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The War Machine

A story by
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It was 7:00 a.m. Jack Dempsey found his timecard among a multitude of others and punched in. In the fifteen years that he had worked at the rubber factory, he had only missed two weeks--once because he had contracted the flu, and the other because his parents had been killed in a car wreck when he was nineteen years old. After the funeral, he rented a small room from an elderly lady who ran a boarding house near the factory. Since he had no family or friends to speak of, it was a convenient abode, for it was only a ten-minute walk to work.

He sauntered down the long corridor to his work station and was greeted by the sounds of machinery starting up for the day's work and the familiar smell of rubber being mixed in the mill room. It was a smell all its own--a kind of sweet smell that was pleasant to him and that he had grown accustomed to.

Toward the end of the long hallway, he made a right turn and the machine shop lay before him. It was an immense room with high ceilings supported by heavy steel beams. A myriad of aluminum pipes containing compressed air and power lines dangled from the beams like a metallic, tropical rain forest. They powered the rows upon rows of computer controlled lathes and mills, all of which were too complicated for him to operate, as well as a long line of manually-operated drill presses. Work was already commencing, and the machines hummed as they spun spirals of white-hot metal into the air. They lay in curlycues all over the floor.

Jack was eighteen years old when he came to work for the factory, and for

his first year of employment he worked on a drill press, reaming holes in parts that were too delicate to be stamped. It wasn't until after his parents had died, thus forcing him to make it on his own, that his foreman decided that he should be promoted to the punch press.

In a little alcove, away from the other machinery, surrounded by a thick, soundproof curtain, stood the punch press. Jack sat down in front of the machine and was dwarfed by it in comparison. It stood about twelve feet high, and the nuts and bolts that held its huge steel parts together seemed unnaturally large. It required special wrenches, almost as big as he was, to torque the nuts and bolts down when the vibration of steel stamping through steel worked them loose. The vibration could be felt throughout the entire factory. The machine was old. On the side of one of the great arms that lifted the heavy, steel piston, which came smashing down with three and a half tons of pressure, was stamped the year 1943. It was the year the plant had first acquired the machine.

He remembered the day his foreman walked up to him and told him that he would be working with the punch press.

"You've been promoted," he said with a sly smile.

"Oh," said Jack matter-of-factly, as if it didn't make a bit of difference to him. The foreman took him over to the machine and familiarized him with its operation. He was intimidated by it at first; it reminded him of a giant, unpredictable beast. Its oversized moving parts scared him, and although he wore ear protection while using the machine, it made the most noise he had ever heard. Each time the die stamped through a piece of

metal, it sounded like a cannon going off. But over the years his hearing had been impaired and the noise wasn't so unnerving to him anymore. He knew every moving part intimately and could tell just by the sounds it made when something needed to be adjusted or when the die was dull. He had learned to trust the machine.

Jack put his safety glasses on and stuffed some little sponge-rubber plugs in his ears. There were two buttons on either side of the piston--one red and the other green. Both buttons had to be pressed simultaneously in order to activate the machine. It was a safety device to make sure nobody's hands were between the die when the piston came smashing down. Jack had thick callouses on the palms of his hands, and the buttons were slightly worn from so many years of use.

He placed both hands on the buttons, bowed his head slightly, and gave them a gentle push. The machine made a loud hissing sound as the arms raised the piston up, separating the top part of the die from the bottom, and then brought it crushing down on a piece of metal sandwiched between the two parts. POW!!! He could feel the vibration in the palms of his hands. It travelled through his entire body. He pressed a pedal on the floor as the die began to open, and a jet of air ejected the stamped part out of the die and down a chute to a plastic bin behind the machine.

In just a few minutes he became one with the machine and had developed a precise rhythm. He never wasted a single movement. As soon as the die opened up, his foot hit the pedal on the floor, and before the part reached the bin, he had another piece of metal loaded into the die. On a good day he could make the machine sound like a battleship during target practice. POW!!! POW!!! POW!!! He worked all

morning unaware of anything, except what the machine was doing, until the tool and die maker tapped him on the shoulder.

Jack turned abruptly around.

"Time for break," he said.

"Huh?"

"Time for break!" he yelled, pointing to his watch.

"Oh," said Jack, taking out his ear-plugs. The tool and die maker went around behind the machine and picked a couple of parts out of the bin. They were just simple metal rings that were later degreased and then set in the lathes where grooves were carefully cut into them. From there they were sent to the rubber presses where o-rings were squashed into the grooves. After that, Jack didn't care where they were sent.

The tool and die maker ran his oily fingers around the edges of the parts, to make sure there were no burrs, and then held them up at eye level to see if there were any scratches in the metal.

"Looks like your die is a little dull. You'd better take it down after break and let me sharpen it," he finally muttered, after a careful inspection, and he walked away.

After break Jack dismantled the die and placed it on a cart. He wheeled it through the maze of machinery over to the tool and die maker, who sat with his feet up on his desk reading the newspaper. He had been working at the factory for over thirty years and had reached the top of his pay scale. His job was to sharpen and repair dies or build new ones should the occasion arise. Most of the time, however, he just sat and read the newspaper. He

didn't associate with very many people although he was well respected for his sagacity. But over the years he had become cynical and hard, and most people had found him difficult to deal with.

Jack stood in front of his desk and looked down at the front page of his newspaper. The Israelis were bombing the hell out of the Palestinians, and there was a photograph of a city reduced to rubble. Jack had no idea where the Middle East was, much less who the Palestinians were, and the headlines hardly affected him.

The tool and die maker saw him gazing at the picture.

"Did you know that for every part you stamp fifty people die?" he asked.

"Huh?" said Jack. He thought the tool and die maker was making fun of him, like he did with just about everyone, but then he pulled a set of blueprints out of his desk drawer and spread them out.

"Look," he said, "This is the little part you're making. See where it goes?" Jack could discern the part from all the others, but still he couldn't comprehend the total picture.

"Do you know what this thing is?" asked the tool and die maker. Jack felt a little apprehensive. The tool and die maker had a look of intensity in his eyes that made him nervous, and he started to back away.

"No," he replied, shaking his head.

"This is part of the fuel injection system of one of those jet fighters that demolished this city," he said, holding the newspaper up for Jack to see. The expression of shock and the horror on Jack's face made him chuckle.

"Think of all the people that died because of your work!" he said contemp-

tuously. "Think about all those homeless children! Don't you feel proud?"

Jack stared at the picture dumbfoundedly and then looked up at the tool and die maker. The tool and die maker only laughed and clapped him on the back.

"Your die will be sharpened in about twenty minutes," he said with a condescending smile.

Jack walked away mortified. He couldn't be sure if the tool and die maker was lying to him or not. He was always teasing people. However, his stomach knotted, and he felt dizzy as he walked over to the punch press and looked up at the great machine. Images of homeless children wandering through streets of rubble raced through his mind and tore his heart open. The machine made a quiet hissing sound as it stood there idle. Still, it was a foreboding beast to him, despite how he had learned to trust it, and an element of fear always lurked in the back of his mind. As he looked up at the machine, he finally realized its evil nature.

He went over to the foreman's desk and told him that he wasn't feeling well. The foreman looked rather surprised. Jack's face was ashen, and his eyes were bloodshot from holding back his tears.

"You O.K.?" asked the foreman.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he replied. "I just need to go home and get some rest."

On his way out he stopped to look at the tool and die maker. The die had already been mounted on the sharpener, and each time it passed beneath the grinding wheel, it sent a fiery array of sparks into the air. The tool and die maker sat and watched the spinning wheel with a stolid look on his face. As Jack left the factory, he became violently sick to his stomach.

The next morning when Jack came to work he didn't bother to punch in. Instead, he walked stoically down the long corridor with a purposeful look in his eyes. He finally stopped in front of the punch press and stared up at the machine with remorse; he knew what he had to do, and it caused him great pain. Standing in the corner were the huge wrenches used to tighten down the nuts. He picked one up and climbed on top of the machine. There were two packing nuts that secured the arms to the axle. Using all his strength, he finally worked them loose, and they dropped with a thud on the cement floor. He gave the end of the axle a solid bang with the wrench, thus off-centering the stroke of the piston, and climbed down from the machine.

The die was freshly sharpened and he reassembled it into the press. He was sweating with determination and tears rolled freely down his cheeks as he stepped back to look at his work. For an instant, he wanted to turn and run, but he knew there was no alternative; he was a slave to the machine.

He put both hands on the buttons, and his body trembled.

"No!" he groaned, "It's too much!" And he pushed the two buttons resolutely. The machine made a sickening howl as the piston raised up. When it came down, the two parts of the die were not aligned, and it exploded from the sheer force.

Jack felt a sharp pain as shrapnel ripped through his body. Parts of the die were embedded in the back wall of the factory. As the piston made its upswing, the axle snapped in half. The force of it broke off one of the arms, and the piston came crashing down with a huge bang. The machine was destroyed.

People came running from all over the factory.

"What happened?" they all chanted.

The tool and die maker stared down coldly at Jack's body lying on the floor.

"Looks like it's time for a new punch press," he said, as he turned away.

First Place, Prose

DRIFT

A Poem by
Howard Post

You discerningly lean,
Turn out the light
And your scenery slips
Into the night.

Your thoughts fill up
A whirlwind of dreams,
Pictures set forth
By unnatural means.

Through manifestation
They come and go,
But their relevancy
You do not know.

And you awake with thoughts
That your dreams go away,
Before you understood
What your dreams had to say.

Fourth Place, Poetry