



memoir **By MARSHALL FRADY**

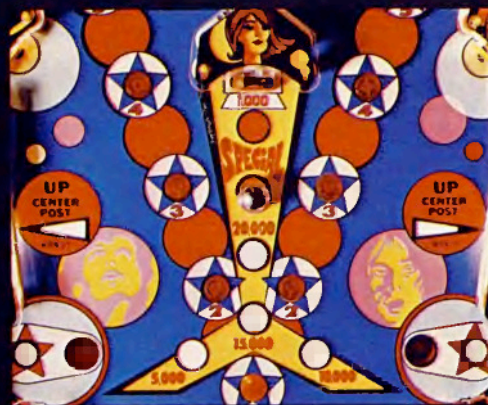
NO DOUBT FOR ALL MEN since Cain, the first true tastings of life have blurred to the palate of innocence coarsely, rank and violent as new garlic. I suspect that one of the common events in the private unarticulated history of my own generation, growing up during the Fifties in the fluorescent beginnings of the shopping-center civilization, was that we tended to come by those rude musks of experience by way of playing pinball machines—much as poolrooms once served the boyhood seasoning of our fathers. In America's lost age of villages, even in the most meager and grimly prim township could be found at least one pool hall, unobtrusive on a dirt side

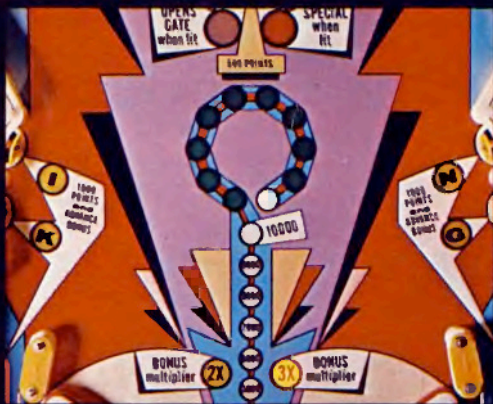
PIN-BALL

of honky-tonks, whores and gaudy machines that taught about life at a nickel a pop

street, with a kind of sleazy indestructibility, a solitary quality of being one great gong of time older than all the trim white churches, the banks, the schools, the flags. It shared this peculiar primeval authenticity with only one other place in town, the jail. In fact—aside from such trivial tokens of freedom in the poolroom as half pints sagging lumpily in hip pockets, a petty interchanging of linty wadded dollar bills and the idle clack and murmur of cue balls—the interiors of the two places were virtually indistinguishable. There was the same mute stalking and pacing of derelict figures under wanly glaring light bulbs, in a muggy lassitude of tedium faintly sour with the brutal swelter of (text continued on page 164)

Three basic flipper machines in current or recent production: All are available from local distributors, as explained in the text beginning overleaf. Bally's consummately subtle Fireball is possibly the finest flipper machine ever produced. Alas, it's out of production now, but used models are available for around \$800. Super Star, a one-player machine from Williams, features knockdown target hiding hole that offers up to 20,000 points, plus possible free games. New one-player machines sell for around \$695, used models for less, depending on condition. Gottlieb's two-player King Kool, an all-time arcade money-maker, boasts four oversized flippers, plus advancing bonus recorded after ball leaves playfield. A new two-player machine costs around \$795.



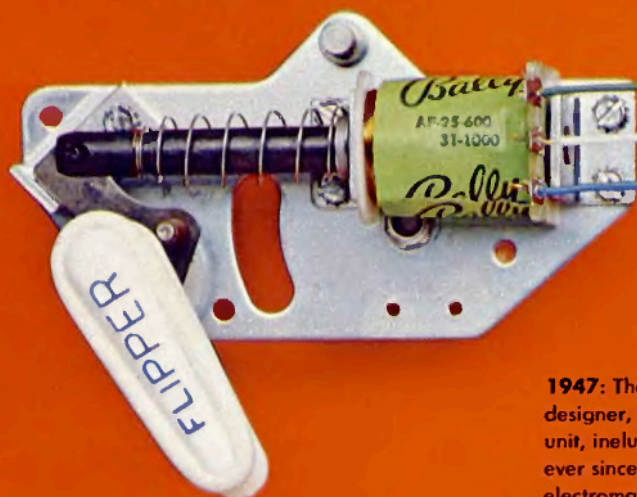


Above the machines:
Details from their playfields. Spinning disk at the vital center of Fireball adds chance to what otherwise would be entirely a game of skill. Putting ball in either hole (top left or right in Fireball inset) produces an extra ball; hitting white knobs at lower right and left releases captive balls for points and action. Messenger ball at upper left also releases captives, returning one for reshooting. Blue knob closes flippers, white knobs open them. A machine you've got to play to get into.

In the drop-target area of Super Star, rolling over numbered buttons in order lights concealed hole for free games. King Kool's advancing bonus array is a clever means of mollifying failure. Bonus award increases during play and scores after ball disappears.



GREAT MOMENTS in PINBALL HISTORY



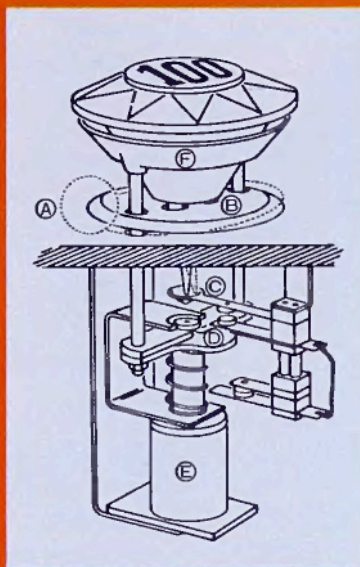
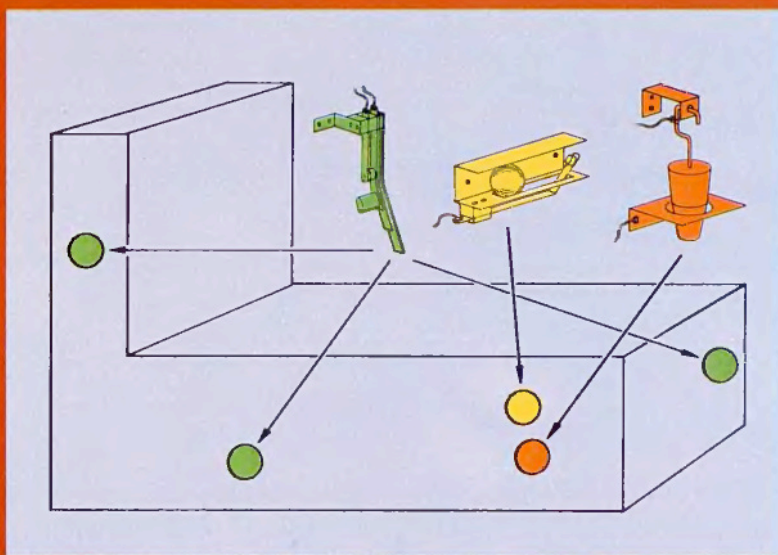
1947: The late Harry Mabs, legendary pinball designer, invents the solenoid-activated flipper unit, ineluctably associated with the game ever since. At the touch of the button, green electromagnet swallows black plunger. Ka-pow!

... concerning the finest game on four legs—and how you can purchase one for your very own

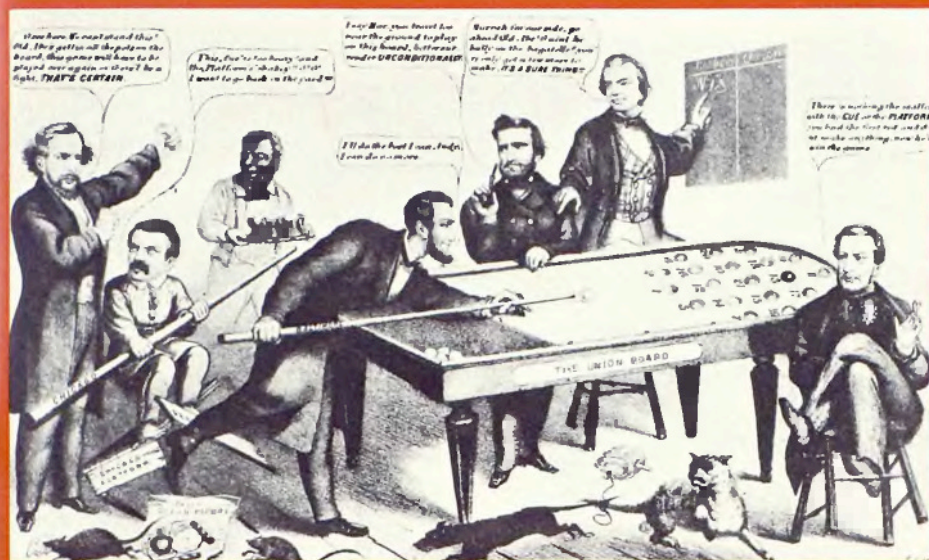
modern living
By MICHAEL LAURENCE

DESPITE ALL THE BLATHER about airplanes and racing cars, the ultimate commingling of man and machine still takes place at the silk-smooth flipper buttons of a well-tuned pinball machine. No other human endeavor so involves skills of mind and body with the challenging intricacies of a mechanical toy. Nowhere else are the rewards as rich, the sorrows as devastating. Except for its ability to preoccupy for hours or even days at a time, pinball playing could be compared to making love. Both acts are sources of a pleasure better experienced than described. Both improve with practice and respond to innovation. And both can prove satisfying day after day for an entire lifetime, as refinements in technique supplant flagging desire and increasing familiarity.

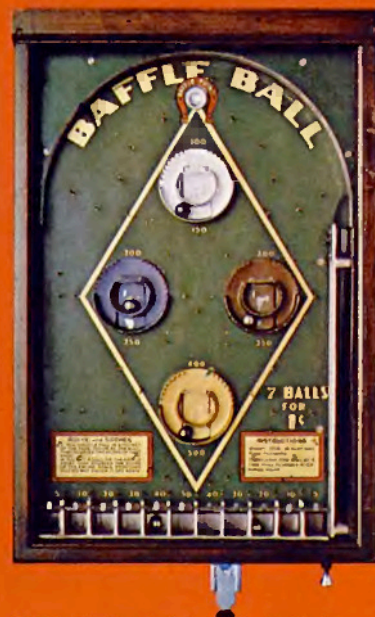
Not surprising, when you think about it. While not as old as lovemaking itself, pinball far preceded airplanes, automobiles or other mechanical gadgets through which men express themselves. The contemporary pinball machine had its ancestor in the bagatelle board, a billiardlike gaming device whose origins are lost in antiquity. The first literary reference to pinball—in chapter 14 of *Pickwick Papers*—mentions one of these: Members of the Pickwick Club visited the (continued on page 260)



1935: A banner year for pinball innovation. Electronic anti-tilt devices eliminate brawn as a play factor; solenoid-powered kicker units add action. Sketch of contemporary machine (above) shows design and placement of anti-tilt devices. Plumb bob (in red) is positioned near left flipper button; machine tilts when plumb hits metal ring. Moral: Nudge the machine with your right hand. Ball-in-channel device (yellow), also located at left, tilts if machine is raised. No putting bricks under the front legs. Anti-slam devices (green) protect against hard knocks. Left: The modern thumper-bumper unit is a model of electronic simplicity. Ball A hits ring B connected to pylon C closing contacts D activating solenoid E, which pulls down ring F. Ka-chunk!

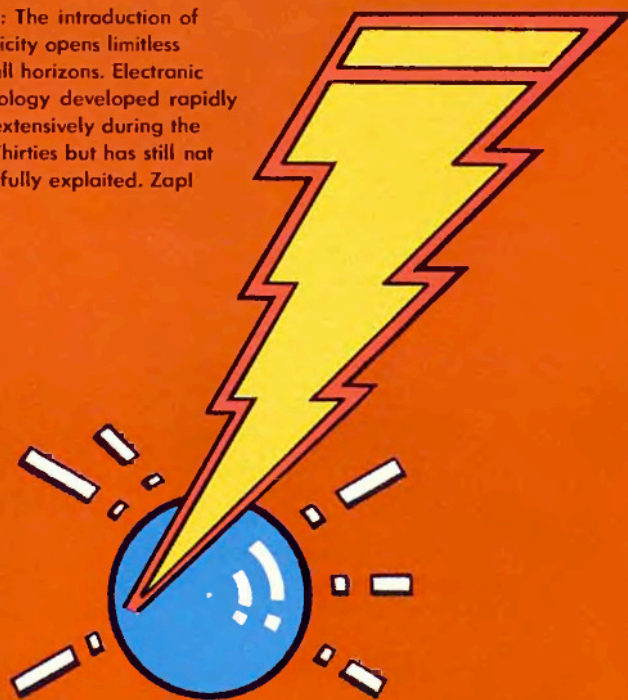


1862: Union Army suffers staggering defeat at Bull Run, while President Lincoln plays pinball. Rodents at lower left—and players' scruffy beards—typify the sleaziness with which pinballing was once associated. But no more. Football is now the sport of Presidents, but Beautiful People still prefer pinball. Ka-ching!



1930: D. Gottlieb's Baffle Ball, the first mass-marketed pinball machine, paid the rent for a generation of Depression-era barkeeps. Plink, plink.

1933: The introduction of electricity opens limitless pinball horizons. Electronic technology developed rapidly and extensively during the late Thirties but has still not been fully exploited. Zap!



1973: Tomorrow's pinball? Sea Hunt, by Allied Leisure Industries, gives illusion of underwater play. Motorcycle grips activate flippers and shake mirrored playfield. Glug, glug.



1937: A year writ larger than life on the mnemonic backboard of a generation of pinballers. On December fourth, Western Equipment and Supply Company, now defunct, introduces Aksarben (that's Nebraska spelled backward)—featuring the addictive allure of free games. To the subjective rewards of five well-played balls, add positive reinforcement and delayed gratification. Thwack, thwack!

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN CRAIG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON AZUMA

PINBALL

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weary but unflagging human quick, enclosed in bare glum walls scribbled over with an infinity of graffiti. For a youth from the genteel and circumspect neighborhoods in town, where on sunny Saturday mornings the careful measured cadences of piano lessons gusted lightly from front-parlor windows, the pool hall was a clandestine entry into the darker, measureless labyrinth of his more ancient and elemental legacy as a man, the local depot beyond which lay those unknown primordial regions of mortality.

In my own case, as a Baptist minister's son in a small Georgia city, I grew up in a world I now remember as an endless recurrence of luminous chaste Sunday mornings, ethereal hymns and an abiding chill mustiness, like old roses in stale water, of implacable rectitudes and decorums abstracted beyond the senses, away from the earth. And it was not pool tables but pinball machines that acted, obliquely, as the medium of translation out of that nebulous, cauled boyhood. Augusta was not only aboriginally and incorrigibly a river city, enduring rowdiness lurking below municipal sedateness, but it had also acquired an Army base on its outskirts, a conjunction of circumstances that made it prime turf in pinball geography, multiplying one more time what had already been a clamorous extravagance of honky-tonks and other covert retreats—rather barbarous territory altogether, suggesting some remote metropolitan reservation for sullen half-tamed Anglo-Saxons from the surrounding piny gnat-shimmering flatlands. So the frontier edge of that larger ultimate continent of experience turned out to be a dingy nether region of old gas stations and cinder-block roadhouses—dumpy back rooms bare as a penitent's cell, where one found the serious machines, with that plain cigarette-scorched, slightly dilapidated look of authenticity, on which free games meant money, not just replays. There, sometime around 12 or 13, it was as if I were hung for a year in a single changeless pose, arms spread to grip the edges of the machine like a pulpit, in an urgent lean of supplication before an illuminated board furiously and unintelligibly pinging and chattering. And illustrated—like a primitive talisman of the essential sensuality of all gambling—with exuberantly livid comic-book visions of a race of identically glad and opulent females in bathing suits, arrayed over an anonymous palmed beach under a tropical moon, all of them strenuously frolicking around windows of numbers, the crosshatched cryptograms of whimsical and inscrutable chance.

Entreating those static, blankly festive nymphs of luck, it's also possible that the

body—engaged, with urgent tugs and hip nudgings, in a tensed and delicate interplay with the elusive drift and swoop of the ball—began to pick up, like dim signals of another intelligence, the first smoldering premonitions of the heft and play of pleasuring a woman. It was, along with everything else, most assuredly a gently dynamic intercourse of kinetics, involving a fine elegance of watchwork movements, thoughtless subtle reactions, a body wit of discreet and infinitely varied syncopations. Some veterans of the machines allege that no one who has arrived at a deft rapport with pinball has ever wound up dull in the leg clasp of woman. But that poses the prospect that a number of artisans might pass the rest of their lives trying to discover some palpable materialization of those vivid beach sirens imprinted on glass, always with an obscure anticipation that, through the same heatless fierce exercise of precision in bed, some ultimate mystic board of their own lives will suddenly erupt in lights and bells and free games.

In any event, in those dank cement back rooms, bleakly lit by the flickering glare of icy neon tubes, one had a rudimentary apprenticeship in the immemorial mysteries of the race: lust, loneliness, obsession, risk, defeat; but also indefatigable hope and belief. What lent this apprenticeship its particular dark and tawdry glamor of the illicit was, more than anything else, the places where one ventured to play the machines. Across the river in South Carolina, there was a certain roadhouse tucked away in pines, reached by a long and viciously gullied dirt road that plunged, unmarked, off the highway, trailing wearily through a cow pasture, through nighttime whiffs of sweet dew and manure, distant disembodied lowings and moans. It was a plain harsh cracker-box building, adorned by a single neon Pabst sign, constructed seemingly in one swift ragged fit of carpentry out of raw yellow-pine planks. Inside, there still lingered a wild tang of pine resin, along with a savage mildew tinge of whiskey and vagrant nuances of vehemently sweet female perfumes—making up a kind of musk that will forever remain, for me, the incense of prodigality. On weekends here occurred all manner of mayhem, this site having somehow become appointed by the countryside as the ritual ground for the resolution of elemental scores: a muttered insupportable affront in a café two weeks earlier or a yellow-haired wife who had honky-tonked one time too many. Such matters were taken care of here in a kind of common sacrament of retribution, which usually began inside with a sudden clatter of chairs and a climactic exultant

howl and bellow of voices, continuing outside in the deep summer night with a fitful, wordless scuffling in the gravel parking lot, bodies clumping against pickup-truck fenders, maybe a quick glint of knife blades, sometimes a few blue gunshots.

Playing the machines that stood off in a corner of that low catacomb-dark room, I had seen several times a closed door at the rear, edged with a thin stenciling of light like a tin slide slipped over a lantern pane, behind which intermittently heaved a vague muffled uproar like the sound of surf on a distant shore. Then one Saturday night, the door briefly opened. There was a momentary glimpse, no longer than the dazzling flash of a few frames of film, of smoke gauzing sluggishly under hooded lights, a soft glittering of amber drinks, a single flicker of white dice across a brilliant green-felt tabletop around which moved a slow luxurious eddy of expensively preened people, among them a tall, gaunt woman in an iridescent emerald gown, poised slightly off-tilt with her mouth open in hectic oblivious laughter. I recognized her, after the door had shut again, as my second-grade music teacher—known to me, up to this instant, only as a tenuous presence in drizzling February afternoons past, a lank and gawky figure in drab sagging woolens, usually smudged in eraser dust, who lived, unmated, in a shuttered antebellum hulk with several sour female collies and an unmowed yard. Now, in one quick glimpse, she had startlingly and surrealistically metamorphosed. Attached to her was an anonymous plumpish man with thinning sandy hair and whiskey-scorched cheeks who was wearing a glazed grin, one small dainty hand spread against her flank. But in that second the door had been open, it seemed she had glanced at me—had seen me, out in the dark blind depths of that other room, standing solitary in the lurid nickelodeon glow of the pinball machine—but without recognition, or rather, with an idle and totally different kind of recognition, her eyes bright and avid and ecstatic, a rapid and incidental glance that nevertheless communicated some stunning rumor of other unsuspected galaxies. (Only a few months later, after the roadhouse owner got a call one Saturday sundown apprising him that four carloads of state lawmen were headed his way from Columbia, the place vanished, in about 15 minutes, in a sudden roar and glare of flames.)

By accident—or perhaps not so much by accident—one tended to come by such peripheral epiphanies wherever one went to shoot the machines. One summer evening, at the back of a drive-in

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eatery adjoining the modest white tidy house of another former teacher of mine—a sturdy ample-hipped spinster with a clamp to her mouth like a Boston terrier's, whose apparent sole exhilarations had been Longfellow and Whittier and Sir Walter Scott—I looked up after finishing a game to discover her standing in her lighted bedroom window. It overlooked the diner's back parking lot, where there was the usual uproarious dog pack of male adolescents like myself, moiling in the smoldering night. Now, above their profane lewd yaps and brays out there in the dark, she proceeded slowly and deliberately and serenely—with a grace and elegance and detachment almost theatrical—to shrug off her housecoat, reach behind and disengage her bra, then peel it off lightly, lingering in the lighted window, above the abruptly stricken and hushed parking lot, for a long giddy moment: bared, astonishing, momentous, ponderously mammalian.

Perhaps inevitably, there was a single battered pinball machine in the front office of that archaic pre-expressway motel—called something like *The Blue Moon*, no more than four meager wooden cottages huddling under mimosas with a feebly festive piping of thin red-and-green neon along their eaves—where, one heavily raining autumn night, I waited for two friends to return from their five-dollar assignations in the back. After a few minutes, the man at the desk—bulky as a ham, with a Marine crewcut, wearing one of those purple-silk jackets with a Japanese dragon embroidered on the back—observed in a voice like the sepulchral croak of a toad, "You sho' like to play them pinball machines, don't you?"

"Hell, I sho' do. Yes, sir."

"Your buddies came in here with you. I don't guess they like to play them pinball machines as much as you do, do they?"

"Oh, yeah. It's just they—"

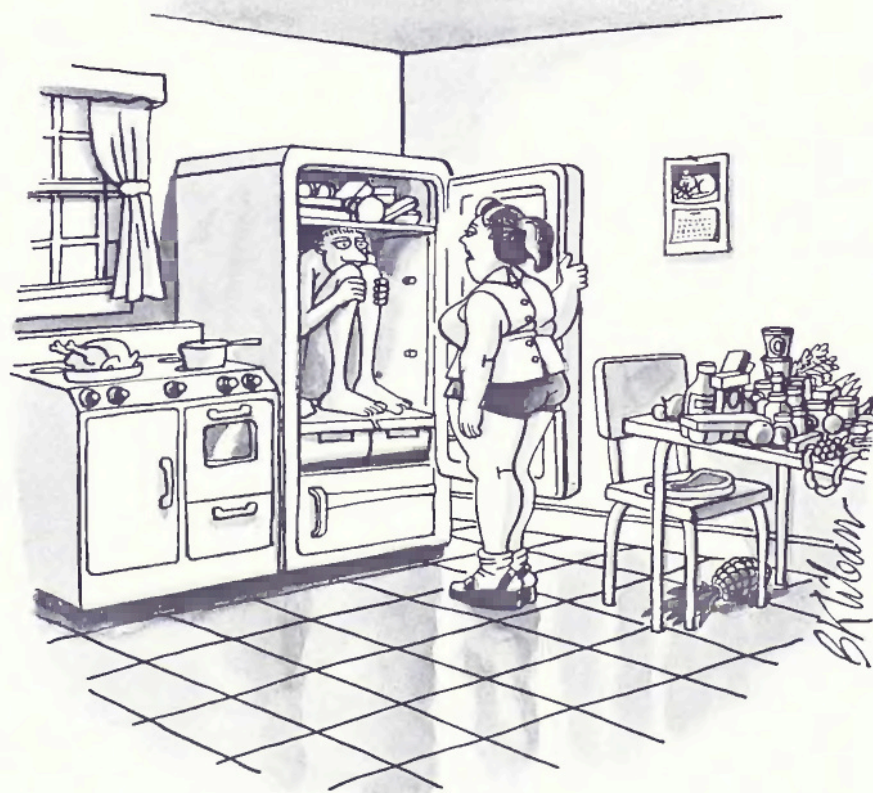
But at that point, a woman wrapped in a frazzled chenille bathrobe appeared through a clapping screen door, barefooted, mellowed somewhat beyond her 30s and a bit drab and dumpling of features, but, in all fairness, heavily plush and languorous under the robe as she leaned on the counter. "Hey, Ralph. I want you to call Sonny at the Dixie Cab and have him bring me out a pint of J. W. Dant. . . ."

In short, about seven minutes later, I was in a room with a single bare light bulb dangling bleakly between slat-board walls painted a sallow caramel, and a wire-coil heater glowing on a wilted linoleum floor, lying skin-bare between the harsh sheets of a creaking iron-frame bed with rain booming on

the tin roof as I watched her—in uncanny duplication of that same calm and formal motion I had glimpsed in that lighted window behind the diner only a few months earlier—bend her plump arms behind her and then delicately shrug off her bra, brimmingly abundant as she leaned to snap off the light, the bed twanging loudly again as she settled herself beside me. May she be blessed wherever she dwells tonight, she was—if a bit parched—anything but perfunctory. The bed clangor of those tumultuous seismic heavings and surgings at last ceased, and after a moment she slipped back out of the sheets and clicked on the light, putting on only her bra at first, standing before me with the lush tufting of her luxurious lap as she recited some ancient joke about a lickish Indian. A few minutes later, I was back in the car with the two friends—it was only 9:30, not 20 minutes since we had first pulled up there, but I had the sense of an age having passed unawares. Whatever. I have no recollection of ever having played the machines again, after that night.

But through the fevers of that year or so at the machines had filtered murmur-

ings of distant metaphysical frequencies. One always seemed to be playing pinball in settings that were more or less the stage drop of transience—truck stops, the waiting rooms of bus stations—transience itself being that particular condition in which mortals come closest to picking up, like faint vagrant memories of some dream whose meaning has been lost, intimations of the quiet spaces of eternity. And after an hour at the machines, one became lost in fierce solitary communion with a miniature contained cosmos under glass that, like a pool mirroring the universe, was filled with its own infinite chaos of caprice and happenstance. Each time one tenderly pulled the throttle back to that exquisite precise measured delectability of tension, it seemed as if one were acting out a simple metaphor of all brief human tenures on this planet. The throttle, released, softly bumping the steel ball on its blind lunge out into the contrived carnival of circumstances: an imponderable physics of loss and gain, blessing and disaster, upon which one could only impinge by dull approximate secondary nudges. Unlike pool or poker, pinball is a singularly isolate and self-absorbed exertion, a kind of isometrics, perhaps an appropriate spiritual



"We can't keep meeting like this, Hilary. All my food is going rotten!"

calisthenic for the age. Over the course of those long marathon sessions—realizing one has eaten only by noticing in mild surprise a brief aftertaste of chili, not hearing until five minutes later the clang of the filling station's service hose, while the throttle between the fingers began to assume a film of warm dew, like sweating change—one seemed to enter higher and higher vibrancies of concentration and consciousness. Abruptly, at some point, it was as if one had passed completely beyond all time and motion and materiality: had become suspended in a lasting stasis, oblivious of whatever collapse of empires might be under way in that surrounding world now only occasionally glimpsed, beyond a murky, grimed winduppane, as the façade of a pale and trivial illusion, without dimension or sound, ephemeral and meaningless. One began eventually to arrive at certain suspicions about the true secret processes of time—that centuries sometimes evolve in an afternoon and calendar days amount to the idle interval of an instant. That, in fact, there is really no such thing as time, since the past is polyphonically simultaneous with the present.

For most, with the waning of adolescence, that mysterious poetry disappears. But even in their 40s, a few continue fitfully and obsessively to return to the machines. Across the river from Augusta,

in the back rooms of scrubby little cafés and cement-block beer taverns squatting in grassless dirt yards under chinaberry trees, hardware salesmen and office clerks and bread-truck drivers still wander in at midmorning, out of the flat vicious emptiness of their lives, out of the unremitting brute attritions of car payments and sales quotas and phone bills and time clocks—as if haunted by a nostalgia for some old indefinable stillness, a timelessness now lost in their pasts. They invoke the bingo machines, the ones that still pay off, devices that have the doomed unkept look of meaningless relics. Technicolor numerals fading into dusty blankness. All of them, as they play, stand spraddle-legged, with a rigid quality of obstinate furtive rage, amid a wide litter of shredded nickel-roll wrappings like the numberless spent cartridges of some furious unabating firing line.

Among this company one morning recently was an insurance salesman, a brisk, stubby, chipper figure in wine-gabardine trousers and diamond-patterned shirt. He admitted happily—without taking his gaze off the board, one eye squinting from the smoke of a jauntily uptilted cigarette that pinned his grin together in the middle, ash dusting his scintillant tie—"Hell, I've lost maybe twenty thousand dollars on these goddamn

contraptions. I've dropped three hundred in 'em in one day." All the while, he maintained a kind of running undertone incantation of constant incredulous gleeful despair—"Awright. Awright. Wait—no, no, you mother. You sonuvabitch. Not worth a shit, look at that"—plying his shots with little abject bitten shoves with the heels of his hands, muted grunts and whines, his hips dipping, impervious to a fly trickling down the edge of his ear and then across his shirt collar. "Yeah," he reported, "my wife never knew for sure where I actually was all those mornings I was supposed to be out there selling policies. Now I got my house up for sale to get outa debt. Hell, she knows now." Presently, with a sudden gloom like the twilight of an eclipse, a storm blew down with slamming, ransacking gales of rain. "Aw, shit, my car windows," muttered the salesman. "Look, don't let nobody hop on this machine, it must be about to get hot, with all the junk it's been giving me all morning." He was gone only a moment, scuttling back with his shirt and trousers drooping soggly, but his cigarette still lit and pasted at its doughty angle to his grin, as he hastened back to the machine with that heedless eye-glittering alacrity of rapt inextinguishable expectation.



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