

Michael Cartmell

Home

Home.

There is no better word to describe how I felt walking along Blackpool Promenade. I had probably never taken those exact steps before - I wasn't even sure if I'd ever walked the promenade alone during my childhood - but still I felt an overwhelming sense of belonging. It was as though the town itself was welcoming me; a hand-shake from the fresh sea breeze, squawked greetings from the seagulls. The warm, glistening beach; a carpet of sand rolled out for my arrival.

There were a lot of people around, but compared to the busy streets of the city it still felt quiet, even peaceful. I think it was the leisurely pace of the crowds; not in a hurry to get anywhere, just taking in the sun and the sights. You just don't find that in the city; everyone's trying to get somewhere, rushing around like they're constantly late. Everyone. I think, even if you could pluck someone from the beach and drop them into them onto a city street just like that, they'd start to look busy and flustered and merge in with the crowds. It's unavoidable. Like being flushed through a sewage chute.

I looked left at the beach and the sea. They had always been there, always would be. I wondered if anything in the city could ever be as permanent and unmovable. New buildings sprung up all the time, old ones were getting torn down, too many shops opened and closed to keep track of. Was there any part of the city that went untouched? Perhaps, somewhere, in a corner of a park or something. There might be a piece that everyone has forgotten. I couldn't think of one.

An old tram rattled past on my right. They hadn't changed for many years, more than I could remember. Yet they looked old and tired, more so than they ever did. Maybe hundreds of years old. That green and cream colour was so old, so *vintage*, it just wasn't used anymore. It's like the colours themselves didn't even exist, except on the earliest photographs. Dull and faded.

A donkey cart clopped behind the tram.

There were shops, stalls and attractions here too, of course. Many of them to my right that I didn't recognise. Some I did. The *Sea-Life Centre*, *Ripley's*, were always there. The greasy fast-food shops. Doughnut stands. The mysterious stall of the fortune teller. I always imagined she was an ancient, wrinkled old woman dressed in purple cloth and exotic jewellery, even though I had never actually seen her. That stall was still there. I imagined it would be there forever, and she would not ever die. Somehow I didn't think it was possible that she could die; she'd just get older and more wrinkled, her body becoming gradually more bent and shrunken until eventually she just vanished.

There was an abundance of souvenir and sex shops; the kind that are decorated with just red and black painted words advertising their wares, but there's so much text it hurts to look at. The paint's scratched and peeling off the wooden boards outside; flaky and cracked.

Some places had supernatural or extraterrestrial-themed themes. Several, actually they must have been in season. The most prominent had a huge, dome-shaped, alien head looming over the entrance. I didn't remember anything like that as a child.

I passed a hen party going in the opposite direction. I assumed it was a hen party by

their dress and loud conversation, but they all looked too young to be getting married. I was getting old. Last time I was here I would not have known what a hen party was. The girl in front shouted *hi* in my face and ruffled my hair as she walked past. The others giggled and hurried along, then someone called a lewd remark, which brought renewed bursts of laughter. I turned around but felt a twinge of pain in my chest and I hunched over. I took deep breaths, closed my eyes and thought of the sea. Relaxed. The pain passed. I stood up again.

I carried on to the North Pier. If there was one place that epitomised Blackpool for me in my childhood, it would be there. I could recall the position of every arcade machine, every sign and stall. It was my fondest memory of perhaps the happiest time of my life. I hoped that by going there, I could somehow regain something that I had lost.

I had already passed several smaller arcades and felt nervous shivers. They were very much as I remembered. It gave me hope.

Standing in front of the entrance to the North Pier, I framed it with my eyes as though taking a photograph. I wanted to fit it all in, to make sure it was all still there. It was.

I stood there for minutes. As though if I waited just a bit more, the satisfaction would be stronger. I felt slightly nervous.

I watched the lights around the red and yellow letters of the 'North Pier' sign flash and dance. Even in daylight it was a wonderful display. I wanted to get closer to it and somehow absorb the illumination.

One of the letters was slightly blackened; burned, I remembered reading, in one of the recent fires. I frowned. Already there was something that had not lasted. It was damaged. They would have to repaint or replace the letter, and then it wouldn't be the same again.

I watched an open-top tram cross in front of me, sunglassesed passengers with their hair blowing in the breeze, and then walked towards the pier.

Claw machines lined the entrance. Guarded it. A young boy was pushing the joystick without spending any money. The giant plush penguins nearly filled the cage; the claw looked undersized and flimsy for the purpose. They would probably be there a while.

A chubby man in the change booth waved at me. For a moment I wondered if he might have actually recognised me from long ago, but I decided that was unlikely. How many people would have walked through here in twenty years? How many coins had he changed?

"Hi," I said, smiling and excited.

"Come for the day, have you?" the man asked. His tone was welcoming and unassuming, his accent familiar.

"Yeah. Actually I'm from Blackpool. Used to come here a lot." I laughed nervously. "I'm so excited - it's exactly as I remember it."

"Aye, well. Been here a few years myself. Can I get you some change?"

"Oh, yes, sure." I rooted my jeans for a ten pound note, which he exchanged for a bag of coins.

"Enjoy the pier." He grinned.

The noise of the arcade was louder now. Retro jingles filled the room in a medley of eight-bit bleeps and blips. The occasional low-fi voice sample accompanied them, from the more advanced slot-machines from that era.

It seemed the pier was as popular among young people as it always was. I had

wondered if the attraction would still be there for this kind of entertainment, while consoles and television offered a much wider and sophisticated choice and had done for a long time. They were much cheaper, too, to be honest. But no, it definitely seemed that there were regulars here, as well as the tourists. I was glad that the pier appeared to still had its charm.

A bank of six coin-pusher machines were the closest temptation. I marvelled wide-eyed at them. They were still there.

I assessed each of them for suitability; likelihood that they would drop coins. Inevitably it made little difference - you played until you were out of coins, or at least started to lose - but it was part of the game. The mound of coins varied wildly between machines. Some were almost flat, dry and barren; some heaped at the sides, some were wavy and uneven. I decided on one that seemed to have the highest pile of coins at the central point; a strategy which I had always used to employ, but probably had no factual basis. I wondered if there was a widely-known 'correct' strategy to use. Probably there was.

My first coin pinged off the metal poles and was funneled down the side. I smiled. I tried again. This time my coin reached the lowest platform, but barely nudged the pile of coins in front of the reward chute. Maybe it was too heavy? If that was the case, my strategy was greedy and naïve, even though it was intuitive. It must catch a lot of people out.

I switched instead to the machine with the flatter pile. The first coin fell nicely and pushed almost a pound's worth of ten pence coins out from the bottom with a delightful clinking. The next few tries were not as satisfying, though, and I moved on.

I noticed the boy had left the penguin grab machine, and went over myself to peer through the side. I had always wondered what it would be like to be inside one of those cubes, and wanted to immerse myself in it. I pressed all of my face against the cold glass.

The penguins were stacked on top of each other. I looked at them for a long time.

I felt sad for the penguins.

They'd been piled carelessly, neglectfully, like wasted bodies. Their expressions were lifeless, broken. Tongues hung out of their swollen heads.

My eyes flicked to the claw. It looked worn and rusted. I felt my chest tighten, worse than before. I made a fist with my hand and breathed.

I shook myself away from the machine, letting it be.

I walked quicker around the arcade, wanting to see the familiar games and slot-machines; take in the atmosphere. The buzzing hum of the machines, the bleeping noises should have been comforting, as they used to be, but they were making me increasingly jittery. They seemed discordant; out of sync, somehow. It began to jar.

A row of one-armed bandits stood at one side of the arcade. They were solid, well-built things with a heavy metal lever that made satisfying clicks as you pulled it down. Their casing glistened like the body of a sports car, and I imagined they were as lovingly looked after by whoever cared for them. The lever didn't pull without coins, so I slid a ten pence piece into the holder.

I put my hand on the red, spherical handle, but it felt wrong in a way that I couldn't quite place. I looked at the machine next to it. The gap between them seemed too large. I thought they should be touching each other, like I remembered.

I stood on my toes and looked down the line of one-armed bandits. They were skewed and uneven; some too far forwards, jutting out; some too far back. They were all out of place.

My hand slipped off the handle. I didn't pull it, but I knew it wouldn't have felt right.

There was one group of slot-machines that I remembered more vividly than anything else, and I urgently wanted to find one of them. They were cylindrical, with three horizontal reels that spun and stopped, like a fruit machine on its side. On the reels were cartoon characters in various costumes: a tall man dressed in a suit and top hat, monocle and moustache, a ridiculously fat woman in a swimsuit, a child in shorts holding a beach ball, and other similar stereotypes. Some of the sketches would probably be considered bad taste nowadays. But it was still my favourite machine. Their tops, middles and bottoms were swapped by the three reels and if they matched up, you won. Even if you lost, the reels often matched up in a comical way, and there were many combinations to be amused by.

The machine, I knew, was towards the end of the pier, and I hurried through the blurred lights and muffled noise. A group of teenagers in leather who were playing a basketball machine stopped and watched me as I passed. I couldn't quite place the look on their faces but it felt hostile and unwelcoming, and I broke eye contact.

It was still there.

I let out a nervous sigh of relief and felt safe, as though suddenly anchored. I ran my hand down the smooth cylindrical cabinet that housed the slot machine. It felt cool and slightly dusty, as though it had been neglected for some time. I looked at the scoring table and saw the familiar characters; the possibilities of costumes to match up and collect winnings. Sailors, doctors, nurses, pilots. There were even some animals, like a lion and a bear. The reel had been left in a winning position (someone had quit while they were ahead, incredibly) depicting a milk maid. She had a glint in her eye.

I took out a coin and slotted it in. It fell into the machine with a clunk and the reels lit up. I pushed the green button.

The reels spun slowly in alternate directions. I smiled. The top one stopped first: a sailor's head. I knew it would be unlikely to land on two wins in a row, and the middle reel stopped on a large-chested woman in a yellow dress. The lowest reel stopped; the legs of a child in shorts, baring his knobby knees.

I had another go; again, no win. Again; this time the top and middle reels matched, but still no win. It was the head and torso of a boxer, complete with gloves. I stopped for a moment, because I couldn't remember seeing that character before. Perhaps they had drawn new reels? It didn't look like it. I checked the score table and there was the boxer; a win of sixty pence if he matched up fully. It was a good drawing. The tone of his muscles were well defined, and there were tiny beads of sweat on his body. His face was rapt with the intense focus of a fighter; his eyes alert.

There was even bruising on his face. A cut underneath his left eye looked deep and would soon be spilling blood.

I spun again.

This time it seemed the reels had not stopped correctly, because the head of the suited man did not entirely line up onto the neck and body of the weightlifter. It looked wrong, and yet deliberate somehow. Their combined neck looked to be broken nastily. I could see the break. The line at which it snapped. Saw the bone pressed against the skin, wanting to burst through.

I slammed the button with my first.

This time a woman's head and body. The hairline gap between the reels seemed more

prominent, noticeable. Blood seeped from the line at which the neck should have been joined. It poured from the hips, as the torso started to slide off, disconnected, from the legs.

I just wanted to use up my credit, to have no turns left, and hit the green button over and over. Each image that the reels on the machine produced seemed more grotesque and horrifically vivid than the last. I could feel tears in my eyes.

Finally, it stopped spinning. There was no difference between the characters on the reels now. They were indistinguishable; each unclothed, and the skin underneath mutilated beyond recognition. They had no skin. They had no features left. Just flayed, ripped and bloody flesh, held together by something I did not understand.

I looked and stepped away, feeling disoriented and cold.

There was a smell now that I could not quite place, but I felt sure that it had not been there before. It was hard to breathe; the air felt clogged.

I walked, trying to get away from it. I could feel my chest twitching, and fought hard to stop the rising tide of pain. *It's just in my mind. I'm doing this to myself.*

Some paces later I stopped to look down. My feet had been brushing through something, and I saw that the wooden floor was covered in a thick black soot. It must have been what filled the air.

Ashes.

Burning. The smell.

I looked around for the arcade, but I knew it wasn't there.

The breeze was biting. It was too dark to see where I was going, but I could still hear the crashing of the waves.