

Lee Alan

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SEEING RED - - -

Years ago I was working at WXYZ radio in Detroit I went to Las Vegas for some meetings and stayed at the fabled Sands Hotel. One afternoon while waiting for a meeting I was in the casino playing the quarter slot machine.

In those days slot machines took real coins and when anyone won even a few coins they made a loud crashing noise as the machine dumped them into the metal tray that caught them. You could tell if someone was a big winner by how long the crashing lasted. They were all mechanical and also only about chest high and back to back. You could stand at your machine and look directly at the person playing the machine in the next isle facing you.

So there I was pulling the handle when this tall red headed smiling man stopped at the machine in the next isle facing me. It was the great comedian Red Skelton himself. He was the headliner that week in the Copa Room, the main showroom at the Sands. I pretended not to recognize him and just kept on playing my quarters. He was doing the same thing. Both of us pulling the handle and both spinning the wheels. There was one big difference. When I pulled the handle Nothing! When he pulled he won.... Every time!! Crash, clink, clink, clink I could hear his winnings dropping into the metal tray.

Soon people started recognizing who was playing and a large crowd gathered to watch this marvelous red headed clown play the slot machine. And soon they started to laugh. The more I'd lose, the more he'd win, and the louder the crowd would laugh. I was about to quit, but when I looked up again Red was gone. I turned to go myself when I saw this wonderful and famous clown walking toward me in my isle.

"Sir", he said with a smile so huge it would break anyone's face. "My name is Red Skelton". (As if everyone in the world back then didn't know it.) He went on: "Sir I came to apologize. You see I was having a little fun with you and I hope I didn't embarrass you too much. You see every time you pulled the handle and lost,I lost too. The difference was I had a handful of quarters. When the wheels stopped I threw them as hard as I could into the metal tray so they would make a noise loud enough for you to hear."

Unbelievable!

"The crowd wasn't laughing at me at all. They were laughing at the frustrated look on your face when I won every time and you lost every time". So Sir, please be my guest for dinner and tonight's show. I will have a front table waiting for you". And he turned and left.

WXYZ Radio and Channel 7 television were located in Broadcast House in Southfield, Michigan. It had everything one could imagine including its own cafeteria in a separate small house on grounds. One day, 5 years after the incident in Las Vegas I wanted lunch but didn't want the hassle and same old conversation in the station cafeteria so I jumped in the car and went to a nearby Howard Johnson's. It was mid afternoon and there was no one in the place except for me and another man sitting in a booth way at the back. Right! It was Red Skelton. All by himself just having lunch. By this time in my career I had met almost everyone from the Beatles to Elvis. But I found myself approaching that table like a star struck fan to try and get his autograph in my notebook, and at the same time ask what he was doing here in this empty old restaurant. ?

Red Skelton was one of the greatest painters of clowns who ever lived. I knew he couldn't possibly remember me and didn't bother reminding him of our encounter years earlier in Vegas. He said he was here to show some of his clown collection on a television show across the street at Broadcast House " Sure I'll sign your book". And he did. We exchanged some small talk, I thanked him and said goodbye.

I didn't look at that autograph for a few days. When I finally opened the notebook I read what he wrote.

"Thanks, Best Wishes. . . . and May God Bless "

Signed: RED SKELTON

PS: "Lee. if you ever go back to Vegas ...stay away from those quarter machines".

