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Night Crawler

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Slow Emotion

At the Walton Derby, the moment means more than winning

By Silke Tudor
 Article Published Mar 19, 2003

I am at a cultural disadvantage, but I don't know it yet. (This is a good thing, since I am one of those who prefer to fail discreetly, with as few spectators as possible.) While still happily ignorant, I march over to **Body Manipulations** to pick up the "package" that has been left for me. It provides me with no further clues; I turn it over a few times, confirming that what I hold is, indeed, a small block of wood in a zip-lock bag.

"Don't you know what it is?" asks **Paul Stoll**, owner of the piercing studio.

"Um, well, sure, a pinewood car," I say, not sounding sure at all.

Stoll nods and smiles, seeming satisfied with our mutual knowledge of timeless Americana. Hmm ...

At home I drop the package on the kitchen table, thinking I can ignore it until morning, but, upon spying the innocuous block, my housemate lets out a little "whoop" and launches into an animated tale about Cub Scouts in Roseland, N.J., and his making it to the regional competition with his trusty pinewood car. With grand enthusiasm he offers me helpful tips on aerodynamics and weight distribution, time-tested plans, passed from generation to generation, for getting the most inches per second out of a small chunk of timber.

"It needs to be the slowest car on the track," I clarify, offering the only solid facts I know about the second annual **Walton Derby**. "The last car comes in first. Only the slowest car survives."

My housemate frowns and reorganizes his thoughts.

"Ahhh, well, that will take a whole different design strategy," he says, hoisting his weekend bag and heading for the door. "You'll want as much wind resistance as possible. Lighter is better. I really wish I could stay and help." I don't doubt him, even as the front door closes with a somber click.

On my own. No problem.

I dump out the bag and study the contents: a block of wood, four plastic wheels, and two little rods for the chassis. Seems straightforward enough. Determining the enclosed list of rules and regulations is gratuitously long-winded, I decide to skip it and focus on the chirpy letter from Walton Derby founder, and local artist, **Lee Walton**, to "Potential 2003 Walton Derby Champion," i.e., to me.

"I am hoping that you're [sic] car will be the slowest in the world," writes Walton.

Hmmm ... Recognizing that style over substance is my only option, I rifle through the official Night Crawler tackle box, which yields one half bag of pink sequins, a few patches of fun fur, and two large, diaphanous, bunny ear-like leaves dyed peppermint pink. With a little perseverance and several punishing hours of late-night glue gun action, I am able to go online and register *SF Weekly's* official entry for the 2003 Walton Derby: **Cotton Candy Caterpillar**. Ours is a ramshackle little slug with tiny button eyes, drooping ears, sluggish wheels, and an odd, toothy grin, but, at 2:42 a.m., I am pretty sure my employers would be proud if they were, like me, cheerfully ignorant of what the following night might hold.

OK, I'm a little surprised by the size of the crowd gathered at the **Southern Exposure Gallery**. I note with some trepidation that there are no seats available along the 25-foot-long Pinewood Derby track, but assure myself that there is still plenty of standing room in the spacious exhibition hall, except, of course, by the banquet table, where people are admiring the four-wheeled entries. Summoning sequins-fueled self-confidence, I push my way through the crowd and plop down the little pink caterpillar. There are more than 100 entries, and it takes but a second to realize that *SF Weekly's* Cotton Candy Caterpillar is not only a bottom-feeder in



Details

By Mari Coates



On this track, the slowest racer wins.

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the engineering division, it is also potently, incontrovertibly outstyled. In a quick look, I notice the sublimely elegant **Cambodia**, a rolling ship with curling, handcrafted sails, fantasy-inspired pinwheels, and a spiral staircase made of parchment; as well as the **Jesus Christ Super Car**, a Christian savior aboard a plank of clouds created by the delightfully droll **Jason Mora**; the **Shotwell**, an aerodynamic marvel carved by **667 Shotwell** proprietor **Chris Sollars**, and inspired by his engineer mother; and the **Elements of Style**, a writerly assemblage of cigarette ashes, an old coffee cup, crumpled \$1 bills, empty airline liquor bottles, and the *Elements of Style* by **William Strunk Jr.** Feeling a little embarrassed for *SF Weekly's* pink pupa, I slink away hoping to avoid detection; sadly, the fluorescent pink wig and sparkly pink fun-fur jacket I chose to wear in solidarity do little to aid in the subterfuge.

Heading for the balcony, I come across a small room displaying a circle of old Pinewood Derby cars. All but one -- a self-possessed little car covered in funny pages and driven by Goofy -- are cleaved in two, their broken halves scattered with wheels hanging at odd angles, their careful, colorful veneers terminating in jagged splinters. I imagine a rosy trail of sequins and fur leading to the losers' circle, where all but the winner of tonight's entries will inevitably find themselves.

Out on the balcony, I am horrified to discover that the crowd has tripled; I tell myself that it's no big deal, I'm not really here to compete, just to work, but there are cameras and video monitors and several people scribbling furiously on notebooks the size and shape of my own, and I can't help but notice the growing buzz of excitement in the air.

"By the end of the night, we will know which car is the slowest," says Walton through a loudspeaker at the top of the track. The crowd falls silent. "We will know which car is the most ridiculously sluggish, which car will be the winner of the 2003 Walton Derby."

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