

To be a Rock and not to Roll

The bowling alley is empty except for Kenny. He leans against the front desk where you rent shoes and, if you're lucky, get a mist of disinfectant in your face by whichever careless teen is spraying foot germs that day. On the counter next to Kenny rests a blue duffel bag, and tucked underneath the bag, a paper scoresheet that must be a photocopy of a photocopy dating back to the 1960s.

"You here for the league?" he asks me.

The sheer desolation is shocking. Not a soul bowling on a Thursday night. Where's the crackle of balls on pins? The raucous cheers after strikes? Children birthday parties that spill into your lane, distracting you as you fail to pick up a four horsemen spare?

I knew candlepin bowling was a dying sport in New England, but I didn't realize it was already *dead*.

I look at my watch. Seven p.m. Right on time. I feel a desperate urge to say no, I'm looking for directions to the nearest gas station, and flee.

"I think so?" I say.

"I'm Kenny," he says and comes over, his hand extended. With his gray straggly hair and lean wrinkled face, he appears early seventies, but I'm horrible at guessing ages. He might be as young as fifty-five and as old as ninety.

"Jack," I say, fighting off an urge to go with one of my usual pseudonyms, like Randolph or Fred, reserved for one-and-done social situations.

"Jack," he repeats as our hands meet. He clasps tightly, as if he were squeezing a stress ball, then shakes it hard in an up-and-down motion. He leans in his face close, and I can smell

Doritos on his breath. “You got a last name, Jack?” His speech is slow, a bit slurred, though not in a drunk kind of way.

“I do.”

“You’re not going to tell me?” he says and smiles. He’s missing a tooth on the bottom right.

“I will if I get a strike tonight,” I joke to keep things moving. There’s like a 0.002% chance of that happening. I haven’t bowled candlepin in nearly twenty years; I’ll be lucky to get a ten box. Plus, my last name, Khatchadorian, doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue. I often have to repeat it a few times, which gets tiresome. “Like cacciatore, with a dash of Armenian spice,” I usually resort to.

Sidling behind the counter, Kenny bangs a couple keys on the register. “Twenty bucks, please.”

I get out my credit card.

He looks up. “Cash only.”

I dig in my wallet and fork over a twenty.

He points a long finger at me. “Ten-and-a-half?”

“Ten-and-a-half?”

“Need shoes, right?”

“Yes, wow, great guess.” I’m genuinely impressed.

“Been doing this a while.” Saliva bubbles out of his mouth and he wipes at it. He lays the shoes on the counter.

“Is anybody else coming?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

I had been looking forward to meeting new people. Two months ago, I moved across state for a new job two blocks from the alley and came in to inquire about a league. The teenager behind the desk told me one was starting tonight, and I marked it on my calendar in excitement. I loved candlepin bowling as a kid. I have fond memories bowling with my older brother and his friend Scott at my neighborhood alley that closed down twenty years ago.

More than bowling, the last couple of years, I'd become a hermit during the pandemic, like a lot of people I suppose. I lost touch with some peripheral friends, dropped out of a few social groups. I needed to get back into life, start participating in activities, make some new friends.

Kenny isn't exactly who I had in mind.

He walks with a purposeful stride to the lane at the far left. "This is the best lane. You can see everybody bowling, everybody coming in."

"I can see that being helpful."

"Oh yeah," he says with conviction.

He puts the bag down next to the ball rack and drops to a knee. He unzips the bag and pulls out a ball that's powder blue with flowing tan swirls, shining like it was freshly buffed and waxed. He lays it into a rack alongside several brown balls.

"Jack," he says. "The blue balls are mine. You can use any of the other balls here."

"Fair enough," I say, suppressing a joke about his lack of sexual release.

I can understand not wanting a possible rookie, some random guy off the street, damaging your balls.

Still on one knee, he places five balls in the rack. He gets back to his feet, nearly stumbling as he does, and says "Five minutes to warm up. Then we'll start."

I take off my sneakers and put on the bowling shoes. The soles are worn so thin, I'm expecting my feet to break through.

"I'll go, I guess," I say, as Kenny shakes some white powder into his open right hand.

My stride is a clumsy six-step disaster. I feel like a baby learning to walk. The ball rolls off my hand and lands in the gutter half way down the lane.

On my way back, I glance over at Kenny to see if he notices. He looks back stoically. "That's why these are warm-ups," he says. "When's the last time you bowled?"

"Candlepin, almost twenty years. But I've bowled tenpin a bunch over the years."

"Jesus Christ."

"I definitely need to warm up."

Candlepin bowling is more merciful than its "big ball" cousin, in a way. In candlepin, there are three balls per frame. A first-roll gutter ball leaves a couple chances to get an eight or nine fill for the box, a decent candlepin score.

My next roll veers off to the right and nicks the ten pin in the back right corner, causing a beautiful reverse waterfall. After the final pin topples, seven are down. A horrible roll ends up with a good score—sometimes the bowling gods are on your side.

"That was definitely lucky," I say.

"You need some luck in this game," he barks, sitting bolt upright in the hard plastic booth.

My third shot misses everything by three feet. I look back, grimace, and do a half-shrug, as if to say, "Sorry, I'm not going to give you much competition today."

"I'm ready when you are," he says.

"You're not going to warm-up?"

“Warmed up already.”

He’s holding a mini pencil without an eraser, hunched over and scribbling on a scoresheet.

“You’re up first, Jack,” he nods up to the lane. “We bowl two frames up at a time.” He holds up two fingers.

“Two it is.”

I get off to a decent start, posting back-to-back seven boxes. Not that Kenny has laid out any ground rules for what the winner gets and whether we’re actually competing.

“You’re up, Kenny.”

He has a pocket calculator in his hand and taps at it with his index finger. Then he picks up the mini pencil and jots something on the scoresheet. When I approach, I see that he’s just written “14.”

He places the pencil hard on the little table, pops up, and heads to the ball rack. He picks out one of his blue balls, rubs his hand over the top of it, like he’s sweeping the hair out off a child’s forehead and out of their eyes.

After holding the ball in both hands and staring at the pins for a couple seconds, he begins his stride. Five quick steps, a pitter patter of the feet. It’s all natural enough. The ball shifts from his cupped hands into his right hand. He brings his arm back and begins to propel it forward when suddenly his arm stops mid-motion and the ball crashes into the lane, like a shot-put bomb. *Bam!* A shocking sound that throttles my ears.

The ball ekes down the lane, as if it were rolled by a toddler. It starts straight but soon curves to the left in the direction of the lonely seven pin. The ball taps the edge of the pin, and it wobbles down onto the lane.

“Got one,” he says, with a little shake of his closed fist.

He lines up his second shot. He walks up, rears his arm back and then brings it forward, fluidly enough, when suddenly again, his arm stops short. Again, even louder this time: *Bam!* The ball thuds into the lane. This time his roll has no chance: the beautiful blue ball swerves immediately to the left and slides into the gutter. His third roll meanders in the opposite direction and finds the right gutter.

His next few frames are barely better. After four frames, I’m up 28 to 16.

It’s clear that as a bowler, this is who Kenny is. And it’s clear that as a helpless onlooker, I now have a pounding headache.

To my surprise, Kenny has a suggestion for me. “Keep your back straight,” he instructs after my horrible first ball barely nicks the ten pin.

“My back straight?” I’ve always had horrible posture but I didn’t know it affected my bowling form too.

“You’re dropping your right shoulder too much. When you’re about to release the ball, don’t compress your spine.”

On my next roll, I make an effort to keep my back straight. It feels like I’m pantomiming someone with perfect posture. I’m in my head too much. The ball has no chance. It plops in the gutter halfway down the lane.

“Well, that didn’t work,” I say.

“Keep it up,” he says. “When you’re about to release the ball, keep your back straight and your eyes up at the pins. Don’t look down.”

Is this the moment I ask him about his own *imperfect* form? Does he realize that his form offers zero chance of success?

It's all a bit curious. I haven't noticed any biomechanical limitations preventing him from swinging his arm fully forward, or getting lower to roll the ball rather than dropping it from three feet. I'm about to ask when I realize hundreds of others probably have broached the topic in the past. What's the point of my bringing it up again?

Instead I focus on implementing his suggestion. There's regression over the next several rolls, as I get used to my new form, but then I start noticing progress. No spares and certainly no strikes, but I feel more in control of my rolls. I finish strong with a nine and a ten box to end up with a 72 string. Not bad.

"How long have you worked here?" I ask as Kenny stands up for his ninth box.

"Twenty-five years," he says.

"A quarter century!"

"Yup."

"Are you from this area?"

"Born and raised." He points downward to indicate, presumably not the bowling alley, but the town we're in.

"Wow, that's great. And rare these days," I offer. "I've moved around a lot myself."

Kenny doesn't inquire about my background. Since his initial question about my last name, he hasn't asked me anything about myself.

He gets up and begins his familiar stride. Another *bam!* But this ball has a chance. It starts in the center and moseys down the lane. No curve or side spin like his other balls. He stares in rapt attention. The ball taps the head pin, triggering a slow domino effect. The sequence is captivating in a bizarre and melancholy way. Seven pins have fallen and an eighth teeters, the

isolated ten pin. Kenny chops down his arm, one, two, three, and then a fourth time. The mojo works, the pin falls.

“There you go, Kenny,” he says.

“There you go, Kenny!” I echo. Eight down. Great chance for a spare with only the four and seven pins standing. “You got this spare, man,” I say and give a couple claps.

He goes right into it. The ball shows promise as it heads straight for the seven pin, but slowly spins to the right and off course.

“Damn it,” he barks.

“Almost got it,” I say.

His third roll topples the seven pin for a nine box.

“Good nine box. Way to hang in there,” I say and jot it down. After his first recording when he pulled out his calculator, Kenny silently ceded scorekeeping duties to me.

Kenny rolls a seven on his tenth box to finish with a 55.

“Solid finish, Kenny.”

He nods and walks back.

“Ready to go again?” he asks.

League play, that is, my match vs Kenny, is three strings. We’re only a third of the way there.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I say.

He twists his body and points toward the entrance. “Right over there.”

“Got it.”

The bathroom floor is caked in dirt, and the walls are a dismal yellow with brown streaks that are hopefully just nicotine stains. Not the kind of place to casually loiter if you have a functioning nose.

I want to scrub the whole bowling alley off my hands. I push on the knob and it's one of those faucets that shoots out water for a second and abruptly stops. I splash a little water on each hand and don't even bother with the cracked soap dispenser that's dangling off the wall.

There's an opaque mirror over the sink. I gaze into it at my graying temples and the wrinkles on my forehead. And then the old question pops into my mind: What the hell am I doing here? My question is answered with an impulse, an *irresistible* impulse: To exit the bathroom, wave to Kenny from a distance of thirty feet, shout out, "Kenny, sorry but I have to get going. Just got a text from my brother—he needs a ride. Good bowling with you and thanks for the game." Rush to my car, zip home, put on the TV and find some good standup comedy, anything to put my mind on something light and breezy.

There's nothing stopping me, and my future evening still salvageable. It's all so tantalizing.

I step out and am ready to announce my departure. Under the dim florescent lights, Kenny sits and gazes out at the lane in front of him, his head bowed forward, like he's watching a gorgeous sunset. I can't help but envision where his night goes from here. A small windowless room. The TV's on, a black and white war movie. A halogen light dimmed in the corner. A tray on his lap. Microwaved meatloaf with mashed potatoes swimming in gravy. He eats with a plastic fork and knife. An old man desperate for a little human touch, abandoned by another person. Worst of all, a fellow bowler.

He looks over at me and shouts, "You won the last string, Jack. You're up first."

“Alright, Kenny,” I say and walk back over. “Let’s do it.”