

A Matter of Losing Face

“Sho’ nuff yo’ dead-wooded them pins tonight, Deloris, they’s lyin’ across three lanes and a coupla ‘em still spinnin’,” Kingpin had hollered as we exited the building. Everyone knew Kingpin as the alley cat who hung out at the lanes inviting anyone, anytime to roll a game. He kept score penciling in frames on the grey paper score sheet (this was before automated scoring with computerized display in modern bowling alleys), and also registered the same scores in a tattered small brown spiral notebook he kept in his hip pocket. Keeping scores twice was just Kingpin’s way. Nobody ever asked why he kept his duplicate book, he just liked statistics and knew all the bowlers’ scores at Rolling Thunder. Regulars at the alley were naturally curious, however, to see the contents of the notebook, but he never ever allowed anyone a glimpse. Kingpin guarded it secretly as if sacred. He wouldn’t allow anyone to touch it, much less open it to reveal the true contents. In fact, he would scowl fiercely at inquirers and bark at them gruffly to mind their own business, then stalk away sullenly.

As a young couple newlywed only four months, my wife and I were strolling home from a Tuesday night’s recreational bowling league at the local alley in our blue-collar neighborhood, just after Kingpin’s farewell. Throwing soft, slow creepers with more spares than usual, along with two, loud cranker strikes, my wife Deloris had accomplished one of her better games for the Sweet Rolls, her ladies team.

On a double date early in our courtship, another couple since split and guttered, introduced us to bowling. Despite our lack of prowess, we liked the experience enough that subsequently on occasion we laughed through ten frames enjoying our time together rather than the game. We were never serious pinheads. As newcomers to our small town, bowling seemed like it might be a fun way to make friends. The Rolling Thunder was unavoidably conspicuous as a gathering place, especially after the town’s factory whistle announced to the hot and thirsty day shift that happy hour had commenced in the bowling alley’s “RT-66” bar. It attracted a packed house with hot pastrami on rye sandwiches and longnecks of cold beer—icy beads of condensation streaming happily down the throats of the bottles concurrent with the liquid gold contents running happily down the throats of the guzzlers. The throng thumped to rock-n-roll oldies belted out from a chrome, turquoise and peach plastic jukebox, and they crowded the length of a 22-foot long hand shuffleboard table with a black light tube suspended low over its length illuminating the 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 flippered pings, buzzes, bells, and flashing lights excitedly heralded the track positions of painted race horses vying tirelessly for victory.

Deloris and I avoided the rowdy 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 we hadn't imbibed at all, which was not particularly unusual. We had relied instead on Dr. Pepper and pretzel sticks to fortify our strength and stamina needed to accomplish the physical maneuvers associated with the sport. These feats included hoisting "14-pounders" from the ball rack, dancing nimbly towards the foul line deftly cradling the "plastic stones" in our arms, initiating backswings then stepping forward to send "snow plows" down the lanes, "shaking hands with the head pin" on the follow-through, leaning this way and that imparting crucial body English of gyrating hips and contorting torsos, and finally directionally flailing arms to coax and steer our three-eyed rotating projectiles into "hitting the pocket."

Over our shoulders, the bowling alley's enormous green and purple neon wave crashed on a beach of white neon pins turning them bright red and scattering explosively just beyond the bowling alley's roof. Magically, they would then fly back rearranged neatly packed in white, triangular formation awaiting assault from another huge green and purple wave booming iridescently on the building. The big splash of moving lights was dramatic advertising, especially at night, effectively drawing patrons like a bonfire to a backwoods revival. Heading home, we walked hand-in-hand on the familiar gravel road as the light behind us from Rolling Thunder's pulsing, luminous waves dissipated with distance. In the increasing darkness, Deloris released our gentle, affectionate clasp and blew softly on an emerging, warm pink blister in the crease of her thumb and palm.

"I guess victory comes with a price," she declared, lightly shaking her winner's hand to soothe the hot spot.

"No pain, no gain," I sympathized in cliché.

"You know, Darrell, that was the first game I ever beat Kingpin," Deloris reflected diffidently.

"That goes for both of us, my spare lady," I teased. She smiled through a groan. "He's thrashed me at least a half dozen times, and you, too. Even I finished two pins ahead of him tonight lickety split, go figure," I continued, honestly surprised as anyone of my unlikely, fleeting victory.

With the appearance and talk of a quintessential hayseed, Kingpin had blown into town over five years ago. Some said he had been dishonorably discharged from the Army, speculating that it

probably was due to not taking orders. He was smart beneath his redneck disguise. He worked as a mechanic and maintenance man at Rolling Thunder, keeping the pinsetter and ball return machines operational, maintaining the HVAC system, lighting and plumbing, 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, management and patrons alike gave him his nickname, which he liked as it connoted authority.

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 those he invited to bowl a game. Routinely, Kingpin could be seen crouching in the pit at the end of an empty alley inspecting mechanical equipment or on the other end 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 opponents on adjacently active lanes. Despite his good ole boy demeanor during these planned contests, he was all business with an intense competitive drive. Not especially affable by nature, as he didn't have or seem to want any friends, it was somewhat peculiar that he took such interest in keeping a private tally of all the scores. Magnanimous in victory, Kingpin commonly offered to buy his vanquished foe a beer with a slap on the back, saying "yo' sure gave me a fright ta-night, better luck nex' time, friend." I had never seen him lose, come to think of it.

I recall no cars passed on the road and the air was still that night. There was no sound, not even from some insomniac bird, nocturnal cricket, or rustling tree branch. As we crossed the railroad track in the cool, clammy night air, a distant, low train whistle broke the silence of our homeward jaunt, stirring a more formed thought from my reverie.

"Deloris, have you seen Andy around town lately?" I asked. "He wasn't there tonight for the Pin Pricks; that's not like him. He's our best bowler; even beat Kingpin last weekend, he told me. Come to think of it, several of the team rosters seemed to be short the last few weeks in league play," I recalled, innocuously kicking a crumpled soda can aside.

"Well, there's a flu bug going around, maybe he's at home in bed? No, I remember Celia saying that Andy had a sales trip coming up, that's probably it," Deloris replied. Although Celia didn't bowl, she sometimes accompanied Andy on bowling nights for diversion, where she had met Deloris and had become friends. Similarly, Andy, our genial team captain, and I became bowling buddies shortly after we moved to town.

“He’d have called me or one of the guys,” I said mildly perplexed. The locomotive’s purple moan faded away, leaving us alone in the dampening darkness and resumed silence, getting closer to home.

We were unaware that the men with no faces were watching us in anticipation. The attack had come suddenly and noiselessly from nowhere, as if Rolling Thunder’s monster wave had let loose—flying soundlessly like a stealth missile seeking its target triangle. My faceless assailant’s violent assault was instantaneous, with the split-second precision of a malevolent king cobra’s blinding, paralyzing strike. I registered but did not feel a slashing thrust, like that of an adept assassin’s throat-slitting knife silently dispatching a sleeping victim in dead repose, so swift and sure in utter shock that it precluded comprehending awareness or any possible fight or flight reaction. A deep, white gash from a razor-sharp contrivance hurried morbidly along the diagonal length of my face. Wide-eyed and dazed, I staggered from the traumatic force of the blow.

“Splits happen.” Is that what I heard my attacker say? Momentarily shock-ridden, I bolted panic-stricken down the road on stilted legs howling blindly in pain, my face boiling red like bright, molten tephra. After maybe ten yards, I wheeled about wildly in foaming terror attempting to see if my assailant was in pursuit and what had become of my wife. “Deloris!” I screamed in excruciation.

Overwhelmed with consternation about my wife’s unknown fate and overcome by my own horrific wound, I discerned dimly other men with no faces now lurking some distance behind me along the roadside. Like a cult of warlocks, they, including my assailant, stood stationary, contemplating me with seeming kindred fascination, as I perceived them as oddly grinning in approval. However, at the same time each mishapened figure evoked a baleful, menacing taunt. Threatened with dread, I fully expected renewed assault, but inexplicably, none of them advanced towards me. As I gaped in terror of another impending attack, I found their wait-and-see demeanor even more unnerving. As cold sweat and hot blood poured over my disfigured face, I thought what more unimaginable malice might be in store? Then my devastation sored—my Deloris had gone missing, disappeared. Retreating another twenty yards in terror, I felt sure that my life’s end was near, but no matter, adrenaline pumped through my veins as my feet resumed pounding haphazardly up the road as fast as my wild heart could sustain.

Panting and now crawling, I strained to see another defaced man, or the same faceless man as the one who had attacked me—I couldn’t distinguish which, but did perceive a calumnious grin despite the absence of facial features to bestow such a gesture from him. He was moving quickly, almost invisibly as a whispering blue zephyr across a dark, empty plain. His flying shadow crossing

ahead of me at close range, I felt the rushing wake of his advance that left a faint, oddly reminiscent smell unidentifiable at the time. As I turned my head, straight away he came upon the trembling figure of a woman hiding amongst grey beards adorning the dark branches of live oak trees on the other side of the road. “No!” I gasped. Horrifically in an instant, I witnessed his quick blade pierce her jaw. She screamed, staggered a single step, and collapsed. As she lay motionless, her blood-soaked neck adorned in a stubble of mossy whiskers, the grinning man with no face struck again immediately, opening a deep gash from below her right jaw where the initial stab had been inflicted to above her left eyebrow, staining the street crimson.

I then heard a deep, sly chuckle and low, guttural utterance, “lucky strike.” I recognized the eerie words as emanating from a familiar voice and I detected again the malodorous trace of my own assailant. Appallingly, a comprehension emerged that I had recognized Andy’s voice flavored with Lucky Strike cigarette smoke, like a stale cough of barroom air at the bowling alley. Impossible I thought as dizzily I lurched sideways in a spin and fell into a muddy puddle in the roadside ditch, like one of Rolling Thunder’s wave-ravaged white and red bowling pins flung face down in the rain gutter of the roof.

Some minutes later in semi-consciousness, a pair of flaming headlights dazzled me abruptly, like brilliant silver rays of a meteor bursting on the nearby railroad track. In a wild plea for help I waved, clawing the foggy beams over the ditch.

“Over here! Stop! Please help!” I brayed hysterically. Like tandem Roman candles shooting smoky, golden rockets in the darkness, the glaring headlights slowed then halted, washing over me with the unrecognizable woman’s body lying unconsciously across the road in shadow. I looked back scanning for the faceless man, but he and the others had vanished. All was dark except for headlight beams eagerly scrutinizing the scene. Gasping for any slim, hopeful deliverance of Deloris and me, my heaving breath was the only noise audible, except for the automobile’s idling engine. Soon, I heard footsteps crunching the gravel in approach. Looking at the man from the vehicle who now stood over me, to my amazement and boundless relief, I beheld my rescuer, Kingpin! As I attempted reaching for a helping hand, however, he folded his arms across his chest like a pinsetter genie and laughed. “Well, lookie here, who we got down dare in deh gutter? Why he be ole Darrell, A-number one Pin Prick,” Kingpin said grimly. “Yore scorecard is done filled in all deh frames, ever,” he chortled.

Breathlessly, swinging wildly from the clinging hope of a merciful rescuer to the blackest despair at the hands of a chiding villain, my relief turned to terror. Any attempt to react, to run, to

move away from Kingpin was futile, impossibly catatonic. Collapsing in the paralyzing revelations of Andy and now Kingpin as monstrous assailants without reason or cause, the incomprehensible fear of my wife's apparent murder, the racking pain in my face, and my own probable death at their hands, I lost consciousness again in the muddy gutter of the roadside ditch.

Kingpin crossed the street to inspect the job performed on the woman's face. Bending down, he clicked open and thumbed a flame from a Zippo lighter to inspect her slashed face. He found the gruesome disfigurement to his satisfaction. "Attaboys, done did a mighty fine facelift ta-night, mighty fine indeed," Kingpin imparted approvingly with a smile. From the blackness, Andy and the others appeared at the margin of the headlamps' reach. They slowly gathered in a silent circle around Kingpin several yards away, grinning as if they had faces with which to smile. Their leader was happy, so they were happy. Holding the flame of his lighter beneath his chin, like a Halloween prank, he reached into his hip pocket and retrieved the small notebook. Taking a pencil from above an ear, he inscribed a few, brief words in his ledger, and said, "T's done gonna finish deh transformation now on dees two, jus' like I's done on ya'll." The faceless men inched closer towards the flame, tightening the circle.

"Andy, come hole' dis lighter over her face," Kingpin ordered, "and here, read out deh verdict fo' dees gutterballs." Never before had Kingpin allowed anyone to touch his notebook, but Andy was not just anyone. Kingpin had transformed him and the other faceless disciples completely, to do his will as he desired. He handed him the opened notebook pointing to the fresh entry. Dutifully, like a novice altar boy serving a bishop, Andy held the flickering mechanical candle in one hand and the book in the other. The faceless congregation surrounded the flaming Zippo in the dark like celebrants in some ancient necromantic ritual. Obediently, Andy announced Kingpin's judgment as written, "Deloris and Darrell—wipe them big smiles clean off; split 'em like mule ears!" Pleased to have heard his verdict read out to his rapt minions, Kingpin issued authoritatively, "One a ya'll other fellers fetch my bowlin' bag from deh back seat." Deloris moaned unawake, oblivious to her plight. A car door slammed followed by rapid steps crunching gravel. In a hazy semi-consciousness, I vaguely discerned the conclave convened around the fluttering light across the road. "Here's your bag, boss," a voice echoed from inside the circle. From the bag, Kingpin removed an unlabeled, pint-sized, blue glass bottle with a large black rubber eyedropper.

Slowly, painfully, I rose on my elbows and clawing upslope, I emerged without making a sound from the ditch onto the road. In seemingly arrested time, noiselessly I inched forward imperceptibly slowly over the gravel on my hips and elbows towards the cult surrounding Deloris.

“Teach yo’ to mess wid me, missy, and yore pinprick of a husband, too,” Kingpin spat, as he held the blue bottle like a chalice. “Think yo’ can beat me n’ get away wid it? Hmmph! Ole Kingpin ain’t gonna lose face from deh likes a yo’ or anybody else. On deh contrary, yo’ and yore hubby deh losers tonight afterall. Yo’ deh one done gonna lose a face, darlin’, yo’ own!” he sniggered scornfully and grinning broadly over Deloris’ bloody head. The others grinned without faces, too.

At last making it to just outside the circle, I detected a slight, stale aroma of exhaled cigarette smoke once again—Andy must be near. I struggled to my hands and knees, thinking I must get to Deloris if I can. Before I knew what was happening, Kingpin removed an eyedropper full of the blue bottle’s contents and squeezed the liquid into the long gash on Deloris’ face. Then, extracting another eyedropper-full, he emptied the draught over the remainder of her face. Hearing the sizzle of raw flesh, I shrieked and instantaneously mustering whatever strength remained, I catapulted myself through the circle, landing at the feet of Kingpin and Andy. My beautiful Deloris’ face was a seething, featureless froth. Mercifully, she had not regained consciousness through this latest, most hideous ordeal. She lay there unmoving, except for an ever so slight twitching where her mouth had been. To my horror, I witnessed the beginnings of a smirking grin emerging facelessly from my wife.

“Why hidy-ho, Darrell, step right up. Don’t she look happy to see yore face?” Kingpin laughed. Several of the faceless cult immediately lifted and dropped me roughly flat on my back, knocking the wind from my lungs, next to my yet unconscious, morbidly grinning wife. “Lickety split,” Andy chuckled, holding the lighter nearer to my head, as Kingpin dipped the black eyedropper into the blue bottle, squeezing another bulb full undoubtedly destined for me.

“Yo’s deh next in line fo’ deh barber’s chair, Darrell, and we’s gonna cut off a lot mo’ than just yore sideburns,” Kingpin stated gleaming with pleasure. I blanched ghastly white staring transfixed at the two madmen leering over me. At that moment of hysteria, my mind flashed to Kingpin’s words as Deloris and I had left the bowling alley, “...dead-wooded them pins...” and then his words that Andy had read from the notebook, “split ‘em like mule ears”—a 7-10 split was almost impossible to make spare. It’s a loser’s throw.

The maniacal horror had originated when we each had beaten Kingpin at Rolling Thunder just a few hours ago. Us, losers? Dolores and me? Kingpin was the sore loser! He couldn’t stand losing, livid with jealousy and resentment of being beaten—losing face—even innocently, as had occurred that evening in a silly game of ten pins. Beneath his smile, he raged in his deranged, vengeful mind. The small, vindictive coward thrived on the troubles of others and sadistically

enjoyed inflicting pain on others to elevate his own low, miserable, despicable existence. In violent depravity, he attempted to save face by literally removing the faces of those he insanely perceived to have dared to offend and belittle him with a better bowling score.

Suddenly, as the eyedropper's streaming liquid entered the long, deep gash over my face, a blistered hand jabbed upward fast as lightning from Deloris' arm smashing the bottle and its contents directly into Kingpin's face. Almost simultaneously in involuntary reflex, I punched blindly towards the light, which suddenly had become much brighter and hotter. My blow had struck Andy's hand holding the lighter, conveying the flame to the paper pages of the notebook in his other hand. The book burst into a flaming torch that set Kingpin's drenched face afire, as if the liquid were a volatile accelerant. Like a great Eucharist candle, his head was a towering flame of red, orange, and yellow hair. As he ran wailing loudly, his movement fanned the flaming coiffeur higher and higher in the night.

Falling to his knees at the nearby railroad track, Kingpin reach up with both arms and removed a fiery mask. In the reflected light of the burning veneer, to our horror we saw an alabaster face, cool as marble, from which peered red-hot coals. Dropping the flickering, smoldering remains of his facade, the unmasked Kingpin turned away and fled cowardly without another word down the tracks, without his notebook.

As the notebook turned to ashes falling through Andy's charred fingers as grey and white snowflakes to the gravel road, I watched in amazement as a profound change occurred. Faces with familiar features of eyebrows, noses and nostrils, lips and teeth and tongues reappeared in the countenances of each of the formerly faceless cult, including Andy. They looked at each other as if dazed, but with the returning comfort of recognizing friends and familiar acquaintances, otherwise normal, but bewildered as to why they were standing on a gravel road in the middle of the night.

I felt a blistered hand grasp mine tenderly, and turning I beheld my beautiful Deloris fully restored without a blemish or care. "I was awake the whole time," she whispered. "I knew that you'd save us," she added demurely. We both knew our rescue, including that of Andy and the others whose misfortune was to have outscored the maintenance man at Rolling Thunder, was delivered in the last frame by her perfect strike in the pocket of Kingpin's losing face. Staring into my eyes, she caressed my face with the other hand, gently outlining a healthy, rose-colored cheek and nose, then lightly touching my lips with her fingers in lovely prelude, she proffered me a kiss.