On Memory Lanes
by Shawn Jacobson

If you want to know why I am traveling west beyond human lands and into the mountains of mystery, you will need to know what happened on that strange night, the night when dad bowled for a perfect game, and weirdness walked the alleys. Though it seems odd that a night of bowling, actually, a night of watching someone else bowl, should profoundly change a future, you will se why it changed mine.

The hunger was the first sign of strangeness, a hunger beyond explanation, as if I hadn’t eaten in forever, a hunger you got from doing something, not from sitting around while your father bowls.

“How was it?” the waitress asked.

“Wonderful” I said through my food as I ravened my meatloaf. I expected to be told not to talk with my mouth full, but mom and dad were too busy stuffing it in to take time to criticize. Uncle Carl was eating like there was no tomorrow. The weird hunger was even affecting Kate my kid sister; she was eating her peas, and that was just plain unheard of.

“It’s the best in the land!” the waitress said. “We’re famous for our food around here.”

“Sure is good” I said as I savored a large bite of meat with gravy; I washed it down with grape soda, the good kind from bottles, not the fizzy canned stuff.

“I have to be running” the waitress said. It seemed like everyone else in the restaurant had the same unexplained hunger that we had. Most of the other customers were dressed like farmers, but some were bowling in the tournament with dad. My attention was caught by a family in the corner, that didn’t fit either group. They were in their Sunday best, and I got the impression that they were wearing the only good clothes they had. I wasn’t that interested in the little boy who was Kate’s age or the older girl between my age and that of my older brother. The middle boy, might make a great playmate for the evening; bowling can be real boring when all you do is watch. So I had great hopes when their dad came over to our table.

“Hi” he said sticking out his hand “my names Jake.”

“Ben” replied dad “good to meet you. Are you bowling in the tournament?” Dad liked to swap bowling stories and was always on the lookout for a kindred spirit.

“No” Jake said, we’re just watching” he continued “but you’re bowling well.”

“Thanks” dad said, “I’m not doing that well tonight though.” Indeed, his bowling thus far had been average, not bad, but not good enough for prize money. I expected to hear dad cuss the lane conditions all the way to Chicago.

“Daddy’s the best bowler here” I said, too proud of my dad not to butt in. Everyone let it pass.

“You should be proud of you father” Jake said turning to me “he’s as good a bowler as I’ve seen.

By the way” Jake asked turning back to Dad “you folk from around here?”

“Nope” dad replied “from Boone, north of Des Moines, how about you?”

“Oh we’re from a bit further west than that” Jack said with a laugh in his voice. At this, Uncle Carl perked up the way our hound does when she scents a rabbit. Uncle Carl had been way out west, out in the spirit lands where magic ruled and where, if you believe Pastor Bryce, the Devil had his abode, a place of wonder shunned by respectable people.

“Yes” continued Jake with a furtive look that I had never seen on an adult before, the look of someone who has said too much “we’re from just west of Iowa. Well” he continued sheepishly “I’d better get back to the family. Good luck.” We returned to our food still astoundingly hungry.

“What do you want for dessert” dad asked “the blueberry pie looks good?”

“Al a mode” I asked?

“Sure” dad said. “I think I’ll have that too”. As if on cue, the waitress appeared.

As we finished, the boy I hoped to play with came by. “Want to play cowboys and Indians” he asked “my pa says it’s OK.”

“Run along son” dad said interrupting a whispered conversation with Uncle Carl.

“How about over there” my new friend said pointing to the labyrinth of bowling lockers at the far end of the building. “I don’t see anyone over there.”

“By the way, my name’s Bram” the boy said sticking out his hand as we approached the pretend west.

“I’m Bill” I replied shaking.

We drew straws and, since I’d drawn the short one, I got to play cowboy. We played among the lockers used to store bowling balls pretending they were canyon walls. Then, Bram said “spirits arrive, cowboys can’t shoot Indians anymore.”

Just then, Bram’s sister arrived, like a rescuing angel. “Bill” she said “your mom wants you. Dad’s getting ready to bowl.”

“Ah Lisbet” Bram said “do we have to stop now; we’re just getting to the fun part.”

“You know what dad says about minding” Lisbet said, “and about being selfish. The rest of the game won’t be much fun for cowboy Bill.”

“OK” Bram sighed as I walked back to where mom was sitting.

Lisbet was right about the game; things went badly for the cowboys once they ran into the spirit folk. I remembered from history classes, how the spirit people had stopped the white man’s advance into the west. I remembered reading about the battle of the badlands and the first and second battles of Denver creek. The lesson on the disastrous battles of Rollins and Laramie that had doomed the Cheyenne campaign was especially memorable. The spirit people had been too few to push the settlers back across the plains, but they had kept us out of the mountains. Finally, after a long list of battles, the treaty of Tucson brought an end to the Indian wars once and for all. If you wanted victorious cowboys, you would have to read one of Louis L’amour’s alternate history books, the kind without spirit folk where the cowboys rolled to the Pacific without meaningful resistance.

Of course, if I wanted to know about the spirit folk, I would ask uncle Carl. He said the spirit folk were no more magical than you or I. They were from another world and had some very advanced science, but that didn’t make them devils. Folk who talked that way were ignorant. “They don’t know what they’re talking about” Uncle Carl would say with disdain “and they don’t rightly care either.”

By the time I got back to our seats, Brad had put his headphones on and had tuned out from the world. Just then, I envied him his radio.

My gaze wandered from the scene in front of us. I counted the lanes. ‘Yes’, I thought, ‘still 28, just like this morning and this afternoon. Nor had anything else changed; the restaurant was at the near end of the building. Then there was the entrance framed by a giant blowing ball and pin, the sort of equipment you’d bowl with if you were God, or a giant. A shoe rental counter stood to the right of the entrance facing the restaurant. Further along was a bar with a bartender and a couple of barflies who would probably be drinking all night. Next were some old looking pinball machines and three doors, two restrooms flanking a door marked “staff only”. Finally, there were the lockers and a fire exit. Beyond that was the Illinois night.

Dad was bowling average like earlier in the day. I looked up and he was facing a split. He rolled a straight ball as fast as he could towards the ten pin in a valiant, but unsuccessful, attempt at a spare. “I’ll give you a fence” mom said as she kept dad’s score. “Go on like it didn’t happen.”

I looked around again, “can I have some pinball money” I asked Uncle Carl?

“Sure” he said handing me a quarter “good luck.”

“Now you be careful” mom interjected in a worried voice “uncle Joe started with pinball, and you know where he ended up.”

Uncle Joe had ended up living on the streets of New Orleans after throwing everything he had into the casinos of the city; it was a story mom told every time I wanted to play pinball.

“I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about“ Carl soothed as mom groused about his lack of parenting instincts.

“Get a good score” Carl said, eyes twinkling “just stay away from the gambling bug.”

I walked back to where the pinball machines were; on the way, I stopped to watch dad bowl. He pushed off and swung the ball down the lane. It made a smooth rolling sound as it hooked into the pocket. There was a white blur of flying pins, then nothing stood. It was a strike, a thing of beauty.

“Your dad will be all right now” said a voice; it was Lizbet.

“Thanks” I said; then I checked the machines to see which gave the most balls for a quarter.

I settled on the oldest machine As I dropped my coin into the slot, I heard a voice. “If you let me play a ball, I’ll show you how it’s done” Bram said.

“OK, sure” I said as I relinquished the machine. “I hope this will be more fun than cowboys and Indians.”

“Oh shucks” Bram said as he shot the ball “this will be a lot of fun; trust me”.

The ball rattled around in the bumpers for a while, then if came down and Bram caught it just right with a flipper sending it through a gate (one of those where you can get tons of points if you hit it right) and back into the bumpers.

“How’d you do that” I asked? If I could get the secret, I could play all night on free games.

“It’s all timing, you have to hit it at just the right time” he replied with assurance “you have to flip your wrist just so at just the right time to make it work. I’ll show you on the next ball.”

When he finished, he said “here, you try it.”

I sent the ball up into the bumpers. The ball came down, teetered on the edge of the tube then fell where I could flip it.

“Now” said Bram and I flipped the ball with coordination I’ve never had before or since, as if my body had some psychic bond with the game making me and the machine one. “Wow!” I exclaimed in joy as the machine went crazy adding to my, well our, score.

“Like I said” Bram continued “it’s all in the wrist.”

We switched off balls for a while winning several games. Then Lisbet called him back to his folks and I went back to being inept; soon the games were gone.

I stopped by the bar on the way back to our seats. The man behind the bar looked board, serious bowlers don’t mess with booze while they’re bowling despite what you may have heard about beer frames and the rest. He was alone except for the drunks talking about baseball expansion.

“Do you think Havana will get a team” the first drunk asked?”

“No way” the second drunk replied dismissively “Senator Castro makes too much trouble with his common man’s agenda. You can’t go around calling rich folk thieves, especially if they are, not if you want anything from them.”

“OK” the first drunk replied “how about Fargo?”

Then uncle Carl called “Come back now. Your mom will have a fit if she sees you hanging around that bar. Tell you what, how about I buy you another grape soda and I’ll tell you a story.”

“Sure!” I said eagerly. As I’ve said, Uncle Carl knew a lot about the spirit lands. He’d lived out there a long time being some sort of diplomat or problem solver or something, just what I wasn’t sure, but he had a whole lot of stories to tell.

As we walked back to our seats, dad threw a strike that could have been the twin of the one I’d seen him throw earlier on the way to the pinball machines. “That’s three in a row” mom said excitedly. “If he’d started better, he’d have a really good game.”

Carl handed me the soda and I asked “Carl, what are the spirit trains like?”

“When we get to Chicago tomorrow, you may get to ride the elevated trains.”

“So the spirit trains are like the El” I asked?

“Kind of” he replied “but they’re underground like the subway they’re digging in Des Moines, and they go a lot farther, a lot faster to. You can travel from the Canadian border to the Arizona corridor in four hours, maybe less. Pretty much the only folk who ride them are the spirit people, but sometimes ordinary folk ride them when there is need.”

“And you rode them?” I asked knowing that this would start Carl on one of his stories.

“Just once” he said “I was supposed to mediate some issues at a high council meeting north of Tucson. They wanted the council convened quickly, so I rode down from Deseret with a couple of Mormon leaders and a couple of the spirit folk. It was incredible, very fast, but very smooth, it wasn’t very scenic being underground, but impressive nonetheless.”

“And how about the high council” I asked prompting him to continue. And he did telling a wondrous tale of a school with spirit folk and ordinary kids in the same class and the problems that caused. There were heroic children having their minds read by telepaths and ceremonies and mysterious rites and all sorts for excitement. It was one of Uncle Carl’s best stories, and every time he told it, it was just enough different to feel new.

“What did the council decide?” I asked though I knew the answer.

“They decided that the teacher should write down what happened in her school so that there would be a record. Then they would make a final decision.”

I would have given my right arm to read those chronicles. And I would have given my soul to go to such a magical school, to have my life touched by such wonders.

Dad bowled another perfect strike. As the thunder of falling pins subsided, I looked up at the scoreboard and, wow! dad had started the last game with four strikes. I took a swallow from my drink now interested in what happened on the alleys in front of us.

There is a pro bowler known as “the machine” because of his consistency. Dad was like that, seemingly mechanical, throwing strike after strike. If dad was ever going to bowl a perfect game in his life, well, this would be the night. Dad had mentioned on the way from Iowa that the owner would pay five grand to anyone who bowled a perfect game. I thought of cool ways to spend the money.

But even machines malfunction. Dad’s approach in the ninth, was just enough wrong to swing the ball too far right. It finally hooked toward the headpin, but way too late. Dad tried to pull the ball toward the pocket as if it were on a string, but that never worked.

The ball hit to the right of the headpin shoving the pins on the right side to the back of the lane. Suddenly, a pin bounced back from the pinsetter and tapped the seven just hard enough. Pins started falling forward till the headpin tottered and fell.. It was a backward strike.

“Now that was as strange as anything I’ve seen out west” Carl said.

“Weird” Brad said tersely as he pulled off his headphones, returning to the world just as it stopped being mundane.

“He’s going to do it now” mom exclaimed “he got a lucky break on that shot. Dad’s going to get a perfect game! Only three more strikes; just do it” she continued.

Dad had come close before. A couple of years ago in a league game, dad had thrown ten strikes. Then, on what had seemed a perfect shot, he’d left the ten pin standing. He’d cussed the lanes with fury the whole way home; no one wanted to in the same room with him the rest of the night.

I sat there waiting for the tenth frame. I glanced to the right. Lisbet gave me a smile so bright that it seemed to harness the sun. It lit me up briefly, warming parts of me I didn’t know I had.

“I told you he’d get better” she said. Then she turned back to her father, leaving me with a residue of what I later learned to call joy.

By the time dad bowled in the tenth, everybody stopped what they were doing to watch. Even the guys drinking at the bar turned their stools to watch dad as he picked up his ball. He wiped it with a towel to get the oil off and backed up till the backs of his shoes touched the end of the approach. Pushing off, he started towards the foul line. He let the ball swing, letting his body power the shot as he had taught me to do. Then there was the release; it was a strike!

We all sighed with relief as the pins came down; the machine was back. Dad just picked the ball, from the ball return, wiped it again, backed to the approach’s end and threw another businesslike strike as if it were the simplest thing in the world; we all figured he’d get his 300 game now.

Some people say that there is no beauty in bowling; they are wrong. When my dad threw the ball, and did it right, it was an act of grace, a soaring stretch of body and swing of arm. A good approach put me in mind of a bird taking flight. Dad’s last shot started that way.

“Stop! You’re dropping the ball!” a man screamed as he ran towards dad from the door marked “staff only.” Dad flinched, just enough, and the ball went skidding towards the right riding the edge of the gutter. None of us watched to see if the disastrous shot stayed on the alley.

We all started down to where dad stood to see what was going to happen. I pushed past a couple of guys who were getting out of the way (I suspect they had a good idea what was coming) and tried to get to my dad. Mom grabbed me by the sleeve. “Stay here!” she said. The note of command in her voice froze me to the spot.

But by now I was close enough to see it all. Dad and the other man, I would learn that he was the owner of the place, were yelling. Dad used army language that would have gotten my mouth washed out with Lava. Some of the other bowlers were trying, vainly, to calm him down afraid of a fight. Then I noticed Lisbet right in the middle of it all screaming at the man “if you don’t have the money …” her voice broke unwilling to say the rest.

And then something scary weird happened. She gave the man a look I’ve never seen before and hope never to see again. The owner started to quake and I knew, never mind how, that he’d gone beyond stark terror to some nightmare place beyond. And then I knew why, his thoughts, his petty deceits and lies and his disregard for others, were thrust before me and, somehow, I know these thoughts for the evil abominations they were. For all the shock and shame I felt at seeing these things, I realized that I only got a shadow of the dark revelation, as if I stood at the edge of a soul consuming furnace of divine wrath.

I would learn later in life that the owner was no worse than most folk, but right then his evil was unescapably scarlet. I’ve never been a churchy sort of person, but whenever I hear preachers talk about the judgement of the damned, I go back to that moment in the bowling alley.

“Take the money” he wailed shoving wads of cash at my father. “Take it all; it’s all I have. Take it and be gone” he continued with mounting hysteria “take your devil spawned friends and be gone. Take the money, just never come back. Never bring your devils here again” he continued now blubbering “just leave. In the name of almighty God leave!”

And while all this was going on, I looked up at the overhead scoreboard. Somehow, dad’s ball stayed on the alley and knocked the ten pin off the back of the pinsetter back to catch the seven. Two pins down on the last ball, a 292 game. Later, at a calmer time, dad would show me the certificate he got. It said that 292 was the rarest score in bowling. Out of all the games bowled in history, only 20 games had ended up with that score. I guess if you can’t have perfection, you can have something extraordinary, and that’s something.

But dad wasn’t thinking of the compensation of an extraordinary game when he grabbed his ball. “Let’s get the Hell out of here” he said. Nobody argued; mom didn’t even criticize his language.

No one said anything as we left that place on the edge of town, past the giant ball and pin, out where the sounds of town seemed to mix with the country smells of hay and manure.

“Too bad that guy ruined dad’s perfect game” I said turning to Carl.

“You’re right” he said slowly “though I’m not sure it was really all his.”

“What” I blurted out “why wouldn’t it be?”

“Remember the ninth, that lucky strike?”

“Yah, I guess” I said though now it seemed forever ago.

“You ever see dad throw a backwards strike? For that matter, have you ever heard of one?”

“No” I replied “what are you saying?”

“You know that family, Bram, Lisbet, their folks, the ones we had supper with and you played with?”

“Sure,” I said “really nice folk, what about them?”

“You remember that their father said that they were from west of where we live, west of Iowa?”

“Yeah, from Nebraska or someplace like that.”

“From further west than Nebraska” Carl said musing “from a lot further west than that.”

“From the spirit lands” I asked “you think they’re…. Spirit folk?”

“I don’t think so, not regular spirit folk anyway. If they were regular spirit folk” he said “they would have done some real damage. They’re not known for putting up with the owner’s sort of garbage; and they don’t mind showing their power when it needs to be shown. No, it’s more likely they’re newcomers. You remember how the newcomers came from the same world as the spirit folk, but later, about a century ago, during those stalemate wars with the Indians. They don’t say anything about it in the history books, but the newcomers did much to bring peace to the west. They’re really good people” he continued “as you said.”

“But if they’re good people” I asked “why would they help dad cheat?”

“Because they’re Alien” Carl replied, “like the spirit folk in that. They look like us, talk like us, and mostly act like us when they’re not showing off; it’s easy to be lulled into thinking they’re human, then something happens….”

“OK I understand that they’re alien” I said as we got to the car and dad stowed his bowling bag in the trunk with the suitcases, “but what about the bowling?”

“You remember that I told you they were telepaths, that they could read each other’s minds and even read ours?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if they win in a game, they feel the victory, but they also experience what the other guy feels when he loses. It makes for being less competitive. I don’t think they have a lot of competitive sports or play a lot of games with winning and losing. I don’t think they have the concept of sportsmanship the way we do. They may very well consider sports to be like art. To help someone bowl a perfect game might seem to them no more wrong than it would be to help a sculptor carve a statue out of a particularly difficult piece of rock. When dad was bowling this game, someone in their family, probably one of the kids, decided to help him create this great work of bowling art. Just like Bram helped you create pinball art.”

“It was more than just a flip of the wrist?” I asked.

“Yes” he said “definitely more than just a flick of the wrist.”

And then I remembered Lizbet telling me that dad would do better after the fence mom had given him. ‘Where did dad’s bowling leave off and the magic begin’ I wandered, but I didn’t want to ask, not tonight.

“The adults know enough not to mess with what they don’t understand” he said, “but the kids need to learn these things. Lisbet, for instance, might have lent a hand with the bowling, for one thing, I think she’s a little sweet on you.”

“Ug” I exclaimed but my heart wasn’t in it.

 “Besides” Carl went on “them being newcomers explains a lot of stuff, like the hunger we felt this evening. We were probably feeling their lack of food. You see the spirit folk, and especially the newcomers are rich in spirit and in power, but not rich in money; they’ve probably been skipping meals.”

“And then there’s what happened to the owner; I guess you heard him, everyone did.”

“I felt it to, some of it anyway. What the Hell was that?” I asked. “Or maybe I don’t want to know.”

“It’s called the mirror” Carl explained “it takes the things in the deepest parts of your soul and brings them to the surface for you to see. Their version of psychiatrists, use the mirror to help folks face their problems, and when used wisely, it can bring healing. When used in anger, as happened tonight,” Carl’s voice got grim here “well, it’s like having an angry God stomp through your soul throwing your trash out for everyone to see. It can be a truly horrifying experience; you can break people with the mirror, especially when you’re as strong with it as Lisbet is. She has talent.”

“Yeah” I said, “I can believe that; I thought I was going to break and I just got the edge of it, not near what the owner got.”

“Newcomers consider it a perversion of a gift to use the mirror that way. Lisbet may be in serious trouble with her folks for doing what she did.”

“I should hope so” I said shuddering with the memory. It was crazy hard to believe that the girl with the sunny smile could do that. Suddenly I realized that wonder was more than the fun in stories, it could be dark and scary and make you unsure of just what was real. I realized that there might be good reason to fear the spirit folk, to see them as devils. I realized that fear might be a good thing sometimes.

And then I heard something I’ve never heard before, a voice, but not speaking, or at least not speaking with words. The voice called me to courage, to not give up on the dream of wonder even if it had its scary side. And besides, the voice said, the mirror used in love could be a wonderful experience.

At this I felt an uplifting joy. It was more than just a warm smile, it filled the soul with something that must be like the Heaven that the church folk are always going on about.

Whatever it was, I would do much to secure this feeling for myself. I would face the crazy side of magic where the rules did not make sense. I would go into the dark places overshadowed by fear and danger. I would gladly risk my life, my sanity, even my soul to win through to the joy promised with this warm feeling. I had no doubt of my decision. I would answer the challenge. The answer would be yes!