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Pinhead

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If you watch “The Simpsons” as religiously as I do, you may remember a particular episode when Homer fulfills one of his many lifelong dreams—to become a pin monkey at the local bowling alley.

In that episode, Homer finds out that there is an elaborate process behind the scenes to keep the alley in working condition. The pins are instantly discarded after a ball strikes them, and an entire redwood tree is whittled down, painted and polished into one pin.
In reality, the process behind the lanes to keep the alley running problem-free is much more complicated than that. Like most people, I assumed the machines behind the lanes ran without mishaps, and the only thing needed to fix them was the simple press of a reset button.

I found out there is an entire job dedicated to making sure nothing goes wrong - the legendary pin monkey. A pin monkey's role is to stay behind the lanes with the machines and correct any problems that arise. Such problems include upside-down pins, balls becoming stuck in tracks and pins lying in the lanes. The job is notorious for its tremendous potential for serious injury and pain. I found myself worrying about this slight detail even before I got to 20th Century Bowling at 505 S. Duff Ave.

I bravely braced myself for what I thought would be an industrial hell complete with grease, sparks and loud noises. By the end of the night, I realized what the job lacked in grease and sparks, it did make up for in noise.

Mike Pearson, a pin monkey at the lanes and long-time friend, volunteered to be my instructor for the night. I got there a few minutes before league play began, and he guided me to the back of the bowling alley. I saw a row of 24 massive machines - complex masses of metal and wire - all quietly sitting before a switch at the front of the alley would turn them on. "Not a whole lot of safety features," Mike says.

I must have looked slightly worried. He told me these machines were supposedly the oldest Brunswick machines west of the Mississippi. He wasn't sure if it was true, but the claim existed nonetheless.

I looked them over more carefully. The main component of each machine was a large steel wheel. When a ball strikes the pins, the wheel captures them, along with the ball. The ball is caught by a track where it is rolled into a tube that transports it back out to the bowlers in that nifty, futuristic-like ball return. The pins are pushed into the pin deck, each into its own slot. When the pins go around the wheel and are deposited up the track, they are turned upside down in order to land inside the deck right side up.

As far as I could tell, there were about a dozen different ways I could be injured, and all of them involved my limbs being snapped from my body by high-powered belts. I began to question my career of journalism and thought about becoming a human cannonball: At least I'd get a helmet.

A roar ripped through the back room, and the machines' wheels and belts of possible death began rapidly spinning as they rumbled to life. The noise was incredibly loud, and was intensified by 24 balls hitting the pins less than three feet away from where I was standing. How the employees haven't gone completely deaf is something beyond my comprehension.

Gathering my wits, I soon learned why the position is referred to as "pin monkey." The machines, each a little over six feet tall, are connected by a series of wooden planks so a worker could maneuver and climb over them without slipping and seriously injuring themselves.

Mike and I climbed to the top of the machines and observed them in action. I saw the balls strike the pins, catapulting them everywhere in the lanes. The morbid thought of a pin flying up and hitting me in the face crossed my mind more than once.

We jumped off and went to a smaller room, where I could actually hear words now instead of a loud din and the sound of thunder coming from the lanes with each successful strike. It was now clear what the massive machines' role at the bowling alley was. But I asked Mike what exactly he does as a pin monkey. I got a straightforward answer - the famed pin monkeys basically sit around and wait for something to screw up, and then they jump into action.

"We screw around a lot," Pearson says as we stood around, waiting for the eventual failure of a system that enables the monkeys to roll. Soon, a garbled message rang over the PA
I hadn’t even noticed existed. I could not understand a word of the message.

Apparently, pin monkeys develop a highly acute sense of hearing in the back room. Although I hardly even heard the message over the din, Pearson rushed out of the small room and into the cacophony of jarring noises in the larger back room. He rushed to a lane, climbed up, and looked around. He climbed back down and shrugged.

I tried to ask him what the alarm was about, but I couldn’t hear a single word he said. Since my lip-reading skills aren’t up to snuff, all I understood was a slow ball return. He stuck his hand inside the spinning wheel and pushed a ball down the space tube.

He then showed me more of the back room, including several of his tools and equipment. First was a $7,000 lane oiler, a piece of equipment that propels itself down the lane, oiling as it goes. Before the lanes could be oiled, however, they had to be dusted with the “Hot Duster.” The duster looked anything but hot. In fact, it was fairly grimy.

Pearson then reached around a corner and proudly displayed what I thought was a spiked club. I thought this would be the end of me. I would be beaten and chucked into a machine. I took the club, and saw that the end of the handle was covered with duct tape and had two massive wires jutting out from it, forming two crooked fingers. I asked Pearson what it was.

“Grabbin’ stick.”

I was confused. “Without the ‘g’?”

“ Yep.”

The grabbin’ stick is used when a pin isn’t pushed back by the rake into the pinwheel, called a “deadwood” in pin monkey jargon. The quickest way to fix the problem is to climb up onto the top of the machine, use the hook to grab the small end of the pin, and lift it up.

Almost as if fate wanted me to become horribly disfigured, the PA mumbled something about a deadwood in lane seven. Mike thrust the grabbin’ stick at me, and I climbed up on top of lane seven’s spinning device of demise. I reached down with my trusty stick and grabbed the pin. I jumped down and chucked the pin back into the wheel. I checked to make sure I wasn’t short a hand and was quite relieved when I saw all 10 fingers.

Mike and I walked up and down the back room, watching the lanes. I hoped no belts would break and launch a wheel with a two-and-a-half foot radius at my sternum. We talked a bit more about what a monkey does. He reiterated the fact they don’t do much, except wait for something to go wrong.

We talked about what pin monkeys do when they don’t have any problems to correct. Mike told me he plays games on his laptop and does crossword puzzles. I learned that there’s only one pin monkey on duty.

“Sometimes, you get lonely,” he says. He did seem excited that there was another person behind the lanes with him to help relieve his boredom.

We wandered around the back room for a while longer. Mike showed me a splintered pin that had been cracked open by a ball. The inside of a pin is, like the outside, made of wood.

We roamed a bit more, and Mike informed me he had shown me everything he did as a pin monkey. I took that as my cue to leave and was escorted out the side door into the crisp night air. The sounds of thunder faded behind me, and I found a new appreciation for pin monkeys.

Not for the work they do, necessarily, but more for the fact I don’t hear about vicious belt-driven bloodbaths ensuing behind bowling alleys.