Crickets

by Linda Jenkinson ©2022

Randall slid a dollar’s worth of quarters into the vending machine and weighed his options. Too late. They were his last four quarters, and the pickings were on the wrong side of slim. He could’ve smacked himself for not checking the selection before he dropped his money into no-man’s-land.

A long and stressful drive had put him out of sorts. He thought he could finish the trip to Louisiana in one day. He thought wrong. Instead, he ended up in Dallas-Fort Worth during rush hour. Six lanes, bumper to bumper. More traffic than this country boy had ever seen on a road. Hell, more road than he had ever seen in one place.

Besides the cowboys cutting in and out like rodeo riders, every friggin’ motel was on the other side of the road. Randall white knuckled the steering wheel past the Holiday Inn, the Best Western, and the La Quinta Inn. Not knowing if the next exit was left or right, he kept missing the window he needed to move into the turn lane. And now he had to pee. Finally, traffic thinned enough for him to edge over. He wasn’t sure where this exit would take him, but frankly ― he didn’t give a good goddam.

The turn took him to Millie’s Dew Drop Inn. \_Honest to God, a motel with that name. They’d never believe it back home. Nah, probably not so funny.\_ He was just tired and hungry.

The desk clerk sat behind a security window that faced the small foyer. He wouldn’t open the door to the lobby until Randall’s card had been approved.

“Is there a restaurant anywhere around?”

“There’s a Denny’s about a mile down the road, and a Subway in the filling station across the way.”

The clerk pressed a button, and the door lock clicked open.

“Nothing closer?” Randall wasn’t going to get back on that road, even to get across it.

“Nope. Well, we’ve got a vending machine in the hallway, just back from the staircase. It has some food, some toiletries, but it doesn’t take bills, just change. There’s a coke machine back there, too.”

“I’m kinda low on change after all the toll roads. Can you give me a few quarters for a five spot?”

“Nope. We’re not allowed to make change for guests. We don’t keep much cash on hand.”

Randall felt in his pants pocket. He came up with three quarters, two dimes and a Canadian nickel.

“What about one quarter for two dimes and a nickel?”

“Well, I guess, so.”

\_Whoopee. It’s my lucky day.\_

His mother’s voice was in his head, “Sarcasm isn’t becoming Randall.”

He passed through the door to the lobby. He might as well have a look at the vending machine before he went to his room.

So here he was. He’d just given it his last dollar. Its skimpy pickings made choosing easy. The machine had more empty slots than full ones. A salad with some red leaf ― or was that wilted iceberg? ― sat in a deli cup, a plastic envelope of Roquefort taped to the top. Deli cup? Hell. It was small as a Dixie cup\_.\_

Another container held a depressed-looking bun. Depressed like someone sat on it. A greenish brown piece of ham peeked out from under a glossy looking piece of Swiss. Everything else in the machine either cost more or… well, you can’t eat Trojans or toothbrushes.

Maybe he’d be better off hitting the coin return and settling for a Coke. His stomach growled at him. Nope. A Coke wouldn’t do it, and his bladder warned him that time was running out. He still had to pee.

He hated bleu cheese, but better bleu cheese than crunchy Swiss and green ham. He pressed the button for the salad. The container started dropping and then… it stopped. \_Oh, for Chrissakes!\_

He belted the glass in front of the stuck container with the palm of his hand. Nothing. Then he jolted the machine with a kick. \_No joy. Really, no joy.\_ He’d all but fractured his foot.

The only thing moving inside that machine was some bug hopping around the bottom tray. It stopped and turned to face him. Was it looking at him? Then it lifted its back legs and began rubbing them together. \_Hmm. A cricket. Singing for\_ my \_supper. Cute little feller, though.\_

Randall walked back to the front desk. “Your machine ate my money.”

“I can’t help you,” said the clerk. “I can’t leave the front desk. Try shaking it.”

 No way. Randall had read the articles about vending machines falling over on disgruntled customers who got too rough with them. This machine had a regular grift going. Or maybe it was the cricket clogging up the works. Or maybe the clerk was in on the con with the bug. \_Their get-rich quick scheme?\_ Randall snorted. \_Jesus, I am tired.\_

“I’m not going to shake the machine. By the way, there’s a cricket dancing around the bottom of it.”

“There’s crickets all over Dallas-Fort Worth right now. It’s been a wet year.”

Randall turned away from the front desk and headed to the elevator. He wasn’t up for arguing over a buck in quarters. Fatigue and frustration had squashed his appetite, anyway. He chuckled at the irony. \_Squashed my appetite… I’m so tired, I’m getting giddy.\_ He just wanted to find a bed. And yes, he still had to pee.

Either the elevator had stopped on the third floor, or the light had stuck on three. After a short wait, Randall hobbled up the stairs. At the door to his room, he searched his coat pocket. He pulled out the room key and surprised himself with a forgotten roll of quarters that he’d bought to pay the tolls back in Kansas.

Oh well. Screw it. That vending machine wasn’t getting any more of his money, and he wasn’t so sure he could trust the Coke machine either. He swiped the key through the slot and the door opened. Just like it was supposed to. \_Funny how big a relief it is when just one thing goes right after everything else has gone wrong.\_

He looked around the room. He caught just the faintest musty smell and figured they hadn’t rented the room or aired it out for a while. \_Aired it out?\_ He looked around the room. There weren’t any windows. \_First class all the way.\_ Small matter, though. There was nothing outside he wanted to see.

He set his suitcase on the bureau and walked into the bathroom. The towels were fresh. Overall, the room was okay. He sighed as he emptied his aching bladder. Now, \_that\_ was a relief.

Randall opened his suitcase, took out his laundry bag, and stripped down to his shorts. The bed looked inviting, downright seductive. At last he could hit the hay, but by now, a bed of nails would have been fine with him. He pulled back the covers, crawled in, and turned off the light. Another cricket chirped somewhere in the room.

“Your cousin’s down in the vending machine. Probably eating my salad,” Randall said. Then he fell asleep.

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Randall woke to darkness. The back-lit face of his travel alarm read two a.m. \_Sheesh. I thought for sure I’d sleep until noon.\_

Still in the remnants of a dream, he felt a tickle running across his stomach. Another hunger pain? Weird. This one was outside, on his skin, not inside where it should be. Something skittered across his nose. \_That\_ opened his eyes. The room pulsed with the chirping of crickets. The bedding moved around him. They were on his legs, his chest, his arms. Something wiggled through his shorts. He fumbled for the light switch.

“God! God damn it!” Randall could hardly hear his own disgusted roar over the sound of the crickets. He jumped out of the bed, shook his head, and crickets fell out of his hair. He brushed them away. Their bodies crunched under his feet, squished between his toes. He shook the bugs out of his shoes and grabbed the robe from the foot of the bed, shaking it free of insects. On the bureau, his open suitcase crawled with the varmints. Through the open bathroom door, he watched them crawling up the mirror. The sink, the toilet, the tub — full of crickets. Chirping and crawling. Chirping and climbing. His skin crawled with revulsion.

He shoveled his keys, phone, and wallet into the robe pocket and rocketed out of the room. He streaked down the hall, taking the stairs two at a time. When he got to the front desk, the clerk was dozing in his chair.

“Wake up. \*\*Wake up\*\*! My room is swamped with crickets and I’m bailing out of here. I’ve left my suitcase and I expect you to send it to me as soon as you get the bugs out of it \_and\_ I expect you to refund my card.”

“We can give you another room if the cricket noise is keeping you up.”

\_The clerk must still be dreaming.\_ “Noise? Noise! They’re crawling the walls. They’re in the bed, on the floor, the sink, the toilet—God knows how many in the tub. I’m outta here.”

“I told you, Dallas is swarming with crickets this year. You won’t find a room without ’em.”

“I’ll sleep in my car if I have to.”

With that, Randall fled the premises. He started his car. Go where at two o’clock in the morning? Hell, it’s probably 2:30 by now. He remembered the three motels he had passed earlier and decided to try them last to first. At least now he’d be on the right side of the road to get to them.

He peeled out of Millie’s parking lot and drove up the road to the La Quinta Inn. He parked and went to the door. It was locked. He looked around for the reception window, but there wasn’t one. No buzzer. No bell. Nada. He started back to his car when he spotted the night clerk sitting behind the desk. Randall pounded on the door. “Help! Help!”

The clerk looked at him. His eyes widened, but he walked to the door. “Can I help you?” he said through the door.

“Do you have a room? I‘ve just escaped Millie’s Dew Drop Inn!”

The clerk’s knowing grin said it all. He dropped his gaze to the floor, but Randall caught his grin on the way down. When he looked at Randall again, he had regained his composure. “Yes, we have some vacancies.” His tone was still cautious, not cordial.

“Good.” Randall let out his relief in one long sigh. “But, do you have crickets?” Now it was his turn to show some caution.

“Crickets? No, not that I’ve seen. Why do you ask?”

It was then Randall caught his reflection in the door. A wild-eyed man, hair uncombed, and dressed in a robe stared back at him. He reached into the robe pocket and pulled out his wallet. At its edge sat a cricket staring, no… glaring at him. Randall shook it to the floor and stomped on it. He shakily pulled out his Visa. “Please, I’ll take the room. Open the door, and I’ll tell you all about the crickets.”

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