

Andrea Worth

THE RAISING

Down the south tower, across the pier, over to Van Ness Avenue, past the ferry station, up Market Street, and around the corner to the Maroon Dune – there I sat with a chicken dinner and a highball of brandy-water, my throat too tight to swallow. We had just finished raising that south tower, the one on the San Francisco side, which was 746-foot tall, all told. The earthquake came before the end of the shift, rolling that tower underneath us.

“How did you come to be such a damn good bridgeman, Albert Baile?” Jack asked, knocking back another shot of whiskey. No matter what, Jack can drink one after another and another, then walk out without so much as a slur in his step.

“Could say I was born to it.” That’s what I like to believe.

“Shit, I was born to nothing, from a rail town. Had no mind for that kind of work, everything covered in soot.” As if even talking about the railroad could dirty him, Jack held out his hands and examined his palms, fingers, fingernails.

We’d been crewing together on the Golden Gate gig for eighteen months. I was on the raising gang, working with the traveling derrick to hoist and set the hulks of steel, and they had to be set perfect. Jack was on the riveting gang, which operated about a hundred feet down from us raisers. In the riveting gang, one guy hooked onto the outside of the tower and tonged the rivets; another worked inside the tower to secure them. A lot of workers were poisoned because of the fumes when the heat hit the orange paint.

Both me and Jack were up top, setting up for the next phase of the work, when the quake hit. When the tower started swaying.

“I’ll be looking for a little comfort tonight,” Jack said, eyes streaming across the bar to a woman with fire-colored hair. I don’t go in for socializing with Jack much, aside from the bridgework. We ain’t the same kind of man.

“Not me. Need to get some rest before heading back for the real high work, now that the towers are done.” I picked up my highball with both hands, tipped it, but couldn’t drink. “They’ll be a few men that won’t be back after today,” I said, glancing down at my plate full of chicken.

“Yeah well, there’s always men who can’t hold on a job. I came down here and found a man to train me in bridgework because I knew it’d be good money. Hell, eleven dollars a day for this gig is more money than anyone else is making. But I had to learn how to take it, you know.”

The thought of eating that chicken made my stomach feel jellied. I pushed the plate away while Jack talked.

“I hung one-handed in the wind as high as I could until I scared out my own fear. That’s what it takes, men like us, who have no fear.”

“Got that,” I told him and stood up. I had to put my hand on the bar to steady myself. Jack picked at my chicken, plucked the skin off and popped it into his mouth, seemed to swallow it whole.

It was a clear night and I headed up Kilborn Street toward home. I could see the San Fran side tower, tall as ever, and I squinted, trying to see the tower on the Marin side

of the bay, but it was lost to the darkness. The Marin side tower had gone up first, and even the best bridgemen in the union, like me and Jack and a few others, realized right off that the Golden Gate project would be a challenge. Cold that felt like snow against bone, winds likened to seventy miles an hour, working in fog so thick you couldn't see more than a few inches out. We could hack it, though. Because good steel workers need to build, just as much as a bridge needs to be built.

By the raising of the south tower, the crews knew what it meant to look down at the city from the height of the sun. Lower crews were used to ducking falling rivets, and we were all used to constant pins of cold. A few men had been lost, those who'd had too many close calls, or had imagined too many close calls. Just as well. A shaken man is a hazard to himself, the crew, and the bridge. And that's always the number one, the bridge.

At the corner of Kilborn I came upon a group of folks sitting on empty flour sacks, most of them slack-faced, likely from hunger. A woman stood from the group. She was in a short-sleeved shirt and skirt nearly thinned through.

“Got a smoke, sir?”

Her shoulders and arms were knobby, but her face looked like a warmed peach. I took my tin out of my pocket and loosened the lid. Damn thing nearly shook right out of my hand before she caught hold of it.

“You sick or something?”

“No.” I pulled my coat around me. “Cold night, isn't it?”

She didn't say anything. I was shivering in that cold, though, and had to keep my muscles moving, had to keep walking. “You can have it.”

When we got down from the tower, I heard the quake had been little more than a shiver to those on the ground. Not so to us on top. Even at 22,000 pounds of steel, it was as though those towers were made of cards. See, suspension bridges work on opposing forces. Without the cables being anchored and the road bed being set, the towers were near defenseless. Engineers knew that, of course, even if they barely felt the quake themselves from their desks. But there's things they will never know first hand, like the crews know. When that quake came, we felt for real how vulnerable the Golden Gate dream was.

By the time I reached my street, my arms were shaking like the joints were coming loose, even in my coat. All the houses had the front windows open, letting in the night air. It was fatigue, I supposed, more than cold, making me shake. Working too much. My bones felt hollowed, as if they could break apart in the wind.

The house belonged to my mother's half-brother, an old Swede that everyone called by his first and middle name, Albin Einer. As always, Albin Einer was in the kitchen, holding a cube of sugar between his teeth, drinking his coffee. Coffee all day and all night, flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, wood-carving tools beside him, and thinly curled strips of peeled wood around his feet.

I wasn't in the mood for talking, so I stayed in the doorway between the kitchen and the mud room, just outside of the light that surrounded my uncle.

"Got a postcard from your folks." Albin Einer, no pleasantries or anything, always started talking as if I had been in the room with him all along.

“Any news?”

Twenty years back, my folks left me with Albin Einer because they signed-on to work as trapeze artists with a traveling act. By the time I was grown, my folks were no more real than characters in a book, people in a love affair with the air.

“They been dropped again for younger performers. Stuck in Wichita, say they don’t have money enough to make it back to California. Same old same old. Asked if they had any grandchildren yet. I wrote back, said you worked fourteen hours a day, drank four, and slept five. No time for anything else.”

“Unc, that’s only twenty-three hours, gives me one extra.” I had to lean into the doorframe.

Albin Einer winked. “Give them something to wonder about. Who knows, maybe you have a love somewhere, besides that bridge.”

“Nope.” Albin Einer was always trying to get me interested in his trade, but building big has been my great love. As a kid, I thought all the time about where my folks lived, where everything was temporary and unsecured, walls flimsy and easily bent in a breeze, hinges rusted and flaked. Far from my folks, I would walk around Albin Einer’s house with a screwdriver tightening things. By the time I grew older, I realized I had inherited strong hands, limber legs, and quick reflexes. California had open water and big ideas for steel, so when I was ready to take on a trade, I went in for bridgework.

“Quite a day I hear on the bridge.” Albin Einer leaned back in his chair.

“Yeah. Finished raising the south tower.”

“One of Carl’s neighbors has a boy working on the bridge.” He took another swallow of coffee, and the last of the sugar cube disintegrated. “Came home and lay flat on the floor. Wouldn’t even climb the stairs.”

Albin and his friends gossiped more than a ladies’ knitting circle. The old man chewed on every morsel that showed bridge building as too-risky a profession, anything to perk my interest in wood grains and furniture craftsmanship.

“Well, there’s always men who can’t hold on a job,” I told him, “but I got a good trick, Albin Einer.” I turned and started up the stairs. “Hell, I’m not even holding onto the rail.”

I laughed, loud enough so he could hear.

“Crazy,” I whispered.

When I reached the top of the stairs and looked back over the rail, the feel of that tipping tower came at me in a flash. Surprised me so much I sat down hard, crawled to my room to rest.

I pulled the shade and undressed in the dark, wriggled into bed without untucking the sheet or wool blanket. I lay flat on my stomach, crossing my arms underneath me. I repeated Jack’s words, “Men like us. That’s what it takes.”

The work coming up would be the hardest: building the foot walk 700 feet up and 4,200 feet across the open water. The highest and longest suspension bridge in the world.

I could feel the press of blankets, mattress, bed frame, wood floor, support beams. Everything connected to my bed was connected to cement blocks embedded in the earth.

I imagined myself rested and heavy, bone marrow made of steel, muscles of split rock. “That’s what it takes.” The words echoed, like I was talking into an empty can.

I replayed the end of the day in my mind.

At the top of the tower, the crew was limp-limbed tired. We were so close to the sun I raised both my arms, like I could touch the heat with my hands. I could see clear out to where the Pacific disappeared around the curve of the earth, all the way across the 4,200-foot span to the Marin tower. I imagined the bridge complete and strong, hanging over the gate like a glory. And it would be our bridge, would belong to those of us who’d built it.

Then I heard it.

A low rumble at first, as if the earth was hungry. I saw movement before I felt it. The tower swayed. I crouched down, then flattened against the deck, pressing into it as hard as I could. Out to the side I could see others from the crew also faced flat against the deck, gripping the edge. I didn’t want to shift from where I was, so I had nothing to hold on to.

“Earthquake!” Someone called.

The tower bent toward the bay, making it seem like the water heaved. A creaking sound followed, mixed with thunks of tools and equipment sliding away.

The structure straightened again. For a second. Punk shouted, “God damn it, hold on.” Then we bent toward the city, the buildings like bugs below us. I heard a man vomit.

All I could think, at that moment, was about how the towers weren’t cabled, had nothing to support them. Near the top, the last slabs of steel hadn’t been riveted yet. They

were held in place with temporary pins. Unless it ended fast, the towers would tear apart. We'd all ride iron to the water below.

There was a chaffing sound as we moved back to center and lopped again toward the water. My hands were sweating, slipping. More tangs as tools fell. I thought about the equipment – riveting guns, tongs, spreaders – sinking easily as soap to the bottom of the bay. I knew just how it would feel when my boot heels struck them in the water. I saw the headline: *Fatal Gate Fall*.

When the tower returned to center, I wiped my hands, then pressed them back flat.

“Here it comes again!” Rover shouted. I heard his breathing, his *Hail Mary*. We were riding an earthquake from the sky.

In the next sway, tools slid from the leg pocket of my coveralls, like long bones slipping from under my skin and dropping into the empty air. The tower groaned. Bent again. Topped out. Stopped.

For near five minutes, no one moved, no one let go, no one made a sound. When we started getting up, there was only one man among us who grinned.

Jack.

Rover, who'd already lost six teeth and nearly lost an arm on the job, stayed belly down. I held out a hand to him but he didn't take it. “It's over. Are you alright?”

“He's near dead like always, right buddy?” Jack laughed.

I bent down. “Come on, Rover. It's done. We'll ride down.”

“Hell, Baile, you know that elevator ain't going to work now.” Jack ran his hands through his hair, making sure everything was in place. “We'll have to go down rugged.”

He was right. They'd never send the elevator up, not knowing if it had been damaged. Rover closed his eyes and hugged tight to a plank.

"How we going to get him down?" I asked. No way we could leave the guy.

"Rover," Jack nudged him with a boot tip. "Lot worse to stay up here alone, man. Get your ass up."

Silence.

"Anybody holding?" I thought maybe a slip of whiskey would help raise Rover. One by one Jack and the rest of the crew shook their heads no and went to the edge of the tower, swung around and began to scale down. I couldn't think of nothing beside getting Rover down alive. I hooked a raising line around my middle, then kneeled beside him.

"Sit up, buddy." I circled the other end of the line around him. "We're going down rugged. We'll be connected. If you let go, I'll hang on for both of us, got it?"

Rover nodded. He stood and followed me to the edge. "Look at nothing but your hands." I told him. I started down the steps, slow, so my arms were always on either side of Rover's legs.

We lowered ourselves along the outside of the tower, hand over hand and boot by boot, for what seemed like hours. We didn't talk. We were waiting, just waiting, to hear the rumble of the earth again, I think. But there was just the sound of the wind rippling our clothes, and, as we went lower, waves rushing the rocks, a work whistle, roll call, iron pounding. Finally, we made it to the bottom and walked the pier to the ground.

Jack was waiting at the roll call site. He had his tin in hand and held it out. I took a finger of tobacco.

"Might have to start bringing the good stuff from now on."

“Got that right.”

After a few minutes Jack spit over the bay. Usually, I would try to beat his distance, but instead I pouched that chew in my lip, making it last.

I woke flat on my back, aware of a heaviness on my chest. Something was pressing on me. With my eyes still closed, I wondered if maybe something hadn't crawled up on me in the night and died. I slit my eyes open and slowly raised my head to look. Slowly, slowly, the something came into view. Pale and unmoving.

“Hell, all.”

I sat upright and it fell from my chest: my own hand. Must have fallen asleep under me, and when I turned over, it came right along with and settled on my chest. I picked it up and let it drop. Poked at it with my left hand. Pinched it. Nothing. Dead asleep clear up to my elbow.

Hindered by my hand, I was late getting downstairs. Albin Einer was already standing at the dry sink with his box of sugar cubes and a cup of coffee. “So boy, there's plenty a things doing today. You should help out the old uncle.”

“What do ya mean? I'm going to work.”

Albin Einer smiled, close-mouthed. He looked up at the wall calendar, then at me, sat down at the table and started working a piece of wood.

I whacked my hand into the cupboard, trying to make the blood move, but there was still no feeling. “Slept in one spot all night dreaming about that tower rolling. I'm stiff as hell and one arm totally asleep.”

“I'm heading to that bakery this morning if you want to come with.”

My knees gave a little. “I can’t let one quake incapacitate me like this.”

Albin Einer pulled a sugar cube from his front pocket, popped it into his mouth, and crunched down. He raised the wood overhead and examined it, then set it back on the table, rubbed at a spot with his large thumb. “Better go then.”

The wood was curved so gently it looked soft as dough.

I trudged through the streets toward the bay, hearing a few far-off car rattles and the morning edition being tossed onto corners. I walked past a stack, first seeing the headline as *Fatal Gate Fall*, but the words dissolved into something about the high price of beans.

The work site was deserted. Clean of engineers, workmen, job bosses. No one. Nothing. Couldn’t be dreaming. The prickling sensation that had spread to my whole arm was too sharp for a dream. I kept walking, went through the gates, which weren’t secured right. Stepped onto the pier and headed for the tower. The waves were coming fast, with such a force I felt dizzy looking at them. Usually, work started early. Behind me, the city hills were like a shadow.

Maybe the work was called off because of the earthquake, after all. But where were the engineers, their little hands, pursed lips, and creased trousers?

The sun was just rising to the east in a thin line of light, barely cracking over the mountain top. When I reached the base of the tower, I looked up. The orange vanished into a wash of white fog. Across the water I thought I could hear church bells.

It came to me then. It was Sunday. The one day that stood between God and the building of the Golden Gate.

I thought about walking back to eat a few breakfast cakes with Albin Einer. Spend a whole day without thinking about rigging up a foot walk, rolling cables, setting a road bed. Without thinking about hard hands, steel, rigs, derricks, spreaders, scaffolding. Without thinking about the rise, or about the 4,200 feet space between the towers.

I slapped that right palm against the tower. The feeling was back, though the hand felt heavy. With my left hand, I opened the door to the inside of the tower. Damn engineers, the experts who had been checking out the bridge the day before, forgot the simplest of details: how to lock up the site.

I stepped inside the tower and pulled the door shut. I knew every part of the structure. As the tower was raised, a maze of steel was crafted inside, and on typical work days me and Jack passed the elevator and the rest of the crews and hoisted ourselves into the tower through the heel. We'd each take a side and climb.

A race.

Man against man, man against structure. In bridgework, stunting is not allowed, so the races to the top were quiet, unannounced. A dare, incited with looks, nods.

I could hear my own breath. My own heartbeat mixing with the fists of wind coming off the bay.

Some said the real high work led to either a constant fear of death or to no fear at all. I didn't go in for that way of thinking. Never had to because of my natural abilities. I saw my parents do an act once, during a summer visit. They were feathered and fearless, as if riding the current of the air.

My eyes adjusted to the dim of the tower. I thought I heard Jack say, *You're no quitter, are you, Baile?*

I started to climb.

Hand to hard steel, feet to slit, I scaled through the inner steel cells. Sounds came from everywhere and from a deepening nowhere. Tings and scrapes from outside, almost as if other men were hooking on to work the lower part of the structure. In the dark I thought I could hear Jack's breath. Was he higher or lower? Who was in the lead?

I kept moving. Hand over hand, not thinking of slipping, not thinking of a misstep, of bouncing back down the inside of the tower to the ground. I could taste the tin of my own breath. My legs knew how to bend and set in the steel. As the tower grew further and further up into the gate, it narrowed, and the number of steel cells inside went from one hundred to twenty-one. As I climbed, the space smalled, less air, fewer holds. It didn't matter. I knew every hold. I pushed to the top. I could sense the light above me, the open sky. Finally, as if commanding my own birth, I emerged from the tower.

I almost expected Jack to be there, holding out a hand, saying, *I finally beat you, buddy. I think you're maybe losing your edge, Baile.*

At the top I noticed the thickness of the fog. I couldn't see where the bay opened its mouth to the Pacific Ocean. Couldn't see the high-crested hills or the city streets. Only the orange tower, my own body, and the near blindness that surrounded us. My breath whitened in that cold air, hung for a second, then pushed back and mixed with the fog.

I walked to the edge and sat down. My skin didn't feel cold, but my teeth rattled like my jaw was unhinged. I could feel my bones shifting under my coveralls and coat. The shaking came from an unknown place and spanned through me.

I was on the scaffolding beside a plank that extended over the edge of the tower. The plank had poles at each corner, a cross bar underneath, and a horizontal bar we called a last line bar, because under it there was nothing.

I slid myself onto the plank.

After the quake, once we'd descended the tower, I saw Rover collect his pay, then take a flask from his bag. He walked away, talking to himself: "Damn ringing in my ears, I can't hear a thing over it. What'd you say?"

He wouldn't be back.

I grabbed hold of a side pole and slid down below the plank, stepped over so my hands were on the cross bar and my feet were on the last line bar. I reached out and touched the tower, almost expecting it to yield like flesh.

I bent down and grabbed the last line bar with my hands, let my legs drop. I was 746 feet up into the Golden Gate. The wind moved in a current around me and I shook hard against it. I closed my eyes and let go with my left hand. My right hand felt hard hinged around the bar. My body hung beside the tower, finally solid and still with its own weight.