

Magic Cable

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“I think I’ve found what I’m looking for,” Gary Roberts said.

“Oh yeah, what is that?” Jim Handley asked, as he handed Roberts a pair of vice grip pliers.

“I’m thinking I might have found a way out of this dump. No more tile dust, no more forty-mile an hour winds blowing through the plant, and no more Al Wright for me”, Roberts replied.

Wright, the plant manager, and Roberts, journeyman maintenance mechanic for Tile-Elite, had been at odds for years. Roberts had been hired during a manufacturing plant expansion at Tile-Elite and Wright had promised Roberts a production supervisor’s job upon its completion. However, when the expansion was completed and the last production line was ready to produce, Wright told Roberts to forget the supervisor’s job because he was more valuable to the company as a maintenance mechanic.

“I know what I said, Gary, but I think you’re going to be a mechanic here even if you stay twenty years,” Wright had stated at the time.

After that encounter, Wright and Roberts had mixed like oil and water and that was almost five years ago. Roberts had to admit that he was probably more valuable to the company as a maintenance mechanic in the short run, but he had been looking at the long run. He wanted to be more involved in the production process. He had just turned forty, was recently divorced, and had been involved in maintenance of some type ever since his military service in Vietnam twenty years earlier. While working full-time at his previous job, Roberts completed his bachelor’s degree in business. His major had been Management and it had taken him six long years to graduate. He had then wanted a position where he could use his management education. The company for which he was working while going to school had promised him a supervisor’s position when he graduated, but that promise had evaporated when the company went bankrupt during the oil recession of the 1980’s.

During his years with Tile-Elite, Roberts had searched for another company that would give him a chance as a supervisor, but it seemed no one wanted a man his age with minimal management experience. The oil recession had left the employment market flooded with unemployed managers with significant supervisory experience. Consequently, Roberts decided he would stick with what he knew best, maintenance, because jobs were more plentiful and the pay was reasonably good.

“Magic Cable, in Fresno, is looking for a maintenance mechanic. I’ve got an interview tomorrow morning,” Roberts said to Handley.

“I’ve seen their plant over on Cook Street, behind the county barn, but I’ve never been in it. What do they build there?” Handley asked.

“Shoot, I don’t know and I don’t really care. All machines are alike. Just some are bigger than other ones, so my job will be basically the same. What I want is better working conditions and a chance for advancement. I’d even take a slight cut in pay to get out of here.” Roberts answered.

“I understand where you’re coming from but don’t tell Magic Cable that. Well, good luck tomorrow, Gair. I hope you get that job,” Handley said as he closed his tool box and started moving toward the time clock.

Roberts hated it when Handley called him “Gair”. It sounded so trite. The only reason he hadn’t say something was because Jim was such a good friend and he had taught him a lot.

Magic Cable wasn’t but two miles further from Roberts' home than Tile-Elite. The facility was considerably smaller, but the grounds were kept neat and trimmed and Roberts considered that a good sign. The parking was also directly in front of the plant and that would be good during bad weather.

“I’ve got a good feeling about this place,” Roberts muttered to himself as he drove through the gate.

After parking in a vacant visitors parking space, Roberts gathered his resume and the completed employment application, took a couple of deep breathes, and headed towards the door labeled “Personnel”. Once inside, all he saw was a door bell mounted on a wall, a door with a peephole and mail slot, and a poster that displayed a picture of the building and a narrative describing the company’s history. The poster was on the outside wall opposite the bell. Above the door bell there was a small sign, which read, “Ring for Personnel”. There was also a sign below the button that read, “We are **NOT** accepting applications.” The word “**NOT**” was hanging loose so it could be removed if need be. “Lucky I’ve got an appointment,” Roberts thought.

After pushing the button produced no sound, Roberts said out loud to himself, “Just my luck. The stupid thing is broken and no one even knows I’m here.”

Almost immediately the door opened partially and a neatly dressed young woman stuck her head out and asked, “Gary Roberts?” Roberts nodded his head in reply. “Bill Lindsey, the manufacturing engineer, will be right with you,” she added before shutting the door again.

“Great, more waiting”, Roberts thought. After looking around the sparsely furnished lobby for a minute, Roberts occupied himself by reading the narrative written on the

poster. It said Magic Cable had been started in a small warehouse in Oakland in 1977 by a group of friends with a good idea. They started manufacturing throttle and drive cables for outdoor equipment. The business grew very fast and in 1979 the plant was moved to Fresno. Now they were producing push-pull cables for automotive and aircraft purposes with a workforce consisting of about 300 employees.

Just as Roberts completed reading the poster, the inside door swung open a second time and a tall grey-haired man in an open collared shirt emerged.

“Hi, I’m Bill Lindsey, the manufacturing engineer. You must be Gary Roberts. Come in here.” As Roberts edged through door, Lindsey added “We need to go up and meet Bob Walters. He’s our manufacturing manager. We’ll both be interviewing you,”. And with that Lindsey turned to go up the set of stairs to his right. “Have you ever met Bob Walters?”

Roberts remembered seeing Bob Walters name on the list of people who started Magic Cable. “No sir, I haven’t”, he answered.

“He’s kind of rough around the edges so don’t let him run you off,” Lindsey said with a wry smile. Roberts smiled back and said that he wouldn’t.

Lindsey and Roberts went up one flight of stairs and proceeded down the hall. One wall of the corridor was glass and Roberts was able to see the entire production floor. The floor was organized into small production cells. Each group of operators in a work cell was busy at their machines doing their individual tasks. He noticed that many of the workers were female and of various minorities.

“They really look overworked don’t they?” Lindsey asked while showing a slight sarcastic smile. Roberts noticed Lindsey walked with a slight limp. He had to make a conscious effort to walk slowly and not pass him. “He must be disabled somehow,” Roberts thought to himself. Magic Cable appeared to be a lot different than the ceramic tile plant with all of its dust, heat, noisy conveyors, and frantic production pace. Gary Roberts had his second good feeling about Magic Cable.

As the pair approached the third office Gary noticed the expression on Bill Lindsey’s face change. It became somber, almost showing agony. Lindsey turned and knocked on the door facing the hall. Roberts maintained his position behind Lindsey while they both stood quietly and waited to be acknowledged.

“Bill, ya’ll come on in,” the man inside the office said. As Lindsey and Roberts entered the office, Bob Walters rose so he could shake Roberts’ hand. “This is Gary Roberts, Bob. He’s here to interview for the mechanic position.”

“Great, have a seat, Gary,” Walters gestured to an empty office chair across from his desk. He was a good bit taller than Roberts and appeared to be in his middle fifties. He was dressed Western style and had an air of arrogance in his manner and speech, which gave Gary an uneasy feeling.

“First, Gary, tell me why you want to leave Tile-Elite,” Walters said. In reply, Roberts described the working conditions at Tile-Elite, explained that there was no overtime, and stated that there was little chance for advancement. He purposely omitted his feeling about Al Wright, the plant manager. Walters sat almost motionless and listened.

“What about the people you work for?” Walters asked, expecting Roberts to add to his explanation. So Roberts related that he and management had had some differences, but said that he preferred not to expound upon them. Walters seemed satisfied with that explanation. He knew Gary’s present boss personally and understood the problems. He also knew that if Gary had said there were no problems, he would have been lying and there was no room at Magic Cable for a liar.

Walters began to explain what Magic Cable had to offer a plant employee. He compared Magic Cable to the tile plant. Magic Cable’s working conditions were fairly pleasant. He told how the building was air conditioned, clean, and reasonably quiet. Maintenance always got overtime because they were required to work six shifts of ten-hours each per week, with no exceptions. If the production floor was not working, maintenance people could always find something to do. The hourly pay was not quite up to Tile-Elite’s level but Walters explained that Roberts could expect to catch up in salary after a ninety-day probationary period. Magic Cable paid an incentive bonus every three months and the maintenance department was included in that program.

“I’ve got one final question,” Walters added. “How do you feel working with women? We have around one hundred fifty women on first shift and about one hundred on second shift, so if there’s going to be a problem in that area, I need to know it now.”

“It’s not a problem for me. I don’t believe in dating anyone where I work,” Roberts replied.

“Great, as far as I’m concerned you’ve got the job if you want it. What do you think Bill?” Walters said, after turning to face Lindsey.

“Sounds great to me. Gary, you ready for work?” Lindsey asked.

“Let me give Tile-Elite a week’s notice and I’ll be here with bells on”, Roberts answered, smiling broadly.

Roberts loved his new job. When people would ask him what he did at Magic Cable and he would reply that he was semi-retired. The work was easy, the machines were simple, and the sixty hours a week did wonders for his bank account. On the sixth day, Saturday, most of his time was spent in the machine shop teaching himself to run the machines. He had some small conflicts with the way things were run, but nothing serious. The most significant difference was that he wanted to be given formal training relating to the new electronics being integrated into production processes. However, Magic Cable had not shown any interest in providing that training. Roberts hoped that attitude would change. He knew he had to have patience.

As the months passed, the machine repair procedures became routine. As a result, the days became rather boring and the sixth ten-hour shift of every week felt more like twenty hours. Roberts suggested to his maintenance supervisor that the mechanics should take turns being off on Saturday. That would give everyone some recreational time and save Magic Cable some money.

When the lead man voiced the proposal to Walters, he went ballistic. He did not bother with relaying his reply through the supervisor, he came to the floor himself to find Roberts. As the manager quickly strode through the maintenance shop gate with the lead man right behind him, Roberts thought to himself, "Uh-oh!"

Walters stopped in front of the workbench where Roberts was putting seals in a gearbox. He pointed his finger at the mechanic, and said in a rather terse manner, "When you came to work here you agreed to work six ten-hour shifts a week and that is what you are going to work. The choice is not yours. If you do not want to live up to your agreement, you need to load up your tool box and move on."

Roberts had no reply, other than a rather weak "Yes, sir". With that response, Walters immediately turned and left the maintenance shop without speaking another word.

For the next two years Roberts and the other members of the maintenance department worked within the work schedule guidelines set by Walters. Although some weekends off would have been nice, the steadiness of the overtime enabled them to have a higher standard of living. One mechanic purchased a newer and larger home and Roberts purchased the new sports car he had been wishing for.

Then one Monday morning a new production supervisor, Dale Wood, met Roberts at the time clock just inside the plant door. He appeared to be a different type of person than Walters. Wood handed Roberts a white sheet of paper folded in half so that the print was covered. As he did this, he said, "This memo outlines the new policy covering the work schedule of the maintenance department and machine shop. Rick Tanal is over the maintenance department and the machine shop from now on. He broke the news to me this morning and told me to pass it on to you and the other guys."

Tanal was the plant manager. He was a retired Major from the military and had a terrible attitude toward the guys, but was sweet as sugar to the girls. One indicator of his personality was that he would shoot armadillos and rabbits while hunting on the company deer lease with his .458 magnum rifle (elephant gun) and then brag to everyone as to how many pieces they were blown into. Roberts disliked him immensely and did not try to hide it. His "big me, little you" attitude had caused more than a few problems and clashes with male employees. His favorite reply, when asked about something the company had promised but had not delivered was, "You got that in writing?" The hourly personnel had not signed a contract so their answer was always "no." His typical comment was that if the promise was not in writing it was not binding.

Roberts opened the folded sheet and read the memo. It stated that as of the previous Friday evening the maintenance department and the machine shop were not part of engineering anymore, they were now a part of the production department. The memo also stated that the personnel in those two departments would be limited to forty hours a week of work for an indefinite period. As he read the memo, Roberts temperature skyrocketed. He yelled, almost screamed, several very vulgar words and made several derogatory statements concerning Tanal and his parentage as he headed for the production office.

When Roberts got to Tanal's office he did not even knock on the door. He rushed in through the doorway, causing the plant manager to abruptly stop a telephone conversation in mid sentence.

Holding the memo up in Tanal's face he asked, "What the hell is this crap?"

"New orders from the front office", Tanal replied, smiling slightly. Tanal told the party on the other end of the phone line "goodbye" and hung up the phone.

"This is not what I agreed on when I went to work here. Bob Walters said that overtime was a requirement of the job. When I tried to get him to cut the hours back, he threatened to fire me," Roberts almost yelled.

"That is in the past and has nothing to do with what is required at this time," Tanal answered. "You and the rest of the department need to learn how to live on forty hours a week," he continued. "If you had been doing that all along, you would not be hurt by the cut back in working hours."

"I don't know who the hell you think you are, but don't tell me how to live. I spend as I see fit, whether I make my money here...or somewhere else." Roberts paused, and then added, "I'll tell you what, I'll give you a week, unless you don't want it, then I'm out of here."

"Are you saying that you quit?" Tanal asked.

"That's what I'm saying. I don't want to work for a thief, and I consider you a thief," Gary stated.

"A thief. How do you get that?" Tanal asked.

"Whenever you take something away you promised without discussing it, you're stealing and that's what you did. As far as I'm concerned, you stole my overtime hours from me, which amounts to about half of my check," Roberts returned.

Tanal did not have a chance to reply to this conjecture because Roberts turned on his heel and exited the office.

Roberts worked his last week grudgingly. He did not want to stay at Magic Cable, but he said he would, so he did. By the end of the week, he had secured a job as a line mechanic for a local bottling plant, loaded his toolboxes in his truck, and moved on.