

## Poets At Work... San Francisco 1973

I was sent from the union hall to a high-rise job, the Holiday Inn on Van Ness Street. The steel framework was already complete, and it loomed up twenty-six stories, far above its neighborhood. The contractors were a family of ex-Marines and the eldest son, Jack, ran the job with military overtones and a terrible sense of humor. For example: there was a company man from Norway, a heavy drinker with dark hangovers. One Monday he didn't show up until after lunch, still drinking. Jack put him to work anyway. Gave him the nailgun and told him to work by himself – nailing down loose plates on every floor. Then he provoked him, playing on some drunken score he felt unsettled in the crew of regulars. The Steward and I saw them at the elevator and heard some of the agitating.

“That's right Thorvald...you can't trust these assholes. Ray might've told me something, *sure* he might have. Fact is any of these guys would tell me anything I need to know about you. But you're such a coward Thorvald. Disgrace. Always talking that shit how you'll make him pay someday. Bullshit.” ... and on like that. Thorvald left with his nailgun and a box of .22 caliber shells.

The Steward said, “I don't think Thorvald ought to be roaming the job with a gun that way, as soused as he is.”

Jack came right back; “Oh come off it. He won't do anything. And what if he did? that'd be fucking wild, shoot a guy with a nailgun! Like to see that.” Big guffaw. Maybe he was drunk too.

The foremen were pushers rather than experienced carpenters who had risen thru skill & merit. There was a reactionary, punishing sensibility in all conversation. One weekly safety meeting I ventured to raise a serious issue. Safety meetings were mandated and regular – to comply with the State & Union in trying to cut down on the accident rate. We were supposed to bring up things we'd noticed during the week

that needed correcting. Maybe a bunch of loose boards in the scaffold rail. Or even more serious matters that the Steward might have been looking into.

So on this one particular day I had been brooding about something I had read in the newspaper regarding the use of asbestos in the fire-protection cladding sprayed onto the steel framework throughout the building. Before the rooms are framed in, each floor is just a bare steel grid with a concrete floor. All those exposed beams and girders covered with the soft fire-retardant were shedding it in the wind – and the dust was blowing all around us as we worked. I asked the steward if he could bother to find out: “Is there asbestos in the spray? Because it said in the paper yesterday that stuff will give you lung cancer.”

The steward began cautiously to promise to check it out, and was interrupted by Jack: “What the hell do you want to know about that for? What do you think we’re going to do, supply you with oxygen masks? Haw! Look, this meeting is over, get back to work!”

I was pretty unhappy in that crew, but eventually they partnered me with an apprentice who was quiet and thoughtful. There was a period when they had us laying-out the wall plan on the concrete floors up above the twentieth. It was less supervised and a big relief. We ended that assignment on the roof, the 27th floor. Working our way along the extreme edge striking lines for the parapet wall that would be made by steelworkers. Mostly we crawled, out of respect for the 300 feet of space below us, but it was thrilling: a kind of pinnacle for a young carpenter.

Next we were working in a more general crew of ten, in the basement, creating a concrete stairs & flooring – with their worst foreman. No chance to talk with the bastard standing right near us all day, occasionally barking out something like “Hey, were not paying you to pick your nose, buddy!” If you asked him about the blueprint he snapped at you to conceal his ignorance of stair geometry, and you’d have to just figure things out on the fly. I’d noticed some new guys from the Hall, and one in particular who I had been teamed with one day, a new apprentice named Peter Allen. He was clearly a little out of synch. His hammer was inappropriate, his

overalls brand-new. It's easy to discern an educated voice even when it's just asking for a handsaw. (You might hear it say *discern*).

We finished moving a load of posts and had a moment to ourselves, out of range of the boss. We exchanged some basics, like... married or not, kids, years in trade, last job. We were clearly edging outside the vocabulary of proletarian San Francisco. He said it first: "Did you go to college?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

"Where?"

"San Francisco State, a couple of years."

"Oh yeah? What did you major in?" He sounded a little sarcastic and had the trace of a grin.

"English."

"What especially did you study in English?"

"Well ... it was poetry."

"Oh yeah?" he said, looking like he was on to me. "Who's one of your favorite poets then?"

This guy seemed to have caught the provocative, baiting tone of the company. But I was older and a full journeyman, and felt like dismissing him:

"OK, you need to know? my favorite poet is Gerard Manley Hopkins."

He stared at me with that same mischievous grin. Several beats went by as he let me swing out there at the end of my limb. Then he just said, "You mean: *I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon...*"

and I finished it for him: "...*in his riding of the rolling level underneath him steady air.*"

"Yeah, *that* Gerard Manley Hopkins."

