

The First Two Pages: “Taking Names” by Steven Wishnia
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An Essay by Steven Wishnia

I set the opening scene of “Taking Names” at the annual memorial for the Triangle Fire, the 1911 garment-factory conflagration that killed 146 people. It was an appropriate spot for the plot I conceived: a reporter probing the death of a construction worker on a nonunion job site.

A white-haired firefighter in full dress uniform tolled a silver bell. Elementary school children and distant descendants laid roses on the sidewalk as the names of the dead were intoned, the bell tolling again after each one.

I at first thought it would be a twist to begin a *Jewish Noir* story in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, at the building trades unions’ annual mass for their fallen coworkers. But using the Triangle Fire memorial worked better. It’s more vivid, visually and aurally, with a stronger connection to Jewish history and tradition. The reading of the names is a kind of collective Kaddish, a may-their-memory-be-a-reminder ritual.

Molly Gerstein, my great-aunt, age seventeen.
Sarah Kupla, sixteen.

It sets up a motif: The title, “Taking Names,” comes from an old Afro-American spiritual that begins, “There’s a man going ’round taking names” and ends “Now death is the man taking names.” (As covered by Paul Robeson during

the 1950s anti-leftist purges and their demands that the accused “name names,” the song had an unspoken extra meaning.)

It also opens the way to the theme that develops later in the story. One speaker alludes to the Rana Plaza disaster of 2013, in which more than 1,100 people were killed when a building containing several garment factories collapsed in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the frequent fatal accidents among construction workers in New York City—which at the time I was writing were claiming more than a dozen lives a year, mostly immigrants working nonunion jobs that cut corners on safety.

The fire was also part of my family history: One of my grandfathers, then 15 and barely a year off the boat from the Pale of Settlement, witnessed it. I wonder what he thought seeing scores of girls his age or a couple years older plummeting to their deaths from the flaming factory, immigrant girls from his neighborhood. My other grandparents were garment workers and union activists, bringing the dream of Clara Lemlich and the *farbrente meydlekh* (“burning young women”—burning with passion, that is) of the thwarted 1910 strike to fruition in the 1930s.

I allude to that when Charlie Purpelberg, the freelance reporter protagonist, goes into a brief internal-monologue reverie.

He spaced out for a moment, remembering the murky family story of his great-aunt Reyzl, who had either been fired or quit Triangle the week before the fire. Was it talking union, or sexual harassment, or some secret scandal the greenhorn girl got tangled

into? No one knew the details, she'd died in the flu epidemic of 1918.
He clicked back to alertness.

I invented the name "Purpelberg" as a Jewish name that would include the color purple, after Goldberg, Greenberg, Schwartzberg, Silverberg, Weissberg.

The second scene sets the actual plot in motion; the first body, in crime-fiction parlance. Not in 1911, not in Bangladesh, but in Brooklyn. The victim, an ironworker bolting together framing on the eighth floor of a 12-story building, plummets to his death.

It's structured as the way an on-his-own freelance reporter would cover the story, except that it depicts it from every angle other than the just-the-facts of the final product (which will appear a few pages later). In a way, this is a twist on the 1960s-1970s "New Journalism," which applied personal, novelistic techniques to journalism, rather than the traditional "the word 'I' should never appear in your copy" attitude. (The publisher of a low-budget rock magazine I wrote for in the late '70s lampooned the style as "I had a really bad hangover, and then I took a shit, and oh yeah, Aerosmith played.")

How he hears about it and gets the gig:

Charlie was halfway through his bagel the next morning, alternating bites with sips of coffee while checking his email and posting his article on social media, when the text bell pinged.
Construction worker killed in accident. Bushwick. Lafayette Ave bet. Broadway and Bushwick.

Description of the cityscape:

The block ran north from Broadway and the J-train el. Mostly three-story buildings of flat clapboards or yellowish-beige stone with round alcoves curving out of the front. A few modern ones, six stories high. They looked prefab, like they had just patched on IKEA panels of brick and balcony. And this one, ten incomplete stories and two not built yet, green sheetrock insulation on the lower floors, naked steel skeleton on the upper ones.

Police had yellow-taped off the scene, almost two-thirds of the block.

Speculative musings on the victim's experience:

An hour or so before someone had been walking the edge of the eighth floor, bolting together the framing, with others below laying rebar on the floor for concrete, when he slips, the kind of sudden malapropism you wouldn't make if you were mindful, but who's always mindful? Maybe he drops a bolt and grabs for it. Grabs at empty air. No harness. Off balance. Empty air, two and a half seconds, one hundred feet, hit the ground double nickels on the dime. The cruel laws of gravity.

And finally, an encounter with two union organizers at the scene, which leads to the next phase of the plot. This was not a tragic but unavoidable accident.

There is a deeper context:

A small crowd milled in the space just in from the corner; a couple TV cameras, print reporters with smartphones and notebooks, neighborhood people, and two or three cops watching over them. Charlie spotted Frankie Medina and Lavon Stackhouse, two organizers from the Trades Community Project, a campaign to reach nonunion construction workers loosely backed by various Laborers and Ironworkers locals. They made an odd-looking pair, Medina short, bushy-haired, and wiry, Stackhouse big, shaven-headed, and burly.

Medina was raging. "The fuck? Guy didn't have a harness, wasn't tied off, no nets, no nothing. Union job, you'd be tied off so tight or they'd close the job down in three seconds."

The victim wasn't "tied off," attached to a harness, a standard precaution to prevent falls—and a corner commonly cut by cheap-labor contractors. Many of them hire undocumented immigrants and recently released prisoners, who can be paid minimum wage or a couple bucks more and can be stitched up for deportation or parole violation if they complain about unsafe conditions or getting shorted or stiffed on their pay.

But can Charlie get a witness to reveal the details? You'll have to read on.

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