

On the Bridge

© 2018 Patrick Dobson

We stood shoulder to shoulder that morning during lineup. Everyone dreaded getting started but were anxious to get going. The day wouldn't get to the end all by itself, and the longer we dicked around, the farther away quitting time was.

Next to me, a kid hopped from foot to foot. He wore clean jeans and white t-shirt. His belt was new, his wire spool shiny, right out of the shop. He was a little round, white, puffy kid with blue eyes that peered with fear from beneath his hard hat. He kept telling us he wanted his whole life to be an ironworker. He'd signed up with the union and this was his first job.

"It's a bridge deck, kid," a dirty, slumped black man next to him said. "In about twenty minutes, you won't want to be an ironworker anymore."

The job was a straight-ahead rebar deck, the most punishing labor in the trade—a hundred tons or more of half- to one-inch diameter rebar laid out and wire-tied in neat grids over the girders that spanned 1,400 feet. The carpenters had already laid in the concrete-form pans. We had two mats or blankets of rebar to lay on a bridge five-lanes and two shoulders wide. The first would sit just an inch off the girders, the other four inches above that. All the rebar was epoxy coated, bright green.

"Some ironworkers won't touch bridge work," the slouched figure told the kid. "Hard labor and pain. You have to carry all that rebar and then bend at the waist for days tying everywhere where the rebar crosses."

I looked at the kid's side cutters. His pliers were new, the blue sheathing on the handles unmarred. I pulled mine out of the loop on my belt and looked at them. Time and repetition wore an ironworker's side cutters to fit the hand that worked them.

The sun was full up and the day turning warm when 7 a.m. struck. The foreman organized the crew. He knew some names but most of us had come out of the union hall that morning. At 45, I was the oldest apprentice on the bridge. Most of the men were in their early 20s. A few, the most experienced, were 30 or so.

We set to carrying rebar. The kid and another man, the least experienced, laid out wire seats about four feet long that would suspend the rebar above the girders. The most experienced men marked the side-most girders for bar placement. Behind them, two men stood on either side of the bridge, a leg over the side of the curb barrier, and placed the rebar on the marks. The rest of us—sixteen—fanned out in gangs of four. We carried the 60-foot bars from piles the foreman had the crane operator place on the bridge at intervals.

We carried between five and eight sticks of half-inch rebar and laid them out one by one on cue of the man in the middle. We walked up to where we were laying rebar in, crouched with

one hand clutching the steel, the other hand free to take the one piece out of the bundle that the man in the middle chose. Once we all had the same piece in hand, we laid it down for the two men to put on marks the other ironworkers had already painted on the girders. As one gang walked back to the pile, the gangs coming toward them lifted the rebar so we could bend beneath it. We took turns being the man in the middle.

After we had a 60-feet of rebar laid out, the gangs started carrying four or five sticks of one-inch rebar to lay crosswise on the rebar already on the bridge. Then, seven or eight of us started tying, one wire tie every time the rebars crossed, about every six inches in all directions. It would take about 10 days to deck the bridge.

We made it to the morning break, all of us now sweating and out of breath. We took up our picnic chairs next to our trucks and cars. I poured coffee from my thermos as the kid walked by.

“What do you think?” I said. His white shirt was grubby now, his jeans already wearing at the knees. Dark smudges streaked his forehead and cheeks where he wiped away sweat with his gloves.

“I’m going to do this thing, old man,” he said.

“I hope so,” I said. “You stick with it, it gets easier. There’s a good feeling when you look back over that field of green growing behind you.

We came back from break. Just as we were starting back to work, the slumped guy from the morning I now knew as Derek, pointed to the kid’s belt, spool, and pliers laying in the grass.

“What happened to the kid?” he said.

We looked around. The kid had disappeared. Derek and I divided up his tools. I needed a new belt anyway.

After lunch, the sun beat on us. Some of us were smart enough to have brought sunscreen. Those men who started the day with watches took them off and put them into their belt bags to keep from keeping track of the time. The day just went faster when you weren’t paying attention to the clock.

We were all tying in a line, banter going back and forth.

“I swear to god,” one man said. “I’m buying a lottery ticket tonight. I gotta get out of this kind of work.”

“Yeah, man,” said the ironworker bent over next to him, “winning the lottery would be great.”

“Whatever happens,” said another man, “I win the lottery, I’m putting in a pool.”

“Shitfire,” said his partner. “You win the lottery, you’re gonna smoke it up in crack.”

Every afternoon, the repetition of the work cast me into a sort of meditation. My world shrunk to a grid of rebar about seven squares wide and four deep. It usually happened when the heat burned through my hardhat and after I'd gotten use to the physical strain of bending and tying, clipping wire, tying, clipping wire.

The third day, in the afternoon, a deep voice interrupted my reverie.

"Say, Dobson." I looked up and it was Joel Kaufman. Jesus, I thought to myself. It's my turn. He was about 25 years old and could tie faster than anyone, carry more rebar than almost anyone. But he was a terror, known for picking fights and winning them. He stood four inches over six feet. He had legs like stumps. His buddy, a short, little lickspittle by the name of Nathan, walked up behind him.

Joel took up next to me. I could feel his him looking at me. He irritated me, breaking me out of my trance. He could tell that the other ironworkers respected me, and that was too much for him.

"I been watching you all week," he said. "That a faggot sticker on your truck?"

I had a little blue sticker with a yellow equal sign on the bumper of my truck.

I wanted to ignore him, but I couldn't help myself. I'd watched him bullying guys all week, intimidating them until they knuckled under and gave in. I was sick of him.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

He stood over me now, hands on his waist. I was used to his type. Some guys had daddy issues and took them out on me, the old guy. I didn't mind. It came with the job, and if it didn't interfere with getting the work done, I didn't care. But I wasn't going to take his shit.

"That little blue faggot sticker," he said.

I'd been the vice president of the Kansas City Pride Democratic Club, a gay and lesbian political organization. My best friend was gay and died of AIDS back before antivirals were available. I went freely among Kansas City's gay and lesbian community. I had family who were gay. So did my wife.

"You're a faggot lover, aintcha?" he said. "Hell, you're probably a fag yourself." The other men working next to me stopped talking. They'd seen Joel at work before. They were as sick of him as I was.

The thing about Joel was that it could be anything. Had we not been working with a crew of black ironworkers, he would have been after me for being a nigger lover. He was that kind of guy.

"You know, we don't do fags out here on the bridge," he said.

Nathan jiggled around excitedly. “Yeah,” he said. “No fags.”

I kept tying and was quiet, paying attention to Joel’s boots. He inched closer and nudged my foot.

“You probably have lots of fag friends,” he said. I thought I felt him poke my belt bag.

I stood up and faced him, lifted my chin to look him in the eye. I could see Nathan wearing an amused, excited grin over Joel’s shoulder

“I have homosexual friends,” I said. “There’s no law against that.”

“Law of God,” he said.

“God can’t tell me who my friends are,” I said.

This took the wind out of Joel for a second.

“They’re not faggots, by the way.” I bent back over, took my place, and started tying. There was utter silence on the bridge but for the clicks of wire being cut.

I spied the foreman way up on the green bar we’d laid out that morning. He talked to the operator and pointed where he wanted the next pile of rebar laid in. He signaled over the side to two ironworkers rigging the steel. Now, I knew why Joel had taken this time to give me shit. The foreman would be tied up directing the operator and other ironworkers for at least a half hour.

“You better watch your mouth,” I said.

“Oh yeah,” he said.

“You don’t know who’s out here or what they’re about or who their family is.”

The men around me stopped tying. They bent at the waist and rested their elbows on their knees, looking at me from under their hardhats or over their sunglasses. Joel took a step back. I could feel his gaze sweep over the doubled-over figures around me.

“There ain’t no such thing as a faggot on the bridge,” he pronounced.

“Yeah,” Nathan said. “No such thing. Ironworkers ain’t fags.”

“Then, I’m not a fag either,” I said. “Besides, just how do you know that, Joel? Been whoring around with these boys?”

Joel stomped back up to me, nudging my spool with his leg.

“What’re you saying?”

I stood up and faced him again. I started to pull my glove off, finger by finger.

“So, now, what are you gonna do? Kick my ass?” He laughed.

“Well, there’s only one guy out here on this bridge talking about homosexuals and it sounds a lot like he’s afraid of the homosexual in himself.”

“You calling me a fag?” he said. He cocked at the waist.

“I’m not calling anyone anything. I’m just saying.”

“I’m no fag,” he said.

“I didn’t say you were, only that it’s kind of suspicious that this is a big deal with you.” He advanced until we were just about chest to chest. “And now you’re going to kick my ass?”

“I just might have to,” he said. I’d put him off his guard. He started to look steamed.

“Well, I tell you what. You go right ahead.” I stuck my chin out further. “No one’s stopping you. I’m not going to stop you. We both know you’ll win and I’ll lose.”

Joel hesitated and stumbled back, tripping on the rebar. I walked away, over toward the water cooler. I turned around as I drew a drink. Joel was stomping off to the back of the pack.

When I came back to my place and started tying again, I heard a whoop. Then another. Soon, applause. First Derek, then a couple of the men sidled up and slapped me on the shoulder.

We all went back to work, back to talk of getting desk jobs in the air conditioning and gossip about the union or this man or that. I heard later that Joel and Nathan both quit the job that day and moved on to other projects.

We finished that bridge. It was a beautiful thing, a great expanse of green rebar stretching from one side of the interstate to the other. We all knew it was ephemeral, a moment. The concrete men would soon arrive and cover it all. On the last day, we stood a long while before we went off our different directions.

As long as I worked iron, Joel and Nathan never talked to me again. They never bullied anyone when I was around. I was a faggot lover to them, and that was just fine with me.