The Economics of Thirty Kisses

Or, what I learned at the Great Wolf Lodge

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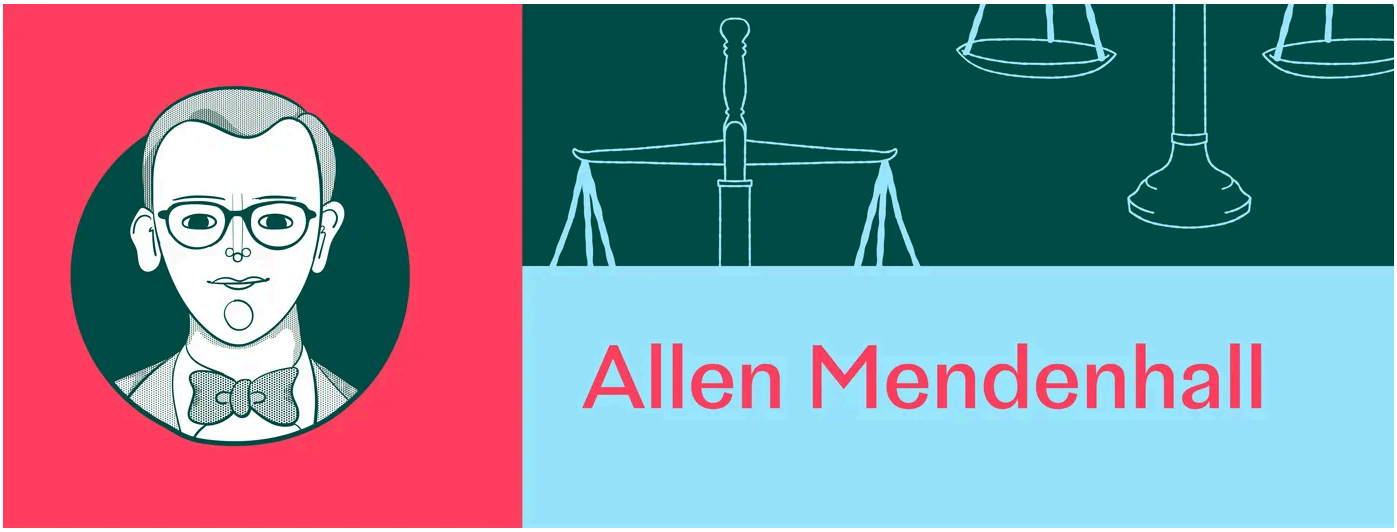

Winter had descended upon us with its usual indignities—the early darkness, the punishing cold, the sort of gray skies that make one question life choices—when I found myself fulfilling a promise made months earlier to Noah and Gabriela: a trip Great Wolf Lodge.

One doesn't simply *go* to Great Wolf Lodge. One *commits* to it, the way medieval penitents committed to walking barefoot across Europe. Except with considerably more chlorine.

We arrived Friday at half past six. The sky was black as pitch, but Gabriela, who is 1 and has developed that teenage talent for making demands while withholding affection, insisted we begin immediately with the waterslides.

Never mind dinner. Never mind that I had been traveling all week. The waterpark beckoned, that curious American invention: a tropical paradise hermetically sealed inside a vast warehouse, a defiance of both season and sense.

There is something positively indecent about stripping down to one's bathing suit i the dead of winter. My skin, pale as a communion wafer, seemed to glow with an unhealthy luminescence under the fluorescent lights. I felt exposed, vulnerable, ridiculous, a middle-aged father conscripted into recreation.

We began with the racing slides, those dual tubes where one competes for absolute nothing of consequence but feels compelled to win anyway. We zipped down, Gabri shrieking with delight, and I executed what can only be described as an awkward da dismount from my tube: a graceless tumble that nearly had my swimming trunks betray me and my dignity.

Looming above us all evening, however, was *it*: the Wolf Tail. The green slide. The c at the very top.

To understand the Wolf Tail, you must understand its particular brand of terror. Yo climb inside a glass container: a capsule, really, like something designed for launch humans into space or disposing of them in dystopian fiction. The door closes. You a locked in. And then comes the wait. That pregnant, interminable wait, standing upright in your little glass coffin while the mechanism decides your fate. I had glimpsed it three years prior, during our last visit, but had found convenient excuse avoid it.

Now Gabriela, who no longer hugs me, who flinches away from displays of paternal affection like I'm carrying some contagious disease, made me an offer. If I went dov the green slide, she said, she would give me twenty kisses on the cheek.

Twenty! I cannot tell you what this meant. For a father watching his daughter slip away into that country called adolescence, twenty kisses represented a fortune, a ki

ransom of affection.

But Friday night was not to be. We did every other slide: the blue, the yellow, the family raft rides in which we screamed together in manufactured peril.

We had a late dinner, bowled, climbed ropes, played miniature golf, and ate ice crea We wandered the hallways meeting other families, all refugees from the winter outside, all paying considerable sums to splash around in chemically treated water.

The anticipation hung over us like ominous weather.

Saturday morning arrived with that strange quality of light that hotel rooms have: neither day nor night, but some liminal space between. I slept remarkably well, bett than I had in months, perhaps years.

I felt *relaxed*. Actually, genuinely relaxed. So relaxed that I was having something lik an out-of-body experience, my mind wrapped in the softest fog. I realized, there on stairs leading up to the slides, that given my uptight personality, this sensation mig never visit me again in my natural life. This was it. The single instant of peace I mig ever know.

"I may do the green slide," I heard myself saying.

Gabriela's eyes widened. "If you do it," she said, "I'll give you thirty kisses." She had raised the stakes, doubled down on affection, and I was already moving forward bef I could reconsider.

The line bifurcates near the top: blue slide or green slide. Almost everyone chooses blue. The green slide's queue stands perpetually empty, like the entrance to hell. *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.*

The attendant opened the rope for me—he seemed almost surprised that anyone ha volunteered—and Noah began to beg.

“Dad, please don’t do it. Please. Dad. *Dad.*”

But I was already climbing into the capsule, already sealing myself inside this glass tomb. The door closed behind me with a pneumatic hiss.

Now, I must tell you that the wait is probably only three to five seconds. But that is enough time for an extraordinary number of thoughts to rampage through one’s mi I thought about how, three years ago, there had been a computerized voice in here– cold, mechanical, saying “prepare for launch” and then counting down: three, two, one.

But, alas, there was no voice. Only silence. Surely, I thought, this was because so ma people had died of heart attacks waiting for the floor to drop; the lodge had remove for liability purposes.

I was aware of my own heartbeat. I could see Noah through the glass, looking at me with such sadness, as if this were the last time he would ever see his father alive; suddenly, the bottom gave way, and I was falling, falling, falling straight down throu a tube of rushing water and terror.

Truth be told, it all happened very fast. One flash, you’re contemplating mortality, a the next, you’re splashing into a pool at the bottom, alive, gasping, human.

Gabriela later kept her promise. Thirty kisses on the cheek, delivered one after anot while Noah watched.

The moment passed as quickly as it came, the way such bargains always do. Affecti spent, adrenaline drained, we drifted back into the ordinary rhythms of the place, unaware that the weekend’s true work was already finished.

It wasn’t a long drive home. The children were half-asleep in the backseat, exhauste from their final morning of slides. I found myself thinking about the place we’d left behind—not just the waterpark, but the whole elaborate construction of it: the ther

rooms, the animatronic wolves, the restaurant serving mediocre food at exorbitant prices, the arcade with its cynical exchange of dollars for tickets for prizes worth pennies, the labyrinthine hallways that all looked the same, the chlorine smell that would linger in our hair for days.

Some would call it artificial, manufactured, a capitalist fever dream designed to ext money from exhausted parents. And they wouldn't be wrong. Great Wolf Lodge *is* a those things. But it's also something else, something I hadn't quite understood unti then, watching the winter landscape slide past the car window while my children sl

It's a memory machine.

Someone, somewhere, had the audacity to imagine this place into existence. To bui summer paradise in the middle of winter, to construct slides and pools and fearsom glass capsules, to hire teenagers to run the machinery and keep the water warm, to design a system that would bring families together from their scattered lives and deposit them, half-naked and vulnerable, into a shared experience. There is someth exhilarating about that ambition, isn't there? To create the architecture of nostalgia To build the infrastructure of joy.

When Gabriela is 30, and I'm old, she won't remember the drive home, the cost of t room, or how the pizza tasted. But she will remember when her father climbed into that glass capsule for her. She will remember that he was afraid and did it anyway. S will remember giving him thirty kisses on his pale, chlorinated cheek. And Noah w remember begging his father not to go, and his relief when I emerged alive at the bottom.

These instances happen because someone built a place for them to happen, because some anonymous dreamer of commerce understood that what families sometimes need is permission—permission to be silly, to be scared, to be together in the middl of winter when the world outside is dark and cold and indifferent.

Great Wolf Lodge will take your money, yes. It will take all of your money. But in exchange, it offers what people wrongly insist capitalism cannot: a theater for love. stage where fathers can become heroes by riding green slides, where daughters can generous with their affection, where sons can show their fear without shame, where families can gather in the warm water and remember, for a weekend, what they mea to each other.

The lodge sits there still, I suppose, glowing in the winter darkness, waiting for the next family to arrive. The slides don't care who rides them. The glass capsule doesn distinguish between the brave and the afraid. The water is always the same temperature. But the memories—ah, the memories are different for everyone who passes through.

That is the miracle, really. Not the slides or the pools, but the audacity of believing meaning could be made to order. And making it. Somewhere in the ledgers and balance sheets of corporate America, next to the line items for chlorine, maintenan and teenage lifeguard wages, there's an accounting for what cannot be accounted fo the value of a father's fear, the worth of a daughter's kisses, the weight of a son's rel

Thirty kisses on a chlorinated cheek.

It seems like nothing. It seems like everything. And in the end, it's the calculation t mattered.

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