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The B Side of Life
26 May 2023*
Revised Nov2023
8, 696 Words

Bowling for Divorce

The bright colored bowling balls down at the 4th Street Bowl were always chipped, cracked, or damaged in some way. Usable, but imperfect. It was one reason Dad liked taking his daughters, Olivia and Grace, there -- the place had real "old world" charm which offered valuable insight into life. Not everything had to be perfect or electronic to be fun.

The bowling alley itself was a throwback to the 1970's -- clean with original fixtures including a pinball game room, cigarette vending machine, and countertop café. Highly polished wood lanes, first gen scorecard stands, and Jayhawk ball spinners all enhanced the ambiance. Everything decorated in Formica and chrome made you feel like you had left the modern world behind when you walked through the front doors and let them swing shut behind.

"This place is, like, so literally vintage. Just like you, Dad," Dad's teenager, Olivia liked to tease.

"Yeah, Dad," added Grace, his precocious 9-year old, "if you were a bowling alley, this place would totally be you."

The owner, Beverly, was always on hand and an original as well -- a former pro bowler from the 1960's who built the place during bowling's great broadcasting heyday and managed every detail. The place was alive back then. Bowling leagues filled every lane every night of the week with middle-aged men and women, their names patched over their matching bowling shirts, co-mingling about while young studs and stud-ettes pulled out the latest Brunswick's and Pyramid balls to impress each other with. Senior citizens gathered as well, pushed to the end lanes, but still active and relevant. And scores of teenagers invaded the place every Friday and Saturday night for disco bowling and midnight bowl parties -- excited to have a place that wasn't the roller rink or the drive in to be welcomed at. Not to mention the back to back to back kid's birthday parties every Saturday and Sunday afternoon requiring extra staff just to manage. It was a different time and era.

"Well, if I'm an old bowling alley, then that makes you two my little bowling balls."

"Dad, that, like, literally makes no sense," Olivia said shaking her head.

"None at all," Grace added shaking her own head as well.

The 4th Street Bowl refused to die. Over the years, as patrons grew up, left, or passed away and families became more interested in amusement parks and beach vacations, Beverly held on; she neither changed décor nor updated her beloved bowling alley in any way, shape, or fashion. Everything was kept original and in good repair. And like her, the remaining patrons considered 4th Street Bowl a last bastion of honor and purity from a previous era. Those few who still clung to their glory days and those fewer still who grew up in its sanctuary -- like Dad.

Beverly, even as she approached 80, kept everyone on a first-name basis. And could be stern where bowling etiquette was concerned. She tolerated no "tom-foolery" on the lanes.

“Roger, you old curmudgeon!” Beverly hollered across the alley to one of her oldest living patrons, “You drop that ball one more time on my lovely wood lane and I’ll skin you alive. If I told you once, I told you a million times you need a lighter ball. You ain’t a teenager no longer so quit tryin’ to act like you was. Pick up the seven pounder and put the twelve back where it belongs.”

“Sure thing, Bev,” Roger replied.

If Roger was embarrassed, he didn’t show it. He smiled because he loved the recognition. Beverly yelling at him reminded him he was alive and still a force to be reckoned with — even if it was for being too weak to hold up an already too light damn bowling ball.

“Beverly’s not playing around today,” Olivia whispered to Grace and Dad. “Do you think that’s because she’s worried?”

“Worried about what?” Dad asked.

“Don’t get mad at me, but I accidentally overheard Mom talking to her on the phone this morning. They kept talking about how Beverly owed Mom something. And Mom said money was the problem.”

“Are you sure Mom was talking to Bev? Mom doesn’t talk to Bev.”

“She did this morning. She said her name real loud a bunch of times.”

“Oh, okay. Well, whatever it was about, you shouldn’t eavesdrop, young lady.”

“I wasn’t trying to. I was in my room and Mom was pacing in the hallway. I couldn’t help but hear. It wasn’t my fault.”

“I heard her too, Dad,” Grace added. “She was being real loud.”

“Okay, well, I’m sure it’s nothing.” Still, Dad was concerned.

“If Beverly needs money, do you think she’d let me record a TikTok with her? If I asked nicely? She’d definitely get like literally a million hits! People would literally come from like everywhere to meet her and bowl here. And she’d be rich cause so many people would come and pay her to bowl.”

“That’s a nice thought, but Beverly’s old school. You can ask, but she’s as likely to throw your phone out as much as let you record her,” Dad advised. “I once saw her make a grown man cry because he had the temerity to answer his cellphone in the middle of a game. She also threatened to shove his ball, and his phone, into a very dark place if the man didn’t take it outside.”

“Did she really?” Grace asked eyes wide.

“No, Grace,” Olivia interjected, “Dad’s just making up stories.”

“Am not!”

“Nice retort, Dad. What are you, like, five?”

Beverly was old school for sure. Dad was old school. Millennials were not. Every now and then young people would pop in seeking new places to explore and hang out. But they would also leave just as quickly when they realized 4th Street Bowl had no outlets to charge their cellphones and Wi-Fi so slow their YouTube searches for “how to bowl the best strike” took forever to load and stream.

“I tell you,” Beverly croaked, “The last bunch of kids that came through I barely understand a word they was saying. They kept talking in letters. BTW this. QRST that. And what the hell is an *influencer* anyway? As far as I could tell, the only person they was trying to influence was me giving them free stuff. What’s up with these kids nowadays?”

Beverly was invariably polite enough to send them over to the Crush Ultra Bowlero at the Vanity Fair Mall where they were much happier with the state of the art visuals, high-speed internet, and glass and chrome electronica to distract. But she lamented their lack of interest in bowling for bowling's sake.

"I don't know how much longer I can hold on to the old gal with this new generation," Beverly mentioned to Dad, "As low as the overhead is, still. No new paying customers coming in. Old patrons nearly gone. Bowling leagues dead. And it seems like every week some new developer comes in offering a big payday if I would only just sell the place. They want to put a microbrew with Hazy IPA's here, whatever that is. And now the city is putting pressure on me. They informed me my liquor license fees were going up again this year. And not by a little. Hell, they was always cheats, but now they're downright criminal. I remember when beer was a nickel and no one questioned who drank what as long as you didn't act the fool."

"You should sell, I suppose," Dad replied, "You've certainly earned it. And since you own the land, you'd make millions. Bowling is not going to make a comeback, I'm sorry to say. And as much as I love this place and would hate to see you leave, you should take the buyout and go travel the world or buy a beach front villa or something like that. Live the good life. You certainly could live comfortably for a very long time enjoying the time you have left."

"Oh, hell's bells! Travel the world my ass! This is the place I enjoy most. Always have. Always will. I've been in one bowling alley or another since before man landed on the moon and Sinatra belted out his first tune. I been bowling since I could barely stand when my Daddy first put a lacquered wooden ball in my hands and taught me how to roll it down the lane. It's part of me. Ain't no place worth travelling to if you're content to be where you at."

"I know, Bev, I know, but the world is changing in ways no one expected. And this area has become so expensive, it's a great deal harder to keep up. Dot com gentrification is pushing everyone out. How much longer can you hold out? If your daughter had ever expressed any interest in running the place, it might be different. And your granddaughters are still too young to take over."

"Well, who asked them too? They have they own lives to live and I have mine. I forged this one. They can take care of their own. This place is my home. For me and the last of my kind. And I will be here for as long as I can hold onto the life I have left."

"I admire you, Bev, I do. And I respect your tenaciousness. I wish I could embrace life in such simple, effective terms. But it's wearing you down. I can see it. And it hasn't helped that your daughter has been on the warpath against you for a while now. I wish I could do more."

"Not your circus. Not your clowns. Not your fight to fight."

Despite how serious Beverly's predicament was, Dad laughed. Bev always had the most unusual sayings to end any difference of opinion and ensure the other person knew she could handle her own business.

"Daddy?" Grace asked. "Can we bowl now?"

"Sure thing, sweetie."

Like Dad, Grace loved the 4th Street Bowl, especially how the bowling balls were always set out in rows behind the lanes -- from one end to the other -- in a panorama of colors offered. Yellow next to blue next to red, green, black, and pink orbs resting in semi-glossy circumference waiting to be picked up and sent rolling down the lanes.

Today, Grace was keen on bowling with a pink ball, which sent her and Dad heading down to the far right.

“Pick a ball that’s not too heavy, Grace,” Dad mentioned. “If the pink balls are too heavy, you might have to try a different color. Maybe blue or green. Choose one you can hold with one hand.”

“Can I still bowl with a pink one even if it’s too heavy?”

“Sure, I suppose. If you want. You might have to roll it with both hands though. And there are no gutter guards here.”

Grace smiled. “That’s okay,” she said brightly. She was going through a pink phase again after recently cleaning her room and re-discovering one of her favorite childhood books, *Pinkalicious*, on the bottom shelf of her bookcase among the dozens she kept piled there. Tucked away with the other bedtime books Dad used to read to her like *Hairy Scary Story*, *That Old Devil Wind*, and *Big Words for Little People*. Grace, like Dad, was a bibliophile.

Thankfully, 4th Street had a pink bowling ball that was light. Six pounds. Ideal for a nine year old. “Pink-a-bowl,” Grace squealed turning to the lanes with her ball.

“Dad look,” Olivia called out, “This ball is the color of the sky. It even has little white clouds streaked across it between the cracks. Like lightning. I like this one. Look!”

Blue ball. White streaks. Small lightning cracks. Ten pounds. Good.

“Good choice, Olivia,” Dad replied.

Olivia had been Dad’s “little buddy” since she was young – always wanting to tag along everywhere with him whether bowling 10-pin or biking to the store or hiking the local wooded trails. Recently, her teenage hormones had dampened their relationship a bit due to her mercurial moods, but she was still his first joy. He remembered how she always liked to pretend she was a cat, or a dragon, or whatever fiery animal struck her fancy that week. It could be exhausting but fun. Now, with her jump start into puberty,

she had grown taller and skinnier, but no less fiery. A moderately sarcastic, know-it-all attitude cropped in — along with a shock of black hair brushed nightly to de-tangle and her gleaming braces, which made her look adorable when she smiled. He loved watching her grow up and held his patience as best he could as she discovered her own identity.

As for bowling, Dad selected his standard sixteen pound black ball with holes big enough to accommodate his heavy duty fingers and could handle his muscularly inverted spin delivery. The spin being an unexpected gift from a spiral arm fracture he received diving for a baseball when he was eleven. While the cast allowed his broken bones to heal, they also twisted his forearm out so his palm faced forward and his thumb stuck out like a hitchhiker. It looked awkward but was invaluable when he played sports. The angle putting a wicked corkscrew on any ball he threw - whether bowling or pitching or launching an X40 Franklin cross court during pickleball games at the Willow Glen courts on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“Lane seven,” Dad commented looking at the ticket Beverly had given him. “Old lucky number seven.” Together, Dad, Olivia, and Grace walked to the lane and put their bowling balls on the rack. “Are we ready to bowl?”

“Not yet, Dad. I have to put my shoes on.” Grace said.

“Ahh, of course. How silly of me.” Dad felt distracted. *Should I tell them now? He thought, Should I tell them their mother and I are going to divorce? That she wants to sell the house they both have lived in since birth and move to Hawaii? Tell them while putting on their bowling shoes? No, that definitely feels like bad timing. Better to let them enjoy a few games first.*

When everyone had their bowling shoes on, Dad said brightly, “Let’s bowl.” And thought, *Let them enjoy this time. Bad news can wait.* Sadly, he also realized, when he did

tell his daughters, they would most likely remember that particular moment and place. Bowling might be ruined for them if he broke the news here. And the truth was, it might ruin it for Dad as well.

I should wait, Dad thought, not without a bit of frustration. Come to think of it, why am I the one to tell the girls? Why not their mother? She's the one who's insisting on getting divorced. Who wants to uproot everything so she can start over in Hawaii. Who's running away because she can't face the truth of her choices over these last many years. That it was she who made the marriage impossible with her drinking and bitterness and passive-aggressive attitudes?

Dad answered himself. *Because you don't want her to spin it her way is why. Which she'd most certainly do. She'll make herself out to be the victim and not the alcoholic in recovery who quit on our marriage years ago when she couldn't get what she wanted -- a leisurely, self-serving life that quieted all her co-dependent, inner demons while leaving me to do all the heavy lifting. It would be better to preserve the girls' innocence where their mother was concerned. They shouldn't be put in the middle of all our marital problems, which their mother is sure to do.*

Well, Dad thought, I may not be able to tell them the truth about their mother and all her problems and all the ways our marriage went wrong. But I can be considerate and preserve their childhood for as long as possible. I don't have to tell them here at Bev's place.

It wasn't the bowling the girls loved so much as the time spent on "Dad Adventures" where they could be goofy and play around and eat junk food and get hyper. Mom had always forbidden such things, along with the easy-going nature Dad had with the girls. Dinner turned into food fights, baths into water wars, and just getting into pajamas for bedtime could result in wrestling matches and running from room to room leaving the girls too excited for sleep and Mom cleaning up after. Mom didn't like chaos; she abhorred it. Was pathologically resistant to it. She thrived on order. Everything in its

place and every rule followed on time in everything. Everyone obeying the rules even if it was board games *always played at the table, never on the floor*; or having the same salad each and every night with the same ingredients including *cut carrots, never shredded*; or going to bed exactly *at nine thirty sharp* so everyone received exactly the right amount of sleep. It was exhausting.

Mom was clear on her rules concerning the house, the kids, who paid the bills, who did the shopping, who drove, who cut the lawn, who organized; just about every day-to-day routine each and every day. But in their twenty-five year marriage, she seldom explained why Dad wasn't working out for her as a husband. She drank and became unhappy. That's how he knew. Oh, he had several strong suspicions as to why - and even tried a time or two to reach out and resolve them - but she always shut him down and never explained. Just expected. After which, the penalties for violating her spoken and unspoken codes resulted in growing contempt and a steady withdrawal of love till she had too much of one and not enough of the other at the end.

"Doing things right," Mom once told him, "keeps the world in its proper place and provides security for the girls. If you would just do things the way they should be done, you might find more things going well with me where you are concerned."

"Or maybe it's because you feel you have to control me, and the girls, and the house — which is really just a surrogate for the world outside — all so you don't feel unsafe and out of control. Being uptight to compensate for insecurity is not the same as being safe and secure, you know. You're missing the whole point of family, marriage, and life. To have joy in spite of the chaos."

"Of course you would see it that way. And run me down for my way of doing things. Why can't you just agree and make things easier. Do things the way I want them to be done for once."

She hated when he poked at her psychologically. Or tried to get her to open up about the negative inner spirit she carried with her that always poisoned her inner thoughts – (about him, mainly, for refusing to bow to her way of doing things). It created tension between them, which she just pretended wasn't there most of the time, but still undermined everything between them.

“Alright, Gracie-Pacie,” Dad said, “you start us off. Then the mighty, mighty Olivia. And finally, Daddy-Paddy.”

“No, it's my turn to start,” Olivia said. “Grace bowled first last time when we were at Incline Village. And Mom's rule is whoever starts first last time can't start first the next time.”

“That doesn't count! We were on vacation,” Grace jumped in. “Mom says there are different rules when you're on vacation.”

“It certainly does count! You can't cheat. That's not fair.”

“I'm not cheating.”

“Grace it is cheating if you go first today after going first last week.” Olivia whined.

Dad interrupted before his frustration rose beyond their silly bickering. He understood sibling rivalry, but he didn't care for senseless arguing and usually put a stop to it summarily. He gave both girls his most intensely withering stare, dropped his voice to a growl, and stated, “The next one who argues or insults the other will be forced to lick all the bowling balls down the entire length of the bowling alley till they apologize.”

“Eww, Dad. That's really gross,” Olivia responded, but she laughed.

“Dad, you're weird.” Grace added smiling.

“Okay. Grace get up there and bowl. Olivia, you're next.”

They bowled and had fun.

During the third game, Beverly walked over. "Hi girls."

"Hi," both girls smiled in unison.

"Nana Bev, how old do you think this pink ball is?" Grace asked.

"Oh, let me see. This one I ordered from the Sears and Roebuck catalog when the dinosaurs still walked the earth, so it's probably older than I am."

"Really?"

Olivia interrupted. "No Grace. She's just pretending. It's a joke. Dinosaurs are way much older."

"I know that!"

"Girls," Beverly said, "If your Dad says okay, you can go pour yourself a soda over at the counter. I'm out of root beer and need to re-order, but I just changed in a new batch of RC cola."

"Do you still have grape soda?" Olivia asked.

"Yes, but it's as old as that bowling ball and probably pretty flat tasting. Drink it if you like, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"Can we have some of the sour patch candy too?"

"Sure. I only ordered them cause I knew you girls liked them. If your Dad says it's okay, you can each grab a bag. But eat it over at the counter."

"Okay by me," Dad said.

The girls skipped over to the counter, laughing and jostling each other.

Beverly handed Dad a beer. "So, I had a very unexpected and interesting call from my daughter this morning. Seems you're a monster trying to destroy her and she needs money to get divorced and move out to Hawaii so she can live the life she was supposed to."

Dad looked over to make sure the girls were out of hearing range. "I'm sorry about that, Bev. I didn't think she would involve you. It's been bad lately and I'm scared she's on the warpath with me. She filed for divorce a couple of weeks ago and sprung it on me. Just had some guy show up at the door and serve me the papers when I answered."

"What's she after?"

"Money. You know her. She wants her way and is threatening to burn everything I love to the ground. She actually claimed it was all my fault and she's done tolerating my bullshit and no longer has the patience to carry all the burdens I've imposed on her over the years," Dad replied bitterly.

"Ouch. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm not sure what I can do. Legally she has me over a barrel because I can't buy her out. She wants me to sell the house and pay her half the equity along with my half of the 401k. She also wants me to pay her a monthly alimony along with child support for the girls, if you can believe that. Which really pisses me off. I raised the girls and paid for the house and paid the bills all these years while she laid in bed getting drunk most days. I also worked my ass off for that retirement, which she had nothing to do with, not to mention the insurance coverage I provided for the whole family. Hell, who do you think paid for her sobriety camp and all her medical bills after her drinking gave her jaundice and alcoholic hepatitis. And now she claims she deserves half. It's not fair."

“You’re right about that. But I seldom find life is, especially where marriage is concerned.”

“I tried to talk to her. Be fair and rational. Make a deal so I could keep the house – at least till the girls are old enough to move out and get established on their own. It’s breaking me up inside knowing I may not have the girls living with me and our house to live in. She knows how important they are to me. And the house has been our home for over twenty years. But she says she couldn’t care less, which makes me angry. She might not care, but I do! How can she just burn everything to the ground that I worked to provide and not care? That’s what really hurts. Hell Bev, I even offered to get a second job so I could finance her move to Hawaii on a budget and support her for a few more years. Just leave me the house and custody of the girls and she could be free to do whatever she wants. Then, in a few years when the girls grow old enough, we can divorce and settle all the equity issues.”

“But she wasn’t having none of it, was she?”

“No. She claimed I was undermining her again and trying to control her if you can believe that.”

“Sadly, with my daughter, there isn’t much I wouldn’t believe.”

“I hate it. Things are great here for us. Why does she have the right to burn it all down? I mean it’s not like we haven’t been on the outs for years - just co-habituating in the same house. Now she feels entitled and expects me to do all the paperwork and return everything to her on a golden platter.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I called my lawyer to block her on the divorce and file an injunction for her to move out while I keep full custody of the girls. I think it’s gonna get ugly. But, maybe if I can

keep her from forcing us out, maybe she will take my other proposal and leave us alone. At least till the girls are old enough to be legally independent.”

“How did she take that?”

“I don’t know. She was supposed to get a lawyer and file a response this week but hasn’t said anything about it – to me at least, which isn’t unusual. She doesn’t, as a rule, talk to me. But, it could be any time now. And I’m fairly sure she won’t be too happy and will let me know in some dramatic, accusatory fashion.”

“Well, that could explain why she called me for money. I ‘bout fell off my stool when she said I owed her. She hasn’t spoken to me directly in how long and the first time she does, she wants money? Not ‘how are you’ or ‘sorry I accused you of making me an alcoholic.’ Just ‘you owe me money for ruining my life.’ ‘Too bad,’ I told her. ‘Sorry to hear it. Your problems, not mine.’”

“She probably didn’t like hearing that.”

“No, she was a bit hot after. How are the girls taking it?”

“I haven’t told them yet. I’m not even sure I know how to, though it’s probably better the sooner I do. I can’t wait for their mother to do it.”

“Well, I can’t help you with that one. I wish I could. Three failed marriages don’t prepare you for much in the parent department. I left her father, you know, when she was barely one year old. It was hard, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to stay with that abusive bastard. Not for me or for her sake. He turned out to be a drunk and good for nothing except when he went around spending my pro winnings on every bowling slut housewife he could get his hands on. And there I was with a newborn baby myself and a brand new bowling alley just opened.”

“Sounds tough.”

"It was. I'm afraid I ended up being a bit too stern with her over the years and she ended up hating me for a long time because of it. Said I'd robbed her of the life she was supposed to live, whatever that is. Hell, she might've been right. I screwed up her childhood pretty bad trying to keep her on the straight and narrow."

"You did fine. I know how hard you worked and the adversity you had to deal with."

"Well, you know, it was just me and I still had to provide food, shelter, and clothing. And she was always safe here at the bowling alley. Or so I thought. I tried to keep all the bad influences away and give her a home. I even closed off the back storage room so she could have a place of her own to hang out. But she ended up missing out on a lot of traditional family stuff because I had a business to run."

"I know. I remember meeting her here when we were still in high school and her showing me the room back where she lived. I thought it was cool how she lived in a bowling alley, but she told me she was a princess locked in a cage run by an evil stepmother. Like Cinderella."

"That girl is something, I grant you that. Always smiling to your face, but if there was anything to rebel against, and any reason to be pissed, she's the first to embrace it. I'm surprised you stayed married to her for as long as you have, as contrary as she can be."

"Honestly, she's a decent woman -- challenging sometimes but loving. At least in the beginning. And she's much better now that she stopped drinking and started going to AA meetings. Maybe she can get back to her old self. Who knows? I did love her once, but something changed when she hit mid-life, if you can believe that old, stupid cliché. She just broke down over everything, internalized too much and wouldn't let it go. She refused to talk and was never willing to change anything; wound herself up and locked herself down and never had insight into a damn thing. Then she lashed out

in bitterness at me because things didn't turn out the way she wanted them to. I just couldn't get through to her or satisfy her. Ever."

"Yeah, well, I wish I had been a better mother."

"Yeah, well, I wish she didn't have to destroy everything just to get what she thinks she wants. For the girls' sake. And mine. I was scared at first, but now I'm just angry. I won't let her do that. I can't. She won't say it because she's pretty bitter and vengeful, but she doesn't want it either."

"Do you think she's seeing someone else?"

"Probably. Most likely. She's done it before, but this would be the first time since she's been sober. At least it feels like she is by the way she's always taking off for this meeting or that. Plus, she's lost weight and has been going to the tanning booth again. Getting into "bikini" shape as she calls it, which is certainly not for my benefit. We haven't been together for years so I suppose it's not really my business anymore. I don't pry. I've got the girls to think about. And you."

"Me? Like hell you have me to think about."

"Bev, you may act tough and insist on being independent, but I know you've had it rough after your last hip surgery. The girls and I have really loved coming around to help out. No shame in relying on family. I mean, you may insist the girls call you Beverly, but you're still their grandmother whether you like it or not. And you need us as much as we need you."

"Well aren't you bowling for the grand prize? You tryin' to be son-in-law of the year or something?"

"Thought I already was," Dad laughed.

“Girls,” Beverly yelled, “You better get back over here before your grandmother drowns in all this bullshit your father is slingin’!”

Maybe I should tell the girls about the divorce after dinner? Dad thought, but then they’d just get upset. Which means they’ll end up being super grumpy and not sleep. Not a good plan. Better wait.

“Well,” Beverly whispered, “Whatever plans you had about telling the girls just flew right out the window. You better get ready. I’m not a fortune teller, but I see trouble coming into your immediate future.”

“What do you mean by that?” Dad asked.

“Look at the door.”

Dad followed Beverly’s gaze and looked.

“MOM!” Olivia and Grace yelled running for the front door together.

As if on cue, Mom walked in pushing her way into the 4th Street Bowl like a gunslinger - letting the doors swing close behind her. She was holding legal papers balled up in her fist, and she did not look happy, or exactly sober.

“Mom, you’re here!” Grace squealed running to her. “Are you going to bowl with us?”

“Please, Mom. That would be, like, literally too cool,” Olivia added following along.

Dad watched Mom talking to the girls and was amazed how fast she could change gears emotionally. He had seen it before over the years of their marriage, but it always caught him off guard. And to be honest, it frightened him how quickly she could shift her face from angry to docile in seemingly an instant.

Where do those feelings go? he always wondered. How is she able to bottle them so fast? It was just as much a testament to the trials she faced early on in life as much as the high

inner walls she had built over the years to protect her internal psyche. Dad himself had very little ability to do this. He could be stoic at times, sure, but realistically his emotions were always on display across his face, easily read by anyone who cared to look.

"I tell you what girls," Bev called out to Olivia and Grace, "why don't you come back over here and bowl another game with your dad while I talk to your mom. And when we're done talking, we'll see if we can't all bowl a game together."

"You promise?" Olivia asked a little surprised.

"Yeah, you promise? Cross your heart and pinkie swear?!"

"Of course I do."

"Yay!!!" Grace squealed running for Dad. "Nana Bev said she's gonna bowl with us after she talks to Mom!"

Dad looked over to Bev surprised, and then across the room at Mom, but she was half turned and not meeting his eye.

"You're going to talk with her?" Dad asked.

"I know," Bev replied, "It sounds like I'm about to put lipstick on a pig before taking her to the ball, but that's what I'm gonna do."

Dad laughed despite himself. "Go easy, Bev," Dad whispered, "Watch out too. She can pull out the big guns when she wants, especially if she's had a few to loosen up with beforehand."

"Hell's bells! I can handle her. Always have. Even when it called for a little tough love. I raised her, remember?"

Dad ushered both girls back over to lane seven and got them started on another game while trying to keep an eye on Bev and his soon-to-be-ex-wife. He watched Bev cross

the distance between the two, walking right up to her and saying 'hello' like not a day had passed. Then Bev motioned for her to follow. Dad was shocked to see, without a word, her daughter followed. No smile or 'hello' in return. Just turned and followed Bev into her office just off the front lobby with big bay windows looking out over the bowling lanes.

I wonder if that glass is soundproof? Dad wondered. As he watched, the two faced off across from each other like gunfighters at high noon, neither willing to concede or sit down first, or back the other down an inch. Finally, Bev relented, and sat, which allowed her daughter to follow suit. You could've knocked Dad over with a feather, as they used to say.

How do they always do that? He thought. *Find a way to sit and still talk. She'd never allow that with me.*

Truthfully, Dad wished he could eavesdrop in on this conversation, but was also glad not to be a part of it. Especially if *he* happened to be one of the subjects brought up. Once upon a time, he loved both women and they loved him in return as husband and son-in-law respectively. He felt special for their attention. Worthy. But he also learned there was deeper connection between these two than he would never know. Along with an ongoing, unnamed tension which neither would talk about, but it tended to rear its ugly head when the two disagreed.

Dad was an orphan who grew up in foster care so he had almost no experience with mother-daughter relationships. He just assumed this was normal and they all were like Bev and her daughter – close but charged. For the millionth time in their marriage, he also wondered what the roots of conflict between daughter and mother were that kept periodically interrupting the balance of love he relied on both of for.

Once, early on while he and his soon-to-be-ex-wife were still dating, she unexpectedly gave a few clues. Not much, but enough to allow one or two deductive leaps of logic explaining how her passive aggressive habits didn't necessarily originate with an absent father who abandoned her.

"I didn't know my father. I never knew him," his once young bride said when Dad asked her about him early on. "All I knew was he was a baker and an alcoholic who lived somewhere up north of Sacramento after he and my mom split up. I never saw him and he never came to see me. I didn't even know he passed away until I was twelve and insisted my mom take me to see him. She had to show me the letter from a lawyer addressed to his next of kin before I believed her. It was her fault I never saw him or had the chance to know him."

And then there was the very pivotal year between Bev and his soon-to-be-ex-wife when she was fourteen and Bev was busy with the 4th Street Bowl. Dad had little info to piece together the before, during, and after so never learned the whole story. Even his soon-to-be-ex-wife and Bev barely acknowledged that time when he tried to bring it up.

Dad learned, when his soon-to-be-ex-wife was fourteen, she and Bev took to fighting a great deal over Bev's third husband, Reggie. Bev claimed it was teenage jealousy that caused the arguments. His soon-to-be-ex-wife hinted that the roots of those arguments stemmed from Reggie paying an inappropriate and uncomfortable amount of attention toward her. Trying to get her to have sex with him when Bev wasn't around. Bev was having none of it and didn't believe her, going so far as to accuse her daughter of being both intentionally provocative and a liar intent on stirring up trouble.

"She even had the nerve to deny what he was trying to do to me and suggest I was making it up for attention," his soon-to-be-ex-wife told him once. "That I was jealous and being competitive with her."

Dad didn't know what to believe, but he did learn, as a result of what happened between the two, Bev kicked Reggie out of her house and his soon-to-be-ex-wife ran away from Bev's home for eight months. Well, not really ran away as much as moved in with a twenty-eight year-old-man while she was still a freshman in high school. She made a point of going to class every day and finishing the year, which she held a strange point of pride about. But that was all she would say. Dad knew almost nothing about what happened during those eight months because neither Bev nor his soon-to-be-ex-wife talked about it. Not even who the 28-year-old had been, how he knew her, or even if he was still around. All his soon to be ex-wife briefly admitted was the relationship had been sexual, consensual, and she had used both cocaine and heroin while with him. Like a bullet point report. Otherwise, she refused to say anything further. To Dad, Bev, or anyone else. Even the marriage counselor they once visited together.

"There's no reason to talk about the past. It's done and can't be changed," she adamantly stated for years. "Why even bring it up or dwell on it. I'm not living in the past."

"It was terrible," was all Bev said when he approached her about it. "I couldn't sleep for a year. I begged her to come home. Begged! Every day cause I didn't want to lose her to that bullshit. My own mother quit on me when my father died, and I'd be damned if I was going to be like that woman."

It was obvious that, whatever had happened in that year had deeply sunk itself into both women. Changed them internally. Whether his soon-to-be-ex-wife had been vulnerable because of her home situation and groomed by a manipulative, older male, or like Lolita, had willingly walked down a dangerous path of juvenile sexuality to antagonize her mother, Dad couldn't say. Sometimes she came across as iron-willed as her mother. Other times, she played the victim. The dichotomy between the two like a

little girl lost (the one you wanted to take care of) and an iron cast Mae West (the one you wanted to possess and own). She was the most enchantingly passive-aggressive woman Dad had ever come across and, over the years, had excited him as much as frustrated him. It had taken their failing marriage for Dad to recognize how codependent he was with her and how their marital troubles may not have all been due to her manipulative nature. He still had difficulty telling if her repression was intentional or habitual and his need for her maladaptive.

"Mom should bowl first," Olivia said breaking into Dad's thoughts, "She hasn't had a chance to bowl yet and we should let her start."

"Definitely," Grace added, "And Nana Bev can bowl after her. I don't mind waiting this time. You can even go before me, Olivia, and then Dad. I'll go last so we can all bowl together. It'll be Pinkalicious!"

Dad smiled at the girls even though his heart was breaking. Why couldn't he give them the happy family he so wanted them to have? Why couldn't he have the marriage he dreamed of? Why had their mother gone and ruined it? With her drinking and her pride and her need to always look for the grass being greener on the other side. She was always breaking what didn't need fixing. And destroy because she knew no other way to deal when things were good. Dad felt Mom could still make it right if she just got her mind set in the right place like she once had. If she just made a commitment to what they promised each other in the beginning and not fall for all her mid-life, unfulfilled self-crisis bullshit. Then they could be a family.

"Dad, how long are Mom and Nana Bev going to take? I want them to bowl with us."

"I'm not sure. Maybe not long. Soon."

"That's no help," Olivia grumbled.

"Yeah, Dad. That's no help," repeated Grace.

Dad looked through the office window at the two but couldn't tell how it was going. There was definitely some intense conversation going on, with gestures back and forth, pointing and, if he wasn't mistaken, hands put up in surrender. But no yelling or screaming. And neither looked particularly angry enough to fly into a rage. In fact, both looked more or less relieved.

Every time I think I understand them, he thought, they go and do things like this. I hope the girls never have that kind of relationship with their mother. Dad didn't think they would because he felt being their father, loving them dearly, and staying a part of their day to day lives was insurance. No abandoned father syndrome allowed.

"Dad," Olivia asked. "Can I ask you something and you promise not to get mad?"

"Of course. You can talk to me about anything."

"You and Mom are gonna get a divorce, huh."

"Yes, I think we are. I'm sorry."

"We kinda already knew Dad. Grace and I. We heard Mom say it a bunch of times before while talking on the phone. And you guys don't even stay in the same bedroom anymore. And you don't even talk to her anymore when you're in the same room."

"I don't? I hadn't really noticed that."

"You don't Dad," Grace added. "You don't even look at Mom."

"I'm sorry about that girls. I love you both very much. I didn't want it to be like this, but it happened anyway. You both know though, no matter what, you still have a Mom and Dad who love you very much. That will never change or stop. Even if your mom and I aren't necessarily together anymore, we'll always be a family. I just never wanted anything like this to happen for you."

“It’s okay, Dad. We know, but Grace and I have been talking and we decided we need to help Mom out. She’s having a hard time and we need to help take care of her.”

“No girls. It’s a Mom and Dad’s job to take care of you. Not the other way around. Mom is fine, believe me.”

“We know, Dad, but Mom needs us right now. She said she would when you split up.”

“Yeah, Dad. She would be lonely without us.”

“So, if she goes to Hawaii, I think Grace and I should go with her. We talked about it and we’re going to live with mom so we can take care of her.”

Real tears tried to force their way up and a large lump formed in his throat. It took everything Dad had not to let them out. “No, girls. I want you to stay with me. Mom can still visit, and we’ll make sure to see her often, but I want you two to live with me. It’s better that way. You’ll be safe...it’ll be better for all of us that way.”

Dad’s heart hurt. The thought of not living with his daughters and raising them induced a feeling of panic he had not known before. It was neither fair nor surprising; just like their mother to manipulate the girls so she could take advantage. She knew how important they were to him. Yet still she had their love despite all the ways she had ignored them, put them in danger, and destroyed the life they all once had. His soon-to-be-ex-wife had been the one to become anhedonic about marriage. Who had laid in bed getting drunk while the girls were at school and Dad worked. Who did little beyond complaining while Dad cooked and cleaned, took care of the girls and took care of all the bills. Why did she deserve their sympathy?

“Mom will be fine, girls. I promise. My concern is for you girls right now and to make sure you are safe and have the best opportunities. I don’t know if Mom can do those things for you right now.”

"But that's why she needs us," Olivia confessed.

"She needs us, Dad," Grace added.

I need you too, Dad thought not without a touch of bitterness and the feeling of hatred growing inside.

He was still distracted talking to the girls when Bev came walking over. Dad hadn't noticed the office conversation had ended and his soon-to-be-ex-wife had left.

"Girls," Bev started, "Come here for a moment. I want to talk to you both."

Dad must have looked a little wild eyed because Bev immediately looked at him and said, "It's going to be okay. Maybe not what everyone wants, but there's a solution on the table."

"Where did Mom go?" Olivia asked. "She was going to bowl with us."

"She'll be back. She went to her new house to get it ready for you guys."

"Her new house?" Dad asked. "What new house?"

"Does Mom have a new house, Nana Bev?" Olivia asked surprised.

"What new house?" Grace added.

"She does now. I don't normally do this, but I've decided to smooth out a few rough edges and stick my maw in where it don't necessarily belong. Plus, believe it or not, I love you little pumpkins and don't want to see you fly the coup just yet. I want to keep seeing you as often as I still can. Plus, don't repeat this," Bev winked, "but I love you two more than anything. You've grown on me and I don't want you to move to Hawaii just yet."

"We're not going to Hawaii?"

"No, I don't think so. You two are going to live with your Dad at your house during the week and with your Mom at her new house on the weekends. Which just happens to be my house."

"What's going on, Bev?" Dad asked.

"Girls," Bev said, "Why don't you go put your balls away and take off your bowling shoes and leave them on the counter. I want a few minutes to talk with your Dad."

"Okay," both girls replied heading off to the counter talking a mile a minute with each other.

"What's going on, Bev?" Dad asked again.

"I gave my house to my daughter."

"What? Why?"

"To prevent what was just about to happen between you two and make sure you don't make the same mistake I did with my daughter. You'll tear each other apart fighting over custody during the divorce and those two girls will be the ones who will really pay the price."

"So how is giving your daughter a house any better? We're still getting divorced."

"Yes, but this way, she stays local and so do the girls. You both have a year. I told my daughter the taxes on the house have been paid up for one more year. Which means, she can live there rent free till next year at the end of which, I will sign over the deed to her. She can sell the house or keep it. That will be her inheritance and the only guilt payment I will ever concede to her if she ever asks again. Whatever I have left at the end of my life will, from now on, go to the girls. What my daughter does with that is on her."

“Wow, Bev. That’s unbelievable. But what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to move back here into the apartment behind the bowling alley. I practically spend all my time here anyway. And I don’t need much else except those girls. Just make sure you keep bringing them around.”

“Okay. What else can I say?”

“Nothing for you to say. I make my own decisions. This gives you one year to get everything in order and keep the girls safe. Don’t sit on your ass though or think you’re going to get back together with my daughter. That ship has not only sailed but been torpedoed. You do what’s right now by your daughters. Or you’ll have me all over your ass.”

“Alright, Bev. I’ll take your cue and make it work. Find a way to make peace and get everything settled with the divorce. I don’t know if thanks is in order but thank you.”

“Damn right. Now how ‘bout you get the hell out of here for a little while and let me have some time with my granddaughters. You can go to the house and talk to my daughter. I gave her the keys. Go talk to her and be reasonable about the separation. She promised she would do the right thing by you and the girls if I did the right thing by her. Okay?”

“Okay, Bev. I’ll do my best.”

“Don’t care about your best. Just get it done.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The End.

