

THE YEAR WAS 2020

By Rory Douglas
Senior Hotel Manager, Veriu Group

The year was 2020, the outlook bleak. First the country caught fire, then the pandemic had ravaged the industry, dust blew through empty lobbies, buffets gathered rust, housekeeping trolleys...abandoned.

The corridors of what we used to call hotels were spun with cobwebs, animals roamed these halls now. Where once suitcases were trundled from door to elevator, fierce beasts staked claim and made nests in the overturned room service trolleys. The rooftop pool, once a place of levity, laughter, and divebombs, was now a green pond, the depths of which no person dared venture, lest they never return.

The only denizens remaining within the walls were the strongest and fiercest. The clan who were known as the Keepers of the House had taken control of the basement. These were the canny merchants of the building, controlling the vast stores of tiny soaps and Nescafe Blend 43 sachets. If you wanted to survive in these end times, you had to have something to trade with the Keepers. Too many had thought loftily that they could survive on their own. That they could find their own Nespresso pods and long-life milk cartons, that they would be the true rulers of the hotel that time forgot. You could still find them, those that thought themselves smarter than the rest, their bones lay mostly in Conference Room B, amid piles of empty Mentos wrappers.

The Lobby Lizards still controlled Reception, clinging to past procedures, as if these would protect them now. Gaze on them as they pick up phones that aren't ringing, type on keyboards connected to nothing, push luggage trolleys through the gathering sand. But don't get too close, should you be pulled into their grasp. How many of the Counters of Coin fell victim to this fate?

For the Counters of Coin in most cases didn't even notice the pandemic or its impacts, it had been month end you see and inevitably they had been pre-occupied. When they emerged from their spreadsheets out of the staff entrance into the lobby and saw what the world now was, the eager Receptionists snatched them off their feet and bundled them into the shadows. You can find them now chained to desks in the business centre, forced to fill out endless 5-star TripAdvisor reviews.

What of the rooms you ask, those empty and silent spaces that stand as a testament to the calamity of this world? If you dare you can venture close to their doors and listen carefully. Can you hear it, that soft yet cracked laughter within? The Handy People thought this would be their big chance, finally no guests to disrupt their preventative maintenance. Yet how many of their minds were lost as they realised their quest now had no end. That perfection of having the room painted just the right way would never be enough.

Perhaps it's too risky a place to be now, maybe we should take this opportunity to find our way out of here, find a way home. Maybe you think once you get out of the front door and start your way down the street that everything will be ok? I venture you would not take two steps without a cold withered hand falling on your shoulder. Yes, turn and look upon the wild eyes of the un-caged BDM. Scream in horror as they pull you back into the depths, asking you if you're here on project work, or if you have an office in the area.

Pray they do not take you to their shared level two office. How hard it is to look upon the leaping and dancing form of what we once knew as HR. Permanently intoxicated on hand sanitiser and oxygen bereft behind 18 disposable facemasks, no-one knew that could even happen, yet now here they are, a hideous jester for the damned.

Finally I ask you to consider the person who oversaw it all, that leader, that hero of ages old, the General Manager. Where do we find them now in this hellish landscape? Do we dare open the door to their office, what horrors would lie behind? Surely their mind is gone, surely they have fallen victim to these terrible times, surely they.....oh it's past 5pm? Never mind they've already gone home.

THE YEAR IS 2021

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The Hotel Manager stared out into the lobby with unblinking bloodshot eyes. From her laptop, the tinny sound of another 11am press briefing could be heard echoing from the speakers. A breeze blew in through the half ajar main door, bringing with it the vague notion of an outside world, something beyond the grim purgatory of the building. A soft repetitive noise is the only thing you can hear. The HM's finger is clicking the mouse, over and over again. Looking down at the laptop you can see the ReviewPro page, refreshed repeatedly, still no reviews. The HM is not even sure what she's expecting to see, her mind almost empty now, dulled down by the months, years of the pandemic and its effects. Maybe it's just muscle memory, echoes of what we lost informing her movements, driving her empty husk forward.

The date is October 18th 2021, a day much like all those that had passed, a day that for the HM showed no signs of what was to come.

Movement at the front door, the HM's glassy eyes barely move. A figure moving through the silent lobby towards the desk. The sound of luggage rolling across the floor. The HM ignores it all, surely another hallucination, no they will not be fooled by this again.

A figure standing silently in front of them. A pause, another moment of silence. Finally, a polite cough. The noise of tendons creaking and cracking erupts through the lobby as the HM raises her head up, finally meeting the eyes of the person before them. She blinks once, twice, brushing away the film of dust that had gathered on her eyes.

A man in a business suit stands before her, looking concerned. He opens his mouth to speak,

"Hi, I'm here to check-in" he says worriedly, glancing around the lobby nervously.

The HM stares back, a minute passes again in silence. The words the man has uttered are bouncing around her empty mind, checking in? Checking....In...?

"Checking In.." she rasps, a voice that hasn't uttered a word in months, dry and neglected.

"Umm yes, checking in please" the man replies.

The HM looks down at her laptop, clicks over to arrivals, that screen they had abandoned so long ago. Her body shakes as she sees it, for the first time in so very long, a name sits on the arrival list.

Her hands shake as she opens the booking, a one night stay, a business traveller, a booking from the GDS... Her knees weaken and she almost falls.

The man reaches forward at this, reaching out his hand to steady the strange figure before them, but thinking better of it, steps back, clearing his throat nervously.

"Am I in the right place, this is Veriu right" the man asks, the hope clear in his voice that he is indeed in the wrong hotel.

"Veriu...?" the HM says, almost to themselves.

"Umm, I think I'll just go..." the man says, turning.

"NO" the HM screams. The volume and desperation in her voice stuns them both.

"Checking.....In.....of course" the HM says, her hands tapping on the keyboard in no discernible pattern. Her hand reaches towards the mouse, but then stops, frozen.

She looks back up at the man suspiciously,

"But how.....pandemic.....Gladys.....lockdown.....?" she says, words tumbling from her mouth.

The man relaxes slightly, realising they're all getting used to the new normal.

"Double vacc'd, all good to travel again" he says, fumbling around on his phone, trying to open his Service NSW app.

The words hit the HM like an explosion, all good to travel again. All good to travel again.

"All good to travel again" she whispers. The man looks up, "Sorry, did you say something" he asks.

“All good to travel again” she says it louder this time, her head bowed. After a moment her shoulders begin to shake slightly.

“Are you ok?” the man asks, taking an involuntary step back. “All good to travel again” the HM says, even louder, laughter erupting from her mouth. Mad sounds, the laughter of the truly deranged.

“ALL GOOD TO TRAVEL AGAIN” she screams hysterically, eyes wide, mouth agape in a lunatic grin.

The man turns and breaks for the door, he’d already been worried about the trip, getting stuck in Sydney if they locked down again. He’d told his boss that he could do all this via Zoom.

Before he gets to the door he’s tackled to the ground. The woman, how is she so strong? She drags him back to the desk as he screams for help. A key wallet is thrust into his hand and he’s carried into the elevator. In his panic he cannot hear her explaining how to turn on the electricity in the rooms, nor the many restaurants she is suggesting he try whilst in town. He is tossed to the ground, the doors sliding closed before him.

The lobby stands silent again, silent bar the heavy breathing of the HM standing before the elevator doors. Her shoulder rise and fall as she breathes. Laughter jerks out of her every now and again as she watched the elevator display showing it rising for the first time in aeons.

Silently she stands, eyes fixed on the elevator door, a flood of adrenalin, emotion, everything flowing through her at that moment.

She stands so still that the next person who walks into the lobby doesn’t even notice her. Walking to the desk, they arrive and look curiously over it. After a moment, they clear their throat and call out,

“Checking in”....

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