

Hangin' By Threads

1970

This job was in San Jose, when Burt Bacharach thought it was a small town without freeways, thought nobody in LA would "*Know the way to San Jose*". It was the time of the homegrown Doobie Brothers and the beginning of cassette tapes and the phrase 'Silicon Valley' hadn't infected the media yet. I had just been laid off from General Motors' truck division in Fremont where we had the midnight strike riots so I could see what "class warfare" was really like. After the layoffs I went back to my trade; got back in the Carpenter's union, got back in big-league construction shape...and was sent out of the Hiring Hall to this high-rise senior-citizens housing pile near downtown. Buildings like this are sort of military actions. Everything is broken down into modular efforts and there are squadrons led by Foreman/sergeants who are led by a Superintendent/captain. There was a floors crew, a yard crew...and I was on the walls crew with five others.

We had our chops down; it was the eighth floor and everybody knew what to do. Strip the forms on Seven, get the crane to take them to the yard where those guys cleaned them up, lay-out on Eight with a transit & snapline, shoot the plate to the concrete floor, boom up the new-sprayed forms and set them to the line, fix the bracing close to plumb, build a shut-off to stop the concrete at the far end, steel guys set the re-bar, we bring the other panel, push the rows of snapties through, spike up the walers, put spreaders along the top, tighten the hairpins, align with string, plumb with bob, level with Ken, lunch with Jose. Always like that, week after week, in drizzle or wind or bright sunny day.

The foreman of our crew was a clever, ambitious guy in his thirties. He singled me out to help him use the transit to align the succeeding stories, and enjoyed explaining the more complex engineering he was attempting. Jim was a little much. Trying to be my mentor, to recruit me to the regulars' squad once this job ended.

One of my talents was that I was lean and agile, and pretty much unafraid of height. Jim often asked me to run up the rigging, so to speak, and give him a report from the crows nest... on one occasion the metaphor was closer to the truth. A crane engineer had come out to make a required check of the safety of the tower crane. This involved measuring the drift of the tower as it went up 150 feet or so. My foreman volunteered me to help the guy, and without much preamble, he & I began climbing the trusswork slowly upward, occasionally hooking on our safety belts and doing some measurements. Once we got past 80 feet the sheer height made the climbing more exhausting. Each grip and step seemed more dangerous and of course adrenaline tires you. Not to mention the exercise of freeing one's hands by pretzelling on bars or trusting the safety belt while

passing the tape measure and level. I was thinking the whole time that I was marking a new conquest. This was my Everest. I think what surprised me was the lack of bravado in the other man. He looked like an office worker, wearing khakis and a button-down shirt and glasses....but obviously he had done this often and what came across to me was that a samurai calm was essential. One had to treat 120 feet exactly like 20 feet. I knew that in a less dramatic way, from working on big buildings, but usually there was something below to interrupt a fall.

It came in handy, as we say. Came in handy. One day we were working on the eighth floor, clearing out some forms that had just been released from the faintly warm concrete. Once you get all the ties and bolts and braces and nails loose, the crane hooks on to the top of the form and eases it away from the concrete. Usually this requires a little assistance by way of big four-by-four wedges driven in between the plywood at the top and the new concrete wall. I'd go up and stand on the new wall with the crane's ball nearby...hook on the chokers to the two deeply embedded 'eye'bolts, signal the crane to take up a little strain on the wall...then stick a wedge or two in the crack and find a safe stance from which to whale on it with a sledgehammer. The footing is awkward with rebar ends sticking up two feet alongside your shins, and it's very hard to get a safety-belt attachment anywhere. You just have to free-form it, get balanced and cut loose with some very authoritative blows. You don't want to have to swing twenty times... It's a fine feeling when your wedge sinks on the first smack and you can feel the release of surface grip to the still-damp concrete...the form parts from the wall like an ice-floe, and sags a little, to a point where the crane's grip suspends it. Then you signal the crane up a foot, and the other men guide the bottom to be leaned against some safer column. When all the forms are 'stripped' in this manner, the next job is attaching them again one by one to the crane which would lower them to the yard to be scraped and oiled and repaired for the next floor.

On this particular day, we had a substitute crane operator. I hadn't met him... he was sent out from the Operating Engineers Union to fill in for three days. There's always a little unease about such things. One's relationship to the crane guy is a keen form of teamwork, completely silent. The signaling must be a channel of certainty. When you indicate slow rise of the ball, you must not get a surge upward. If you signal boom down, the operator has to trust that you know exactly what that will do, that it brings the ball further outward and thus lowers at the same time. The operator must know that you have an intuitive sense of how much movement and momentum a load of several tons will tolerate. Often the line of sight for an operator is broken and he can't see the landing spot or the obstruction you're trying to guide over. There is an absolute rule of the crane about this: no operator is allowed to make any movement unless signaled. He must wait for the hand-signal no matter what his eye is telling him. When you work with a single operator for months, there are times when this rule is broken. On this job for example, sometimes I would be the one sent down to the yard to hook on the forms for the next story above. I'd go over to the correct form, the crane's hook would follow me without a signal across the yard, would wait patiently behind me while I checked to make

sure I had the right one...and then would come up like an elephant's trunk next to me, barely touching my shoulder. I'd take hold of the ball and hook & the operator would lift me up to the top of the form. Nothing spectacular, but it was a rush to feel the easy power under you as the ball silently swished upward...and the gentle placing of it right where you needed to be to step onto the top and hook on the chokers. I loved that stuff; it was like a childhood fantasy of being a mahout. The strongest being on the planet was silently obeying and assisting me like a best friend.

But our regular guy was sick this day. After lunch I was working on the top floor with my partner, hooking up the biggest wall forms to the crane and then guiding them between walls & piles of debris to the edge of the building so they could be lowered to the yard below. The walls are twenty-four feet long, ten feet high & weigh half a ton with all the mass of framing lumber that it takes to keep them rigid under the pressure of a concrete pour. We were moving along an aisle between walls, the bottom of the form at chest height so we could hold it, one of us at each end, to keep it from twisting or bashing into anything. It rocked up & down as we walked along, my end going up above my head a little, then seesawing down...I just ignored this, only concerned with the side-to-side motion, the 'aim' of the thing. At one point I saw that a pile of re-bar and concrete debris was in my path, and a split-second decision came to me because the seesaw motion was conveniently beginning upward...and I just clung to the form and let my legs leave the floor, tucking them up to clear the pile. It would have been perfect...but just at that moment the crane took the cable upwards. The small hop I expected translated up effortlessly with that gliding power and by the time I understood what was happening, I was eight, ten, twelve feet above the floor...it was too late to let go! The debris I would smash into if I dropped would certainly impale me. I had no choice now but to hang on and hope the crane would descend right away. Why had he gone up anyway? We hadn't signaled him...?

But he didn't lower it, the ball kept rising until I was twenty feet above the deck, which itself was eighty feet above the ground. Each few seconds I went through ghastly feelings; terrible fear, resignation, a sense of farewell to my young wife and children; then moments of intense concentration on the framework I was holding. And waves of something like prayer as well, from my whole chest; *please, please let him bring it down...* But he didn't.

Now the crane began a horizontal tracking, he was booming eastward to get clear of the building. I glanced down and saw the gulf below me, a hundred feet of the void, a hundred feet of absolute certain death. At this moment a tremendous gust of energy came over me. I heard my mind as if eavesdropping saying: "*I'm not going to die up here! If I have to climb right up that fucking cable, I am not going to die here*". Then a lucid, magnified visual take on the frame above me. I was gripping the bottom horizontal two-by-four with both hands. I had the sensation that I was making an imprint in the lumber, squeezing it until finger holds were crushed into it. I felt my hands were superhuman, my forearms were humming as if electrified. But I knew that I would not be able to hold on

much longer, and saw that there was only one chance to get a better grip. I would have to grab the vertical 'walers' that crossed at right-angles to the frame I was holding. It would mean letting go with my right arm, then heaving up a foot so I could stab my hand and forearm in between the walers and the frame. That same rush came over me again, that I could climb right up if necessary. And I gathered myself and did it.

There was a nanosecond of feral nerve when I let go with the one hand. My left arm told my right: *'go! I've got you covered, trust me!'* And was true to its word. Once I got the forearm through, I knew I could get a more permanent grip. Now I let go with the left hand, and snatched my right hand, locking myself like a big handcuff around the waler. A huge outbreath, my whole body shook with a kind of pleasure and terror combined. Now I knew it would take a hurricane to pry me loose, and I was able to take in my situation. I believe this whole thing took about five seconds.

I saw that I was swinging slowly around over the yard with piles of lumber & rebar far below me. Men were shouting. The edge of the building was a hundred feet to my left, and my crew were all on the edge leaning over the guard rail yelling support, *"Hold On!" "Hang in there!"* They were reaching out as if they would catch me. It struck me as pathetic and beautiful. Of course they couldn't do that. But they wanted to, they were telling me they would save me if it was humanly possible. The foreman was screaming at the crane operator, telling him to take me in slowly, not to jerk the ball. He was afraid I would be stripped-off by a sharp stop in a downward pay-out. I knew I wasn't going to get loose no matter what that guy did. Slowly we swung over the building; the crew gathered under me, and the form eased downward until they could grab my legs. Then I was on the floor, the men were holding me, they were saying *"You can let go now, man, we've got you!"* But I couldn't at first. I needed help getting my hands apart and the forearm out of its clench. It was like rigor mortis. Then I was standing free...but then I wasn't, I slumped. I felt suddenly as if all my joints had turned to jello, my muscles were taffy, it all melted completely. I was on the ground helpless. Men picked me up under the arms, but I couldn't make my legs work for about five minutes. They were rubberized. It was almost comical but I couldn't smile. I had the gravest feeling I've ever experienced. Like I had in fact died.

They assisted me down the stairs to the shack and laid me down on a cot. The foreman stood awhile watching over me. Finally he said, *"Man...I'm glad that was you up there...old Higgins would've been dead."* It was a compliment but didn't feel that good. Shouldn't have been me up there either. He picked up my thought and added: *"That son-of-a-bitch crane operator is fired!"*

The day was nearly over anyway, so he told me I could go home as soon as I felt capable. They left me lying there and after a half-hour I left. I was still in a state of morbidity and I wanted to go home & think. Something had happened that wasn't able to hear itself in the job shack. I was performing for the crew & the boss...feeling like what everyone wanted now was for me to run up the scaffold cheerfully and say I was fine.

I drove home and couldn't greet my wife civilly. I wanted to, but the monosyllables drained away from my lips in a surly drone. She knew instantly anyway. One look and she knew to stay clear & wait for me to gather words. At that moment I was turning over & over the thought that I should never go back. I should never give Fate another chance to kill me like that.

I lay down on the living room floor flat on my back. I couldn't move, it was coming over me again, the muscle collapse. Just a log lying on the floor empty. Don't know what to say. She's very worried, I have to say something. When I finally explained, it was very brief...but there was no way to minimize the gravity of what had happened. We stayed like that a long time. She staring at me, occasionally saying "*You don't have to go back. We'll get by, you can get a different job, the trade isn't that important...*"

But it was not a conversation of equals. I was shellshocked, having flashbacks, electrical jolts of memory...*that lunge upward*. The insanely bad luck of having left my feet just as the crane went up. How my confidence with cranes, my youthful "hops" had led me into a face-off with Death. How could she enter my narrative, what I was telling myself had happened? Impossible.

After a while, the kids came in the room. That wasn't a force I could withstand. They figured: *Dad is lying on the floor, O Boy, our favorite!* And came rumpling over teasing and trying for a wrestle. The scene at work switched off, I smiled at them, I was myself. But later that night after bedtime, talking a little with my wife, I realized I was going to go right back the next day. Something like this: I had faced the worst already! They can't do anything to me now. And a theme from my dad: that one gets right back up on the horse after being thrown. He never rode horses, it was just the adage-mine we all used in California, feeling that cowboy lore was still our Deep Stuff. I suppose too that I wanted the feeling of respect I knew was waiting for me if I did show up next morning. Wanted the slap on the shoulder, the grin, the gladness to see me, the little edge of admiration...and that's just what I got.