the force of a land mine blast, and their eyes cast around in confusion at the sudden activity surrounding them. The medics lifted the men off the back of the truck, carried them inside, and laid them on metal cots. A soldier standing next to me clucked his disapproval when he saw the wounds. The effect of a land mine on a person is so devastating that it is almost disorienting. It takes several minutes to understand that the sack of bones and blood and shredded cloth that you’re looking at used to be a man’s leg. One man lost a leg at the ankle; another man lost a leg at the shin; a third lost an entire leg to the waist. This man didn’t seem to be in pain, and he didn’t seem to have any understanding of what had happened to him. Both would come later. “My back hurts,” he kept saying. “There’s something wrong with my back.”

The medics worked quickly and wordlessly in the lamplight, wrapping the stumps of the legs with gauze. The wounded men would be flown out by helicopter the next day and would eventually wind up in a hospital in Tajikistan. “This is the war,” Reza hissed over and over again as he shot photos. “This is what war means.”

Reza had covered a lot of wars and seen plenty of this in his life, but I hadn’t. I ducked out of the tent and stood in the cold darkness, leaning against a wall. Dogs were barking in the distance, and a soldier shouted into his radio that the wounded were coming in and they needed more medicine, now. I thought about what Reza had said, and after a while I went back inside. This is the war too, and you have to look straight at it, I told myself. You have to look straight at all of it or you have no business being here at all.
and the factory was far different from that of Yetta Lubitz, Celia Weintraub, or Ethel Monick—a connection that's disturbing for me to consider, even now, twenty-two years after having received her letters: the quintessential sweatshop of the early 1900s—the Triangle Shirtwaist Company—was owned by two men. One of them, Isaac Harris, was my grandmother's cousin.

My father was given a job as head of the shipping department in my cousin Isaac Harris's firm, The Triangle Waist Co. At that time they were the largest in the industry. So, we were luckier than most immigrants who struggled to find jobs and to make a dollar. My dad received a nice salary, more than enough to take care of our family. My brother-in-law also got a job at Triangle. So did my sister Mary, and eventually so did I. Our whole family worked for my cousin and life was an easy one.

My grandmother's letters place her in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory near the year 1909, when two hundred Triangle workers went on strike, prompting a general walkout of twenty thousand garment workers from New York to Philadelphia. It was Grandma's cousin Isaac Harris who brought in the thugs who beat the women on the picket line outside his sweatshop, Harris who bribed the police to haul the women off to jail: "The hoodlums hired by the company could do their work without interference," the historian Leon Stein reported a cashier at Triangle as saying. "You could get a man on the beat to look away by giving him a box of cigars with a $100.00 bill in it." It was Isaac Harris who helped ensure that some of the progress other strikers gained after the walkout—21/2 work week, an end to the subcontracting system, a wage increase, adequate fire escapes, and open doors from the factories to the streets—would not affect his employees at Triangle.

And my grandmother's letters place her at her desk in Triangle's tenth-floor administrative offices on March 25, 1911, when, on the eighth floor where the cutters worked, a cigarette butt supposedly tossed into a rag bin ignited the fire that raged through the sweatshop and left 146 people, mostly young women, dead in less than twenty minutes. "On the 25th of March," said one writer at the time, "it was the same policemen who had clubbed [the girls] back into submission [during the strike] who kept the thousands in Washington Square from trampling upon their dead bodies, sent for ambulances to carry them away and lifted them one by one into the receiving coffins."

I worked at Triangle as a factory bookkeeper until March 25, 1911. That was a day to remember. It was a nice cool day on a Saturday afternoon about 4 P.M. We heard the word FIRE and within ten minutes, we were surrounded on all four sides by flames. Triangle occupied the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors of the safest building at that time and all three floors were in flames. 146 people died. It was the worst fire in the history of New York. We were on the 10th floor and escaped through the roof. It's a long, long story and I don't care to go into details. I'll never forget it.

I'll never forget it. But my grandmother never told me much about the fire in her letters. Though I understand her inevitable loyalty to the relatives who provided so well for her and her family, the pride she sustained in being connected to one of the most exploitative manufacturers in the women's garment industry is more difficult for me to comprehend.

When Triangle went out of business several years after the fire, Grandma became personnel manager at another factory. I also took charge of payroll, she writes.

It was a very good position with excellent pay. Then all of a sudden, the unions interfered. Our shop was non-union and I took over for management and had to arbitrate.

If she felt outrage over the tyrannical conditions at Triangle, she didn't evidence it in her letters to me. Yet the knowledge I've acquired researching my own family's part in the tragedy has compelled me to look at what my grandmother didn't allow herself to see, to pose questions she didn't ask.

What allowed people to look the other way before and after the fire? While the ashes were still warm, many ignited questions: What had happened here and why? What's to keep it from happening again? Who is to blame? So many others demanded answers, and laws to ensure that such horror would not be forgotten. Because of so many other voices, from the ashes came reforms. From the ashes also came my private search for detail. For answers Grandma never revealed.
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On my desk I see the photo of Grandma Rose at age twenty, her thick dark hair wound into two loose braids that fall below her shoulders, her small, bright blue eyes so darkly circled they disappear into apostrophes with her smile. In the photo she's gazing over eight decades into the future while I'm gazing back to a time I'm struggling to understand. What did it feel like to know that security was tenuous in a world where signs reading “No Jews or Dogs Allowed” infected roadsides along the East Coast for at least the first four decades she called this country home? What drove people like Isaac Harris to exploit their fellow immigrants, fellow Jews who, like themselves, had fled from tyranny in their homeland to a life that promised, as Grandma said in her letters, streets paved with gold?

I look at the photograph of my grandmother, hold her in my hands, try to find my place in a continuum of which I know so little. What would you say, Grandma, if you knew that my niece, your twenty-year-old great-granddaughter born two months before your death, feels that she now must make “reparations” and has focused her energies on eliminating the sweatshop system that your cousin helped flourish? What would you say if you knew that my questions were what first pushed her to make connections? And while I raise certain questions of others, I must ask myself too, Grandma, what have I done to further social change in this arena? I’ve never spoken out on sweatshop labor issues, or in any way helped ensure the removal of contemporary sweatshops. Is it fair for me to demand from others in the past what I’m not demanding from myself now, while I try to make connections of my own, gain entry into history, to bring what I can of the unknown from the shadows?

I never lived close to any of my grandparents, who remained in New York while my parents chose an academic life in Iowa, where I was born. Though distant in miles, Grandma Rose and I corresponded regularly by letter from the time I was eight until her death the year I turned twenty-seven. My grandmother was not only a true epistolary companion, she was also the only adult in my life who offered unconditional and consistent support. The letters we exchanged were filled with details that kept us in touch with each other’s lives: how much she’d lost at her last mahjong game; what boys filled out my dance card at my first box social and the grades on my most recent report cards; updates on Grandpa’s health and the new teeth he got courtesy of the hospital after his physicians misplaced the original set; and birthday cards emblazoned with prepubescent girls (no matter what my age), their silky hair fixed into smooth pageboys, and wearing white gloves and flouncy dresses with pink pumps and satin bows cinching their waists, opening screechingly turquoise doors to gay birthday verses: “May every candle on your cake shine with the love this brings, and may your special day be filled with fun and happy things!”

Just as Grandma Rose was the only grandparent with whom I communicated regularly, she was my only entry into extended family I otherwise would not have known. During my family’s biannual visit, she hosted late-night card games including every relative within fifty miles, my cousins and I raiding her cherry-wood hutch for the fancy marzipan, sugared fruit slices, and chocolates that she stocked in seemingly endless supplies. To me, she was the emblematic Grandma who served soft-boiled eggs in elegant porcelain heart-shaped egg cups, yolks cooked just the right consistency to coat the toast; who, whenever I used words like “magenta” or “irresistible,” praised me for having “such a strong vocabulary.”

Though mining the past suggested in her letters was, at times, like coaxing water from rock, Grandma Rose was also an entry into Jewish history — from the pogroms in Russia, to immigration to America, to employment at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company — which, no matter how appalling I may find it, is a story that is mine, to shape and hold on to.

The biggest excitement in my life came when my folks decided to go to America due to all the pogroms in Russia. Jews were being killed right and left and the police and government did nothing about it, just laughed. It’s all too gruesome to write about. We were given protection by a countess. She took us into her home and the murderers dared not touch us. They wouldn’t enter her place because she was royalty.

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Grandma described herself as a young child in 1903 — in the little town of Bender, about thirty miles south of Kishinev, in
Bessarabia province — running through the countess’s estate and playing tag with the countess’s children among the walnut and fruit trees and peacocks that strolled through the yard. The children had to stay in the front yard. *Too many gypsies around to grab a child,* Grandma wrote that her mother, Dina, often warned her. Evenings Grandma played lotto with her family. Perhaps letters from her eldest sister, Dora, studying in France, were piled on the table near the sofa, along with papers regarding her father Louis’s wheat business. Grandma’s aqua school uniform and her older sister Mary’s brown one draped across the back of the sofa where their mother left them after pressing them for school the next day. Both girls attended Catholic school after they refused to continue in the local cheder (Hebrew school). *There were only a few Jewish girls in this parochial school,* Grandma wrote. *It cost a lot of money to get us in. It also cost a lot to bribe the police — to bribe a countess too? — to keep a Jewish family from being murdered, to keep home and business intact during the spring and the coming of Passover and Easter — “pogrom season” — in Eastern Europe and Russia.*

Four months after the massacre of Jews in Kishinev and eight months before a mob attacked the Jewish quarter of their hometown, the Alter family arrived in America. While they planned their move to a country where *we believed,* wrote Grandma, *that the streets were paved with gold,* thousands of Jews wound their way through the streets of Kishinev behind the velvet-draped caskets containing the Torah scrolls desecrated in the pogrom of April 6 and 7, 1903, to a gravesite marked with plain wooden posts. A few months before Grandma’s seventh birthday, while the Alters collected their feather pillows and comforters, brass candlesticks and lace, across the ocean in New York, tens of thousands of mourners filled the streets of the Lower East Side, marching for the living and the dead in Russia.

*We began preparations for our trip to our dream world. Personally, I’m surprised this information would interest you. None of my relatives were celebrities, just everyday people. So far, not much interesting for your family tree, I’ll bet. We took a boat to Liverpool and boarded the ship, Fatherland, and settled in for a long ride in third class. We were on that ship a week before we landed at Ellis Island on August 20, 1903.*

A multistoried brick structure with minaret-capped towers and decorative cornices, the immigration center is set on an island that once housed explosives for the navy. Over twelve million immigrants who came through its Great Hall saw America as “an adventure, a beacon of hope.” Over two hundred thousand were sent back to the homelands they had fled, often because of physical disabilities or other so-called medical reasons. There are photographs of medical inspections immigrants who’d traveled in third class or steerage were forced to endure after embarkation — like the photo of a young child, her eyes red from crying, having her upper eyelid flipped back with a hook to determine whether or not she has trachoma — pictures that prefigure the photographs and instruments behind glass at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum — instruments that developed as eugenics was born: the metal ruler with prongs used by the Nazis to examine nose width, the stethoscope-shaped object used to examine skull width, the photo of the young girl, nude to the wrist, head tipped to one side, as an inspector compares the color of her dark brown eyes to the eye colors on a chart developed in Germany to identify non-Aryans.

In the Great Hall my grandmother’s cousin, Isaac Harris, vouched that she and her family would not be a burden on this country. Then he transported her family to the apartment he’d set up for them at Ninety-ninth Street and Lexington Avenue — a place complete with gaslights, steam heat, toilet, and running water, the latter so amazing Grandma, she wrote that she ran from room to room and back to the kitchen opening faucets, just letting the water run . . .

For my grandmother, from a little Russian town not far from Kishinev, who was accustomed to water sold by the barrel, outdoor toilets, no electricity or gas, and rooms lit by kerosene lamps, walking into this apartment was, she wrote, *like a magic story.* Unlike so many immigrants who fled to America at the turn of the century, Grandma wasn’t forced to battle an unsympathetic landlord demanding rent. She didn’t have to wait in long lines for a nonexistent job in a sweatshop, vie for sleeping space in a filthy, bug-infested room with seven other relatives, without even a toothbrush or towel of her own. She didn’t have to haggle for dry goods from the pushcart vendors that lined Manhattan’s Lower East Side.
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From the minute her cousin Isaac Harris met her family on Ellis Island, Grandma’s position in the New World was secured.

Two years ago, having reread my grandmother’s letters and studied various accounts of the fire and subsequent court case in which Triangle’s owners were tried for manslaughter, I stood at the northwest corner of Greene Street and Washington Place reading the plaque commemorating the workers who died in the fire. I stood at this spot, in what is now at the edge of SoHo, and projected myself back to the early 1900s and the Washington Square Park area as it may have looked when my grandmother arrived. It was not as fashionable as it had been fifty years earlier when wealthy New Yorkers started building “country homes” here. But in 1911, it was a peaceful residential area. Horses, their hooves clopping along the streets, pulled covered landaus with women inside, elegantly dressed under French serge coats in Empire dinner gowns of lace and apricot velvet, their large hats trimmed with sprigs of wisteria or plumes. Stanford White’s Washington Arch graced the eight-acre park to the north, at the foot of Fifth Avenue. Along Washington Square North were the Greek Revival townhouses that made up “The Row.” Facing the park to the east were the buildings of New York University and the American Book Company, on the same block as the Asch Building. And inside the Asch Building, more than five hundred people, mainly girls and young women, toiled at their sewing machines fashioning thin cotton fabric into shirtwaists.

These sheer, high-necked blouses were less expensive than dresses. Typically, they were worn with tailored skirts and featured masculine collars and bouffant sleeves and tapered to a tightly fitted waistline. Artist and illustrator Charles Gibson became famous at the turn of the century for his “Gibson girl,” the ideal young American woman, ready to compete with any man in the workplace, dressed in her efficient yet feminine shirtwaist and skirt.

In 1911, Triangle was among several of the major firms that dominated the shirtwaist industry, and owners Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, known as “the shirtwaist kings,” epitomized the sweatshop boss. Both owned large cars and used chauffeurs. Both were competitive and ambitious. Within six years after they moved Triangle into the ninth floor of the Asch Building, they had taken over the eighth and tenth floors. Each had separate responsibilities in the firm. Harris, a “frail man and slight,” was, according to historian Leon Stein, the “inside man [who] knew all about garment production, machinery, how to keep the work flow going through the plant. His daily task was to patrol the factory, moving impressively down its aisles, checking, questioning, directing.” Themselves refugees from Russia, Harris and Blanck exploited the immigrants who worked for them through a subcontracting system common in the industry at the time: they dealt only with their “master craftsmen” machine operators — actually men they’d hired as contractors for the factory. In turn, the contractor hired, and had the power to fire, the young immigrant workers whom he taught to make the separate shirtwaist pieces, which he eventually joined together. At Triangle, there were between five and ten contractors per floor. The firm’s owners felt no responsibility for the workers, and never knew exactly how many employees they had because only the contractors’ names were listed on the payroll. It was the contractor who, on Saturdays, paid the workers. (Other, similar shops were closed on Saturday afternoons, but Harris and Blanck had managed to ignore the union’s demand for a five-and-a-half-day work week.) There was no starting salary — though the pay was reportedly no lower than at other shops — and little chance of a raise. “The girls . . . got whatever the contractor wanted to pay as a start,” recalled a cashier at Triangle. “In two or three weeks they knew how to sew very well. Never mind. For a long time they still got the same low pay. Triangle and the inside contractor got the difference.” Contemporaries of my grandmother’s called the subcontracting system “an admitted evil . . . [that] the best manufacturers condemn.”

Triangle workers were charged for supplies and for the electricity they needed to run the sewing machines. They were also charged “rent” for the chairs they sat in eight to thirteen hours a day, six days a week, in overcrowded rooms — chokingly hot in the summer — where on the ninth floor, 240 sewing machine operators were packed together elbow to elbow at tables seventy-five feet long that almost filled the entire floor in a room of about ten thou-
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shop boss. Both owned large cars and used chauffeurs. Both were competitive and ambitious. Within six years after they moved Triangle into the ninth floor of the Asch Building, they had taken over the eighth and tenth floors. Each had separate responsibilities in the firm. Harris, a “frail man and slight,” was, according to historian Leon Stein, the “inside man [who] knew all about garment production, machinery, how to keep the work flow going through the plant. His daily task was to patrol the factory, moving impressively down its aisles, checking, questioning, directing.” Themselves refugees from Russia, Harris and Blanck exploited the immigrants who worked for them through a subcontracting system common in the industry at the time: they dealt only with their “master craftsmen” machine operators — actually men they’d hired as contractors for the factory. In turn, the contractor hired, and had the power to fire, the young immigrant workers whom he taught to make the separate shirtwaist pieces, which he eventually joined together. At Triangle, there were between five and ten contractors per floor. The firm’s owners felt no responsibility for the workers, and never knew exactly how many employees they had because only the contractors’ names were listed on the payroll. It was the contractor who, on Saturdays, paid the workers. (Other, similar shops were closed on Saturday afternoons, but Harris and Blanck had managed to ignore the union’s demand for a five-and-a-half-day work week.) There was no starting salary — though the pay was reportedly no lower than at other shops — and little chance of a raise. “The girls . . . got whatever the contractor wanted to pay as a start,” recalled a cashier at Triangle. “In two or three weeks they knew how to sew very well. Never mind. For a long time they still got the same low pay. Triangle and the inside contractor got the difference.” Contemporaries of my grandmother’s called the subcontracting system “an admitted evil . . . [that] the best manufacturers condemn.”

Triangle workers were charged for supplies and for the electricity they needed to run the sewing machines. They were also charged “rent” for the chairs they sat in eight to thirteen hours a day, six days a week, in overcrowded rooms — chokingly hot in the summer — where on the ninth floor, 240 sewing machine operators were packed together elbow to elbow at tables seventy-five feet long that almost filled the entire floor in a room of about ten thou-
sand square feet. There was no belonging to unions. Most doors, even the one to the inadequate fire escape, were usually locked during business hours to keep union organizers out and to prevent theft.

To further ensure that their property was protected, Harris and Blanck had watchmen stand guard at each exit at closing time, rifling through the girls' pocketbooks and poking at their upswept pompadours, hunting for pieces of shirtwaists that might have been stolen, or bits of fabric that a working girl might use to turn her simple straw hat into a treasure. "If one of the Triangle girls was caught filching a ten-cent bit of shirtwaist material," wrote Samuel Gompers two months after the fire, "she would have been liable to arrest and sentenced to a term in prison." Harris even admitted under cross-examination during the trial after the fire that he'd had six girls arrested in 1908 after the detectives he'd sent to their homes found shirtwaists the girls had supposedly stolen from his shop. More recently, though, there had been no arrests. A few girls who were accused of stealing had sued the firm for damages, and, Harris said, "We found the best way to deal with the girls was to discharge them on the spot and not bother with them anymore."

Grandma must have visited the eighth and ninth floors during her time at Triangle and seen the sewers packed together on nine. Hunched over their machines, they breathed in smells of human sweat and dust and machine oil, the silent pounding in their temples a metronome to keep their pace allegro, to ensure they'd each bring home at least twelve dollars that week. She must have heard the roar of the 240 new electric Singers — powerful machines, which operated with a foot pedal rather than a hand-turned crank wheel — as vibrating needles zipped across flimsy material so quickly, novice sewers' fingers were easily mangled: "I didn't know how to sew on an electric sewing machine," eighty-six-year-old Bertha Lanxner admitted during an interview sixty-eight years after she'd quit Triangle. "The needle went into my finger and I have yet a cut . . . so my future husband told me, don't tell that. I'll tell them you have a sore finger so maybe they'll excuse you so you'll have a chance to learn."

As part of the administrative staff, my grandmother, like everyone else in her family who worked for the firm, was allowed to enter Triangle through the front entrance on the Washington Place side, "beautiful with marble floors," and take the front elevator up to the spacious tenth floor, where she had her own desk near her cousin's office. Because she was family, after stepping off the elevator, she didn't have to confront a partition with an opening through which she had to squeeze — an opening wide enough for only one person at a time, to enable the watchman to easily detain workers and search them at closing time. Unlike my grandmother on the tenth floor, the hundreds of girls on the floors below had to step into enormous rooms filled almost entirely with long wooden tables and sewing machines. On the ninth floor, where most of the fire victims worked, passage from aisle to aisle was difficult. If a girl worked at the end of the room far from the entrance, she was forced to wind her way around the seventy-five-foot-long lead table — one of eight such continuous tables arranged in rows parallel to one another — before she could worm her way to her seat, trying not to bang into the wooden chairs, the backs of which, even when they were shoved under the table, almost touched each other, "like the 'double two' in dominoes." A savvy worker quickly learned to arrive at the shop early to avoid the crush of bodies that rushed from the cloakroom to assigned seats before the six-o'clock bell announced the beginning of a workday.

If Grandma let her eyes roam around the eighth and ninth floors for a few moments, she'd have seen the wicker baskets on the floor to the right of each girl overflowing with bundles of fabric. She couldn't have helped noticing that the machines of the girls sitting across the troughs from each other dripped oil — oil that collected on the wooden floor beneath their feet when the wooden shells above their knees became too full to hold the drippings. Did Grandma wonder what any of these hundreds of girls would do if they had to leave the room quickly, if there was a real emergency? If there was a fire?

There had been fires in the past. In 1902 two fires had broken out on the ninth floor of the Asch Building, and in 1909, there was a fire on eight when a motor supplying power for the two hundred machines there emitted a spark that ignited a pile of remnants under a table. According to her letters, Grandma could have been at work the day of that fire. Though the flames were contained on the eighth floor, there was little damage, and no lives were lost, she
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In trying to look at what my grandmother did not, I must also try to envision her as she describes herself in her letters: a young woman filled with energy and plans, chattering with her older sister Mary while they wait for their father so they can travel the one hundred plus blocks home together after work. They’re enjoying the view out the windows overlooking Washington Place and discussing the boy Rose had invited to Shabbat dinner that night — a smart, good-looking accountant for a well-known millinery shop on Broadway, who also attended Wadleigh High School. And though mishgass, shaineih maideh, faidrai zich dem kop! and many other scraps of Yiddish patterned her speech, she had heeded her cousin Isaac Harris’s advice and worked hard at school, speaking only English, leaving her native Russian and Yiddish behind — just as her family was forced to leave Dora and Solomon, Rose’s older sister and brother, behind when they emigrated to America, never to see them again.

I never knew my eldest sister Dora. She was always away studying in France. And just before we left for America, Solomon told my parents he was in love and couldn’t leave. His clothes were already on the way to America and had to be sent back when we arrived. I never saw him again. He and his family as well as my sister and her family were no doubt killed by the Germans. When Solomon finally wanted to come to the U.S. he wasn’t allowed to emigrate. After the war we tried to locate him but got nowhere.

By 1911, eight years had passed since Rose witnessed her own mother’s longing for her lost son and daughter, but to a young woman, it must have seemed like decades ago that she and Mary, three years her senior, sat in Miss Müller’s class, trying to learn English after school, trying to ignore the insults their classmates heaped on them for being greenhorns: Children in class laughed at us because we couldn’t understand English. Our relatives told us never to speak Russian or Yiddish. “Forget it,” they said, or you’ll be stoned.

It must have seemed eons since her name and those of her sisters were changed at Ellis Island: Roza becoming Rose, Malta metamorphosing to Mary, Zina turning into Juliet. I wish my sister’s name had remained Zina, I loved it. So stupid that it was changed. At least mine stayed almost the same.

Rose was proud of her agility with English, of her ability to attract such an intelligent boy. As she, her father, and Mary rode the Sixth Avenue El north to Central Park South and then hopped the trolley for the remaining forty blocks to their apartment at 109 St and Madison Avenue, I see her father settling in with a copy of the Daily Forward while his daughters discuss which china they should use on their new Sabbath tablecloth, which dress brought out the blue of Rose’s eyes — the gloxinia shift with the cream-colored collar or the wild lilac princess dress with the matching starched hair bow. The two are still in deep conversation as they reach their stop at 105th Street and Fifth Avenue, where, in comparison to the floods of people in the streets where most of Triangle’s employees lived, only a handful of well-dressed men and women are out strolling. It is at this site, almost fifteen years later, that a museum will be built encapsulating New York history. And in this museum will be a painting, made shortly after the Triangle fire, depicting the fire and firefighting apparatus of that time: ladders that reach only six stories, life nets built to support the bodies of girls — but not when they link arms in twos and threes and jump from the windows of burning buildings — and high-pressure hoses that can cool those burning buildings on the outside but can’t extinguish the fire cremating the bodies within.

My daughter Raychel has heard me talk about my excavations into the fire, and shows me a copy of this painting — in the collection of the Museum of the City of New York — illustrated in her high school American Studies text. Under the picture the caption reads: “The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1911, in which 147 [sic] people died, finally convinced many Americans of the need to reform the appalling working conditions that existed in many industries at the time.” I’m glad the editors mentioned the fire. It wasn’t even a footnote in my history books when I was in
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Black and smudgy tiny script writhes in front of my face, and I struggle to make sense of the crammed prose on the screen. For three hours I’ve been twisting the knob on the microfiche machine to the left, to the right, fast, slow, to get the immediate story of the fire as it looked to someone eighty-seven years ago when it first appeared in the New York Times: 141 men and girls die in waist factory fire; trapped high up in Washington Place building; street strewn with bodies; piles of dead inside (from March 26, 1911, page one, before the final body count). And then, on page four, under the headline PARTNERS’ ACCOUNT OF THE DISASTER; “Harris took the lead in guiding people to the roof and once there, led them to safety.”

On the roof Harris took the lead and marshaled the women, pushing them toward the northeast corner of the building where it joins a factory building at Wooster St. and Waverly Pl. This building adjoins the rear of the Triangle Waist Company’s factory for only about one quarter of its length . . . The rest of the way . . . the buildings are separated from each other by a narrow wall . . . ten feet wide. This was spouting flames and embers, which rained on the roof, and swirling eddies of hot gases added to the peril.

My grandmother’s cousin managed to get the forty or fifty people who followed him to the Waverly Place building and safety, but cut his right hand severely in the process when he bashed in a skylight with his fists. During an interview with the New York Times reporter, he paced the room nursing his injured hand, more interested, the reporter claims, in explaining precautions that the firm took to avoid fires than in recounting his part in the escape from the building.

Someone laid a board, a very narrow plank, from the roof of the Asch building to the building next door, my grandmother once told a cousin of mine five decades after the fire. This board was one hundred feet above the street and I had to crawl across it. I was terrified.

Not so lucky were the three men on the eighth floor — their story on the same page as that of Isaac Harris — who made a “human bridge,” swinging their bodies across an alley to the building fronting Greene Street. “As people crossing upon the human bridge crowded more and more over the men’s bodies, the weight upon the center man became too great and his back broke,” says Pauline Grossman, eighteen-year-old survivor. “He fell to the alley below and the other two men lost their holds upon the window sills and fell. People who were crossing upon them dropped with them.”

The story unfolds as it was written over three quarters of a century ago.

As fashion writers cringe at the “pantaloon skirt” in favor of the “gown,” and announce the designs that await readers in the following Sunday’s “Easter and Spring Fashion” section, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck deny that their factory’s doors were locked from the outside, even though the two remaining doors that hadn’t burned were still locked in the ruins and had to be chopped down by firemen. As hawkers slide through the crowds of sightseers that gather near 123 Washington Place after the fire, shouting, “Souvenirs from the big fire! Get a ring from a dead girl’s finger!” H.E.J. Porter, city fire prevention expert, interviews factory owners regarding their use of fire drills: “Let ’em burn,” one owner says. “They’re a lot of cattle anyway.” While three hundred thousand mourners
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prepare to follow the caskets of the seven unidentified fire victims from the morgue to Mt. Zion Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York City Building Department inspectors issue Triangle a violation notice after discovering that the firm’s new quarters at 9-11 University Place isn’t fireproof, and that Harris and Blanck have arranged the tiers of sewing machines to block access to the fire escapes. While Jews all over the world prepare to celebrate Passover and freedom from four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, Blanck and Harris determine how to fight charges of first- and second-degree manslaughter — punishment for their contemporary tyranny of keeping factory doors locked — that are leveled against them after the fire. And as ads for automatic sprinkler systems spatter the New York Times, and J. M. Gidding suggests half-price after-Christmas gift-giving ideas, the jury in the case of Harris and Blanck bring in a verdict of not guilty.

The charge against Triangle’s proprietors was manslaughter in the first and second degrees. The state intended to prove that the ninth-floor exit door on the Washington Place side was locked at the time of the fire, that the owners knew the door was locked, and that this violation was the direct cause of the death of Margaret Schwartz, one of the 146 victims.

For defense counsel, Harris and Blanck hired attorney Max D. Steuer, a rising star, with “that instinct for the jugular vein,” says American history expert Richard B. Morris, “which was to keep him in the first rank of notable trial lawyers.” According to Leon Stein, Steuer, like most of the witnesses called by the prosecution, grew up on the Lower East Side. “He knew them well, spoke their language, sensed their fears and resentments,” and, says Stein, he used this understanding to his advantage as the trial progressed. In one instance, he cross-examined the state’s star witness to the point where he discredited her story (in his own words after the trial, “toyed with the story”), leaving the jury with the impression that she’d been overcoached by the prosecution.

Despite the procession of witnesses for the state who all testified they’d never seen the Washington Place door open and had never seen anyone pass through it; despite all the witnesses who said they’d tried unsuccessfully to open the door during the fire, who swore that no fire drills were ever held at Triangle, and that flammable refuse was allowed to accumulate to dangerous propor-

This “complete miscarriage of justice,” as the New York Times put it two days after the verdict, did not mean that “nobody was to blame for this hideous disaster . . . What it really means . . . is that . . . Harris and Blanck were not guilty as charged,” Richard B. Morris points out before the jurors considered a verdict, Judge Crain’s charge to them “virtually constituted a directed verdict of acquittal.” He told them to remember that the defense contended that Margaret Schwartz died as the result of the Washington Place door on the ninth floor being locked. The judge gave his interpretation of the New York penal code and explained that the accused were on trial for first- or second-degree manslaughter, which meant that the girl’s “death resulted from a misdemeanor or an intention to commit one, or that her death was a direct result of the firm’s negligence.” Morris says that Judge Crain reminded the jury that “manslaughter was a felony and unless it could be shown that the accused were aware of the violations, they could not be found guilty. It must be shown ‘beyond a reasonable doubt,’ Crain charged, that the door was locked with the knowledge of the defendants, and that the locking of the door caused the death of Margaret Schwartz.”

The verdict troubled at least two jurors. Afterward, one of them told a reporter:
prepare to follow the caskets of the seven unidentified fire victims from the morgue to Mt. Zion Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York City Building Department inspectors issue an eviction notice after discovering that the firm’s new quarters at 9–11 University Place isn’t fireproof, and that Harris and Blanck have arranged the tiers of sewing machines to block access to the fire escapes. While Jews all over the world prepare to celebrate Passover and freedom from four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, Blanck and Harris determine how to fight charges of first- and second-degree manslaughter — punishment for their contemporary tyranny of keeping factory doors locked — that are leveled against them after the fire. And as ads for automatic sprinkler systems spatter the New York Times, and J. M. Gidding suggests half-price after-Christmas gift-giving ideas, the jury in the case of Harris and Blanck bring in a verdict of not guilty.

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For defense counsel, Harris and Blanck hired attorney Max D. Steuer, a rising star, with “that instinct for the jugular vein,” says American history expert Richard B. Morris, “which was to keep him in the first rank of notable trial lawyers.” According to Leon Stein, Steuer, like most of the witnesses called by the prosecution, grew up on the Lower East Side. “He knew them well, spoke their language, sensed their fears and resentments,” and, says Stein, he used this understanding to his advantage as the trial progressed. In one instance, he cross-examined the state’s star witness to the point where he discredited her story (in his own words after the trial, “toyed with the story”), leaving the jury with the impression that she’d been overcoached by the prosecution.

Despite the procession of witnesses for the state who all testified they’d never seen the Washington Place door open and had never seen anyone pass through it; despite all the witnesses who said they’d tried unsuccessfully to open the door during the fire, who swore that no fire drills were ever held at Triangle, and that flammable refuse was allowed to accumulate to dangerous propor-

This “complete miscarriage of justice,” as the New York Times put it two days after the verdict, did not mean that “nobody was to blame for this hideous disaster . . . What it really means . . . is that . . . Harris and Blanck were not guilty as charged.” Richard B. Morris points out that before the jurors considered a verdict, Judge Crain’s charge to them “virtually constituted a directed verdict of acquittal.” He told them to remember that the defense contended that Margaret Schwartz died as the result of the Washington Place door on the ninth floor being locked. The judge gave his interpretation of the New York penal code and explained that the accused were on trial for first- or second-degree manslaughter, which meant that the girl’s “death resulted from a misdemeanor or an intention to commit one, or that her death was a direct result of the firm’s negligence.” Morris says that Judge Crain reminded the jury that “manslaughter was a felony and unless it could be shown that the accused were aware of the violations, they could not be found guilty. It must be shown ‘beyond a reasonable doubt,’ Crain charged, that the door was locked with the knowledge of the defendants, and that the locking of the door caused the death of Margaret Schwartz.”

The verdict troubled at least two jurors. Afterward, one of them told a reporter:
I believed that the Washington Place door, on which the district attorney said the whole case hinged, was locked at the time of the fire. But I could not make myself feel certain that Harris and Blanck knew that it was locked. And so, because the judge had charged us that we could not find them guilty unless we believed that they knew the door was locked, then, I did not know what to do. It would have been much easier for me if the state inspectors instead of Harris and Blanck had been on trial. There would have been no doubt in my mind then as to how to vote.

Harris and Blanck, threatened by mobs earlier in the month during the trial proceedings, were smuggled out of the courthouse accompanied by policemen, and again almost attacked by over one hundred relatives and friends of the victims. "Justice! Where is Justice?" Josephine Nicolosi cried, and others echoed her. "Murderers!" screamed David Weiner, whose seventeen-year-old sister died in the fire. Breaking from the throng and shaking his fist in Isaac Harris's face, he's reported to have screamed, "Murderers! You're acquitted now, but we'll get you yet. Murderers!" he yelled again, before collapsing in convulsions, before the ambulance took him to Hudson Street Hospital, where doctors pronounced him suffering from a "disordered mind."

Two years after the fire, after Triangle had moved to another location on the corner of Sixteenth Street and Fifth Avenue, Max Blanck was fined the minimum twenty dollars (the law considered this his first offense) for keeping one of Triangle's doors locked during working hours, with 150 girls inside. Three years after the fire, the families of twenty-three of the victims collected seventy-five dollars apiece from the owner of the Asch Building for each life lost.

"Management got a bum rap." That's what my cousin says when I ask him if he remembers anything Grandma said about the fire or the factory. Kenneth and his sister Lois lived a few blocks away from Grandma a good part of their lives. In response to my request for any information she might have on Grandma and her connection to Triangle, Lois sent me a scrap of paper she'd discovered that her brother had used to jot notes on the fire for a junior high history project, now long gone. Over thirty years have passed since I last talked to Kenneth, over thirty years since he'd worked on this project, yet when I read him the fifteen words on this scrap that has somehow survived the decades, he recalls his interview with our grandmother as if it had happened recently.

"Grandma was always anti-union," he says. "She insisted that they didn't keep doors locked in the factory. She was angry about the locked-door story that the media reported at the time, and adamant that other misinformation was reported."

Called a sweatshop but not really. I ask him what he thinks Grandma meant by that declaration he'd noted on the scrap of paper. "She said that after the fire, the media portrayed Blanck and Harris as evil, as treating their workers unfairly, even brutally, like during the strikes before 1911, but that 'they weren't that bad to the workers.' Grandma stressed that Triangle was not unlike any other factory at the time, and if people couldn't get the doors open during the fire, it was because the doors were hinged so that they opened in instead of out and were simply more difficult to open. She said Blanck and Harris were charged with manslaughter on the basis of this locked-door theory, but 'no way were those doors locked,' she'd insisted."

If only I could believe my grandmother. How do I condemn someone who'd been always generous with her love, gentle, and considerate, who never found fault with my behavior or appearance, who flattered me with attentive questions and lively discourse about her own life? I'm uneasy taking sides — management against workers — but everything I've read and heard makes me embrace, instead, the workers, the survivors from the eighth and ninth floors, whose words (recorded in interviews conducted more than forty-five years after the fire) are testimony to a reality different from the one Grandma experienced.

Survivor Max Hochfield had worked at Triangle only several months before the 1911 fire. As he recalled the horror of that day almost five decades later, his voice trembled, his emotions, after so many years, still blistering to the surface. "I can tell you this much," he says to the interviewer, "I think that if the door on the ninth floor would've been opened, most of the people would've been safe." Mr. Hochfield, whose sister was killed in the fire, wanted to kill Harris and Blanck, but couldn't raise the money necessary to
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buy a gun. "I can’t prove it," he says, ending his interview, "but if this door on the ninth floor had been open, I’m sure that the casualties would have been much less.”

Dore Maisler, who had her “teeth knocked out and was arrested three times a day” as she picketed during the strike of 1909, escaped the fire on one of the few elevators working that day. That elevator only made one trip up to the eighth floor, where she worked, before the cable broke from the weight of so many people jammed in so tightly the door wouldn’t close, and it crashed into the basement of the building. "People had torn my clothes off because I was the first one there [in the elevator]. I was on the floor and they were stacked on top of me. I was black and blue. By the time I got carried out from the basement they were jumping from the windows already." She says that people were frantic because the doors to the stairway were locked, a fact corroborated by Pauline Pepe and Bertha Mandel Lanxner. Though not a survivor of the 1911 fire — Ms. Lanxner worked at Triangle only a short time before quitting in 1910 — she repeatedly stated her simple reason for quitting: "I didn’t like closed doors. With doors like this, I always saw a prison . . . They shouldn’t have locked doors. It was locked on the outside."

During the trial, Ms. Maisler was a witness for the state. To the interviewer she repeats the question that Max Steuer asked her: "How did you feel when you knew the building was burning and you couldn’t save yourself?" And her voice, level and strong, spits back her answer with a venom that forty-six years hasn’t dulled: "How would you feel if you would be trapped in a cage and I put in a match?"

After the fire, Ms. Maisler had to leave New York. She needed a job, but could no longer work in tall buildings, and left to find employment in California. At the end of his interview, Max Hochfield also admits that after the fire he was afraid to work in a factory, and that “even today [1957] when I go to the theatre, or a movie, or a banquet, I need to make sure that the building is fireproof before I can enjoy myself.”

I listen to this admission and recall the fires I’ve been in, minor fires with minimal damage and no deaths, but alarming just the same: Two in the morning, a hotel in London, I’m nineteen. A fireman carries me on his shoulders from the fourth floor down to the curb after a dozing smoker drops a smoldering cigarette butt into an upholstered couch and sets the place on fire. Four years later, at five a.m., a cheap hotel in Hollywood where I’m visiting Grandma Rose. Again, a lit cigarette and napping smoker, but this time, as columns of dark smoke rise by pink stucco, I’m the first one at the curb.

March of 1997 was cold and windy in Manhattan, but that didn’t stop schoolchildren, members of UNITE (Union of Needle-trades, Industrial and Textile Employees), and firefighters from gathering at the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street to remember the victims of the fire. Beneath the plaque dedicated by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in 1961 to commemorate the lives lost, students, union members, and firefighters placed 146 white carnations — each bearing the name of a worker who died — and read aloud the name of each fire victim. Brisk winds had marked the fiftieth anniversary of the fire, and it was chilly during ceremonies on the seventy-fifth anniversary too. Yet, each time, crowds number in the hundreds for the memorial service at Washington Place and Greene Street and the subsequent ceremony at the cemetery in Brooklyn where the seven unidentified fire victims are buried in a common grave.

Page one of the New York Times from Sunday, March 26, 1961, includes a large photo of David Dubinsky, then president of the ILGWU, standing on the speakers’ platform during the fiftieth-anniversary ceremonies. He’s flanked by Frances Perkins, former secretary of labor and member of the state commission that investigated the Triangle fire, Eleanor Roosevelt, and two survivors. Dubinsky’s expression is emotional; his plea to Governor Rockefeller to veto a measure that would delay, by almost two years, the installation of sprinkler systems in old buildings is eloquent and urgent. But it’s the face of one of the survivors, Isidore Wegodner, on which I focus. Sitting erect in fedora and trenchcoat, the collar of which is pulled up around his neck to block the wind, he appears dignified, quiet. When Dubinsky asks “on whose conscience will it rest if before 1962 there is another fire with loss of life in an unsprinklered building?” and appeals to those gathered to fight the “outrage” of a bill that would keep buildings unsafe and the “mockery [this bills makes] of the sacrifice of 146 garment work-
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ers,” did Isidore see himself again, as he must have seen himself countless times in the fifty years since the fire, escaping down the stairs from the ninth floor, where he and his father worked as sleeve setters? He must have dreamed so often about the street — a street he probably once envisioned as being paved with gold, just as Grandma Rose had — littered with bodies after the fire. He must have felt a sharp tug in his belly each time he recalled thinking that his father was among those broken bodies in the street. The boy Isidore eventually found his father alive, stumbling from a subway car, his pants torn, his flesh bleeding. “I remember,” Isidore said in an interview with historian Leon Stein, “how with my last strength I shouted to him, how I went tearing over the little bridge that connected the two platforms, how we fell into each other’s arms and how the people stopped to look while sobbing he embraced me and kissed me.”

It’s late summer in 1958 and I’m kneeling on the sidewalk in front of my grandparents’ house in Jamaica, New York, hunched over a magnifying glass and a maple leaf. Grandma Rose is pressed close beside me, knees apart and bent, bottom almost brushing the sidewalk, elbows balanced on her knees, hands hanging loosely from relaxed wrists. Her olive paisley-print shift gapes open at the neck, revealing bronze, ample cleavage beaded with sweat. The sun is so hot, Grandma has made me wear one of my grandfather’s white V-neck undershirts over my swimming suit so my seven-year-old fair skin won’t “fry like an egg on the sidewalk.” As intent as I am on having this leaf catch fire, I’m aware of Grandma’s smell — musky and damp, like the sweet and sour smell of earth after snow has melted and the scent of decaying plants fills the air. Outside her brick row house near one of the few trees on this busy block, Grandma is giving me my first lesson in combustion. Suddenly, the leaf catches fire, its edges magically curling up and over itself, and we’re both transfixed by the exquisite flame, the brief crackling, and then the quick burning as veins and stem turn to ash.