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# THE SEARCH FOR THE GREAT AMERICAN PINBALL

"You're treating her too rough," I heard somebody say, then felt a bony finger poking into my rib cage. I didn't want to look away from my game—the ball was perilously low—but I caught a glimpse of a craggy-looking man at the edge of my vision.

I shrugged him off. "She's got a tilt, don't she? If she don't like it, let her say so." I affected the nonchalance that a suburban kid who grew up in the Midwest but watched *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* a couple times expected a cowboy would have.

The old man didn't budge. "Kids like you," he sighed, and although I wasn't looking at him I knew he must be shaking his head. "Think you can come through our town, spend some money, act all gruff. I don't like it. And," he added portentously, "neither do my friends."

My father was standing to the other side of me. He set a hand on my arm and said, "Come on, buddy. We've still got a long way to go."

I frowned. Puffed a sullen breath of air past my pursed lips. How bad could it be to let some old guy and his decrepit friends get mad at me? I was twenty-one; like most healthy young people, I felt immortal. I hit the left flipper at just the right time and the ball rocketed up the ramp again.

My father squeezed my arm. I glanced at him. This time, he didn't say anything. His look was enough. And so I stood, unmoving, while my ball jounced around the upper bumpers, racking up a few more points, then plummeted. It landed on my idle flipper. My fingers twitched, but I didn't press the button. I let it drain. I wasn't gonna let some skeezy geezer bogart my game, claim my score as his own. Not after jabbing me. He

was way out of line. Maybe that machine really was his baby. So what? Every machine has a tilt. Inside the electronic guts is a ball set on a shallow ramp. If you try to cheat, shaking the table, that ball will roll up and up until it completes a circuit and freezes the controls. But let me tell you: I was never even close.

My father might have been right in making me walk away, though. As we strolled silently from the truck stop to our car, I began spinning an elaborate mythology in my head, the American West as a place where pinball turns deadly. Where sharpshooters set down their guns and took up the game but never lost their fists. Play wrong, you might get your jaw cracked open by an angry punch thrown with a roll of quarters gripped in the mitt. Mouth off, face death. Or worse.

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My father and I were driving across the country. I'd recently finished college and was heading off to graduate school, but in between had been three weeks of summer to idle away at the ancestral home. A tiny taste of high school again: my father would get out of bed to ask where I'd been when I slunk into his home past midnight. I figured, *what difference does it make*? I was an adult in my eyes.

Actually, I was a spoiled brat. Most of my tuition had been paid for by my parents. I'd done well in school, but I'd done well in that pre-med sort of way: stellar grades, absurd course load, sporadic volunteering, limited personal growth. And I was expecting graduate school to be more of the same.

Most of my friends from college were attending medical school. I'd chosen to get a Ph.D. in chemistry instead. One of my friends had asked me why; like most college kids dreaming of the day they'll be doctors, she couldn't imagine anything competing with her choice.

"We can make a bet," I told her. "You do medicine. I'll do research. And in twenty years we can tally who has saved more lives."

I saw myself as a hotshot. It's true that my identity was stamped with the sort of numbers—*3.98, 790*—that can convince college kids of that. My father must have seen me differently. Now that I have children of my own, I know: you never quite forget the helpless baby your child used to be. I'd attended a college fairly close to home, but at Stanford I'd be on my own. So my father found people to cover his rounds at the hospital and offered to drive me to California.

I was proud. I couldn't imagine his simply wanting a few more days together. I'd read Kesey and Kerouac and wanted our trip to *mean* something. To be epic. I started claiming—to my old high school friends, to my mom and dad, to anybody unfortunate enough to listen—that my father and I were planning a *Search for the Great American Pinball*.

When he was in college, my father washed dishes. He worked warehouses some evenings. Took whatever odd jobs came his way. He'd grown up in a family of musicians, and, like most musicians, his family was always broke. Sometimes off-to-bed-without-your-dinner broke, not as punishment but because there wasn't food in the house. He had to fund his education with minimum-wage exertions and loans. Then came medical school; he took out more loans. He wouldn't finish paying them off until the year he turned forty-five.

But despite feeling broke the whole way through school, despite being dead on his feet after thirty-hour ER shifts during his residency, he always blew a couple bucks playing pinball on Friday nights. When I was six he shelled out several hundred for a machine, Bally's Wizard, that we kept in our garage. When we'd visit my uncle in upstate New York, they'd let me tag along to the 7-11 for a couple games. Abutting the Slurpee Station was Diner, a classic machine.

About the only time my older sister and I got along, when we were young, is when we played pinball together. We'd stand on stools, one of us on each side of the machine. She'd take the left flipper—on *Wizard* this meant she had the shot toward the 5,000 point pocket that could also earn an extra game, when lit—and I'd take the right. I grew up playing.

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When I went to college, I stopped. Having played my whole life, pinball felt like children's stuff. Like listening to a Beatles' *Best Of* instead of their real albums with all the druggy shit. Like taking Tylenol for a fever instead of a slug of vodka and a glass of orange juice with the plan to sleep it off. Even though my parents were paying my way, even though I was living in a dorm, even though I had no real responsibilities at all, I wanted to feel grown up. Which meant, what? Choosing to eat Frosted Flakes for dinner? Cussing with abandon? Oggling fancy gadgets at the mall and deciding to splurge instead of buying books for the semester? Wrestling with a lady friend while we giggled and peeled off our clothes? Getting drunk? Smoking pot?

Unless you count completing projects that a professor had carefully outlined, my conception of adulthood included nothing along the lines of "getting shit done." Nor financial independence. Nor people relying on me for help. Instead I had freedom! That's the sum total of what I thought growing up meant.

Maybe a game or two of pinball really would've made my illusions crumble.

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The week before we left for California, my father couldn't sit me down for a

conversation without my launching into wild speculations about all the machines we'd find. They have games at truck stops everywhere, right? We would surely find and play a dozen. Two dozen! And we would find *the truth*!

"Truth is, son," he told me, "gravity always wins."

"Yeah," I said. "But what if there's something more?"

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Once upon a time—the 1970s, possibly as late as the 1980s—there were pinball machines tucked away in truck stops across the country. By the time my father and I drove I-80 West, we found a grand total of zero. That old man jabbing me in the ribs, complaining I was jostling his machine too hard? Nothing but a dream I then snorted myself awake from. I was slack-jawed and drooling while my father drove toward the blinding sun through Utah.

We'd been stopping every two hours to get out of the car and stretch, but all we found were shitty arcade games. Shooters, side-scrollers, fighters. A surprising number of racing games, the type with a steering wheel and floor pedal and all, in case you wanted to take a break from driving by spending 75 cents to pretend to drive. Those sham-gamblers where your quarter gave you control of a claw that *might* grip tight enough to lift a prize. Even a boxy-looking machine with a rollerball control that simulated beanbag toss.

But no pinball.

My father and I had planned to take a whole week for the trip, driving easy hours and spending the weekend together once we reached California, but on the second day

my fifteen-year-old little brother, back home, was play-fighting with a friend and broke his face. His maxilla, the bone beneath his right eye. My father and I curtailed our plans, deciding to make the whole trip in three days so that he could fly back to Indiana in time for my brother's surgery.

We still hit all the truck stops, mind you, checking for pinball at every one. But instead of easy days, we drove to midnight, then hit the road again at six in the morning.

We reached California late, booking an overpriced room in one last low-amenities hotel. The next morning we drove around Menlo Park, looking for an apartment. I found one, a dumpy studio, for $950 a month.

My upstairs neighbor walked down to say hello while my father and I were carrying in my few possessions: a blanket, a box of books, an electric guitar, and a duffel bag of clothes. The neighbor looked Indian, but his accent couldn't have come much farther than New Jersey. He seemed to be about my age. He asked what I'd come to California for.

"Graduate school. Studying, like, quantum mechanics, enzyme design, some biomedical stuff. At Stanford," I added, as though that wasn't obvious from the fact we were in Menlo Park. Then I asked him back, "What about you?"

"I'm with a computer company. We're making this thing like email but only for messages that fit on your phone."

"Cool," I said, but I thought his work sounded dumb. Why would anyone switch to a service that forced you to write less?

My former neighbor—I've long since forgotten his name—is probably a millionaire by now. But I still think Twitter sounds dumb. I do have an account, but for me Twitter

means a frustrated half hour staring at the computer trying to think of something pithy, then deleting a few more words to make room for octothorpes. Maybe it's more fun for people who can post messages from their phones. My phone can't even receive texts; my wife and I had to learn to live cheap in order to do the work we want to do.

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I drove my father to the airport. He gave me a hug.

"I'm sorry we didn't find any pinball," he said.

I wrapped one arm around my father to pat him on the back. My other arm dangled limply at my side. "It's okay, dad. Maybe that's the message. That all the machines are gone."

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A year passed. Despite my big dreams about saving lives, I hated school. I shirked homework, rocked exams, graded while drunk, made awkward attempts to ask my classmates out on dates. Given that our incoming class was predominantly male, the women I asked were probably already sick of blockheaded flirtations and would've preferred a conversation about *science* instead. But what did I know?

I did make a few friends. I found the undergraduates who sold drugs. And I heard somebody say that there was a pinball museum out in Alameda.

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Despite its proximity to debauched San Francisco, Alameda seemed stuck in a time warp that never left the 1950s. We saw tree-lined streets with tiny, interchangeable houses. A group of scrawny white children with buzzcuts playing kick the can in somebody's front lawn. A non-ironic diner. There were televisions flickering through some windows, but most of the houses were already dark at nine o'clock.

My friends and I parked near the pinball museum then walked down one of those quaint street to the military docks. We huddled in the space between two giant cement tubes to smoke pot. It was a chilly autumn night, especially alongside the water, but we were dressed in short sleeves and flip-flops. We shivered as we passed the joint around. Eric said he wished he had a sweatshirt, to which Branden replied:

"When I moved to California, I resolved never to be prepared for anything. Ever. This place is soft! What's the worst it could do to me?"

"Have bud, will travel," said Eric, using his hands to rub his upper arms.

"What more would you need? You start showing up with a sweatshirt, people are gonna think you take this place seriously."

We smoked till the nub was burning our fingertips, then Eric dropped it and used a flip-flop to scuff it out, his arms still huddled tight against his chest. Then we straggled our way back to the museum.

It was a claustrophobic place, five rooms packed wall-to-wall with fifty or more machines. We were giggling, but I'm sure the matronly woman at the door had seen plenty of long-haired city kids before. She let us in without remark.

The machines were all set to "free play," no quarters required, just press the button, pull the plunger, and commence to lose. This was ideal for patrons attempting to play

pinball high. And their collection! I don't know if you're a pinball person, but if so you probably know about *Addams Family, Attack from Mars, Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and *House of Magic*. These all have well-organized targets, fluid gameplay, charming sounds, and surprisingly compelling storylines, especially considering that the stories had to be grafted onto games where, really, the player is just trying to keep a little metal ball from falling down the drain.

But the table that dazzled us was *Orbitor 1*. It was like nothing I'd ever seen; played stoned, this game felt like magic. The ball seemed to float inside the glass display. The ball *swooped* in arcs and curves. Whirling bumpers spun it rather than simply knocking the ball away, making its path excruciatingly difficult to predict. Sometimes the ball seemed to swerve away from one course or another without having touched a thing.

"What is this trickery!" I shouted.

"Magnets?" mused Eric, peering down.

Honestly, we hardly cared. We just wanted to play. Play and play again. After six awestruck games, I raised a finger into the air to declaim:

"This is the future of pinball!"

At the time, I had no idea that the machine was older than I was, first manufactured the year before I was born. All I knew was that it was wicked fun. That it was like none of the others. It apologized if it drained your ball too fast! It had beautiful astronomical art, none of the stereotypical imbalancingly-buxom babes. It seemed to glow while we played.

I realized that I had a phone call to make. "I gotta dash out to the car," I told my

zonked friends. They barely nodded, still entranced. My flip-flops led to ineffectual dashing.

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When my father answered, he sounded groggy. And worried. "Little buddy? Is something wrong?"

"No, no, dad, I found it! We found it!"

"What'd you find, little buddy?"

"The future of pinball! What we were looking for! It's here! It's in California!"

"That's good..."

"Aw, man, were you asleep? Man, I keep forgetting about the time change. I'm sorry, dad. You should, like, go back to sleep. I'll call you tomorrow. It's just, I was so excited."

"It's always good to hear from you," he told me, then hung up.

I flipped the phone shut and tucked it in my pocket. Then looked up at the night sky, but my eyes couldn't quite bring the stars into focus. Still, I felt like the aborted phone call had been insufficient reason to come outside. I opened the trunk of the car, grabbed the plastic jug of cheap gin I always kept in there, uncapped it, took a swig. Then spat. Stuck out my tongue. Cheap gin is disgusting. I screwed the cap back on, tossed the jug in, slammed shut the trunk, and swaggered back inside. There were more games—and more games of *Orbitor*—to play.

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Eventually they kicked us out. Not just us. I'm sure we were obnoxious, but not sufficiently so to receive personalized punitive treatment. No, they kicked everyone out at midnight.

Still buzzed, I drove us home, back across the bay. Like usual, I flashed a big smile at the toll collector, hoping she wouldn't notice I was cracked. I didn't realize that, safe and weary inside her booth, she probably didn't care.

My father called early the next morning. I assume it was simply ignorance at how late grad students sleep on weekends and not any sense of retribution that led him to ring while I was still asleep. He usually did rounds at several hospitals in Indianapolis—including the HIV clinic where kids no older than myself routinely went to die—but had pulled no clinical service for the following weekend.

"I could take a few days off," he told me. "Fly out to see you Thursday. You could show me your new machine."

Only one year after we began our search, my father and I would rendezvous with the Great American Pinball. And play.

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My father and I arrived at the museum minutes after opening on Friday night. I wanted to be there before the crowds. And my father was on east coast time. Hospital time, too. Even when we lived at the same longitude, he'd always gone to bed much earlier than me.

My father paid the woman for our tickets—did she seem to remember me?—then I ushered him in. For a moment, I felt worried. The museum's website claimed their collection was three-fold larger than would fit inside this space, so they sometimes rotate the machines. How often did that mean?

But then we reached the back room. There it was: *Orbitor 1*. Its lunar crags gleamed magnificently.

"Should I ring up two players?" I asked my father, beaming.

He nodded, leaning down to inspect the case. He'd played a lot of pinball, but never a game like this.

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Sober, it was easier to understand what was happening. The machine had a painting of lunar craters at its base and, suspended above, a sheet of curved and contoured plexiglass for the ball to roll across. The swoops and jags in the ball's course were caused by hills and valleys on the clear play surface. Which was interesting, sure. But also: a gimmick. After two or three games, it began to seem gaudy and cloying. Once I'd drained my last ball, while my father was still playing his, I shuffled out to the parking lot and sat down on the curb. Dusk was settling. I stared at the leaf-shedding trees across the street.

A few minutes later, I heard my father's voice. He'd stepped out to join me. "What's wrong, little buddy?"

"It's just... I'd thought..."

"Hey, you might still be right. Maybe the soul of American Pinball really is a cheap trick now." He paused. "Medicine is a lot like pinball, you know. The machine is always gonna get you in the end. So we'll do anything, fire up the bells and whistles, the multiballs and flashing lights, to keep ourselves from remembering."

I shook my head. He was a fifty-two year old doctor, saving lives, somebody with a successful career, a successful (or so I assumed at the time) marriage, too. It was fine for him to treat our failed quest as a sardonic joke. But I was in my twenties, still in school. Despite the drugs, the boasts, the escapism all around, I needed the dream to be real. I wasn't ready for the thought that I might be on track to waste my life.

My father sat beside me. With both our gazes fixed upon those trees across the street, he slung an arm over my shoulder. I'd been a year in California, but that was the first night I cried.