



# EVERYONE WAS THERE

*STORIES*

ANTHONY  
VARALLO

## 7-ELEVEN

When I was fourteen my mother moved into an apartment across town with my principal, Mr. Lorenzo, who was rumored to keep a pistol strapped beneath his dress slacks. My younger sister, Caroline, locked herself inside her bedroom. My older brother, Randy, joined a wannabe gang. My father took to staying up into the wee hours listening to big band records, a new and surprising habit that complicated my efforts to wish him goodnight, and convinced me never to mention that I had started seeing my mother and Mr. Lorenzo at the 7-Eleven near my school.

I saw them often. The first time, they were shoplifting ice cream novelties. Mr. Lorenzo held open one of the freezer doors while my mother filled her purse with Fudgsicles and Drumsticks. The second time, my mother played a video game as Mr. Lorenzo filled out a job application. The third time—but I ran away before they saw me spying from behind the hot dog carousel. I ran outside, where my brother's gang was trying, unsuccessfully, to break a bottle against the wall.

"Ragamuffin!" my brother shouted.

"We alarm you!" another gang member cried. He waved a knife he'd fashioned out of aluminum foil.

My father drank bourbon on those nights he listened to big band records. I got to know some of the numbers pretty good, well enough to say, "Which Dorsey is this?" something I'd rather say than, "I saw Mr.

Lorenzo and Mom making out in the 7-Eleven parking lot this morning.” But my father didn’t answer; he just sipped his bourbon and conducted the air with his fingers the way he sometimes did.

I realized this was a low time for our family.

And then Caroline turned into a bird. I heard her thrashing against her bedroom window, so I opened it and watched her fly off to wherever she flew off to. “Poor Caroline,” I whispered, but really I was kind of jealous.

A few days later Mr. Lorenzo and my mother started working nights at the 7-Eleven. My mom wore a nametag that said, *Ask Me About Lotto Pick-Six!* Mr. Lorenzo manned the Slurpee machine. It got dark out, but my father never asked me where I was going or what I was up to, even when I replaced all his Benny Goodman records with sand.

And maybe I should have seen it coming, but I didn’t.

One night my brother’s gang tried to rob the 7-Eleven with swords they’d made from paper towel tubes, and Mr. Lorenzo shot Randy with his pistol. My mother screamed loud enough to wake Caroline, who’d made a little nest inside the 7 of the 7-Eleven sign. Caroline flew to our house and beat her wings against the window. She could see our father inside, listening to music, but all he heard was sand.

## THE PINBALL SPEAKS

I want to start by saying thank you, first and foremost, for this opportunity to address you all this evening. Please know how much I enjoyed meeting with many of you this afternoon; our conversation accompanied me, quite happily, to the lovely restaurant we hastily fled a few moments ago, my good host checking his watch and reminding me, without the least trace of panic, that we were already running late. He is a kind man, as I'm sure you know, who will certainly be embarrassed to hear himself included in this address; I see him blushing now. Forgive me my tardiness, sir. It is a pinball's habit to linger.

Thankfully, I was able to review a few of the questions you've supplied, at my request. These questions will help guide my observations, whose first is that a pinball needs to be steered, whether by bumper, flipper, or punctual host, and rarely seeks to chart his or her own course. A quality that may explain, in part, pinball's loss of popularity in recent years, along with the computer chip. The few children who peer at me beside their parent's gleeful faces now wear expressions of sheer boredom and pity, something I'll never quite grow used to somehow. A pinball rolls on and on, but is slow to change.

But a gloomy present cannot eclipse a glorious past. And what a past it was! I can still remember the days of steady work, when no sooner had I dropped between the flippers than I was released again from the plunger—whoosh!—the glass sky above me freckled with cigarette ash and the foam

of root beer floats. An old pinball remembers root beer, pocket combs, and the crinkle of leather jackets.

But—onward. You've asked me how I feel about being a pinball, an odd question, sort of like asking how you feel about being, say, a mammal. The truth is I do not really know how I feel about being a pinball, and feel myself to be somewhat of a mystery to myself, if that's not too ridiculous to say. I am a composite of contradictions, to be sure: slow but fast, brave but fearful, a doer who is done unto, my front my back and my back my front. But these warring essences lend little complexity to my sense of self: I am a pinball. Guide me well. Never let me drop.

You've asked how I got my start, and must forgive me when I say I have no idea, really, my earliest recollection the same as last evening's: I was in darkness, then sped toward the light. I careened, I caromed; I dropped into darkness again. A pinball sees the religious in everything.

But I will tell you a secret, since tonight seems the occasion for secrets. When a pinball is in darkness, and the light seems far away, a pinball sometimes weeps and weeps. Listen closely, and you'll hear.