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THE PENNY ARCADE

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The Penny Arcade smelled of dust and old tobacco, the carpet was as smooth and brittle as lino, its swirling patterns flattened after decades of holidaymakers looking for entertainment on overcast and rainy days. It sat ironically on the Sundeck; a small wooden pier that remained long after the elegant Victorian pier that stretched out beyond the harbour walls had been blown away in a January storm. In the centre of the arcade was a booth where a bored teenager handed over plastic money bags of one hundred halfpennies in return for a 50p piece. Each Sunday afternoon we would collect our 50p bags and spend an hour or so winning and losing on the ancient machines. My favourite was a driving game that looked like a pinball machine, except a white steering wheel with hard plastic moulding for your fingers stuck out from the end of the machine so you could control the pink tin car under the glass, held in place by wires that somehow were attached by pulleys, I think, to the white steering wheel. Six halfpennies inserted started the painted road which rolled beneath the car, and random warning lights would shine out from the road telling you a dangerous curve was coming up. The slightest deviation from the grey road onto the flat green verges would be a life lost. I never won my money back.

The journey to the Penny Arcade from our house was a long one through small villages, open flat fields, and finally to the tall red brick hospital, once a Workhouse. Forty-five minutes each way every Friday evening and Sunday afternoon. Friday evenings after my dad finished work, straight there, straight back. Sunday afternoons, straight there, stopping off at the arcade on the way back before returning home.

The lotto machines in the arcade were called One-Armed Bandits because they robbed you of your money and had a single silver arm with a shiny ball on the end that you pulled down to get the reels of numbers to spin in their housing, right before your eyes. Each pull down gave a mechanical clunk and a ding as the spinning started, and then three clunks as each reel stopped and the silver arm flipped back into its upright position, waiting for your next coin to drop in after you'd lost again. Three BARs gave you the jackpot, three Xs gave you half, but anything including 0s and you lost your money. I rarely played on them as it appeared to be just chance whether you won or not, and the red noughts and black crosses were dull, but my mother spent all her ha'pennies staring at the spinning reels, hoping to win the jackpot. The One-Armed Bandits sat squat in rows near the large double doors that opened out onto the Sundeck. Even in the summer when we came, it never seemed full or even busy, as it was always Sunday afternoon teatime - visitors had already left on coaches returning to London, and locals rarely wasted their money on the old machines.

The first time we stopped off at the arcade on the way back my sister was 10, and I was eight. Brierlands smelled like a hospital. We parked out in front of the main entrance which had a ramp so her small wheelchair could be pushed inside and along the long corridor down to the Peter Pan ward where the babies and small children were kept. The corridor had tall windows that ran up to the ceiling but started way above my head. I could see the blue sky and a few wispy clouds, mares' tails, high in the atmosphere.

Most of the machines, if not all of them were gambling machines. My dad, who loved to bet on the Grand National, always made a beeline for one where the tin horses and jockeys raced down the length of a green painted track. Each one named after a colour, Dad favoured spread-betting and would rush to post six coins at the start of each race and ensure a win each time. I would choose according to whoever hadn't won recently, not because I guessed that the winner was randomised but because I felt sorry for those who weren't fast enough. Teal Drake was my favourite, it never seemed to win, but I loved the colour teal and its name, new to me then. The horserace stood in the middle of the arcade, across from the driving game, so I was rarely out of my father's sight, I knew he was there as I tried to keep the pink car on the road.

The corridor had industrial pale grey flooring that squeaked with my trainers but made it easier to mop and keep clean. A steep wide staircase on the right led up to the adult wards for those able to walk. Sometimes, at Christmas, when there was a party for the children, adult patients would wander down in search of the music, party food, and Father Christmas. He was always played by one of the van drivers, a man I didn't know but he looked right with a round red face and even rounder belly. He was jolly but his white fur-fabric beard slipped often and didn't fool me, I knew the magic of Christmas was provided by my parents. The patients who came were mostly tall thin men, shabby ill-fitting clothes hanging on gaunt frames, grinning like small children in bodies that were too big for them. I was less scared of them than the little boy in the next cot to my sister's.

Sometimes my dad and I would challenge each other on the tin can shooting alley. There were no tin cans, but rather jaunty yellow tin ducklings that resisted being shot down by the ball-bearing pistols, the clowns' heads were easier to pick off but still almost impossible for a competitive eight-year-old on tip-toes. The huge coin pusher machines were easier, and more financially rewarding as they could sometimes pay out without dropping coins into the chutes at the top, and instead the piles of ha'pennies cascaded down into the shiny metal collector and straight into my money bag. One machine, the Log Cascade had coins pushed by miniature piles of tree trunks with white flecks of paint against the back of the machine which was decorated with an alpine scene and rugged looking lumberjacks with double-handed saws in primary colours. If you watched the logs and carefully timed your coins going into the slots at the top they would land right in front of the pushing shelf where the logs sat. Sometimes the coins would join the pile of ha'pennies waiting to be shoved and sometimes the coins would be just enough to cause a cascade.

A large heavy grey door at the end of the corridor led into the Peter Pan ward. Its walls were a deep pink cerise colour with giant Disney cartoon characters painted on top, and a wide walkway ran up the middle of the room between the rows of cots against each wall. Every cot was like the NHS one we had at home in the bedroom I shared with my sister. They were tall, almost as tall as my mother. The upright metal bars, like the legs, were painted cream, and reminded me of the abandoned Edwardian animal cages at the back of Dreamland funfair, across the road from the Penny Arcade.

My dad never played golf, but he and I would have a go at the golfing machine where, for four ha'pennies you could turn a small tin man, dressed in plus-fours, and bent over his golf-club, then he'd whack the ball-bearing into one of the slots at the end of the tiny driving range. More often than not he'd miss the ball, or else it would dribble off to one side. My dad would return to the horse race and spread-betting, and I would try the penny drop where, if my coins landed within the coloured lines on the rolling floor, the machine would light up and I'd receive my winnings which shot down the glass top in spectacular fashion as I squealed with delight.

At first, after she went there every week I couldn't sleep. We'd shared a room all my life and I was used to her cries and shouts which sometimes woke the entire street up. I usually slept through it all, but the decision was made that it would be better for her, so she didn't end up like 'poor Mavis Turtle' who had passed away in a 'home', heartbroken, and confused, not long after her elderly mother died. This way, like wealthy families who sent their offspring to boarding school, my sister would have another home and I would have a 'normal' home life where I could bring school friends back and not worry about the stares or questions.

There weren't many electronic games in the Penny Arcade. A tall narrow tube with metal handles and viewing goggles set into it to look like a periscope was a submarine game. Three ha'pennies gave you three lives to try to torpedo ships passing above, careful timing was needed to hit the enemy as a sonar bong sound got closer. The ships were moving red outlines on the black night sky and

sea background. Outside the arcade, beyond the Sundeck where its wooden walkway met the pavement, stood a statue remembering those lost at sea, yet the figure looks inland, facing away from the shore.

At the end of the ward, next to the nurses' desk, was a cot that held a small blond boy, about three or four years old, dressed in pale colours to match the little bit of hair that could be seen peeping out of the adapted helmet he wore. He rocked continually and banged his head against the bars, fighting against anyone who tried to prevent him, his sightless eyes closed and one simply an empty socket. When one of the nurses saw me watching him, she told me he was very poorly and wouldn't live much longer.

It always seemed to be sunny when we went to the Penny Arcade, never particularly warm, but always sunny. I always stayed away from the round red machines with a viewer set into the top, and labelled 'What the Butler Saw', and I don't remember seeing anyone curious enough to find out. I knew they'd have ladies taking their clothes off, but I was more interested in winning coins so I could play on the other machines that had bright lights and bells. The upright pinball machines were more fun as you pulled the bolt back to allow a ball bearing to load, then with a satisfying 'thwack' the ball shot up and around the circular track, guided by metal strips and landed in the pit for win or lose.

There was a Day Room off Peter Pan ward, it was a long rectangular space with floor to ceiling windows running along one wall, that looked out onto a small patio where wheelchairs could be pushed in the summer. The room had no

seats, instead there were giant soft plastic shapes in primary colours. You could perch yourself on a red and blue cube or lay against a yellow and green triangular wedge. My sister enjoyed rolling around the floor at home, she could sit up straight with perfect posture, but never learned to crawl or walk.

The pinball machines were grouped together, lined up against the back wall, each one promising fast cars, rockets, laughing girls, or different sports. My favourite stood in the corner, a dark green and black Haunted House pinball that had spooky noises coming from it and offered not one flat bed for the ball to bounce around in, but three, if you were lucky enough to shoot the ball up into the attic or somehow get it to drop down into the cellar. Both attic and cellar had their own set of flippers, causing me confusion every time I played. Set into the back board where the painted black house stood on a green cliff were two counters, one for your score and one for the impossibly high score set decades ago. Sometimes my dad would play the Haunted House and my mum and I would watch him as he swayed his hips with each flip of the pinball, his bottom lip tucked under his tongue in concentration.

Next to my sister's cot in Peter Pan was a boy of about my age; he had shaggy dark hair and dark eyebrows. Across his entire face he had a strawberry birthmark. He was always silent and left propped up as if his small frame was unable to support his head. He had hydrocephalus and to my eight-year-old mind he looked as if he was holding his breath. Next to him, my older sister looked doll-like and out of place here left amongst the seriously damaged children, and the overly jolly nurses. Here too was the smell of strong disinfectant

of regular hospital visits in a fruitless search to discover why my sister's brain had never developed beyond that of a year-old baby.

We carried on returning to the Penny Arcade until I was in my teens, Brierlands was finally condemned, and my sister moved on to another 'home', this time she was among the chosen few living in an adapted bungalow in the grounds of a grand house once owned by a Russian count. The arcade was closed down, demolished, and the beach there is now unbroken all the way around to the harbour where boats still shelter in safety from the storms.