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## Bowling for Manhood

*D'Anne Witkowski*

My uncle taught me everything I needed to know about life through the most manly sport I have ever encountered: bowling. He used to take me to the lanes every Thursday night, and on weekends when he had time. He'd stand there in his tan terry cloth bowling shirt with the maroon stripes down the sleeves and light up a cigarette.

"Now, son," he says, "bowling is a lot like life. Take this ball here, this is you. Say those pins down there represent some part of life, like love. You like girls, Robert?" He turns and looks at me.

"Yeah, I like girls just fine." I feel myself blushing. I am sixteen. Of course I like girls. He just wants me to have to say it.

"Of course you do." He blows a ring of blue smoke my way. "Now say that this here ball is you and those there pins represent a girl you really like." He throws the ball down the lane like a professional bowler on TV and knocks down two pins. "Now, for the most part, things will start off slow during your first try at the game of love. You only knock down a few pins. Maybe you'll take her out a few times and that'll be it. You ever been on a date, son?"

"No, not really. Not a lot of girls are real

interested in me." I know he expects me to lie, but I have never even kissed a girl.

"Well, that'll come with time." He wipes the sweat from his hands on a blue towel that reads "Hospital Property." The lanes are empty save for a handful of other bowlers at the far end of the alleys.

"Sometimes," he says, "your luck will change. You'll knock down more pins. It depends on conditions, really. Sometimes the lane will be warped, sometimes your hands will be too sweaty, sometimes you won't have the right ball. But sometimes, when everything is right, you'll score." He rolls the ball down the lane and knocks down every pin but one. "See? I wasn't even thinking about it. Really, it's not that hard."

"Yeah," I say absently. I really don't know what he's talking about. I mean, I think I do, but I don't want to say anything in case I'm wrong.

"You a virgin, son?" he asks me.

What the hell is he asking me that for, I think. My face flushes with embarrassment. Yes, I'm a virgin, of course I'm a virgin. Again I know he expects me to lie. I don't say anything.

"Aww, come on." He can tell I'm embarrassed. "Don't get like that."

I fiddle absently with the scoring computer. "Yeah."

"That's no big deal. What's wrong? You've got plenty of time. Are there any girls at school you're interested in?" He smiles at me, the gap between his front teeth showing.

"There are a few pretty girls," I say. "But none of them would ever be interested in me."

"And why not? You're a good looking boy. You get it from your uncle." He runs his hand over his black

hair slicked back with some kind of mail order Jerry curl juice. I can't see the resemblance.

"How many women have you known?" I ask him. He hates it when I get Biblical on him.

"You mean how many women have I slept with?" He laughs. "Too many to count. Your uncle's been around, son. I know how to make a woman *real* happy." He licks his lips.

I wonder then why did my uncle sleep alone. Why did my Aunt Maureen leave him and move to a trailer park in Georgia. I get up my nerve. "How?" I ask.

He looks at me suspiciously. "I don't know if I should be telling you this," he says. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Well..." he hesitates. "Old enough, I s'pose. And anyway you ain't got no one to talk to about these things since your daddy died, so if you're going to hear it you might as well hear it from an expert. Follow me."

He takes me over to the rack where the house balls are kept. "Now, to start off, you've got to find the right one," he says. He picks up a pink eight pound ball and hands it to me. "Now some of them are way too easy. You don't even have to work to knock any pins down. Hell, I could get a strike with my eyes closed using this." He tosses it up a foot in the air and catches it. He picks up a black sixteen pound ball.

"Now this one is probably not going to be something you want to start off with. This one," he said, putting the ball down, "you'll be lucky if you can even get from the rack to the lane."

He holds up the pink ball again. "You want this one or should we keep looking?"

"Keep looking," I say. I don't want him to think that I'll settle for just anything.

"Here, try this one," he picks up a twelve pound ball and hands it to me. "It's light enough to knock a few pins down, but heavy enough to keep you interested."

Back at the lane he got out his blue towel from his bowling bag. "Now that you have her, you're going to want to be real nice to her. Take her out to see a movie, buy her dinner if you want." He shines up his ball with that towel. "Treat her like she's special." He hands me the towel. "Go on," he says.

I start shining up the ball even though I feel kind of stupid. I wonder how other people learn about stuff like this. I was thinking that even though he is kind of strange, I'm pretty glad I have my uncle.

"Now what?" I ask after I finish.

"Well, to start off, no woman would want you to finish that quick. You've got to put some time and care into it."

I blush.

"Okay," he says looking at me. "Do you want me to give you some pointers or do you just want me to let you go at it with what you already know?"

I ponder the meaning of that question. Is he talking about bowling or girls or both? Bowling I'm okay with. I know about bowling. I'm not very good, but I know enough to get by. I've never really bowled before, but I've watched my uncle hundreds of times. The game of girls, on the other hand, seems a lot harder to win. I know only what I've heard from my uncle, guys in school, and from a few R-rated movies.

"I know how to bowl," I say, trying to sound confident.

"Of course you do," he says, winking. "Go ahead."

I take the ball up to the lane and throw it down, aiming for the middle pin. In my nervousness my hands

slip and my thumb sticks a little too long in the ball. I watch as my ball slides across the lane towards the gutter.

"Got nervous, huh? That's okay," my uncle says. "You'll get better with practice. It takes time. Usually the first time is a little awkward. Things don't always go so right. It's to be expected. Life isn't like the movies, son."

I nod.

"Go on," he says. "Keep trying."

Several gutter balls later I'm getting frustrated. I'm not getting better.

"How long does it take?" I sit down in one of the orange and white plastic chairs. "Why is this so important, anyway?"

"Don't give up," he says. "You're getting there. It's okay to feel defeated sometimes, but you've got to have confidence. You have to approach every turn like it's going to be a strike. That's the way a man plays the game. A man plays to win."

If a man has to play to win, then what is he winning, anyway? He's a good bowler, sure. But I have a feeling that women don't want my uncle, and he is the only one who doesn't know it.

"So," he says with a gleam in his eyes, "is there any girl at school that you've got your eye on?"

"Yeah," I lie. "There are a couple of really nice girls I'd like to ask to the movies, ... or something." My uncle smiles when I add "or something."

"You can borrow my car any time you need it, son," he says. "You want to take a girl out somewhere special, take my car. No problem."

"Sure," I say. "Thanks. How about Saturday night?"

"Go get her, tiger." He winks and socks me in the

arm.

Saturday night I drive my uncle's rusty 1986 Monte Carlo to the empty lot behind the high school, alone. I climb onto the roof and lie back with my hands behind my head. I look at the stars and soak in the cool night air. I wonder what's so important about manhood anyway. I have my whole life to bowl, why should I start now? I picture my uncle crying in his maroon striped shirt clutching his turquoise bowling ball the night my aunt left him. I count the stars and think that when I grow up I won't drive a Monte Carlo, slick my hair back, or wear tan terry cloth shirts. I won't bowl unless I really love it, and I won't switch lanes after I find the right one.