

The Empire State Slave

I climbed the steep rungs on the dull metal beams. "Don't look down. Don't look down. Don't look down." I silently whispered to myself. Even though I had taken this course a million times, I had never stopped being afraid. The sharp smell of dirt and pollution clogged my nose, the dust and chemicals ruining the air.

The beams were strong enough to hold an entire army, but I could always remember the droning voice of our boss, "The beams are more important than your life. You cost me fifty cents every day. These beams cost me a lot more." Trust me on this one, he meant it too. Just last week, his strong leather boot had sent my friend Michael spiraling down onto the pavement when he demanded \$0.75. I still remembered the look on his face; surprise, anger, shock, but also fear. A look so sad, that it had kept me up for four nights. At last I reached the top beam. My deadly screwdriver and ridiculous overalls were waiting for me. As I carefully tiptoed across the beam, the smell began to intoxicate me. Dust, steam and sweat swam together to create a living hell. My feet suddenly altered, and my head tipped upwards, trying to find some clean oxygen.

"Stop daydreaming, and get your lazy ass over here. I am already paying you \$0.50, I need you to stop cheating me out." A loud crazy voice yelled. I looked forward and saw a huge man, wearing a leather coat and carrying a whip, standing on a moveable platform with railing. "You want to end up like Michael?" he continued, his loud voice breaking into my skull. Normally, I would have scampered like a rabbit, but today I was just too tired.

"Move it!" he yelled, and every single worker started looking at me. As quickly as I could I flew across the beam, threw my dusty blue overalls over my sweaty clothes, and grabbed a screwdriver (Phillips had just invented these).

"That's more like it!" the boss exclaimed, chewing on a dusty cigarette. I leaped towards my station; I still had fifty more nails to screw in before I could move to another floor. The heavy air clung to my nose and mouth, filling my eyes with tears and my heart with fear. I tried to be hopeful, so I nodded hello to a fourteen year-old boy working across from me. He glanced up at me, and I shot him a friendly smile. The boy quickly looked down at me, and I didn't blame him. A false move could mean the death of you, since all we sat on was a small porch, and that was not an exaggeration.

However, the worst punishment was not death. I had seen a few workers take flight downwards when the work got too tough. It always ended the same way: they die, the police picks up their dead bodies, and they are replaced the next day. The worst thing that could happen up here in the sky was the boss' snake he called a whip. I was still recovering from the lashes I had received a few weeks ago, when I had whispered hello to a new worker, and told him my name. The boss had the hearing of an owl, and he was disgusted with the idea that his workers were communicating.

As far down as I could see, I saw only crossed frames, with their drills filled in. *At least fifty of those were done by me*, I thought proudly. Despite the dead air, roaring pain, constant sweat and occasional blood, I was silently slightly overjoyed at the thought that I had helped create one of the world's biggest buildings. The

satisfaction it brought was one of miracles, but it could only truly be appreciated when I was safe on the ground.

I guess you could say we were slightly crazy. Even though we worked in hell, somehow we all managed to hold onto hope. If any of us ever let it go, we might as well let go of the building, because without any hope, we would all crash and fall. This may sound insane or stupid, but it was almost certain that the whole concept of having the sky in arms reach was incredible, and it always pushed us forward, as if it was telling us, “you will never be able to reach me!!!”

A loud cough broke the dull sound of metal. It came from a girl, and she looked like she was about to be seriously sick. Girls weren't aloud to work on the building; they had to do all the painting. Sure, the building was tough, and if you weren't careful you would fall to your death, but the paint the girls had to use was toxic, and there was a much higher chance that you would collapse and die.

The sneezing girl got back to her painting, and boss started giving us evil eyes, the type of eyes that told us we were on slippery ground. I leaned forward and began to drill in each nail. “1” I counted. “2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10... 48. 49. 50.” Finally, my frame was complete. “Just an extra cent! I thought bitterly, but I had to remind myself that cent could be the difference between life and death.

“So you finally finished you pile of dog droppings?” the boss sneered at me. I knew that he wasn't being just; I was the swiftest and smartest builder of them all. Over here though, I had no thoughts, feelings, or identity. I was just a tool to be used and manipulated.

“Go to the next floor!” he shouted at me. “And if you're not done today, you can forget about getting anything extra out of me!” he bellowed, and as fast as lightning I flew up the dusty metal ladder.

Again and again, over and over, the same dull pattern ruled my movements. Pick up a nail from the tool box. Stick it into the carefully machined hole. Grab the ridicules nail gun. Nail the peg. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. This was the life. Nothing new ever existed. Nothing new was ever born. It was just repeat, repeat, and repeat, until the sun goes down.

“Lunch 15 minute break!” the boss shouted. I knew how much he detested lunch breaks. In his ‘humble opinion’, we were slaves and aliens, not even humans. We didn't deserve to have the luxury of food and water, at god forbid socializing. But I did not care, because I lived for that 15 minute break. So, as soon as it was called, I jumped down from my porch, carefully landing on one I had just completed. My legs sprinted me to the makeshift tables, where watery bread, stale water, and a rotten tomato waited patiently for me. It was disgusting but it was food, and it was what kept us going.

As I sat back, trying to enjoy the food prepared for me, I realized how lucky I actually was. If you were careful, you had nothing to fear. If you did your job well, you could more than sustain yourself with the weak pay and measly twice a month off. So I promised myself, I would do whatever it takes, to keep a smile on my face, hope in my pocket, and freedom in my heart.

By Shreyas