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670 ft.

Valerie Brewer
University of North Georgia

“Come on, Arch. You were doing just fine 30 minutes ago.” Paul said, reaching for the arm of the man standing on the edge of the metal beam.

But that wasn't true. Nothing was ever “just fine” with Archie, at least not since the Depression hit in 1929. Archie had lost everything when the stock market crashed six years ago: his money, his home, even his wife and children. He was a lonely loser working any job he could get his hands on, moving from Hooverville to Hooverville all across the state of New York. His only possession being the three holes in his heart that had reopened as soon as the words dropped from the fat man's mouth. Whether it was intentional or not, each of those words danced around in Archie's brain, taunting him, reminding him why his life was meaningless, why things would never get better, why he should've ended it all a long time ago.

This whole story began 30 minutes ago, as Paul had said, when four men decided to take their lunchbreak on a suspended beam 670 ft. in the air. They had been working all morning on what? The fortieth, fiftieth floor of the Rockefeller Center? Too many to count, so they had stopped at twenty-five. Now each floor was beginning to look the same. Rizzo swore up and down they had him rebuild the twenty-eighth floor twice just to see if he'd notice.

“And I did,” Rizzo said, taking a bite of his ham and pickle sandwich.

“Boss thinks he can fool me? He forgets Ol' Rizzo here had the best eyes in the Marines. Could spot a German 20 miles away, no squintin'.”

That was Rizzo, alright. Never missed an opportunity to talk about his time in the Marines. He had left for Europe in 1917, when he was barely 18, to join his brother, Rico, in an effort to defend the American way. He wanted to prove to his parents, and to himself, that he was as good a soldier as any other member of the Capucci family. However, little did young, blue-eyed, dark-haired Rizzo know the kind of threat that lie in wait for him across the pond. He was thrust into the midst of it all, unsure of how to act and relying too heavily on his older brother for support. He had to grow up and he had to grow up fast if he wanted to make it home alive. And he did. He only had to give up a toe, his peace of mind, and a brother to do so.

Rizzo finished devouring his lunch and was now lying on his back against the steel bar letting his arms and legs dangle off the side as he soaked in the afternoon sun, which was sitting at a sweltering 12 o'clock. It was a hot summer day, the kind where people would seal their windows and doors to keep the cool air from escaping. The rays of sunlight

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bounced around in a zig-zag motion atop the roofs of some of the most boring buildings in all the United States. It was an endless sea of brown and grey. Not a single one stood out from the rest. Sure, they were all sorts of different shapes and sizes, but, when you really boiled down to it, there wasn't much to see. Just a bunch of tall, colorless structures and a street full of tiny people carrying on about their day.

"You know what this city could really use? A giant, pink building plopped right in the center of Manhattan," Dean said before taking a swig of his water.

"Ha! Pink?! What are you?! A lady?!" Rizzo scoffed.

Dean opened his mouth in protest, but, seeing how large Rizzo's muscles were and how intimidating that hawk tattoo looked on his left arm, he thought better of it and shut his mouth again. After a minute or two of silence, Dean turned to Rizzo and smiled in his typical jovial fashion.

"No, I ain't a lady. But I do like me some pretty ladies. And you know what pretty ladies like? Pink. What better place to find myself a pretty lady than a giant, pink building stuck right in the middle of all the action?" Dean said, a wide grin emerging on his face as he spoke.

"Hmm...you make a good case there, freckle face. Forget I said anything," Rizzo said, pushing his newsboy cap over his eyes to block out the glare of the sunlight.

If he wasn't smiling before, Dean was certainly beaming with delight now that he'd gained the approval of his older coworker. Dean was like that: always pleased by the simplest of things, flashing his big buck teeth at anyone who'd look at him, the living embodiment of enthusiasm. But don't mistake his excitement for ignorance. Dean had gone to college to become a doctor, after all. Well, at least he tried to before his parents' farm in Vidalia, Georgia, fell on hard times as soon as the Depression began. Dean had quit school and started moving across the country to find work and send money back to his ma and pa. Despite the circumstances, Dean never lost sight of who he was: an optimistic southern boy with enough freckles to give a spotted leopard a run for its money.

"Pffft...still a stupid idea. Not surprising, though. It is coming from a back-country hick." Paul said, slurring his words.

"Yer just mad cause that back-country hick, as you so call him, could run circles around you in the smarts department. Hell, he could just run circles around you, you fat-ass." Rizzo laughed.

Paul shrugged his shoulders. He'd heard it all a million times before. "Yer a fat ass." "Yer a drunk." "Yer a middle-aged, balding man who could use a few good blows to the head." They started sounding more like selling points than insults. Any day now, he was expecting to see his image on a post-prohibition ad campaign for Old Crow Bourbon Whiskey: "This could be you if you don't switch over to Old Crow, a young man's drink." Paul never made it clear what had gotten him to this point. Each time someone asked, he'd mumble something incoherent under his breath and then finish it off with an offensive comment followed by a swig of some alcoholic beverage or another. Least to say, no one really liked hanging around Paul.

"Fat ass? Can you believe this guy?" Paul said, nudging Archie with his elbow.

Archie didn't move, didn't flinch, didn't say a word. Just sat there with vacant eyes, staring down at all the little dots of people passing by along the streets.

"Hey, Arch? You alive?" Paul said, tapping his knuckle against Archie's head, "Hello? Archie? Anybody home?"

Archie continued to ignore the fat man, his gaze remaining locked on the sidewalk far below them. He was always in this sort of distant state, unaware of anything else around him. His vision clouded by this lingering fog of sorrow, removing any color and happiness from his life. It had turned his skin grey, his hair grey. It had aged him 40 years, making him look weathered and faded from constant uneasiness. His thoughts were always focused on anything but the task at hand and seemed to occur in the same pattern as though they were songs on a record that was being played over and over again. First, it was his life before 1929, when he and his wife would spend their evenings sitting on a rug in front of the fireplace discussing their dreams and the future of their three children. Then, it was during

1929, when the stock market had crashed, and Archie sat by the phone for hours waiting to receive the dreaded call from his broker. Finally, it was after 1929, when he watched as his wife and three children boarded a train destined for his wife's sister's home in Mississippi. His littlest, Suzie-Sue, looking back over her shoulder at her father with tears swelling in her big, green eyes. No wonder he was such a nervous wreck.

"Arch? You okay, buddy?" Dean said, peering around Paul to look over at the silent man beside him, "You've hardly touched your lunch. You coming down with something? Stomach not feeling too good?"

"Stomach not feeling too good?' Is that how they taught you to diagnose someone in medical school? 'I'm afraid, Mrs. Jonson, that the reason your husband is in so much pain is because his stomach's not feeling too good.' Tch. No wonder there's such a high demand for good doctors nowadays," Paul said, taking a drink from the flask inside his shirt pocket.

"How many times I gotta tell you to leave the kid alone, Paul? Next time, I'm throwing you over the edge." Rizzo said, sitting himself up to show Paul that he meant business.

"Alright, alright! Relax, Mr. Red, White, and Blue! I'm just picking on him. Defending my ol' pal, Arch, here." Paul said as he slapped Archie across the back. "You see, Archie's been through a lot. He doesn't need to be bothered by some buck-toothed country boy. He's already lost everything. Why does he need to lose his rights to some peace and quiet? Hell, that might be the only thing he has left now that his old lady ran off to her sister's place with their three kids. What were their names again, Arch?"

"David, Abraham, and Suzie-Sue." Archie choked as he fought back the tears.

"Yeah, those three little shits, I mean angels. Point is they're gone, and it's all because Archie's financial situation couldn't satisfy that gold-digging floozy. Now, he's got nothing, zip, nada. Just a deadbeat down on his luck. No saving grace for this guy. If it were anyone else, I'd tell 'em to give up and finish it. They're probably better off dead anyway." Paul said with another shot of his flask.

At that moment, it was as if Paul's words

acted as the key to a chest deep within Archie's subconscious, unlocking a horde of dark, delirious thoughts he never knew himself capable of thinking. Without hesitation, Archie stumbled his way around until he was standing upright atop the metal beam, the toes of his shoes poking out over the side. He didn't know what he was doing, and he didn't know what to do next. All he knew was it felt right, as though he had been planning this for quite some time. It only took a little bit of guidance to get him there.

"Whoa! Archie! What the hell are you doing?! You gotta death wish or something?! Sit down before you slip and fall!" Rizzo shouted.

"Yeah, Archie! It's too dangerous to be showing off like that! Sit down before something happens or at least inch a little closer so we can catch you!" Dean said, motioning with his fingers for Archie to move towards them.

However, Archie wasn't listening. His feet remained planted in their spot while he continued to look down at the pavement, watching as a large group of people gathered around the sidewalk beneath him. They all began pointing, and gasping, and shouting at the crazy man who was soon about to join them at the bottom.

"Look at that man!" one woman shouted from amongst the crowd, "He's going to jump!"

"Don't do it!" another man said, cupping his hands around his mouth so Archie could hear, "It isn't worth dying for!"

"Ugh. Bunch a jerks. Don't listen to 'em, Arch. They're just looking for a show. We know you aren't gonna jump. You hear that?! He ain't gonna jump, you sick sacks a shit!" Paul said, throwing his flask at the people below who quickly scattered to avoid getting drenched in whiskey.

"How would they know?" Archie said, mainly to himself.

"Do what, pal?" Paul said.

"How would they know it isn't worth dying for? They don't know me.

They don't know what I've been through. They don't know how I lost everything. They don't know that my wife left me. They don't know how she took away my three kids! They

don't know that I'll probably never see them again! They don't know I'll die a lonely, old man without a single person to love! They don't know me at all, and they probably don't care! So I ask again, how would they know it isn't worth dying for?!"

"Come on, Arch. You were doing just fine 30 minutes ago," Paul said,

"Don't go loopy on us now."

"Besides, Arch, this sorta stuff ain't just special to you. Things have been rough all over for everybody. My family's gonna lose their farm if I don't find some work. I had to give up my entire medical career for them. You don't see me leaping off no high places." Dean said, jabbing an accusing finger at Archie.

"Lose?! You don't know what real loss is, farm boy." Archie snapped.

"Real loss?! Are you kidding me?! You didn't lose nothing! If you're so upset about your wife stealing away your three kids, why don't you stop feeling so sorry for yourself, hop on a train to Mississippi, and go fight for 'em?! If they're still alive, there's still a chance! That's what I always say! Wish I could do the same for my brother! Instead, all I'm left with is this cheap, hawk tattoo in honor of his memory! Hawkeye, the best shot in the Marines, until he was gunned down by some damned German while trying to protect his baby brother! So don't you talk to me about no real loss unless you know what it is!" Rizzo spat, "Am I right, Paul?! Paulie?"

"I told her not to worry about it," Paul said, staring down at the palms of his hands, "Told her I didn't care what people would say. Told her I'd marry her as soon as it arrived. Told her I'd always keep both of them safe. Told her that, no matter what, I was always gonna be there for her and for it. Told her I wasn't gonna be no bum, wasn't gonna runoff to save my own skin. Not like my father. No, I was gonna be good. But out of wedlock? That wouldn't fly. Not where she came from. She couldn't face the shame, couldn't tell her parents, couldn't trust me at my word. Instead, she chose to face the ocean's current than face the circumstances. Took me ten years and a lot of booze just to get over it. Please, Arch, I'm begging ya here. Don't put me through that again."

Finally, Archie broke his gaze from the sidewalk below and looked over at the three men beside him. Each one sat there with their backs straight and their necks tall, looking proud and valiant. Even Paul had this sort of dignified air about him, something Archie could never pull off, not with how beaten up he felt inside. He couldn't get over what had happened to him no matter how hard he tried. He wasn't strong like the others. Wasn't able to swallow the pain so easily. There was a moment, just a split second, while staring into those stern faces, that Archie considered sitting back down, maybe following through on what Rizzo had said: "If they're still alive, there's still a chance." But was there still a chance for Archie? All of a sudden, the memory of sweet, little Suzie-Sue looking back over her shoulder with tears clouding her eyes came crashing down on Archie at full force. Her face was red and swollen as she tried to capture one last image of her father before heading to Mississippi never to return. While he stood there watching this pitiful display, all he could think of were the last words his wife had said to him, "By my life, Archie, I will make sure you never see these children again. I don't want them to remember their father as the loser he's become." Now, here he was, alone and miserable, with the only thing standing between him and sweet release was 670 ft.

And then he took a step.

Faculty Mentor

Gloria Bennett