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Hard Nosed & Soft Hearted

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Hard-nosed and Soft-hearted

From diesel truck cabs to skyscraper boardrooms, all across America women are slashing the harnesses that have kept them reined to the roles assigned to them by men and tradition. No longer must women sell their physical bodies, through marriage or otherwise, in order to put food in their stomachs and roofs over their heads. Hard nosed and caloused revolutionaries they may be on the surface, but underneath the business exterior the biology has not changed. Women remain compassionate, concerned, supportive, and nurturing.

Judy, a firm-jawed and tough lesbian, has rained up all those egos that blocked her assault on the summit of the corporate mountain. Yet I have found this avowed man-hater in my kitchen emptying my last beers down the sink drain. She glared at me and growled, "I'm going to jack your jaw if you don't quit poisoning yourself." She has threatened to castrate her male opponents; yet one evening she unplugged and put aside my power saw; she thought that I was too drunk to keep my fingers from the sawblade's path. The last time I saw her was just before she moved from Texas to a promotion in Los Angeles. That evening she took me out to dinner and reminded me to eat well, we went to see the stage play, "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," and she, grinning and index finger pointing, told me to have fun. Later, she said good-bye and take-care with genuine concern in her eyes. Beneath her self-proclaimed "tough bitch businesswoman" exterior, Judy was not the monster that she would have others believe she was.

Carol, a successful and independent businesswoman, bucked the status quo at every turn of her life. Though a mother, she never felt the need to carry a husband through life. She attracted money and passed it on. She opened successful restaurants where the experts and their demographics said there were no customers; folks drove from across town for great food at fair prices. She bought run-down and condemned houses in ratty neighborhoods and turned them into clean and affordable rent properties. All across the state she took on politicians, bankers, and over-zealous capitalists—and won. She built businesses and turned them over to employees. She restored houses and sold them to the tenants. She bought little for herself; the few personal possessions that she kept were mostly gifts from friends. While working in the next room, I've listened through open doors as she bargained, wheeled and dealed, and courageously attacked the biases of power brokers. In a fight she could flash and strike quick as a cat. After a win she would kick off her shoes, plop down exhausted in her chair, and wonder out-loud if she had been too hard on her adversary. Carol did whatever she thought was right. What she thought was right was to make this a better and fairer world—for everyone.

Susan was the first woman that I ever worked with on a construction job. When the superintendent climbed up onto the bridge deck and sheepishly told Bob, our foreman, that his new carpenter was the woman standing down below next to the trucks, everyone within hearing distance froze. Bob sent his hardhat sailing and bouncing across the steel, he spat on the superintendent's boot and, cursing all the way, he practically slid down the ladder to the ground. On the way to his truck he yelled at our new carpenter, "Go home—get barefoot and pregnant. You don't belong out here!" "Hi, I'm Suzie," she replied. Through all the catcalls, jokes, and harassment she became one of the best carpenters in the company and eventually gained the respect of almost all of the macho-boys. In hard work, grime, and sweat she kept her twinkling eyes and good humor. When she did leave to get pregnant and barefoot, we all felt the loss of Susan's hammer and laugh.

Slowly but surely women are breaking the barriers. They are coming to play more and more active roles in all areas of our society. A kinder and gentler nation will not be built by any snarley-mouth man who out of the other side of his mouth speaks of gun-downs, attacks, fights, and kills. Peace will come when the carriers of life gain an equal footing with the bullies. Strength is not the elimination of compassion—we are all in this world together.