

# Percy

by Julia Smillie

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When the desk clerk called our room at the hotel, she was far more helpful than she'd been when I'd spoken with her earlier, seeking help with the free wireless connection I was unable to achieve. "There's nothing I can do," she had said. "I mean, I could call tech support, but that would take hours."

This time, she asked, "Is it working yet?" I wondered if she was calling back to remind me she still couldn't help me. "We have another guest here in the lobby right now," she said, "who has a perfect signal and he's offered to help you try to figure it out."

What I really wanted was for her to fix the problem from afar or to send an impersonal tech support person to help, someone whose job it was to assist me. What I didn't want was to have to actually speak with another guest and *ask* for help – not exactly my strong point or, frankly, that of anyone I know. Still, I had no other options. My husband had stood over me supportively as I tried every option I knew, to no avail and for reasons I couldn't explain, reasons not rooted in logic, the longer I was unable to connect, the more it became his fault. It was probably not unwise that I step out of the room.

When I arrived in the hotel's bright lobby, there was only one person and although he sat with a laptop in front of him, I assumed it couldn't be my savior. Probably in his late sixties, the man wore a thin v-neck undershirt, marked with what I hoped were coffee stains big enough to see from a distance. Said shirt was pulled tight across a magnificently unyielding gut and tucked into a pair of thin jersey shorts, the drawstring waist pulled to capacity. That man is in his underwear, I thought.

I glanced around a bit, catching the eye of the desk clerk. Surely this person, now bent over his laptop so that his thick, coke-bottle glasses were only an inch from the screen, wasn't going to deliver me to internet connectivity. The desk clerk caught my eye and, with no hint of apology or sense of irony, nodded and smiled. "That's him," she said, then raised her finger to point, in case I'd missed him.

If I'd had a smile left – after spending an hour trying to connect, fruitlessly, to the internet – it would have drained. But instead, I let out what I hoped was an inaudible sigh and headed over to the table. Perhaps this man was a computer genius.

He looked up. "Hello, there. You can't connect to the internet?" I shook my head. "Well, let's see what we can do." He opened up his laptop and I saw, for the first time ever, a keyboard dirtier than my own. Mine perpetually has cat hair poking out from under the keys, no matter how many cans of environmentally disastrous high-pressure air I squirt in there. This man's keyboard was a revelation in filth – enough crumbs embedded between the keys to reassemble at least a couple of full-sized cookies. My heart sunk. For some reason, I was quite certain that someone with

computer prowess greater than my own wouldn't operate a keyboard that looked like a bakery floor.

"Go ahead, fire yours up," he said, kindly. I didn't say a word, just opened up my laptop and hit the power button. I glanced at the skin on the man's arms, a deep brown but dappled with strange scars and discoloration marks. He squinted and his mouth hung open slightly as he leaned forward to within an inch or two of it to see what he was doing. My hope drained. My impatience grew. I appreciated his willingness to help – somewhat – but now I was realizing it was a complete waste of time.

"Look down to your right corner of your screen," he said, looking over at my computer. "You should see a little computer with, like, waves coming out of it. Do you have that? See? This is it on mine? Do you have that?" He leaned over to my computer, his curly salt and pepper hair just inches from my nose, and tapped at my screen. *Don't touch the screen*, I thought. *Don't ever touch the screen*.

"Yes," I said. "The wireless connection icon thingie. I have that." My tone did little to hide my impatience.

"What does it say?"

"It says 'no signal'."

The man spoke slowly and thoughtfully, his eyebrows knitting. "Hmm. No signal, huh? Mine says it has an excellent signal. Yours says no signal?"

"Uh huh. No signal."

"Okayyyyy. Well, that is strange. Mine says excellent."

I nodded, wondering how soon I could excuse myself without seeming rude. Yet I was frustrated enough that I wasn't sure I cared how I seemed.

"Okay," he said again. "Let's try something else. Go to your start menu. Do you know where your start menu is?" *Good Lord*, I thought. *I'm not retarded. I just can't get a wireless signal*. Painfully slowly, the man moved his fingers around, conjuring up his own start menu and leaning in to his screen, squinting to view its contents. I knew already we were walking through the exact same steps that I'd been through several times in the hotel room. I knew, with some degree of certainty, that this man didn't know any more than I did about internet connectivity.

"Now this screen here, you should see the available wireless networks." He pointed at his screen again, where four or five live wireless networks appeared. "See? I've got, like, a bunch to choose from. Show me what you got."

"None," I said. "I've got nothing."

"Nothing?" There was a hint of disbelief in his voice, so I turned my computer screen towards him to prove it. After a moment of squinting at it, he raised his eyebrows. "Huh. Nothing. You've got nothing." He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "That is strange." After a moment, he suggested old standard, the solution if all else fails: "Why don't you restart your computer?"

I knew that this would be a good time to exit, to thank him tersely for his time and effort and to return to the hotel room and take my frustration out on my computer-illiterate husband. But for some reason, I didn't. I figured this guy was nice enough to try to help me – I wasn't so far gone that I couldn't see that much – and so I restarted my computer.

While we waited for my computer to power itself up again, we sat in a moment of silence before I extended my hand and introduced myself.

"I'm Percy," he said and he was. His name fit. He was Percy. "Where are you from?" When I told him, he chuckled with delight. Everyone does when you say St. Louis. It's in the middle of the country and everyone has a story, everyone's been there, passed through, has a relative or friend living there or knows something they have to share. Percy was no different. "That's where Truman University is," he said.

"I don't think so," I responded. "Washington University?" Perhaps he had his presidents mixed up.

"Oh, that's right. Washington University. Good school."

I nodded. "Expensive."

He nodded. "St. Louis is where they make more funeral cars than anywhere else in the country. Did you know that? More funeral cars come from there than anywhere else."

It wasn't something I knew. In fact, it was something I doubted the veracity of, considering it seemed something I might have heard about in my 17 years in the city. "I did not know that," I said.

"Oh, yeah. It's true." A pause. "What brings you here?"

And I told him, about the fellowship my husband was applying for that weekend. He looked duly impressed. "Oh, that's a good program. That's a very fine program."

"What brings you here, Percy?"

"I live here."

It struck me as odd that someone who lived in Ann Arbor would be at the hotel we were in, especially half-dressed. "You live in Ann Arbor?"

"I live *here*," he said again and it dawned on me that he meant he lived *here*, in the hotel. He seemed to know that sounded odd and rushed a bit to explanation. "I travel a lot. I'm in sales and after my wife died of cancer five years ago, the house was too big. I don't have any family in the area. So I moved in here. It's easier in a lot of ways."

My mind flew immediately to my own father, rattling around a house far too big for him since my mother died, bumping into the absence of her in every corner. Percy lived here because it was easy and, I knew, because there were other people here. Maybe they were guests, transient populations he may never see again, but they were real, live people. They were company, someone to pass just a few moments with in his living room, the lobby of the extended stay hotel. And I was one of those people.

When my computer finally had restarted, Percy and I walked through every step that I had already tried. We did them twice. I let him mine every possible solution in his brain, even though I already knew they wouldn't work. The entire thing took perhaps a half hour of my time, at the end of which, I was no closer to a successful internet connection and I wasn't so sure anymore why it had seemed so important.

"I think it's probably your wireless card," Percy said and I said he might be right, even though it had worked just fine earlier that day. His comment caught the ear of the desk clerk, some ten feet away.

"Do you want to try one of our wireless cards?" she asked. Why on earth, I wondered, hadn't she made this suggestion an hour ago when I had called her from my room, complaining about my lack of connectivity? This entire time, she'd had a possible solution and had said, instead, there was nothing she could do to help me.

"That would be super," I said.

"Yeah," Percy said. "Oh, yeah. You should try one of those. See if it works. Then, you know, it might be your card." The desk clerk walked a wireless card over to our table. I slipped it into my wireless port and instantly received a strong signal. I was connected. My problem was solved. I looked at Percy.

"There you go," he said. "That's the problem. It's your card. You might need a new card."

"I might," I said. "I guess I might."

Percy pushed his chair back to stand and I couldn't help but notice how skinny his legs were, poking out of his shorts. Like his arms, they had some strange scars, like age spots. I wondered if these marks and his cloudy, deteriorating vision were signs of diabetes encroaching. I wondered how he still managed to travel on his own and felt suddenly grateful that he was here, at the hotel, instead of home, alone where if – God forbid – something happened, who would ever notice?

I stood up, too and extended a hand. "Thank you so much for your time, Percy," I said. "It was a pleasure to meet you." He smiled and shook my hand. "You too." He turned and gestured towards the desk. "If you need anything else, Amanda knows where to find me," he said, calling the desk clerk by name. "She always knows where I am. Take care, now."

I shut my computer and sat back down at the table Percy and I had shared. I watched him as he pressed the button to call the elevator, which arrived almost instantaneously, as though expecting him. I watched him as he stepped inside and turned with one last wave before the doors closed behind him and Percy disappeared, heading home.