

Ambivalent Vacancies

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The rusty red shell of the rundown Ford pickup truck raced the horizon along the desert highway, Luke Lemon determined and damned if they didn't make it to Phoenix by nightfall. Hands gripped the steering wheel and a foot stabbed the gas pedal, nerves twisted and contorted under the high tension of a frantic getaway. Whistling along out of tempo and out of tune to the twangy chords of Ry Cooder on the radio, he nervously eyed the fuel gauge as the needle flirted towards the empty mark.

“Will you cut that out?” Asked Logan Lemon. His partner in crime, equally quixotic, impulsive, and bound by brotherly bond and oath, sat opposite in the passenger seat, a flimsy highway map in hand while the other toyed with a silver revolver with three rounds recently expelled.

Luke's whistling made a sudden decrescendo, and a quick hand switched the dial on the dashboard.

“New updates just in,” came the voice of the announcer on the radio. “The Lemon brothers are presently under police pursuit following the failed robbery of an El Paso bank. The brothers are believed to be in possession of almost two thousand dollars having lost most of the cash in a shootout with police-”

And just like the crack of a bullet, an abrupt and abrasive metal cough erupted from inside the engine, a hissing and steaming death rattle announcing inevitable mechanical failure. The truck dangerously swerved across the road as it slowed to a stop and the stillness of the surrounding desert seemed to amplify itself.

“Aw hell,” Logan began, sounding off a series of poetic insults that would have riled their mother, Miss Lucy Lemon, from the grave. He stepped out of the truck and kicked at it, hoping that some miracle of engine resurrection would manifest.

“I knew we shoulda taken the Cadillac instead,” Luke said. “It's as good as dead. Let's grab the money and go. The longer we wait the sooner someone finds us.”

Afternoon slowly crept towards evening, and the oppressive heat beat down while imaginary vultures circled overhead and mirages of passing vehicles in the distance faded. Time seemed to fold into itself, the distant horizon appearing further and further ahead as the long road stretched on in the infinite afternoon. Luke and Logan stumbled under the agony of the sun, their silence quelling futile squabbling and threats to leave the other behind. Night soon set in and the flaming sky faded with occasional glimpses of distant celestial beings while a symphony of crickets sang amidst the humid air.

“Luke, I won’t make it,” Logan groaned, dropping to his knees. “Carry on without me...”

“Oh hush,” Logan snapped, kicking his brother. “Look, down there.”

“What is it?”

They approached the crest of a sandy hill and the apparitions of their arid fate disappeared upon the sight of civilization just ahead in the distance. The transient road into town gave way to occasional signs of life, aimless pedestrians and distant nighttime traffic. They wandered through the streets, passing by dingy dive bars and roadside diners, welcome sights of a seedy oasis

“The promised land,” Logan remarked, catching his breath. “What’s our plan?”

“I’m beat,” Luke said. “We rest for the night, grab a car, then get back on the road.”

A half respectable motel sat at the end of the main street, between a questionable car dealership lot and a graffitied pawn shop. The vacancy sign flashed occasionally, as if unsure if any rooms were available.

Logan looked to Luke, and his brother gave a weary but affirmative nod as he imagined the heavenly comforts of tepid bath water and cheap bed sheets.

As they entered, a dutiful dog barked to greet them, then returned to a futile nap while the owner at the front desk peered up from a wrinkled newspaper crossword puzzle.

“Can I help you?” Came a slightly discernable sound from the inner bowels of nicotine infested lungs. A careless hand with the eternal presence of a cigarette straightened a useless nametag with a jumble of handwritten letters that resembled something like Clibe but might have been Clive.

“You got any vacancies?” Luke asked.

“Probably.”

“What do ya mean probably?” A clueless glance was the man’s response.

“You either got a room for us or ya don’t.”

“What’s the sign outside say?”

“Couldn’t tell ya...looked like it was half blinkin’.”

“Interesting. I can offer a room, but I can’t promise a harmless stay.”

“We just want a room for one night, is all.”

“I should tell you that this place is...how shall we say, not quite up to proper operating standards.”

“I don’t care if your bathtubs don’t got hot water or if the television don’t work—”

“I can assure you, those luxuries will be the least of your worries.”

“Lovely, we’ll take it.”

Clibe or Clive, or whatever the hell his name was, ignored an empty logbook and opened a box of mismatched keys, while Luke handed over the payment, mysteriously and promptly denied.

“I don’t know which one is which one, so try em’ out and take your pick,” Clibe or Clive said, giving Luke a handful of keys. “And lastly, please, enter at your own peril.”

“Sure, uh...thanks...” Luke replied, grabbing the keys. Walking out, the curious dog eyed him and his brother with a look of mild uncertainty.

“Rooms 3, 9, 4, 25, 22, 7, 11, 8, and 29,” Logan said, examining the handful of rusty mismatched keys. They began with room number 3, and upon opening the door, they were greeted with the sight of a couple in mid argument debating what seemed like a matter of life and death but sounded like a disagreement over the television channel.

“Apologies,” Luke said. “Don’t mind us.”

Room 4 was occupied too, this time with a group of four children engaged in a deep game of Monopoly, ignoring the unwelcome intrusion of the motel’s new guests. A boy who looked no older than seven clenched the dice in a tense fist and rolled a five. Piercing grey eyes shot back at the brothers, and he turned back to the game, collecting a small stack of pink paper bills.

“Carry on,” Logan told them, nodding. He shut the door and picked the next key. “Should we let management know about the...occupied rooms?”

“He’s seen enough of our faces,” Luke said. “We’ll take the first room that’s empty then call it a night. This place is gettin’ weird...”

Room 7 was empty. They turned on the lights, and examined the beds, satisfied that nothing seemed out of place. Logan stepped into the bathroom, turned on the sink, and the creaky faucet spewed a viscous pink liquid turned dark crimson. Covering his mouth, he ran out of the bathroom. Luke held up the bed sheet, revealing the faint outline of a vaguely human shape stained upon the mattress. They shook their heads and approached room 8.

“Freeze!” Shouted a police officer, with a pistol raised as the door opened. He squeezed the trigger and the plastic toy made a harmless pop. The man laughed, stepping aside, revealing a costume party in the crowded space of the room, a faint disco ball hanging from the ceiling above a punchbowl that reeked of cheap wine.

“Come in, come in!” Greeted one of the guests, dressed as a flapper. Luke and Logan made a courteous nod, then closed the door and moved on.

Room 9 had tattered curtains and suspicious marks on the wall, hints of what resembled a vicious attack by an unknown feline predator. Room 11 featured a horrid paint job of floral patterns and ambiguous threats written in black paint on the walls, bed sheets, and carpets.

“Your soul looks delectable,” Logan read off the poorly written markings. “Enter all who swear’...’death to those who pass the threshold’...let’s try the next one, shall we?”

In room 22, they saw a gaping hole in the floor, the bed leaning into the depths of an empty abyss. As they left, the door seemed to pull itself shut but didn’t close all the way.

“We gonna find a room here or spend the whole night doin’ this?” Luke asked. Logan shot him an equally confused look.

In room 25, a man sat in an armchair watching a distorted television, hypnotized by the spectral glow of the white noise and luminescence of a blank transmission. A shape began to form from the television screen resembling a hand, grasping the beguiled viewer’s head, pulling him into the screen. Logan kicked the door shut and they moved on.

“We got one room left,” he said, holding up the key for room 29. “Shall we?”

“After you,” Luke said, stepping aside. Logan unlocked the door and pushed it open, staring into the uncertainty, damned if they didn’t find an adequately harmless room, or perhaps, damned if they did.