

Master
Of The
Welded
Bead

By:

Kit Cain

Master Of The Welded Bead

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PREFACE

Originally written as a screenplay, I later realized that the nature of the screenplay doesn't include enough essential details to produce a proper feel for the story, introducing too many mechanical instructions essential for other professional film artists to have. The story is short because screenplays are quite short—110 to 120 pages—in order to accommodate the average 90-minute screen time.

The underlying theme of this story is my effort to illustrate what a man who is a master of his own personal universe looks like to me. The hero of the story, Warren “Jack” Diamond, is transparent at whatever level of society he chooses to move within at the moment. His dress and mannerisms may not be equal to those of the poor or very wealthy, but they are at least not intimidating and not purposely chosen to make any kind of statement. He feels unity with all of humanity and his actions express those inner feelings. His cheerful, outgoing, and humorous attitude place him on an equal footing with the self-important while at the same time his positive, encouraging friendliness and compassion for the poor in spirit and material well-being make him loved and respected at that level. In short, he moves through all levels of society with equanimity and without prejudice, but his trials and tests would sorely tax the mind, heart, and body of lesser souls ... or retire them to their gated community post haste!

The other major character of the story, Don Hendrix, is an old acquaintance of Jack's, but their paths through life have led them in quite divergent directions with resultant motivations and levels of awareness quite diametrically opposed to each other. The attempt to resolve this conflict is a recurrent theme throughout the story. Jack and Don, as young men just out of college, met during their tour of active duty in the U.S. Marine Corps while undergoing flight training. Though modest rivals, they were none-the-less great friends until going their separate ways after their armed forces duties were completed. Jack, being of a more adventurous nature, worked as a pilot in all kinds of aircraft and helicopters all over the globe, learning to be a qualified aircraft mechanic as well as having single-engine, multi-engine, helicopter, instrument, and airline pilot's ratings. He is a naturally mechanical person who loves working with his hands and also has specialty training in various trades, having gradually achieved the level of master welder over the years.

Don, on the other hand, moved into the business world right after his service obligations were completed and gradually worked his way up in corporate management until he had accumulated enough wealth and experience to buy his own company ... with more than

a little of his family's financial help it might also be added. In this story, the company he has purchased is a ship building company whose primary source of income lies in building small, high-speed gun ships for the military and government. Don's primary focus of attention is first of all on his own personal net worth (financially and socially), his company's success (but only as an extension of his personal pride), and his family (as objects of his personal pride and personal desires).

Other differences between the two men are equally as dramatic physically, emotionally, and mentally. Jack is physically in good shape for his age, controlling intuitively and intelligently his quantity, quality, and type of food and liquid intake, and he chooses trade professions that demand physical exertion as a form of exercise and muscular maintenance. Don, on the other hand, has "gone to pot" from over-indulgences in everything but exercise or any other kind of physical effort ... except perhaps sex.

Jack's relationship with his two daughters gives some idea of his capabilities—or limitations, depending upon point of view—as a Father in an age of broken families, greater freedoms of all kinds, and abundance beyond anything experienced before by the masses in our own short period of mankind's recorded history.

Other more colorful characters in the story—friends of Jack's from all social levels and walks of life—are caricatures of real people given more character, awareness, intelligence, and "joie de vivre" than they actually demonstrate in real life, but from whom Jack derives a certain measure of enjoyment and satisfaction through his own willingness to help and interact with them. Hendrix, on the other hand, would feel so far above most of these individuals that he would not bother to speak to them except with disdain—and most probably not at all.

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CHAPTER 1.

Morgan River Shipyard sprawls along one side of the Morgan River right where it widens out into the North Atlantic Ocean. The city of Steeltown, once a well-known industrial city, straddles the river on both sides, the shipyard being in the industrial portion and next to the lesser social levels of the city. Several very large construction hangars landmark the yard from a distance along with a sprawling junkyard filled with rusted scrap steel, boat parts, junked steel fishing boats, and a coastal freighter waiting to be dismantled and sold for scrap. Granted that the shipyard is an eyesore to the community, it nevertheless employs over a hundred men and women in a somewhat sporadic fashion dependant largely on national and international government orders for small, fast gunboats and coastal patrol boats.

The shipyard is owned by a tough businessman named Don Hendrix who constantly resists demands by the town commissioners to clean up the mess, retorting that it doesn't bother him—and if it bothers anyone else, they can pay him to clean it up. Like so many things in life, however, where one finds a measure of darkness, one also finds an equally bright light—though in this case the light is masked in such a way as to appear unobvious to the eyes of the mundane, frustrating, and physically exhausting world of manual labor and heavy construction. Such a light is Warren “Jack” Diamond, a welder and a one-time companion of Hendrix in their younger years as U.S. Marine pilots.

Inside the largest hangar, the noise level increases dramatically. Steel being hammered, drilled, or dropped mingles with the grating sound of high-speed grinders and the scream of metal-cutting saws that require ear plugs to keep the workers from going deaf. Constant brilliant flashes of light from arc welders light up the inside of the hangar like lightning, and the smell of ozone and burned steel permeates everything. In the welding section, Jack Diamond puts the finishing weld on a hawse pipe, his body covered by a long leather apron, his face masked by a welder's helmet that enables him to stare into the brilliant white light of the welding arc without losing his eyesight. Jack is a Master Welder, self-taught, but known throughout the shipyard as a master of the welded bead. He would probably acknowledge the compliment with a shrug of the shoulders, but were there someone (which is there isn't) capable of seeing inside the more profound parts of his being who was to refer to him as a “Master Of The Welded Bead And Other Illusions Of The Universe” it would most assuredly bring a knowing smile to his face.

At his welding station inside the hangar, Jack straightens up, flips the used-up butt of a welding rod from the wand of his arc welder onto the concrete floor, and raises his

helmet to look at his work with a critical eye that misses nothing. Suddenly, from behind him, he hears his name being called.

“Jack? ... Jack!” yells Wanda, Don Hendrix’ personal secretary, above the din of the hangar.

Jack pulls off his helmet and slowly turns to look at Wanda.

“Hi, Wanda. What brings you down into the bowels of Hell?” Jack asks.

“Mr. Hendrix would like to see you as soon as possible,” she replies.

“*Mister* Hendrix?” Jack sneers with a slight smile on his face. “You mean, Don?”

“Suit yourself!” replies Wanda with a shrug of her shoulders.

Jack looks at his watch.

“Tell him I’ll be there at 1:30. I have to meet my daughter at the airport in fifteen minutes. In fact, I’m late now.”

“Okay ... I’ll tell him,” replies Wanda reluctantly, “but he isn’t going to like it!”

“Tell him to count his money ‘till I get there!” replies Jack sarcastically.

“Oh, sure! ... and who’s going to hire me tomorrow?” replies Wanda.

Jack hurriedly sheds his leather apron and heavy leather welder’s gauntlets, punches himself out with his time card, and heads for the parking lot. He climbs into an immaculately reconstructed Volkswagen “Thing”—the civilian version of the World War II German Jeep—and makes his way to the local airport. His daughter Jenny waits patiently for him at the curbside with her suitcase and the two of them proceed homeward.

“Sorry I’m late, Honey. I’m now old enough to start losing track of time,” says Jack.

“I wasn’t really worried, Dad,” says Jenny quietly.

They look at each other. Jack takes Jenny’s hand.

“I’m sure proud of you making your own way like you are. I think about you more than you’ll ever know,” says Jack.

Jack suddenly brakes hard enough to make the tires squeal slightly. Jenny is startled to see some ne’er-do-well pushing a shopping cart full of junk into the street directly in front of their car and making his way to Jack’s window. Before Jenny can ask what’s going on, Jack comes to a stop, rolls down his window, and speaks to the individual as though he knows him well.

“Ike ... for God’s sake! You’re blocking traffic!” says Jack, slightly exasperated.

Ike reaches into his shopping cart, pulls out a slightly worn mini metal grinder, and holds it up for Jack to see.

“Ten bucks!” says Ike, a man of very few words.

By now the traffic behind Jack is becoming impatient, horns are blowing, and there are more than a few impatient faces in Jack’s rearview mirror.

“Bring it over later,” says Jack, leaving Ike stranded in the middle of the traffic.

“Who was that, Dad?” asks Jenny

“That was Ike ... one of my ‘friends of a lesser-experienced soul’, if you know what I mean,” replies Jack, “and there’s another one over there on the street corner painting at the artist’s easel. That’s Trudy ... you’ll like Trudy.”

Trudy is a huge woman dressed in gaily colored attire and wearing a crazy floppy hat. Her constant speech and wild gesticulations indicate that she is one who obviously enjoys being the center of attention, and by the nature of the people from all walks of life and social class seated or standing around her, she is intimidated by no one. Just as Jack and Jenny are passing by, she bursts into the loudest and most infectious laugh imaginable ... the noise echoing throughout the park and for at least a city block in all directions. As they pass, Jack pushes the button on his electric tape recorder/noise machine and the loudspeaker just behind the front grille sends out a loud OOOOOGAH! Trudy turns quickly and waves.

“Hi, Jack!” she yells in a boisterous voice. Jack waves and drives on.

“Good Lord, Dad,” exclaims Jenny. “These are your friends?”

“I don’t really have a lot to do with them,” replies Jack, “but they don’t have many people they can turn to for help, so I help them out every now and then.”

“You’ve sure moved further into the lower side of life than you were when we were together,” said says Jenny.

“I guess it may look that way, but only because you’re older now and see a different side of me,” replies Jack. “I got tired of fences around subdivisions; fences around houses; and fences around everybody’s heart. Money and its acquisition seem to insulate people from one another ... and that’s not all bad ... but people who have money entertain themselves in quite a different manner than those who have to make their own entertainment, as you will see while you’re with me.”

“You’re not afraid of crime or violence in this part of town,” asks Jenny.

“I’m not exactly the victim type!” laughs Jack, “but there are other, deeper reasons why I have no fear.”

“Such as ...?” asks Jenny.

“For one thing, I’ve hunted down my fears like a dragon slayer,” says Jack. “The minute I found myself fearful of something, I purposefully and carefully experienced it or examined it until I understood it well enough to fear it no longer. Some people fear the unknown. I used to. Now, the unknown is my playground. I’ve grown to trust it as much as I trust the known.”

As Jack’s buggy approaches the far side of the town park, Jenny notices two more characters gesturing in their direction. One of them—obviously a Preacher of some ilk, as noted by his dress—is standing on a box, Bible in hand, sending some sort of a hand-waved blessing in their direction. His companion of considerably shorter stature,

unshaven, dressed in an odd assortment of Salvation Army clothes, and boasting a pair of black oversized gumboots, gives Jack a buddy-type wave. Jack again responds with his electronic noise generator. This time, the loudspeaker behind the front grille of the Jeep blurts out a very loud DING! ... DONG!

“Another friend?” asks Jenny.

“They’re fun! They’ve always got something besides ‘Hi, how’re you today?’ Ike always has good used things for sale for a pittance, and I’m probably his best customer. He gets stuff out of garbage bins and I don’t even want to know where the rest comes from. Preacher there, he should be on stage. Have you ever tried to be original with religion? He does it without even trying. The secret is to help them and not get too close.”

“This is going to be interesting!” remarks Jenny. “I can’t wait to see the home you been telling me about. A ship in a junkyard is a long way from a \$300,000 house in Denver!”

“Shorter distance than you think!” Jack replies, “...and this place is free!”

Jack makes his way on the town streets around the perimeter of the huge Shipyard grounds which are surrounded by a high steel fence. At the far end of the junkyard and close to the water he stops at a gate in the steel fence which is securely locked with a chain and padlock. Unlocking the padlock, he drives slowly into the junkyard on a very rugged dirt road marked with potholes. He stops beneath the bow of a 150-foot-long, rusting steel ship’s hull with the words LAND LADY crudely painted high up on the bow. The ship was once a small coastal freighter now hauled up high and dry for dismantling and recycling as scrap steel.

Mid way between the bow and the stern and not too far out from the keel, Jack has cut a large hole in the steel plate and welded in place a steel gangway ladder which extends from the ground upward into the dark bowels of the ship’s interior. Jack and Jenny climb up the steel steps of the gangway ladder past a massive diesel engine, pipes, valves, generators, pumps, and other paraphernalia of the ship’s engine room and finally onto the third level of platforms which lead to the ship’s living quarters. They walk toward the stern of the ship past several stateroom doors on each side until coming to a nicely-decorated door at the end of the hall which has a polished brass nameplate saying CAPTAIN’S CABIN.

As they walk into the captain’s cabin, Jenny can see a sleeping area on the left side, a small galley kitchen on the right side, and the entire stern being a living/sitting room with portholes placed at even intervals all the way around the ship’s stern and sides. The interior of the cabin is impeccably decorated with ship’s memorabilia, signal flags, brass lights and lanterns, beautiful pictures, a number of living plants, and an odd, but neat and clean assortment of wood and leather furniture.



“WOW! Dad!” remarks Jenny excitedly. “This is so neat! Did you do all this yourself?”

“Most of it.” replies Jack.

“How did all this come about?” asks Jenny.

“If I remember correctly, I told you about meeting my old Marine Corps Flight School buddy, Don Hendrix, in a store in Steeltown one day, and when he found out I was a welder, he asked me if I wanted a job as a welder in his shipyard. I took him up on his offer and came to find out the company had a problem with ne'er-do-wells breaking through the fence and building fires and little shacks back here in this part of the junkyard. I had already spent numerous hours out here wandering around, looking the junkyard over, and been up on this ship and in the captain's cabin ... though it certainly didn't look anything like it does today. I thought to myself this would make one hell-of-a nice living suite and so told Don that I could take care of his problem by living back here. He was really appalled at his old buddy wanting to live in the company junkyard, but he quickly agreed since it offered a cheap solution to his problem. He still won't come out here ... it's just a little too far beneath him.”

“It's so cozy,” remarks Jenny.

“Not much is new,” Jack adds. “The table came from Goodwill; the easy chair from the Salvation Army. The rest came from yard sales here and there, and various dumpsters in the wealthy part of town. Oh! I almost forgot! I have to meet with Hendrix. Go back down the hall a couple of doors until you find a stateroom with your name on it. There's a little surprise for you. See you later.”

Jack returns to work and his meeting with Don Hendrix.

Jenny makes her way out of the Captain's Cabin, down the hall, and stops at the door of a stateroom which has a small polished brass plate with her name on it that she had not noticed when passing by before. She slowly opens the door and peers in.

“Andy!” Jenny exclaims.

She runs over to the bunk bed, falls to her knees, and hugs the huge Panda Bear propped up at the head of the bunk.

“Andy, where did you come from? I haven't seen you for years. Oh ... Dad!” says Jenny as the tears fill her eyes from happy memories of the distant past.

CHAPTER 2.

The Executive offices of the Morgan River Shipyard Co. lie in a separate building which adjoins the Main hangar building. As Jack walks into the Office of the President, he first encounters the secretarial office where Wanda looks up at him with a scowl on her face.

“Go on in,” she says. “He’s waiting for you ... and not very patiently, either.”

Jack walks into Hendrix’ office.

“Nice of you to come up, Jack!” growls Hendrix facetiously.

“Get back on your throne, you Turkey! You can choose your lunch hour—I can’t. What would you be wanting me for?” asks Jack.

“I can use a little of your help,” says Hendrix condescendingly.

“You’ve got something to weld, maybe?” says Jack facetiously.

“Right!” growls Hendrix in a disgusted voice.

“Management? ... again?” says Jack.

“I offered you a management position and you wouldn’t take it,” adds Hendrix.

“What good would it have done? You don’t listen to me,” says Jack. “My ideas are like from another planet. I don’t need that kind of frustration. What is it this time?”

“Help me hold off the strike for another two weeks until the Patrol Boat contracts are let.” Hendricks says quietly.

“I don’t control the Strike Committee. The Union does.” adds Jack.

“Yes, but they’ll listen to you.” Hendricks says.

“They listen to me because I’m human. They don’t listen to you because you’re a greed-bag and you lie to them.” says Jack with a very firm voice. “You don’t have to be an insider to know who gets the money around here.”

“Look, knock off the bullshit, Jack!” exclaims Hendrix with no small amount of anger.

“This is very important for the company as well as you. If we don’t get the Patrol Boat contract, there may not be any work for anybody.”

“I don’t like siding with management when I don’t agree with their philosophy,” says Jack with a matter-of-fact tone to his voice.

“You’re going to be retired in six months! What difference does company philosophy make to you?” demands Hendrix.

Jack looks out the window and thinks for a minute.

“Okay. I’ll try,” says Jack. “But if I succeed, I want five hours of flight time in the P-51.”

“What! It costs five hundred bucks an hour just to keep that thing in the air,” replies Hendrix in an exasperated tone of voice.

“Yeah,” replies Jack, “and it’s my money and the other guys’ money the keeps it there!”

“It is in a pig’s ass!” exclaims Hendrix. “It’s my personal money that pays for that airplane.”

“And where do you get that money?” says Jack intensely. “Are you worth ten, twenty times what I’m worth? You want to post your expense account on the cafeteria bulletin board so the workers can all see where their money goes? *Is the hand worth less than the brain?*”

There’s a long pause during which time Hendrix looks intensely at Jack with something considerably less than friendship.

“Answer me! Is the hand worth less than the brain?” demands Jack.

“Fuck!” exclaims Hendrix. “You always were a problem!”

“Right! ... like back in flight training I should’ve bailed out just after I gave you that practice fuel-failure emergency,” says Jack.

“Well, you could’ve at least waited ‘till 2,000 ft. instead of turning the fuel off at the end of the fucking runway,” says Hendrix, remembering all too well that very frightening incident.

Jack laughs boisterously.

“Even then you forgot what you were supposed to do,” says Jack with a smile on his face. “You were suckin’ up pine needles through your puckered ass before I finally turned the damn fuel pump on. It’s always your help that bails you out ... and you think you’re worth ten times what they’re worth! What’re you gonna do this time if there’s no Patrol Boat contract?”

“I’m working on it. I’ve got several other big deals in the fire. One of them will come through ... you watch ... they always do,” says Hendrix with assuring confidence.

“You’re gonna need some loaded dice, Don,” says Jack. “Things are too far out of balance here, and you’re the only one who can put the balance back. You get too much, and we get too little. It’s getting to be time for me to leave anyway, but I’m not doing anything unless you give me a lot more reward than you’ve given me in the past. Five hours in the P-51 is little enough to ask.”

“Three! ... You pay for the gas!” retorts Hendrix.

“Four hours! ... and YOU pay for the gas!” Jack demands.

“Only if you get me the extension,” adds Hendrix.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Jack replies and turns to go.

Several hours later, Jack is sitting in his living room in the Captain’s Cabin talking on the telephone to one of the Union executives. Jenny is preparing food in the galley.

“I’m in favor of this strike totally,” explains Jack, “but I’m finding out Hendrix is in more financial trouble than we think. If the government gets wind of any labor unrest, it may influence the letting of the Patrol Boat contracts. Also, it may just push this company over the brink into bankruptcy. I don’t know what else to tell you, except that’s the way it looks

from here ... and from my latest conversation with Hendrix a few hours ago.”

There’s a long silence while Jack listens to the reply.

“That’s fine,” Jack says. “Get back to me as soon as you make a decision. Talk to you later ...and thanks, Jim.”

Jack hangs up with a grim look on his face.

“Is the company in financial trouble?” asks Jenny.

“Yes,” replies Jack, “but this isn’t the first time. Hendricks has always pulled it off at the last moment before; nobody knows how. I have a feeling this time it may be different. He’s not quite as cocky as he usually is.”

“You aren’t worried?” asks Jenny.

“In six months I’m a free man,” replies Jack, “ ... retirement pay; social security; and I’m outa’ here. For all I care, this whole damned ship can sink; I’m finished with making it my personal problem.”

“How’s Casey doing?” asks Jenny, changing the subject to ask about her half-sister.

“She’s going to be here sometime next week,” says Jack.

“She is?” says Jenny, somewhat excited.

“Yes ... and it may not be too much fun,” replies Jack.

“Why not?” replies Jenny. “We have fun together.”

“Her mother’s put her foot down again. Instead of putting her foot down firmly each day, she waits until things become a huge time bomb. Then she slams her foot down—for a while—and then gives in. This time Cayce’s decided to come live with me for a while. Things may get wild around here. As you know, I don’t give in at all!” says Jack.

“I can handle it. After all, Dad, I am your daughter!” says Jenny.

“Yes, but Casey doesn’t have as many things going for her as you do,” replies Jack.

“As I’ve told you before, there’s no such thing as an accident of chance or fate in this Universe. You had help when you needed it because you deserved help. There’s nothing rebellious or lazy about you.”

Jenny is silent for a few moments.

“I think I should probably go by and visit Mom tonight,” she says. “Could you please drop me off there?”

“Sure. I’ll go by the club and visit Marty,” says Jack.

“Who’s Marty?”

“She’s a singer,” replies Jack, “a very nice girl; about ten years older than you.”

“Is she ... are you ... um,” asks Jenny, unsure quite what question to ask.

“She’s not exactly sure what I am,” Jack says, “ ... father image; lover image; security blanket; hard-times counselor; or just a good friend.”

“And how do you see it?”

“All of the above!” replies Jack with laughter. “Let’s go. We’ll get a bite to eat on the way.”

After leaving Jenny at her mother's, Jack makes his way to the local nightclub where he is well-known. The band is playing as he walks in and Marty is part way through one of her songs. She notices Jack the minute he comes through the door and smiles at him without missing a beat. Jack smiles in return and takes a table off to the side, ordering a beer when the waitress comes by. When Marty's song is finished, the band takes a break and Marty moves to Jack's table, pulling a chair over next to him.

"Where have you been, you old Devil?" asks Marty.

"I guess it's been three whole days, hasn't it?" replies Jack.

"Well?" continues Marty.

"Problems at work that take my mind off you," replies Jack.

"They must be very big problems!" says Marty kiddingly.

"Oh, they are! ... bond underwritings; new stock issues; political parties in D.C.; the president's secretary pregnant and she's not sure if it's her husband, her boyfriend, the President of the company, or the Chairman of the Board," says Jack facetiously, then adds, "You're still a little nervous when you sing, aren't you?"

"Nyaooh! ... not a bit!" responds Marty.

"The mike is shaking because it weighs a ton, right? ... or maybe there's a high wind up on the stage that I don't feel!" says Jack with a smile on his face.

Jack takes Marty's hand in his.

"Oh ... your palms are sweaty!" Jack remarks. "That happens to me when I'm really nervous ... like in an airplane flying under extremely dangerous conditions."

"Well, if you can be nervous under some conditions, why can't I?" counters Marty.

"Marty, if I was nervous every time I got into airplane, I'd have no business being in an airplane!"

"I still wouldn't call myself fearful, Jack."

"Fearful ... nervous ... it's pretty much the same thing," Jack says. "The nervousness that you feel is transmitted sub-consciously to your audience. It's a small thing, but you have such a great voice that you would go a lot further if you cleared up that little detail."

"And how would you suggest that I do that?" asks Marty.

"The same way that anyone overcomes limitations," replies Jack, "By putting yourself in a position that produces anxiety or nervousness, studying it, asking yourself what makes you feel the way you do, and then talking yourself out of your response. There are occasions when anxiety, nervousness, and fear are well justified as warnings that one is over-extending one's self. You are very good at your trade. You are not over-extending yourself. No one in the audience is going to throw rotten eggs at you. You aren't going to die if you miss a note or two, so just relax and turn your nervousness into a new power of projection."

"Boy, that's a mouthful!" remarks Marty. "I don't even understand what you mean let alone how to do it."

“Would you like me to help you with it?” asks Jack.

“Sure,” says Marty, not knowing what she’s letting herself in for.

“You have to let me be your petty tyrant for a while because that’s part of the game, okay?”

“Okay,” replies Marty. “Whoops! Here comes the band; it’s time for me to get back to the mike . Meet me in my room after the next set.”

Jack nods and smiles at her as she gets up.

Twenty minutes later, Jack is sitting in Marty’s hotel room at the top of the club while Marty is in the bathroom removing makeup.

“I don’t understand why you can’t be a little more serious about our relationship,” says Marty from the bathroom.

“It’s fear!” says Jack from the sitting room.

Just then Marty walks out of the bathroom in her scanty bra, and scanty, frilly panties. She has an incredibly beautiful body which draws Jack’s attention like a powerful magnet.

“Fear?” exclaims Marty facetiously. “I thought I was talking to the fearless one.”

“No, Sweetheart,” Jack replies gently. “I said you should recognize fear for what it is, admit that you have it, decide whether there’s any real danger to your being, and then either keep it around as a warning or banish it from your world.”

“So, I’m a real danger to your being!” exclaims Marty.

“In a sense ... yes,” says Jack.

“What’s that sense?”

“Marty ... I’m not sure I want to talk about this. I don’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“Hurt my feelings?” exclaims Marty. “You tear me apart daily like it’s part of your milk run, and you don’t want to hurt my feelings? Come on, Jack, talk to me.”

Jack pauses to think for a minute in an effort to choose his words carefully.

“You don’t see the difference between us, do you, Marty?”

“No, I don’t,” Marty replies. “I get along better with you than I have with any man I’ve ever known. I know what happens when I get my body up next to yours. You can’t lie about that! How many women do you know like me?”

“None, Marty. That’s why I’m here. But our physical relationship is not where the problem lies.”

“So, just what is the problem?”

“It’s your perspective,” Jack replies, “You want this relationship to be so close that there’s no separation ... no freedom for either one of us. It’s what happens when you’re not complete in and of yourself ... when there’s still a big empty space in your being.”

“Well ... but ... what else are relationships for?” asks Marty plaintively.

“Partly for the purpose of filling that need,” replies Jack, “But it only works well when you have a partner with the same need ... and I don’t fall into that category.”

“You’re talking about the spiritual difference between us, then,” says Marty.

“That’s the major problem, Marty. The other one is an age difference.”

“You certainly don’t FEEL like there’s an age difference between us,” remarks Marty.

“I’ve already raised two families,” replies Jack. “The first one was unplanned and due to stupidity on my part; the second was by acceptance because that was part of the package placed before me. You’ve mentioned many times that you want to have a family of your own. I don’t want another twenty years of that kind of responsibility. There are plenty of men in the world willing to accommodate you,”

“But I want so badly for this to work out,” says Marty with tears in her eyes.

“Marty, I love you very much just the way you are,” says Jack getting up and putting his arms around her. “I’ve already experienced the things you have yet to experience. Were the circumstances different, I might be willing to experience them all over again just for you, but such is not the case. A major part of life’s instruction is to teach us to make the most we can of what is placed before us, and that’s just exactly what I’m trying to do right now.”

Jack looks at his watch.

“Uh-Oh!” he exclaims. “I told Jenny I’d pick her up at her mother’s ten minutes ago.”

“Dammit, Jack!” exclaims Marty.

Jack stands very still, looking at Marty intensely for several seconds.

“See what I mean?” asks Jack very quietly. “Release me!”

“Sometimes you make me so mad ...!” says Marty.

“You’re just making yourself mad, Sweetheart. Let’s get together Sunday afternoon. I’ll give you a call. See you later.”

CHAPTER 3.

The next day Jack drives to the airport to pick up his step-daughter, Casey, who makes it quite clear all the way from the airport that she is not in a very good mood. As Jack pulls up underneath the bow of the Land Lady, Casey's face takes on a somewhat disgruntled look.

"Honestly, Dad," she says, "I don't know why you choose to live in a junkyard. Why don't you have a nice home like we did in Denver?"

"It's not that important to me, Casey," Jack replies. "This is actually much more fun ... and a lot less responsibility. It's also free."

"Doesn't look like fun to me," Casey mutters under her breath.

Jack stops her short as she is unloading her bags, looks her very intensely in the face and says equally as firmly:

"You don't have to be here, you know!"

Casey looks away with a slight sneer on her face. Jack picks up several of the bags and walks up the steel gangway into the ship, Casey following.

Casey's stateroom is full of animals and dolls, big and small, covering the bunk bed. There's a small makeup dresser and mirror in the corner, and pictures all over the walls of young men, fast cars, surfers, and movie posters. Casey surveys the room carefully as she walks in.

"Hey!" she says, "Something's missing. Where's Panda?"

"You mean Jenny's Panda?" asks Jack. "When I let you borrow him, I specifically told you that he went back to Jenny when she was here. Do you not recall my words?"

"Then I don't know why you gave him to me if he was going back to her," Casey replies indignantly.

"Well, if you can't figure that one out, I can't help you any further with it," replies Jack looking at his watch. "We'll be eating in about an hour. Come up when you're ready."

"What's for dinner?" asks Casey.

"Dinner!" replies Jack.

"If I don't like it, I may not eat," states Casey in a very matter-of-fact, controlling fashion.

"Stir-fried chicken and rice," says Jack calmly.

"I'll pass, thanks," says Casey busying herself with her suitcases.

"Suit yourself," replies Jack, leaving.

An hour or so later, Jack and Jenny are sitting at the table with no sign of Casey.

"Good dinner, Dad!" remarks Jenny.

Jack nods his head and they eat on in silence.

“What’s on your mind?” asks Jenny.

Jack thinks for a minute and then says:

“I guess I must still need a button-pusher because that’s exactly what Casey does to me very often when I’m around her.”

“What else is new?” remarks Jenny. “She’s never been any different, but she’s not always that way either.”

“She’s old enough now to start thinking about someone other than herself. What the hell’s wrong with what I cook and eat? It’s done with careful thought and consideration. Can’t she see that?”

“Feed her mashed potatoes and gravy,” comments Jenny. “She’ll always eat that.”

“For some reason, I just don’t feel like accommodating that kind of consciousness,” replies Jack.

“Wait ‘till the half-hour-shower starts!” comments Jenny.

“The half-hour-shower! Right!” says Jack.

Just then, as though prompted by the conversation, water starts running through the ship’s pipes and Jack glances at the clock.

“There it is! The half-hour-shower!” remarks Jack with a disgusted look on his face.

“Can I quote you?” asks Jenny with a smile on her face.

Jack nods his head.

“What am I doing in a space where this is real to me?” quotes Jenny from Jack’s teachings.

Jack replies with a mock British accent:

“Oi think Oi c’n ‘andle this, Mate,” he says, getting up. “Right now, let’s you and me get out of here and go to a show.”

“Sounds good to me,” says Jenny, as they grab their jackets and leave for the local theater.

Two hours later, they return from the movies to discover the entire ship vibrating with loud rock music which seems to emanate from somewhere near the aft end and the captain’s cabin. On entering the captain’s cabin, the noise becomes deafening, and there is Casey in a pair of tights, dancing herself into a sweat. Jack walks over and turns the volume down.

“Nice stereo, Dad!” remarks Casey. “I didn’t know you liked ROCK HOUNDS.”

“Actually, I don’t,” replies Jack. “That’s your disk that’s been there since the last time you were here.”

“Where have you guys been?” asks Casey.

“We went to the show,” replies Jack.

Casey puts her hands on her hips and responds indignantly:

“Thanks for waiting for me!”

“If we’d waited for you, we’d have missed the show,” says Jack. “You had just started your half-hour shower when we left. And while we’re on the subject, we don’t do half-hour showers here, as I’ve told you before. You get twelve minutes once a day.”

“But, Dad, I can’t wash my long hair and shave my legs and arms in twelve minutes,” Casey complains. “I just can’t do it!”

“You can take an hour if you like,” adds Jack in as calm a voice as possible, “just don’t run the water more than twelve minutes. This ship has no sewer! Do you hear me? ... no sewer! I have to pay to have a truck pump out the sewer tanks.”

Casey storms out of the room and slams the door behind her.

Early the next morning, Jack heads for the Executive Offices before donning his welder’s outfit. As he walks into Wanda’s office, he says:

“What kind of mood’s he in today?”

“Intense! ... No change!” replies Wanda.

“I have to talk to him for a minute,” says Jack.

“No way! You’re better off trying to talk to a hungry lion!” says Wanda.

“It’s good news,” says Jack. “The strike is off for now.”

“Oh ... good news he can handle,” says Wanda reaching for the button on her intercom.

“Strike’s off! Jack has to talk to you.”

“Send him in,” says the intercom. Wanda nods her head towards Hendrix’ door, smiling.

Jack walks in to Hendrix office.

“I knew you could do it, Buddy Boy!” says Hendrix boisterously and with much relief.

“It’s just temporary, Don,” adds Jack. “We haven’t really resolved anything.”

“I’ve got a line on two fat contracts,” states Hendrix enthusiastically. “We land one; then we negotiate. Either the employees work, or they leave!”

“That’s real negotiation!” replies Jack disgustedly.

“They’re overpaid now!” states Hendrix, knowing there’s some element of truth in what he says.

“That may be so ... when they’re actually working,” replies Jack, “But they don’t know what this company’s problems are. There’s no communication between the top and the bottom.”

“Why should there be?” demands Hendrix incredulously. “It’s real simple: the top leads; the bottom follows.”

“Oh, right! You’re fifty years behind the times, old friend,” replies Jack. “You’ve got working partners, not slaves! These people are like you and me. They have hopes and dreams too. They’re the ones who get you where you’re going ... and where does it get them? Do you give them rewards? A piece of the company? They’d all work harder, longer and

for less if they understood the company's problems and had a long-term goal."

"I'm telling you, they're overpaid now!" states Hendrix flatly. "You want me to cut their pay back and give them a lump-sum reward? ... Okay, I can do that. You want them to own a piece of the company? Just tell them to walk the two blocks down the street to Richardson, Blaine, and Evers and buy stock like everyone else does."

"You're not on my wavelength, Don," replies Jack. "What you say is half right, but what I'm saying is far more synergistic ... gets everybody working toward the same goal and enthusiastic about what they're doing. What's needed here is a change in attitude as well as a change in procedure. If the executives took less when times are rough; if everyone felt the bite at all levels ..."

"They do!" interrupts Hendrix. "No work ... no profits ... no bonuses!"

"They get two to ten times as much ... plus bonuses!" adds Jack in an exasperated tone of voice, "and we're back again to that old human issue: if it takes everyone to make the company run, who's worth more than who?"

"What it is ... is what it is!" replies Hendrix, terminating the conversation for good.

Jack stands up and holds out his hand.

"Keys, please." he says.

"To what?" replies Hendrix.

"The airplane!" says Jack. "What the hell do you think I want the keys to, your wife's chastity belt?"

"They disappeared a long time ago" mutters Hendrix.

"I don't wonder," says Jack.

Hendricks pulls the keys to the P-51's cockpit from his desk drawer and tosses them to Jack.

"Don't hurt it," he adds, " ... and there's not much gas left in the tanks."

"God dammit, Don! You always change your fucking agreements in mid-stream ... in YOUR favor! Gimme your credit card, you Greedbag ... come on!"

Hendricks has a devilish smile on his face when he reaches for his wallet and pulls out the credit card, holding it up in a teasing fashion to Jack. Jack grabs it, shakes his head, and leaves. Hendricks drops into his big leather desk chair, folds his hands up behind his head, and looks out the window with a satisfied smile on his face.

Jack dances past Wanda, waving the keys in the air and singing a little ditty.

"Kick the tire, light the fire, and it's off we go into the wild, blue yonder, climbing high, into the sun" ... and he dances out the door.

As promised, when Sunday morning rolls around, Jack calls Marty and invites her to go for a drive. He's not quite sure if she'll go for the plan he has in mind, so he decides to be very devious about it. As though the event occurs strictly by chance, they just happen to drive by the airport where the P-51 is located.

“Oh, you know what?” says Jack naively. “This is the airport where Hendrix keeps his World War II fighter airplane. Want to go have a look at it? It’s really an exciting piece of machinery.”

“Okay,” says Marty.

Jack drives around the airport to the private flight service hangar, pulls out onto the aircraft parking tarmac, stops not far from a shiny silver-colored P-51. They climb out of Jack’s little custom Jeep and walk over to the airplane.

“WOW!” says Marty. “Is this ever impressive! What’s it like to fly in one of these things?”

“It’s sort of like riding on a motorcycle ... only there isn’t any wind,” replies Jack.

“That sounds like fun,” says Marty. “Does it tip?”

“Does a motorcycle tip when it turns, Marty?” says Jack.

“What happens if the motor stops?” asks Marty.

“The plane still flies if the motor stops!” says Jack, somewhat exasperated. “You just put it down on the runway or on the highway. How many planes have you seen on the highway in your whole life?”

“None.”

“That should tell you how safe it is,” adds Jack. “Being in this thing is like being on a magic carpet. You look down, you see the farmland below ... the desert ... smooth as silk. Want to go for a ride?”

“In this one?” asks Marty.

“Yes,” says Jack. “This is the one I fly all the time.”

“Oh, yeah?” remarks Marty.

“Don’t tell me you have a FEAR of heights?” asks Jack facetiously.

“Nope.” replies Marty somewhat hesitantly.

Jack climbs up onto the wing and opens the canopy.

“C’mon up here and try it out,” suggests Jack.

“I don’t think so,” says Marty.

Jack, disgusted, drops the canopy.

“Shit! ... you want to know what the big difference between us is,” says Jack. “Your guts are all in your stomach! I’m not going up in this thing to commit suicide, you know!”

“Oh, well, okay,” replies Marty, realizing she has no way out of that one, “... but promise me you won’t do anything crazy.”

“Everything I do is calculated to be safe and get us back here in the same shape we left in,” replies Jack, carefully avoiding the promise.

Marty climbs up onto the wing and into the rear seat of the P-51. Jack shows her how to strap in.

“What are all these straps for?” asks Marty naively.

“They hold the airplane together, Dummy!” replies Jack. “Here, put this on your head so I can talk to you.”

Jack hands her a helmet which she puts over her head and ears, and Jack snaps the chin strap.

“When you want to talk to me, push this little button here,” says Jack.

Jack notices that her hands are shaking with apprehension.

“Marty, relax, sweetheart. Airplanes fly all over the skies twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You are far safer in an airplane than you are in an automobile, and those are well-known statistics.”

Marty relaxes and smiles at Jack. Jack climbs into the front seat, fires up the big Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, and starts to taxi out onto the taxi strip toward the duty runway. He calls the control tower for clearance and the control tower replies.

“Fox-trot 51 Alpha, you’re cleared for takeoff when ready. No traffic in the local pattern.”

“Roger, 51 Alpha,” replies Jack.

“Who’s that you’re talking to?” Marty asks Jack over the intercom.

“The guy in that tower over there,” Jack replies. “He makes sure airplanes don’t run into each other. Plus, he’s had his eyes on you with his binoculars since you got out of the car. The Blue Angels could buzz this field and he’d never even notice. Wave to him ... or give him the finger ... anything you like. Here we go.”

The engine noise builds to a deafening roar and the power of the acceleration forces Marty and Jack into their seat-backs for a few seconds. The rumble of the wheels on the runway ceases after a few seconds as the P-51 climbs into the air, but the air is smooth as silk as Jack throttles back and reduces the propeller RPM.

“See? Nice and smooth,” says Jack over the intercom. “I’m going to make a little turn here so we can head out onto the desert.”

Jack banks into a slight left turn. Marty immediately reaches for the sides of the cockpit.

“Whoa! ...Oh, Shit!” says Marty, alarmed at the change in flight attitude.

“Just relax and go with it,” says Jack calmly on the intercom, “Just like you would going around a turn on a motorcycle or on a roller coaster.”

“I’d rather have my arms around you than be strapped into this beast,” remarks Marty.

“What are these little bags for?”

“They’re lunch bags,” remarks Jack.

“We didn’t bring any lunch,” adds Marty.

“Right! Just remember where they are,” Jack says. “Hey, look down there among the rocks. That looks like a little pueblo ... a lone Indian camp. I’ve been out here a number of times and never seen that before. Let’s go down and take a look.”

The P-51 does an abrupt wing-over; the engine power comes off; and the plane plummet's straight down towards the earth ... the wind whistling by at an ever-increasing pitch. Marty grabs for anything she can hold onto.

"What the fuck are you doing?" screams Marty at the top of her lungs.

"Not exactly a motorcycle maneuver," Jack replies over the intercom, "But then, this isn't a motorcycle."

"Stop it, will you, Jack," Marty yells.

Jack turns off the intercom so Marty's voice can only faintly be heard in the background. She pounds on the rear control panel; screams, but Jack pays no attention though he can still see her in the rearview mirror.

The P-51 pulls out of its dive just above the ground and zooms up and over the Indian pueblo in a tight ninety-degree banked turn. A lone Indian comes out, peers up, waves, and Jack waggles the P-51 wings. Marty has her hand over mouth, and is turning white.

"Put your lunch in the bag, sweetheart," says Jack kindly. "That's what the bags are for."

Marty's spends the rest of the flight throwing up, passing out, in tears, or cursing. Jack heads back for the airfield, drops the landing gear and the landing pattern, and squeaks the wheels onto the runway with barely a bounce. The plane taxis to its parking space, the huge propeller spins to a halt, and Jack climbs out.