

Disappearance

by **Patrick Dobson**

I hoped the day would remain overcast. A winter day with a crystalline sky set my teeth on edge and a peculiar tension gripped my insides. If the sky cleared, I'd grow frazzled. The hard-edged light of the season scraped hard against my nerves. My thoughts raced. Sometimes the stress was so great I wanted to vanish . . . zip, gone.

I don't easily deal with this peculiar malady sitting still. The return of night or of clouds and freezing rain and snow would settle me again. Something about the nuances of darkness was calming, reassuring. In the meantime, work always helped. The adrenalin and repetitive nature of hard labor soothed my agitated soul and quieted my fitful mind. Once my head cleared and my heart steadied, labor's balms got right to the spiritual mark. I could ignore the noise of a clear winter day and put my head down and do my job, get home, and hide from the light.

The wind bore down from the north. The previous days' melt had turned the construction site into a gumpy mess. Now, the night's cold had frozen the deep, ribbed tracks of the backhoes and lifts into rock-hard ditches and troughs. My truck jerked across them to the parking area, a plot of dirt barren of snow but for the yellow and orange machines and stacks of cinder block and brick. Bouncing to a stop, I turned off the engine and took in the sudden stillness and quiet. Deeply scored bare dirt spread out past the site to the edge of snowy pasture land, which met the dark sky at the horizon. I asked the first man I could find, an electrician, where the ironworkers were.

"Why, where they're supposed to be," he said.

"Point me," I said with something of a smile. Ironworkers could be anywhere on a job, placing and tying rebar for concrete floors or walls, installing fencing, interiors, and handrails, or erecting steel on the ground, in the air, or in between. I only knew that the union hall had sent me to join a structural crew. They didn't tell me what the job was.

"Up there," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "On the roof."

This was my first job on the structural side of the trade. I was nervous, as I was every time I ventured into unfamiliar territory. The foreman was a leather faced man with a handlebar moustache and icy blue eyes. As I came through the manhole onto the roof, he took off his glove and shook my hand.

“We ain’t usin’ harnesses on this job,” he said as soon as I came off the ladder. “We got three days to roof this box. So, we’re working fast. Harness’d just get in your way. Be careful.”

It seemed a weak command as I looked sixty feet to the concrete slab below the steel bar joists. The foreman was the kind of guy I’d met on other jobs—a good old boy with his head somewhere in the era when ironworkers worked without the safety gear now required by law.

It was the first time I was working at height. I didn’t have the sense at that time in my apprenticeship to tell the guy I wasn’t working without a harness to catch me if I slipped on the iron. I looked down. I wasn’t scared of heights but still got a heady rush. The foreman sent me to work with the men attaching three-inch angle iron to the walls above the bar joists with three-quarter-inch anchor bolts.

At first, I walked toward the other men working the angle iron but found myself wobbling, trying to balance myself on the joists. I looked up at one point and noticed other men scooting the iron. I sat down on the bar joist and scooted as well. A couple of more experienced ironworkers walked the joists with ease. One man, Billy, an older ironworker in his forties—not quite my age—literally skipped from joist to joist like a jumping spider.

I set to work drilling holes in the cinder-block wall for anchor bolts that would hold the angle iron against the wall. It wasn’t tough work and I fell into a rhythm as the hammer drill sent vibrations up my arm and into my shoulders and neck. The morning passed like a deep breath.

After the ten o’clock break, Billy and I were waiting for a couple of men to rig up a bundle of angle iron the crane operator would fly in to set on the joists. Billy filled his time sort of dancing between joists. My heart nearly stopped when he leapt from joist to joist, which were set about three and a half feet apart. I haven’t been to church or

believed in years but found I crossed myself instinctually when Billy went airborne. My reaction surprised me. All those years of Catholic school still lay just under the surface.

As we waited, I thought of my situation. Here I was again at the beginning, a new man without much of a clue how to do the work. Watching Billy, I wished I was back tying rebar. Such work usually took place on solid ground or where you couldn't see the earth, like on a bridge. Months earlier, I had started with the union on a bridge deck carrying and tying tons and tons of rebar. At forty-five, I was one of the oldest men on that job, and certainly the oldest apprentice.

The work was the toughest I've ever done in a life of labor, of lifting heavy things for other people. I bent at the waist and used my new side-cutter pliers to tie the steel rods together with wire, albeit inexpertly, when I wasn't schlepping piles of forty and sixty-foot, three-quarter and one-inch rebar with twenty-year olds. The morning break was too short, as was lunch.

By the end of the first day of bridge work, I couldn't walk. My arms, legs, shoulders, and hands felt like jabs of electricity and, more disturbing, the small of my back was numb to the touch. I was determined to return the next day despite the pain—or because of it. It took a week before I felt like a regular, but sore, human being. Two weeks later my legs and arms had stopped feeling like Reddy Killowatt's lightning-bolt appendages. The feeling in my back returned after three weeks.

That first job introduced me to work I liked. After the pain subsided, I found the work liked me. The day ended almost as soon as it began. Tying rebar became a form of physical meditation. Eight to ten hours of it ripped me with fatigue. Sleep was good. In a short time, work became restorative. I woke mornings fresh and ready to get back to the job.

The other ironworkers were interesting and friendly. I worked with Malco, a black-owned company, and my mates were black and Hispanic men I could work with without the kind of racist banter that comes with working with all-white ironworkers. I was the only white guy on the crew. They were a rough-cut lot, more intimate with the workings of steel than their insides or polite society. They spoke a familiar workingman tongue I understood in all its nuances. Its accents and cadences were comfortable and its meanings open and accessible. Most of the men were friendly, even jovial. The chatter

on the deck, the kinds of taunts and jokes tended toward the impersonal and were often hilarious.

I'd been on the deck for three weeks, listening to the joking, learning to tie wire. We were working in a group, moving slowly down the bridge, the sea of green-epoxied rebar transforming from a rough grid in front of us into solid symmetry behind after we passed over it. The afternoon was hot but with a wind. Everyone was feeling good, even if they were wearing down.

"Man, I want to win that lottery," said Miguel, who had joined the union after many years carrying iron with non-union outfits for cash. He was bent over next to me. "If I win that lottery, I'll buy my wife a house and bring my family from Mexico."

Jesse worked next to him. He cracked a smile and wiped his dark bronze forehead with his glove. He impressed me. He was a nice guy who labored like a beast, seemingly immune to the pain the rest of us felt.

"Lottery, man," he said. "I'd buy an island or a piece of land on an island, you know. Buy a good skiff."

"What's a skiff?" Miguel said.

The foreman, Barry, who had been overseeing work farther down the bridge joined us.

"It's a boat, you know," said Barry, "like a row boat, only a little bigger."

"You'd fish?" I asked Jesse.

"Yeah, fish. But nothing like work. Just fish to be fishing. I'd sit in a chair every night and watch the sun set. In the quiet. Just sit there."

Some of the other workers stood and chattered about their lottery winnings. I could see Barry looking at them from underneath his hard hat.

"Y'all are nuts," said Dexter, a man from the city who was glad to be an ironworker after a life of drug dealing and prison. His arms were huge, his skin the color of liquid chocolate. He, too, was a good man, easy to work with. "Families? Sitting? Shitfire," he scolded. "I'd buy a fine car, a big fine house, and a big-screen TV. Have a swimming pool and a sauna *and* a hot tub."

Another man, Jerry, who was even newer than me on the job, piped up. We worked as a pair. He was loud and good humored, as slow at tying the bar as I. "I'd

carry a wad in my pocket,” he said. He took off his glove and stuck his hand in his jeans. “And if anyone ever told me to do anything, anything at all, I’d pull out my roll, like this, see,” he slid his hand from his pocket and unrolled his fingers just below his belt. “I’d look at it and then look them in the eye like this and tell them to fuck off. Fuck-you money.” He nodded and bent back to his work. “Yes, sir. That’s what the lottery’d be for me. Fuck-you money.”

By this time, many of us were standing, gloves off, using bandanas and handkerchiefs to wipe our foreheads and the backs of our necks. Barry stood up, all six and a half feet of him. “Man fuck all ya all,” he said, his baritone voice rolling down the bridge. “If any of you losers won the lottery, you’d smoke it up in crack.”

A roar of laughter rose from the group. “Now get your asses back to work!” Barry bellowed. “Bend to it. Make the money you’re gonna drink up this weekend.”

Since I was an apprentice, I’d go to the hall for work when Malco had a lull. I worked rebar with other companies whose crews were white guys from the country. They weren’t as friendly. They also spoke a language I was familiar with but didn’t favor. The white guys often used macho intimidation to show their worth. The racist language and talk about women as sluts and whores grew tiresome. On the other hand, the talk among the black and Hispanic guys more concerned the work and the way people adapted to it (or didn’t) than who was fucking whom, who was weak and unworthy of respect. I always felt good when Malco called me back to work with them.

Now, on the roof job with a contractor completely new to me, the wind started howling, sucking the heat right out of any exposed skin. I stood on five-inch steel beam sixty feet above the ground, waiting for the crane operator to drop three-inch angle iron onto the roof. I was a white guy on a white crew. The talk was getting to me and I hated it. The jokes were mean-spirited and personal. The men rattled on about niggers and spics and sluts and whores all morning. The more it agitated me, the more I bent to my work, leaning into the hammer drill and sinking anchor bolts.

After a few hours of scooting the iron, I comforted myself with, well, at least it’s not a bridge deck. I found the work easy compared to an overpass or retaining wall. On a rebar job, you kept your head down. You stayed busy and moved as fast as you could. You didn’t want to be the guy always standing up when the foreman looked

around. He'd kick you off the job for being a lazy-ass. These structural guys moved more slowly. Here you waited, worked carefully. While we had to get this job done quickly, no one rushed. Still, these guys complained about how hard they had to work. As the new man, I could only listen and nod my head and try to keep my attention on the job.

At one point, Billy and I waited for another load of angle iron. I looked past the bundle floating up from the yard and saw Barry cross from the parked cars to the foreman's trailer. My heart skipped a beat. The chatter and jokes getting under my skin would change. With Barry on the roof, I wondered what these white guys were going to talk about.

He came through the manhole in the finished part of the roof. The foreman pointed him to where Billy and I were waiting for the iron to fly in. Barry walked the joists easily and with confidence. I shook gloved hands and I asked him what he was doing here. Had he quit Malco?

"Nope," he said. "They don't have any work right now. I'm takin' it where I can get it. I usually don't do stuff at height. Gives me willies. Man, it's cold as fuck."

Barry joined me, and Billy bided his time skipping across the beams like he had solid ground under him. The rest of us, especially me, scooted slowly, carefully, almost in slow-motion, conscious that ground always won in a clash between human flesh and the earth.

Once the bundle reached our height, Billy stood still and signaled the operator. Billy guided the stack of angle iron to where he wanted it on the roof. He caught me staring at him.

"Ever wonder why we do this shit?" he asked. He held his index finger downward, rotating his arm slowly to tell the operator the iron was close to landing and to take it real gently.

"I don't know," I said. "Hard work? Good money?"

"Nope," he said. The iron touched down and he patted his hardhat, indicating that the operator needed to stop lowering the load.

"What then?" I inched toward the angle iron to unhitch it from the crane rigging.

“We wanna win the lottery,” he said, “and have to buy the tickets, that’s why. You think a guy’d put his life on the line like this if he had a couple million in the bank?”

“If I win the lottery one of these days, I’d retire, you know, buy a big house in the mountains. I’d walk around with a wad of freedom cash in my pocket. What would you guys do?”

“I’d keep enough for myself to live comfortably,” I said, sitting down next to Barry. “Then give the rest away.”

“Give it away?” Billy said, coming to a full stop on the joist he’d just danced across.

“Yep,” I said. “I only need so much.”

“You say that now,” he said. “But money always needs more money. I hope you get to find that out.” He looked at Barry. “What would you do?”

“Houses, fuck-you money . . .” Barry said. “Nah, that ain’t me.”

“What would you do with all that cash, then?” Billy asked as he sat down next to us.

Barry said, “I’d do the best thing a black man can do in this country.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. We all turned and stared out toward the horizon. We had to unstack all that angle iron and push it out to the walls. Plain, dumb, slow work.

Barry cleared his throat. I felt him shift a little on the beam.

“If I win the lottery, I’d become a memory.”



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