

Rolling Thunder

Another couple since split and guttered had introduced us to bowling on a double date early in our courtship. Despite our ineptitude, my wife, Dolores, and I liked the experience well enough. On occasion, as our coin jar allowed, we laughed through ten frames, enjoying our time together more than the game. We were never serious pinheads. As a young couple newlywed and newcomers to the small town only two months, bowling seemed like it might be a fun way to make friends.

“Dolores,” I asked, “how about going bowling tonight?”

“Sure,” she replied, “nothing better than lifting big balls for a weekend’s fun.”

“I’m talking about Rolling Thunder, the bowling alley.”

“That, too.”

The Rolling Thunder, the one and only alley in our rural, blue-collar town, was unavoidably conspicuous as a gathering place. That’s where we met Kingpin. It served as birthday party and reunion headquarters, venue for proms and wedding receptions, polling station and post-election celebration or commiseration site, meeting destination for any other prominent social function in the small community, and local watering hole. The local patronage included great grandparents and babies, churchgoers and degenerates, poor and not-so-poor as there were no rich people in town, shopkeepers, grocery clerks, barbers, used car salesmen, gas station attendants, mayor and sheriff, teachers, and military veterans. A potpourri of tool and die factory workers and farm laborers of assorted heritages, and all their families and friends, considered it their home away from home. So, naturally, many others and we were drawn there as if on a pilgrimage to Graceland. Rolling Thunder was special because of its owner Max, and especially his sidekick, Kingpin. It later signified a place that made our connection to Kingpin innately deeper than I could have ever imagined.

During that first visit a couple of months ago, he had met us at the door.

“Folks around here call me ‘Kingpin’. Maybe because I keep the beer cold and the toilets clean.”

“Sounds like royal treatment,” Dolores said.

Taking his outstretched hand, “We’re Darrell and Dolores Hennings,” I said. “We thought we’d bowl a few frames.”

“You’re at the right place. Follow me for your shoes,” Kingpin offered, as he escorted us to the rental counter. He fitted our green with red-striped shoes, gave us a score sheet, and pointed to

what he called the best ‘beginner’s luck’ lane assignment. He found bowling balls from the rack matched for our weight and grip. Leading us to our alley, he asked,

“Care if I join you for a game?”

“Sure, we need all the instruction we can get, especially from a guy named ‘Kingpin.’”

Affably, he sat down and opened a worn, cracked black leather bag to pull out an old pair of brown and white wingtips with plaid laces and salmon rubber soles.

“Good ole dogs,” he said affectionately tying on the bowling shoes. Then, like a magician pulling an earless ebony rabbit from a hat, he thrust a big hand into the bag and retrieved a chipped and scarred old black Brunswick ball whose varnish had long since lost its luster.

“This here’s ‘Bollocks,’” he beamed, “Mr. P. Bollocks.”

“What’s the ‘P’ for?” asked Dolores, elbowing me with a stifled giggle.

“Petrified,” responded Kingpin, “either from fright bein’ plucked from his sack there on the floor, or hardened through time rollin’ down memory’s lane to become the old, cold stone he is today.” He laughed and winked.

“Watch me knock another wart and wild hair off Mr. Petrified Bollocks.” He sent the ancient, now highly kinetic, gyrating ball crashing into ten pale, trembling pins.

“Bollocks!” he bellowed as the pins splintered lying akimbo, some strewn prostrate in the gutter, some supine and spinning dizzily in the pit.

“Strike!” Dolores and I shouted spontaneously leaping to our feet. Kingpin smiled with his hand over an air jet to dry away any doubt that his next throw would achieve a similar result.

Running up a ‘ham bone’ of four straight strikes, Kingpin quipped,

“Tonight Bollocks’s rollin’ true and tight with all his might.” After an ignoble spare, he recovered with a ‘turkey’ of three strikes. He certainly didn’t need the ninth or tenth frames to top our measly tallies.

“Let me buy you two a beer to make your first night at Rolling Thunder official,” Kingpin said. “Afterwards, Dolores can check out the toilets.”

Rolling Thunder was most popular after the factory’s four o’clock whistle announced to hot, thirsty dayshift workers, farm fieldhands, and everyone else in earshot that happy hour now commenced in the bowling alley’s ‘RT-66’ bar. On audible cue, community residents locked up shop and office doors. Town square was deserted quickly. Old dungarees, jeans, dark olive green or blue pants and white shirts with red embroidered nametags of shop uniforms, and lots of hand-me

downs re-threaded their way to Rolling Thunder. Kingpin would welcome them with a genial smile and knuckle bump.

“What took you? There’s pints and pins to down!”

Attracting a packed house with hot pastrami sandwiches and cold beer, icy beads of condensation streamed happily down the throats of the longneck bottles as the liquid gold refreshment guzzled merrily down RT-66 customers’ throats. The throng soon thumped to rock-n-roll oldies belting from a chrome-trimmed, turquoise and peach jukebox. They crowded the length of a 22-foot long hand shuffleboard table with a black light tube suspended low over its length illuminating score lines and revealing the slippery glide and final resting spots of pink and yellow glow-in-the-dark pucks. Still others urged vociferous encouragement over a bank of ever-popular Hayburner pinball machines, whose flipped pings, buzzes, bells, and flashing lights excitedly heralded the track positions of painted racehorses vying tirelessly for victory. Sounds of bowling balls bouncing, rolling, and crashing into pins on the lanes, whoosh of the ball return, clatter of the pinsetter, banter and squealing glee or lament of the bowlers, and pop music piped in through mounted speakers reverberating above the alleys left no question that Rolling Thunder was ‘the hot spot’, and Kingpin was ‘the man’.

At nightfall, the bowling alley’s monumental electric light marquee mounted atop the building flared to life. Thousands of alternating gold and silver bulbs sparkled letter-by-letter spelling of ‘R-O-L-L-I-N-G T-H-U-N-D-E-R’, then flashed the fully illuminated name repetitively in five short, colossal blasts; followed by a steady ten-second dazzle in towering majesty. Timed concurrently, an enormous green and purple neon wave crashed on a beach of white neon pins turning them bright red, then scattering explosively orange, pink and yellow just beyond the bowling alley’s roof. Magically, the pins flew back rearranged neatly packed in white, triangular formation at attention awaiting the repeated spelling followed by assault anew from another huge green and purple wave cresting and booming iridescently on the building. The pulsing marquee and big splash of moving lights was dramatic advertising, especially at night, effectively drawing crowds like a bonfire to a backwoods revival. People would actually sit in their trucks gawking at the emblazoned sign spellbound for a few minutes before leaving the parking lot, unsure if they should take their fingers off the ignition key and go back inside or reluctantly call it a night.

* * * * *

Dolores and I usually avoided the frequently loud and raucous RT-66 happy hour scene, preferring the more sedate, but not entirely sober, recreational bowling league play on weekday evenings after happy hour ended. This evening was our Tuesday night's team bowling at Rolling Thunder. Our strength and stamina fortified with a couple of frosty pints and a plate of nachos, we rose to the practical tasks at hand. Throwing soft, slow creepers with more spares than usual along with two, loud crankers as strikes during practice, Dolores had bowled one of her better games warming up for the Sweet Rolls, her ladies team.

"I guess victory, even when it doesn't count, comes with a price," she declared, lightly shaking her winner's hand to soothe an emerging blister. "You know, Darrell," Dolores reflected, "that's the first game I ever beat Kingpin."

"Lickety split, even I finished two pins ahead of him tonight," I said, "go figure."

Everyone knew Kingpin as the alley cat who hung out at the lanes inviting anyone, anytime to roll a game. With the appearance and talk of a quintessential hayseed, he had blown into town ten years ago. Some said he had been in the Army, guessing Vietnam or maybe even Korea. He didn't talk, however, about his military service, even when asked. People speculated that he might have experienced shell shock—what they now call post-traumatic stress disorder—or capture by the enemy in combat. It was not because he seemed disturbed or otherwise conflicted, but he was reticent and removed whenever war stories cropped up. As frequently occurred in idle chat at Rolling Thunder, many other veterans rehashed their wartime experiences at the slightest whim. Otherwise, Kingpin was amiable and gregarious in an unpretentious, inviting way. Operating machinery or any mechanical device was a snap for him, which folks assumed he picked up in the military. He was a master electrician, plumber, and carpenter. Beneath his redneck exterior and impression, he was plenty smart.

Working as the maintenance man at Rolling Thunder, Kingpin kept the pinsetter and ball return machines operational, maintained the HVAC system, lighting and plumbing, fixed immediately any issues with the jukebox, shuffleboard score display, or tilted pinball machines, and other odd jobs requiring his electrical and mechanical skills. One of the perks of his employment was that he could bowl for free, as long as his daily tasks were finished, everything was in working order, and no emergencies or unexpected repairs needed attention. Because he took advantage of this benefit regularly, but never abusing the privilege, local patrons gave him his nickname. He assumed it good-naturedly. The title connoted some authority in the bowling alley, which was after all the community's social citadel and sanctuary. Kingpin enjoyed the good-humored respect of his

townsmen as one of them, a dependable friend and neighbor without complications of status or aspirations. ‘A good ole boy’ was what he was, and then some.

Not that he was a champion bowler, but he had sufficient amateur prowess and plenty of practice thanks to his job arrangement, that he consistently beat, without bragging, those he invited to bowl a game. Routinely, Kingpin could be seen crouching in the pit of an empty alley inspecting mechanical equipment or at the ball return apparently adjusting a hand dryer or power lift with a wrench or screwdriver. But inconspicuously, all the while he was sizing up potential teammates or opponents on adjacently active lanes. Despite his friendly demeanor, he had a competitive drive. Magnanimous in victory, Kingpin commonly offered to buy his vanquished foe a beer with a soft pat on the back, saying,

“You sure gave me a fright tonight, better luck next time, friend.” I had never seen him lose, come to think of it, until that practice round.

As captain of the Pin Pricks men’s team, Kingpin had ‘recruited’ me two weeks ago because I was the only warm body available when one of the guys fell off a roof hammering shingles and broke his left leg and arm. Calling me ‘rookie’ with a grin, he introduced me to the team, who seemed friendly but dubious, after all the Pin Pricks were reigning champions and had a high reputation to uphold.

“This here’s Darrell, boys, he might not look it, but he’ll do,” Kingpin said.

“Do what, KP?”

“Do what you pricks can’t do, knock down some pins!”

In our co-ed warm-up game on lane six, Dolores, Kingpin, Jimbo, Andy and his wife, Celia, and I practiced our bowling approaches and angles, lofts and loopers, strokes and spinners. Other members of our team were limbering up on lanes four and five, and the opponent teams were using the far lanes down by the ‘wailing wall’, as Kingpin dubbed it. Each of us, Kingpin, Dolores, and I, would soon be supplicants with needs at the wall.

Beyond lane twenty-four at the end of the building, a 3 by 10-foot, mottled tan corkboard was mounted on the wall’s length at eye level. It was tattooed with out-of-work job wanted notes, business cards, lonely heart pleas, old circus flyers, and yellowing posters. Kingpin had thumbtacked mementos from his youthful days in Ohio—a faded poster of vintage rock band, The James Gang, as well as autographed black-and-white photos of professional athletes Rocco ‘Rocky’ Colavito in a Cleveland Indians uniform with bat on shoulder and the Browns’ Lou ‘The Toe’ Groza posing to kick a teed football. From infancy I had grown up Darrell Gregory Hennings in Cleveland; legally

adopted by a foster family, whom I loved and knew as my only kin. Reading the names of these hometown heroes, I registered some vague familiarity, but then, they were a couple of generations before me. The Black Keys from Akron were my current favorite music group, but Kingpin had never heard of them.

* * * * *

By the wall, a fading, copper-colored, wooden bald eagle perched atop a flag stand displaying Old Glory nested in a corner, which was readily moved on stage for rallies of all sorts. During social and political events, the alleys were covered with red-carpeted or linoleum-topped plywood sections; left open for dances or set up with rows of metal folding chairs for meetings, depending on the desired ambience and purpose. A dais, lectern, or panel table—all with red, white and blue bunting—were available as needed. A plastic silver-faceted disco ball was permanently tethered in suspension over lane twenty. Readily, Kingpin completed the entire set-up for all these functions, including furniture and decorative arrangements, microphones, lights, sound systems, projectors, and any other required equipment. He was always there to insure that each event proceeded without a hitch, at least technically, as he couldn't control what he termed 'human bein' behavior' when things went awry.

Once, a gaggle of grannies was upset with the local school board's decision to charge a \$100 per night fee to use the elementary school cafeteria for ladies bingo on Wednesday nights. They stormed a fundraiser meeting for school playground equipment at Rolling Thunder. Brandishing 'Bingo Battalion' headbands over pink, blue, and white hair and carrying paperboard signs taped to yardsticks, they cried out the sign slogans—

“N-100: No \$100 Per Night—No Way No How!”

“B-52: Bombs Away!”

“I-2 Pay Taxes!”

They shouted down a cowering superintendent who quickly relented on the rental fee.

Other times typically involved over-exuberance, often pre-fueled at the RT-66 bar. Like when two local luminaries, undertaker Wilbur Probst of Eternal Time-Share, LLC and beautician Loretta Mabry of Becoming Coiffures, whose salon's motto was 'if your hair is not becoming to you, you should be coming to me', competed in makeovers of twin female manikins.

The contestants were set up on the dais and presented with one of the silent but willing customers, either 'Ida' or 'Irene'. Both dummies had wild, long, unkempt, greasy, blond wigs glued to their domes, each lying supine on an operating table before each contestant. Wilbur and Loretta stood at makeover stations identically equipped with portable shampooing basins, handheld hairdryers and curling irons, and arrays of cosmetic paraphernalia and products including brushes, scissors, combs, dyes, sprays, creams, eyeliners, blushes, lipsticks and more. A panel of three impartial judges, consisting of the matronly president of the local Daughters of the Revolution, a young female high school chemistry teacher and girls cheerleading advisor, and the venerable county sheriff with greying temples and hearing loss, assembled at a table under the disco ball to witness the proceedings and pass judgment after an allotted contest time of one hour. Leaning next to the bald eagle, ready with mop and bucket and other back-up tools mounted on his utility belt, with his premonitions on 'human bein' behavior' stirred, Kingpin said loudly,

"Let the mayhem... I mean contest... commence!"

As a cowbell rang 'Go!' a large, vociferous crowd of spectators behind the judges screamed encouragement to their respective contenders. In the contestants' frenzied blur of motion around Irene and Ida, excitement mounted with each tick of the clock. Kingpin re-checked extension cords and power strips he had duct-taped to the floor to prevent jostling loose by boisterous foot stomping and jumping. Performing truly sublime transformation of the twins' appearances to the crowd's enraptured roar, the professional makeover artists donned finishing touches to the now exquisite dolls.

Just before the cowbell sounded 'Stop!' Loretta sat Irene on her knee ventriloquizing loudly before the judging panel,

"Vote for me! Vote for me!" Not to be outdone, Wilbur hoisted Ida onto his shoulder, rushed in front of Loretta and Irene, and boomed,

"Not on your life, Dummy!" Infuriated, with a crazed, wild-eyed shriek, Loretta grabbed and wheeled Irene by the ankles and slammed Ida off her perch with a swinging head butt. Horrified and enraged at the damage inflicted, Wilbur picked Ida off the floor and holding her at the hips like a lance, lunged and thrust Ida's head into Loretta's midrib, knocking the wind from her.

As pandemonium ensued, unhinged supporters stormed the platform, wrestling contestants and dummies alike in a dog pile of flying elbows and knees. In the ensuing mêlée, deranged warriors from each camp locked chokeholds on the twins' heads. They twisted the disfigured skulls from the torsos like popping champagne corks. With a wild roar, the decapitated heads were sent rolling as

rouged, blinking gargoyles down the dark alley of lane twenty. Taking this as a cue, the sheriff proceeded to separate the hair-pulling, obscenity-shouting beautician and mortician, who had locked horns with death grips of each other's hair. Silencing the mob with a piercing cry, the sheriff shouted,

“Kingpin! Retrieve those motley heads from the pinsetter!”

Cradling them in the crooks of his elbows, Kingpin serenely presented the matted or missing-haired, lipstick-smearred, dangling eyelashed, bruised and battered heads of Irene and Ida to the judges. The spent crowd caught its breath in dazed anticipation. After an extraordinarily brief consultation as if nothing untoward had just occurred, the panel delivered its decision in restored solemnity—

“Ida wins the talent category by virtue of hitting the pocket in lane twenty. Irene wins the beauty category as her coy wink yet captivates the eye.” However, when the panel was at loggerheads on which would be proclaimed congeniality winner, Kingpin interjected,

“For obvious reasons, shain't be no recognition fixed for congeniality,” then added sagely, “lets all retire to the bar for a beer!”

The thirsty multitude embraced the wisdom of his words and immediately packed RT-66. Loretta and Wilbur, reconciled arm-in-arm at the jukebox, were joined by progressively inebriated, happy supporters, judges, and Kingpin. All sang along with Bob Dylan in a frolicking rendition of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’. Some noted exuberantly how Irene and Ira gave new meaning to the lyrics.

As a thoughtful testament, Kingpin mounted a framed Dylan photo above the mouth of the enshrined lane's pit, which became the alley of choice for everyone who knew its immortal meaning. That made him smile, as it did local patrons, including Wilbur and Loretta, who were subsequently married with vows exchanged on memorial lane twenty, witnessed by the framed recording artist and the fully restored and lovely bridesmaids, Ida and Irene. Kingpin was best man, of course.

“May you roll down the lanes of life together,” he toasted, “helpin' each other out of the gutter now and then, and strikin' harmony and sparin' no goodwill more often than not.”

* * * * *

As a result of his steady, easygoing presence and reliability, Dolores and I recognized and esteemed Kingpin as a pillar of the community. When we inquired how he had come to live here, Andy and Celia said they heard that Max Purdee, Rolling Thunder proprietor and occasional town

mayor, had invited him to work at the bowling alley. Max had arrived some three decades ago to stage small circus acts and unknown musicians to stimulate business in his recently purchased roller rink. The skating operation was mildly popular, primarily with kids and teens during weekends and summer, but didn't generate much income in the small town. The 'side show' entertainment as Max called the various acts he booked into the roller rink was marginally profitable. By combining skating, circus shows, and music gigs together, he was able to eek out a living, especially when supplemented with taxpayers' funds as occasional part-time mayor.

Max was a frugal, levelheaded, and astute entrepreneur, with a keen sense of marketing for what his town needed, or would soon come to need through his promotional abilities. He decided to convert the roller rink into a bowling alley and bar. His fortunes changed much for the better. After remodeling and expanding the facilities, in launching the venture he had staffed the new business with local employees, who were appreciative and performed to Max's satisfaction. However, Max soon learned that he was overworked personally as the sole proprietor responsible for business management, accounting, tax preparation, payroll, marketing, food and beverage purchasing, bowling equipment procurement, as well as maintenance of the building's physical structure and equipment in the kitchen, bar, bowling lanes, and more. He needed a partner. And he sensed the place needed a new name with more pizzazz than the existing 'Neighborly Lanes'.

By coincidence, at a bowling equipment trade show in Atlanta, Max met an Army buddy from basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1964 during the early days of the Vietnam conflict. Mike was working at the North Atlanta Trade Center setting up and tearing down a steady stream of commercial exhibitions at the venue. Before work one morning of the trade show, Max invited his old pal for coffee to catch up on the intervening years. After exchanging some boot camp reminiscences, Max recalled clearly that in 1965, President Johnson had approved the U.S. Air Force's 'Rolling Thunder' air strikes of North Vietnam, the sustained bombing campaign designed to convince the North Vietnamese to discontinue their support of the Viet Cong insurgency in the South. That same year, Max remembered that he and Mike, as grunts in the 1st Infantry Division or 'Big Red One', deployed at different times to Vietnam. That's where they had lost touch. Max's unit was stationed north of Saigon, and Mike's outfit had been deployed to the west. Max recounted some of the more horrific skirmishes he had experienced, while Mike quietly sipped his coffee looking vacantly at the table. Observing his friend's demeanor, Max paused and gently asked,

“You want to talk about it?”

Mike's eyes filled as he lightly shook his head declining to speak. In the quiet void space Max allowed, the two war veterans sat transposed and finished their coffees without a word. Just as Max was about to suggest that they meet again before he left Atlanta, Mike looked up at him and said,

“I was captured behind enemy lines within six weeks of landin’ in Nam. I don’t like to think or talk about those bad experiences. I was declared ‘missin’ in action’ and lost track of things. You may remember I’d been married only a couple of weeks in Cleveland before basic trainin’. Years later, when I returned States-side, I learned my bride had died in childbirth. We hadn’t known she was pregnant when I shipped overseas. She didn’t have no family; a baby boy was put up for adoption. Never found him. Anyhow, I took odd jobs here and there, and then we meet up here after all these years. It’s damn good seein’ you.”

Max put his hand on Mike’s shoulder.

“Our reunion this morning has inspired a brilliant idea. I’ve been searching for a new name for my bowling alley, and ‘Rolling Thunder’ it is, by God! Also, I need a partner to take care of the physical facility, much as you’re doing here. I’m offering you a job and full partnership. How about it?”

Mike brightened with a broad smile, extending his hand in a firm, affirmative grip,

“I’m in, let’s roll!”

They drove back from Atlanta together, sometimes quiet and reflective peering out the window at the passing landscape, but more often engaged in high-spirited joking, laughing, and planning a grand future for their business partnership in the small town up the road.

Max and Mike complemented each other well. Max gladly relinquished all the upkeep and maintenance work as well as all physical plant operations of the building and parking lot, and Mike happily accepted these tasks. Concurrently, Max excelled in marketing and business management, his professional passions. Max conceived Rolling Thunder’s giant advertising sign atop the building and RT-66 bar accessories, and Mike supervised construction, turning dream to reality. Business flourished and their friendship deepened over the decade they had been together. Life was good.

* * * * *

Then came the full circle. Only a short time before Dolores and I arrived in the community, Max discovered and kept secret that he had advanced pancreatic cancer. Tragically, in a few short

months he died ‘unexpectedly’. But not before having signed over his estate including the Rolling Thunder to Mike, whom he had affectionately joined others in calling ‘Kingpin’. Many local friends provided sincere comfort and heartfelt condolences to the grief-stricken Kingpin, replete with home-cooked meals, invitations to picnics and other small social gatherings, and offers to help out at Rolling Thunder as unpaid volunteers in his time of need at the wailing wall. Dolores and I now understood how we had outscored Kingpin that Tuesday night.

Still feeling the loss of his best friend and business partner, he increasingly worried about managing Rolling Thunder on his own. He had made a jumble of the books, and missed vendors’ calls and making payments. A well-intentioned, but incompetent volunteer hadn’t been helpful in clearing up the mess. Kingpin knew, like Max, that he needed a competent partner to help manage the business, whose identity turned out to be great surprise to Dolores and me.

Eventually, over maybe a month’s time, I noticed that his smile and affable demeanor gradually returned. He resumed providing homespun insights on ‘human bein’ behavior’ to the delight of friends and patrons. When some mishap occurred evoking one of his witticisms, like some hapless bowler leaving himself an impossibly wicked split, he would shout amicably to the grumbler,

“Splits happen! Have another go. I’ll even lend you the services of Mr. P. Bollocks!”

Then one afternoon, I showed up at the RT-66 early. With raised eyebrows in insight on ‘human bein’ behavior’, Kingpin asked,

“How’s you and Dolores gettin’ along?”

“She lost her accounting job this week in a downsizing at the credit union,” I muttered dejectedly. “Last one in, first one out.”

“Damn, that’s tough. I knew somethin’ was wrong. What about you, Darrell? Holdin’ up? You two able to get by on your work?”

“Until today, yeah, but I just got pink-slipped at the bank, too. Haven’t told her yet. Looks like we should have stayed in Cleveland where we met.”

“Double damn, Darrell, lets grab a beer,” he said, adding, “I’m from Cleveland.”
Now it was Dolores’ and my turn at the wailing wall.

Soon after learning we were jobless, however, Kingpin made a decision and putting his arms on our shoulders at the doorway, he came straight to the point—

“I need a partner to run this place, and I’ve decided it’s you two. I want you to take on the business management aspects of this joint. Whataya say?”

Our jaws dropped. He added before we could respond,

“We’ll split the profits 50-50.” Dolores and I looked at each other as if we’d been handed a golden key to the city from its most esteemed and illustrious citizen. In humble delight, we accepted and asked,

“When do we start?” He reached into his old, black leather bowling bag and retrieved a dark green ledger book that he promptly gave to Dolores, the new bookkeeper, and replied,

“Now!”

Reaching again into his bag, saying, “Excuse me, Bollocks,” he pulled out a paper, which we first assumed to be some sort of contract. But it was a tattered, pale blue document not of recent vintage. Slowly, he handed it to me, deeply moved to our bewilderment, beaming inexplicably through sudden tears. Puzzled by his strong display of emotion, my gaze shifted from Kingpin to the document. In my hands was an original birth certificate, which I had never seen before.

“It was left among Max’s papers,” Kingpin said, “with a hasty note written on the day of his death to the estate executor to share with his livin’ business partner after his grievin’ period had waned.” Kingpin explained that he had been presented the document only yesterday. In Max’s handwriting on his life’s final day, an accompanying note read—

“Dear Mike, since our renewed acquaintance in Atlanta ten years ago, I had taken liberty to track down your son with professional help, finding proof of his identity only today in this document from Ohio. You will be startled and delighted to know that he resides presently in our same town. Your long lost son is none other than that fine young man, Darrell Hennings. His true name is Michael Townsend, Jr. On my deathbed, know that I leave rejoicing. Your pal, Max.”

* * * * *

Strolling hand-in-hand-in-hand and smiling brightly, our family—Dolores, my dad Kingpin, and I, the new business manager—approached the glittering beacon with pulsing, luminous waves sending red pins flying like hearts on wing above Rolling Thunder.

“Adding sound to the sign,” I said casually, “might attract even more customers.”

“Yeah,” Kingpin bantered, “like a storm siren blarin’ for all to seek shelter at our place might be good for business... or then again, they might flee in panic for higher ground!”

“Bollocks!” Dolores shouted.