

Andrea Worth

RIGGED

1936

Undal shucks off the ferry, feeling rubbered and unreal. Early that morning, he drove his son Bobby to the county hospital, saying, "It's alright. Alright?" When he carried the boy, finally, through the hospital door, Undal felt a stuttering breath against his hands. The boy's eyes opened, stared up, *up*, that long blue color gazing up.

"Pleurisy," the doctors said to him later. Their clean coats and stiff, straight elbows, the hospital hall, white lights, empty, no scuffs on the floors, no life.

"What's that mean?"

"Fluid around the lung."

"But everything's alright?"

Neat head nodded no, "I'm sorry." Words between even rows of yellowed teeth.

Undal won't think of it. Not now. He has to work. The Golden Gate Bridge job, pride of the city, the job everyman wants. The camp rats are there, waiting for a spot with a bridge crew, so miss one day and a camp-man will take his job. No matter if he is a good bridgeman, no matter if he raised the towers, rigged the catwalks, rolled the cables imagining the rhythm of a heartbeat, putting life itself into the bridge. And no matter if his youngest boy is gone. If he doesn't show for work he doesn't get paid, doesn't get to come back.

On the slot, bridgemen wait for assignments. Undal stands wrapped in his own silence, closes his eyes so he can see nothing but nothing, hear only Alvarez and Frenchy.

“Salt air is stripping the paint right down to the shop coat.”

“Pisser.”

“Look at ‘em over there, job bosses about ready to have a stroke. District is coming at the end of the week and the bridge is peeling so it looks like it’s already old. They’ll need some men to go in the bosun’s chair and brush the girders.”

“No how.”

“Shit fog’s so thick today can’t see your hand in front of your face out there. I hate them painter’s chairs. Too easy to swing out. Give me the high, steady steel any day.”

“Yeah.”

“They need extra men. See it? They’re coming to ask. It’s too damn windy today; they know better. Who wants to feel like he’s getting tossed from one side of the gate to the other?”

Undal opens his eyes. In the morning fog he feels surrounded by a big, bright light. When the job boss points, asking for a man to work painting, he nods, rocks on his heels, says, “Why not?”

The rollers cry as the ropes lower the bosun’s chair. Undal reaches the girders that have to be repainted. Orange, color of the sun, color of light. Life. Above, crews are welding iron grids, which will be buried in cement before the final roadbed is rolled.

Surrounded by the thickly salted fog, he moves his arms.

His boy Bobby came to see him here, back when they were rigging. *It's orange*, Bobby said when he saw the towers, two orange arms stronged through the sky. That day Undal met his son and wife at the edge of the work site. Their other boys were older and did older boy things. Off picking fruit or back alley gambling or fighting. *It's orange, like light, the sun, a burning star, fruit*. Bobby listed all the things he knew as orange, and Undal and his wife Cole each took one of the boy's hands and walked up the street. They stopped at the Russian bakery, got ham and cheese on rye and cookies, and the Russian woman told Bobby, "Don't just eat the sweets or your teeth will fall out." She smiled, dark-gapped mouth, and laughed when Bobby kept on eating cookies, no care at all for the future. *Hard fire, leaves, that stray dog behind our church*. He went on listing things, then asked, *How do you rig, Papa?*

"Bridgemen need a walkway, so we put ropes between those two booms of orange. We're hoisting flatboards of redwood, 100 feet long, and putting them up on that rope. I ride the wood up and hook it in. Way up in the air, over the water. That's how we get it started. Then we go to middle rigging."

Are you afraid to fall?

"Never," he said. "When you work a bridge, you know it like you know your own self, like you know your own children, and you know how to make it alright."

But Bobby didn't hear him, because he was bent into a sharp angle, hand to chest, coughing, coughing, that wet rattle he could never seem to shake loose from his lungs.

Undal feels the steel structure sway from the fists of wind, but it's no worry. The bridge is built to move, become part of the gate so it won't break apart in the wind or an earthquake. He wonders if that sway is a sigh for lost souls. So far, two men dead and

twelve men fallen from the bridge – those landed safe but busted up in the safety net. He imagines those men, pushed out by the wind, or slipping a grip, or making a misstep and not being hooked on. He imagines them swift through the air towards the bay. Breath sucked from them from sheer velocity, the mind preparing for the blindness of death.

He wants to go higher. Working high is kin to glory or god. Fog rolled out below, above only sky, the bright flint of orange hung between. Like heaven. He raises the painting chair up, passing the girders, passing the roadbed work, where, for a moment, he can see men surrounded by rods and sparks. No one notices him and he keeps moving up until the fog again masks all.

He thinks he hears crews above tearing the rigging down. Somewhere, beyond what he can see, is a hard tearing, as if the whole damn thing is coming apart. He keeps raising higher and higher, wanting to get to the rigging, to jump the chair and climb onto the planks and say no, this catwalk has to stay, it's got to.

In his haste, his compass comes loose. He feels the clip against his arm and looks down as it falls. He reaches for it with both hands, but misses. The compass disappears into the fog. He's alongside a vertical cable, in-between the road girders and the main cables. He puts his head in his hands.

He remembers a Sunday when Bobby played with the compass. He told the boy about the middle rigging, standing 600 feet above the bay on wood that had been hooked in, waiting for more. For that phase, derricks raised the redwood to the tower top, then a crew settled the grooved slats onto ropes, pushed the wood out to him and Albert. When the redwood sections came along the rope, they reached up, out, danced them down, hook fastened bolts around the catwalk ropes and the wood, then jam tightered the nuts.

He told the boy he would need the compass back because some mornings the fog was so thick he couldn't see his own feet. The fog was so disorienting then that he had to check the compass, make sure he wasn't facing west toward the open sea. If he faced the wrong way, the slats would side swipe him and push him into a great white nothing. "I hold the compass near my eyes, right myself, wait for Mac's call. When it comes, I slack my muscles, get ready, let go, let the work take over." He handed the boy the compass. *Going up is not the same as north. Going down is not the same as south.* Bobby jumped from the porch rail, watching the compass as he landed. Cole said that it was too cold and the boy should get back to bed, but he told his wife to let the boy be. Bobby wanted to be a bridgeman like his old dad. Bobby climbed the side of the house, tearing through ivy vines, hooking his legs, one after another, onto the roof. He stood, coughing, trying to clear his lungs, and then he called out, *Watch me.* Let himself go into the air.

In the boson chair, surrounded by ghosted air, nothing seems solid. There is only untouchable sound, bright paint, steel. Undal recoats one spot of the vertical cable. He sees nothing but his own strokes, but he can hear the breaking apart of the redwood. Last week, after everyone went home, he took Bobby up to the catwalk. Cole waited below. They wanted to walk all the way across, but it was so windy they could only go out a few yards. They sat for a few minutes. Behind was a dark sky, before them the last red line of the setting sun. The catwalk was strung with lights and the boy thought it looked like heaven. He'd carried Bobby back because the wind was so fierce he worried it might take the boy right over the edge.

"We'll come back," he said. "We'll walk all the way across. I promise."

He's worked so long without gloves that his hands are numb. He drops a brush, the orange paint splattering on his face and jacket. A wind pushes the bosun and his head clips the cable. Rollers squeal. He reaches to hold onto something solid, but there's nothing. Paint rivers his hands and arms. The bucket swings like the tongue of a grandfather clock. When it comes back to center, Undal bends at the elbow and hooks the cable. Stops with a jolt.

Wind whisks around him, sounding like low moans of the men who have fallen from the bridge, their crippling pain, their questioning *why why why*.

After he brought Bobby to the catwalk, the coughing grew worse. Then he couldn't get out of bed. Cole put warm towels on his chest. The cough was long and ragged. Days and days of it. *Tell me bridge stories*, the boy said, his voice like a snapping gun.

Undal grips the cable. *The sun, hard fire, orange*. The wind fists in again and he doesn't fight it. The bosun swings, but this time, he sees the rope unraveling on one side. Everything starts to tip. His hands are too cold and stiff to reach out and stop it.

That morning he carried Bobby to a borrowed truck, drove through the darkening sky, toward Mount Diablo, toward the hospital. He didn't want the boy to be afraid. "We're going to see the bridge, alright? You and me, together. So hold on." Hold on, hold on, those words coming through and away from him until they were nothing words, meaningless, untouchable as burned-off fog. *Hold on. Hold on*. But he could not.

He is falling. Arms legs voice tight to speed tight wrapped by wind moving down down fast there is no air through the lungs the salt scent of death life pushing to blinding light to deep bay water to a hum and the heart's reaching beats pound pound like it can't stay captive in the chest he flies to the mystery colors blend land foothills ocean sky city blend except a final flash of orange.

He tries to inhale but there are only sharp ricks of pain. As though his ribs are bent through his lungs. Something holding him. Like a cradle or large, webbed fingers. He knows the safety net is under him. Words, so small, a thin flight above him. "It's alright, Undal, hold on." A crew coming for him. He imagines their boots running the beams, the dirt road, the net. Their toes catching in the rope squares, arms out to balance as they make their way to him. Until then, he is alone with his pain and the sound of wind through the gateway. He opens his eyes, sees the long blue color of the ocean and holds out his empty hands.