

Pulling Together

I paused at the gangway and looked back at the rest of the crew trailing me on the wingwall. Freddie was right behind me, a good, steady type. Wallace was next. Another good one. He took a moment to look off across the wingwall at the skyline. I didn't blame him. The rays from the afternoon sun came through a window in the clouds and lit up the downtown towers like a holy picture. It was going to be hard to leave it behind and plunge into the ship, into that grayness. I caught Wallace's eye. "Best view in town," I said. "Drydock two."

He looked back at the pink and yellow beams lighting up the pastel-hued skyscrapers, the windows sparkling and glowing across the water. "Yeah, can't beat San Francisco with a stick," he said. "No shit," Freddie contributed. I sneaked a peek behind us and saw Alfonso plodding along. He's too old for this shit, I thought. Hell, me too. I made a mental note to keep him on the cable reel. Light duty. Let the young guys do the acrobatics. I swept my eyes along the wingwall past the shore power cables, steam lines, water hoses, Christmas trees branching out their acetylene and oxygen lines, the welding grids and their ground cables and welding lines joining all the other spaghetti running out to the ship in the usual eye-fatiguing tangle. The crane behind us started up with a loud ringing and approached us. No Tyrone. It's started.

Wallace turned from the skyline and caught me looking along the wingwall. "Tyrone's fuckin off already," he said.

"He'll be here," I said. Then my troubles would really begin.

Suddenly the sandblasting started up below at the bottom of the drydock and some sand bounced off the ship up at us, a signal that it was time to start up work all over the ship. The crane was getting near and would soon cut us off from the gangway. "Leg's get aboard!" I hollered against the sandblasting. A jackhammer started up, followed by a grinder. We stepped across the crane tracks and clambered aboard the gangway just ahead of the clanging crane. I covered my right ear and the side of my face with my arm as I strode up the gangway, closing my right eye as well against the sand coming up at us. We paused just inside the ship. I turned around and saw Alfonso was still on the wingwall, waiting for the crane to pass. Freddie pointed to my face. "Glasses!" he hollered through the din. I nodded thanks and fished out my safety glasses from my coverall pocket. I could see Alfonso through the scratched and frosted lenses inbetween the wheels of the crane as it crunched over the rails between us. We used to lay pennies on the cable car tracks when we were kids, then would excitedly run over after the cable car had passed and laugh to see how it had flattened Lincoln's face and spread the copper into a little tortilla. Now it was our own faces we had to worry about.

The crane passed and I saw Tyrone had joined Alfonso. That's how he is. You never see him coming. I waved to them and then the rest of us moved to the starboard passageway ahead of the rush of other yardbirds coming aboard toting pipes and bags of insulation and tool boxes, no two men alike, with their Can't Bust Em coveralls, grey or blue or brown overalls, some with insignia from some other yard, Levi's, ragged corduroys, khaki army surplus shirts, faded old sports shirts, gas station attendant uniforms, most ripped some place or other, riddled with welding burns, spotted with grease and paint. The one item all had in common was the hardhat, yet even there each man managed to sport his helmet at a different angle that in some way expressed his individuality. Yardbirds.

Alfonso plodded up to us. Tyrone had somehow disappeared again. "Where's Tyrone? Wallace asked.

“I don't know,” Alfonso said. “He was right behind me when we were waiting for the crane to pass.”

“I don't know how he does it,” Freddie said. “I never seen a guy could disappear so fast.” He shook his head.

I shook my own. “Never mind. He knows where we're goin. We gotta round us up some more warm bodies. McMurty said—”

“That asshole,” Freddie and Wallace both chimed in, simultaneously. Freddie held out his palm and Wallace gave him some skin. I had to laugh myself. “He said,” I continued, “that we could get Billie and them from the bridge. That'll give us enough.”

“We shouldn't all go up there,” Freddie started.

“I'm glad you volunteered, Freddie. You're a helluva guy. Here's where we gonna meet up.” I wrote the deck and frame numbers on a notebook page and tore it off and handed it to him. Freddie looked at me and the paper in mock exasperation. We grinned at each other. One of my favorite cohorts. But it was going to be nice to get to the work site first and set things up my way while he was getting the rest of the crew. Can't have two lead mules on a team.

I led Wallace and Alfonso down to the second deck and there was Tyrone, bullshitting with a welder buddy of his who was securing his welding line to the overhead in a passageway with a bent welding rod. “Hey, nigger, where you been?” Tyrone boomed out at me, his eyes shifting over to Wallace to gauge his effect, since Wallace was the only other Black man in the crew besides himself. Wallace's jaw got tight and he turned away. Tyrone laughed and nodded in Wallace's direction. “He don't like that kinda talk.” He grinned wolfishly, playing to his welder buddy as well as to Tyrone. His friend just rolled his eyes and pulled down his welding hood. “Go 'head with your crazy self, Ty,” he said. “Some of us got work to do.” He raised his voice. “Watch yourselves, now,” and he struck an arc.

We all continued down the passageway, Tyrone in the lead, followed by Wallace. At the hatch to another compartment he hollered to a laborer inside. “Hey, what it is! What you got for the head, man?” Wallace shook his head again. I’d have to keep them apart.

“Head?” Alfonso asked.

“Naw, he meant—”

“I have to go to the head. Too much coffee,” Alfonso said. “I go to drydock wingwall.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. When you gotta go, you gotta go. “Okay, here's where we goin,” I said, and wrote down the deck and frame numbers as I had for Freddie and gave them to him. 2-25-3. Before the yards I used to write poems in my notebook, keep a half-assed little diary. Now all I have in here is frame numbers and cable footage, I thought. 2-25-3 300' D3. If that's a rhyme, I'm doin time.

Tyrone snorted as Alfonso walked off. “You shouldda drew him a map, man. He's a shop man. He don't know hi way around no ship.” My head throbbed with a slow-starting hangover.

“Alfonso knows his way around a ship. He was a steward in the Navy, back when that's all Filipinos could do,” Wallace said.

“That's his problem. We was in the same boat back then, blood. You forgot?”

“All I said was—”

“Well, we better get some place, too many coordinators n quartermen n shit roamin aroun here,” I cut in. I led the way down the passageway and stepped over a kneeknocker into a thwartship passageway and stopped..

Someone had taken our cable reel off the stands and shoved everything aside. “Aw, fuck,” I said. “I had it all set up.”

“Probably some rigger,” Wallace said. “Had to get room to get some machinery by. See here?”

and he pointed out a shackle left on a pad eye overhead, where riggers had probably set up a block and tackle.

“Well, we'll set her up again soon as Freddie gets down here with Billie and them,” I said. “I can show you guys the run.”

“What you runnin?” Tyrone asked.

“D3. It's for a TLI job I got.”

“Tank Level Indicators?” He gave a sneering look at the thin cable. “You need this many guys to run that skinny little D3 shit?”

“It goes all the way to the bridge,” I said. “And McMurdy—”

“That asshole!” Tyrone said.

I had to laugh again. Wallace had kept silent this time. “He said they had to tear out the last TLI run Monte pulled in cuz the cable got fucked up, layin on deck, riggers draggin shit across it, so we can't 'S' it or leave loops on the deck, fake it out. Sez we gotta run it all up in the racks as we go, so we'll need a man at every loop.”

“Shit, he don't know what he's talkin about. That run that got fucked up was that fire alarm cable, that real flimsy shit. That' why the electrical department has the rep for bein a money loser, cuz we got a dumb cracker dickhead runnin it. Ain't that right?” Tyrone turned to Wallace for confirmation. Wallace looked away.

“What we need to wait on them lame fo'?” Predictably, Tyrone spoke Blacker when he got igged. “Sheeitt, there's three of us. We can do it.”

“Might as well wait—”

“You only gotta lift one side at a time. See what I'm sayin?” He positioned the cable stand and started wrestling with the reel.

“That ain't where I want it,” I said, and I moved the stands to another spot in the passageway.

“What you want it there for?”

“Cuz it's an easier run from here. See?” I pointed overhead to the cable racks. “From here it's a straight run. One less bend.”

“You still gotta make that bend.”

“Yeah, but why start out a long run with a bend, be pullin against it all the way?” I wrestled the cable reel over to the position I had chosen. Tyrone left his hands atop the reel for a long moment in protest, working against me. Working with him was always like dragging around a backpack full of rocks.

Tyrone got the cable reel bar and stuck it in the reel. I had wanted to wait for help but I didn't want to fight him on another issue already so I gave in and joined him on one end of the bar. I looked at Wallace, who hadn't moved. “I can't see killing ourselves when everybody else going to be here any minute,” he said. Aw shit, now he was saying what I should have been saying, and I felt undercut, all behind Tyrone and his loudmouth self.

“Hey, if you don't wanna work, we can't carry you, man,” Tyrone said.

Wallace whirled around, the sides of his jaw throbbing. “The day I need your—”

“Hey, what's hapnin, brodder?” Billie boomed out behind me. Tyrone laughed at Billie's put-on Black accent on top of his FOB Chinese accent. Even Wallace had to join him. Freddie piled into the little space, along with Max and Carlos. That made eight of us, as soon as Alfonso came back, which he did as everybody was greeting each other.

Wallace looked triumphantly at Tyrone, who studiously ignored him and boomed out at Alfonso, “Hey, Alfonso, everythin come out all right?!” which drowned out Max, who was saying “Wanna see a White man's soulshake?” to Tyrone. Everybody was jabbering at once. I looked for an opportunity to

get things rolling.

“C'mon, Billie, let' you an' me how these turkeys how to lift a cable reel,” I started. Max and Wallace stopped socializing and looked ready to turn to, but then Tyrone grabbed Max's shoulder.

“Sorry to cut you off, man,” he said. “I wanna learn this 'White man's soulshake.' How it go?”

Max shook Tyrone's hand, then went up for the regular soulshake, but slipped the next step and went for Tyrone's wallet, which busted everybody up. I laughed along with everybody else, but my radar was buzzing. Sure enough, that's precisely when McMurty barged around the corner on the other end of the thwartship passageway, sporting his clean white overalls that highlighted his nonworking boss status.

“All right, let's pull cable or punch time cards. You runnin this crew, Wheeler, or what?” he said to me. My nostrils flared. “I got a new hire from the hall today, a helper. She'll help you on this pull.” She? “This is Cathy Acosta,” and he stepped aside to present her to us. She was short and stacked and stuck out all around her overall straps. Whatever she was like in the outside world she was ten times the woman here in this all-male environment. I had to force myself to not show any signs of, of what? Barking? Howling? She had taken my breath away for a moment, no getting around it. As it was I heard a gasp and a whistle behind me and a soft “Gawdamn . . .”

McMurty glared over my shoulder, then locked eyes with me. “I don't want this run to take all goddam day! But I don't want to have to come back and pull it again with another crew, either, or you'll be back in the hiring hall with Monte, is that clear?” I held his gaze and refused to say anything.

McMurty's cheeks got red and he finally swallowed and walked off.

“What an asshole,” Billie said.

Freddie turned to the new m-helper and said, “Any time you look in a dictionary under 'asshole' you'll see his face.”

“Looks like just another boss to me.”

“No, he's on another level entirely,” Max said.

“I don't know how somebody like that became general foreman,” Billie said.

“Shit floats.” Carlos demonstrated a turd rising to the surface of water with his hand.

“I know how to handle his ass.” Tyrone looked at Cathy as he spoke.

“Well, let's see about handling us some cable,” I said.

“Boy, it's a good thing you ain't Black, or I'd be callin you a Tom,” Tyrone said to me, still checking out Cathy. Wallace's lips tightened.

“Even without Asshole, we still got some cable to run. C'mon, let's get this bad boy up on the racks,” I said, and we lifted up the reel. “Cathy, I'm gonna leave you and Alfonso here on the reel, okay, Alfonso?” I looked from one to the other. “We gotta go all the way up to the bridge, so we'll leave a guy off at every bend, keep the cable up off the deck, like our beloved leader wants.” I pulled the end of the cable off the spool as I spoke.

Tyrone pulled the cable from my hand. “You gonna want to cut a peckerhead ain't you?” He pulled out his dikes and stripped back the armor and cut off a few inches of cable, then pulled the armor back over the cable and twisted the end to make a nice, easy-pulling tapered end. “You gotta use your foreskin.” There he was again, pinning Cathy.

“C'mon, c'mon,” I said, and I took the cable from Tyrone's hand. “Let's pull cable.”

I shoved the cable up through the pile of dusty old cables overhead into the racks and pulled it along, snaking it through several racks until I hit a tube at a bulkhead. I shoved it through the gland nut, ring, gave the nut a few turns in the tube, then fed the cable through to Billie, waiting on the other side of the bulkhead.

“You see it yet, Billie?”

“Wiggle it!” he hollered.

“I’m wigglin, I’m wigglin. You got a flashlight?”

Tyrone stepped over the kneeknocker into the dark area of the passageway Billie was in.

“Lemme see, Billie. You ain’t used to findin holes in the dark.”

“Then how come so many Chinese?” Billie said, and the bystanders cracked up.

“You just not used to findin a big snake in the dark,” Tyrone countered, groping next to Billie in the rat’s nest of cables in the rack overhead.

“You look for snake; I look for hole,” Billie said, and Tyrone was capped again.

We finally got through and I took the lead again and took the cable around a bend. “I need somebody to form a loop right here,” I said.

“I’ll take it,” Tyrone said, still checking out the new helper on the cable reel, twenty feet away. I grunted an okay, grateful to be rid of him. If he were any younger I would have sent him back to the shop to get something they didn’t have and I didn’t need, anything to get things running smoothly.

We plunged ahead through tube after tube, deck after deck, and I left a man at every bend, once having to pull a loop in a straight run due to binding. There was a minimum of hollering and confusion, now that Tyrone was out of my hair, and things went fairly smoothly until the hollering started up again.

“Send me some cable!” somebody hollered a deck below, and somebody below him hollered something in reply, then it was “Give me some slack!” from below again. I worked my way back down the run and found the bottleneck was, of course, Tyrone.

“You gotta keep that loop goin!” Max hollered down from the deck above.

“Just pull the motherfuckin cable!” Tyrone hollered back, right in my ear.

“C’mon, Ty,” I pleaded. “I’m bustin my balls up there, pullin, runnin up an’ down. You know how to keep a loop goin.”

“It's that little thing on the reel, man!” He jerked his thumb toward Cathy. “She can't handle it. They ain't feedin me fast enough. They shouldn't never send a bitch to do a man's—”

“Man, I don't wanna hear it. That cable reel's not the problem. We need a good man here to feed us. Is that you, or what?” Oh-oh, I had used the same phrase on him McMurty had laid on me. Was it catching? Would my picture be next to him in the dictionary under “asshole”?

“Suck my dick!” Tyrone boomed out.

“If that's what it'll take to get you to keep a loop goin . . .” I fished my needlenose pliers out of my pocket, ready to say I couldn't find my tweezers, but—

“Damn right!” Tyrone hollered. “Send over that helper. She looks like she knows how to—”

I hunched my shoulders in embarrassment. “Damn, man, what kinda barn you raised in? All she wants to do is work, draw her paycheck, feed her family or whatever, same's anybody else.”

“This a shipyard, man. Anybody can't handle it, skippy. In fact, they can suck my dick! Ain't that right, my brother?” I turned to see who the audience was behind me that Tyrone was playing to. It was his welder friend again. He nodded to Tyrone.

“See me in my office,” he said, then rolled right on up the passageway into a compartment. There were no welding leads going in there.

Tyrone turned to me. “Hey, I'll catch you in a minute. I'll be back here before you get back up where you was.” I looked back at Cathy and Alfonso, then turned back to Tyrone, but he was gone. I flashed on the bottle I'd stashed, then thought better of it and walked over to Cathy and Alfonso.

“Hey, howzit hang-goin, Alfonso? Bet you can't wait to get back to your bench in the shop, huh?”

“Oh, I like it here. Less bosses, less chickenshit. Just too far up the wingwall for me to walk,” and he pointed to his bad leg.

“Well, we almost done.” I looked back along the passageway toward the compartment Tyrone had undoubtedly popped into. I had a pretty good idea of what was going down and I was well clear of it. “Uh, I can use you up topside, Cathy. I need somebody who can fit in a small space. I’ll send you somebody else, okay, Alfonso?”

Cathy and I started climbing up above. I led the way up the first stairway, then motioned for her to go ahead of me on the next one, and I admired the view as I watched her wiggle up the ladder ahead of me. Yeah, maybe it looked like I was angling for my own entry in that dictionary, I thought, but still it was the right thing to do to head off trouble. When we got up by Wallace I paused to kick it with him for a minute, try to cool him out. “Hey, what it is,” I said.

“He fuckin up, ain't he?” I didn't have to ask who he meant. I held out my arms as if to say What can I do? “See, that's why they don't want to pay us in the middle of the week, behind ignorant motherfuckers like that, fuck it up for the rest of us,” Wallace said. “I know he's in there right now, messin with that shit again.” He pantomimed stuffing something up his nose. “You know what I'm talkin 'bout.” What I knew was that Wallace rarely cursed. It took a lot to get him going, and he was ready to blow.

Somebody cleared his throat behind me. It was McMurty. It must be those rubber-soled boots, I thought. “Where's Tyrone?”

“I haven't seen him,” I automatically said. McMurty's nostrils flared, but he knew the game and held his water. Then Cathy spoke up.

“He's somewhere on the deck by the cable reel.”

“Thanks,” McMurty uncharacteristically said, and he whipped down the ladder. I sighed and turned to Cathy.

“I don't know how long you been in the yards, but that's something you never do. You never tell

any kind of boss—”

“Yeah, yeah, you're right. I just blurted it out before I could check myself.”

“—where somebody is,” I finished. “We watch out for each other here.” She apologized again and I said goodbye to Wallace and we headed on up to the lead of the cable. It was just a deck below the bridge and I was down to only Billie and Carlos, both of whom were as small as Cathy. She looked at them, then raised her eyebrows at me. I avoided her gaze and looked up at Carlos, balancing precariously on one foot atop a pipe, his head and shoulders buried in a rat's nest of cables overhead.

“Oye, Carlos, me haces un favorcito? A little favor? We need some more muscle on that cable reel. Can I get you to spell Cathy here?”

“Fine by me. You want me to finish this little bit while I'm up here, take it through this tube?”

“Hey, go for it.” We stood around for a couple of minutes while he clung to his perch and poked his way through the snarl of cables to the opening in the bulkhead. We were too high up out of the water to have to worry about tubes and watertight security up here; if the water got this high, forget it, it was all over.

“You getting close to vesting for your pension yet?” Billie asked me.

“Man, I'm so short a snake couldn't crawl under—”

Just then McMurty hove to. Have to get my radar checked, I thought. He'd snucked up on me. He had a peculiar, dreamy look about him. The corners of his mouth curled up in what, on anybody else, would be called a smile. He looked at the three of us standing around while Carlos climbed down. “Good work,” he said, to no one in particular, then drifted off, stoned, sniffing and licking his lips.

“Did you see that?” Billie asked. We three old-timers looked at each other in astonishment.

“Wait'll I tell them about this down below,” Carlos said.

“I'll go with you,” I said. “But I think somebody down there already knows.”

Wallace was standing on a subpanel next to the ladder on the deck below, working a loop.

Carlos stopped on the ladder behind me and grinned over at him. “We goin down to straighten out your brother.”

“Shit, he ain't no brother of mine.”

“An' McMurty ain't none of mine,” I added. “What's the sayin? 'He may be my color . . . !’”

“' . . . but he ain't my kind,' ” Wallace finished for me. We looked at each other and nodded. It was good to make it plain.

I bulldogged Carlos past the rest of the crew on the way down and put him on the cable reel with Alfonso. “McMurty been by?” I asked him.

“He was just here.” He pointed up the passageway, where Tyrone was at his spot at the bend, holding a nice loop in his hands, grinning in much the same absent way as McMurty had. Alfonso had a signifying look on his face. I looked at Carlos and he grinned and shook his head. There are no secrets in a shipyard.

I strolled over to Tyrone. “I seen McMurty,” I said.

“Uh-huh. How was he doin?”

“He wasn't feelin no pain.”

“I didn't think he would be.” He almost giggled.

“He was so mellow I couldn't believe it was him,” I said.

Tyrone looked at me. “I told you I knew how to handle him.”

“Uh-huh.” I raised my eyebrows and nodded. “Well, you ready to pull cable?”

“Oh, yeah. I been ready. Much as you want, son.” He sniffed and licked his lips, a dead giveaway.

“All right.” I walked along the thwartship passageway to the run, then turned the other way and

stepped into the chain locker and felt under a pile of coiled rope for my bottle. I took a long pull and put it back for the next time and started back to the run. Somewhere a grinder made an ear-splitting sound against hard steel. I looked up the ladder and took off my hardhat and pulled out my earplugs from the little plastic case dangling from the webbing and stuck them in my ears. Two, three more weeks and there would be a layoff and I could dry out again. That wasn't so long. Hell, I might even get her phone number by then, I thought. I smoothed back my hair and put on my hardhat again and fished in my pocket for a cough drop, brushed off the welding dust and popped it in my mouth and started up the ladder.