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2/15/05

Crickets

There are no crickets in Los Angeles. At least that's what Sonny thought when he heard the chirping coming from the bark-chip garden next to the pool. He decided to excuse himself from the party conversation and escape mention of his still unfinished screenplay. In the middle of a large agave he saw a small, green and brown cricket struggling in a spider web. Fishing it out, he marveled through a half-drunk haze at the iridescence on his wings and the purple squares along its side. Pleased with his discovery, Sonny dropped the cricket in the breast pocket of his sport coat, fastened the button and headed home.

The next day, with the cricket happily stowed in some Tupperware, Sonny got on the Internet. He learned emperors in ancient China believed crickets were good luck and kept them in special bamboo cages. He thought it must be true too when Zack called. Zack said he'd scored a meeting with John Davros, the producer and casino magnate, about a part in his new film. He also said Davros was looking for new material, and he'd convinced him to let Sonny pitch his idea. They just had to go Vegas next weekend to meet him. Sonny tried to tell Zack his script wasn't ready, it wasn't perfect, but his friend insisted. Zack was a struggling actor and Sonny a struggling screenwriter, so they got along fine. They'd been to Vegas before, mostly to circle the wagons over drinks and talk about the lives they'd have once they made it big. Sonny always drank too much and lost his grocery money while Zack practiced hitting on the waitresses.

When Zack showed up with his T-bird convertible, Sonny came out with his suitcase and a small, three by four inch, bamboo cage on a short chain. The cage had delicate toothpick-sized bars and sliding door. Sonny put the cage on the dashboard and began explaining about crickets and ancient China. Zack asked about the cage. Sonny told him it was for protection. He said there were all kinds of things that might devour his new friend – birds, cats, lizards. He didn't want to take any chances.

“Does it have a name?” Zack asked

“Jimminy.”

“That's cute.”

“Did you get a room at the Davros' hotel?”

“I had to get a place down the street. They're full up this weekend. Get this, Davros has got this flower. It's the largest flower in the world and only blooms once every twenty years or so. It's blooming this weekend and they've got it at the hotel. The guy on the phone said that people are coming from all over to see it. Oh, I also forgot to tell you Davros' daughter is going to be there. She's crazy for writers, and I told her about you.”

“I'm not interested. I'm still getting over my last great disappointment.”

“Dude, it's been six months. The perfect relationship isn't going to fall from the sky. You gotta get out there. Besides, she's hot.”

As they walked up to the casino, they could see a line snaking through the parking lot and past the front door. In the parking lot under a white canvas tent, was what looked

like a six foot tall, purple calla Lilly on a pedestal surrounded by tall black fans purring away. Sonny asked the doorman the reason for the fans.

“The smell,” he said and pointed with his white gloved finger to the poster sitting on a brass easel at the start of the line.

“*Amorphophallus titanum*,” the poster read, “has the largest inflorescence by bulk in the world. Native to the rainforests of Sumatra, it blooms at most every 20 to 40 years. Its common name is the ‘Corpse flower’ because of its repulsive odor that attracts pollinators such as carrion beetles and sweat bees...”

For the moment, Zack and Sonny were safely out of range of the smell and walked through the sliding doors of the casino. They sat down on some purple foam couches next to the bar above the lobby. Zack looked slightly embarrassed, “Why didn’t you leave the cricket at the hotel?”

“We’re in a casino. He’s supposed to bring good luck.”

“*Amorphophallus titanum*,” Zack said, spreading his arms wide on the couch and looking out over the crowd. “I tell you that’s all the luck I need right there.”

Sonny shook his head. “It means ‘large shapeless penis.’”

“Oh.” Zack experienced a momentary deflation. “Say, I thought you said you couldn’t afford to gamble anymore.”

“I know. I just want the meeting to go well.”

“Zack!” The voice came from the lobby and a woman in trim black pants and short top came up to their table. Brittany Davros flirted effortlessly with Zack, while Sonny watched Jimminy hop up and down in his cage. He wondered if he should jump in, but Zack saved him the trouble.

“His screenplay is awesome. He’s been working on it for years. It’s a cross between *Wizard of Oz* and *Ghost* and what’s the other one you talk about?”

“*Braveheart*...”

“Right. *Braveheart*. It’s awesome. You got to get him to tell you about it.”

Brittany turned to him and smiled, but before he could explain the imperfect nature of his grand project, her cell phone rang. It was getting dark and her friends had a spot in the flower line. She asked if they wanted to come. Zack was up for it, but Sonny demurred and the two of them left him alone at the table. Looking around the windowless casino and listening to all the bells and clings, Sonny thought for the first time about how artificial everything seemed. At the slots and gaming tables, people stood transfixed, their faces cast in a sickly blue or green from the glowing neon of the machines. As he ordered a drink, he thought that Jimminy seemed to be the only thing in the room that was truly beautiful, truly alive.

Still, he liked to gamble. After his third drink he headed over to the blackjack table. As the cards came down, he brought the cage up to his face, and asked, “To hit or not to hit, that is the question.” Jimminy slowly wiggled his left antennae. Sonny looked through the bars of the cage into his waxy green compound eyes.

“Take a card, sir?” the dealer asked.

Sonny took the card and hit 21 on the nose. At that point, he found his groove. Each round he’d stare at Jimminy -- left antennae was take a hit, right antennae was stand pat. He kept winning too, for what must have been half an hour, until he finally went to cash in his chips. Zack found him in front of the cashier.

“Man, that flower stinks. Say, what are you doing?”

"I just got on a roll, that's all."

"Well, cash out. I'm going to meet Davros. You've been drinking, haven't you? Look, you've got to get it together. I'll get him down here to meet you. This is your shot. Don't embarrass me."

As Zack disappeared, Sonny stared at Jimminy through the bars of his cage and then like a comet reeled in by the sun, turned and headed over to the high-stakes table. As the cards went out, Jimminy froze. No hops. No wiggles. Having to rely instead on cool logic, Sonny hit on 13 and busted at 23. Then as the dealer, reloaded and Sonny ordered another drink, Jimminy began to rub his legs together and sing. The other players looked at him. "Shhhh," Sonny whispered. But Jimminy continued to purr. "Shhhh!" But to no avail.

The woman at the other side of the table with too much makeup and a frizzy red dye job leered at him. "Hey buddy, shut that thing up. I'm trying to play cards here."

The dealer piled on, "Sir, your bug is causing a disturbance."

Finally juiced from the alcohol Sonny responded, "It's a cricket dumbass. Just shut up and deal with it. Get it. Deal with it."

At that point, the dealer looked behind Sonny and nodded. Two men in grey suits stepped up. "Sir, if you don't silence your cricket, you're going to have to leave the building."

Sonny had a 16, and Jimminy's song was getting louder. "You've got a flower outside that smells like rotting flesh, and you're telling me that my cricket's a problem."

"Sir..."

"Go to hell!"

The two men grabbed Sonny under his arms, snatched the cage and began moving toward the door. Sonny began to scream. "You're not going to take away my cricket! You're not going to take away my cricket!"

As the sea of people parted to let them through, Sonny broke free. He grabbed the cage and began running towards the buffet. Unfortunately, he didn't see the grandmother in the pink polyester jump suit fully absorbed by the spinning of her slots. She scooted her stool back just enough to clip his heel and send him tumbling into the shrimp platter. Jacket torn, disheveled with punch stains, Sonny looked up to see Zack walk in with Brittany and her father.

Outside Sonny stood next to tropical planter. Jimminy was silent. The crowd was gone. The fans were off. And the warm desert breeze filled Sonny's nostrils with the smell of the corpse flower. He carefully set his cricket cage on the sidewalk and began to sing to himself. "When you wish upon a star, it makes no difference who you are..." As he did this, he searched the planter and pulled out a rock, about the size of football. He lifted the rock over his head. "When you wish upon a star, your dreams come true..."

Creative Writing Reflection Sheet

Name: Marcus Renner

Title: Crickets

1. What stage of the writing process are you at with this particular piece of work?

Check all that apply

- Just getting started Still exploring Know what I want, but not there yet
 Need others to read Need more time Need to leave it alone for a while
 Have specific questions Feeling good Totally bumfuzzled

Explain:

This was the first draft generated by an assignment for a short fiction class at UCLA. The assignment was to write a story based on two photos and have it not be more than six pages. The photos I used were of the corpse flower and a cricket cage. I turned in the draft, got positive comments from the instructor, but haven't done anything with it since.

My sense of humor runs toward screwball. I enjoyed writing it, but now it feels a bit "one note," meaning that it's fairly simplistic, a joke wrapped up in a story. I was intimidated by writing a short, short story because I had been writing ten and twelve page stories before this. Now, I think I could give it more punch and still take a couple of pages out. So, I'm interested in focusing in on what's most important and what's most comic and finding ways for those two things to intertwine those two things more closely.

2. What was the original spark for this piece of work?

I have a hard time with the artificiality of Los Angeles and even harder time with this in Las Vegas and so the spark was juxtaposing this type of scene with something that was wild, not-of-the-human world. Crickets seemed like a great vehicle for this since they are good at jumping away from people and make strange sounds. It seemed like a much more wild image to put in the middle of Las Vegas than a dog or cat.

The corpse flower is also one of those incongruous entities from nature that also seemed a good fit for this particular setting. I was looking for things from nature that would clash with civilization. I wanted the characters to confront and have to deal with this tension.

3. List three things you like about what you've written? Give examples...

- I like the symbolism of putting the corpse flower in middle of the Las Vegas strip and have this be a big attraction—crowds of people paying money to participate in an irony that they don't understand.

- I like the ending. I'm generally optimistic, but when I realized that the best thing was for the character to fail, for the potential for change to be there but for Sonny's weakness to ruin it all, I smiled. It was like a dark secret discovering that having characters fail could work in a story.

- I like image of Sonny staring into crazy compound eyes of the cricket for guidance.

4. What's non-negotiable for this piece of work? What are you sure isn't going to change?

- The cricket, the cage, and the corpse flower will stay in this piece

5. List three things you're struggling with and want to improve in this piece?

- The characters are a bit cartoonish and flat. They're stereotypes roughly based on the characters in the film "Sideways" and "Swingers." I struggled with creating full characters in only a few pages. I think I'd be much better now at finding some essential details to give a clearer sense of who they are and what they want.
- The dialogue feels contrived. I know now that dialogue should be motivated by characters pursuing what they want. The characters say what they need to say for the plot to move forward. And I think that makes it unconvincing.
- The tone. The voice of the narrator is a bit too knowing. I think a drier delivery of the facts would allow the humor to come from the characters and situation. The narrator needs to get out of the way.

6. What feedback do you expect readers will give you?

- That it feels like a sit-com and that the characters are stereotypes.

7. What would your response be if you receive this feedback?

- I'd agree.

8. List three questions you want to ask your readers?

- Do you understand what happens at the very end?
- What is most compelling about having the cricket and corpse flower in the casino?
- What do you want to know about Sonny and Zach?