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Burning Bridges As We Go

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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. Which was why Dad liked taking his daughters, Olivia and Grace, there -- the place had real "old world" charm, offering valuable insight for those who cared to look.

"Not everything," Dad oft recited, "has 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. And everything decorated in Formica and chrome felt like you'd left the modern world behind once you entered and let the doors swing shut.

"This place is, like, so literally old, Dad. SOOO like vintage and stuff. Just like you," 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 original as well -- a former pro bowler from the 1960's who'd built the place off her winnings during bowling's great heyday. The place was alive back then. Middle-aged men and women, their names patched over

their matching bowling shirts, with kitschy bowling team names like the Pin Kings or the Rolling Roses, filled every lane every night of the week. Co-mingling with younger studs and stud-ettes who liked to pull out their latest Brunswick or Pyramid balls to impress each other by. And senior citizens who were still active and felt relevant. Friday and Saturday nights brought scores of teenagers invading the place for disco nights and midnight bowling parties -- excited to have a place that wasn't the roller rink or the drive in to be welcomed at. And families with their back to back to back kid's birthday parties every Saturday and Sunday required 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 pins," Dad laughed.

"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 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 at 80, kept everything informal and on a first-name basis. She could not only remember who you were, but your bowling style, shoes size and even lane preference. Still, she could also be stern where bowling etiquette was concerned and tolerated no "tom-foolery" on her 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 acting like you are. Pick up that 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 damn weak to hold up an already too light bowling ball.

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

“Worried about what?” Dad asked.

“Don’t get mad at me, okay? But I accidentally overheard Mom talking to her on the phone this morning. Mom kept saying Bev owed her money.”

“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.”

“Hunh. 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 back and forth in front of it. 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. He couldn’t remember the last time those two had willingly spoken to each other.

"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 hang out. But would leave just as quickly when they realized 4th Street Bowl had no extra 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 what," Beverly once complained, "That last bunch of kids that came through here only talked 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 would be 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 recently, "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 check if I would only just sell the place. They want to put some kind of cyber internet brew pub dealio here, whatever that is. And now the city is putting pressure on me. They informed me my property taxes were being raised again -- not to mention the liquor license fees are up again this year. And not by a little. Hell, they was always cheats, but now they're downright criminal. Beer sales and them video poker machines are the only thing keeping this place open. But not if I have to pay higher rates. *Hell's bells!* I remember a time when beer was a nickel and no one interfered with you as long as you didn't act the fool. What's happening to this country?"

"You should sell," Dad replied, "You've certainly earned it. And since you own the land free and clear, you'd make quite a bit. Millions I suspect. Face it, Bev, bowling is not going to make a comeback. And as much as I love this place and would hate to see you sell, the smart option is to take the buyout and use the money to go travel the world or buy a beach front villa or something like that. Live the good life. You could live comfortably for a very long time with the profits from selling this place if you wanted."

"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. It is me. And 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. Much more complicated and harder to keep up. Dot com gentrification is pushing everyone out and no one is there to stop them. How much longer can you hold out at this rate? I mean, maybe if your daughter even once expressed interest in running the place, it might be different. Or if your granddaughters weren't still too young to take over."

"Well, who asked them too? They have they own lives to live and I have mine. As do you. I forged this one. They can handle their own. Not to mention, this place is my home. For me and the last of my kind. And I intend to be here 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 terms. But it's wearing you down. I can see it. And it hasn't helped that your daughter has been on the warpath for a while now. Nor have I been able to do anything about that, though I've tried countless times. I wish I could. I wish you would let me 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 differences of opinion and ensure the other person knew to leave well enough alone.

"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. Yellows 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 down the far right aisle.

“Pick a ball that’s not too heavy, Grace,” Dad suggested. “If all the pink balls are too heavy, you might have to switch to 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’ll 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 at the moment. She’d recently re-discovered one of her favorite childhood books, Pinkalicious, on the bottom shelf of her bookcase piled up with the other bedtime stories Dad used to read her like Hairy Scary Story, That Old Devil Wind, and Big Words for Little People. Grace, like Dad, was a bibliophile who enjoyed the comfort of her favorite books.

Thankfully, 4th Street still had a pink bowling ball that was light. Six pounds. Ideal for a nine year old. “Pink-a-bowl,” Grace squealed running back to the lane with her ball. She was so adorable.

“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 smiled. “I love your imaginative take on it.” Olivia was Dad’s “little buddy” and had been ever since she was young – always wanting to tag along with him everywhere -- whether bowling 10-pin or shopping at the store or

hiking the local trails. Recently, her teenage hormones had dampened their relationship a bit due to her mercurial moods, but she was still his first joy.

Honestly, Dad loved both girls with all his heart. And being a father integral to his wellbeing. So knowing it might end one day, at least in its current state, troubled him immensely.

As for bowling, Dad selected his standard sixteen pound black ball with holes big enough to accommodate his heavy duty fingers and inverted spin. The spin being an unexpected gift from a broken arm he received diving for a baseball when he was eleven. The arm had healed, but the cast twisted his forearm out so his palm faced forward and his thumb stuck out like a hitchhiker ever since. Great for sports, but awkward as hell when his arm hung low.

"Lane seven," Dad commented looking at the score sheet 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. Probably 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, if he did tell his daughters here, they might remember that particular moment and bowling would be ruined for them. To tell the truth, 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 anyway? 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. Which she'd most certainly do. She'll make herself out to be the victim and not the person who quit on the 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 him to do the heavy lifting. Bear all the responsibility. It would be better to preserve the girls' innocence where their mother was concerned. Nor should they be put in the middle, which their mother was sure to do.

Well, Dad thought, I may not be willing 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 "Dad Adventures" they all engaged in -- where they were allowed to act goofy and play around. Eat junk food and get hyper. Their Mom forbid such things, along with the easy-going nature Dad tried to raise the girls with. Dinners could turn into food fights with Dad, baths into water wars, and just getting into pajamas for bedtime could result in tickling and running from room to room leaving the girls too excited to sleep. Their mother, Melody, hated this. The spontaneity of it all, the mess, with a near pathological resistance. She thrived on order. Everything in its place and every rule followed on time in everything. Not just her, but everyone around her. To the point everyone, not just her, had to obey the rules. It didn't matter over what -- *board games were to be played at the table, never on the floor; salads were made each and every night with cut carrots never shredded; and going to bed was*

exactly at nine thirty sharp so everyone received exactly the right amount of sleep. Or else she'd rage. And complain. And argue. It was exhausting living under such rigidity.

"Doing things right," Melody once told him, "is your responsibility. Not to mention, providing stability and security for me and the girls. If you would just do things the way they should be done, the way I've told you to, you might find more things more amenable between us where you are concerned."

"Or maybe you feel you have to control everything -- me, the girls, the house -- because it's your safety blanket and a surrogate to hold off all your fears -- so you don't feel unsafe and out of control. Being uptight and compensating for your insecurities is not the same as being safe and happy, you know. You're missing the whole point of family, marriage, and life. To have joy together in spite of the chaos."

"Of course you'd see it that way. And run me down for doing things my way. 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 let go of her negative inner spirit – which was always there, but locked deep inside her by high walls of stubborn pride. No one really knew either. She was invariably sweet and kind to all others, but Dad learned this was her camouflage. A projection of who she wanted to be rather than the miserably insecure wreck underneath. Which Dad never really understood, even after they were married and her darkness came out. But it did create tension between them, which Melody only pretended wasn't there and refused to address anyway. Her denial seeping into their marriage and undermining the intimacy between them. Not to mention the drinking.

"Alright, Gracie-Pacie," Dad smiled, "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 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 above their silly bickering. He understood sibling rivalry, but didn't care for senseless arguing. And usually put a stop to it summarily. He dropped his voice and growled, "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 laughed. "I certainly won't be licking any bowling balls."

"Me neither. Dad, you're weird." Grace giggled.

"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, Nana," both girls smiled in unison. They loved their grandmother.

"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. Nana Bev’s just pretending. It’s a joke. Dinosaurs are way much older.”

“I knew 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 the grape soda?” Olivia asked.

“Yes, but it’s older than them dinosaurs too 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 order them cause you girls like 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 called out, “Yay!” and 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 meant 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. She’s fully on the

warpath now and filed for divorce a couple of weeks ago. Didn't say a thing till I was served. Just had some guy show up at the door and serve me the papers."

"Ouch. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm not sure what I can do. Legally she has me over a barrel since California is a no fault state. Everything we own is split 50/50. And since I can't buy her out, she wants me to sell the house just to pay her half the equity. Not to mention half of my retirement 401k. She also wants me to pay her alimony and child support for the girls, if you can believe that. Which really pisses me off. I raised those girls by myself for the most part while she got drunk in her room every night. Not to mention I paid for the house, paid all the bills, paid for health insurance, and still kept a roof over all our heads. I provided for the whole family while she did what? Hell, who do you think paid for her all of her "sobriety camps" and all the 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 fair, especially where marriage and my daughter are concerned. Both of which I've had plenty of regrets over myself. Have you tried mediation?"

"I tried to talk with her. Be fair and rational. Make a deal so I could keep the house – or at least keep it till the girls become old enough to move out and get established on their own. It's breaking me up inside knowing I may not be living with the girls in our own home together. Melody wants to take them to Hawaii with her even though she knows how important they are to me. And the house has been our home for over twenty years. But she says she could care less -- which makes me angry. She might not care, but I do! How can she just burn everything to the ground 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 was having none of it, right?"

"Right. 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. At least the girls and I. 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 a divorce lawyer and tried to file an injunction for full custody of the girls. That really pissed her off. I think it's gonna get ugly too. But, maybe if I can keep her from forcing us out, maybe she'll take my other proposal and leave us alone. At least till the girls are old enough to be legally independent."

"What did she say to that?"

"I don't know. She was supposed to file a response this week but hasn't said anything directly to me about it - which isn't that unusual. She doesn't, as a rule, talk to me. But, it could be any time now. And I'm fairly sure she'll find a way to 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 since the last time she went to rehab and the first time she does, she wants money? Not 'how are you' or 'sorry I accused you of

turning me into an alcoholic' or any of that bullshit. Just 'you owe me money for ruining my life.'

"What'd you say to her about that?"

"Too bad is what I told her. 'Sorry to hear. We all have our problems – that don't change if you put lipstick on a pig and try to dress it up.'"

"She probably didn't like hearing that."

"No, she got about as hot as a skillet on Sunday. How are the girls taking it?"

"I haven't told them yet. I'm not even sure I know how to. Though it's better if 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. And her father, you know, he was no prize. But he did do us a favor when he split, even if my daughter doesn't realize it. She was barely one when he left and doesn't remember him. Which was good because he was a pretty abusive bastard who turned out to be a drunk 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 my daughter over the years and she ended up hating me for a long time because of it. Said I robbed her of the life, whatever that means. Hell, she might've been right. I screwed up her childhood pretty bad trying to keep a roof over our heads and 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 it was more like being a princess locked in a cage run by an evil stepmother."

"That girl is something, I grant you that. Always smiling to your face, but if there was anything to complain about, or reason to be pissed, she'd be 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 enough woman I guess -- challenging sometimes but there were years when she was loving. At least in the beginning. And she does seem much better now that she's stopped drinking and started attending her sobriety meetings. Maybe she can get back to her old self. Who knows?"

"Yeah, well, I wish I'd been a better mother."

"Yeah, well, I wish she could be a better wife and not need 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 a lot of weight and been going to the tanning booth again. Getting into "bikini" shape as she calls it, which certainly isn't for my benefit. Plus, we haven't been intimate in years, so 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. And the girls and I really love 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 Nana Bev 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's 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. "Please, please, please."

Dad watched Mom talking to the girls and was amazed how fast she could change gears emotionally, though he'd seen her do it many times before in their marriage. Still, her fluidity always caught him off guard. And if he were honest, frightened him.

Where do those feelings go? he always wondered. *How is she able to bottle them so fast? And keep them under control?* Dad knew he had very little ability to do this. Sure, he could be stoic at times, but realistically his emotions were always on display for 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.

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

"Of course I do."

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

Dad looked over at 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.

"Yes," Bev replied, "No sense holding it off. Looks like I'm about to put lipstick on that pig myself and take her to the prom."

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. Well before you. It's called 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 close the distance between the two, smiling and walking right up to her to say 'hello' like not a day had passed. Then Bev motioned for her to follow.

Dad was shocked to see Melody follow without a word. No smile or 'hello' in return. Just turn and follow Bev into her office off the front lobby – the one with those big bay windows looking out over the bowling lanes.

I wonder if that glass is soundproof? Dad wondered. As he watched, the two women faced off across the desk from each other. Like gunfighters at high noon, neither willing to concede 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 Bev might've said.

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

Dad didn't want to eavesdrop, and was glad he couldn't hear, especially if *he* happened to be one of the subjects brought up. But he did wish he were part of the discussion.

Once upon a time, he loved both women and they loved him in return as husband and son-in-law respectively. They had made him family and he felt special from their attention. Worthy. But he also learned there was a deeper connection between mother and daughter that he wasn't part of and was beyond any he'd yet known. Along with an ongoing, unnamed tension between the two about some serious incidents from Melody's teen years that they refused to talk about.

Once, early on when they were first engaged, after they'd had sex, Melody unexpectedly dropped a few clues. Not much, but enough for a few deductive leaps of logic. Something about Bev's third husband, Reggie, and some inappropriate contact. Bev said it was all teenage jealousy and a lie, which ended up destroying her marriage to Reggie because Melody was being dramatic. But Melody claimed Reggie, when she turned thirteen and puberty kicked in, started paying inappropriate attention toward her. Melody refused to say anything further except that the resulting argument between her and her mother ended when Melody ran away for several months till Bev agreed to leave Reggie.

"She even had the nerve to deny what that prick was trying to do to me and suggest I was making it all up for attention," Melody told him. "That I was jealous and being competitive with her."

Dad didn't know what to think since Bev did eventually leave Reggie and Melody returned home after eight months away living with "an older boyfriend." A twenty-eight year-old-man Melody refused to identify. It was hard to know what had taken place since both sides were so locked down about it all. Sometimes, throughout his marriage to Melody, when times were at their worst, he tried to get Melody to go to

counseling – believing might be the root cause of Melody’s difficulties trusting him and communicating during their marriage. But she’d have none of it.

“I am not the problem,” Melody adamantly insisted for years. “And there’s no reason to talk about the past. It’s done and can’t be changed so what would be the benefit of bringing it up or dwelling on it. I’m not living in the past.”

“It was terrible,” Bev once said when Dad 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. ‘Nuff said.”

It was obvious, whatever had happened in that year had sunk its claws deeply into both women till neither knew how to live without it.

“Dad, we should let Mom 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? Why couldn’t he have the marriage he dreamed of? Why had their mother gone and ruined it all? With her drinking and her pride and her need to always sabotage true intimacy. She was always breaking what didn’t need fixing. And destroying when things needed fixing. If she’d just made a commitment to what they promised each other and not de-construct everything, then maybe they could be a family of joy and substance.

"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 an intense conversation going on, with heavy gestures back and forth. And, if he wasn't mistaken, hands put up in surrender at one point. Or defensive in preparation of throwing fists. But so far, 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 hoped, because the girls had a father who loved them dearly and was a part of their day to day lives, there wouldn't be any abandoned father syndrome to contend with.

"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 getting divorced, huh."

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

"We already kinda knew Dad. Grace and I. We heard Mom say it a bunch of times before. And you guys don't even stay in the same bedroom anymore. And you don't even talk to her when she's 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 though, 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 together, we'll always be a family."

"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."

"Yeah, Dad. She would be lonely without us."

"So, if she goes to Hawaii, like she told Nana Bev she was going to do, I think Grace and I should go with her. Grace and I 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 out of Dad's eyes, and a large lump formed in his throat. It took everything not to spill them. "No, girls. I want you to stay with me. Mom can visit, and we'll make sure to see her often, but I want you two to live here with me. In our home. 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 never known before. It was unfair and 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'd ignored them, put them in danger, and destroyed the life they all had. Why did she deserve their sympathy?

"Mom will be fine, girls. I promise. My concern is for you right now and to make sure you are safe and have the best opportunities. I don't know if Mom can provide 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 growing inside.

Dad was still talking to the girls when Bev came walking over. He hadn't noticed the office conversation ended and Melody had left.

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

Dad must've had a wild eyed look because Bev immediately 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 see her new house and 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 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. And don't repeat this," Bev winked, "but I love you two more than anything. You've grown on me and I don't want to see you 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 his 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 and make sure you don't make the same mistakes I did. You'll tear each other apart fighting over custody of those two girls. And they will be the ones who suffer and really pay the price. I can't allow that."

"So giving your daughter a house is 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. What my daughter does after that is on her. And whatever I have left at the end of my life will, from now on, go to the girls."

"Wow, Bev. That's unbelievable. But what are you going to do? Are you going to live there too?"

"No, 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. I will. Of course I will. I mean, 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 find a way to make peace and get everything settled with the divorce. I don't know if thanks are 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 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.

