

Fool's Gold

Era: circa 1990

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Hector flew past the coffee machine with a file folder under his arm, a piece of paper in his teeth, and a D-size blueprint wafting in and out of his hands. He was trying to shape the blueprint into a roll without tripping over it, all the while swearing as best he could since his mouth was full.

I got out of his way - quickly - which meant I stubbed my toe on the coffee counter and landed on Jeff's foot. Jeff responded according to Newton's third law. He spilled coffee over his hand and down my skirt.

"Sorry Jeff."

"Ah, Lois, why is everybody so up-tight around here today?"

"National Board Examination," I responded. "Only the second one since the company was formed. The inspectors are supposed to show up sometime today." I had to agree with Jeff that everybody did seem pretty up-tight - much more so than during the last examination when Barnes had handled the details.

"National Board?" He screwed up his nose to keep his glasses from falling off.

"The National Board is the organization that makes sure we're meeting all the requirements of the ASME Pressure Vessel Code. Their inspectors are coming today. If they don't like the way we do things they could take away our U-stamp."

Hayden appeared around the corner from the drafting office. He was wearing his power suit - a rare occurrence. "Where's Abdo?" he asked.

"Pardon?"

"Abdo... Abdo Rahman, you knucklehead."

"Oh Abdo. I haven't seen him."

"Neither have I," Jeff agreed.

Hayden hustled off down the hallway, revealing a slight anxiety in the way he tilted one of his shoulders.

"What's a U-stamp?" Jeff continued, ignoring the interruption.

"It's ... oh I don't know ... sort of our license to build pressure vessels? If Pressure-Plus loses its U-stamp, you and I lose our jobs 'cause the company couldn't build pressure vessels anymore."

"I thought we just had to worry about the Boiler's Branch."

"Yeh, we have to worry about them, too. The Boiler's Branch is really part of the Alberta Government. They're sort of our local inspectors. But the National Board is the big cheese - they issue licenses for the American Society of Mechanical Engineers - ASME."

Abdo came around the corner, a sort of pasty haze wafting from his brown skin. "Have you guys seen Hayden?"

"He's looking for you. He just went that way." I pointed down the hall.

"I think they've picked my vessel." Abdo's voice rose an octave above its usual. "This is not fair. My mother-in-law probably had a hand in this."

He scurried down the hall in the direction I had pointed him.

"What does he mean, they've picked my vessel?"

"The inspectors pick some particular vessel and take the design and construction apart with a fine tooth comb. He'll be under the gun... have to answer some fairly pointed questions."

"This doesn't sound like any fun."

"By the way, Jeff, if some stranger comes up to you and asks you where the formula for shell thicknesses comes from, don't pull out that old Code Book that Hector has at his desk. We can get into a lot of trouble for using old code books. Go into Hayden's office and get his. It's the latest."

"You mean they might be asking me questions?" The surface of his coffee started to shake.

I couldn't stand the pain. "Nah, don't worry. They won't do that." Even the inspectors would realize that asking Jeff questions was like beating a puppy.

Things were quiet for the next half hour - until I ran into Max Cord who was in charge of our Quality Control Department. Actually, I didn't really run into him. He came into my office to ask if I was the one who'd checked Abdo's drawing - the drawing that was being used for the inspection. I told him no, that Hayden had checked it, then asked, "How's it going?"

He smiled happily. "Okay now. We got rid of McElroy three days ago, thank rot."

McElroy is the shop foreman.

"What do you mean?"

"He went on holidays. I've been trying to prepare a weld procedure for mig root for two months and he wouldn't let me do it. He always figured something else was more important."

A mig root weld was an essential part of almost every head and shell seam that was welded in the shop. If Pressure-Plus didn't have a weld procedure to cover that, even I knew we were in deep dark manure...

...which raised another issue in my simple mind...why Pressure-Plus management figured it was a good idea to keep quality control under the thumb of the shop foreman was beyond my comprehension. Max shouldn't have to report to McElroy. Our last quality control manager, Barnes, had quit over that issue.

"Mind you this whole thing is a bit of a farce," Max continued. He got a big happy grin on his face and laughed out loud. "I can play these games, as well as the next guy, long as I don't have somebody like McElroy around my neck." I pictured good old Barnes who had quit his job, to preserve his integrity. He would have been gagging on that one. I was a little worried about this examination.

"I don't understand," I told Max. "We've been through one of these inspections before. How did we get past the last one without a weld procedure for mig root? Barnes wouldn't have left us in a position like this."

"Don't ask me. Maybe the inspectors never looked for it. All I know is we don't have one. Didn't. Until 18 hours ago. Soon as McElroy went on holidays I started hopping. The guys at the Boiler's Branch really bent over to help us out. As long as the National Board doesn't realize we only got it yesterday, we're okay."

"So the National Board is obviously here? Right now...judging from the sick look on people's faces?"

"The National Board AND the Boiler's Branch. Norwich from the Boiler's Branch is here too. We've just done a walk through the shop. Now we're going back to the motel room to review the quality control manual. I gotta go." And like a wisp of smoke, he disappeared.

The next morning Hayden was fetching some drawings from one of the drawers in the drafting department. He was still in his suit jacket and pants - looked like a bit of a mountain.

"How's the inspection going?" I asked.

"Pretty good, I guess. I was talking to Max first thing this morning. Max spent yesterday afternoon with the Boiler's Branch Inspector, Norwich, and with the National Board Inspector, going over the quality control manual."

"No complaints?"

"Apparently not. After the three of them finished, our shop controller asked them out for the evening but Norwich and Max turned him down. So the controller just took out the National Board Inspector. Max came back here to do some QC work."

"Good. The last thing we need is Max with a hangover."

"Well, that might still be a problem because, while he was working, Max got a call from Norwich, our Boiler's Branch guy who is supposed to be resting. You know the Boiler's Branch kind of likes us at Pressure-Plus. Anyway Norwich phoned Max and asked him for a drink... to give him some advice, presumably. Apparently when they were walking through the shop yesterday, Norwich stood in front of a few things that he knew the National Board Inspector wouldn't appreciate."

"So Norwich is into action above and beyond the call of duty?"

"You can say that again, especially since the whole thing has backfired. Norwich took Max to the Petroleum Club after he phoned last night and the shop controller and the National Board Inspector showed up there about an hour later. Can you see Norwich sitting at the table and the National Board Inspector looming over him and Norwich trying to explain why he, as a Boiler's Branch Inspector, decided to make it an evening out after all – with the QC manager from Pressure-Plus?"

"But I don't understand. Why would Norwich do something risky like that?"

"I don't know. I'm just guessing. But for an inspection like this, the Boiler's Branch is kind of on our side because they'd look bad if we lost our stamp and they'd been approving our drawings."

A couple of hours later, a pasty faced Abdo belted into my office. "Lois," he hollered, "you got to help me. Hayden told me to come and see you."

"What's the matter, Abdo?"

His dark eyes pierced me with an intensity that revealed a war between naked anxiety and an unflinching sense of humour. "It's probably my mother-in-law. She has it in for me... told me she was going to phone the National Board Inspector this morning." Abdo and his wife Sharée lived with Sharée's parents. "Now the inspector wants a strength-of-attachment calculation for the boot on my vessel."

"And you don't know how to do one?"

"You got it."

"I can help you with that." I turned and started rummaging through my bookshelves looking for a particular binder. "The Boiler's Branch says you should do one of these calcs whenever you have a large diameter opening."

"Like on a boot? Can we get rid of the boot? I'd like to give the boot to the inspector... and my mother-in-law."

I smiled. I couldn't help it. "Here it is." I spent ten minutes explaining how the calculation worked and told him I would check it when he was done. "You can make a copy and bring back the original. Things aren't going that smoothly then?"

"I don't think so. The inspector's arguing with McElroy."

"McElroy? He's on holidays."

"He's downstairs right now."

"Max will be pleased."

"Well, the guy from the board isn't pleased. And I haven't helped any. As soon as this calc bit came up, he knew I didn't know what he was talking about."

"So, did he send you up to do the calculation? Or to find out if somebody else knew what he was talking about?"

"Well, to GET the calculation, I guess, because I didn't admit that I hadn't done it. But he knows."

"Don't worry about it, Abdo. He's had enough to do with Max and McElroy that he has this place figured out. And if your mother-in-law really did phone him this morning - "

Abdo smiled only briefly then disappeared.

He was gone for a half hour. When he came back, I checked the calculation. It was perfect.

"So what are you going to tell the guy - that you dug this out of some file somewhere? Or that you just did it?"

"There's one thing I've learned in the world of Canadian business. The problem isn't the crime. The problem is getting caught. Never get caught."

Then Abdo headed out to the shop, paper in hand and a grin on his face.

During the remainder of the day, things were quiet for those of us in the drafting department. About 4:15, Hayden made the rounds and invited us all to the bar after work, stating that we had passed our National Board Examination. A sense of elation hung in the air - satisfaction and anticipation of a good time. Promptly at 4:30 we headed for the Pizzaz and nested around some tables.

Max was there, Hayden and Abdo. I noticed McElroy was missing and assumed that Max had locked him in a vessel during the National Board Examination.

Max was feeling expansive and in a story-telling mode. "Well, things went fairly well this morning. I managed to get some guys on the floor right at 7:30 and we cleaned up all the stuff Norwich was worried about - like the tail ends of the weld rods laying on the floor."

"Are they a problem?" I asked.

"Yeh," Hayden explained. "Rods are supposed to be held in a heat-controlled oven for awhile before they're used... to drive out the moisture... worried about hydrogen embrittlement. So the National Board doesn't want old rods lying around on the floor. Somebody might pick one up and weld with it."

Max nodded his head. "Course the smooth sailing didn't last long. Pretty soon the National Board Inspector was breathing down my neck because they noticed the weld procedure book wasn't up to date - I hadn't written the combination forms into it to cover the new mig-root weld-procedure."

"Yeh, the inspector was pretty upset right about then," Hayden agreed. "That was when I walked in."

"And it didn't help that McElroy arrived about then too. As far as McElroy was concerned, the whole weld procedure bit is inconsequential."

"The inspector calmed down though, when you pointed out it was a paper-work problem, not a procedural problem," Hayden consoled Max.

"Yeh and I don't think he figured out that the weld procedure was only 18 hours old."

Max swilled his beer in the glass. "Course the walk through the shop wasn't without its moments." He looked at Hayden. "You were there the first time? Remember the vessel that the guys just finished hydro-testing? Then they had to do some work on it?"

My brain groaned. According to code, no welding was supposed to be done on a vessel after it had been hydro-tested.

"Yeh," Hayden confirmed. "The one that was set up so the gusset plates on the skirt kept it from rolling off the horses?"

He was talking supports... saw-horses.

"That's the one. Well, we took another walk through about an hour later and things weren't so great. The welders had moved the vessel so the gussets weren't holding it and the vessel kept rolling. You know what they did? They tack welded the bloody vessel to the horses."

"Course, I noticed this," Max continued, "right at the point when the inspector stopped to examine the skirt."

"So what did you do?" Hayden asked.

"I stood in front of the tack welds. If Norwich can do it, so can I. To top it off, our controller ... OUR CONTROLLER... he insisted on walking back through the shop right past the vessel again." Max smiled expansively, obviously pleased with his cunning. "But I just made sure that I was walking at an angle talking to the rest of you so no one would notice."

"Well, it wasn't so bad in the end," Hayden remarked. "From what I understand, the inspector said we had done okay; that he had really put us through the mill."

"That's what he said." Max was relaxed now, a man who knew he could deal with any problem he created.

Hayden held up his glass of beer. "Well, you guys... toast... a toast to a job well-done. I think we should all be very proud of ourselves."

We were... like the cats that ate the canary and didn't get caught.

But I was about to find out – maybe we were only fooling ourselves...

Max quit his job not long after the examination. I wondered at the time, if management wasn't a little unhappy with that inspection because when Max quit, they re-hired Barnes to run the QC department. I was surprised that Barnes accepted and one day when I went down to his office to ask him a question, I told him he was crazy.

"Crazy? Not really," he laughed, his round belly vibrating and his bald head nodding. "You don't think I came back without insisting that a few things should be different around here."

"Great. Tell me."

"Well, for one thing, I answer directly to Lowe." Lowe is the really big cheese. THE numero uno at Pressure-Plus. "McElroy has no hold over me anymore. As shop foreman, he can't control me"

"Well good," I extended my hand. "...cause I don't want to go through another National Board Inspection like the last one. And I really admire the fact that you put down your foot and quit before you gave in. I like integrity."

"It wasn't much of a sacrifice. I didn't have trouble getting another job and I wouldn't be back if management hadn't given me what I asked for. What was so bad about the National Board Inspection?"

I told him the story, including the details about the mig root weld procedure.

He laughed. "That explains where this thing came from." He flipped open a book and held out a sheaf of papers that was sitting loose in the top of the binder, no holes punched.

"I could never understand," he continued, "why anyone would apply for a weld procedure that required an entire groove to be filled with mig weld." He paused, flipped back through his weld procedure book, "Max could have used just about any one of these procedures right here," Barnes pointed, "and this paragraph in the code on page 1003, to justify using a mig root-pass in the welds. Mig root is already a part of these other registered procedures." He jostled the code book onto his desk, "But I guess Max didn't know about the paragraph."

So? Who DID get fooled?

Barnes saw us through three inspections after he came back to Pressure-Plus and I never heard squat. Everything ran "as smooth as silk".

But after the fourth inspection a year ago, I did hear something.

I was in Hayden's office all set to be tormented. Hayden had dispensed with his power suit, was back in his jeans. He had his feet up on the desk and had just finished talking to his wife on the phone.

"So we made it through another one, did we?"

"The inspection? Yeh well, I wouldn't expect anything less with Barnes handling things."

"He's pretty good, hey?"

"Good." Hayden dropped his legs and leaned forward onto his desk. "You know what the National Board Inspector told Barnes? Two things ...told him that Alberta was the best place in the world to get a pressure vessel built because the quality control is so good AND a day later, told Barnes he runs the best quality control in Alberta."

"Wow!"

"I thought that was a pretty nice complement," Hayden conceded, "To Barnes...and to integrity."

I nodded my head, a little too awe struck to speak.

"Gold for the rest of us fools." Hayden sat quietly for almost ten seconds. "But National Board Inspections are sure boring now."



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