

The Tower
By Jacob Duarte Spiel

I wasn't in the game when the Flatiron Building went up. No, I started walking the beams in the 20s and stopped before the Chrysler and Empire State buildings were finished. I'm sure they're beautiful, but you won't catch me in them. Can't bear the heights anymore. **shudder** Makes my stomach turn just thinking about it.

But in the 20s? I was a bonafide daredevil. I'd come to New York with just about nothing. Got into skyscraper construction because it paid double the other sites. But it wasn't just that. This was the 20s. The Roaring Twenties. The Big Apple was the place to be, everything was happening all at once and I wanted— no, I *needed* to be a part of it. Didn't matter that I didn't have a plan or that I didn't even really know much about building skyscrapers. Being there, being a part of it all. That's what mattered to me.

The building I started on was going to be 86 storeys. No Empire State Building but hell, that's more than twice as tall as anything in Europe.

It was great for about 3 weeks. 6 storeys up, I was really getting the hang of riveting. Got cocky. Then, I slipped off a beam and fell 15 feet right onto a concrete slab. Broke my leg in three places. I did the math. Zero point nine seven seconds. That's how long I'd been in freefall. Zero point nine seven seconds, but it felt like years. I'll never forget it as long as I live. Hair pushed back, clothes flattened against my skin, wind roaring in my ears, not even enough time to scream, just an open mouth filled with cold, city air.

They were clean breaks and I healed faster than most. Soon as I could walk I was back to building scrapers, but now it was necessity that drove me. Double pay. The faster I built my stake the faster I could get away from heights. Thankfully, the site supervisor told me I could come back to work after I'd healed up.

I'd used my time recovering to craft a sturdy safety harness with a length of strong leather cord I could wrap around the nearest girder. The other ironworkers said I was scared, yella, a coward. I said I'd been humbled.

My first day back, I walked past security, punched my time card, and then stood in the guts of the tower. Those three months, we'd gone from 6 storeys of metal framework to 25. Far above me, men crawled, crab-like over the steel skeleton, bright and fleshless in the morning light, a beached leviathan from eons past, pulled from the depths by mysterious currents and discarded in Manhattan like so much jetsam. Now the air and sun bleached its bones, now birdshit splattered its remains, now we, curious scavengers, worried over its corpse in search of an ounce of flesh, not a thought spared for the forces that deposited this bounty, or their motivations. We were necromancers resurrecting 200 vertical feet of carcass.

And we were only one-quarter finished.

My feelings were not reflected in the other men. You had to be a little bit crazy to walk those beams. I recognized myself in many of them, my pre-fall self. Being a part of something important, that was all they wanted. That, and the money that proved their involvement.

But Whitley... his relationship to the tower was unique.

I met Whitley that first night back. Although, I didn't know it at the time.

I had to come back after dark. I'd left my work gloves. People were always sneaking onto the site. Couldn't leave your stuff laying around overnight.

I found them on the fifth floor. The lower levels had sturdy concrete, but above me the beams crissed and crossed up into the night. It all looked different in the darkness. Nearly a full city block of open, unfilled space. It was almost like a church.

Then, right behind me, a sound like a gunshot. I dove behind a beam, banging my knees hard in the process. A long silence lingered. Once the blood stopped pounding in my ears, I peeked out.

A rivet lay still on the floor, like a bird that flew headfirst into a window.

I pocketed it and looked up, all the way up, to where we'd been working just hours earlier on the 25th storey. Somebody must've been damn careless to leave a loose rivet rolling around up there.

I shone a worklight skyward, the framework casting crazed shadows into the night which swung and swayed against the silent towers around me.

Nothing.

Then, about halfway to the top, something scampered whisper-quiet through the shadows.

"Hello!" I shouted. "Is someone still up there?"

No response.

I shrugged, I was sure I'd just imagined it, even as a prickle of primal fear ran down my spine. Either way, I was off the clock and there was no way I was spending even a second up there at night. The mere thought of stepping across the beams in the pitch-black. Not knowing if my next step would hit iron or air... it made me nauseous even while standing on solid ground.

So I walked out, but I left the worklight on, just in case someone was up there.

The next morning I was walking the iron frame near the summit. I kept my eyes up, but weakness lingered in my knees from the previous night. The city jumped and twirled below to a rhythm only it could hear. Vertigo. You either lead the dance or it leads you, gyrates you into hypnosis, waltzes you into oblivion. I knew the steps, but all I could think was “is this the moment that buckles my leg? How about this one? How about this one?”

I didn’t see Whitley approach me from behind.

“Hiya, pal,” he said. He clapped my back hard enough to push a less cautious man to his death.

I gripped the nearest beam, feeling the bandolier on my harness clack against my tools. “What the hell d’ya think you’re doing?” I shouted, out of anger and to be heard over the wind.

“Whoa, sorry bout that,” he said. “My name’s Whitley. Just wanted to thank ya for leaving the light on fer me last night.”

The skittering shadow flashed through my mind.

“That was you?” I asked. “What were you doing up there?”

“Little overtime, ya might say,” he chuckled and did a sickening pirouette. “Plus being up here at night... s’different experience.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I gave him a grim nod and tried to go back to riveting. He tapped my shoulder again.

“Pal, I just thought I’d tell ya, that harness you’ve got on?” He pointed to the leather strap that bound me to the nearest beam. “Well, none of the other boys are wearing ‘em. It ain’t regulation.”

I eyed him for a long moment. “It ain’t regulation,” I admitted. “It also ain’t negotiable.”

Whitley raised his hands in surrender. “Message received, Boy Scout!”

He pirouetted again and walked away as confidently as if it were just another sidewalk, whistling Dixie as he went. Only then did I notice Whitley wasn’t wearing work boots. He was barefoot.

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Each day after work, me and the boys would gather somewhere for drinks. “Prohibition” was just a word in that town. On good weeks, we’d commandeer a 12-top at Bucky’s and hoot and holler through the floor show, telling every girl who’d listen about what it’s like to awaken a giant. Even the richie riches in their tailored suits didn’t get as much attention as a motley gang of skyscraper builders.

On bad weeks we'd make our way to The Understone. The owner playing quiet piano in the corner while we toasted to whoever it was who'd taken that long missed step into the sky. That was the only reason for a bad week in those days. A fall.

Whitley never joined us on these outings, but he was a regular topic of conversation. Stories always accompanied by a cock-eyed grin and slow shake of the head. That Whitley, they'd say, he sure is something.

"You see Whitley today?" one would say. "Caught him sitting on an unfastened pipe on the 19th storey."

"What's so odd about that?" says another.

"He was stone asleep!"

"That's nothing, once I watched him walk beams blindfolded for over an hour."

"Sounds like you both skipped an hour of work, haw haw!"

"I hear he don't even leave the site. He sleeps hanging upside down from his knees, like a bat. I seen it."

"That fella... Acts like he can't fall."

"Well he hasn't. Not even once."

"Neither have you, ya moron. Fall once and it's not like you're coming back."

And then everyone would slowly turn to look at me. The ghost at the table.

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I saw Whitley again a few weeks later. I was riveting on the 30th storey now, sitting astride the frame. My legs dangled in the open air, which made me feel sick even though I knew it was safer than standing.

"Hey pal, you know what the tallest building on earth used to be?" It was Whitley's voice, coming from above.

I craned my neck up. Whitley was on a beam looking down at me. Well that's not exactly correct. He was *hanging* from the beam, bare fingers gripping the flange. It was near the end of shift and the setting sun cast his body in shadow. I looked away, not wanting to see him fall.

"Dammit Whitley, get down from there," I said. He acted like he hadn't heard me.

"The Great Pyramid of Giza. Almost 500ft and it's been there for nearly four thousand years," he began to swing gently back and forth. "Then there's this big stupa – a shrine – in Ceylon, that's 400. St. Mary's Church in Germany used to be taller than 500 but a spire collapse in 1625 took it down to 450 or so. Then of course there's the Yongning Pagoda in China. Over 500, they say, 'cept It burned in 500 and something AD."

I watched Whitley's shadow. As he spoke, he swung faster and faster like a child on monkey bars. His fingers released, launching him airborne. I closed my eyes and covered my ears.

The beam bucked beneath me for a moment. I opened my eyes. Whitley stood before me. He'd completed his jump with gymnastic poise. He motioned for me to take my hands from my ears. I did, heart pounding.

"You notice something? All those buildings were religious-like. Kinda makes you wonder, yeah?"

"Wonder what, for God's sake?" I spat out.

"Exactly!" said Whitley. "For God's sake! If those tall buildings were all for Gods then ain't cha curious which God we're building all these skyscrapers for?"

And with that, Whitley walked back to his work station. I looked around me. Most of the other workers were shaking their heads, grinning, already telling this latest Whitley escapade to the other ironworkers. But some, the ones close enough to hear him, some watched Whitley, staring after him even as their eyes watered from the setting sun.

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The bosses took note of Whitley's willingness to do the most dangerous jobs, jobs that nobody in their right minds would tackle. Riding the girders as our crane pulled into the air, so as to guide them better. Shimmying up bare vertical steel to fasten crossbeams while gales vibrated the cold metal between his knees, like a horse trying to shake off a fly. And he worked for cheap.

It wasn't long before Whitley was made foreman of our crew. The other boys either respected him or feared him but, most importantly, both groups listened to him.

Then, when we were 60 storeys up, the site supervisor took a confident step into thin air while showing our crew how to properly weld a crack in the frame. He didn't even scream. Just fell, trying to grab the wind as it creased his clothes and pushed his hair back against his skull. He was dead before he hit the ground, head bounced off a girder on the 14th floor with a sound like a church bell.

Not long after that, Whitley was in charge of the entire site.

Whitley had us working doubles all through the late summer. The boys were right, Whitley never left the site and, now that he was in charge, he didn't feel the need to hide it anymore.

I caught him hanging from the flanges on many occasions. His eyes stared off to the horizon as he faced the rising or setting sun.

"What are you doing, Whit?" I asked him one day, trying not to look at his feet dangling in the air.

Whitley kept hanging there from his fingertips without speaking. He hung there for so long I'd already gone back to work before I heard him reply.

"Praying," he said. "Do you see something in the sun?"

I looked.

"No," I said. "It's just the sun."

Whitley didn't reply.

The next morning I saw him dangling again, but he wasn't alone. Three other ironworkers had joined him, eyes wide open, staring at the sun.

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Not long after that, Whitley began holding early morning ceremonies on the top floor. Not officially, of course, but it was hard to resist his... allure.

Men would gather to hang limply from the beams, swaying in the gusts that howled through the downtown corridors, funneled by the skyscrapers.

Whitley would speak ceaselessly, his inner monologue flowing forth like the breeze through a revival tent. He spoke of divinity, spoke of church spires, the Great Pyramids, the Flatiron building, the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, pagodas, stupas, the Singer Building, cathedrals, the Manhattan Life Insurance Building, the Tower of Babel weaving all these disparate ideas in and out, agreeing then contradicting then contradicting the contradiction, all his words pointing to one undeniable fact: that there was a *reason* for all of this. Something so pure and ancient and holy that it drove all powerful people in history to build up and up and up. That they were a part of this process and, therefore, the light from that reason must also shine down upon them and if that was so then they must work without fear, hang from the beams without fear. Fear was doubt and doubt could never exist in the same body as faith. Pure faith.

I could never bring myself to trust Whitley that much, but I sat close by in the mornings, listening to his words and feeling my safety harness cinched tight around my chest. My secret shame.

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75 storeys up, Whitley called an urgent general assembly of all the roughnecks and ironworkers on the site. His eyes sparkled as he gave us the news: the building owners had approved a new design. This skyscraper wasn't stopping at 86 storeys, we were going all the way to 110.

A whoop went up from those in the crowd who could do quick math. 110 storeys. That would make this the tallest building in the world. Not just the tallest, the undisputed tallest. Taller than the next one by almost 300 feet.

The excitement at Bucky's was palpable that night. Even I found myself lost in it. The tallest building in the world... that meant something. That meant something. That meant something.

We all kept repeating it. That meant something. That meant something.

And for the first time since my fall, I started to believe again.

The next shift, an ironworker I'd never met fell 900 feet onto the pavement. His pulverized body greeted us with a rictus grin. He'd died smiling. Whitley gently closed his eyes with two greasy fingers.

We all returned to work within an hour. Whitley didn't even have to ask us to, we just did it. Because we knew it meant something, even if we couldn't put our finger on what.

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People can get used to anything. Complacency. It's a sickness, one that eats away at our souls and allows for misery and death. I know that from experience. Somehow, since I'd been working on the tower, I'd gotten used to watching our boys slip, fall, and die on the pavement.

But sometimes, something shakes you out of it. A slight shift in context is all that's needed for the whole grisly picture to snap into focus once again.

I was working the 93rd floor when I saw a shadow drop rapidly out of the corner of my eye. I barely looked up from my work, knowing that there was nothing I could do now that gravity had claimed him.

Then another shadow shot down towards the street.

This time I did look. It wasn't one of our boys. In fact, it was the finished skyscraper across from our site. A man in a suit plummeted towards the sidewalk. I turned away before the impact, but

the screams from the street wafted up to us all thin and broken. As the day went on, I watched men step from skyscrapers that had not been there even 5 years earlier and saw them slowly corkscrew as the air rippled along their tailored suits. I called out to them until my voice was hoarse, pleading, but it was useless. They were blocks away and the wind tore my words to confetti.

That's how I found out about the market collapse. Black Tuesday.

The news made it down the tower before I did. Whitley was sitting with the rest of the crew, calmly explaining that this was merely a bump in the road, did they really think anything could stop the construction of this fantastic, no, *sacred*, building?

He spoke loudly. He had to. Bodies were still falling all around us.

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At first, we kept right on building as if nothing had ever happened. As if the normally bustling downtown streets weren't loud with silence. As if the cold monoliths around us weren't apocalyptically empty, as dark and cold as the tombs they had become.

Whitley's fervor pulled many of us through for a while. Payment was paused for a few days while, according to Whitley, the investors liquidated some assets. A few days turned into a few weeks. The Depression began to strangle the city.

It wasn't until the third check bounced that the crew really began to shrink. Men simply stopped showing up. The liturgy Whitley had woven around the welding, riveting, and lifting was shredded by the economic reality. To be faithful is one thing. To be faithful *and* hungry? That was another. The spell was broken, for good.

I'd left only two days after Black Tuesday. In Whitley's cult, I saw the outline of something grim and deadly. The Wall Street suicides were merely a good excuse to leave.

I still frequented Bucky's to drink Depression-priced liquor with the other furloughed workers who'd sought out greener pastures. We stewed in the funereal atmosphere while the musicians Bucky's could afford plunked out ragtime dirges on sour-noted pianos.

Inevitably we would discuss Whitley, what'd become of him, whether he'd gone home like many of our friends. While we laughed at ourselves for the strange habits we'd developed from our time on that site, we still spoke as if we'd lost something important, even if we couldn't say exactly what.

I found myself walking past the great bulk of the skyscraper, now abandoned and truly dead but for the concrete-winged pigeons that perched in the unadorned girders above and the

steel-eyed hawks that perched above them. There was no sign of Whitley and no sign that his temple, for it was his, would ever be completed.

In early-spring the next year, I received a message from the investors asking me to assess the site. I agreed, grateful for the scratch, and met two of them for lunch to sort out the details. At the meeting, I offhandedly suggested they could save some dough by breaking down the frame on the top 24 floors and reverting to the original 86 floor plan. The 110 floor plan was a waste of money. The two men went quiet for a moment, looked at each other with inscrutable faces. Then one of the investors spoke:

“We never had a 110 floor plan.”

I didn’t even know how to explain. It was too ridiculous, too wild. They’d never known what Whitley was up to. They’d just trusted him. Trusted that the work was getting done the way they’d told him. They never figured on a zealot.

I did my site assessment on a cold March morning, pre-dawn. The building site, once a hive of activity, was deserted, adorned with nothing but ice. The security fences and “no trespassing” signs were long gone. I assumed they’d been transformed into firewood by the shanties that had become all too common. I wrapped my overcoat tight around myself and entered the supervisor’s office. Whitley’s office.

No sign anyone had been there in months. His fraudulent 110-storey blueprints sat on a drafting table, illuminated by ambient streetlights. I grabbed them as evidence.

My elevator key still worked. The wind was wild, shaking the wire mesh cage like a can of paint, and I made the mistake of looking down. The building twisted away from me, following those hideous ley lines of vertigo, leaving me to hover in the thin, cold air. I looked away. It had been months since I’d been higher than four storeys. The city yawned open and fear poured down my spine. Unprepared. A sleeping fawn caught in the jaws of a predator.

I got off at the top floor. The building was supposed to cap at 86 storeys and Whitley’s additions before the shutdown had taken it to at least 105. But as I stared up, mouth agape, I realized Whitley’d been busy during our furlough. The structure now continued well past 110. Was it 120? 125? It was hard to tell. It spired up and away into the sky, hooking off to the East with framework jutting out at odd angles, not following any building code I recognized. It was like trying to see through a hedge full of thorns.

Somewhere high above, I could hear the percussive beat of a hammer. Fear forgotten for the moment, I clipped my safety harness to the nearest beam and began to climb.

The going was slow. Whitley had built the structure without the pretense of anyone else using it. Beams were riveted at odd angles, optimized for a single person clambering through them. I had the ridiculous idea that I was seeing a skyscraper as it would look in nature, without the interference of man. I climbed on.

10 minutes later, it was impossible to tell how far I'd come. Whitley had disposed of the idea of "storeys", the framework served no purpose except to hold more framework. The hammering carried on, unceasing. I clipped my harness to the next beam and I noticed the cold steel beneath my hands was now rusted iron. At some point he'd run out of our materials. Whitley must've salvaged from other work sites and the dump.

Higher and higher. The hammering grew louder, more frantic, but still no Whitley. The iron had turned to scrap materials. Rebar, car parts, cast iron pans hammered flat and pincushioned with rivets. The narrowing tower swayed with the wind, creaking and pinging as it settled. Somehow, it held. I clipped my harness to wherever the bandolier could fasten.

It wasn't long before I saw Whitley. He was hard at work, hunched over a fencepost. He had been the one to take down the security fence, reappropriating it into the skeleton of his tower. His arm raised then came down quick. Close up, each hammer strike was a gunshot. I'd never thought of Whitley as strong, but the thought came to me now. I kept my distance.

"Whitley!" I shouted. "Come down, we need to talk."

Whitley looked around wildly. His face was forty years older, his eyes blood-red like knife wounds. He'd never stopped working, had he? His pupils rolled for a moment before settling on me. He smiled and came towards me on bare feet.

Even in his exhaustion, he still danced over the uneven terrain, surefooted as a mountain goat. He stood before me, taking me in.

"I suppose you're going to tell me to stop," he said.

"Not me, the investors," I replied.

"Investors," Whitley spat the word over the side of the tower. "They're cowards. Idiots. They don't get what we're doing here. What I'm doing here. Nobody does! I only realized it myself a few weeks ago."

"Realized what?"

"I had a... crisis," he looked at me, guilt in his eyes. "I'd lost that feeling, that excitement that drove me. In that low, low moment the tower finally took that moment to speak to me."

"What did it say, Whitley?"

Whitley put his hands on my shoulders. I could feel the callouses on his fingers through my jacket.

"It said that I would know what it was for once it was finished," Whitley grinned, the corners of his mouth trembling. "And I would know it was finished once I knew what it was for."

His eyes searched mine. His face fell. He looked down at where my safety cord connected to his tower.

"But you were never going to understand this," he said. "Not ever."

His hands clenched as if he was going to throw me over the side, but instead he dropped his arms. The dawn sun rose behind him. As if sensing the first morning rays, Whitley spun on his heel.

His eyes went wide.

"Look! Look!" said Whitley. He was pointing into the heart of the sun. "Can't you see it?"

I looked, then shielded my eyes.

"Whitley, there's nothing there," I said. "Just come down. We'll build more tomorrow, I promise."

I reached out to him, but Whitley knocked my hand away and stepped beyond the reach of my safety cord, all the way to the edge of the tower. He was still staring directly into the sun.

"It's in there. It's twisting, roiling, dancing. Bigger than anything, oh God it's incredible," he gasped. "It's looking right at— oh"

Whitley blinked, staggered by whatever he'd seen. He glanced down, as if noticing the height for the very first time. Starry-eyed with vertigo, he stepped back to regain his footing, but for the first time didn't strike true. A slight miscalculation. A tiny imbalance. And Whitley fell. He didn't make a sound.

As if taking his cue, the entire structure groaned and shuddered before the last dozen feet collapsed beneath me. For a moment, for the briefest moment, I felt the entire weight of the Earth's gravity turn its attention to me. It pressed into my back, urging me down down down towards the sidewalk.

And then the harness tightened. And then the harness held.

I dangled in the air, at the crown of Whitley's unfinished masterpiece, idol, god, whatever it was. The earth spiraled beneath me as the wind spun my body like a top and even with the

gale-force gusts my ears picked out my tether creaking under the strain. Seconds passed. Then minutes.

I don't even remember the climb down.

The wind carried the falling debris as far as 52nd street, but Whitley's body was never found. Or maybe his death was covered up by the new foreman, not uncommon in those days.

But some of the boys had other ideas. Years later, once The Depression let up, they told tales of a vision that appeared on foggy nights while working a new frame. A vision of a man who... well he wasn't quite floating. He was falling but without falling, twisting in the air, clothing rippled, hair whipped-back, eyes wild, screaming like the ground was rushing up to meet him, but not moving an inch up or down. He'd float there for a minute or more before suddenly plunging into the mist. Sometimes he would fall four or five times in a single shift, his terrified screeches ripped to shreds by the howling wind.

I don't believe it, you'd be a fool to, except... when Whitley told me to stare into the sun... I think I did see something. Something moving just on the edge of the brightness, roiling and writhing as it watched Whitley build. He believed so *much* that it blinded him. He could never understand... some Gods don't want your faith, they just want your sacrifice.

shudder Makes my stomach turn just thinking about it.