

Chapter 1

It's a common misconception among those who have not made it to my level in the corporate world that we top executives spend too much on accommodation when we travel for the company. Not too long ago, I happened to overhear two of the girls in Accounting make some very unfair observations regarding my expense report for an important conference on trends in the pump industry I had attended in New Orleans. Of course, they wouldn't have dared make such comments if they had known I was within hearing range, but for reasons I won't go into here, I happened to be behind a large potted plant beside the photocopier and, emerging from the foliage, I pointed out to them in no uncertain terms that the best hotel accommodation is not a luxury. It's crucial for a man in my position as Vice President of Marketing to begin each day fresh and keenly alert to business opportunities, and you can't ask for the kind of performance people have come to expect from me if you put me in a Red Roof Inn. Not that I've ever actually been in a Red Roof Inn, of course.

I was not exactly in a Red Roof Inn now either. It was worse than that. I was standing in the bathroom of a room in the Excalibur Hotel in Las Vegas surrounded by bottles of cheap aftershave and cologne. In all my years with the company, I had never before been asked to share a hotel room with a colleague. I was glad it would only be for one night. A senior executive needs his privacy if he's going to reflect on the big picture and think the deep thoughts that will drive his company's success. This is not

possible when sharing a hotel room, especially with someone who clutters up the bathroom with this sort of junk. Although I had never actually seen Chuck Wagoner's desk—he was an outside sales rep, based in Texas—I imagined it must be a complete mess. It would not have been tolerated in my department back at HQ in Falling Rock, North Carolina, I can assure you. I picked up a spray can of something called “Stallion” and lined it up neatly with bottles labeled “Ram,” “Tiger” and “Lion.” Where did he get this stuff? A zoo? Despite my annoyance, I granted myself an ironic smile in the mirror. I have a lively sense of humor, which helps me laugh in the face of adversity. It's one of my greatest strengths. Then I noticed the wet towel on the floor by the bathtub and my smile vanished. There is only so much adversity you can laugh in the face of.

I was just wondering how to deal with the towel situation—I was certainly not going to touch it—when I heard the bedroom door open and a loud voice shouting my name.

“Heeey! TJ! Where are you, you old son-of-a-gun?”

I'm not in the habit of being called a son-of-a-gun by junior colleagues, but since Chuck did not report to me, there was little I could do for the moment. I would report the problem to Ken at the next senior staff meeting.

“You in the bathroom, TJ? Hey, go ahead and try some of that Ram cologne, old buddy. It works wonders with the ladies.”

I should point out that I was in no way Chuck Wagoner's old buddy. I had met him once before at the National Sales Meeting in Wakiah, South Carolina. He had been among those who had laughed the loudest when, through no fault of mine, an overhead projector had fallen over during a presentation I was making on the company's new mission statement and landed on the head of our New England sales rep. It is certainly no laughing matter when a colleague, even a sales rep, has to be taken to the emergency room. Hardly the kind of situation where a man serious about his career would make lame jokes about “overhead projectiles.”

I should also point out that I am no stuffed shirt. I run my department on informal lines. My door is always open and I'm a firm believer in not standing on ceremony. I'm not, however, a firm believer in sharing a

room with a slob. I emerged from the bathroom determined to establish who was the senior executive in charge of this hotel room and lay down some rules and procedures for an efficient stay, but before I could say anything, I found myself subjected to what I can only describe as a hug.

“There you are, you old son-of-a-gun!”

I broke free as quickly as possible, but not quickly enough to escape the overpowering smell of Ram, or possibly Stallion. To look at Chuck, I couldn’t imagine him working wonders with the ladies, no matter how much Ram he slapped on his jowls. I wondered if they made a cologne called Hippopotamus. Chuck was, I guessed, around forty, with thinning hair of an unnaturally shiny black, a big flabby face, and a belly that strained against the buttons of his red and yellow Hawaiian shirt. I wondered if he was in the habit of hugging senior executives, or was just drunk. It was hard to tell with him, since he wore a permanent grin, although I could think of nothing he might have to grin about.

“Hey, why the long face, TJ? This is Las Vegas, baby!”

The long face was because my shirt was already smelling of Chuck’s menagerie. Also, he had just referred to me as “baby.”

“Las Vegas, TJ. Hey, you need to loosen up, old buddy. Have some fun for a change. Me and a couple of the guys are heading downstairs to the casino, then on for dinner and a few cervezas. You coming?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on. It’ll be fun. We’re meeting up with some of the girls from Pumps-R-Us later on.”

“I have a dinner meeting with Ken to go over booth strategy. We are here to work, you know?”

“Booth strategy! What the hell’s that? We stand on the booth, people come up and we sell them stuff. Don’t need no fancy strategy to do that.”

This, of course, was exactly why Chuck was just a sales rep, while I was VP of Marketing. The Hydralex Expo was the biggest trade show in the pump industry year. It was a crucial week for SuperPumps, especially this year. Sales were down, way down, and we were counting on the introduction of a major new product, the PZ-12 dual gasket pump to reverse the alarming slide. The idea of leaving the booth personnel to their

own devices without a comprehensive booth strategy was absurd. How would they know where to stand or what to say? Ken, as VP of Sales, would be ultimately responsible, of course, but he would value my input.

“What do you mean, ‘What’s that?’” I said. “There’s a booth strategy every year.”

”Oh, you mean that little talk Ken gives at the booth before the show opens?”

I gave him one of my looks that made it clear that it was not appropriate to describe Ken’s pre-show strategy session as a little talk. I am a master of non verbal communication.

“To tell you straight, I’m not usually up to paying much attention at that time in the morning. Still trying to clear the old cobwebs from the night before. You know how it is.”

I most certainly did not know how it was, but I didn’t say anything, because he had just dug me in the ribs, something else I am not accustomed to from sales reps, and I was still trying to come up with an appropriate rebuke when he left the room, leaving behind a powerful smell of Ram. Or it might have been Tiger. I was just wondering which it was when the phone rang. I picked it up and found myself talking to the Ostrich.

In the interests of clarity, I should point out here that I was not talking to an actual ostrich. This was the nickname given to Ronnie Byrd, VP of Finance at SuperPumps. The origin of the name wasn’t completely certain. Most people thought it came from a combination of his name, his skinny neck and bald head, and those silly round glasses balanced on the end of his nose. However, it could have been from the habit of burying his head in the sand. Finance people lack the long term vision of marketers. Whatever the reason for the name, the amazing thing was that he didn’t seem to mind it, even from people in his own department. If I suspected a similar lack of respect from my troops, I would come down very hard indeed, but the Ostrich just seemed to find it amusing. He even had a picture of an ostrich on his desk next to his wife. Needless to say, I have no pictures of birds whatsoever cluttering up my desk. In fact, I don’t have a picture of my wife Grace on my desk either. She is behind me on

the credenza. Not only is this a more efficient arrangement, leaving more room for in-tray, out-tray and stapler, but it also allows me to joke with colleagues and subordinates that behind every great man there is a great woman. I am a firm believer in office humor, so long as it doesn't get out of hand.

"Hi TJ, how's it going out there?"

"I've just arrived."

"I hear they've got you sharing with Chuck. Don't let him lead you astray."

"I hardly think that's likely."

"How come you're not living it up at the Bellagio like you usually do?"

"Brenda forgot to make the reservation."

"Of course, you didn't forget to ask her?"

I ignored him. There was nothing to gain by getting into a discussion with the Ostrich about how an efficient secretary should regularly check her boss's calendar and be on the lookout for things like this. In fact there is seldom anything to be gained by getting into a discussion with the Ostrich about anything.

"Anyway," he went on, "I just thought I'd ask if there was anything you needed me to bring out with me tomorrow."

Why a bean counter like the Ostrich was even coming to Hydraulex was a mystery to me. People in his department would be better employed talking about that colossal waste of money than quibbling about my hotel expenses.

"No, nothing."

"You're sure? You don't need me to bring anything?"

"No." He was beginning to try my patience. Conversations with him often did.

"OK then. See you tomorrow. Bye."

I hung up the phone. I was in an even worse mood now. I decided to check my email and looked around for somewhere to put my laptop. With a sigh, I noticed that every surface seemed to be covered with Chuck's stuff—loud shirts, coffee cups, beer bottles, leaflets for strip clubs, a map of Las Vegas spread out on one bed, his suitcases thrown on the other. I

swept a pile of papers and coffee cups to one side of the only table in the room and looked around for my laptop. I couldn't remember where I had put it. In fact, now I came to think of it...

The Ostrich's phone rang six times. No answer. At last, I heard that annoying voice in my ear.

"You've reached the desk of Ronald Byrd. Well, not my actual desk, of course, since it can't speak. Please leave me a message after the tone. If that's you TJ, don't worry, I've got your laptop."