

## Steel Man

A fiery smell drew Harold into the mill. Steam flashed in pulses from red metal while rollers whirled and stopped. Ingots marched forward in rows. Within this world of shade and brightness, workers stalked like warriors. Hard hats surged back and forth; protective gloves and aprons shielded proud and unyielding bodies.

Harold merged with the flow of men entering the locker room for graveyard shift. Ghostly light from 60-watt bulbs washed the cement floor, and condensation glistened on the walls. He shrugged into work clothes, crusty with flecks of metallic dust and sweat, and bent to tie his steel-toed boots.

The crew straggled out to their stations, and Harold prepared to sweep the walkway, which ran beside but four feet below the production floor. The lead man steered the first ingot toward presses, which squeezed the steel into concrete reinforcement bar. Nate was an older guy, but his short hair remained black. Although no more than five feet nine and 165 pounds, his arms rippled, hard like the metal he guided. Up close, Harold was taller and heavier; but from where he stood, Nate towered above him.

Harold waved and shouted, "Ready to wrestle steel?" No response. Not even a nod. His arm drooped, and he wondered when the others would accept him as more than the new hire, a "sweep" cleaning up after the real workers.

The boss, a tall gray man sliding into his late fifties, glanced over. From a distance, the deep sockets of his eyes appeared sinister. Harold leaned hard into his broom and swept metal oxide shavings into piles to be disposed of in a fifty-gallon drum. The slow rhythm of sweeping soothed him.

When the foreman wandered off to another part of the factory, Harold paused again to stare. Nate stood stolid as a matador before the first of five monstrous presses confronting him in a perpendicular line. Each extruded the metal into narrower but longer lengths as the steel wove through the machines like the stitching of a scar.

Nate gripped three-foot tongs in his asbestos gloves and nudged the slab toward a v-shaped guide feeding into the maw of the machine looming in front of him. Joe, a hulk of a man with belly slung low over his belt, returned the ingot through the second roller. The steel stretched like taffy. Nate caught the bar and nursed it into

the opening of the third press. The die squeezed the metal, and he marched stiff-legged down the line to position himself between the final stands.

One-inch rebar roared from the fourth machine, too fast to catch head-on. As if taunting a wounded bull, Nate turned his back to the onslaught and grabbed the shaft when it blazed past. Momentum whipped the steel forward while he pivoted and thrust the red end into the last press. A slight smile brushed his lips as the finished metal tipped into cooling racks on the other side.

Harold stood riveted, envisioning doors thrown wide for Nate as he strode into the gleaming halls of Valhalla in Asgard, the land of warrior kings. He yearned to become a man bold enough to turn his back on steel and forced from his mind stories of workers burnt or crippled after a wrong step. The foreman's return interrupted his trance, and he hustled to resume his cleaning.

At 3 a.m., the crew stood down for a repair. The boss's head nodded as he leaned against a pillar; he'd been carousing during his time-off instead of sleeping. Smelling opportunity, Harold headed for the lunchroom and eased his big frame on an eight-inch wooden bench attached to the table, overlapping the seat on both sides. Long brown hair flecked with reddish tones cradled his head. He struggled for a position where he would be comfortable and safe from falling before fading toward sleep.

Footfalls approached and jerked him back to awareness. He jumped up and pushed the broom with a sharp stroke as the door swung open. The foreman lurched through the doorway, his broken nose floating above grim lips.

"Got the walkways finished; thought to check this room." Harold nodded at the small cloud of dust hovering in the air.

The boss remained silent and stared at him.

"Food and trash all over." Harold didn't blink. "Like pigs rooting."

The foreman grunted and walked off. Harold needed to pass the six-month probation; he was lucky to have any job with the economy in the shitter. Ashamed at having taken such a risk, he returned to the thundering machinery.

Nate descended to the walkway and flung his tongs aside like a bloodied battle axe. Harold stared, mouth open and eyes shining. Nate nodded this time. "Harder than it looks, boy."

Harold, challenged by these bold words, couldn't compose a clever response. He stuttered at Nate's departing back, "Magic...what you do."

If he ended up a lifer at the mill, he wanted to become top dog, a man other men respected because of what he was unafraid to do. He'd weave steel with the grace of a conjurer, inspiring those around him by his ability to bend metal to his will.

II.

In a dull tempo, Nate beat tongs against the toe of his boot as he waited at the start of shift. The new clean-up jockey called to him, but he didn't answer. Had he been green like that when he started at the newly-constructed mill 35 years ago? The broom held the boy up, not the other way around. Any smarts, he'd ride right out of this place. Find a job wouldn't squeeze until no juice remained.

Electric arcs fired in the next building, transforming scrap into molten metal. They poured steel at 3000° F into molds, eight-foot long and nine inches square, and left them to harden. His face twisted. Eighteen when he started, he'd been stuck in the Melt seven years before he went off to war in 1942. He knew, they all knew, the crap they used to line the furnaces contained asbestos. Hell, they marked the packages with a skull and crossbones. Didn't matter. Boss told them what to use; nobody whined. Damn glad he had the seniority to bid into Stranding after returning from the Pacific

Behind Nate, steel billets stretched to the Reheat Furnace, which fired them up until the metal became pliable again. They approached in rows endless as his years in the mill. He prodded the one-ton ingots toward guides, and a ram thrust them into heat-resistant drums anchored in the first stand. The steel stretched through the opening and released on the other side in a twelve-foot section. Oil lubricated space between the rollers, and water sprayed the equipment to prevent overheating. He merged with the unthinking motion of the machines, thumping in an endless rhythm like pistons when a train pulls off.

Steam hissed, and Nate backed away, leg throbbing. Twenty years ago an ingot shifted, pinned his right foot, and burnt part way through his work boot before the rest of the crew freed him. Three skin grafts and four broken bones. The pain built up whenever he stood for more than an hour.

Joe blew his timing and took two attempts to get the steel seated and drawn into the second press. While he struggled, Nate shuffled down the row. He dragged his leg and shouted above the roar of the machinery. "Hey, Joe, want we should wait until you say 'ready' before we send another bar?" Everyone laughed, including Nate, but acid rose in his throat. No more greasy burgers before shift.

Hunkered in front of the third press, he slammed the metal through the stand. His chest hurt, and he hesitated, gulping for air before moving to his next position between the fourth and fifth machine.

A length of one-inch bar surged toward Nate. Head cocked over his left shoulder and back to the press, he listened for the sizzle of water and waited until the glowing end of the shaft passed before he grabbed. He swiveled to feed the steel into the last stand. Pain vibrated up his leg as the completed rebar, 120-feet in length and one-half

inch thick, kicked into the racks to cool. He limped down from the extruding floor, which panted and hummed behind him, and tossed his heavy metal tongs aside. A grim half-smile covered his exhaustion. He blew long strands of black snot from his nose; the burnt odor of raw steel and tang of scorched oil clung to him. Done for another goddamn day.

The sweep, eyes bright and flared with excitement, stared at him like a god or something. He couldn't remember when he'd last felt good standing alone up on the Stranding Floor. "Harder than it looks, boy," he warned, but his lips collapsed under this effort. Turning, he had nothing more to say.

The day crew positioned themselves in front of the stands to catch the next ingot, and Nate rearranged his face into a smirk. "Hey, boys, maybe I should stick around, show you how?" They laughed, but everyone recognized he was king.

He edged close to one of the garbage drums and bent so no one observed him spit up a clot of phlegm. Insides ripping, he stared without moving at the rust-colored mucus lying on top of the trash. Shit, got to make a doctor appointment. He'd put this off because he knew whatever the sawbones said wouldn't be good news. Probably tell him to stop smoking.

Nate stepped back from the trashcan, sauntered to the clock and punched out. He threw his hand over his head in a backward salute and moved toward the exit. "Night, ladies," he boomed. He wheezed from the effort and hoped no one heard.

Energy drained from him, and the bitterness of ash filled his mouth as he walked to his Cadillac. "Can't even open the fucking door." He dropped his keys, fumbling to unlock the car.

### III.

Harold sat behind other men of his crew at Grace Methodist off Lombard. Joe turned and spoke in a low voice. "Can't believe it, Harold." Harold flushed with surprise because Joe remembered his name. "Full of piss and vinegar. Suddenly, he's gone."

Harold nodded, unable to find words to corral the thoughts swirling in hidden eddies of his mind.

"Visited him at the hospital a week ago. Know what he said? 'Gave my life to the mill. Not sure why.' He'd lost forty pounds." Joe choked into silence. "Cancer," they said, "lungs riddled with holes."

In the stillness, Harold lowered his head, shifted in the seat, and thought about what Nate might have meant. Joe's eyes misted, and he swiveled forward. Pretending interest in the handout at each seat—"In Memory of Nate Krieger"—Harold wondered if Joe was crying.

A balding man with long, gray-flecked hair ringing the sides of his head stepped to the dais, and the rustling settled. The pastor

talked about Nate's boyhood as a Marine in the Second World War, his wife Shirley and their children, and finally work. Harold listened, but he figured the preacher didn't really know Nate, except what he'd been told. He was surprised when he said, "He fashioned steel and formed himself into a man, who faced life without yielding where others bend or bow." Sounded about right. He didn't follow the rest of the preacher's eulogy until he ended: "Shirley's asked family, friends, and fellow workers to share their stories."

Joe lumbered down the aisle. Facing the crowd, he kept his eyes lowered and rocked back and forth. "Nate was a St. Johns' boy; all the men he grew up around worked in factories or shipyards. Never crossed the railroad cut into the big city until after high school. You could depend on him to carry his load, and then some." A sigh filled the hall, and he fought to finish. "Nate taught me the ropes..." This time it was sure; Joe sobbed and couldn't speak. Seemed all right to Harold, and he guessed to everyone else by the way they touched him as he maneuvered back to his seat.

Shirley rose from the first pew and moved forward, tears caught in the creases of her face and dabbing at her nose with a small, crumpled handkerchief. "Like Joe said, Nate was a stand-up guy. Life gets busy; we lose sight of things." She paused as if remembering what she'd had and what she'd lost. After talking about their family and friends over the years, she said, "He was my anchor." She stopped crying and gazed out with straight, clear eyes. Her face reflected the same calmness Nate had worn as he stared down steel.

Harold didn't know Nate well enough to speak. Anyway, he was a rookie. Easing into a river of reflection, he imagined Nate threading rebar through the presses and whispering to Joe as he lay dying. Deeper he sank, toward meaning he strained to grasp. Yeah, he'd dreamed of becoming someone like Nate, who didn't grovel before what life dished out; but now, as he resurfaced and contemplated the dark mahogany of the casket, he wondered, "Is that enough?"

He followed the assembly from the church and stopped in front of Joe, standing off to himself. "What do you think Nate meant?" Harold asked. "In the hospital. About not being sure."

Joe returned from where he'd drifted and focused. "Life didn't offer him many options."

Uncertain of how to respond, Harold waited.

"You're young; you've got choices." Joe's grip swallowed his hand. "Make good ones."

Harold dipped his head but had nothing to add. He watched Joe slump away and thought he'd seemed bigger at the mill.