



TALKING
RIVER
SINCE 1994

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The Medical Supply Expo

The Medical Supply Expo at the Atlantic City Convention Center started at 10 a.m. It was my first trip out of the office and I didn't want to foul it up. I had been hired by a small company out of Norristown called Baxter International. They marketed and manufactured kidney dialysis machines. It was only part-time, and they paid next to nothing, but it was work, and I was glad to have it. My job at the convention was to sell to distributors Baxter's newest model, Wilgus II, the prototype of which was stowed in my trunk.

I met the other sales rep at the IHOP on Pacific Avenue. His name was Joe Francis. He was on the chubby side with a goatee and a crew cut. These last two things didn't seem to go together, but they weren't a distraction. We ate pancakes and drank coffee and talked about sports, local and national. Not once did either of us mention the convention. While it would have done me some good to talk about it, to test my memory of Wilgus II's extracorporeal circuit and dialysate delivery system, I didn't want Joe thinking I was sketchy, so I kept my mouth shut and drank my coffee.

"Do you gamble?" he asked as we were getting up to go.

I told him a little, which was true.

"What do you say you and me go to Caesar's after the expo? It's not fair that we have to work while everybody else is having a good time."

I wasn't due back in the office until the following afternoon. I had nowhere to be that evening, no one to go home to. It couldn't hurt to hang around for a bit. I was in Atlantic City after all—the lungs of Philadelphia. And Joe seemed like he'd be fun, although there were times at breakfast when he reminded me of this kid I hated in high school, Charlie "Poopbreath" Goodwin. But I was willing to put that unsavory connection aside in the interest of employee bonding. We agreed to meet at the company sales booth in fifteen minutes and went to our cars.

I popped the trunk to check on Wilgus II. The tall, white, rectangular device looked like something out of Star Wars, a mobile droid with clear plastic tubes snaking in and out of its long, flat face. Wilgus II was an ugly piece of hardware, and I wasn't looking forward to wheeling it from the parking garage to the convention floor and then standing next to it for the next eight hours explaining its high points to a cavalcade of strangers. Not that it would have been out of place among the other monstrosities of modern health care, but at least they could've given me a slip cover.

As I was driving to the convention center a jitney cut me off and I had to slam on the brakes. I heard Wilgus II thumping around in the back, and when I pulled into the parking garage and opened the trunk, the machine was face-down, a bad sign. I pushed it back onto its side, letting it down slowly. The faceplate had been jarred loose and several of the tubes had been knocked free of their holes. The display monitor embedded in the machine was cracked, and the blood pump, a small, hexagonal doodad, was splintered.

I broke out in a sweat. I snapped the faceplate back in place and then lifted Wilgus II out of the trunk and set it down on its wheels. I'm rather tall, and it came up

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to about my chin. I rolled it over to the elevators and stood looking at it for a moment. I knew how it worked, I had that memorized. I knew what the fistula was, and the heparin, and the semipermeable membrane. But I didn't know how to fix it. They hadn't shown me that. They gave me a three-hour tutorial and sent me on my way.

Some people got on the elevator but I stayed behind. I wasn't ready to go up yet. I plugged Wilgus II into a socket between the elevator doors and pressed the main power button. Nothing. I pressed the button again. Still nothing. I unplugged the cord and plugged it back in. Not even a flicker.

I hadn't even gotten into the expo and Wilgus II was dead. I grew tired of standing there, my breakfast in hot revolt, so I got on the elevator with the next group of people. Everybody was wearing an identification badge with their picture on it. I didn't have one of these badges and felt terribly lost without one. We reached the first floor and the car emptied. I was the last person to get off. It took me a long time because Wilgus II was heavy and one of its wheels was haywire like on a bad shopping cart. I was struggling through the lobby, trying to steer my way through the archway that led to the convention floor, when a skin-and-bones security guard slid out from behind a pillar and asked to see my I.D. badge.

"I don't have one," I said.

"You can't get on the floor without a badge," he said.

"Where do I get one?"

He pointed a thin, hairy finger to the corner of the lobby where two women were sitting at a table. They reminded me of the ladies you see on election day sitting in the school gym, checking the names of registered voters. I walked over and asked them for an I.D. badge.

"What's your name?" one of the ladies asked.

I told her and she opened a thick register and skimmed for my name.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't see you in here."

"What company are you with?" asked the other woman.

"Baxter International," I said. "Out of Norristown."

She opened another, smaller register and skimmed for the name.

"Sorry," she said. "No Baxter International."

I took out my cell phone and called Joe Francis. His voice mail picked up and I left a long, rambling message. I had wanted it to sound professional but it went to shit pretty fast. Then I called my district manager and left a long, rambling message on her voice mail, too. That one went to shit even sooner. I began to panic, but then I got an idea.

I rolled Wilgus II out the main entrance and along Pacific Avenue. It was mid-July, and the air rippled with exhaust from the casino charter buses. A black kid riding a beach cruiser with another kid on the handlebars nearly clipped me as he pedaled by, singing, "We don't want none. We don't want none." In the streaked window of a shop across the street a blue neon sign glowed with the words "Cash for Gold." I knew that if I waited long enough I'd catch somebody going in there, some poor schlep who'd lost all his money playing poker and was not above selling his jewelry for another shot at the tables. But I didn't have time for the desperation of others; I was far too busy with my own.

I turned the corner and looked for a side entrance to the convention floor. I

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saw a door open and two people stepped out, a man and a woman. They lit cigarettes and leaned against the side of the building, flirting and puffing, puffing and flirting. I waited until they were done and followed them inside. I was pushing Wilgus II from the back and my head was ducked to the side, so it just looked like a kidney dialysis machine was tagging along behind them.

The expo sounded like a thousand spiels going at once, a real symphony. The floor was crowded with people walking and people standing in little groups and people running to and fro across the aisles. At one sales booth a young woman in a tailored lab coat was modeling a stethoscope, and at another two men were demonstrating the usefulness of their daily pill organizer. It took me forever to get to Section K, where the company sales booth was supposed to be. Even though Baxter wasn't in the register, I knew that Joe Francis would be there, and he would know how to fix Wilgus II, and he would probably have an I.D. badge for me, too. He probably meant to give it to me at breakfast but forgot. But when I got to Section K all I found was an Indian man with a roundish head hawking oversized First Aid kits. I asked him if he had seen a chubby guy with a crew cut and he told me he was not obligated to answer my question because I didn't have an I.D. badge.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I'm calling security."

He dialed security on his cell phone.

"You're a fucking asshole," I said, and rammed Wilgus II into his display, knocking his First Aid kits all over the floor. They were metal and sent up one hell of a noise. The people at the surrounding booths stopped what they were doing and stared at me reproachfully. The woman in the tailored lab coat looked as if I'd just interrupted her wedding. I might've wilted had I not been so angry. Instead, I shot them all a "You're next" look and took off down the aisle, heading for the side door through which I'd previously snuck in, thinking it my best means of escape.

I began to pick up momentum. I found that the faster I pushed Wilgus II the straighter and truer he rolled. The bum wheel corrected itself and the whole machine felt about twenty pounds lighter. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted the security guard from earlier jogging down one of the aisles perpendicular to mine. Nearing the door (which was being held open by another pair of smokers), I set my foot on the running board and scooted Wilgus II across the metal threshold. When I came to a stop on the sidewalk, I glanced behind me and saw the confused and curious faces of a small group of conventioners huddled by the door. A few looked like they wanted to join me, or were at least impressed with my escape. I didn't want to risk interrogation by security so I left them gawking and hurried Wilgus up the street.

In front of Caesar's fountain, a family was having its picture taken. Mom, Dad, and the kids had removed their flip-flops and were standing in the ankle-deep water, each one striking a silly pose. The camera flashed, the family jumped out, and the man who had snapped the photo—a Russian by the cut of his clothes—handed back their camera and stood with them as everybody looked at the picture and laughed. Watching them carry on like that gave me a good feeling, the first good feeling I'd had up to then, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little jealous.

I took out my cell phone and saw that Joe Francis had sent me a text message amid the commotion. It read, "Blackjack @ Caesar's. Where r u?" I didn't bother to text him back; I just went right in.

A casino is a strange place, but not an unwelcoming one. The artificial air cooled my flushed skin, muzak feathered down from invisible speakers, and the marble floor was like a lubricant underfoot. Wilgus and I skated to the edge of the gaming floor and surveyed the scene before us. To the left were the slot machines, row upon row of them, blinking their catchy names and trilling their jackpot promises. An old woman tethered to a machine by the lanyard of her Players Card gripped the lever but did not pull it, as if she were too tired, or too frail, to put forth the effort. To the right were the table games, where heavy-shouldered men sat on black leather stools, trading looks of intense boredom beneath a cirrus of second-hand smoke. All was underlaid by a carpet as magnificent as it was gaudy, a succotash of yellows and greens through which pie-shaped medallions ran through to the horizon.

Joe was easy to spot. He was sitting alone at one of the blackjack tables, drinking a Bloody Mary and smoking a cigar. He looked sleazy, and the fact that he was by himself made him look sad, too. In my excitement, I almost called out to him, but decided nice and easy was a better approach. As I was lowering Wilgus down the steps to the gaming floor, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Right away I thought it was the security guard from the convention center, but it turned out to be one of Caesar's, an older black man with a salt and pepper mustache and big brown eyes that shone behind his glasses.

"I can't let you down there, with that thing," he said.

"What do you want me to do with it?" I asked.

"Put it over there with the vending machines. You can pick it up when you're done."

I left Wilgus against the wall next to a pair of Asian children, a boy and a girl, who were sitting in their pajamas tiredly rolling a beach ball back and forth to each other. I had heard stories about people leaving their kids in the lobby while they gambled, but I'd never seen it first-hand. They stared at me as I walked by and their eyes were glassy and bloodshot. A smile was all I could give them, for I too was an orphan of circumstance.

I sat down beside Joe Francis and waited for him to notice me. He ended up winning his hand and celebrated by slapping me on the back as though I had been sitting with him the whole time. Slapping people on the back was something Poopbreath Goodwin used to do. In fact, his back-slapping was the thing I hated most about him. I squirmed beneath the sting of Joe's palm, and when he offered me a sip of his drink I loudly said no.

"I knew you were a pussy when you ordered that fruit cup at IHOP," he said, chewing on his cigar.

"I thought we were coming here after the expo," I said.

Joe was counting his chips. "I couldn't wait," he said. Then he looked at me through a film of smoke. "The convention's not going anywhere. Relax and play a game."

I told him that Baxter wasn't registered, that we didn't even have a sales booth. "And I broke Wilgus II," I said. "It got roughed up in my trunk and now I can't turn it on."

A waitress came by in tight black pants and a low-cut blouse and Joe ordered another Bloody Mary. He finished the one he was drinking and set it on her tray. He

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leered at her as she bobbed away.

"There's nothing more you need to know in this life," he said heavily, "than how a grown woman's ass cheeks rub together when she walks." He pressed his paunch against the table's leather bumper and rested both hands on the forest green felt, spreading his thick, pink fingers and drumming them anxiously. The dealer, presiding over the chips with a deadpan air, started deftly laying out cards for the next hand.

"Can you call the district manager and tell her what happened," I pleaded. "Maybe she'll pick up for you."

"I'm not calling anybody," he said, and nodded to the dealer to hit him with another card. The dealer obliged and Joe lost. He pounded his fist on the table, rattling his small allotment of chips. The dealer rolled his eyes languidly. Joe turned around to look for his waitress. She was nowhere to be seen.

I got up without asking about the I.D. badge and strode angrily to the spot where I'd docked Wilgus. The boy and the girl were bouncing their beach ball off his face, giggling each time it ricocheted. I wanted to be mad at them, but they were having too much fun. I stood behind them and watched, waiting for just the right moment to pop in and steal Wilgus away. That moment never came, as the children's mother, a thin woman in a black cocktail dress, stalked over and dragged them off, scolding them in her native tongue for I knew not what. So abrupt was their exit that they left their beach ball behind.

It lay at Wilgus's feet, almost as if he had drawn it to him in expectation of more play. I asked the security guard where the boardwalk exit was and proceeded in that direction. Traversing Caesar's Palace with a disabled kidney dialysis machine draws a lot of attention. I received laughter, sneers, and a few looks of compassion, and I answered them all with an expression of weary pride. I was no longer embarrassed by Wilgus II, nor was I frustrated with him. We had come a long way in a short time, and though he had failed in his primary duty, he had not let me down entirely. I had friends like that, and they weren't the most unlikeable people.

On the boardwalk, the mid-morning crowd was out in force, vacationers of every stripe and stature creeping by in contravening currents. I rolled Wilgus across the concourse and parked him with his back to the railing. I gazed out at the Atlantic and felt that skirmish in my gut that everyone feels when they're kept from heeding the call to swim. Beside me, an older couple in color-coordinated bathing suits was inching down the steps to the beach. I looked at my crumpled suit and my crooked tie and remembered the words of the beast Joe Francis: "It's not fair that we have to work while everybody else is having a good time." It isn't fair, I thought, but there's nothing we can do about it, Joe, nothing at all. In the face of this fact I felt neither anger nor despair, only a mild yearning for that better end I knew would never come.

The men who push the rolling chairs were lined up in front of Caesar's, waiting for someone to request their services, waiting to be made use of. A young Hispanic man with a pony tail was pushing two older ladies in a white wicker rolling chair. As they trundled past, I could see that his black shirt was soaked through with sweat, and his sneakers were dirty and worn. The women, picking from a tub of caramel popcorn, regarded him as merely the engine of their pleasure—and yet he was smiling, his legs moving in a swishy blur as he weaved a smooth, sinuous line through

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Suddenly, a small, fat woman wearing green shorts and a yellow shirt walked up to me and smiled. She was carrying several small cups of lemonade on a tray.

"Would you like a free sample?" she asked.

She looked to be about forty, maybe older. A logo for Shirley's Old-fashioned Lemonade was emblazoned on her shirt. Her smile was what stood out, though, broad and big-gummed, flashing beneath a pair of Oakley sunglasses. I took a cup of lemonade and drank it in one shot. It was, without a doubt, the best cup of lemonade I had ever tasted. I told her this and she responded by smiling even more.

"What's that?" she asked. She was talking about Wilgus II.

"It's a kidney dialysis machine," I said.

"What are you doing with it out here?"

I had heard what she'd said, but I didn't answer her. I was staring at the convention center's boardwalk entrance, wondering how long it would be before I would have to sneak back in there, wondering if it was even worth it, if it was too late, or too early, or just too much. I set my cup of lemonade on top of Wilgus and saw that the woman from Shirley's had done the same with her tray. At first I was surprised that she had been able to reach that high, but then it struck me that Wilgus had met her halfway, as he had done for me, and as I would soon have to do for him. The woman was standing with her hands on her hips, puzzling over Wilgus's space-age façade.

"How does it work?" she asked.

"I'll show you," I said.

I drew a deep breath, remembered the opening lines of my spiel, and began.

