

PRACTICING MEDICINE



“At cardiac arrest, the first procedure is to check your own pulse.”

-Samuel Shem, ‘House of God.’

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It was eight o'clock in the morning, and Sheriff McBain had just been shot.

There were no lights, no sirens. In fact, there were no outward signs of urgency anywhere, save for the urgent telephone call I'd received just seconds ago and my own bounding heart rate.

It didn't take me long to change my pants or pull on my boots. Even with my shaking hands, I moved with a sense of purpose, each action a step in a subconscious routine.

Pull up my pants, jump into my boots, grab my glasses, disconnect my pip-boy from the outlet, clip on my pip-boy, turn on my pip-boy...

The black screen turned a vibrant green color as I clicked the power button, lighting up my dark room. These were the words on the screen:

PIP-OS(R) v1.0.3

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LOADER V1. 1

EXEC VERSION 41.10

32K RAM SYSTEM

16811 BYTES FREE

HOLLOWTAPE LOADED: "THE-SCIENCE-OF-UNCERTAINTY"

INITIALISING....

SUCCESS!

> STATUS

Battery Level: 100%

Wireless Signal: (?)

Operating Temperature: 90F

> HEALTH

BP: 150/120

SPO2: 100%

Temp: 98.5F

RR: 16

HR: 160

> TIME

Day: 25 September 2279

Time: 08:01

> CLIMATE

Current Temperature: 78F

Atmospheric Pressure: 753 mm

Background Radiation: 0.231 RAD

I couldn't read much, so I wasn't sure exactly what each of them meant, but I got the gist- I knew exactly what I needed to know. I threw open my door and strode into the hallway, grabbing my father's white coat off of a hook along the way. I slipped it on over my shoulders as I strode up to the front door, where my faded orange doctor's-bag lay on its side. Before I threw the strap over my shoulder, I made sure to quickly button up my coat and pull my green tie tight around my collar, because my father told me that a doctor should always look his best. I hefted my bag up with one hand and pushed the door open with the other.

The morning sun was bright in my eyes. It was hot outside, about 97 fahrenheit if my pip-boy was telling me the truth. Not that it mattered- I was used to the heat, and my patient was inside the air-conditioned Bison Steve's Hotel. I didn't give it much space in my head.

I started to sprint, skirting the corner of my neighbor's house and running out into the main square, heavy bag swinging wildly in my aching right hand. As much as I wanted to have time to process all this, to stride up all slow and confident like father had taught me, I didn't have the time. It could be a matter of seconds deciding whether or not the Sheriff survived.

I was starting to feel kind of dizzy, like you do when you're fixing to vomit. The Hotel was just up ahead now. The big "Bison Steve's" sign flickered eerily as I walked up to the

double wooden doors, which I pulled on at least three times before I remembered that they were push doors. A rush of cool air washed over my skin as I stepped into the building, and tried to regain my composure. I cleared my throat.

“Alright- Alright y’all, listen up: ***My name is Isaac Saller, and I am a medic!***” I shouted.

There was silence. “I don’t got no gun, so please don’t shoot me!”

That may have been a bad idea, in retrospect, but it was all that I had planned for an active-shooter type deal. I didn’t deal well with confrontation.

The front hall and the reception desk were abandoned, but the lights were on. I stepped through the next set of propped-open doors and into a dark hallway, where a pretty blonde woman was cowering, holding onto a wall-mounted telephone. Her red face glistened with sweat.

That would be Mrs. McBain.

“Oh my god, Isaac! Come here, quickly- I think my husband is dying!” I power-walked to catch up with her, then tried to keep up a comparable walking pace. Which was kind of hard, given my height.

“Could you tell me what happened?” I asked. The words felt so strange to say out loud. I’d practiced what I’d do in a real emergency, but now that it was actually happening, I couldn’t believe that I was actually falling into my routine. I guess I didn’t see no other option.

“Well, the boys- Beagle and my husband, right, they were doing firing drills! But then the shooting stopped and my husband started yelling, and when I ran in to see what happened, I saw that Beagle had shot him in the leg!”

And, there was the explanation. I let out a sigh of relief; here I was worried that I might be dealing with some crazy psychopath! Though, the more I let myself think on it, an idiot like Beagle with a gun started to seem just as dangerous.

“Does he still got the gun?” I asked, approaching one of the four doors to what had to be the firing range. The familiar scent of gunpowder stung my nose as I cracked open the rightmost door, and peered into the massive, open room. I didn’t see anyone, but then again, my vision was so awful that my patient could’ve been right in front of me. Mrs. McBain brushed through the doors.

“No, I made him to put it down!” I nodded, took a deep breath, and entered the room.

As I stepped through the doorway, another smell hit me almost as hard as the first- a sharp, metallic smell that hung in the air like some sort of leaking gas. I wasn't quite so intimately familiar with this smell, but I recognized it right away; the acrid smell of blood rubbed on skin.

"Hey Doc, come on in--the Sheriff is lying over here," said Deputy Beagle, waving his pistol at me. I flinched.

"Put the gun down!" I shouted back, "I'm not going to do anything until--"

"Beagle! You put that thing down right now or I'll shoot you myself!" Shouted Mrs. McBain. Beagle made a dramatic sigh.

"Fine. But, you know it was an accident, and it ain't like I'm gonna do it again." He tossed the gun aside. The cocked, loaded, cold-steel weapon hit the ground hammer-first.

The ensuing, "BANG!" was, no kidding, the second loudest thing I'd ever heard.

"Goddammit!" Beagle shouted, and Mrs. McBain screamed and dropped to a crouch. I just sat, stunned, staring at the gun and trying to think again. It was like my mind was a

Television set, and someone had just thrown a brick through the screen; An all-encompassing static crept over my senses.

“Isaac? Isaac, are you alright sweetie?” asked Mrs. McBain, over the loud ringing in my ears. I nodded.

“I’m okay,” I lied. I kept nodding. *“I’m okay, I’m okay, I’m okay...”*

“You sure don’t look okay,” said Beagle. He was too close to me, way too close. I took a deep breath and pushed him back a little bit.

“I’m good! Where’s the Sheriff?!” I looked around warily. My eardrums were still bubbling, but I was starting to be able to hear myself think again. I had apparently dropped my medical bag on the floor, but it hadn’t opened up or spilled.

“Jesus kid, can you not turn your head on your neck? Over there, sitting against the support beam!” snapped Beagle, motioning towards the wounded Sheriff with his whole upper body. I felt like yelling back about tunnel vision or something, but I didn’t. I just gave him a quick nod and strode over to the fallen Sheriff.

The bright red pool beneath Sheriff McBain’s thigh had already begun to clot into ketchup-like clumps. As I got closer, I could hear him muttering to himself, though I

couldn't understand what about. I dropped to a crouch beside him, opened my bag and rooted through it til I found myself a pair of gloves. I could barely pull them on with how sweaty my hands were.

"Hello, Sheriff! Can you understand me?" I asked. He smiled up at me.

"Hey! You're Isaac, the um, the Gambling-Place owner's son. Uh, Casino! Yeah..." He trailed off. Shaking, I lowered him down to the ground, and started going over my ABCs, because apparently my mind was too overwhelmed to do anything but stick to its beaten-path routines.

He could speak, so his **A**irway was patent. I didn't have time to properly test his **B**reathing, but it sounded fast and a little shallow. That was par for the course, which left me with the real problem, his **C**irculation- that'd be the bleeding.

"Alright, Sheriff, I'm going to take your pants off. Tell me if it hurts much," I said, unbuttoning and unzipping his trousers. They got snagged up on his shoes, so I started pulling harder. He just laughed as I pulled them off.

"Actually, I don't feel much of anything in this leg! Just like I got punched, and now it's burnin', sorta."

That was good. It meant that the bone probably hadn't been fractured, and I wouldn't need any med-x. I always kept an emergency syringe of the stuff, but I was reluctant to actually use it on anyone.

Once I'd gotten his pants off, I touched his leg. It was cold and wet. I'd assumed shock, based on the bigass blood pool, but I could be dramatic like that; This was solid confirmation. I was going to have to work fast!

As I searched around in my bag for a tourniquet with one hand, I held up the Sheriff's leg up with my other, so that I could see the wound in the dimly lit firing range. The hole wasn't big. At least, not the entry- just a red, penny-sized oval near the base of his thigh, surrounded by bruised skin and seeping out blood. *Like a bloody little volcano.*

The exit wound, on the other hand, was *massive*. A jagged hole right under his ass with flaps of skin hanging loose around it, spurting out a torrential amount of bright red blood with each beat of his bounding heart. Based on the color of the blood and the way that it was coming out, I knew that the bullet had nicked or severed the femoral artery. I also knew that I probably couldn't repair that with forceps and bandages alone. The best thing I could do would be to stem the bleeding, and get a stimpack as quick as possible.

Of course, that presented a little bit of a problem: See, stimpacks are awful expensive, so carrying them around wasn't always an option for a man like myself. As of now, I

didn't actually have any of them-things in my jump-bag. Some places around here had one in a box on the wall, but I didn't see any of those in here, and if there was one in the hall, I definitely would have noticed it. I cursed under my breath.

"Go and get me a stimpack!" I ordered. I had finally found where I kept my pre-made tourniquets without actually looking into the bag, though if I had any sort of presence of mind, I would have been embarrassed at how long it had taken me. I pulled his shoe off, and slipped the tourniquet on over his leg.

"I'll fetch one from the kitchen!" replied Mrs. McBain, and I nodded in acknowledgement. Now that I had a stimpack on the way, all I had to do was keep the Sheriff from dying until I could apply it.

Easier said than done.

"Why are you squeezing me? You taking my blood numbers or something?" The Sheriff asked, as I pulled the premade tourniquet tight and started cranking on it. I tried to smile.

"I'm not taking your blood pressure, sir, I'm putting on a tourniquet. It'll hurt, but you'll bleed a lot less." When I couldn't tighten it anymore, I took out another tourniquet, and

fastened it right above the first one, against the base of his thigh. It was a good thing that the Sheriff was thin, or I'd be having some issues about now.

"What are you doing? He could lose his leg that way!" shouted Beagle. When I kept on tightening the second tourniquet, he hit me in the back of the head- not so much to hurt me as to get a reaction out of me. I didn't give him one. "Hey, are you blind *and* deaf? I'm talking to you Isaac!"

"Stop it Beagle! Isaac is a good... he's a good kid," insisted the Sheriff, his voice growing weak. I finished cranking the tourniquet, and touched the Sheriff's ashen forehead. He looked like he'd stuck his head in a drinking fountain, with how much he was sweating...

"Could you try and talk with me, Sheriff? I'm gonna try some more stuff, try to keep you from going into decompensated shock."

The Sheriff looked confused. He squinted up at me with teary eyes.

"Shock? You mean, the reason why it don't hurt? I'm pretty sure I'm already in shock, but I ain't- I ain't shocked, you know. Like, I know what's happened. *I got my mind about me,*" he grumbled, pointing at his head conspiratorially. I removed a few packets of gauze from my bag, and started opening them up.

“No, I mean when your organs stop working cause your blood-pressure drops and they ain’t getting enough blood!” Finally, I finished packing the exit wound tight with gauze. I started to wrap up the dressing with a length of gauze bandaging.

“Oh. Huh. Well, you doctors ought to stop having so many words that mean- that mean all different things,” the Sheriff replied, his voice growing so quiet that I was worried he might have fallen unconscious. I stopped moving.

“Sheriff?” I asked. When he didn’t respond, I reached into my coat with my free hand, and pulled out a small metal tinderbox full of a reddish powder. I waved it under his nose.

“Wake up, Sheriff!” I shouted. He started coughing and looking around wildly.

“Ah, Jesus Christ, what the hell is that smell?” I slipped the box back in my coat.

“N-H-Four, sir! It’s supposed to keep you awake!”

Of course, it wasn’t doing a very good job at it! Before I was even done speaking, the sheriff puked all over himself and slumped forward. I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him vigorously.

“Sheriff, don’t you fall asleep! If you fall asleep, I can’t monitor you no more!” I shouted.

His eyes fluttered.

“You know, I like your voice! It’s like, you talk like a teacher, but then you got your daddy’s cowboy-thing going on, so it’s sort of funny...” muttered the Sheriff. His head hung limp on his neck. I let him drop to his side, and focused on applying pressure to the wound again.

“Hey, Isaac?” I looked over my shoulder. Deputy Beagle was standing above me again, clasping his hands together. I wasn’t so good at reading emotions, but I’d seen enough pre-vomit patients to know that he was feeling sick. He had spoken so quietly, which was strange considering how loud he’d been before. “Isaac, Is he gonna die? I thought that getting shot in the leg didn’t kill people. Why’s he acting like that?” I sighed.

“I sure hope not. But, there’s a big red-pipe in your leg, and if it gets hit, you bleed a lot. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do if I don’t get a stimpack soon.”

As if on cue, Mrs. McBain came rushing into the room, her dress all bunched up and full of miscellaneous medical supplies. Among the heaps of things I didn’t need, I could see a stimpack poking up.

“Isaac! I brought a bunch of things, I don’t know what’ll help and what won’t, but-”

Suddenly, Mrs. McBain stumbled, and her makeshift pouch came unfurled as she threw out one hand to catch herself.

Aw shit! I dropped everything and ran towards Mrs. McBain, interposing myself between the unsecured, falling medical supplies and the floor. Packaged Band-Aids, bottles of pills and ointments, a pair of scissors- it all went tumbling over me and I didn’t care, until suddenly I saw the fragile old stimpack teetering on the edge. By now, Mrs. McBain was trying to recover, but she was only making matters worse. The supplies were spilling out both sides now, and she was getting dangerously close to just dumping it all on top of me.

The stimpack. That was the focus. I shot out my hand to try to grab it, but I only succeeded in tipping it off it’s balance point, causing it to tumble back into the pouch.

I stood up, and all the supplies that had landed on me spilled back onto the floor.

“Don’t-“ I started, but she had already slipped and let go of the other side of the pouch. I cringed outwardly as it all went spilling on the ground.

“The stimpack-!” I looked down, and found that through some unchecked reflex, I had caught it on my outstretched thigh. I blinked.

“Huh,” I said, and snatched the needle off my leg. I rushed back over to the Sheriff, who was unconscious and drooling. Beagle was sitting beside him, squeezing both sides of the wound and muttering to himself.

“Sheriff, you can’t die- I’m, I’m just a deputy, if you die I’ll have to handle this whole town myself, and you *know* I can’t do that! Please, please don’t you die, please-“ I took a knee beside Beagle and the Sheriff, stimpack in hand. Beagle was crying.

“Am I- am I doing this right?” He asked. I nodded.

“You are doing just stupendously, sir! Just keep doing that!” I replied. I lifted up the sheriff’s leg, yanked off the bandage, tore out all the gauze and probed around with the needle for a minute, until I’d found the deflated husk of his split femoral artery among all of the ground-beef looking shit in his leg. I didn’t have much light to work with and it was pretty well buried beneath the gory chaos of the exit, but I knew it when I saw it- despite the tornequit, the top end was still oozing out bright red blood with each passing heartbeat. I took my forceps out of my bag, which already had some fishing-line and a hook wrapped around them, and got to suturing the split ends together. The artery kept

on pulsing out blood around the edges as I passed my hook and line through its thick middle layer.

'Moment of truth, Isaac,' I thought, as I squared off my suture. I picked up the stimpack again, prepped the needle. I took a deep breath.

In the dim light of the firing range, I stuck the pipe.

The heat from the reaction burned my gloved fingers. *Had it worked? Would it hold?* I had no idea. It wasn't squirting any blood no more, so I snipped off the end of the suture and pulled all the fishing line out, then started suturing up his ragged exit-wound, so that the ends of the skin were facing upwards. I didn't even bother squaring off the end before running a stimpack along the seam. Once his thigh had sewed up along an ugly white line, I pulled all the fishing string out, because otherwise I was just asking for it to get infected. I still had a little stimpack-juice left, so I shot the rest of it into the tiny-little entry wound, to sort out any of the leftover internal damage.

More time passed in silence. I knew it wouldn't matter, but I loosened and removed the tourniquets to feel like I was doing something. My ears were ringing, blood was soaking into my pants, but I barely noticed- all that mattered now was if he was going to live, or if he was going to die. I was just going to have to have faith now, since all of the important healing would be invisible.

“Is it working?” asked Mrs. McBain. I checked the Sheriff’s pulse, noticed that some warmth had returned to his skin...

Pulse is already stronger, and I can actually get a femoral. I sighed with relief. “It’s working. His artery is healing right.” A few more seconds passed. “I don’t think he stopped perfusing to his brain for long, so his head should be fine, if you’re worried about that. He’s gonna need a ton of fluid, though, and he might need some more help with that leg-“ I started, but then Mrs. McBain wrapped her arms around me and pulled me into a tight hug. Once I was over the initial shock, I hugged her back.

“Thanks,” I murmured. Mrs. McBain laughed.

“You saved my husband, Isaac! You saved his life!”

I nodded and tried to free myself from the asphyxiating hug. Unfortunately, Mrs. McBain was a teensy bit stronger than me. “I don’t even know how to thank you. Do you want caps? We- well, you know we aren’t rich, but we have a tin of caps hidden away under the floorboards!” Still struggling in vain to free myself, I shook my head.

“No- no, Mrs. McBain. I don’t want no caps. Just promise me that you’ll keep a close eye on your husband over this next little while. I mean, he just caught a bullet, he’s

gonna need some help getting back to normal. He'll need lots of water on account of the stimpack..." I was lying about the caps. I would have loved caps, considering how much I was hurting for supplies, but I wanted to establish that I didn't charge for my services.

"Oh, but I can't just let you go like that- look at you, you're all filthy!" said Mrs. McBain, finally releasing me from the hug. I stumbled back and fell onto my rear. "Why don't you come over to our house- You can clean off, get those clothes washed, and I'll get you some lunch. I can't let you go home to Penny looking like that!"

Well, I couldn't disagree with her on that count. Just hugging Mrs. McBain, I'd gotten blood all over her dress. Mom had already had to warn me about tracking blood in the house before...

"Alright," I said. The ringing in my ears was almost gone. I was starting to be able to think straight again, even if I was still shaking and sweating like hell. I noticed that Beagle had offered me his hand.

"Um- yes!" I said, pulling off my glove and allowing him to haul me up to my feet. He held on real tight to my hand and looked at me with an expression that I couldn't parse.

"I owe you one, Isaac. I know that this is my fault, and that I'm not always nice to you, but I- I really *do* appreciate this. I don't know what I'd have done without the Sheriff." I

smiled, and this time it was a real smile. Beagle smiled back at me, and it almost made me forget how much of a prick he'd been when I was a kid. *Almost*.

"Water under the bridge, Beagle," I replied. I thought about winking, but I once made a girl run away from me when I tried to wink at her, so I held off.

"Isaac, sweetie-" I turned around. Mrs. McBain was standing in the doorway. "I'm going to be at my house. Why don't you go get your stuff and meet me there? I'll leave the door unlocked."

I almost agreed, then I remembered the Sheriff. He was stable now, but it would be irresponsible to leave him without a plan for his continued care.

"What are we going to do about Mr. McBain?" I asked. Mrs. McBain looked at Beagle.

"Beagle, seeing as how you're the one who shot him..." she started. Beagle put his hands above his head.

"I'll handle it, ma'am. What should I do?"

"Let him sleep- try to get him on a mattress, if you can. Give him lots of water. He's going to be in a lot of pain, so we'll have to give him morphine when he wakes up. I

brought my IV's with me..." I said, trying my best to cover all my bases without over-explaining. Mrs. McBain started to walk away.

"You two do what you have to, I'll be getting the house ready for him. You take your time!" she said, and disappeared through the doorway. I looked at Beagle.

"He didn't hurt his back none, right?" I asked. Beagle shook his head. "Good. I'm gonna grab his legs then, you grab his arms- let's take him to one of them cots over there."

He nodded. We grabbed ahold of the Sheriff's limbs.

"Alright. Three, two, one-

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