

HEFF IN DEAR- BORN

by MICHAEL FERTIK | PUBLISHED 2015 — ALT HIST

This story finds Hephaistos, ancient Greek god of the forge, in contemporary Los Angeles. He recounts a key incident in his life. The incident took place in early 20th century America, when Hephaistos, disguised as a man named Heff, met Henry Ford. It was the dawn of the automobile; cars were still being made by hand. Hephaistos and Ford race their hand made cars on the famous racing beach in Daytona. Hephaistos wins handily, embarrassing Ford. Ford, secretly suspecting his opponent's real identity, decides to invent a new process, a new way of manufacture that will kill the old ways once and for all.

Heff in Dearborn by **Michael Fertik**

Much of what you've read about me isn't true. I am unvulgar, actually quite neat in my habits. I've never even been to Lemnos. I am not lame. I can do every yoga pose. I do not carry a "pocket forge." What a dumb idea that would be. What idiot would carry a pocket forge? A pocket forge would be huge.

When I moved to SoCal a few years ago, I had to start calling myself by a different name. Introducing yourself as "Heff" in LA makes people think that you suffer from delusions of grandeur.

But I was Heff in Detroit. I met Henry Ford on the beach at Daytona in Florida. He raced his Pirate and I was in my own handmade chariot. There were other guys. Ford bombed past most everyone except me, because I knew how beach sand affected wheel speed, and I had some other advantages, besides.

Ford was a hater. He lived big, everybody knows that. He liked machines, money, cars, women, planes, plantations, politics, and Nazis. He liked efficiency. That's the Wikipedia version. They know he didn't like Moses' people. But that was only part of it. He was filled to the brim with hate for everything he couldn't own or humiliate.

I remember meeting him. So much of my life since then has been an echo of that encounter that I couldn't help it.

I'd just beaten the pants off him on the Daytona beach. He'd left the field behind in his noisy, spewing wake as he took off for the finish line, right out of the gate. I hung back to watch him go, admiring the lines and acceleration of his car. He drove his Pirate, curved like a hip and shaking like a boulder hurtling down a hill. The workmanship was fine. Whoever designed the car understood the poetry of symmetry and the essential virtue of echoing an object's purpose in its contour, that how it looks is the spirit in which it will perform. It is enjoyable to see the divine inspiration appearing in people's work that way. There were details, too. Ford had taken the time to etch long, parallel grooves into the chassis to emphasize the speed of his car, and I perceived the idea of some flares

shooting backwards on the surfaces toward the rear. The automobile was black—he was famous for that before he was famous for that—but he betrayed a feeling for flair in spots with sharp chrome and rounded glass. He even stood in the cabin at times as he rushed forward, like it was a motorcycle. He bared his teeth in what appeared like a smile.

I watched him race. Even though he was lengths ahead of the field, pulling away, he kept the accelerator down and looked back at us to see if anyone was catching up. He would lean ahead, as if to egg on his car. He was admirable. You don't see true desperation and talent bundled together that often. He raced like a starving leopard. I thought about composing a few lines.

I waited until the three quarters mark, and then I stoked my chariot. Passing Ford wasn't difficult, all things considered, but for the sake of drama and to encourage the hero and our competitors, I left it to the last stretch to overtake him. There was a great deal of backslapping, and everyone looked pleased, except for Ford, whose smile could have been chiseled from rough stone. After the champagne had died down, he came over to me and shook hands.

“Hello, I'm Henry Ford.” He crinked his head left to right to loosen something. Ford wasn't very tall, and he was skinny as a wraith. He had close-cropped hair and blue eyes set in deep, arched sockets. His nose, while aquiline, was made for a skull 20% larger than his, as was his forehead. He was what Life Magazine would have called a fine looking man. When I met him he must have been about forty.

“Hello, I'm Heff! Ha ha ha!” I shook his hand vigorously and decided to take the course of the jolly friend. No use rubbing in the victory. “A good race! You have a fine automobile there! Ho ho!” I slapped his back and beamed conviviality at him.

To put it straightforwardly, my kind of emotional energy isn't easy to resist. But it seemed to me he deflected it without effort. He wore a grin that would make it look to the fellows around that Number One and Runner Up were having a good motoring chat. But his eyes burned with hate. He hated my guts for passing him.

“Where did you get that rig? It's an unusual design.”

“Oh, ha ha, just something I made myself.”

“Maybe you could show me how it works.”

“Hee hee, yes, you are a good sport and a card! I've heard, ha ha!” I tried in vain to keep it light. “I hear you are quite an inventor, too, and by the looks of your car, it's true!”

“More of a tinkerer. I’m a farmer’s son, Heff. You?” There was a twinkle in his eye as he started to work something out. It made me uneasy.

“I’m a tinkerer, too.” I said, feeling clever about my minor dodge.

For some reason I wanted him to like me. I probably looked younger than he did, though not young enough to be his son, but father figures have always been a weakness for me.

He tapped my shoulder, more familiar now. “Well, now, anyway, a good race, and congratulations to the winner.” He turned around and led the fellows in a cheer. “Let’s get some food,” he said, and we walked toward the barbecue.

We ate brisket and corn at a picnic table some feet from the others. “You like working with tools? Enjoy working with your hands?” He smiled at me, and the glimmer in his eye grew bigger. “I’ve got a huge warehouse full of the greatest variety of tools a man’s ever seen. You might enjoy visiting.”

I had a feeling Ford knew who I was. Watching him pick his food birdlike as the sun set and colored the sea coral, observing the slight arch in his back and the vague triangle shape to his head, looking hard at his eyes, I wondered for a second if I recognized him, too. Is that you, Scamander, come to take your vengeance? Promo, is it you, come to take vengeance on my vengeance? Or Kratos, you piece of shit, come just to be nasty anew somewhere new?

It happens from time to time. I saw Typhon in Venice Beach three years ago. He was hideous, his stench emanated for blocks, and when I finally saw him, having followed the scent, he was committing the foulest acts on two young corpses he had no doubt freshly killed. He sensed me and looked up and immediately bristled. I posed for a fight. These instincts run deep. But like the rest of us, he was much diminished from his former self, and it seemed neither of us wanted to battle. I made as if I had been distracted by something to my left and out of his view, and I stepped away and reset my countenance so that we both might pretend he hadn’t recognized me, though it was clear he had. He was fearsome but nothing like before, an acorn compared to the oak. It is true I was afraid of him still, but more afraid, I think, for him, something so perfectly powerful and evil, reduced to a mangy shadow. Our fight would have no stanzas, just a wrestle and a brain-bashing either way, nothing to recount, and no matter the outcome, he would be even more miserable. I didn’t have the heart to win or lose. Since that day, I have avoided that section of Venice.

But it wasn’t that. Ford didn’t recognize me from before. He was Henry Ford, as advertised. Still, as we sat there talking, our plates only barely touched and the revels of our meet-mates gaining volume, as the flames from the night torches danced across our faces and cast long shadows into the dunes, I believed he knew who I was. Sometimes people who are gifted can tell.

“Yes, you’re right, I do like working with my hands. My machine—I built it ground up. Ha ha!” I tried laughing again but found myself losing my footing. “Where is your warehouse?”

“Michigan. Let me invite you to visit and see what we’re doing there. I would love your opinion.”

He told me about his company. They were building cars, obviously. It was early days. A few guys in a cavernous building cobbling together new automobiles, handcrafting style and moving parts and engines, working hard and watching the fruits of their inspiration spring to life. Exactly my style. Ford was animated. He knew engineering, design, physical properties, metals, rubbers, combustion, gears, fuels. He was building a team that would fulfill a vision of the future in which every person could drive around in a car. When he mentioned the other guys around the US and Europe who were trying to do similar things, you could see the hate reappear in a flash. He hated the competition. If he could snuff out their lives completely, he would. His passion was infectious. That, and his invitations to “come up to Michigan immediately, no delay” were persistent and flattering. It’s nice to be wanted. I had nothing else in particular I was doing, so why not?

That, again, and something else. As he talked, he looked straight in my eye, as if to say, “yes, I know you, and you know that I know you.” He never said anything, but I had a stronger and stronger impression, and there was something about continuing this cat and mouse game with a man of his caliber that appealed to me. How long could we keep up the charade? Was I going to learn that he had no idea all along? What would it be like to appear to take his lure and then beat him at his own game, as I had done on the beach that afternoon? This was a fun diversion, and in the course of it, I could fashion new tools, new machines, and new instruments with my hands and heat. I could direct teams of men in the ways of founding and developing a whole new tradition. There had of course been no discussion yet of my actually coming to work with Ford. It had all been about “visiting the warehouse in Michigan.” But we both knew where this was heading.

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Six weeks later I was standing with about one hundred other fellows and Henry Ford up there in Dearborn inside the chilly warehouse. We stamped our feet to keep out the cold. The fellows stuffed their hands in their denim jacket pockets and pulled down their wool caps. Only Ford wore no hat at all.

“You’ve all gotten to know Heff this past while,” he said, “and I don’t have to tell you how likeable and useful he is.” Though I say so myself, he was getting at something true. I had done what I could to charm the men already working together there, and they seemed to respond favorably. In that context, only two kinds of men can be found: those who want you to acknowledge their status as having been there first, and those who want your ideas to be right. In this case, it wasn’t so hard to do both, if only I gave the attention necessary to standing.

Ford continued. “He’s got some fine ideas on how to make our products better. I’m sure you’ve heard a few of those already.” There was a murmur around the gang, and one especially jovial fellow, a team captain named Cunningham, shouted “attaboy, Heff!” and the men murmured approval. Ford smiled and raised his hands overhead for quiet. “You’ve also probably heard his ideas for improving how to make our cars. He has some proposals for training and workmanship that can make our automobiles more quickly and even better looking!” He shouted the last part and got some praise back. Turning to me, “well, Heff and I haven been working out just exactly how much faster we can make a car using his new ideas versus our existing ones. We’ve sorted it out that one fellow, working by himself, might just be able to go faster than the regular crew of five who build a car together.” The crowd shifted and said something quietly like “it’s not possible” and “well let’s try it.” I hadn’t ever said it to Ford that way, but what was I going to say then?

“So I figure we should put this into action and invite Heff to stay with us a little while longer before leaving on his travels so we can run a contest between our best team of five—Cunningham’s crew—and Heff to see who finishes first and what the final product looks like.”

There were some raised eyebrows and stamped feet, but pretty soon the good-hearted fellows said “sounds good” and “whaddya say” and “how ‘bout it, Heff?” Cunningham, who was well liked because he was very strong, very funny, and very generous, shouted “Alright, Heff, you’re on, you old Devil, we’ll beat you into shortpants!” The gang erupted with laughter, and I couldn’t help but smile and nod, and then the fellows clapped my back. All except for Ford, who put his hand on my shoulder and said just “good thing, good.” He wore that marble smile again. His eyes were ablaze with hate, hate spilling out into his deep, broad eyesockets, hate at something, maybe me, but I could not tell.

So it was that I faced off against Cunningham and his top four men to build a car faster and better.

It wasn’t hard to win. Even then, even now, it’s not a fair contest. I knew all the best ways to heat and hammer a piece of metal just so, so that only a few strikes would bend it correctly into the proper shape. I possessed special experience in working materials so that a single effort would both mold and beautify the object. In an instant, I could grasp the import of any tool I handled. And I could stoke the heat of a furnace to precisely the correct temperature for each bolt, rivet, or handle I was building. Then there was the other thing. I was just faster, stronger, and more accurate than Cunningham’s boys. The biggest worry bead for me in this contest was to avoid winning it by so much as I could. It took nearly a week for a team to build a car. I had to pace myself so as not to embarrass anyone or arouse suspicion. Anyone with a long life can tell you that people will admire and praise what they see as excellence, until it becomes so superb that it is beyond their scope of comparison, at which point they must fear it, condemn it, or revere it. None of those outcomes would have been good. I could sense old Ford watching closely, gauging, observing, measuring, even timing me on his stopwatch as my fingers deftly maneuvered tongs and anvil,

hammer and steel. What I could have easily completed in 70 hours took me almost five days, with stoppage along the way to show fatigue, frustration, and fear of losing. I would utter quips crediting my speed to process and the good luck of broad training across tools and heat levels. The fellows looked on in astonishment as I kept pace and then exceeded the Cunningham crew. At first they were excited for the early returns and encouraged us in good sport. Then I could hear them grow incredulous as it became clear that I was at least keeping up. “Could he really beat them?” they quietly murmured. They gathered at lunch and in the evenings to place small bets on who would finish the engine block first and then whether I would slow to a crawl when it came time to lift and fasten the larger pieces together. Then they grew hushed again as I fashioned my own simple and reusable pulley system. I made sure to reveal enough devices and how they worked so that the men would feel they could eventually manage what I was doing. As their confidence in the new processes grew, and as they became convinced that they could manage this themselves one day, they began to see me as a hero for their future and not a threat. They loved Cunningham, but they admired me. They felt somehow that I was there to improve their lives. Cunningham and his team felt the same. As we locked down piece after piece of the cars with joiners and welding, the fellows would cheer the final rivets and sparks. Cunningham’s crew would whoop for me, and I would strike my foot hard on the floor for theirs.

By the end it was clear I would win and that I was probably slowing down to be fair. The men only loved that more. In the reflection of the windshield glass, I spotted Ford drop his stopwatch with a smirk as he figured out what I was doing. I felt a shot of embarrassment.

I popped in the hood ornament and wiped it with a clean rag as the piece de resistance, and the fellows shouted “well done, Heff!” Despite the cold, we dripped sweat. Cunningham’s boys were a solid four hours behind. I bought a crate of pop and passed them around to the men as we sat and encouraged them to finish with style.

Beer and sandwiches appeared. We spent the afternoon retelling the race. I hadn’t had that much fun in years.

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Two months later I was in charge of everything that fell under the heading of manufacturing. Hammering, heat, tooling, assembly, construction, and training were all my domain. Ford and I met daily for lunch in the office upstairs overlooking the floor and dined on Thursdays at the country club. It seemed always a contest for who could nibble the least. He would ask after the men and how they were taking to the new procedures. He would remark on what were clearly keen and detailed observations of what exactly I was having the fellows do differently, and he would ask questions on the rhyme of this tool choice or the reason for that tongs technique. He listened carefully, and I could see the whirl and buzz behind his eyes as he co-opted the information, evaluated it, and made it his own. When he had exhausted his inquiry on a particular theme, he would grind his mandible as if he had eaten it. From time to time, he would offer suggestions on how to improve a procedure. His contributions were always smart

and well thought out but never quite right. There would be some minor reason of spacing or speed for which his proposal was off target. When I would point it out he would nod and snap his mandible.

Sometimes Ford would ask after my family and if I expected visitors for holidays. I would say “ha ha ho ho” and change the subject. On one occasion, I let slip to the waiter as he was talking about his upcoming nuptials that I had been married once. Just then Ford returned from the lavatory and plopped down in his chair with a larger than usual glimmer.

Cunningham proved to be a friend and useful lieutenant in adapting the fellows to the new ways we built the automobile. He approved of my methods. While Ford handled the balance sheet and supply chains and arranged to pay everybody well and on time, I invested in the souls of men. I led them in classes in drafting and measurement, in physical exercises for the strength of their bodies, dexterity of their hands, and precision of their wrists and elbows. I trained them personally in the useful arts of each instrument in the warehouse. I even taught them the precious virtues of discourse, so that by talking amongst themselves with clarity and accuracy they might make their ideas understood and more swiftly assimilated. I taught them to love not only the sharp pleasure of achieving the finished products but the blessed nuance of their ancient craft. Cunningham helped me ennoble these fellows. They broadened and stretched. Each car they turned out reflected their personalities and possessed in myriad individual touches the ananke of Victor Hugo’s Notre Dame and the cry of Shelley’s Ozymandias. Men who had begun their working lives as manure shovelers or coal barrow porters enlivened rough canvasses with the play of their pencils, improving bumpers and headlights, the soundproofing of doors, the comfort of seats, and the tactile excitement of steering wheel grips.

Our speed improved with every month, and Ford was able to sell more cars, hire more men, and expand the warehouse. Our fellows trained the newcomers. Ford would watch from the balcony above the floor and write down the times from his stopwatch as he measured how long it took each team to build its car. I saw the marble smile sometimes and at others the heat of savage hate as he saw something on the floor to despise. He would return to his office writing deliberately in his notebook, but I never saw what he wrote in it.

On a Tuesday afternoon in summer, we shipped our thousandth car using our new approach. Someone organized a buffet and a band to liven up the field outside the warehouse. The men invited their families, and someone else organized a spike for the lemonade, so pretty soon there was dancing. It was the kind of day that would show up in photographs of early Detroit.

Ford took the stage and hailed everyone to pay attention.

“I want to thank you men and your fine families for all the hard work you’ve done over the past months. You have

excelled and made our automobile company the top in the world.” The fellows cheered. With their mirth and good lemonade flowing, there was almost nothing they would not have cheered. Cunningham’s deep bellow could be heard above the others. He was in a good mood.

“I don’t have to tell you how useful one of our number has been.” Ford raised a glass in my direction. “Since joining us in Dearborn, Heff has made himself a leader and an improver of what we do. He has many skills. Benefiting from his ideas, we have produced more and better cars than ever before.” The crowd was shouting common assent all along. I found my vanity pleased to notice that the ladies, too, some of whom I’d met over the time, were applauding, as well. “Heff’s procedures make us all faster and more efficient every single month. So I want to say, to Heff, thank you from all of us!” He raised a glass, and the band played, and the men and women toasted. I stretched my back to raise my height.

“Three cheers for Heff!” shouted Cunningham, who emerged from somewhere to join the stage. “Three cheers for our friend and leader Heff!” Cunningham smiled broadly and expanded his arms wide. The fellows said, “Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!” and I felt myself flush.

There was Henry Ford, standing next to Cunningham, the stone smile on his lips and a Hades of rage in his brow and sunken eyes. He looked frozen in place.

I understood then what was happening, and I regretted having made friends with Cunningham. I had the old premonition of foreboding. He was already doomed. Our friendship had ruined him.

Three weeks later Cunningham lost his left leg. Ford had him collect a supply of sheet metal. He found himself crushed under it while handling the load. In another time I might have helped him escape this fate.

Now, as I comb my toes through the sand in Santa Monica, I think about Cunningham and the life he would have led. He would have a large house with educated children and carefree grandchildren. He would have a long and painless old age.

Previously, I could have spirited him out of harm’s way. I might have changed him or his circumstance to prevent the calamity. I had more options then. Your power goes away. I know of only three cults left in the whole world that still light the fires for me. Nearly all of us have lost our cults. When they stop following you, as the people find new allegiances to protect them, you lose your strength. Some of us fought to stay on top, and some of us succeeded, though most had to change their names. I probably should have tried. Some of what you had remains, so long as the flames are lit somewhere, but so much of it departs. I felt the doom for Cunningham as soon as Ford froze next to him on the stage, but I felt my own powerlessness to stop it.

Cunningham remained in good spirits for a time and would come around the warehouse to speak with the men. But he was physically no good and of no more use to the company, so his income dwindled to nothing. When he showed up at the warehouse, Ford would descend from his office and wrap his arm around his shoulder and walk around with him greeting the fellows and asking after his family. He would pass Cunningham a few dollars out of the eyesight of the men. I saw it happen once and knew it would be regular. Not a lot, nothing compared to what the men made for working, but more than zero and enough to keep Cunningham coming back. Over time, Cunningham stopped shaving and then bathing. He gradually lost the muscle in his frame. He would hobble around the warehouse and then smile and bob into a bow when Ford descended the stairs to see him. I wept and cursed myself and my weakness and the changing of the times and the coming of the Nazarene. It was all so much more cruel than I had imagined. And they used to call us scornful!

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Our business grew. The cars sold, the number of our men blossomed, and our output hastened. We added layer after layer of skill and art to our teams. They made the automobiles with more speed, more precision, and more beauty. The customers rejoiced.

At our weekly lunch, Ford told me “Heff, I need you to take things over for a couple of months. I’ve got to take care of some things, and I need to be away for a while.” I said sure, and that was that. We hummed along without him, making our improvements and innovations and growing our sales. The men hardly noticed his absence.

Ford hadn’t said where he was going, and for some reason I hadn’t asked, but I got the impression that he hadn’t traveled far. I heard snippets around the town that there had been sightings at the mayor’s office and real estate purchases and huge orders for lumber. A few burghers would approach me now and again on the street or in the saloon to wink and ask what we were up to. “Who are all these men you are trucking into town?” “Why all the land, Heff?” They would ask me, and I would stand up tall and say “ho ho, mum’s the word, you never can tell, ha ha,” and I would saunter down the street wondering the same thing.

The leaves turned green, and the mosquitoes invaded our warehouse, and Ford’s two months stretched into four. The town’s saloons began to fill with rough, unmannered men who spat and drank too much and brawled and broke chairs and tables and mirrors and each other. Women appeared, and pimps opened brothels. Trucks rumbled along the byways late at night, and in the mornings, deep grooves in the road revealed that their payloads had been heavy.

A few finer cut men also appeared. They wore herringbone and collars, eyeglasses and city shoes. They carried elongated leather cases and sat together at the tables in the town at night looking at drawings they would spread out in front of them and mark up with pencils and rulers. I approached one evening with good cheer and fine spirits, and

they quickly rolled up their drawings and deposited them in tubes and then placed the tubes in their leather cases. One of them introduced himself as Sorensen and invited me to join them for their meal and cigars. I sat with them amiably for three hours, but I was able to learn nothing from them except that they had all been to university and spoke well. They played bridge instead of poker. They stayed at the Grand, the only good hotel we had, and the lamps in the rooms upstairs and moving shadows visible from the street outside indicated they worked late and in groups. Sometimes they would depart in the middle of the night and not return till the following evening.

The mayor hired additional policemen. The faces were new and unfamiliar in the town, and I perceived some foreign accents. They were beefy and Teutonic. The new officers had their own captains. They gave deference to the veterans but otherwise patrolled on their own. When the rough men became too rowdy in the taverns, they would pick out one or two of the foulest and toss them and bash them badly on the street under the lights. When curiosity overtook a man enough to follow the rumble of the traffic out past the byways and into the woods on the new roads that no one in the town had traveled before, reports came back of his being turned away at the edge of the forest politely but unequivocally by the new policemen.

Two more months passed before I saw Ford again. He reappeared as abruptly as he had departed. He dropped lightly into the opposite chair at the partners desk in the office above the warehouse floor. I was reconciling accounts in the large green ledger. It was not my first choice for a vocation, but I was pleased that I had learned the skill, and I had made an improvement by carefully adding four inches to the horizontal end of each leaf, which allowed for several new columns of information to be included in the tables.

“Heff, I have something to show you.” Never since meeting him had I seen him wear such a massive grin. The glimmer of hate was ever present in his eyes, but this time it was accompanied by an expression of immense satisfaction. He looked like he held victory by the throat and planned for his next move to be a squeeze. I still enjoyed the cat and mouse part of knowing him, and I felt some light excitement that he was back with news and an implied boast. But enough years of intimacy with all the purple feelings of premonition made me worry.

We drove in Ford’s own touring car, a magnificent polished dark silver machine twenty feet in length with broad, sweeping contours hand-molded by top engravers from my own design. The automobile glided smoothly over rocks and ruts out of town and into the woods, where the new Teutonic police officers saluted as we sailed past. The day was fine and sunny, though as we rode through the dense forest the thick canopy and heavy trunks of old growth crowded out the light. Then suddenly again we exited the forest and our car and the sun burst open onto a vast expanse of flat ground, covered in buildings just as vast, like our warehouse but longer and wider and many of them, maybe ten in all, stacked in a grid, with hundreds or thousands of rough looking men hurrying about every which way carrying building materials and smoking and talking. Among them were thin men in fine shoes and long leather cases walking and pointing at drawings. I spotted Sorensen. New police officers strolled in fours around the place,

smiling and taking in the sun and fingering their batons. It was a city, made of wood and men and motion.

I drew a breath. Ford must have heard me.

“It’s something, isn’t it? But you haven’t seen anything yet.”

He drove us down the center aisle of the buildings and stopped by one of them that was marked with a giant number four. We alighted, and I could hear the buzz of sparks and the whirl of gears and the banging and clanking of steel on steel. I smiled and breathed in deeply as I recalled my years of enjoyment in the blaze of forges and furnaces. Good things were happening here, I felt.

Ford led me up a long staircase alongside Building Four, and we entered through a door onto a balcony that overlooked the entire expanse of the ground floor. Ford gripped the steel banister and leaned over to take it in. Then he cocked his head to watch me as I came to understand what I saw.

A single, giant, snaking, pulsing pulley carved its way around and through every corner of the place. At one end, it pushed a belt with small fragments and pieces of metal. Then they were joined by stretches of rubber. Then this part was riveted to that or welded to the other. Slowly, over many yards, a skeleton of a car would take shape, and then a body, and then the car itself, an upright, boxy, black automobile. And right behind it would come another, and then another, each one a replica of the last.

The men on the floor worked swiftly. Each of them stood in his own place, never departing. He would add or fasten or deposit or fuse or lift or polish or place one piece or another just so and just in time for the pulley to move the skeleton on to the next fellow and just in time for him to greet the following one and do it again. I remembered what it was like to watch the bees in a honeycomb or the ants around a hill. They were just as industrious. I found myself observing every step carefully, and then I found myself counting off the seconds of each portion. There was no question they were faster than even our fastest team. They were faster than I was. An entire automobile could be completed in hours. I felt an instability in my limbs.

“I call it the Assembly Line,” Ford said loudly, and only then did I realize how noisy it was. “Well, it’s called the assembly line, I should say, since it wasn’t originally only my idea. A few others have been working on it. But this is the tops by a million miles and is going to be for a long time. Everything’s been thought of. The best order in which to add and join each part. Where a man stands, how far he has to reach, how much he can lift, how few motions he must use to get the job done. We’ve divided up every step so that they’re all equal in the amount of time they take for a fellow to complete, so the pulley can move along at the same speed the whole time and not get jammed up. Why, you can see for yourself.” I was listening and had nothing yet to say. He grinned, and his

narrow nostrils flared. “The fellows below can make a car from scratch in no time, days ahead of the best boys at our warehouse. Here’s the smartest part, Heff,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder and squeezing. “We’ve designed the whole system so that we don’t even need to train the men. We can pick a fellow off the street, and if he’s willing and able-bodied, he can be on the line and producing in twenty minutes. In a day he’s competent and in two he’s an old hand. No teaching, no need for elaborate skill, no obligation to complicated art or design. Each man just gets his job done, and presto!, we have a fine car.”

He let me watch in silence for what felt like a long time. Then he squared himself in my direction and, with half of his face lit bright red from the heat and flying sparks below, and the tightness of hate glowing from his deep-set eyes, he said “You see, Heff, your way of doing things isn’t needed any more.”

Then he turned away and walked out and down the stairs, and I followed him. Someone made signs for me to get into the car again, and then someone else climbed into the driver’s seat and drove us away as Ford strode toward another building shouting directions. He looked taller as I craned around to see him.

I rode back in silence. The driver was an uncouth fellow who grunted as we entered the forest and again when we exited and then once more when he deposited me in front of the warehouse. I hung outside in my place, looking at the side of the building, listening to the sounds of chatting and work within. They were the familiar bangs and whirs and gasps. It all seemed so quiet to me now.

I could not bring myself to enter. I had nothing to say and no way to explain. I tried to think of some heroic lines to tell the men about what I had seen and about their place in the long song of history. But I could not even think of what to say to them about their future. Speaking well was never my portion. Their fates were written, and I cursed myself for having nothing to offer.

I curved my shoulders, turned around, and walked with an uneven gait toward the town and then away, riding my chariot the way I had come.