

The Tigress

By M. Stefan Strozier

I returned to my high school, age 18, from a mental hospital, diagnosed a paranoid schizophrenic. I had missed my last year; so, I was allowed to finish up in vocational school, in an agriculture mechanics program.

Our small class studied a textbook for two months, before moving into the machine shop. An old tractor engine, hoisted by wire chains, hung in the back of the shop. It had once been painted yellow but was now badly rusted. The engine seemed to be intact, however.

In the shop, we first learned how to operate each type of welder. A MIG welder feeds a thin line of metal at a steady rate, but I could not control that rate, so I did not like it much. Brazing produces a bond of unruly brass. An Oxy-acetylene blowtorch breaks things apart. Arc welding was the best. I only had to ease the white rod along in small, concentric circles. After cooling, I chopped off the cover; and, a metal bead appeared, shaped like pancakes piled halfway on top of each other. There is no middle ground with arc welding. A bead is right or ruined. And one poor bead jeopardizes an entire structure. I related to this sense of imperative.

I cut some pieces of iron with a hacksaw and the blowtorch and welded them back together into a frame. I installed wheels to the frame. I drilled holes in the frame and bolted the structure securely. I wheeled my frame over the engine, hanging by its chains; and, lowered the engine into its frame. I recalled how I have been shackled to a bed, by my wrists and ankles, for a week, when I had first arrived at the hospital. Having the engine secured in its frame felt right to me, and safe. I had made a home for the engine.

I started to work on my tractor engine.

I wheeled it outside and sand blasted the engine's exterior to remove old paint and rust. After sand blasting, the engine had a smooth iron sheen, like an animal's fur coat, newly brushed. I spray-painted the engine and its frame blue.

After the paint had dried, I wheeled the engine back into the shop. I loosened the head's bolts. The head gasket had rotted, sealing like glue to the block. I had to pry the head off by ramming several long screwdrivers into the gap, using a large rubber mallet. The head slowly lifted, millimeters at a time; until, with one last ram of a screwdriver, the head popped from its block, nearly falling on the concrete floor. I carefully carried the head over to the glass beader; putting it inside the machine. I glass-beaded the head. The head's inner surface became shiny steel. I set the head on my work bench, as I wouldn't need it until I was done resurrecting my engine. I took the valves out of the engine. The valves were caked with rust and grime. I ground the valves down on a stationary grinder and then polished them with the electric wire brush. I had entered something of a trance state. I frequently had to be told to wear my safety glasses on the grinder by the instructor.

I worked on the pistons and rings, springs and cams -- even the transmission -- and tested everything from the altimeter to the timing (with a timing light). I had never worked on an engine before. It was all new to me. The newness fed me and give me strength. I

figured how to work on my engine half by trial and error and half by following the International Harvester manual I used as a reference, though the manual wasn't even for the right model. I took the ancient tractor manual home every night and studied it in my room until I fell asleep, sometimes with my head on its pages.

By now, my tools and parts covered two work benches. I decided to begin assembling things again. I recalled how, at one point, I had decided that I was going to get my mind back and I did. I remembered how powerful that made me feel.

I checked the linkages and began re-installing everything: the pistons, the valves. I set the points with a feeler gauge. I replaced the spark plugs, greased a cork gasket I had cut myself, replaced the head, and dead-set its bolts in proper order. My engine was whole again. I wheeled it back outside, cleaned off the grime; and, spray-painted it with a second coat of blue paint. I did not feel whole, however; and I became depressed, in fact. So, I took the head off again (this time it was easy) and played around with the engine's big pistons.

One day, toward the end of the semester, the teacher came over and knelt down beside my engine. I was setting the pistons to top dead center. I did not turn around; but I knew he was kneeling there.

"What's the name of this thing?" he said to my back.

"I don't know," I answered. "It doesn't have a name yet."

"How about...the Tigress?" He said.

Irritated, I turned around. He looked at me, searching my eyes a second, then studying my engine for a moment. He looked back at my eyes. He was medium height, had sandy hair, a lanky walk; and, often wore a smirk. He was smirking right now.

"Fine," I said, turning back to my engine. "This is the Tigress."

"Are you going to start it?" he asked.

"Start it?" I said. I set my wrenches down, on top of my engine; and, turned around again.

"Well...yes, that is generally what you do with engines, you start them."

I didn't know what to do. Something held me back. It was the past, I think. Not just my own past, but the engine's past as well. How had this tractor engine come to be? What men, working in an assembly line, had put its pieces together? Who had first bought it to use on his fields? I saw that person working on his farm but the closer I got to the owner of my engine, the further he slipped away from me.

Had the owner of my engine fought in World War I? Did he have to leave his wife, maybe before they had children, to go fight in France? He might have even died as he fell into a muddy bunker from a 7.62mm bullet to the brain, as his brigade charged the enemy lines along those barren fields lined with barbed wire.

His wife would have no idea. Maybe she slept with another man right then. Her husband had been gone over a year, even if he was a soldier fighting for his country in a war in a foreign land. Perhaps at the moment he died, she had her legs wide open and some man was giving her all the love she needed? No one would know; not her husband, not his

family, no one. It was just that simple. Too bad if she met her lover at work, he was nice. She had to work and make a living, too. What if there was a child? She would have to cross that bridge when they got there. Probably no child, though.

His body would have come home to the states in a casket covered with an American flag and be buried in Arlington, Virginia. His wife, father, and mother would make the journey, via train, to the National Cemetery, take in the sights in Washington, D.C. for a couple of days as they thought of their son, and then go to his funeral.

A black horse would have pulled his casket, resting in the back of a black wagon with big, wooden wheels with long spokes as a soldier standing in the distance played taps from a shiny brass trumpet. A sergeant would have placed the folded flag in the hands of his mother, not his wife; all to say thanks from a country. His widowed wife might cry because all women cry sometimes, wipe her tears away and be okay. After all, she had someone to help her with it all.

There would be thousands like that, whose names are forever engraved in town square monuments, all across America.

"I don't know how to start it."

"You have to hand-crank it around, like an old airplane. There should be a hand-crank over there where the engine was."

So I went to the back of the shop and dug around in the drawers for a few minutes and produced the hand-crank. I spent the rest of the day grinding and then spray-painting it the same color as my engine. I went home and even woke in the night, covered in a cold sweat, when my dream reached the point where I was confronted with starting my engine.

The next day I came to class and the students and teacher were gathered around my engine. Not saying a word, I stepped up, took the hand-crank from my backpack, eased it into the shaft's teeth, and pressed firmly against the handle. I paused for a split-second, and then pushed down as hard as I could and it moved slowly downward. I pulled back up, and now the rod greased a little. Then the hand-crank ground to a near stop.

The past was just too painful and too beautiful and I was unsure if I could even let go. But I still fought on and then, to my delight, the engine started to do my bidding. I turned around and around as fast as I could until the hand-crank flew out of its teeth, nearly hitting me as it slid out across the concrete floor of the machine shop to the other side of the room, and hit the wall with a thud.

"Boom! Boom! Ra-Boom!"

The Tigress' roar was so loud that the students and teacher covered their ears. I didn't cover my ears because I was standing in awe. The big pistons whirled around and the Tigress' deep bellows filled my chest. Thick, dark smog poured out the exhaust pipe. Sparks appeared like slow-motion trails from fireworks and, at one point, a long flame shot out.

The Tigress' roar was so purifying. It seemed almost magical. I felt the presence of its powerful humming and my past, and all of the engine's past as well, all seemed to come into focus. I once again, had identity.

The teacher had to flip the fuel switch off to make the Tigress slowly cough to a stop. I

stood amazed, speechless.

I did graduate high school. I never started the Tigress again. I spent the rest of the year in the classroom leaning down in my chair and daydreaming, not really following along with any of the words in the textbook.