

POLYBIUS

One afternoon when I was a kid in about '84 or '85, Dads got a call about a clean-out from some old lady landlord up in Geneva. Geneva was a little ways out, but Dads had certainly driven farther for a good deal before. She said her tenant had flown the coop and left all his stuff behind apparently, including a whole room of electronics, Dads bread-and-butter.

Well Dads worked out a deal with her and came back later that night wearing a new used Denim jacket and a whole bunch of other stuff: some guitars, an amp, a record player, cassettes, speakers, a boom box, radios, headphones, even some Atari games, joysticks, and a computer! But the last thing he rolled in was this black arcade cabinet with no side art, two speaker grills, a few clouds on the control panel, and pink bubble lettering on the marquee like the color of bubblegum. *POLYBIUS*

A few years before that Dads had done pretty well reselling a couple of Donkey Kong arcade cabinets he picked up at an old fairgrounds over in Hornell. He had sat on them for a little while, but even back then Dads had several properties for storage so he didn't mind sitting on stuff as long as he could see a profit down the road.

I can still remember him plugging in the arcade cabinet in our basement and then cursing up a storm.

"Damn thing worked when I plugged it in Geneva! Worked fine there. Was brighter than our damn street lights! All the lights lit up and I even got it to play one game with a quarter!" he said. "I paid a hundred-fifty dollars for it! Now it's not doing anything at all! Damn _____ ing cursed son a damn _____ !"

Well Dads was really pissed, more than normal; he tinkered with it some over the next few months, he even ordered some parts from Germany, but he could never get *POLYBIUS* to power on again. He finally gave up, but he never threw it out. He said it was because he knew someone would eventually buy it down the road for more than \$150, power or no power, but I think part of it was Dads just didn't want to part with the damned game. He had some connection to the machine.

But *POLYBIUS* got buried in one of Dads other properties, and I forgot all about it. It wasn't until two decades later, after Dads died that I discovered it again in the back corner of the garage of his small house near the south end of River St. less than fifty feet from the dyke the town built after the big Chemung River flood in '72. Chemung River was right there but you couldn't see it; you could still hear it though.

I recognized *POLYBIUS* right away, but it took over a week to even make a path to it with all of Dads other stuff filling up the garage. By then I had already organized a bunch of stuff and held the first yard sale out front and in the side yard. I had done similar cleanouts at two of his other properties last summer so Moms could put them up for sale.

I had two sales at each of those properties, with every room practically overflowing with stuff he'd picked up at auctions and yard sales over the years. Dads had trouble, especially near the end with throwing *anything* out, broken or not. But he usually had a good eye; there was only a little junk, and even most of the broken stuff was clean high-quality electronics or appliances that might still be worth something.

After making out pretty well at the first sale I finally had a path back to *POLYBIUS*. I wheeled it near the outlet in the corner with Dads dolly and set it down. It had two joysticks, and five buttons, 2 pink, 2 white, and the one in the center gold that together made the shape of an X in the center of the control panel. I kneeled, plugged it in, stood up, and just like I remembered when I was a kid *POLYBIUS* didn't light up or make any sounds.

I pushed the buttons on it and moved both joysticks around. I even put in a quarter and for a few seconds a pink light lit up behind the marquee and bezel, then it made some terrible glitch-sound, like a record scratching. But that was it. I unplugged *POLYBIUS*, marked it broken, and priced it at \$500 with a small pink sticker on both sides.

A few days later at my 2nd sale at Dads River St. property, near the end of the day some big sweaty friendly guy name of Larry haggled me down to \$355 cash for *POLYBIUS* if I could drop it off at Sayre Hill on the other side of the University, in a few days. He said his son might be able to fix it up.

"You got it," I said maybe a little too eagerly. "No problemo." He handed over the money. I was happy to be rid of the damn arcade game. Of course I never told Dads, but I was happy he could never get the cabinet to work; he never gave his attention to anything else when it lived in our basement. Larry and I exchanged numbers, and he gave me his address.

I made out pretty good at the 2nd sale too, even better than the first. A few days later I called Larry up, and he drove down to help me load the arcade cabinet up in the back of Dads old truck. I strapped it in and followed him back to his house, near the top of Sayre Hill.

We unloaded *POLYBIUS* and rolled it into his small garage that had two other arcade cabinets lined up against the back wall. His kid Alt looked pretty excited with the new machine; his eyes were glowing. Perhaps he was a little strange. I think I remembered him from somewhere, but I couldn't figure out where.

"My son Alt's some kind of prodigy with machines. He's only eleven, but mister I'll tell ya he can fix anything up even better than his old man. I mean I'm serious." Larry said. "If anybody can get this game working it's my son Alt."

He was sweating quite a lot. He slapped his son on the shoulder then walked over to the mini-fridge on the other side of the garage. "Can I get you a beer Don? Tequila?"

For a millisecond I almost said yes out of sheer knee-jerk reaction. Just one? Nah couldn't have just one.

"Sounds good but no thanks. Maybe some other time though. I should really get..."

"Alt fixed up both of those other arcade machines. Fixes lawnmowers, fixes radios, the damn kid is some kind of genius and you know what?" Alt was already behind the *POLYBIUS* machine tinkering with it. Larry popped the tab on his beer and lowered his voice.

"They tried to tell me and the wife back in elementary school that Alt was slow. HA! Wanted to hold em back, but me and the wife knew even then that Alt was special but I'm saying because he was so smart, not because he was slow. A little peculiar too like he won't go outside anymore, but like I tell Marla there's worse things than not going outside. You know what I mean Don?"

"Yeah I definitely do. Listen I'm just happy Alt's going to get the game working again. I think I told you my Dads worked on it what almost twenty years ago, but he could never get it to power back on. He said it worked real good where he bought it up in Geneva after he put a quarter in, but he could never get it to power up again after that."

Larry took a long chug of his beer, and held out his big hand.

"Well thanks again Don for bringing it up here for my boy. I mean it! I'll bet dinner he'll get the thing working again within two weeks, heck probably even one!" Alt squealed happily at his Father from what sounded like inside *POLYBIUS*.

"Glad to meet ya. Anytime you're itching for a beer feel free to stop by and oh please let us know when your next sale is gonna be!" He laughed good-naturedly, and I shook his big hand.

When I got in my car and pulled out of the short driveway I saw his wife gardening in the side yard wearing gloves and a pair of large dark sunglasses that took up almost half of her face. We waved at each other, and in about fifteen minutes I found myself parked downtown in the middle of the parking lot between Jolly's and the liquor store, without remembering driving there.

They had cold beer at Jolly's, beer imported from all over the world, any beer you could ever want to drink, and they had whiskey at the liquor store, bottom-shelf all the way up to Johnny Walker. I closed my eyes and sat in my car for a while, until it got dark, getting sleepy. Then I drove home.

Two weeks later I had the final yard sale at the property, and marked down everything that hadn't sold in the previous sale. On the 2nd day early in the morning Larry stopped by wearing dark black sunglasses with pink frames.

He looked around for a while. I didn't recognize him at first, even after he started speaking. Didn't know who the hell he was until he brought up *POLYBIUS*. He had lost quite a bit of weight, and he looked like he hadn't slept in three days. I thought he might be wasted; I could smell beer on him. He asked me if I had anymore arcade cabinets for sale.

"No sorry, but did Alt get the arcade machine running?"

"Huh?" He looked confused. "Oh no but I mean that's why. Not I mean that's why I was asking about more arcade machines cause Alt thinks it needs a few old parts."

"Oh well I wish I could help you out. I'm pretty sure I don't have any more arcade stuff in my Dads other properties, but if I find any how about I give you a call?"

"*Pretty* sure? I can pay you a lot. What about up in Genesse where you Father bought it? Would they maybe have some other ones or at least parts for it you think?"

"Genesse? Nah Dads got it up in Geneva" He was standing a little too close to me. "Dads got it from an older lady and it was one of her renters stuff, but that was over twenty years ago now."

"Yeah Geneva that's what I meant. Do you know where in Geneva?" He sounded desperate.

Dads had said it was a small pink house outside Geneva, right next to this ice-cream place that had mini-golf and a small arcade out back. The back porch looked directly into the parking lot of the place. Might be enough information to find it still, but Larry was acting like a different person, plus I thought it was strange he wanted to know where Dads bought the arcade cabinet so long ago.

"Nah I didn't go with Dads that day. He just told me he got it said somewhere up Route 5."

"Awwwww ok. You sure? Because that's...well you know I'll pay real good you find another machine like that. Alt loved it. I mean I'll pay you more than before for the same game. "*POLYBIUS*" he said, slurring a little. I don't think I had ever heard the word spoken aloud before, not even around Dads.

Larry shuffled around the sale a little longer, browsing though the stuff on my tables then he got in his small car he had parked backwards and halfway in the road. After almost fifteen minutes he drove away. Very strange.

About five days later I got a call. It was Marla, Larry's wife, telling me she would pay me to come back and pick *POLYBIUS* back up, in Dads truck.

"Pick it back up?" "Yeah Larry and Alt's gone please. I'll pay you. There's something wrong with it. I don't have no other way to get rid of it."

"What do you mean they're gone?"

"They're gone please. I'll pay you \$500 to come get it."

"\$500? Wait that's more than...you don't have to pay me I'll come get it just..."

"No I left the \$500 for you under the brown flower pot off to the right of the front of the main porch. Just push the garage door button."

"You left it under a flowerpot?"

"Yes please!"

"And Larry's ok with this."

"Yes he's gone. Please."

"OK I will but..."

By the time I get there I was a little freaked out. I push the garage button like she said and it opens fine. Bright pink light inside, some kind of oil spill near the front of the garage that smells funny. I get Dads dolly out of my truck and push it up to the machine. *POLYBIUS* is in the center of the three arcade games and seems to be the only machine powered on, even though they're all plugged in.

Slowly I walk up to the screen. Pink and electric blue lines crisscrossed but diagonal lines too intersected and moving parts. *Insert coin Insert coin Insert coin.* I remember Dads looking up the name and discovering that Polybius was a Greek historian who made ciphers. I can still hear him saying, "That's about as useful to me as another wife or an empty beer bottle when I'm thirsty."

The monitor is so bright and pink, electric blue and what is it some new color? Not quite gold but...I feel in my pants instinctively for a quarter like I was still a kid. Five buttons, two

joysticks, how the lines crisscrossed making small squares on the board like the bottom of one of those vintage paper slicers that made the SHA sound. The ones you could cut fifty pieces of paper with at once and a couple fingers too. SHA!

And the beeps and bops are a song a song. *Play me play me play me*. I take my eyes off the screen and feel day-blind like when you open your curtains in a pitch-dark room in the middle of the day. I put my palms in my eye sockets, putting pressure there until my vision slowly comes back. Then I have to get on my knees to reach back behind to unplug the cord. I have to practically yank the cord outta the wall, and when I do the cord vibrates and the machine makes that high-pitched record-scratching sound again.

When I stand up the monitor and marquee on *POLYBIUS* are still lit up but much less bright. Faintly the monitor is still blinking *Insert Coin Insert Coin Insert Coin* in the center and underneath that *(C) 1982 Unendlicher Narr Narr Inc.* After about ten minutes I somehow get the cabinet in the bed of my truck by myself and feel like I've earned the \$500 and probably another hernia in the process.

I get the machine strapped in the back of Dads truck and then walk quickly up to the porch and grab the money and a piece of paper from under the flower pot. I hop back in my truck and unwrap the piece of paper. It says: *"Something is wrong with the game, you can't turn it off. And it changed Alt. He couldn't stop playing, and Larry started drinking like before. Don't look at it without sunglasses on, even if its powered off. Please take it away."*

Well I got the hell outta there and drove directly to the beer store and then to Dads cabin in the woods outside Corning. The whole thing was crazy! My mind raced. No other neighbors

for miles and miles out here, and there was a big fire pit on the property, near the small pond. Right before dark I backed my truck right up against the fire pit. I could see the top of *Polybius* in the rearview mirror. Once I turned the car off I could hear some kind of humming emanating from the machine. *ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ*

Still sitting in the driver's seat I ripped a beer from the twelve-pack of green MooseHead bottles and guzzled half of it down. I dropped the keys on the seat and engaged the emergency brake. So quiet and calm out here. It was... I hopped outta the truck and grabbed some kerosene and a sledgehammer outta the shed. Then I climbed in the driver's seat and finished up the beer.

I lit up a cigar and opened another green bottle. 2nd beer in what eleven years? Man it tasted good! Best-tasting-beer I ever had before in my whole life! I watched the arcade cabinet in the rearview mirror and listened to it humming humming, feeling so light and at peace with myself.

The bugs chirped outside the truck. It was so quiet and calm out here. Away from everything else. I felt very very good. Opened another MooseHead and smoked another cigar and just relaxed out here in the woods like Dads used to like to do.

I mean how could I destroy the damn thing really? What would Dads say? It was a piece of history, likely the only one left. Destroying it would be like killing the last animal left of its species or the hubris in thinking you could ever know that an animal was the last of its kind in the first place. *POLYBIUS ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ*

More people needed to play the game. That was the important thing. That was the primary solitary most important thing. More people needed to play *POLYBIUS* than just Larry's

family. The new generation would appreciate it like the kids at University yeah like the kids at the University!

I threw my three empty beer bottles in the fire pit and drove home to get a few things and then directly to campus. Man I felt real good. I parked right up next to campus lounge at the bottom of North Hall where I offered a starving college student \$25 to help me unload *Polybius* off Dads truck. He helped me balance it as I wheeled it right inside the campus lounge in the back corner.

I thanked the kid and gave him five \$5 bills. I had this whole story prepared about my company, I had even printed out some fake paper-work at home, but nobody even questioned me. I positioned the game in the corner of the lounge, in between Turtles in Time and Time Crisis 3, behind the green pool tables and ping-pong table.

I got down on my knees and grabbed a hold of the power cord in the back. In the big wall outlet there was just enough space for the power cord to plug in. Kismet. I put my sunglasses over my eyes, then pushed the cord into the wall and sprang to my feet.

The monitor was bright again; heat radiating from *POLYBIUS*, the humming growing louder. I patted my front pocket instinctively looking for a quarter that wasn't there. Then I went back home and finished off most of the 12-pack, like I used to back in the day. Hell it went down even easier than back in the day.

The next morning I can see from my car there's a long line at the machine, and the other two arcade games are dead. I brought a value meal, two beers, and a fifth of whiskey with me for the stakeout. Should be enough. Around noon a fight almost breaks out with two people in

line. Even in my car wearing sunglasses, behind my windshield, during the middle of the clear fall day I can see how bright and clear *POLYBIUS* looks. In the games pink eternal glow I can see some of the faces of the University students in line, their eyes unblinking, standing on their tippy toes, vying for positioning just so they can get *just one more just one more* look at the screen.

A week later all classes get cancelled indefinitely. *POLYBIUS* is all over campus now; almost everyone has the game downloaded on their personal monitor. Streets are empty except for some deer, bears, and this pack of feral cats I caught a glimpse of wandering through Centerway Square the other day.

There's a few who can resist it, but good luck finding any who aren't full-blown drug-addicts. They are the ones who deliver food directly outside the doors of the dorm rooms now instead of getting called to the front desk because none of the people who watch it can leave their monitors now for more than maybe fifteen seconds if it's some absolute emergency like they're on fire or falling from a great height.

Always there's new levels that shift so there's no way you beat em all only you don't understand that until it's too late. Lines crossing diagonal and in a circle too like the globe, always moving. So bright who needs the sun? Who needs the sun? Learning is obsolete outside of the game. Education is a thing of the past.

Government issued a quarantine for one-hundred-square-miles around campus, but most of the people infected can't even determine what the word quarantine is because as their mind gets to the prefix quar- it is already lost in a foggy maze of being outside the monitor.

New high score but that's not beating it! Lines on top of other lines criss-crossing, twisted, and then mirrored back outside of the screen, imprinted onto the retinas of the players watching. You don't even need to use the joysticks or buttons your mind is all you need to *play now play now play now!*

It's not a game but you can win. Play is the reward. The game transforms any normal screen into the borders of the game itself. It's a puzzle looking into one of those pictures of someone looking into a mirror that's looking into another mirror and another mirror that goes on forever. Unsolvable. Mathematical conjectures ripped off the pages and rotated to fit on the screen backwards and then mirrored and reversed. There's no end.

Food is dropped in to the University from planes like a refugee camp. Most deaths caused by exhaustion or malnutrition, a lot less murders now that most everyone has their own screen. This small gang has a deal worked out with the government where they get paid in amphetamines to remove, identify, and bury all the infected bodies and animals in two mass graves they designated near the old Campus Cafeteria.

Me I'm surviving I guess. I enjoy the quiet I can't lie, and the real estate market has gifted me with a mansion that I paid just 25¢ for! That's it, and no property taxes either! The other night I wheeled the Original Polybius in to my mansion in the dark of night after cutting the power and exterminating some roaches in Ennet Hall.

I don't watch the monitor of course, but I like having it near me, behind the closed door in the next room. Gives off a warmth and the humming that puts me to sleep. Can't sleep without her now. I can see her light under the door, but I can resist as long as I got good whiskey in the

house and boy let me tell you what we got good whiskey in the house now. Fills up an empty space inside me knowing I can live multiple lives now and still never run out.

Sometimes I hear *POLYBIUIS* in the large closet making calculations, purring, trying to communicate though it can't speak words. We develop a rhythm even with the door between us. I spend countless weeks then months trying to decipher the sounds and make an alphabet with the beeps and bleeps and some plosives. Winter comes, but her room keeps me warm no matter where I go in my mansion, but I never much leave my mansion now either. I don't watch *POLYBIUIS* trust me, there's just no reason to leave.

What can I get outside except sunburn and get killed in a car accident? Just cold out there, dark and quiet. The sun's the same as it was before, only it doesn't feel like it now, especially in the winter. Her light under the door is brighter than the sun, only it's still not enough bright enough now for my eyes that have seen the pink/blue lines intersecting in the game.

Still I never open the door; I have locked it from the inside, after I went in her room with a welding mask then climbed down/fell out the 3rd floor window and limped back inside the front door. Most nights now I sleep in the hallway right outside the bottom of the door with my face right up next to the light, immersed, breathing it in. The humming *ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ* like I'm in a cushion blanketed with that yellow red blue afghan Moms Moms crocheted me, inside of a dream. Now that I've gotten used to the humming silence is deafening and crushes me like physical space.

When I close my eyes I see the moving lines pink on electric blue crisscrossing endlessly. Weeks more go by. So weak. Run out of food? Lose almost fifty pounds. Realize I will starve, can't live on the hum and whiskey alone so I rig two welding masks so they fit on top of each other, put em on to go inside the closet and tie two dark blue tarps tight around the whole upper cabinet with some rope I found in the basement.

I somehow get her up on the dolly with the last of my strength and push her with me to the house next door. Get her up on the front porch, leave her there, take my welding masks off, and go scavenging inside for some food. The first three houses are busto, but I find a whole cabinet full of goodies in the fourth house, eat just a little, and bag the rest up and head back home. I barely get *POLYBIUS* back in her room and plug her back in before her monitor has burned through both tarps. I fall asleep in a pile of food outside the bottom of the door with a full belly.

A few days later while I'm downstairs working calculations in the new addition we are attacked, but my traps get one of em! The second one reaches *Polybius*, but she's stronger now than when I first wheeled her into the student lounge. Louder and brighter and... The intruder is being lifted off the floor by the time I get there, drooling with two white beams of light going from the monitor into each of his eyes!

I rip another door off the nearby closet and prop it up against what's left of the smashed-up door of her room. Even though I only saw her light at full-power for a few moments, and even though I'm wearing Cat 4 sunglasses, later that night after I set a few more traps set up I go blind!

But I don't need my eyes anymore All that I need, and the only comfort in the world is

the smooth hum on the floor with my face on the floor *ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ*. Because even blind, behind closed doors, I can see her eternal light burning brighter than a thousand suns. If I never see anything else again in the world except the light of *Polybius* or hear only the hum of her peaceful melody for a thousand lives I would still be more blessed and fortunate and honored than every person who has ever lived *ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ*.

Two days later a fraction of my sight comes back in right eye, enough to get around. His body's gone. I move us across the street. Next day I watch more intruders blast through the front door. The first one gets exploded halfway down the street. Second one's gets shrapnel in his upper leg and face, and the third one scurries away fast into the neighbor's yard and then he's outta sight. Doubt he'll come back, but there will be others soon. I have to leave. I get an idea in my head of where I am, like on the map in the game and decide where to go.

My old elementary school top of the hill above Chemung River that's rushing now will mask the humming for a while. Under the cover of night I push her all the way up the hill, almost keeling over from exhaustion once I get us inside the glass front doors. We go down the long carpeted ramp I can remember I can remember to the 1st grade. Miss Jenny. Very large glass room with four classrooms inside. Macaroni pictures on the walls and Oregon Trail wagons made out of popsicle sticks. Tiny desks and chairs. Colorful everything. I can remember.

I push her past the computers in the center of the classrooms to the far back corner, and then I walk back to the classroom diagonal to it, in the front, near the glass wall. I squeeze myself in a miniature kids desk until it's practically attached to me, turn around and watch her glow and hum behind several colorful partitions from way across the other side, almost in a

different room, a big smile on my dopey face, drooling a little. *ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ ZZZ*
ZZZ ZZZ