

Bowling Lessons

by MerriLee Anderson

On a Tuesday evening in 1969, Mrs. Donald L. Anderson was not making dinner for her three daughters and husband. She was not stuffing laundry into the avocado green washing machine. She was not sewing a dress from the McCall's pattern book. She was not preparing a Sunday School lesson. She was not ironing dress shirts and pillowcases. She was not vacuuming the green shag carpet of her San Antonio home. She was not thumbing through *Vogue* pondering the latest dress style. Jeanne Anderson was bowling.

Tuesday nights were the only night of the week when the Anderson family's plans revolved around Mom. League play started around dinner time, so Dad was charged with feeding my teenage sisters while I accompanied Mom to the bowling alley. She hoisted her gray hard-sided bowling bag with the gold "B" Brunswick logo into the Pontiac Bonneville and we headed ten minutes down the road to Oak Hills Bowling Alley.

If you ran into Mom at the grocery store, you would think "country club" sooner than "bowling alley." She knew the latest fashion trends and found ways to dress accordingly within her limited budget. She carried her tall thin frame with grace, walking upright with a characteristic swish of her narrow hips. She loved bright colors and feminine lines. She carried handbags that matched her shoes and nail polish. Her thick hair was regularly styled and frosted, sporting blonde swoops and curls and twists sprayed into place. But Mom's flamboyance was quieted by insecurity. She did not breeze into a room with the confidence of a fashionista, but rather sashayed in, head cocked, eyes gazing down. Then, someone would say, "I love



Jeanne Anderson c. 1967

your pantsuit! That orange is magnificent on you” and she would appear surprised by the attention. “Oh, thaaaank youuu” she’d drawl, almost apologetically, as she briefly met their eyes before smiling, squirming, and looking away.

Mom did not own a monogrammed bowling shirt. On bowling night, she wore comfortable pants with a brightly colored floral blouse, her hair twisted in a French bun. She walked through the parking lot purposefully with short, quick steps. I skipped to keep up with her, excited to eat a cheeseburger at the bowling alley rather than go with Dad to Luby’s cafeteria. Mom was a “looker,” and I was proud to be in her orbit. She opened the big glass doors to the sound of crashing pins and fervent loudspeaker announcements along with that familiar bowling alley smell of lane oil, fried foods, and cigarette smoke.

Mom was not an athlete, but she was a competitor. She loved games of any kind and cared about winning. When playing cards, she had a *Rules According to Hoyle* book nearby, ready to chastise anyone who broke the rules. She approached bowling with intensity and commitment but no previous athletic experience. Bowling leagues have a way of leveling the field by offering handicaps for players. So, in a sense, Mom competed with herself every Tuesday as she tried to help her team win. While others hurled balls down the lane using powerful spinning strokes, Mom used a consistent down-the-center release. She did a slight flutter step before taking three strides to the foul line, pulling the ball back, and launching it. She did not bend her knees nor throw one foot behind the other, so when the ball was released, it made a loud “thud” as it hit the wood, rolling straight down the lane slowly enough that one could see the pink swirls revolving on the gray ball.

While sipping a Big Red soda and munching french fries at a table behind the pit, I watched Mom stand with tilted head as she urged the ball down the alley. If the pins split or only a few fell, she would turn, head down, fists clenched, muttering to herself as she retreated. If, however, the ball hit the magic spot to the right of the head pin, sending all the pins crashing, she’d wheel around laughing, fists near her face, torso dancing, hips swishing. Boy did I want her to make strikes, because if Momma was happy, so was I.

On Tuesday nights, how many pins fell was the most important thing in the world. Bowling quieted all the other voices in Mom’s anxious head. She wasn’t thinking about her brother fighting in Vietnam. She stopped worrying about her secretarial job, and she

paused caring if people thought she was a good preacher's wife. Bowling erased every worry in her life.

In the 1960's bowling popularity was booming due to the introduction of the automatic pinsetter. Prior to that, young men in knickers were charged with setting up pins for bowlers to knock down. With the new technology, Brunswick stocks rocketed, and the number of bowling alleys in America increased from 6,600 in 1955 to 11,000 in 1963. At the same time, the number of people in bowling leagues increased from less than three million to seven million. Bowling was one of the first sports that allowed men and women to play together—one reason leagues became popular. Bowling dominated Saturday afternoon television during the 1960's and 70's, further increasing its popularity. Richard Nixon even built a bowling lane at the White House.

The people on Mom's team were largely blue-collar and from the north side of San Antonio. There were military men who chain-smoked Marlboros, heavysset women wearing monogrammed shirts adorned with patches, women with tight brown curls in skirts, and Mom. A designer among mechanics. But the truth is, Mom grew up in tough places and felt fully at ease in that crowd. These people didn't care that she was a preacher's wife or a secretary. They just cared that she showed up to win. I suspect they also enjoyed her fresh scent, colorful blouses, and boisterous laugh. I know I did.

Mom saw none of her teammates outside the bowling alley, but on Tuesday nights they were family. They didn't call her "Don's wife" or make her write "Mrs. Donald L. Anderson" on the score sheet. At Oak Hill Bowling Alley she was just Jeanne. They smiled when she arrived, cheered when she bowled strikes, and commiserated when she had a bad night. She drank Coca-Cola through a straw while talking earnestly with Dub as he smoked a Marlboro. She shared fries with Margie between games. They didn't talk about politics or religion or marital stress. They talked about the latest tv shows, the weather and well, bowling.

Some Saturday afternoons Mom took my older sisters and me bowling. Oak Hills Bowling Alley was brighter and less noisy on Saturdays. While Momma unpacked her size 8 1/2 bowling shoes and gray ball with pink swirls, we picked balls from a rack.. Once

our balls were placed on the ball return, we donned well-used rented bowling shoes. We all approached the game seriously, understanding that winning was important.

While we played, Mom instructed us on bowling etiquette.

“Never start your approach until the bowlers on either side of you have bowled.”

“Stay in your own lane.”

“Don’t talk when you are standing on the approach.”

Basically, be considerate of others. Always.

She taught us how to score the game using a grease pen and clear scoring sheet on a glass template while seated at the console between lanes. The scoring sheet projected onto a screen above the lane. One big “X” for a strike with the following two balls added to this frame. A big “/” for a spare with the following ball added to this frame. And a big fat “----” when you threw a gutter ball. In elementary school, I had lots of “----”. There were no gutter bumpers back then. Bumpers didn’t come along until the 80s when adults grew worried about kids’ self-esteem. A softhearted Dallas Dad got concerned about kids crying when they rolled gutter balls so he invented bumpers by placing big cardboard tubes on the gutters. Prior to that, no one cared that kids were throwing gutter balls seventy percent of the time. I suspect that even if there had been bumpers in 1970, Mom would not have let me use them. She was a purist who felt everyone should follow the same rules for any game, be it cards, Yahtzee, or bowling. As the youngest in my family, I learned early on that losing was part of playing games. My sisters and parents never “let me” win nor did they alter the rules so I would think I won. But on the rare times I did win, I felt jubilant, certain I was THE BEST.

I was never THE BEST at bowling. Mom always won. She sat smugly watching us, sipping Coca-Cola with crossed legs, her foot swinging rhythmically. She offered only one piece of advice: “Thumb to nose,” while raising a manicured right hand until her red thumbnail met her nose. Then she’d stand, grab her gray ball and roll it down the middle of the lane, hitting just to the right of the headpin.

It’s impossible to know what made Mom choose bowling as her favorite pastime. Maybe she liked the climate-controlled environment. She is the only person I have ever known that never sweats. She used Tussy cream deodorant, rubbing it on her armpits

like eau de parfum. Bowling would not have stretched the effectiveness of Tussy. I am also guessing that seeing her favorite celebrities bowl on TV added to the allure. Celebrity Bowling was a wildly popular show in the 70s and featured stars, like William Shatner and Angie Dickinson.

But one thing puzzles me. Mom did not like loud noises and bowling alleys are LOUD. The crash of balls hitting pins, loud exclamations from bowlers, heavy balls rolling, and constant conversation. Unlike golf, no hush falls over the crowd. No announcers talk in whispers as the bowler steps to the line of a quieted alley. No siree...bowlers are a tough bunch. They must find inner focus amidst the clamor.

Mom was not a “cool operator.” If our family was seated at a white tablecloth restaurant talking animatedly and a waiter dropped a plate on a tile floor, Mom would jerk rigidly, rise out of her chair with hands raised, flash terrified eyes, and audibly inhale. Her reaction to loud noises was so extreme that a restaurant manager might check on her with a worried face then bring her a complimentary piece of cheesecake.

Mom’s exaggerated startle reflex was like that of a war veteran experiencing PTSD. The involuntary reaction had roots that stretched back to childhood. Her early life was like a war zone, with a violent and unpredictable father. Mom’s nervous system never recovered. Yet she never startled at the bowling alley. In fact, she appeared at ease there. Pins crashed and bowling balls dropped while she calmly sipped her Coca-Cola.

My mother came into adulthood when most women’s primary goal in life was being the wife of a successful man. Being Mrs. Donald L. Anderson was central to Mom’s identity. When my father was preaching, she sat in a front pew, hands folded in her lap, attention rapt on every word he spoke in his booming baritone voice. She starched his shirts, straightened his ties, and smoothed his hair. She poured his coffee and brought him the newspaper. She made sure dinner was on the table at 6:00 and dishes were clean. Never mind that she worked full-time as a secretary; her primary job was housewife. She also took impeccable care of her appearance, understanding that our father cared how she looked, and perhaps believing her beauty was important to his success.

Had this traditional feminine identity been the only model for womanhood that my sisters and I witnessed, we may have been doomed to pursue MRS degrees, diminishing

ourselves in the process. But Mom showed us something different. Long before self-care talk became part of our cultural identity, Mom demonstrated self-care by reserving Tuesday nights for her own fun. Through bowling, she reminded us that she was her own person. She introduced us to Jeanne Anderson, the woman who was separate from the preacher's wife. On Tuesday evenings in 1969, Jeanne Anderson fed herself. We watched and learned that there are limits to self-sacrifice. We learned that women can be caretakers without losing themselves. We learned to reserve space for our own joy.



MerriLee Anderson is a clinical psychologist who is beginning to consider herself a writer. Her essays have recently appeared in *HerStry* and *You Might Need to Hear This*. She lives in Dallas, Texas with her wife, Jill, and mutts, Rosie and Daisy. She finds joy in connecting with people, be it through writing or conversation. She is still a lousy bowler.