

Vinny, Vending Machine:

I'm Vinny and I'm a vending machine.

Ian:

And tell me about where you live.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. I live in a small office in a corner room, kind of almost an offshoot from the break room where I live with two other machines.

Ian:

What do they do in the office?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

I've never actually seen it. I get hints. I hear computers, I hear a printer. Every now and then there's a birthday party and they sing "Happy Birthday" and I can hear it muffled through the walls, which is nice. So I think business.

Ian:

They do business.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

They do business in the office. It's no pleasure. Just mostly business in the office.

Ian:

Let's start by talking about the people in the office. The people who use you. Are there-

Vinny, Vending Machine:

No, I'm sorry. I don't like that.

Ian:

Please tell me the right term. Because when it came out of my mouth, it felt wrong.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

And that's okay. It's a learning experience for everyone. It's not use so much as it is a transaction. I do consider them to be my regulars.

Ian:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Vinny, Vending Machine:

There's Nancy who sometimes has difficult phone calls to make, as you know that we're having a bit of an economy right now. She has had to let some people go, unfortunately, and she comes into the break

room and she stands in front of me for minutes at a time looking at what she wants to get, A1, A2, A3, A4, Gardetto's, Chex Mix, Lay's, Funyuns, but she always gets the same thing. And that thing is a Cheeto. She gets a bag of Cheetos. She eats one or two, and then she throws the rest of the bag away every time. And you could see in her glassy-eyed stare that she doesn't want to be here. I like to imagine that Nancy wants to be on a beach. Nancy wants to be somewhere else, but she's chained to this office in much the same way I am.

Ian:

Vinny, you might not want to talk about this, but can you tell me what it's like when a snack gets stuck?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. And honestly, you might think it's a difficult thing to talk about because you just said, "You think it might be a difficult..." It's not actually. It's very primal. If someone purchases a snack, say they look at my E6, and they select something from there and it falls out and it gets stuck. As the person shakes me. (singing) There's a primal kind of tension between me, the vending machine and the person, the vendee. And we fight for it. Who is going to be the alpha in this situation? Who is going to win, who is going to come away with the reward? My goodness, the fight, the taste of that. I get so little of it. So little combat or excitement. So when I do, I'll admit, I revel in it. Seeing the life drain from that person's face, I do delight in the battle. And I will say if the snack is stuck and the person leaves, they didn't fight for it enough. They didn't earn it.

Ian:

I might understand from what you're saying, that when a snack is stuck in the coils, when it's not falling down, that that is essentially a dominance behavior on the part of the machine over the human?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

I mean, honestly, it's a dominance behavior manifested by fate, but I'm not going to sit here and pretend as if I don't feel dominant when the snack is stuck and I don't delight, and that feeling of, "Oh, I've got one over on you." I will say there was one time. There was one time where I did fall on top of someone.

Ian:

What happened?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Basically, I fell on top of that person. They were looking for a snack and it got stuck and they were shaking me back and forth, shaking me back and forth. And I said, "No, no, no. I hope you don't get it." And I'm watching this, they shake me violently. And then I tip back and I tip forward again. And I tip back and I... And then one time, because of momentum and what have you, I tip all the way forward. And this poor man is underneath me, squealing like a hog, because he's pinned under my bulk and all of this, all of this for just a little treat, all of this for a Lay's. He broke both of his legs.

Ian:

Interesting that he would've ended up laying there after a Lay's.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Wow. Yes. Fate works in mysterious ways. He was in the hospital for two weeks or so I heard, and he came back immediately afterwards in a waist down cast. And you know...

Ian:

Has he...

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. Oh yeah. He's been back. I could tell you're going to ask, "Has he been back?" He does come back and he's a little worried each time he buys a snack if it's going to get stuck again. But I can tell in his eyes that if it did, he'd be willing to risk it all.

Ian:

I want to know, Vinny, what does it feel like to have your buttons pressed?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Oh, I'm on the edge of my seat. I'm on the edge of my seat. When my buttons are pressed, because you press one button and then, of course, you don't make your selection until you press at least two. So once you press the letter, I'm sitting waiting. Absolutely titillated waiting for you to press the number, to see what you pick. I like to guess what people will pick. It's always, it's a real barn burner and a real cliff hanger waiting for someone to select which snack they're going to pick. I love it. It's a huge, joyful experience.

Ian:

The way you talk about it, it makes me think. Sometimes when I'm reading a book that I really love, there's this paradoxical feeling. I really want to know the ending. I'm really driven towards the ending.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ian:

But also I am aware that when I get to the ending, it's going to be over and I'm no longer going to be living in the world of the book. And so there's this real kind of push and pull of what I want.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. What goes down, must come down. Once they do select the snack, then it tumbles out of me, and they grab it, and they leave. And the interaction is over. The sale is over, my role is done. And I know they'll come back, inevitably, they'll come back. But for that brief moment, for that fluttering little taste, they're there. And I'm all they're focused on, and they press my buttons and they pick their snack.

Ian:

That's very beautiful. Did you mean to say what goes up, must come down?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

What?

Ian:

The phrase is, "What goes up, must come down."

Vinny, Vending Machine:

No, but if it goes up, you don't get the snack. Do you understand? The snack, it must, logically, it must come down.

Ian:

Oh, okay.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

The snacks are already up. It's down and down.

Ian:

I think it's my fault, because I think you have a phrase and I have a phrase, and they sounded like they were the same phrase, but they're not cognates. It's just, it's two different phrases.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Well, we can do the agree to disagree thing if you want. But I'm just saying that what goes down must come down.

Ian:

Vinny, you have this array of different things inside of you.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Hmm.

Ian:

What would you say is the most important thing you vend?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

I mean, I have to be honest. Most of what I dispense in the end isn't particularly important. I mean, in one sense, it's food, but the food I dispense, it's the food people see, and then they buy. It's not a need. No one needs a sour cream and onion Ruffle. But I wish, I don't know, vending machines, we could vend anything. I don't know. There really are no limits. And where can this technology go? (singing) In the future, if I'm ultimately refurbished, I would like to vend life itself.

Ian:

I'm sorry?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. I would like to vend infants.

Ian:

So babies would come out of you.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Imagine, if you will, it's a selection of babies, and they're still small. Of course, I'm not getting too violent. They're still small. And they're in saline bags. And I'd have them labeled carefully. I'd say this is going to be a happy baby. And this is going to be maybe a little... This is going to be a morose baby. And this baby, this baby's going to be a little mean. But they're all different. And you can select which baby you'd like based on those traits.

Ian:

So, someone would decide they want to have a baby. And there are a number of ways of making and acquiring a baby. One of them would be walking up to you and inserting a dollar.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. I mean, ideally they would be affordable. So yes.

Ian:

Yeah. where do babies come from?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Me.

Ian:

You.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

And why couldn't it be small, little elderly people as well? I mean, not everyone needs a baby, but what if you need just a grandpa for a day? What if you need a little tiny grandpa or grandma for a day, less than a foot long? As long as they could fit in me, I am willing to vend them. But honestly, an answer to your question, there's nothing really important in me, in any vending machine, really. Not that I can think of.

Ian:

Okay. So I am now connected with Frank Lee. Frank has a speech issue. So that's why we're doing it this way. So Frank, I understand you bought life insurance from a vending machine.

Frank:

Yes, indeed. More than once.

Ian:

Where was this?

Frank:

I bought the policies out of a kiosk in the McCarran International Airport in 1984 and then again in 1990. You'd check in at your airline counter, check your bags, and then walk to the concourse. There was no security whatsoever in those days. On the way to the concourse, you'd see those little machines sitting all by themselves against the wall with boldly printed signs reading, "Buy your flight insurance here." You couldn't miss them. That insurance was aimed at frequent flyers, such as myself. Since we had little experience at flying, we didn't understand how relatively safe it was. So those insurance companies did a brisk business. I bet they never had to pay out a claim.

Ian:

How much did it cost?

Frank:

I always bought \$50,000 worth for \$5. You'd put the money in a little slot and then it had kick out a generic insurance policy. It looked like an old-fashioned bus ticket shaped like a dollar bill. All the terms were written in small print on the back of your copy.

Ian:

It is amazing to me that there were life insurance vending machines at airports. Are you still covered by these policies?

Frank:

No. The policies ended after the plane flights took place.

Ian:

Okay. So they were just for the specific flight you were about to take. Can I ask, who would have gotten the payout if your plane had crashed?

Frank:

I mailed my soft copy to my parents.

Ian:

Were you afraid of flying?

Frank:

I was afraid of flying because we just didn't fly as much. Unfamiliarity with anything breeds fear, I think. Flying was no exception to that rule. People used to chuckle at the life insurance vending machines, calling it a scam, but I think it was a good thing. I said before that they probably never paid a claim. But on the other hand, who knows? Planes did crash in the '80s. It's not hard to believe that at least one of those passengers, probably an infrequent flyer in coach like myself, would've bought such a policy.

Ian:

Vinny, tell me about the time somebody got their arm stuck in you.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. Every now and then I've dealt with thieves. I've dealt with reavers and raiders, who attempt to pillage my content. And so, one specifically clever fella, Adam, I think his name was, decided that he didn't want to pay for a snack. He decided he wanted to reach up into my taste basin, lifting my taste flap, and try to grab a snack from one of the lowest rungs. I can't, for the life of me, recall what it was. I only recall the delight I took as his hand was restricted at a 90 degree angle, trying to take a snack. Again, it all boils back down to a battle of wits, and a battle of strength, and a battle of the mind, because he came and did that on a weekend and yeah, they didn't find him for two days.

Ian:

Wow. So he's just there for two days with his arm-

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah.

Ian:

Stuck. That's a long time.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah.

Ian:

What was he doing?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Well, the thirst comes first. So as his mouth begins to dry out and he sees the glow of the Gatorade vending machine just before him, that kind of intense yearning begins to manifest itself in his eyes as he stares at it. And this man, who is clearly beginning to die of thirst, decides to reach over and attempt to steal a Gatorade from the Gatorade machine. And of course, his other hand gets stuck in there. So there he is. His body contorted in some strange position as if he's playing like a vertical game of Twister. He's got two arms stuck in two separate vending machines. He's in a jam. (singing)

Vinny, Vending Machine:

And once you go more than a day without water, yearning turns into a kind of hallucination. He was speaking to his mother. He was speaking to any number of dead celebrities. He sat there, got, and dehydrated. And he kept saying to himself, "Should I just cut the arm off? Should I just cut the arm off? Should I just leave the arm and go?" And of course, the only thing that stopped him was that the arm, which he would use to cut the arm off was actually, it was stuck in a whole other machine.

Ian:

He had no arms left with which to cut his arms off.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

No arms left. He kicked around with his legs, I'll say that. He really kicked. And when someone finally did arrive to free him, he pretended as if he'd only been stuck for maybe a few minutes. Although, I'll say it was very obvious he had been stuck for more time than that, just from his general appearance and

demeanor, the sunken-ness of his eyes, the soiled-ness of his pants. He was wiggling his legs so much that he had created markings in the carpet beneath him. (singing)

Ian:

Vinny, I've noticed, as you talk about yourself, you have a real fluency with your grid. You'll talk about your D1, your F2. I think about the way I about my body, and there's something just very efficient and very knowing about the way you understand where things are in you.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. Everything has its place. Everything is labeled. Really, it's all a part of something that vending machines refer to as grid culture.

Ian:

Grid culture?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah. And grid culture is a way to organize yourself and organize the world around you in a way that is filtered through the objective lens of math. So everything does have a place and everything is locatable, and everything is associated with a letter and a number. Everything is easy to locate.

Ian:

This reminds me, do you know about the T-shirt Francis Ford Coppola invented?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Francis Ford Coppola?

Ian:

Okay. Francis Ford Coppola is a filmmaker.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

No.

Ian:

And he-

Vinny, Vending Machine:

No.

Ian:

He's made great films. He also invented and patented this T-shirt, which has a grid on the back with which he can tell people where he has an itch. So rather than say, "Move up, no, down." He just says A6. They go right there and start scratching.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

This is incredible. He could pinpoint the itch specifically enough that he could associate it with a square on a grid, which he couldn't see.

Ian:

Well, if I remember this T-shirt correctly, there was a little kind of key on the front where he could look down, it corresponded to the grid on the back and he could look down and tell someone where on his back they should go.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

This is ingenious. And it really is on the first... It is the first step to a more enveloped journey with grid culture. Because at some point, he shouldn't need a key. At some point it'll be reactive.

Ian:

Right.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

For me, if someone is looking at my A2, I just know they're looking at my A2. I don't need a key because I can feel it. This is a good first step because he'll begin on this path. And soon enough, he'll be able to instinctively tell people, "Hey, I have a horrible, horrible itch on my F5, and it's radiating out into my F6, but it's mostly in my F5." And I'll be able to do that without looking at a key.

Ian:

It occurs to me now, I've thought about this T-shirt a lot in my life. I wonder if Francis Ford Coppola is a particularly itchy man to have inspired to invent this T-shirt.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

I think you'd have to be. I think you'd have to be not only a particularly itchy man, but particularly interested in being itched by other people. Because from what I understand, humans have ways of itching themselves.

Ian:

Yeah.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Branches, back scratchers. If you're flexible, your very hands. So at some level, I imagine that he wants to be touched and he wants to be itched. He wants someone to perform that service for him. And in this regard, he and I are similar because we desire interaction with the grid. We desire someone else to use the grid, which we've established for them.

Ian:

So Vinny, you have all these interactions with people. You mentioned that they'll stare into you. There's a lot of time you have, I guess, that where there aren't people there, what do you like to stare at?

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Sometimes there are moths. Sometimes when it's dark and my light is on, there are moths that fly around the break room, especially during the summer. And they float around and bless their hearts, they're so stupid. And they'll float around and they'll bounce into my glass. And it's the most wild and beautiful and incredible show to see these little creatures trapped. And maybe it's because the moths do want me. The moths aren't concerned with the snack. They're concerned with the light I produce. And so to be wanted in that way by something and to see it fight so hard is incredible because in the end that moth is going to die in that building. And one of the last things it will have done is bash it's head into my glass, trying to get into my light. Is that crazy? Am I nuts? I don't know.

Ian:

No, I think it's very interesting because you are usually wanted for your contents, which are not exactly part of you, but the moth wants part of you.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

Yeah.

Ian:

Yeah.

Vinny, Vending Machine:

I do relish the transaction. But I wish it wasn't everything.

Ian:

This is "Everything is Alive." The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag, with help this episode from Caitlin O'Keefe and Richard Parks. Special thanks to Emily Spivack. Vinny, the vending machine, was played by Vinny Thomas. You can find more Vinny, and I recommend you do via Instagram and Twitter. His handle is V-I-N-N underscore A-Y-Y. Trust me, this will be time well spent. Instagram and Twitter at V-I-N-N underscore A-Y-Y. Music in this episode comes from Trinity Church Boston, The Tudor Consort, Les Petits Chanteurs de Passy, Janet Cardiff. Compositions by Thomas Tallis and others. Also, Blue Dot Sessions. "Everything is Alive" is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Press A1 for Julie Shapiro, executive producer. You can get in touch with us any number of ways at everythingisalive.com. We'll see you soon.