

A Flower for Daisy

By Diane Fortuna

...naked they shall be one

With the man in the wind and the west moon

When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,

They shall have stars at elbow and foot

Though lovers be lost love shall not;

And death shall have no dominion.

—Dylan Thomas



Of Spanish and English parentage, Daisy Lopez was born in Kingston, Jamaica on January 11, 1885. She was just 22 years old when a devastating earthquake and subsequent fire leveled downtown Kingston and killed over one thousand people. Injured in that January 14, 1907 holocaust, she left Jamaica soon thereafter with her sister, Ianthe, 20. They sailed on the R. M. S. Trent, arriving in New York, July 25, 1907, all thoughts of fire, death, and destruction left behind.

Before the end of the year, Daisy got a job as a practical nurse at a rest home on the Jersey shore. When she returned to New York City, she worked as a stenographer in an insurance office. By April

of 1910, she was living in a boarding house at 13 Charlton Street, south of Greenwich Village. Also rooming there was Henry Fitze, a young Swiss immigrant. In the course of time, they fell in love, and on January 15, 1911, they exchanged marriage vows at the Spring Street Presbyterian Church, the Rev. H. Roswell Blake officiating. For three years, Fitze had saved all his extra money in the hope of returning to Switzerland to buy property and open a modest inn. Daisy shared his dream. In early 1911, they decided that Henry would leave for Europe without her, roughing it until he found a suitable place when she would join him. By May, they would be together again.

Two pictures from this happy period are extant. In the first, taken when Daisy was working at the shore, ca. 1908, she stands to the far right of a group of co-workers in striped shirtwaists, white lace collars and long white skirts, some sitting on the sand in front of a columned courtyard.

The second photograph of Daisy is a studio portrait in formal dress taken in New York, possibly for her engagement. Her wavy upswept brown hair frames her round face. Her ample shoulders are bare, and a tulle scarf, held in place by two large silk roses, softens the décolletage of her gown. Her eyes are dark and serene, her mouth wide and generous.

Though her husband left her with sufficient money, Daisy felt lonely with him gone and, having time on her hands, decided to earn a few extra dollars. She saw an ad calling for garment workers at a factory downtown. Like all the Lopez girls, she sewed proficiently and had no difficulty landing the job near Washington Square. The factory occupied the top three floors of the Asch Building (now owned by New York University). She could easily walk to work from Charlton Street.

One Saturday in early spring — it was March 25, 1911 — Daisy left for work hopefully. She was young and pretty. She loved and was loved in return. Soon she would be

leaving for Europe to start a new life. The world lay all before her, and, in addition, it was payday.

Daisy never came home from the Triangle Shirtwaist



Daisy Lopez (standing far right) and co-workers at the Jersey shore, 1908

Factory. When fire broke out on the eighth floor of the Asch Building, she had just picked up her paycheck. Within minutes, the ninth floor where she worked was also engulfed in flames. The windows shattered and blew out. Panic set in. There seemed to be no where to go, the elevators jammed, some of the doors to the narrow stairwells were locked and the inadequate iron fire escape literally melted. In desperation, workers perched on window ledges high above the street. As the flames and smoke swiftly and relentlessly advanced toward them, girls began hurling themselves off the sills.



Appalled spectators witnessed one woman lifting up her arms and eyes to the indifferent sky, seemingly mouthing a silent prayer, before she threw herself down to the street below. Many workers fell and piled on top of one another, the weight of their bodies rendering useless the safety nets held by firemen. Some smashed through the glass-block vault lights in the sidewalk making a hole five feet in diameter; their mangled corpses were later found in the basement of the building.

Rather than burn to death, Daisy and her friend, Freda Polakovski, jumped hand in hand.

Amazingly, Daisy and Freda survived the plunge from the ninth floor. A rescue van transported both women to New York Hospital where Daisy lingered for two days and Freda for three, both finally dying of shock and internal injuries.

When the worst fire in New York history was over, 146 workers, most of them immigrant girls, had perished. The hospital and municipal morgues overflowed with the bodies of the dead. Victims for whom there was no space were laid out on the Twenty-Sixth Street pier side by side, some so badly burned that grief-stricken family members could make positive identification only by recognizing an article of jewelry, or in one case, the remains of a single repaired shoe.

Some charred bodies could not be identified. They were buried in a mass grave at The Evergreens Cemetery, Brooklyn. With profound and public grief, the officials of the City of New York erected a large marble column that for many years stood alone in an empty field at the site. Now there are other graves around the obelisk, but at the time, the desolation of the scene was itself deeply moving. Cut into the stone is the figure of a classically draped woman resting her head on an urn, one knee bent, in an attitude of prayer or resignation. An inscription beneath the bas-relief reads: "In sympathy and sorrow the Citizens of New York raise this monument over the graves of unidentified women and children who with one hundred and thirty others perished in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, Washington Place, March 25, 1911."

Horrified by the tragedy, the State legislature enacted strict safety standards for garment factories as well as for other businesses; rules that still are in force today. Testifying to these efforts, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union had a brass plaque installed on the façade of the Asch Building: "On this site, 146 workers lost their lives in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire on March 25, 1911. Out of their martyrdom came

new concepts of social responsibility and labor legislation that have helped make American working conditions the finest in the world."

Public funds paid for the Evergreens grave where Daisy was buried and for the gray marble headstone there that marks her resting place. Engraved on it are the words: "Daisy Lopez Fitz. Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." These words come from the Gospel according to John 15: 13. What could Daisy have done to merit such an inscription? Had she been heroic in some way?

The answer to that question appeared in the pages of the Kingston, Jamaica newspaper, *The Gleaner*. On April 5, 1911, the daily carried the notice of Daisy's death and later reported on her actions during the fire.

A Jamaican's Death

Dr. Lopez, the dentist, yesterday received a letter from New York telling of the death of his sister, Miss Daisy Lopez, in the great fire. She jumped from the ninth floor and was injured. She was removed to a hospital in New York, where she died on the 27th ult.

Miss Lopez was injured in the 1907 earthquake in Kingston, and left afterwards for New York, where she joined her sisters and brothers.

"Great Horror: Details of New York's Terrible Blaze", *The Gleaner*, (April 5, 1911) 14

In a story appearing five days later, the newspaper added her married name and the circumstances that justified the quotation on her tombstone.

A Jamaican's Heroism

The funeral of Mrs. Daisy Lopez Fitz, one of the two young women who were found alive after jumping from the ninth floor of the Asch Building in Washington place, last Saturday, was held last night from the Spring Street Methodist Church.

Mrs. Fitze, who died at New York Hospital, was declared by the Rev. Roswell Blake, pastor of the church, in his funeral sermon, to have sacrificed her life to save others. He declared that she had told him before her death that she had directed more than fifty girls to a stairway, and had jumped to the street only after she found that escape was impossible for her.

"Terrible New York Fire," *The Gleaner* (April 10, 1911), 6



*A Single Flower Blooms on Grave #4430,
Evergreen Cemetery*

The same pastor who had married Daisy conducted her funeral. She had been a bride for ten weeks. Having narrowly escaped death in the Kingston conflagration four years before, Daisy had delivered herself all unknowingly to the fire next time in New York City.

In response to the disaster, ordinary New Yorkers donated generously to a subscription — raising

more than \$120,000 for the victims' families, and the Red Cross dispensed the funds here and abroad. In Switzerland, Daisy's stunned husband grieved privately. The Red Cross tried to compensate him for his loss, but he never contacted its representative. The only recipients of relief were Daisy's desolate sister, Ianthe, a nursing student at a New York hospital, and their father, Christopher Lopez, Sr. of Kingston, Jamaica.

Excerpt from Diane Fortuna, "Balzac y Lopez: a Creole Family Memoir," 21-29. "A Flower for Daisy" won Honorable Mention in the Feature Article category of the 73rd Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition.

The New York Department of Labor first printed the essay and showcased it in its memorial exhibit on the 94th Anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in Albany, March 22, 2005. The next month, New York Senator Serphin R. Maltese hosted a talk about Daisy Lopez on his weekly television program (New York State Senate Office of Communications, Senator Maltese, "Topic: With Guest Diane Fortuna, SUNY at Stony Brook," April 19, 2005).

Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910, New York City, Borough of Manhattan, Enumeration District 109, Sheet 14A lists Henry "Fitzie" and Daisy "Lopass" boarding at 13 Charlton Street. Immigration records and his marriage license list Henry's last name as "Fitze," but the official record of Daisy's interment and her tombstone use the spelling "Fitzl".

Other information in this essay comes from contemporary New York and Chicago newspaper accounts; the Jamaican daily, *The Gleaner*, April 1911; the Red Cross Emergency Relief Committee, *Emergency Relief after the Washington Place Fire, New York, March 25, 1911: a Report*; and the recollections of the Balzac-Lopez families. See also Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (J. B. Lippincott: Philadelphia and New York, 1962) and David von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (Atlantic Monthly Press: New York, 2003). Neither Stein nor Von Drehle mentions Daisy's actions during the fire. In early March 2004, almost 93 years after Daisy's death, I found the two cited articles in the archives of *The Gleaner* at the newspaper's office in Kingston, Jamaica.

Daisy Lopez Fitzl was a great aunt of the writer

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