

THE JOY DIVISIONS

A NOVEL

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On the Saturday after Ed started at Greif, Ed thought about Kunstkeller's words as he drove into the parking lot of the old Phoenix Clothes building, Adelaide Mills at 333 Court Street, down by the Jordan Creek.

Ed met Stan and his daughter, Joanie, who was just in for the holidays. Joanie was twenty-five, and she was getting her master's degree from Penn State out in University Park, writing her thesis on Lehigh Valley labor history. Stan wanted her along to give the context in a way Ed might appreciate. She dressed simply in jeans

The Joy Divisions

and a maroon jacket; she pulled her hair back into a ponytail and wore no visible makeup as far Ed could see. Ed could not tell if this was her usual uniform when she was at school, or if she was performing this identity for her father's benefit.



“I know that you’re not very excited about joining the union,” said Stan, “so I thought that you should see some of your history. It’s part of my job as the shop steward, but I love talking about the union. We obviously didn’t start out in that giant industrial park in Hanover Township. That’s only been there the last ten years or so. This is the original Adelaide Mills. Your mom and dad met in this very building back in the mid-sixties. When they got your old house up on 5th Street for ten thousand bucks, they’d drive together over here every morning. It was only, like, two miles.”

“I don’t get the Adelaide Mills sign,” said Ed. “Wasn’t it always called Phoenix Clothes?”

Joanie explained. Built in 1881, the Adelaide Silk Mills operation in Allentown, Pennsylvania was one of the largest of its kind in the world. After the 235,000-square-foot site was constructed, it revitalized the area after iron making, the key industry in the region, started to decline following the implosion of the railroad boom. The Mills were built by a silk-making firm that relocated from Patterson, New Jersey, called Phoenix Manufacturing, run by a young man named Albert Tilt. Tilt thought of himself as a great industrialist after he had inherited the company

and control of his father's firm. The family had been in silk making, which was a fairly new industry in his father's time, since the 1830s. Albert's father, Benjamin B. Tilt, came to the States from Coventry, England in 1835, and his arrival in America was preceded by a fortuitous antecedent. In 1830, the Chinese Mulberry (*morus multicaulis*) arrived on America's shores. While perhaps a mundane occurrence in other times or with other trees, the silkworms that fed on the Mulberry produced superior silk, it was said, so Congress promoted its culture, leading to wild speculation and bidding, referred to in the media as "the morus multicaulis craze." This craze helped to establish Tilt's rise from silk apprentice to the founder and president of the Phoenix Manufacturing Company. Eventually the value of the tree soared beyond the value of the actual silk, leading to the inevitable crash around 1840. Somehow, no one saw this coming, yet Benjamin weathered this slump. Albert was born from the ashes of that slump the next year.

In 1862, when he turned twenty-one years old—the "attainment of his majority" as the law referred to it at the time—Albert was added as a partner in Benjamin's new business, B.B. Tilt & Son. At first, he did not mind only being "& Son." His father was a great man, after all, and embodied everything a booster could possibly say about what American industry promised. The entrepreneur's poster boy: talented, shrewd, and fortunate. He saw the state of the world and exploited a desire that the world did not know it had. Father and son had many productive schemes, such as representing to the 1876 Centennial Exposition the many benefits and possibilities of silk by handing out a lot of free souvenirs—an event they repeated at the Paris Exposition two years later. After his death in 1879, Benjamin willed the Phoenix to his son, who immediately became president and general manager.

Of course, the heir is not the creator. It is one thing to build something from nothing. It is another thing altogether just to inherit it. The year after his father's death, the thirty-eight-year-old tycoon wanted to move the company, looking for easy waterpower

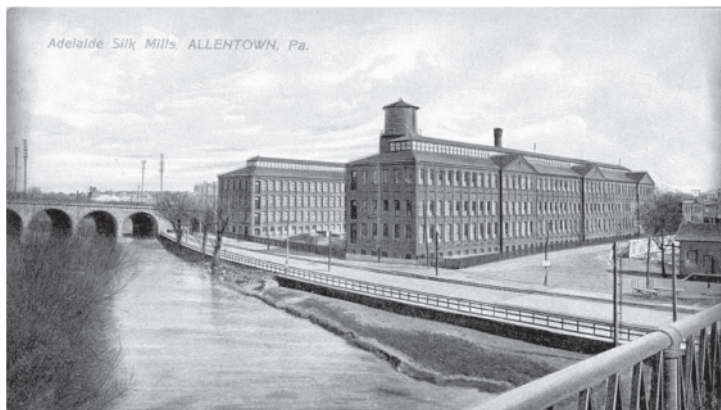
The Joy Divisions

and even cheaper labor, not particularly caring that he would be putting all of the current employees out of work. Albert also expected the new community to pay for the privilege, while his wife, Adelaide, would have her name christen the new plant.

“Now, is that romance, or what?” quipped Stan.

Allentown’s desperate town leaders champed, and Albert had his back scratched so hard that he was almost flayed alive. The Silk Factory Fund Association, with a little greasing from a Philadelphia bank, got the locals to pony up the money to construct their own factory for their own future owner. The robber baron required the funds of the people, and they, for some reason, required someone to own them. The locals funded the factory. The locals provided the materials for construction. The locals built the damn thing. Phoenix provided the machinery to the tune of \$150,000 of the latest silk weaving equipment to start the new venture, a good chunk of it moved from the old mill in Patterson.

The factory’s grand opening on November 17, 1881 was catered by a chef brought in from New York’s Metropolitan Hotel. Fanfare, faith, and fairgrounds. Adelaide had her own two-step named after her by the Allentown Band, whose name continued that city’s ongoing tendency to name things after itself. Imagine a stereotype of late nineteenth-century pomp and circumstance, and that is what Allentown looked like until the wee hours of the morning.



The mill was a massive success, depending on how you define that word. With the hard and cheap labor provided by the company's employees, the Phoenix soared, creating wealth for both the workers and their owner—mostly the latter. Of course, this was not an idyllic world, and there were the inevitable tragedies. Kids started working in the Adelaide as young as ten or twelve years old; widowed women would often pull kids out of school to “help out” in the mills. Work went from six in the morning to six at night, with only a half-hour lunch. In the late nineteenth century, the occasional horror story was par for the course. There was no OSHA back then, and management felt little pressure to make workers' safety a real priority. In 1888, a seventy-horse boiler exploded at seven o'clock in the morning, killing three men and wounding many others. One of them, Hiram Sell, was pinned alive, his right leg broken, and his left leg crushed by a heavy iron lever. No one could move the machinery, and he screamed in mortal anguish. Foreman to the end, he instructed his coworkers to amputate his leg, the only way to move him. He died three hours later in what the papers described as “excruciating agony.” Both of the other men were horrifically disfigured. One of them, Henry Bohrans, was only twenty-seven years old, and his wife gave birth to their second son that same night.

“I've always thought of that story about Hiram Sell,” said Stan, “as a perfect metaphor for the history of labor in this country.”

Joanie smiled somewhat primly at her father. Before she went off to college, he wasn't exactly one to find metaphors in anything.

“And imagine poor Mrs. Bohrans,” Joanie said. “What kind of life was she to look forward to with two kids and a newborn in tow, a newborn not even old enough to work in the mill? This is long before government cheese and Medicaid.”

By Albert Tilt's death in 1900 at age fifty-nine, the Adelaide Silk Mills employed 1,900 people, a strange symmetry not marked by any of the local papers. In that entire time, Albert and Adelaide never lived in Allentown itself. They still resided in Paterson, New Jersey until 1888, after which they moved to New York, where

they became citizens.

“Tilt was an interesting case,” Joanie said, “because he serves as a sign of the changes that have happened in the history of American labor. The libertarian fantasy of the genius industrialist who through a little gumption and can-do spirit rose above the lowly crowd is asinine when you look at the history of these movements. Albert’s father was the closest to this archetype, but his son merely inherited the wealth and learned how to consolidate power by exploiting the desperation of the poor.”

“Remember this, Ed,” said Stan. “Power accretes. Just like money.”

“And still,” said Joanie, “as the sole owner of the firm, Albert felt an obligation to make his workers happy. Upon his death, the leftist *American Economist*, which had as its subheading, ‘Devoted to the Protection of American Labor and Industries,’ offered an almost hagiographic obituary.”

Joanie pulled out of her jacket pocket a printout from a microfiche copy of the *American Economist*:

In the death of Mr. Albert Tilt the silk industry of the United States loses one of its great captains. At the time of his passing away, May 2, 1900, Mr. Tilt was president and treasurer of the Phoenix Silk Manufacturing Company and president of the Silk Association of America. As a member of THE AMERICAN PROTECTIVE TARIFF LEAGUE Mr. Tilt was an active supporter of the cause of Protection, and he lived long enough to witness the splendid triumph of sound economic principles in the phenomenal development of silk manufacturing, one of Protection’s most stalwart children.

“Protection” meant protecting American markets by raising taxes on imports to keep American goods competitive. Back then, the Republicans were the Lefties, and people like Lincoln made their careers in backing tariffs. “I am in favor of a national bank,” Lincoln said in an early 1832 speech. “I am in favor of the internal improvement system, and of a high protective tariff.” Of course, an industrialist like Albert Tilt loved tariffs because it protected his silk mills, but the workers loved it, too, because it secured them

a livelihood.

The Silk Association of America made a resolution the day after Albert's death, pointing to the fact that he was "always closely related to every progressive movement both in the industry and in the association.":

Resolved: That we unfeignedly mourn the loss which has come to us; that we take pride in his conspicuous relation to the development and upbuilding of the silk industry in this country; that we recall with pleasure his record of fairness and justice to the many employees in his mills, and that his highly esteemed personality will ever be a delightful memory to his surviving friends.

Of course, not all tariffs worked to the benefit of the common people, but it sustained the employment of entire industries. Tariffs were never going to provide a blanket protection of any job that ever existed. The McKinley tariff of 1890 actually hurt several industries, but Phoenix did fine.

After Tilt's death, Phoenix Clothes seemed to take on a life of its own, and it continued to provide the blood to the veins of an entire community in a way almost unimaginable today. By 1929, one-quarter of Allentownians were employed by silk makers like Phoenix Clothes; Allentown alone had over twenty silk mills, and the Lehigh Valley was recognized as America's silk-making center. The Great Depression, not caused by a single laborer in the country, decimated the silk-making industry. Manufacturing slumped. Luxury products like silk fabric were decidedly out of fashion. In four years, half of the workers lost their jobs. Wages were slashed seventy-five percent to maintain high profits. Think about that for a while. The belt that tightened around the workers' waists began to tighten around the industrialists' necks. Labor unrest made the great industrialists nervous, so in the 1930s, ten silk plants migrated south for cheaper labor and more easily controlled desperation.

"This is what I'm talking about, Ed," said Stan. "When a company is owned by one or two people or a family, people are accountable. If you want your company to survive, you can take

a hit in an economic downturn. It's like getting laid off from a job. Just because, you dip into your savings or put some things on credit cards for a bit. You don't liquidate your family. And when you live in the community and come to work and see where your workers live and how they live, then you can't be that surprised when they want to negotiate higher wages and better working conditions. At least guys like Tilt seemed to be that way. Don't get me wrong. Plenty of the robber barons couldn't give two shits about their workers, which is why we needed unions in the first place. But that all goes out the window when the company incorporates. Once it is owned by faceless investors, profit is king. Fuck community. Fuck the local schools. Fuck whether your employees have health insurance without a \$2000 deductible."

"It's true," said Joanie. "Phoenix was bought out and merged with Greif Brothers of Baltimore back in 1982 during the last recession, because Phoenix was struggling and couldn't compete against cheap, non-tariffed Korean imports. Greif was, and is, a subsidiary that was gobbled up by a giant corporation out of Nashville, Genesco, fifty years before. Genesco was started by a couple of men, James Jarman and William Wemyss, back in 1924 as the General Shoe Company. They went public in 1939 and have been buying up everything in textiles throughout the eastern seaboard. Genesco needed to keep growing, because that's what corporations do. After Greif bought Phoenix, there were 'redundancies,' as they chillingly refer to human beings after a corporate takeover, so they consolidated the two divisions to become the company you're now working for today."

"And don't kid yourself, Ed," said Stan. "If they could ship everything off to be made in Indonesia tomorrow, they would. Thank god it is still too expensive to do so; what do you think would happen to this city if industry just left? To this country? If a corporation could get away with paying you ten cents an hour, why wouldn't it? And yet in less than two weeks this Slick Willie Clinton is going to get sworn in, and his first priority is to push through NAFTA, a Republican wet dream."

Ed looked confused.

“The North American Free Trade Agreement,” said Joanie.

“Never heard of it,” said Ed.

“Most people wouldn’t have if it weren’t for Ross Perot. Do you remember the debates?”

“Was he the little *Lord of the Rings* character? I was a little preoccupied this election. I didn’t vote.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “It could just mean the end of America as we know it.”

“Without being too alarmist,” said Joanie, “it would decimate American manufacturing. NAFTA will get rid of all tariffs in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Ross Perot was the only one in the debates who warned of the ‘giant sucking sound’ of manufacturing plants relocating to Mexico, since they only pay a dollar an hour—about one-seventh or so of what we pay, sadly enough, but enough to make industry excited. They have no health benefits, and no pollution controls, so no one from the EPA, which we fought so hard for in this country, is going to go and tell you that you can’t dump industrial waste into the groundwater. This is the free trade fantasy: getting rid of all borders and acting like countries are equal. Of course, that’s just the beginning. Neoliberals like Clinton share the Republican worldview that only absolute free trade is the way to prosperity for all. And of course, corporations are funding most of these campaigns.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” said Stan. “The only function of a corporation is to make profits and to keep growing to make more profits. The corporation just *has* to do it, like a fungus or a rabid dog. The CEO is a figurehead: if he doesn’t do it, the board of directors will just fire him and get someone who will. It’s nothing personal. As the Don says in *The Godfather*: ‘It’s just business.’ The union doesn’t take it personally. But we’re not going to kid ourselves, either. They’re not our friends.”

“You can’t be friends with a headless hydra,” said Joanie.

Stan sipped his coffee, thinking.

“Usually when we want things to grow,” he said, “there is a

reason for it. A corporation has either to pay out the profits every year to shareholders or they have to spend its profits on expansion projects, which is why they keep buying up other businesses. Their only capital is in their holdings. So rather than save, they have to keep growing.”

Joanie smiled, sadly, as though watching some slow ship head towards its fated iceberg partner. “Growth as an end in itself is the logic of cancer.” Ed looked up into the darkened windows, thinking of his mother.

Stan sat up, erect, stretching his back a little. “The last two hundred years have been a long, proud tradition of the struggle of the common worker, Ed. While you might be slumming it with us and don’t think it is important, the union helps keep people employed and helps them to put food on their tables. The only reason we make a decent living at all and have some self-respect is because we got together and demanded it.”

“It’s true,” said Joanie. “Until unions, labor was treated like a commodity, but a commodity that couldn’t set its own price. You wanted to start a silk mill, you had to put up the capital for the silk threads, and the silk thread providers set the price based on the cost of their insanely expensive trees. You had to pay for bricks at a price set by the brickworks. Yet labor was the only commodity where the employer could say, ‘This is what I’ll give you.’ Once people came together and unionized, they could say, ‘This is what we cost.’ It was one of the greatest developments in labor history.”

“Look, Ed,” said Stan. “You may have dropped out of college because you were bored or unfulfilled, or whatever, but the only reason you went in the first place and weren’t dead of black lung or rickets from being entombed in some godforsaken coal mine during the only twelve hours a day when the sun was out is because of unions. And don’t ever forget it.”

Ed promised he would think about it, said goodbye, and headed back to his car. He looked up at the long-abandoned and decaying building, thinking of Hiram Sell and wondering at the palimpsest histories of all the traumas within.