

Content Warning: Cancer, terminal illness

Pinball Diary

Thomas Morgan

25/05/2015

My body is giving up on me. Mentally, I'm fine, but physically, my health is at an all-time low. I don't even recognise myself when I look in the mirror. My chest is filled with tubes, holes, lumps, bumps, and scars, and I'm taking so many pills and medicines that I could open up my own pharmacy.

I'm what you would call terminally ill. Cancer is eating away at my kidneys, my liver, my lungs, and most of my other internal organs. There's not a lot that the doctors can do for me now. I've been advised to go into a hospice, but I've refused to go. To me, going into a hospice feels like giving up. At least if I stay at home, I'll be going down with a fight on my own terms. That may sound stubborn, but that's the way I am and the way that I've always been. And I'm not about to change now.

In a last-ditch effort to prolong my life, I've been put on a new experimental drug. At this point, I'm willing to try just about anything. I've already tried acupuncture, cannabis oil, crystal healing, aromatherapy, homoeopathy, hypnotherapy, magnet therapy, urine therapy—you name it, and I've probably tried it. But none of it has worked for me. Not in the long term, anyway.

I'm well aware that this new drug probably won't work either, but at least I can act as a guinea pig and maybe help save someone else's life in the future. That's why I'm keeping this diary—it'll track my progress on the new drug and document the symptoms and side effects that I experience. Perhaps all of this will be useful to scientists and doctors when I'm gone.

So far, the only symptom that I've been experiencing is extreme hunger, yet, in my condition, I struggle to keep anything down. Right now, the only thing that's keeping me alive is dry toast with Marmite and plenty of Lucozade Sport energy drink. That's just about all my system can handle.

This diary is also being kept as a record of my final days, weeks, and/or months on planet earth before I become too weak to even get myself out of bed—before I essentially become a vegetable. It'll be my legacy—and who knows? Maybe it'll go down with the likes of Anne Frank's diary or the diary of Samuel Pepys. But then again, they were writing important historical documents about events of daily life in 17th century Britain and life as a young Jewish girl during the Holocaust. I'm just a dying man with blood in his stool.

28/05/2015

I got drained today. I get drained every week. It's a procedure called paracentesis where a fluid called ascites is removed from the abdomen. I had six litres of fluid taken out of my abdomen today—a new personal best for me. My previous record was four litres. I don't know if that means I'm getting better or worse, but at least, in some respects, I'm improving.

The process itself is the worst pain imaginable. They basically stick a gigantic needle into your stomach—or sometimes, into your back—to remove the fluid. I don't know why, but when I was having this toxic fluid drained from my body, I couldn't help but laugh at the pain. Because, when all is said and done, that's really all you can do.

After getting drained, I met up with a few friends at the bowling alley. I've always hated bowling. My father used to take my brother and me to our local bowling alley at least once a month—sometimes more. He wanted us to be the next big things in the world of ten pin bowling. I'm not sure why he chose bowling. No offence to professional ten pin bowlers, but it's not the most athletic or prestigious of sports.

My father must've had next to no confidence in either one of us; he didn't encourage us to become footballers, cricketers, or tennis players, no—he chose ten pin bowling. And we weren't even any good at it. If I didn't bowl with the barriers up, my ball would veer off and head straight for the gutter. My brother was better than I was, but that's not really saying much.

I told my friends that I was too weak to bowl after my procedure. But that was a lie—I just didn't want to bowl. Say what you will about cancer, but at least it gets you out of doing things you don't want to do.

I sat there and watched my friends for all of about ten minutes before I got bored. It really is such a monotonous and repetitive sport—if you can even call it that. I only agreed to tag along because I knew that it would get me out of the house for a couple of hours. But now that I think about it, lying in bed waiting to die is probably more fun than bowling.

At some point, I decided to go for a wander and maybe play a bit of air hockey or table tennis or something—anything to get me away from the tedious monotony of bowling. That's when I came across an old pinball machine. But it wasn't just any old pinball machine—it was *The Addams Family* pinball machine. I've not seen the TV show or the subsequent film remake (although I am aware of the famous theme song), but there was just something about that machine that spoke to me. It had a big screen on the back with some of the characters from the series/film standing outside what looked like a haunted house. There was also a pale blue bolt of lightning that struck the ground behind them. Then the machine itself actually spoke to me as I stood there in front of it. A spooky jingle played, and it said: "Come on, Thing. If you dare."

I put a pound coin in the pinball machine and had a quick go. *The Addams Family* theme song played, and the letters “T,” “H,” “I,” “N,” and “G” flashed on the big screen. I sent my ball up into the main playing area. It bounced off a few obstacles, making a whole lot of noise along the way. Then I used the levers at the bottom and was able to flick the ball up into a hole beneath what looked like an electric chair. The ball disappeared for a second, and the machine started speaking to me again. It said: “Well played, Thing. You’re really on the ball.” Then the ball came hurtling out of the hole and fell between the two levers before I even had a chance to react.

Playing that game of pinball was such a rush. I tell you, I haven’t felt so alive in months. As soon as I got home, I went online and ordered a book on the science of pinball. Then I looked on Wikipedia to see if I could find any tips and tricks on the game. It’s all I’ve been able to think about.

31/05/2015

The book I ordered on the science and strategy of pinball arrived yesterday morning. I’ve read it from cover to cover and have been studying it for the past day and a half now.

I haven’t been sleeping all that well, and I keep vomiting in the middle of the night. I’m exhausted, but the cancer won’t let me get any rest. So, to take my mind off things, I’ve been doing as much research as possible about pinball.

It turns out that the main area of the pinball machine is called the “playfield.” The ball is launched into the playfield, and there are several obstacles—or bumpers—but also several opportunities to score more points. This is achieved by hitting targets, spinners, and getting the ball into holes—like the one below the electric chair on *The Addams Family* pinball machine. There’s even a technique that experienced players use called “nudging,” whereby you actually move (or nudge) the machine itself to influence the direction of the ball. Another useful technique is called “trapping,” where you use the flippers (the levers that redirect the ball and keep it in the playfield) to trap the ball. Then you can launch it back up into the playfield and hit specific targets, thereby scoring more points.

I’ve decided I’m going to go back to the bowling alley. Before this illness takes me, I’m going to try and put all this theory into practice and get the high score on that *Addams Family* pinball machine—a score so high that it will be almost impossible for anyone else to beat.

It feels like I’m still here for a reason. Maybe this is it.

03/06/2015

I went to the bank this morning and withdrew two-hundred and fifty pounds from my current account. I asked the lady at the desk if I could have it all in one-pound coins. It took her a while to count it all out, but in the end, I came away from the bank with bags and bags of shiny gold

coins. They were so heavy I could barely carry them. I don't care how much it's going to cost me to do this. Money doesn't matter to me anymore—I can't take it where I'm going.

I decided to start my pinball journey today—on a Monday—because I knew the bowling alley would be quiet, and there would be no kids there to distract me because they would all be at school.

Just as I predicted, the alley was relatively quiet. I walked up to *The Addams Family* pinball machine—to *my* pinball machine—and looked up at the backbox. (That's what the big screen behind the playfield is called.) There was a score flashing on the backbox. It was the high score—a score that currently stands at 2,474,242,280. That particular score was achieved by JPF. I don't know who JPF is, but I do know that those initials won't be at the top of the leader board for much longer.

As I warmed myself up and got acquainted with the machine, some teenagers came in and started watching me play. They wanted me to get off the pinball machine so that they could have a go. I asked them what they were doing at a bowling alley in the middle of a school day, and they told me they had the day off. I didn't believe a word of it. I told them I wasn't going anywhere and that they would have to wait until I was dead until they could use the machine (although to be fair, that might not have been much of a wait).

Then they started making fun of me. Another side effect of the drugs is that I'm constantly freezing, even though it's quite warm at the moment. I was wearing a big coat and a thick woolly hat. But the woolly hat serves another purpose in that it hides my baldness from the world. That's another thing that cancer has taken from me: my hair. It's not the cancer itself that has robbed me of my hair; it's the poison that's being pumped into my body to keep me alive.

I told the boys to leave me alone and that if they didn't, I would kick the living shit out of them. I can't tell you how much I wanted to go through with that threat, but I couldn't risk getting banned from the bowling alley. I've always been a mild-mannered person, but I think I'd like to experience a fight of some kind before I go. And I'm pretty confident that I could beat up a child. But the boys didn't call my bluff, and they eventually left me alone.

I went back to what I was doing and put all of my focus and attention into playing some pinball. And before I knew it, I had gone through five bags of coins, and I still didn't get anywhere near JPF's score.

05/06/2015

I was supposed to have had a hospital appointment today. Chemotherapy—the dreaded “C” word. But I didn't go. I had more important business to attend to at the bowling alley. Besides, I don't feel like I need chemo at the moment. To tell you the truth, I haven't felt better in months.

Maybe the new drugs are working, or maybe I'm feeling better because I have a purpose for living.

Maybe getting the high score on that pinball machine is my destiny, and the cancer knows it—it knows that I need to achieve this goal before it takes me. It's as if we have an agreement. I just hope that the cancer holds up its end of the deal.

08/06/2015

I've been playing on that pinball machine pretty much non-stop for the past three days now. When I go to sleep at night, I see it in my dreams. I play, and I play, and I play, but every time I get close to beating JPF's high score, I suddenly wake up in a sweat. Then I vomit. I wonder if this is a sign—if my body is trying to tell me something.

09/06/2015

My progress on the pinball machine has been pretty good. I feel like I'm getting the hang of it now, and I'm improving with every fresh one-pound coin that I feed into the coin slot. I wish I could say the same thing about my health.

Last night, I didn't get any sleep because I was vomiting pretty much non-stop. It's gotten so bad that it's started to affect my teeth and gums—so much so that I have to have a couple of teeth taken out tomorrow morning. Before getting cancer, I never had any problems with my teeth or gums. My treatment is making me sick, and in turn, the sickness is destroying what's left of my body.

The only thing that's keeping me going at the moment is knowing that after I'm finished at the dentist, I can get back to that *Addams Family* pinball machine at the bowling alley. I'm not worried about having to play through the pain—I've been doing that every single day for almost a year now.

11/06/2015

My physical appearance has started to change over the past couple of days, making my unrecognisable body even more unrecognisable to me. I've lost a lot of weight in all the wrong places—my face is pale and thin, and my arms are so skinny that you can practically see my bones. Plus, my eyebrows and eyelashes have turned white. If I had any hair left on my head, then that'd probably be white too. I guess it's just one of the side effects of the new drugs. But somehow, I feel stronger than ever—still strong enough to get down to the bowling alley and play on the pinball machine.

14/06/2015

My scores are getting better and better each day. Although playing all of this pinball has taken its toll on my wallet, it's actually made me feel like a normal healthy human being again. It's as if my body is able to tune everything else out so that my full attention is on that *Addams Family* pinball machine.

It just goes to show that when you have a reason to live, you just keep on living. But I'm well aware that once my reason for living has been taken away, I myself will be taken away with it.

18/06/2015

I came close today. But not close enough. I have to do better if I'm going to knock JPF off the top of the leader board.

To be honest with you, I really struggled today. My breathing was heavy and laboured, and just before my final ball fell in between the two flippers at the bottom of the machine, I fell into a vicious coughing fit that sent me straight to the floor. It was like getting knocked out by a heavyweight boxer.

My episode caused a lot of panic at the bowling alley. Several people rushed to my side, asking me if I was all right and if I needed an ambulance. In between coughs, I was able to tell them that I didn't need an ambulance—that I'm terminally ill and that there's nothing that an ambulance or anyone else can do for me.

I just hope it doesn't happen again; I'm not quite there yet.

20/06/2015

I didn't make it to the bowling alley today. I couldn't even pull myself out of bed, let alone think about pinball. I fear that the worst is coming. I know I'm going to die soon, but I'm not ready to go just yet. I need the cancer to let me finish what I started.

23/06/2015

I had to be rushed to hospital last night because I was vomiting blood. The doctors wanted to keep me there under observation, but I practically begged them to let me go home. I told them it was my dying wish. I've used that line before, and it always seems to work. It's like bringing a gun to a knife fight—you can't lose.

One thing that I have been doing over the past few days is lying in bed watching *The Addams Family*. I bought the boxset online and also rented the film. My favourite character is Uncle Fester. I recognised him almost immediately from the pinball machine as his gigantic bald head is

sandwiched in between the two flippers at the bottom. As long as I can manage to keep the ball above Uncle Fester's head, I will be well on my way to achieving a big score.

25/06/2015

I've been feeling a lot better lately and haven't vomited for nearly two days—a new personal best for me. I also achieved another personal best today when I managed to score 2,128,784,129 points on the pinball machine at the bowling alley.

I'm nearly there. I can feel it. All I need is one final push.

28/06/2015

Today was a difficult day for me. After an entire night of vomiting and coughing up blood, it became clear to me that my time was running out fast. But at the same time, today has been the single greatest day of my entire life.

It took me all I had to get to the bowling alley this morning. I couldn't have done it without that bottle of Lucozade Sport. If I could get Lucozade Sport injected into my bloodstream, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

As always, the game started when I fed a single pound coin into the coin slot at the bottom of the machine. I had to hold onto the pinball machine for support. It was the only thing keeping me on my feet. I fired my first ball up into the playfield and watched the small metallic ball ricochet off bumpers and obstacles.

Before long, I'd managed to light up all the letters on the backbox, which meant that every time the ball hit a target or went into a hole, I scored hundreds of additional bonuspoints. I even managed to secure a multi-ball situation, which I maintained for what must have been a good twenty or thirty minutes. To tell you the truth, I don't really know how much time had passed—time itself seemed to stand still for me.

Soon, I was down to my final ball. But I didn't check my score—I just stayed focused and kept on going.

When my last ball fell between the two flippers—past Uncle Fester's gigantic bald head—I looked up at the scoreboard that was displayed on the backbox. The lights were flashing, and for the final time, the machine spoke to me.

“New high score. Well done, Thing!”

I had finally done it.

My heart was racing, and I nearly collapsed in all of the excitement. To be quite honest, I would've been happy to die right there and then, going down feeling such an epic sense of euphoria. But I felt okay and still had enough energy left to type my initials—SJB—into the machine. And with that—with those three clicks of a button—my name was forever etched in pinball history.

I feel weak now. But I've done what I needed to do, and I'm ready for the next step. Whatever happens to me, whatever becomes of my body and my spirit, at least part of me will live on in that *Addams Family* pinball machine at the bowling alley. And in the end, that's all I ever really wanted.

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