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The Stack Super Smoker

Many years ago, Hickory Stack decided to build a car. It was to be very special and nothing like the cars that were around in those days. The reason it was so special was because he was putting it together by hand. When it was finished, he proudly drove it around town and everyone who saw it wanted to know where he had bought it. "Well," he would say, "I got the parts from lots of different places that make cars; and if I couldn't buy what I wanted, I made it in my workshop." The townsfolk were amazed. A few asked Hickory if he could build another special car for them. Always he refused: "It takes a lot of time on my own," he explained apologetically, "And I can't really spare it."

Then someone said: "You know what you should do, Hickory – set up a factory. You'll make a fortune."

Before that, Hickory had never considered having his own business; but the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. And so the Stack Motor Company came into being. It began simply in an old shed with just three workers including Hickory. Soon, however, because the cars were so special they were in high demand and the Company couldn't keep up with the orders. So SMC, as they started to call it, gradually got bigger, adding two more sheds, one of them huge; plus extra equipment to make the parts needed for the cars; and, of course a large team of workers.

As time went by, Hickory bought some newer and better machines for his factory. These latest inventions made the parts faster than in the early days; so the bodies and doors; windows and seats; and all of the engine bits and pieces were ready for putting together much quicker than before. That meant hiring extra staff which was quite costly; but because they could build more cars than before, needless to say they sold more. This was fine, except that it wasn't truly quite as Hickory had imagined it might be. His latest Stack Specials weren't built entirely by hand anymore; but he was earning a lot of money which was reasonably satisfying; to begin with, anyway.

Unfortunately, the other car makers had the same machines; and their factories were much bigger than SMC's; so they were able to turn out loads more cars than Hickory. Admittedly, whichever company made them, they all looked the same; so the Stack Specials were still the ones people preferred to buy. The major problem came about when Hickory's competitors started selling their brands of cars cheaper. Buyers eventually had to accept that they couldn't afford a Stack and had to settle for an ordinary car. SMC's sales and profits began to fall.

Then, one day, a Supervisor of Hickory's put a proposal to him: "I know I just seem like a mechanic who puts the engines together; but I'm also an inventor." Roger went on to explain that he'd had this idea for automating production. Hickory was puzzled at first until the man explained: "I'm sure I can design machines better than we have now; *and*," he emphasised, "I have also drawn up plans for robots that can put all the parts together far quicker than people."

"That sounds amazing," said Hickory, "But you're actually talking about plans and designs. I assume you've probably drawn them up on paper; but, the way I understand it, at the moment they don't actually exist."

"Not yet," confirmed Roger.

"It's just a dream, then," suggested Hickory, a little disappointed.

"Only until we make it happen," said Roger. "We already have the machines to do it – we can make the robots ourselves. And think of this, Boss," he added, "No other car maker will have them. There's no way they can compete with us. SMC will be the absolute tops where it ought to be."

Creating the new machines began the very next week. As they were truly special new inventions, Hickory had his workers swear they wouldn't tell a soul about them. "Because," he said, "If the other car makers learn what we are doing, they'll have to build their own robots in order to compete; and then we'll be back where we started."

Once everything had been set up and the necessary tests were run to ensure the robots were all working properly, the SMC factory got into full swing. The first models were pretty much the same as the cars they had been building before; but they were coming off the production line quicker which meant there were more to sell; and they were actually a little cheaper than the ones made by their rivals. Then another problem cropped up. SMC's competitors saw their sales dropping and one or two figured they knew the reason why – the Stack Specials looked very different from the cars they made; and now that they were cheaper, people could afford them; so they went back to buying what they really wanted. Before long, the other car makers found a solution – they started copying the designs of SMC.

"That's cheating," declared Roger.

"That, I'm afraid, is business," Hickory advised him, "But I've been thinking that we need to re-design the Stack Special so that it looks even grander than before." He took out a sheet of paper from his desk to show Roger. "This is a drawing of a totally new shape of car."

Roger was delighted. "Hey, it's really sporty."

"I thought so," Hickory said with a smile, "Can we build it, though?"

"Well, it would mean a few changes to Oscar's programming," mused Roger thoughtfully, "But I'd say we can."

Hickory was frowning. "You said Oscar – who's Oscar?"

"He's the robot that makes it all happen, Boss," explained Roger. "You've probably never seen him. Oscar is tucked away in his foundry, creating the car bodies to the design I put into his program. Once he has that, he automatically builds them before they come onto the factory floor to have everything else fitted. I'm sure Oscar can do it." He had expected Hickory would be well pleased, but he noticed a look of concern on the other man's face. "You look worried, Boss. Why's that?"

Hickory took a moment or two to reply. "It's about money, Roger. I haven't said anything because I was hoping things would improve; but they've only gotten worse. The bank is threatening to shut us down if we don't pay what we owe by the end of the month." Hickory checked his watch. "It's getting late. Give the workers the rest of the day and tomorrow off. I'll go to the bank again and see if I can get a life-line, but," he droned dismally, "I don't hold out much hope."

As Hickory left the office, trudging rather than walking, and with his head hung low, it was obvious he was really down in the dumps. Roger slumped in a chair behind a desk and turned slowly to gaze dismally at the walls. SMC had been his life for so long and he was sad that it would soon be closed for good. "There must be something we can do to keep going, surely?" he whispered to himself.

"There might be," said someone.

Roger was startled and looked around the office, but there was nobody there. "Who's that?" he asked, a tremor in his voice.

"It's me – Doris," replied a woman's voice. "I'm the company computer." The monitor screen across the room flickered and came to life. "As for what we can do, there's a major race coming up in a fortnight. All the other car makers will be putting entries in to show off their new models; and, of course, in the hopes of winning the big prize. If we enter the race and win, there would be enough money to save SMC."

"We don't have a suitable car," Roger explained glumly, "And even if we did, we haven't lodged an entry in the race."

"Not a problem," Doris assured him. "Leave that to me – I can do it all by email. The car is your job. It will have to be extra special, though; something that will turn heads and put our company back on top again. Oh," she added, "It must be fast; faster than fast, actually; and I think that new design of Hickory's might just be the ticket. What about it, Roger – are you up to it; are we?"

To save time, although on thinking about it the idea was quite silly, Roger had Doris inform the robots of the new plan. "This is make or break guys," said her voice, echoing around the factory from speakers set on the walls. "Not only do you have to work quickly; but you have to play your parts better than ever before. Now, let's do this: for Hickory; for SMC; and for ourselves."

In the meantime, Roger was in the foundry re-programming Oscar. He wasn't sure why, but for some reason he held up Hickory's drawing of the new sports car to show the robot; then shook his head and smiled. "How stupid am I?" he said to himself, "Showing a drawing to a dumb machine."

Oscar raised one of his many arms and wagged a metal finger at Roger. "Watch who you're calling dumb, Roger." The sounds were coming from somewhere inside the robot. "I'm the one who makes things happen around here, so show a little respect."

Roger's mouth had fallen open. First he was being talked to by the company computer; and now a factory robot was giving him a dressing down. All he could say was: "Sorry, Oscar. I wasn't thinking."

"Apology accepted," said Oscar; then: "Now, about this design – I believe we can make it even better, and certainly faster; so I'll tell you what's needed, and you program me to do it. Is that okay with you?"

Why wouldn't it be? There was nothing to lose and everything to gain. So, Roger programmed the new design into Oscar; along with the changes he'd mentioned, of course; then the talking robot set about making the parts. Going out onto the factory floor to inform the other robots what was going on was a new experience for Roger; but after a while he got used to the idea that he could talk to machines. It was, however, a bit unnerving because they all talked back to him. Still, it did mean that he would be able to keep an eye on progress and get the robots to make the odd changes when needed.

It took the rest of that day, the night included, and most of the following day. Finally, the extra special SMC Sports was sitting right in front of the factory doors. It was the first thing Hickory saw as he entered, and he was amazed. "Did you do this, Roger?" he asked with his eyes popping.

"Actually, WE did it," he declared proudly, "Me and our wonderful machines."

"I'm astounded," said Hickory. "The Stack Super Smoker has a good ring to it."

"We thought so," Roger went on to say, "That was Peter's idea..." Roger went quiet as he realised he was letting the cat out of the bag.

"Peter?" queried Hickory.

"He's the robot that puts the decals and stripes and things on the bodywork."

Hickory was frowning. "It seems to me you're beginning to think of the machines as people. Maybe you need a bit of a holiday."

"No way, Boss," Roger declared adamantly. "I'm going to be here to make sure our new Smoker gets to the race; then I'm going to watch it win. I was thinking about Donny as the driver

– he’s a bit crazy behind the wheel of his forklift, but we’ll need someone who’s prepared to take chances...”

Hickory cut him short: “Hang on a minute. Which race would this be?” Roger then had to explain about the race, and that they had put in an entry without first talking to the Boss. Needless to say, he didn’t mention about Doris’s part. “That’s all well and good, Roger, but this race is only for production cars: the ones made for sale to the public. The Smoker’s hardly that.”

Roger went to the computer, diddy-datted on the keyboard to bring up the company website on the screen. “There,” he said pointing at it. Plain as day, there was a picture of The Stack Super Smoker, and underneath a simple statement: ‘It’s Sleek, it’s fast, it’s available now. Don’t miss out – contact us with your order.’ “This went online yesterday,” Roger explained, “It’s available to the general public, which means we can legally enter it in the race. Forget the bank, Boss,” he declared positively, “The Super Smoker is the only life-line we need, believe me.”

For the first time ever, The SMC racing team set up in the pits. All were excited, except for Donny the driver who just thought it was a bit of a buzz; and he proved that he was indeed a little crazy; actually a lot really. What with the risks he took and the incredible speed of the car, The Stack Super Smoker won by a country mile.

Once the prize-giving and the celebrations were over, it was time to return to the factory where another in-house celebration took place. Afterwards when everyone else had left, there were just the Boss and his Supervisor alone on the floor. “A good day, I think,” commented Roger.

“A truly incredible one,” said Hickory. “Given the short time, you did something quite amazing.”

Roger sent his gaze along the line of robots now standing idle. “Actually, I did have a little help; a lot really. The machines did all the work.”

“Yes, but,” Hickory reminded him, “You did the programming. They couldn’t have done it without you.”

Roger smiled. “You’re probably right, Boss,” he admitted, and hoped it sounded genuine. “Still, they do deserve some credit, even if they are only dumb machines.” He felt a shudder through the floor as the robots stirred slightly. Fortunately, Hickory failed to notice. When the Boss had left for home, Roger was able to walk along the production line, personally thanking the robots that had made it possible for SMC to win the race and continue building cars. “Just one thing,” he said to all of them, “No talking when there are humans around – they wouldn’t understand.”

“Does that mean you?” asked Brenda the die-casting robot. “I mean, *you’re* human.”

“Not Roger,” proclaimed Bert the fender machine. “Roger’s one of us.”