



UP HERE

Rubén M. Pérez

BY RUBEN M. PEREZ



You know, this is even better than I thought it would be. It's only temporary but I'm glad I had the chance to do this. I could have passed it up but I know I would have regretted it. Besides, I've always wondered what it would be like, to be way up here, washing these windows.

When I arrived in Boston and found that my old job wasn't waiting for me anymore, I had to get moving so I took the first job I could find. I had been away too long to expect that things would be the same. It's as if I had been lost at sea all that time, the world leaving me in its wake. And now I'm trying to play catch up. They said they would call if anything opened up but I'm not holding my breath. I've learned and had to accept, that there are no guarantees in life. I found that out when you passed away.

You would have said that I didn't fight hard enough to get my job back. You would have told me to sue the company. Once you formed an opinion there was no backing away from it. That was you. But before I decided to leave and help out at home, I was told that there was a strong chance that I would have to be replaced. I remember that bit of silence after the manager informed me and it made me think for the first time, My father has died and things will never be the same. It was a quick decision for me, an easy one to make. It was the right one.

I'm working as part of the crew that washes the windows here at the Prudential building, the "Pru". On your last visit, we walked past it on the way to the Charles River. It's seven hundred and eighty-eight feet and a quarter inch high with fifty-two stories. That's the first thing they tell you. The reason I landed the job is because I know the guy who I'm now replacing. His name is Andy. We met on the tennis courts in the Boston Commons. On that day, we were both waiting for our partners to show up when a court became available. We decided to hit around until they showed up and ended up having a pretty good warm up. After that, we made plans to start playing on a regular basis. We were averaging at least

two matches a week before I had to leave. The word “finesse” isn’t part of his vocabulary when it comes to tennis. And when he’s on, it feels like the guy is firing a cannon at you. You would have liked him.

Anyway, Andy has been saving and planning all summer long for this trip to Peru. He started his annual winter break a month early to visit the Inca ruins on top of Machu Picchu. I’m replacing him until I find something permanent or until these guys close up shop for the winter. Whichever comes first.

I don’t know exactly what Andy’s big attraction is for that place; in fact he’s not too sure himself. He first heard of it from a married couple he met while visiting the Great Pyramids. He has seen and done a lot. He has worked on the Alaskan pipeline, reached the summit of K2 and even rode his bike along the Great Wall. These are just some of the things he has done but Machu Picchu is different and represents something completely new. This is something he has to do. He says he feels compelled to go there. He feels it has something to do with a past life. He’s very spiritual that way and says he has an old soul. I admire the guy. He listens to his heart.

I was making plans for my own summer. Last spring, I received a raise, not a big one but I was going to use that extra money to buy something or maybe take a long vacation myself. Instead, I used it to get home, to see you for the last time.

I live next door to this guy who has Red Sox season tickets. He had

trouble with a broken water pipe one night and I helped him mop up. He traveled a lot and offered me tickets to the games he couldn’t go to and when he was in town, we’d go to some of them together. I was hoping to see as many Red Sox games as possible this summer. I was going to live on Fenway Franks and beer.

And then there’s Katy. We had gone out a few times before you became ill. Things were going really well between us. She likes to call me by my full name. “Benjamin,” she says, not “Ben” or “Junior” like I’m used to hearing but “Benjamin”. And I like the sound of her voice when she says it that way. We were just starting to become good friends when I had to leave and any plans I had for that summer had to be put on hold, even Katy.

I was planning to do a lot, travel, see some ball games, and maybe even fall in love. But sometimes things don’t turn out the way they’re supposed to. And now it’s October, the summer is over, and you are gone.

Before all this, when I was at my old job, I used to come to this part of town for lunch or just for the walk. There’s usually something going on here in the Back Bay. Sometimes, I’d notice the men above me on this same scaffold, scaling the Pru, washing these windows. I’d often think to myself how great it would be to escape the every day boring routines and spend time away from it all, high in the air. I’d catch myself staring upward, wondering and daydreaming, images of steeples and treetops in my head. Now look at me, here I am actually doing it. And it’s perfect weather for washing windows. These October days are bright and



breezy, and the nights cool and calm. Some of the leaves on the trees along the Charles have even begun to change. Winter will be here soon.

When I first started, I was slow to finish my share of the windows because I always had one hand firmly gripped onto some part of the scaffold leaving me with just the other to finish the job. Tim, my partner, used to try to get me to relax by offering me one of his cigarettes. He’s a big chain smoker. He always keeps a couple of packs of Marlboros in the small toolbox here on the rig. I’ve never accepted one from him while working but I will sneak one or two for myself after he’s gone and I’m left alone to put things away. I don’t know why I do this.

Tim is always talking about the things he’s going to do unlike Andy, who goes out and does them. But he’s a good guy, funny too. Being a comedian is on his list of things to do but I think he’s got a long way to go . . . He’s always joking about how he tells people that he has friends in high places and how business has been up and down. And even though his face is weathered and makes him look older than he really is, he says this is the best job he has ever had. He says it gives him a good “altitude” toward life. That’s how he says it. And you know, he’s right. He may not be that funny but I like it up here, too.

I like getting here early too. I still have trouble sleeping sometimes and when I do; I just get up and head for work. I’ve been here as early as five-thirty in the morning on more than one occasion. At five-thirty, even the newspaper machines haven’t been stocked yet so I usually arrive with a book or a magazine and head straight for the rooftop. Lately, I’ve been

bringing this collection of poems by Walt Whitman. It's a book that I used in college and just sort of carried around since then. Whenever I read them, I can feel them deep inside – like a good meal. That's what poems do. Sometimes, I think it's my heart beating in a certain way when I read them but it's not. I don't know exactly what it is. And as still as it is in those first few hours of the day, I really don't get to read them as much as I'd like to. Between the sun rising up over the harbor and watching the way its yellow-orange glow washes over the buildings and lights up the Charles in blues and greens so brilliant that they hurt my eyes, I end up spending most of that time in quiet, silent awe.

You'd think that I'd be moved to write some poetry of my own after seeing something like this. Well believe me, I have tried. I have scribbled words and phrases that come out slow and tangled like weeds. Unlike Mr. Whitman, who could turn a candy bar wrapper into gold leaf with his words, my poems do nothing to add value to the scraps of paper I find to write them on. I should just toss them over the side of the Pru one day but I can't for some reason or another. Instead, they lie in a loose pile on my kitchen table waiting for something to save them; the grace of inspiration maybe, or that rare and great gift of talent. In the meantime, I'll just read more poetry, watch more sunrises, and pile the paper high.

The quiet of the mornings doesn't linger either, it floats swiftly and effortlessly with the breezes and up drafts. Before I know it, it's eight-thirty and traffic on the central artery has slowed to a crawl. The streets at this end of town start to fill with cars and pedestrians filter up from the T. At about the same time, Tim arrives with a big cup of coffee in one

hand and a lighted cigarette in the other, smoke rising from both. "Want one?" he'll ask raising his hand holding the cigarette. "No, thanks," I'll say.

Sometimes, I find myself playing that old game of trying to find similar shapes and faces in the clouds. I remember first learning of the different types from you: nimbus, cumulus, cirrus. And when Tim catches me in this cloud-watching trance, he'll break it by asking me if I've discovered anything new. I'll tell him of seeing different animals, even cars, sometimes the face of a president or a movie star. Like you, Tim has trouble spotting these things but gives it a good try and it provides us with some good laughs. What I've never told him though, and probably never will, is that sometimes I catch myself looking for you.



I get to see things from up here in a way that I've never seen them before. Sunset is the best time of all for doing this. By then, I'm done with my work for the day and Tim has already left. Lately, I've been offering to put away all the gear and secure the rig just so I can have more time to my self up here, like now. This is when I'll open the little toolbox and reach for the cigarettes and the lighter. I do the same thing every time before I start putting things away I'll take three long drags and then turn the cigarette around and study the glowing tip and watch the smoke curl away from it like fingers. I can blow smoke rings. I don't know if it has anything to do with it but I feel more aware after going through this little ritual. My eyesight seems a little sharper and my hearing – it seems as if I can hear everything: a car horn in the distance, people down below making plans or wishing each other a good night, the wind slipping by and the creak of the tethers suspending this rig.

By the time I've secured everything, locked it all down, I've finished a second cigarette leaving just a few seconds, maybe twenty, before the street lights come on.

Now this is a sight.

I can count slowly to myself those silent twenty seconds and anticipate the streetlights illumination. And when I do this, I do something stupid. I'll stand there on the rig, my safety line unharnessed, and start to count: eight, nine, ten ... and this smile comes across my face: fifteen, sixteen, seventeen ... then I'll spread my arms out, as if I'm about to conduct the Boston Symphony or something and in three simple beats, the lights just

flare up like stars. They shoot out away from me and race down streets and through twisting alleyways in swift currents and lace patterns in all directions at once; out to Brookline and across the Charles to Cambridge and Watertown, to Fanueil Hall, toward the harbor islands and out to sea, down to the Cape. It sweeps over everything and leaves this sparkling trail of lamplight that blankets Boston like moonlit frost shimmering up into a dark sky. And you can't help but be moved by all this. It fills me up the same way the poems do. It makes me think of words like "ignite" and "explode" and in that same instant, something happens, I think to myself, There are times that will always be remembered.

And I feel something, somewhere, open up wide. It makes me breathe deep and my heart pound fast. It makes me want to fly, no, soar. That's a much better word. Sometimes I think it's a feeling of hope and others a poem that's trying to write itself but lately I've had this feeling that it's just everything, my whole life, rushing up to meet me.

I'll stand there for a while filling my lungs with the cool air, drinking it in. Then I'll climb out of the rig and onto the roof where it seems the moon has come to rest. If it weren't for the chilly temperatures, I'd stay out all night and study it's progression among the constellations, past Lacerta and Orion. It makes me think of Copernicus and Da Vinci, of telescopes and gravity, of satellites and comets, of angels and rockets.

Mom misses you. You must know that. She loves you in a way that only you'll ever know. And sometimes she still cries. She wishes she could talk to you. I've told her what I do, now that you're gone. I've told her that

I still talk to you and that I do it from wherever I happen to be at the time, like now, from up here. I just say what I have to say. And I don't know what it is but I feel you can hear me. I know that you are listening.



My cigarette is almost out.

So here I am trying to get my life restarted. Some people feel sorry for me but I tell them that there's no reason to feel that way. I tell them that everything will be all right. And I guess that's what I've been trying to tell you all along; That

I will be all right. And Mom will be all right. She's stronger than either of us knew. You really shouldn't worry. You would probably ask how I could possibly think this and I would never be able to give you straight answer except that sometimes, you just know things. And I know this.

The sun is going down and the light from it is this astounding, blazing red color. It looks as if there's something brilliant just beyond the horizon. Katy should have been here by now but she's probably running a little late as usual. She's really something else. I should tell you that there was a time during all this that I wanted to die myself I was mad at everything when you died. I was running out of reasons. And Katy was there the whole time for me. This morning, I wrote this:

I stopped believing
Because
I had forgotten

But there you were
Looking the way you do
Reminding me of
Butterscotch and whippoorwills,
Periwinkle and helium
Venus and wind chimes,
God and thunder,
Moonlight and miracles,
Horizons,
Vistas,

Yes

There you were
All this time

Earlier, I said that I was planning to do three big things this past summer and considering all that has happened, I guess one out of three isn't so bad. Actually, it's kind of wonderful when you think about it. Yeah, things are going to be just fine.

I told Katy to meet me after work because I wanted to show her something. *(fifteen)* I told her to get here as early as possible but she said she'd stop first and pick up something for us to eat. *(sixteen)* That's probably why she's running late. *(seventeen)* In fact I think that's her over there in her red coat, waiting to cross the street. *(eighteen)* Look at her, she's beautiful, even from up here. *(nineteen)* Sometimes when I see her like this, without her knowing, I just smile and think, Wow ... there's Katy.



And it makes me want to spend the rest of my life with her ...

To continue Ruben's legacy, we have included more of his short stories, photos, and his memorial video online at www.TheLightAt330.com



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