

THE SPACE BETWEEN

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LIME POINT

As he awoke, he could hear the foghorns booming. The sound was muffled by the damp shroud that the air had become. It was the dampness that brought him back to consciousness. It had slowly seeped through his bedding, penetrating his shallow and troubled slumber. When he first spread his down bag and insulite pad on the thick metal of the bulkhead, it had been a cool, clear evening just past midnight; no sign of clouds, no wind. He glanced at his watch. In the two hours that had passed since then, the night sky had changed dramatically. A plump tendril of fog had stretched out of the amorphous cloud bank that crouched just off the coast. Spurred on by increasing easterly winds, the fog pushed through the gate and into the bay. By dawn the process would be complete; most of San Francisco Bay would be filled, much like a bowl brimming with beaten egg white.

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Knowing this didn't help with his immediate problem. He was damp and chilled and his sleeping bag would soon be unusable. Although he had hoped to sleep under the stars, it was becoming apparent that in order to escape the drenching atmosphere, he had no choice but to slip back inside and establish a nest. Taking out the key that he had gone to so much trouble to obtain, he unlocked and opened the heavy metal hatchway and carefully began his descent. He was back inside the top strut of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The strut was in itself a small portion of this mammoth structure. It was composed of two parallel trusses with top and bottom chords of heavy girders, skinned all around in riveted plate metal. The resulting chamber was 70 feet long by 20 feet wide and hung suspended between the two Marin tower posts seven hundred feet above mean high tide.

He came to a stop on a hanging platform midway to the floor of the strut. He switched on his headlamp and began to search out a niche in which he could rest for a while. Bridge painters had hung a staging deck above and to the right of the platform he was on. It was a fairly heavy plywood deck, supporting piles of tarps and several drums of International Orange paint. Brushes, buckets and miscellaneous painting accoutrements were hanging and lying in piles about the deck.

In the farthest corner he found what he was looking for. The painters had prepared a perfect hidey hole. Overshadowed by the girders was a section of the deck covered in astroturf that was the perfect size for a reclining man.

This secret retreat was appointed with a small battery-operated lamp, a deck of cards, several porn magazines, a large thermos jug of water and a dusty but serviceable cushion. He realized upon closer inspection that his new sanctuary had

been designed with care. There was no direct line of sight from any of the interior platforms or walkways, nor could it be seen from the entry hatchways at either the tower post or the one he had just entered from above. It was the perfect place for a painter, ironworker or perhaps a clandestine bridge climber to nap in safety and solitude with little chance of detection.

It was several hours until dawn; a bit more sleep would serve him well for the task to come. Using a painter's drop cloth as a dry blanket and his down vest as a pillow, he settled in for some rest. After setting his wrist watch alarm for half an hour before dawn and shutting off his head lamp, he allowed himself the luxury of reflecting on his history with the astonishing structure that he was now reclining in.

Since childhood he was consumed by an impractical yet overwhelming love for and interest in bridges. This interest was one of the elements that had propelled him into a career as a photojournalist. The first time he had climbed the Golden Gate Bridge, some two years before, he was convinced—up until the actual moment he set foot on the box girders below the road deck—that it would not be possible to ascend. Getting out along the beams below the road deck was one thing, but finding a way into the tower posts, those elegant duo pillars that soared taller than any other bridge in the country, well, that would be a trick. He had considered walking the cables but the security camera hanging below the lowest horizontal strut, the one just above the roadway, seemed to have the cables well within its viewing scope. It was obvious that to attempt the cables could only be a last resort. Approaching from beneath the roadway seemed best.

That first climb stayed with him, as only the rarest of dream images will. He recalled each part in dark pastel detail.

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Subsequent climbs, though always rewarding, were never as spectrally impressed onto his mind's eye.

The approach he used was from the cliffs above Lime Point. A trail plunged down and zigzagged crazily along the crest of the cliff face, descending eventually to a ten or twelve foot leap onto the broad, man-made plateau directly below the road deck. He jumped down the last few feet from the trail to the plateau. Standing at the very edge, you could look across a foreboding gulf of over a hundred yards distance, yawning open and deadly before the mammoth cross girders of the Marin Tower. A quick toss of his short climbing rope up and over the girder about fifteen feet overhead, followed by a short climb, placed him on the lower chord of the road deck, twenty feet below the pedestrian walkway.

Once on the superstructure he kept reminding himself that in the dark, on a structure climb, every plane, every space and every angle were all simply different shades of gray. You could easily step into air thinking you were stepping onto a gusset plate or an I-beam. One could not depend solely on vision.

He advanced, sometimes walking, sometimes crawling along the girders. Several yards along, the plateau beneath him fell away to the full drop of over two hundred feet to the rocky shoreline and the lighthouse below. Every forty feet or so the girder he was traversing intersected a vertical compression girder. At these junctures he had to climb out and around the beams, hanging momentarily in quiet, empty space, just two seconds above eternity.

Having made his way to the relative safety of a catwalk, which skirted the colossal tower posts just below the pedestrian walkway, he was able to relax and breathe in the unreal brilliance of the singular panorama he found himself in the

midst of. His aerie was a perfect viewing spot. The massive roadway decking supported by the elaborate lattice work of girders shot out above him back towards the cliff face he had so recently vacated; the resemblance it bore to a gigantic erector set was unmistakable. The view under this ponderous firmament, down to the rocks and surf and then back toward the plateau, was so akin to a towering Panavision movie image that he could hardly accept it as real.

For some reason it reminded him of the last scenes of the film: "North by Northwest". In particular, he referred back to the dream-like images of Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint clinging desperately to the sheer granite wall separating the colossal visages of Washington and his protégés as Martin Landau loomed grimly above them. In his mind's eye, the colossal image of the actual cliff seemed indistinguishable from the fantasy image of the film. Enhancing this reverie, the sounds of the surf below conjoined with the sharper, more distant murmur of the late night traffic to form a sound mosaic that embraced him in a strange synesthesia.

Realizing the need to regain clarity of mind for the remainder of his precarious climbing adventure, he reluctantly tore his attention away from this entrancing phantasm. He pressed his attention toward the comparatively prosaic task of finding a hatchway that would allow ingress to the tower. To his great surprise he did not need to search for long. Contrary to his assumption that the towers would be locked up tight, several entry hatches had been carelessly left open by bridge workers.

As he entered the closest hatchway, he was aware of subtle shifts in his sensory perceptions. The ever-present sound of waves crashing against Lime Point two hundred feet below him

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could almost be felt pressing against his skin, as the darkness of the shaft engulfed him. He began climbing the rungs, passing through the hatchway portals every twenty feet or so. For some daring or perhaps perverse reason he chose to ascend in darkness. At first the climb in complete blackout was invigorating. Gradually, his excitement at the novelty of his situation turned to a sort of grim resolve to continue. He kept climbing, sightlessly, refusing to use his light, despite his increasing unease caused by the bizarre tactile hallucinations he seemed to be experiencing. What should have been metal all about him began to feel less and less substantial.

His hands, holding him away from what he knew to be riveted plate metal, seemed to almost vibrate in unison with what felt like pliant, fleshy matter. The atmosphere was dense and wet; it seemed as though he was under water. The shaft he was in, a three foot square cell that shot up the entire height of the tower, should have been metal. It was not ... fumbling with his light he could feel the cloying atmosphere closing in around him ... that droning murmur, was it the water below? It almost sounded like ... voices. The shaft seemed smaller and yet smaller. Losing some nerve, he reached for his light. It would not work. Frustrated, he smashed it against the riveted wall. The anticipated crash did not occur. Instead, the impact was a sodden thud splattering him with some unknown liquid.

Stopping at a hatchway, he knew that he should have been standing on a floor plate with a man-sized round hole for ladder access. The floor did not feel hard. He felt for the ladder rungs that he knew should be there. Grasping a rung, he pulled himself up a step; it almost seemed that his shoes would be sucked off of his feet; his dead flashlight fell from his grasp. It made no noise as it fell.