

The Accidental Alchemist

"You'd think we were lepers," I said as we weaved through the noisy lobby of Trump Plaza. I pointed at the casino, where two blackjack dealers rolled their eyes at the long check-in lines.

My boss, Pete, laughed. "Yeah, well, our crowd's not exactly known as high rollers."

I agreed. Chemists are generally double-checkers, not risk-takers.

The excitement of this place was contagious, and this year, I'd be presenting my work for the first time. It was a nice piece of research and a potential money-maker for my company.

Twenty thousand chemists descended on Atlantic City every March to attend the Pittsburgh Conference. In 1960 it outgrew Pittsburgh and eventually moved to A.C. in 1980. The name never changed and five years later, it still raises many a suspicious spouse's brow.

Pete glanced at his watch and ran off to a "management meeting," which I knew would end shortly after I and his underlings had done the grunt work of setting up our exhibit booth.

Of course, to get to my room, I had to cross the entire casino floor, a great design—for the casino. Even at ten in the morning, the excitement of slot machine jackpot sirens and flashing lights pulled me off course, like the Odyssey sirens were calling.

After losing all my loose change in two minutes flat, I put on my best James Bond expression and rolled my suitcase to the elevator. I flashed my room keycard to the guard and squeezed into the next arrival. I held my breath for twenty floors squashed next to a garlic-stenched moron trying to look "connected" with his ten-pound gold chain.

He spotted my badge and winked at the guido next to him. "So what the hell you guys talk about over there?"

I hadn't felt so conspicuous since I stepped out of a restaurant into the mean streets of Philly, forgetting to remove my lobster bib. "Just chemistry stuff, mostly for food and drugs."

He gave his buddies a sly smile. "Ohh, drugs." His nod of approval and three quick sniffs spoke volumes.

After unpacking my luggage, I walked back through the casino to leave the hotel. I spotted an old college chum at a blackjack table. He still had the thick glasses and cowlick. They went well with his dual major—chem and math. I figured he'd be beating the house odds with his knowledge of probabilities.

As I approached, I heard someone at his table screaming. "No, you jack-ass, you never do that! You're fucking up my shit over here!" The hoarse, fifty-year-smoker baritone was downright scary. She even drew a pit boss over to quiet her down.

From my friend's blush, I guessed he'd made an unconventional play that broke the table's mojo. He held up his hands to block whatever she might throw. Poor thing must have been eighty and had probably been cramped on one of those retirement home buses since dawn. Her perfect blue hair said school teacher, but her missing teeth and vocabulary said longshoreman. Based on her dialect, she'd come all the way from Brooklyn to parlay her Social Security check and get a free buffet lunch. I'd be pissed, too, if I were her.

I detoured around their table and walked to the convention center, where our equipment and unassembled displays awaited my arrival. There was something comical about a few hundred out-of-shape eggheads uncrating their gear and assembling their show booths, many on their hands and knees looking for dropped parts. Like myself, they must have made fun of the woodshop guys in high school.

The convention center's union carpenters were amused, too, as they kept a keen eye out for labor violations. Usually, Pete would handle such trade-show diplomacy with a well-placed twenty-dollar bill and his fast-talking southern drawl. With that unique cadence and his toothy smile, he could tell you to go screw yourself and make it feel like a compliment. But Pete wasn't there, and it would cost me at least fifty.

I added to the exhibit floor circus. To set up our instrumentation, I had to inject a reservoir with fifty milliliters of quicksilver using a large syringe. Imagining myself as a famous doctor, I flicked a bubble of trapped air towards the raised tip of the needle, then pressed the plunger. In all the excitement, I pushed too hard. On the other side of the aisle, my colleague brushed something from his hair. Even back then, squirting someone's head with mercury was considered poor technique, if not highly unhealthy.

Before he saw me, I quickly moved to the other end of our display and set up an easel-mounted sign announcing my presentation:

Recovery of Gold from Circuit Board Manufacturing Waste- By Marc Rothstein, Applications Scientist, EG&G Princeton Applied Research-Trump Plaza Regus Room B. Monday, 10:30 A.M.

As a recently graduated electrochemist, this job was my wet dream. EG&G PARC was the world leader in electrochemical instrumentation, and I was paid to show what their stuff could do. I traveled the world as a *factory expert* while marketing their products. The further away from headquarters they sent me, the more of an expert I became.

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The next morning, as the auditorium filled with attendees, I nervously tried not to spill my carousel of thirty-five-millimeter presentation slides while checking for upside-downers. Three papers were before mine, providing an hour for my butterflies and last night's wine to taunt me.

This was my first Pittcon paper in the casino city by the sea, and I'd forgotten that half my audience would be hung-over amateurs who'd overdone it the night before. I could have mooned everyone from the podium to the applause of half the room.

To my surprise, during my talk, the alert half of the group listened intently, nodding often. Some even closed their eyes for a long time to focus on my every word. It made me wonder...

My paper was based on a customer demonstration I'd done for a circuit board manufacturer. I'd developed a method to recover gold from manufacturing waste plated with the precious metal. The proof-of-concept work was done with our famous research gear, and the customer agreed to let me publish the work. This was an unusual topic for Pittcon, attended primarily by medicinal chemists, so it drew a curious crowd—including a news reporter from The Atlantic City Times.

After my rousing presentation, I fielded a few good questions and thanked the audience for their attention. I left the podium, strutting like a rock star, and joined Pete, smiling from ear to ear.

"You done good, son. Even I was on the edge of my seat."

And he'd heard me rehearse that talk at least three times.

The reporter asked me for an interview right in front of my boss. I had prayed for a flawless talk, but this interview was too good to be true. He took us for coffee in the smoke-filled lounge next to Donald's Unlimited Waffle Bar. Luckily, Pete was a witness to our discussion.

The reporter clicked on his recorder and began. "Thanks for your time. I've always wondered what you Pittcon folks do in these meetings. I scanned hundreds of titles in the program, and yours was one of the few that kind of made sense. So, here we are."

I was glad I didn't throw too many fancy buzzwords into the title.

"Well, our company *is* called Princeton *Applied* Research, and this was a valuable application. Saved our customer a bunch of money and opened up a new market for our products."

After a few questions, some silly and some surprisingly astute, he put his recorder away. "In summary, you used your instrumentation to *de-plate* and recover the gold from circuit board scraps?"

Yes. Wow. He promised to send me an advanced copy of the article. Feeling like a V.I.P., I picked up the tab for our coffee.

With my presentation a success, I enjoyed the rest of the week. I worked a rotating booth duty where prospective customers engaged me in a game of *Stump the Electrochemist*. A few disgruntled customers had to be dealt with. They had either a broken instrument or an operator error. I'd hustle them off to the side of the booth, away from new sales prospects, acted very empathetically, and promised to call them next Monday to diagnose the problem.

The rest of my time was spent browsing the exhibit hall, collecting competitor intel, and learning new jokes from the salesmen over mediocre, overpriced meals. I even worked in some gym time at Trump Plaza's first-class health club. Life was good...

...until about a week after returning to the office. Every day that week, I looked for a newspaper article that never came. Then, Pete showed up in my office doorway. Glancing up and down the

halls, he stepped in and eased my door shut. "Man, the phones have been ringing off the hook today. You hear?"

"No. I've been in the lab all morning trying to make that piece of shit polarograph work. I have a demo in a half-hour."

He couldn't stifle a laugh. "No worries. You're famous. We're all famous! Seems you've invented a black box that turns old, electrical junk into gold. Congratulations! It's made newspapers all over the country!"

"God damned reporter. I said electronic manufacturing scrap, not discarded appliances. It's like Charley Tuna tasting good vs having good taste in those Star-Kist commercials."

Then the knock at my door. My snickering lab mates, Andy, Saroj, Guy, and Don, crowded around my desk. Behind them, some assorted office workers huddled in the hallway for the show.

And I thought these guys were my friends.

The guy laid a duct-taped calculator on my desk. "I'd like five ounces of twenty-four karat, please. This beast hasn't worked right for a year. Gives the wrong answers."

Saroj was next. "I just got off the phone with some poor bastard in Texas. He hasn't worked in years and has a yard full of rusty T.V.s. Wants to turn them into gold. What do ya think?"

Don pointed at his mouth. "You do gold fillings?"

My fifteen minutes of fame turned to shame. It wasn't funny. Then my phone rang.

"Mom, I'm busy right now. OK, OK. Wait a minute."

I covered the phone with my hand. "Get the fuck outta here. All of ya."

Mom gushed at a mile a minute until I stopped her.

"Listen, you need to tell your mahjong friends I was misquoted. I won't be winning any Nobel Prizes."

The internet wasn't so fast back then, so I called The Atlantic City Times. They faxed me the article and told me it was already released to the Associated Press.

Yeah, no shit.

The FAX machine outside of my office clattered away, and there it was, in all its distorted glory. To make matters worse, as papers across the country picked up the story, they got ever more creative with their headlines and interpretations, like the game "Whisper Down the Lane." Our salesmen were kind enough to send me copies of their local versions for autographs.

The embarrassment heated to a boil for the next two weeks. Then, like old news, it all simmered down. We did make a few more sales for this application, but I'd learned a tough lesson: There is such a thing as bad publicity.

Fortunately, my original paper was published as presented in the official Pitt-Con Technical Program and over the years, I'd made many more presentations but no interviews—peer-reviewed articles only.

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Four decades later, whenever I see my old workmates, they rub it in. Who knew the term *fake news* would become so popular? Especially since it *was* coined by our modern-day King Midas. After all, this *did* happen at his hotel.