

Emilie Zink-Wright

Professor Jean Harper

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Pinball Prodigy

It was the middle of September. The thick air pooled in my lungs and stuck my clothes to my skin. Acorns littered the ground, freshly fallen from the sprawling oak trees, while the occasional leaf hinted at changing its color. Inside Dave & Buster's, the balmy end of summer air felt like a distant memory. The over-sized tv screens displayed various football games, providing sports enthusiasts a location to see any games they could dream of, all in the same place, while having the opportunity to drink and eat.

Past the teeming restaurant and sports bar, the glow of the arcade games illuminated the faces of scores of content gamers. Row after row. Aisle after aisle. From basketball to skeeball, beer pong to air hockey, Mortal Kombat to Space Invaders, there were games for old and young, athlete or gamer alike.

In the far corner of the main floor stood an old, rickety pinball machine. The clacking paddles and ringing bells were indiscernible in the general din of the room, but were the only sounds heard by the young man who stood with his hands fused to the machine. His name was Jack. He looked to be around 19 years old, and was dressed in jeans and a faded black hoodie that seemed to reside permanently on his slender frame. He'd been standing there for so long he wasn't sure if he could bend his knees anymore, and his feet felt like they were encased in a

block of cement, but he focused on the rise, fall, and zig-zag of the pinball. Jack hit the lever to activate the flippers with the rhythm of a dancer.

“How long have you been playing?” I asked him, as I found myself drawn to the intensity of his playing.

“Overall, or today?” He asked. He continued, without waiting for me to clarify my question, “My father taught me to play when I was about 12. Today, I got here about 2 hours ago.”

“And how many games have you played today?”

“In the first hour, I was on a bit of a cold streak. I had to start over about 10 times. But I’ve been playing this ball now for about 30 minutes. I’m hoping to get a new high score, and add enough tokens to my card to get the Xbox One in the prize shop,” he said.

In awe, I fell silent, watching the score increase with each flight of the ball. Back and forth, up and down. Then, right before the ball fell through the gap to end the game, a quick flick of Jack’s wrist and the ‘thwap’ of the flipper hitting the ball, and up and away again. For more than twenty minutes, I stood transfixed, just as much a part of the game as the ball, the springs, or Jack. It seemed the game would never end.

At 4:33 pm, an hour and thirty-three minutes into the game of this one pinball, Jack was struck with the worst possible ailment for an avid pinballer: a Charlie horse in his right arm. As the ball hit the right side of the machine, causing a series of lights and bells, he pressed his hand in an effort to stretch out the exhausted muscle. As the ball started falling, falling, falling, he shook his arm violently, urging the hand to work properly. As the ball reach the flippers, he hurriedly slammed his right hand into the side of the machine. The flipper flipped, the ball

bounced, but the trajectory took it straight into the bottom of the ignored left flipper. Just like that, the high-scoring game ended. I unclenched sweaty fists and let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

Unfazed, Jack stuck in a new quarter, pulled back the starter spring, and began again.