

Pinball Wizard

APRIL FOOLS, 1971. The pinball wizard pulls the spring-loaded plunger, shoots the silver ball, and the game of Pull the Wagon—Wayne Stier—begins. For reasons that will make sense eventually but did not when they were happening, Mars, my wife of three years, had a car accident, sliding on ice into a frozen meat truck. She took a big bite of the steering wheel. When I arrived at the hospital, she was on a gurney, waiting for surgery. Her sliced bottom lip was hanging open. She was toothless. I was near fainting. She motioned for me to come closer and said as best she could, “Wayne, cancel my beauty appointment.”

I was losing the only person I ever knew who understood my soul. We found out later that had she hit the unpadded steering wheel anywhere other than at her breakaway teeth, the blow would have killed her. We didn’t feel grateful at the time. I was bitter and swallowed my anger as a time-release poison pill.

Two years later I took a routine physical for my first teaching position, in Coon Rapids, Iowa. The doctor suspected I had a tumor and suggested exploratory surgery. This entailed the removal of my left testicle—not pleasant for a person with a name that sounds like steer. The test came back positively malign. I returned for a full gut opening, where the doc picked out my troublesome lymph nodes as if he were harvesting grapes. The last one, up in my chest as high as they could reach, was found to be malignant.

Before the doc operated, he told me that it was not easy to tell my lymph nodes from the ganglia that controlled the flow of sperm. I suggested he wear new glasses. It didn’t help. I had been surgically removed from the physical history of humanity, a cul-de-sac of a breeding human being. Mars and I bonded on a spiritual level. She was content to live without children of our own, despite the fact that the burden would fall entirely on her when I die.

I needed to have radiation five days a week. We would leave school early—I’d skip out of monitoring study hall—and drive to Des Moines, an hour away, go for my thirty-second dose in a room that smelled to me of burnt flesh and lipstick and then return home, arriving after dark. It was exhausting. Mars did all of the driving. She also quit wearing lipstick.

After three months of numbing radiation, they looked at my blood count a final time and, because I was young and otherwise very fit, gave me a fifty-fifty chance to live. I felt that the doctor was lying to help me handle the really bad news. I left without a thank-you. I never wanted to see a doctor again in my life. A flip of the coin, and I wasn’t feeling lucky. My name was turning ironically negative. Wayne: to become lesser, as in the waning moon. Stier: as in a castrated bull.

Still young, this already was my second trip to the hospital. The first was in October 1962, when I was fifteen. I had to have the cartilage in my right knee removed—a high school football injury that broke my heart. I loved the game, loved to play it full out. Ironically, this injury occurred during a half-speed drill, the last one I would ever participate in. I was following instructions at that time. This has become progressively more difficult for me.

Before the operation I was given a local anesthetic, a long needle full of fluid stuck into the base of my spinal cord. As the fluid to kill the pain is slowly oozed into my nerve system, the process continues to be very painful—but only until the needle is removed.

A nurse-accountant ran in and demanded that we go no further, nor could we remove the needle, until they had obtained a waiver from my father. It was an eternity before that needle was removed. I was sweating from the pain. All that pain so that they couldn’t be sued? “Jesus loves me, this I know. But those doctor so-and-so’s.”

I was filled with self-pity about my bad luck at having to experience that screwed-up operation so young. I remember rolling down the hospital hallway in a wheelchair chasing after nurses for the impotent fun of it when an elderly man called out from a room I was passing and invited me in.

He asked me how long I was in for. “It will be five days before I finally get out,” I complained. “How about you?” He smiled. “I have lived in a hospital for most of the last twenty-eight years.”

“That sucks. So why are you smiling?”

“When you realize what a precious gift life is, son, you will see only joy.” His face showed me he meant everything he was saying. I thought he was delusional. He was the happiest man I had ever met. It confused me that someone who had such a great reason to complain was so content.

“Sure, I guess. But twenty-eight years?”

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The knee operation was only minimally successful. My leg kept slipping out of joint at times ever afterward. I was so angry with the doctor for leaving in me something around which grew a golf ball of a calcium deposit that I stole his reflex hammer from him. I hated all doctors.

Still, I had some speed if not lateral movement, so I played defensive noseguard, always going full out straight ahead. I loved it. When I went to college I was a walk-on for the junior varsity. I felt I needed to bang my body around to get ideas to seep into my brain. Every day at practice the trainer applied three rolls of tape to that knee. Every week I spent ten hours in the hot tub to bring down the swelling. I reached the conclusion halfway through the season that it wasn't going to get any better. The day I went to the coaches' office to quit, I found out I had been promoted to varsity. I couldn't refuse, and I accepted the pain as the price for the privilege of playing.

I was the only poet-philosopher on the team. This surprised me. I guess I was out of touch with what most people thought was obvious. I didn't play football only with my body. I would watch the opponents, look them in the eye, study their body language, and predict where the play would go. I usually guessed correct.

I lasted on the team the rest of that season and stayed with them as a respected ball boy. Then in the summer of 1967, I met Mars. We were on the same team selling encyclopedias door-to-door, slogging books and dodging Green River laws and the anti-peddling police. We became engaged after two months.

It surprised me, too. We were in the middle of a heated philosophical argument. To anyone who didn't know any better, it would probably have sounded like a quarrel. I felt she was stubborn. In the middle of my anger, I heard a voice: “You should marry this woman.” I was still angry, but somehow the disagreement disappeared. It made no sense to me at all, but I couldn't explain the voice, so I asked her to marry me. I didn't know if I loved her. I thought I did. Can one think one loves someone?

The advice from the voice was perfect. We were married in July 1968. I was twenty-one; Mars, twenty. We are still married, happy together—and together even when we are apart—for over forty years now. Amazing.

I dropped out of college to work selling wood paneling to home-remodeling dudes who wanted a basement sports bar. During slow times I would stare at the wood grain and imagine I saw images.

“Wayne. Wayne. Come back here. You're daydreaming again.”

“Customers waiting, Stier.”

Lost my college deferment and was drafted to be sent to Vietnam. The man at the final desk paused, his stamp in air, ready to come down like a hot brand on a calf’s butt, when he noticed my mention of knee surgery. He frowned and called me a draft dodger, but he wrote out a slip and sent me to the vets’ hospital to have my knee x-rayed. “Then we’ll get your sorry ass to ’Nam.”

At the Vets, Doc comes out with a grim face: “Got some bad news for you, boy. You are never going to make it as a soldier with that knee. You get it fixed, and we will get you in.”

“Gee, Doc. I can’t tell you how bad that makes me feel.”

The knee has never been fixed.

I went back and finished college, mostly through independent study. Some of the classes I was even allowed to design myself following my personal interests. And I continued on in a program for a master’s in the Art of Teaching.

I had to drop out again after Mars’s accident. We were without an income. We took a job at the Bar None Ranch in Anoka, MN as houseparents for six emotionally disturbed children aged nine to fourteen. They were just normal kids reacting to an abnormal environment. I could identify. But it soon evolved into a job as a jailer. Punishment.

Reward. This is how we train dogs.

In order to get my group to function maximally without constant supervision, I read the college course book on group dynamics about rewarding each person in a group for taking on their natural function, be it clown or leader, doer, or group conscience. I convinced my professor, Dr. Evans, to allow me to take the course, Independent Study in Group Dynamics (I love the sound of that), using our six kids as a test for the theory.

It worked. Ours was the only group at the Bar None Ranch that functioned well when not supervised. With that course I completed my master’s degree.

I had passed my final exam the previous fall by accident. As was my wont, I was talking intensely to a fellow student I met in the hallway. He was on his way to something important. It was his final exam for the master’s course. It showed in his face. He was slightly relieved to be distracted. When he walked into the test room, I followed and sat beside him, continuing the thought I was chasing. I had planned to leave when the test started.

The tester, a friend of mine named Dr. Dorothy Evans, noticed that I wasn’t on the list, but she told me that I would be allowed to take the test if I really wanted to. I asked what would happen if I failed. She told me I could take it again in the spring. So, with nothing to lose, I took my final and passed it with absolutely no additional study.

I applied to fifty high schools without an answer. No one wanted to pay a master’s salary to a beginning teacher. Finally I got an interview at Coon Rapids, Iowa. It seems they had a slot for a combination English teacher and assistant football coach. If I hadn’t played football I would never have landed the job.

The superintendent came rushing into his office for our appointment and apologized: “Sorry I am a little late.” “You are fifteen minutes late, but that’s OK. You are hiring me. I am not hiring you.”

I missed the first two weeks of my teaching career, using all my sick leave to recover from the cancer operation. After the operation I intended to bounce back super fast, and did so by most standards. Rule of slapstick: stand up quick, and pretend it didn't happen.

At the old brick school building I had to use the handrail to pull myself up to my third-floor room. I was on some pain drug that made me weird—or, just as likely, more normal. I used coffee to stay awake.

To my students: “I have cancer, and I've got some good news for you. We are all going to die someday. So let's not waste the time we have left. If we aren't enjoy•ing what we're doing, let's find a way to do so.”

I guaranteed them that literature was not a punish•ment. They laughed me out of the room when I told them it was better than TV.

The radiation caused me to have the urgent need of a bathroom at odd or awkward moments. Even as we traveled around the world, I rarely had more than a fifteen-minute warning before my bowel situation became dire. Put that on a thirteen-hour bus ride and you have reason for concern. I informed my students that they had their teacher's career in their hands. We made a fairness treaty. There was never a problem when I was out of the room—until I became stronger, that is.

The principal was another matter. He came into my classroom scowling one day and scolded me in front of the ninth-graders for a textbook one of them had dropped in the alley. I asked him to please leave. I would talk with him later. In his office I told him that if he entered my room again, no matter what the reason, the class would belong to him. I'd be gone. Life was too short for me to take that kind of—I used a word then that I would prefer not to use now. Saying that to the principal felt good.

He never appeared in my classroom again. Instead, he tried to use the intercom to spy on me, but unfortunately for him it made a static noise. I would switch midsentence into a lecture about the dangers of Big Brother. Some of the ninth-graders were in on the joke and started reading 1984 and asking intelligent questions to fool the principal.

By the following spring of 1974 Mars was bored to tears. She decided to start up a community theater group in a town of only thirteen hundred people. Fat chance, that. Only one person showed up to help choose the play, so I volunteered to read a couple of the parts. I did it as a favor to Mars. I didn't want to be the one that caused her dream to fail after all I had put her through. I made it clear to her that there was no way she was going to get me onstage.

At the reading, I played the first part with a very overdone imitation of John Wayne and for contrast chose an effeminate voice for the other character, Richard. I was cast in the latter role, which was to be played exactly as I had misread it. Despite my firm objections, shored up by an extreme fear of the stage, I found myself strutting across the boards as a girly man. The play, *Blithe Spirit*, by Noël Coward, was performed in the same building that had been the dressing room for the previous fall's 0–8 football season, during which I had acted as assistant coach. Talk about identity issues. (Come to think of it, I was not asked to be the coach the following year.)

I stole the show. In the audience was Roswell Garst, the Iowa farmer who brought Khrushchev to his pig farm in 1959. He laughed loudly through a hole in his neck amplified by a vibrator. For months after, whenever I met someone downtown, even if they were across the street they would inevitably wave at me limp wristed in an overdone imitation of my Richard. That farmers' town began to prance around as a gaggle of ersatz gays. At parties they asked for Richard rather than Wayne, and I could stay in character as long as I wanted. (I wish to apologize to all gay people for having made them into a joke. I played the part with feminine dignity, but the audience saw it as ridicule. I wasn't conscious of this at the time.) I was happy that people were laughing at my illusion. I didn't feel quite so alone.

Meanwhile, I felt my precious time slipping away. I began to toy with the idea of writing a country and western song. (“I’ll get by with killing time, till time gets ’round to killing me.”) Only thing was, I didn’t know how to write music. (What Miss Wiggins tried to teach me was how to play other people’s music.)

I vowed to live my life to the fullest, but here I was in small-town Iowa teaching high school English. Do you see a headliner here? Neither could I. I wanted to live every moment, to squeeze every drop of life from each day. My ideal was an anecdote I had read about a French bishop.

*We all are going to die someday. So what?
Bishop’s playing cards. His flock is shocked.
“If you were to die five minutes nigh
You’d pray now would you not?”
“I’d play this hand. You see the hand I got!”*

Looking at my hand, the only way I could possibly win was to bluff. How do you bluff a flip of the coin? The illusions onstage were as real to me as anything else. I wished they were more real.

Unhappy in small-town Iowa, we moved to a much larger small town, Charles City, Iowa, with a very active community theater.

I had the lead in *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, my seventeenth play in three years. The irony had not escaped me, for I was able to perform sexually with only the echo of feeling and no ejaculation. I felt that I was wasting what little life I had left. Once again, as always, the comforting illusion of the stage had disappeared. I was in that dreaded space between plays. My fear of dying had blossomed into anger at the unfairness of life.

“Now is the winter of our discontent,” *Richard III*,” I enunciated theatrically. I was drunk. My bum was freezing from sitting in the snow. Perhaps I could freeze to death, I thought sardonically. Death by frozen gluteus maximus. I shouted at the stars, “Get me out of here!” My friend Larry coaxed me back inside.

My self-esteem was at its nadir.

*How stupid of God to make me,
When He/She does most things right.
It must be presumptuous to tell She or He,
“I’m afraid that you had an off night.”*

The next morning Larry drove over to my house with his Sunday newspaper. He had circled a job opening for a college theater director and thought I should apply. I would not have been deemed qualified by academe to be a professor of drama in college, for I had taken but a single drama course, and that as an independent study.

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I needed one drama course to be certified to teach English in high school. It was two years after I graduated from Wartburg College, December 1969. I called my mentor, Professor Sam Michaelson, and asked him if he could help. Instead he insisted I drive some of his students to San Francisco for a month-long course entitled Arts in the City, May 1971.

“But I need a drama course in order to get a job, Sam.”

“Trust me.” It was paid travel. Mars came along. Sam made sure we saw a performance of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, a play adapted by Dale Wasserman from Ken Kesey’s novel.

When we returned to Iowa, he arranged the promised course for me. Independent Study in Drama. He was the president of the community theater in that town of Waverly, Iowa. I was to single-handedly produce Cuckoo's Nest. I started from scratch and learned from books how to build the set, do the sound and lighting, arrange for programs, tickets, costumes, props—the whole asylum.

The play was a success, but it still wouldn't slip me past the closed gates of upper academe. I wished it would have. At least Larry's thought had been kind. He was disappointed, too. However, the want ad right beneath the one Larry had circled read: "Teach English in Japan."

"Mars, want to go to Japan?"

"How soon?"

Some small Iowa towns are extremely conservative and don't like so much those people who are different. So I silk-screened a bumper sticker for them: "Charles City. Love it or Leave it."

It was on the back bumper of my car as I drove out of town, with Janis Joplin singing a song in the attic of my mind: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

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An Arab fisherman off the coast of East Africa cast a net from his dhow and brought up a brass urn. It was corked with lead that had been stamped when molten with the seal of Solomon. The fisherman excitedly pried open the cork, and in an explosive gust, out came a huge jinni.

"How many wishes am I granted?" asked the fisherman, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

"Only one," answered the jinni.

"In that case, I wish for countless wishes," chuckled the fisherman. He had been ready with that one.

The jinni shook his head. "You did not let me finish. Now that I am free from the urn, the only wish I will grant you is for you to choose the manner of your own death."

The fisherman was shocked. He asked for time to contemplate such a "delicious" choice. Finally he came up with his selection.

"You know, when you came gushing out just now, it almost scared me to death. If I were to get closer to the mouth of the urn, that explosion would surely kill me. It would be an honor to die such a death by your hands. Therefore, I wish for you to go back inside the brass bottle and come out the same way."

The jinni did as he was told.

"Now, to make it seem more real, I'll put the stopper back in."