

Dirck Toll

Utterly Starched

The morning was so young that even the typicals didn't know it had arrived yet. Tony rhythmically banged the steering wheel with joy and excitement at his successful early start. He'd be at the shore even sooner than he'd expected, and the overnight change in the distant storm's path meant that his timing would be about as perfect as it could get. The waves would be seriously ideal, and he'd be on them one right after another.

He rolled the van to a stop, hardly using the brake, and shut off the motor. He sat for a minute looking out at the ocean, and gave a deep and loud exultative breath. Then he jumped out and stretched his arms straight up, arching his back and rising on his toes, and finally reached to unfasten the straps holding his board to the roof rack.

The enthusiasm flew out of his arms, and they sagged. His shoulders did so as well. Anger entered his feet, and he turned and kicked a rock clean over the nearest dune.

He gave a yell of exasperation that the wind spread across the empty parking lot.

Instead of his surfboard, he'd brought his ironing board. Again.

Tony slumped against the side of his van, which the sun was just beginning to warm. Yes, it had been dark when he loaded up. But hadn't he noticed anything unusual about the weight, the feel, the shape, the fact that it had folding metal legs on it? Apparently not. Just like the other time. You'd think that a college degree in a combined major might mean that this wouldn't happen. Certainly not more than once.

A wagon with two unfamiliar typicals pulled in and parked near Tony. One climbed out the window of his dented door and called to Tony, "Great plank, man!"

Tony gave him a stare, then walked off to stand on top of a dune. The typicals quickly suited up, got out their boards, and ran into the breakers. Tony kicked at a clump of sharp-bladed grass and had sand blown back at him.

Finally, he sighed and started back to the van. An hour back to the house, another hour back to the shore. By the time he made a round trip, the surf would be swarming. The day was shot. Go home. Stay there. Brood.

Before getting back in the van, Tony took a last disgusted look at the roof.

And then...smiled.

"Hey. You Tony Eskin?"

Tony scrutinized the chap before committing to a response.

He didn't look like a drastic loser, so Tony said, "Yeah," and put out his hand. The chap said, "Tim," as they shook, and then said, "Guy down at Tubee's said I'd find you here."

"And. You did." Tony knelt down and resumed waxing his surfboard. "Why'd you want to find me?"

"I got a, a kind of a problem, and the guy at Tubee's said you could definitely unscrew it."

Tony thought: What the hell has that jerk told this jerk?

Tony said: "Uh huh. And your problem is?"

Tim made some use of his hands. "See, like I'm not a complete weed, first of all. But sometimes, sometimes, I get to the shore. And I'm ready to really kick. But then I find out, I'm ready, I'm only ready, to like...press shirts."

Tony's hand stopped waxing.

Tim kept talking. "Because I've like – and I don't know how I do it – brought the wrong plank. Meanwhile, my *real* plank's getting wicked scorch marks on it, 'cause I've been...pressing shirts."

Tony had felt considerable anger when he realized where Tim was heading, because he thought that jerk at Tubee's had instigated this. But now, sensing a curious sincerity, he felt sympathy, and interest.

"Not that I iron a lot, of course," Tim went on, "'cause I think it's a minimal need. But just, like, once, and I've got to do sanding again. If it's the wrong plank."

Tony looked up at him. Then Tony pressed the catch on the side of his board, and stood up with it, while its legs unfolded beneath it. He released the catch, and the board stayed up.

He grabbed a shirt from the basket and spread it on the board.

“Whoa, Sport!” Tim gasped. “Cuss-*tom!*” He ran his fingers along the glassy edge. “The *answer!* Can you make one of these for me?”

“Yes,” Tony replied calmly and helpfully. “I can do that.”

Tony got the door closed and turned back to his phone. “Anyway, yeah, it is looney. I just had that one little ad in the back of *Pipeline*. I wasn’t even going to put it in, because I figured after the first couple around here, I mean, how great can the demand be? But now I’m getting orders from, from Iowa. Really.”

His sister gave a laugh. “Maybe it’s some extreme idea of being prepared. Who knows how permanent your coastline is?”

“Yeah. Here’s one from Chicago...Washington...Missouri. It’s wild.”

“It’s a yearning for some connection to the sea, or for a piece of an idealized state of being.”

“It’s a mealticket on the bus out of downtown. I can —”

“You — “

“What?”

“What?”

“You go.”

“No, go ahead.”

“No you.”

“I was going to ask if you were moving.”

“Probably, before too long. I want to get a place closer to the workshop, ’cause with all this going back and forth, I haven’t even been able to surf in a while.”

“Have you had time for ironing?”

“Hah. No, actually, none of that either. I’m pretty rumped.”

“What do you call it again?”

“Comboard.”

“Comboard, that’s it.”

“Combination board.”

“I figured.”

Tony smiled. There was light silence for a moment or two. “Well, I’ll call you in another month or so.”

“Okay, good. I’ll look for your ad. Some place around here we must get that magazine.”

“Yeah, if it’s in Missouri...”

“Yeah.”

“All right. Stay nuts.”

“Be good. Bye.”

“Look,” Tony was shouting to the vice-president of Comboard International, who was nearly a full arm’s length away, “if it wasn’t for me, this business wouldn’t exist in the first place!”

“Yeah,” the vice-president shouted back, “and if it wasn’t for you, we *also* wouldn’t now be on the verge of ceasing to exist!”

“Hey! Hey!” the company’s business manager shouted at both of them, putting a hand on each of their shoulders and pushing them to back away from each other. “Let’s just calm down! Calm down!”

Tony went back to the head of the table and slumped into his Big Chair. The vice-president, Tim, sat down and leaned back in his own chair. After a few seconds of

quiet had drained off some of the tension, the business manager, Tony's sister Carla, continued, "We got really really big really really fast. Problems aren't unheard-of in the world of business."

"The *problem*," Tim retorted angrily, "is that now we aren't the only ones who got really big really fast, and we *should* have been!" He flipped open a folder in front of him on the conference table. "There are now thirty-one companies, besides us, that are selling surf/ironing boards. Thirty-one. Are their boards better than ours? No. Are they cheaper than ours? No. So what is it that all of them have that we don't have? Patents!"

Tony responded defensively, "Why should I have to think of everything?"

"This isn't everything! This is the *one thing*! We have *one* product! And now so does everybody else! And now we can't even continue with our own design because somebody else patented *it*!"

Tony became calm. "Do you want to sit in the Big Chair?"

"I don't want to sit in the Big Chair."

"Do you think you have what it takes to sit in the Big Chair?"

"I don't want to sit in the Big Chair."

"Because, let me tell you, things look a lot different in the Big Chair than they do on a plank. Are you saying you think you'd be better at filling the Big Chair?"

"I don't want to sit in the Big Chair."

"I think you want to sit in the Big Chair. Here, go ahead." Tony got up. "Go ahead. Go sit in the Big Chair."

Tim screamed. "*I don't want to sit in the Big Chair you cheesewacker!*"

“Good,” Tony said, sitting down. “Just remember who sits in the Big Chair.”

“I’m going to take that chair,” Carla said, “*and put it on a spit over a bonfire!* And the only thing that *might* stop me is if you two start behaving like adults.”

Tony sighed. “Ah, you’re right.” He stretched out his hand to Tim. “My man.”

Tim shook it without hesitation. “My man.”

“So,” Tony stated, “I guess I actually should have thought of it, but I didn’t. The question is, what are we, as adults, going to do now?”

They all sat silently. Thinking.

After a while, Tony said, looking to Carla, “You weren’t serious about the Big Chair, right?”

Owing to the significance of the event there was a much larger crowd than usual, clustered in front of the Comboard International area. And also owing to the significance of the event, Comboard International’s area itself was much larger than that of any other participant at the trade show. In addition to the long tables stocked with CI’s product literature, sales brochures, bumper stickers, t-shirts, key rings with miniature Comboards, and electric irons packaged with a free pair of wraparound sunglasses (Tim’s idea); in addition to the large posters that covered every available upright space, showing Comboards in use by overjoyed customers; in addition to the two bikinied models that accented the display of actual Comboards, and with whom one could have one’s picture taken (one with a backdrop of a beach, the other with a backdrop of a laundry room); in addition to all this,

CI's exhibit area also had its own stage.

This in itself was not that unusual, as several other exhibitors were using raised platforms to give themselves greater product visibility in the large convention center, and some even had circular platforms that rotated. But what distinguished CI's stage from these others was that it actually was a *stage*. There was a proscenium arch, from which hung a closed red curtain that glittered from the spotlights focused on it. All three sides of the backstage area were blocked off by large partitions, and security guards diligently prevented the curious but unauthorized from getting near it.

Out front Tony and Tim were greasing the crowd like the professionals they were. By prior agreement, Tim was flapping at the representatives of retail outlets, while Tony buzz-tongued the trade journalists.

Tony was happy to see a particular acquaintance, and approached him with genuine enthusiasm. "Mark! Hey, my man, I didn't think you'd be here!"

"Hey, well, this is news, my man."

"Who was that gent you were just talking to?"

"Him?" Mark pointed at an older bluesuit with his back to them. Tony nodded. Mark said, "He's the steering wheel of your main competitor. They say he got the idea to go into this business when he couldn't find a regular ironing board."

Tony gave an exaggerated dismissive gesture toward the bluesuit's hindside, and then turned back to Mark. "Anyway, you know, thanks again, really, because it was that first article you did in *Pipeline* that truly got this all going for me."

Mark grinned and shrugged. “Yeah, well, when I saw that ad I was like, ‘Hey!’ And I hope that what you’re coming out with today is as good a story.”

“You’re about to find out. I’ll see you later.”

“Luck, man. Be nuts.”

Tony, pausing to chat a couple more times, made his way to the stage. He nodded at Tim, and at Carla, and after a final deep breath, climbed the steps to the stage itself. There was some scattered but strong applause and whistles as he went to stand at the microphone in front of the curtain. Mark flipped open his notepad and uncapped his pen. Tony smiled toward one group of whistlers, then began to speak.

“Okay. I’m glad you’re all here, because as you know we have something very special for you to see. We’ve kept it a secret until now because, well, we weren’t sure the world could handle it.” The crowd laughed. He continued, “We pioneered the combination surf and ironing board, and it’s turned out to be a really big deal. Not just for us but for a lot of companies. But lately we decided that it’s time to grow, to move on. To try something different. So now, we introduce our totally new innovation. We introduce to you —”

The curtain opened behind him. Stretching across the back of the stage was a panoramic photo of snow-covered mountains. There was some kind of ramp on one side of the stage, covered with artificial snow. And center stage, supported by a beautiful silver and glass display rack, were —

“The world’s first *skis* that you can do ironing on! Who wants to come up and try them out on our

Alp-ramp?!”

Mark quietly recapped his pen, and closed his notepad.

“Look at the bright side, “ Tim consoled. “At least they’re patented.”

The smell alone made him feel full, and he fleetingly considered just sending it back, but Tony knew he should have something despite his lack of appetite. He looked up from the table to the server, thanked her, and watched her walk back to the kitchen.

He shouldn’t be eating out. He shouldn’t be eating period. He should be at the workshop. But he hadn’t been getting anywhere anyway. He looked away from the kitchen door back to his plate.

His hand stopped with the first bite halfway to his mouth. What about a combination fork and spoon? Call it a foon. Wait, there already was one. Campers used it. Called a spork, though. Tony sullenly put the food in his mouth.

His eyes rested on the table again. A combined flower vase and drinking glass. No, hell, that’s what they have straws for. There had to be something. Something that would save the company. Something that wouldn’t turn out like Ironskis.

He continued to absently eat.

Maybe they should have been *cross-country*.

He looked around the restaurant.

A combined tablecloth and blanket? A combined newspaper and tablecloth? A combined toilet stall and automatic teller machine? A combined picnic table and

white-water raft? A combined —

His server said that her shift was ending and that this guy would be taking over, pointing her thumb at the cleanshaver next to her wearing a similar but not identical white-top/black-bottom outfit.

Tony stared.

Tony blinked.

Tony said he was finished anyway, and introduced himself, and asked if she and her coworker could meet him later. At his workshop. “For some measurements.”

Carla shifted the phone to her other ear. “No, I mean, I’m *really* worried about him.”

Back home, her friend dropped her sarcastic tone. “How do you mean?”

“He doesn’t seem psychologically healthy. He’s obsessed.”

“With?”

“With combinations. Or things that are combined. Or combining things. For instance the only thing he’ll eat now – breakfast, lunch, and dinner – is peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And they *have* to be made with that stuff that’s got the peanut butter and jelly already together in the same jar. And now he wants our next product to be clothes that combine masculine and feminine fashions.”

“You men unisex?”

“No, like a combined sun dress and coveralls. He thinks that just like the Comboard caught on even with people who don’t surf or iron, those would catch on with people who don’t care about clothes.”

“I...don’t know about that.”

“Me neither. And another cinderblock like Ironskis could sink the company. But this obsession is sinking Tony even worse.”

He stretched his arms straight up, arching his back and rising on his toes, and took a deep and peaceful breath of the salt air. Then he checked to see that the umbrella was securely in the open position, which it was. Tony reached into his bag and got out *Pipeline*, pulled his plain tomato sandwich out of the cooler, and settled down into his Big Beach Chair.

When he finished the first article, he looked up.

He noticed a kid at the snack shack looking at him. Tony went back to the magazine.

A minute or so later he glanced up, and the kid was getting to be right there. The kid, who had completed about thirteen or fourteen years of being alive, said, “You’re Tony Eskin, right?”

The kid didn’t look like a psychoshrimp, so Tony said, “Yeah, I am.”

“I used to see you around here a lot but I didn’t know who you were then. But I haven’t seen you around here in quite a while.”

Tony recognized him now as one of the typicals at this beach. “Yeah. I went inland to get my view reassembled. And I fully did, so now I’m back.”

He took another bite of his sandwich.

“Hey, I saw that you don’t have your company anymore.”

“No. So I have time to be out here again. It’s densely more supreme than what I’d been doing.”

After a few moments the kid said, "I've got two of your original Comboards. Yours are the best, man. The absolute best."

Tony smiled. The wet-ears was okay. "Thanks, my man."

The kid seemed to get a little nervous. Then he said, "It's kind of sheer corn...but could I maybe have your autograph?"

Tony gave a laugh of mild surprise and delight. "Uh, sure. You have anything for me to put it on?"

The teenfan handed him a postcard that he must have just gotten at the snack shack, along with something to write with.

Tony abruptly jerked back, but then recovered. The wet-ears asked, "Something wrong?"

"Uh, no, it's okay," Tony answered. "I'd rather it was a pencil and eraser, not just a pencil. But this...this is good." He grasped it decisively.

The kid took back the card and pencil after Tony signed his name, and said, "Hey, thanks a lot. I mean it!"

"Okay. Stay nuts."

"Hey, stay nuts, man!" Visibly delighted, the kid slipped the pencil back into a pocket of his Dressalls and ran excitedly back toward the snack shack.