

On the Job

The novel is set a century ago, but workplace tragedy is still with us

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The village of Herminie No. 2, about twenty-five miles southeast of Pittsburgh, was named for its slightly larger neighbor, the town of Herminie, which in turn was named for Herminie Berwind, wife of E.J. Berwind, co-founder of the Ocean Coal Company. To live in either Herminie in the early decades of the twentieth century was to work for Mr. Berwind and his partner, Mr. White. The village contained about seventy houses, a company store, a community center, and the No. 2 mine—all owned by Ocean Coal. In 1919, the year my grandfather turned 18, the No. 2 mine employed 262 people and produced 298,207 tons of coal. It also had two fatal and four non-fatal accidents.

Like everyone else in his western Pennsylvania village, my grandfather, John J. O'Neil, worked for the Ocean Coal Company. But he did not work in the No. 2 mine.

When Grandpa was just a kid, his older brother Francis got crushed between two coal cars. Francis lingered as an invalid for a few years before dying in his early twenties. I don't know whether his accident was counted as fatal or non-fatal, or whether it was even counted at all. I do know that my great-grandfather—himself a coal miner—and great-grandmother decreed that their youngest son, John, would not work in the mines. So Grandpa got a job in the company store when he was around 13, and he remained there for close to 30 years.

My grandmother, Anna Bush O'Neil, also grew up in Herminie No. 2. Daughter of a coal miner, she left school after eighth grade and worked as a live-in maid to help support her seven younger siblings. Sometime in her teens, her family moved to New Jersey, and Grandma briefly went to work in a textile factory. But the other girls were rough—they smoked, they swore—so Grandma found another domestic job. Her family moved back to Herminie; John and Anna got married; a daughter was born in 1931 and a second, my mother,

in 1933. By that time, the coal was running out. The No. 2 mine closed in 1938, and a few years later my mother's family moved to a bigger town, where Grandpa had found a factory job.

Grandpa, by contrast, lived to see his ninetieth birthday. Grandma lived until almost 93, just weeks before the birth of her fourteenth great-grandchild. Both of them ate a typical twentieth-century American diet of meat and potatoes, fried foods, and plenty of sweets. Neither of them exercised. And yet both were essentially healthy until their last few months.

They had good genes, obviously. And they made good decisions: they didn't smoke cigarettes, and they didn't drink much. Lately, though, I've been thinking about another decision they each made: the decision about what kind of work to do and, perhaps more important, what kind of work not to do.

Aside from marrying my grandmother, staying out of the coal mines was probably the best decision my grandfather ever made. If the accidents didn't get him, there's a good chance black lung would have. These health and safety dangers are not artifacts of the past, found only in the pages of history books and documentaries. They are the living, breathing job hazards of living, breathing miners in twenty-first-century America.

My mother told me about her mother's short stint in the New Jersey textile plant when I mentioned that I was reading *Triangle*, a novel about the Triangle shirtwaist-factory fire written by Katharine Weber, one of our celebrated local writers. The fire killed 146 people in a Lower East Side sweatshop in 1911. Most of the victims were young women and girls, trapped in the building by doors locked to keep them from stealing the goods.

They were trapped in other ways as well. *Triangle's* fictional character Esther Gottesfeld, who survived the fire, came to New York from Pinsk with her sister at ages fourteen and fifteen, wearing three changes of clothes apiece and carrying with them little besides the name and address of a cousin in the Bronx. When the cousin chased

them away, they found jobs in one sweatshop after another. With its seven-day work week and no-talking rule, Triangle Waist Company was a relatively good choice because, even when the bosses stole part of their pay, the poor Italian and Jewish immigrants could make a little more money to send home.

New Haven had its own brutally exploitative garment industry, which you can read a little bit about in Neil Hogan's *Moments in New Haven Labor History*. Hogan quotes Amelia Spose, who started at a Meadow Street dress factory in 1931, at age fourteen: "I wouldn't teach my daughter to sew. I made sure they got an education." That's the way it's supposed to work. Parents make hard decisions so their children can have better choices. In 1909, Esther Gottesfeld's tailor papa taught his daughters to sew and sent them away from the poverty and pogroms of the shtetl, toward a hoped-for better life in the sweatshops of New York. A few decades later, Amelia Spose steered her children away from the sweatshops.

New Haven's garment-industry history includes our own tragic factory fire—not back in the dim reaches of the Taft administration, but a half-century ago, in 1957. As in the Triangle fire, women found themselves fatally trapped on a faulty fire escape. As in the aftermath of the Triangle fire, public officials said the New Haven disaster could have been avoided with such simple measures as fire drills and sprinklers. Forty-six years after the national disgrace that was the Triangle fire, these measures were still optional in Connecticut.

In many American workplaces, health and safety are still optional. Husbands and sons and fathers died in last year's entirely preventable coal-mining disasters in West Virginia and Kentucky. Rescue workers survived the conflagration of 9/11, only to contract fatal lung diseases from the toxic mess at Ground Zero. Workers have recently died of brain cancer after decades of making jet engines at Pratt & Whitney Aircraft, right here in Connecticut. Too many workers still have to choose between a paycheck that will support their families and an employer that wants to make sure they live

to see their families at shift's end. And not everyone is lucky enough to have parents like Amelia Spose or my great-grandparents, who can help their offspring avoid such a choice. As *Triangle*, and our recent history, remind us, better opportunities don't come automatically to younger generations.