



Three Things I Don't Do
Sheryll Bonilla

There are three things I don't do.

I don't drink.

I don't bowl.

I don't carouse.

My parents and brother were bowling champions. In their closets hung bowling shirts, custom-made by seamstresses for each league, each player's name embroidered on his or her shirt.

The entire highway-facing wall of our living room was decorated from floor to ceiling with shelves of bowling trophies. Golden figurines in classic form, one arm extended with a ball in hand, one leg slung backward to balance, perched atop wooden or marble-like bases. Inscribed on the gold plate were the date and names of the league, bowler, and award. I liked clock trophies best because they were useful. My favorite trophy, the most beautiful one, no figurine anywhere, the only one I have – is an intricately carved sandalwood jewelry box my mother won. Its fragrance still reminds me of her.

My childhood was lived in bowling alleys. Classic Bowl was two lanes from Kapalama Canal, across Honolulu Community College. Kam Bowl was east of Kenny's Drive-In and Kenny's Restaurant and north of Kapalama Elementary School. The alluring smell of french fries wafted from Kenny's Drive In on the corner closest to Kam Bowl. On the far corner, Kenny's Restaurant infused the irresistible aroma of grilled hamburger steak into cars across the twelve lanes intersecting at Likelike Highway and School Street. Boulevard Bowl's large diner windows gave views of its parking lot, Nimitz Highway, and the barbed wire-topped concrete of Oahu Prison.

Each bowling alley had its own diner inside. The aroma of beef patties grilling to be put on buns or mashed potatoes, permeated the air. Kids brought money to the counter and ordered fries and icees. Parents sat with friends in the booths, laughing over cups of coffee and plates of gravy covered meat, sandwiches, or pancakes and eggs. To impress her friends, my mom once told me to spell "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious". I did. Her friends told her I was a smart girl and would grow up to be a doctor.

Days and nights I grew up surrounded by the noise of pins knocked down by the force of a fast-moving ball, league members' loud chatter and guffaws, and cheers or "aw!"s of teammates.

The smell and smoke of cigarettes drifted as bowlers inhaled and rested them in metal ashtrays before picking up a ball to aim it at ten pins standing under the rack on the far end of the darted narrow lane. The heavy sound of dropped balls was followed by their rumbling on the lanes, sometimes clunking in the gutters. Mostly, the eight-to-ten-pounders loudly toppled the pins, marked by teammates' cheers. Children talking, laughing, playing chase master or tag, loudly ran around unsupervised while parents sat on curved benches with teammates, all waiting their turn.

The bar upstairs was the only place quiet enough for a little child anxious to study and finish homework to get "A"s in all my subjects. Its dim lighting made me sit next to the large windows overlooking the bowlers, so I could read and write by the bright lights from downstairs. The fluorescent tubes over the lanes shone just enough light to my table in the second floor darkness so I could do my assignments.

But a bar isn't a place for children. This was an era when no laws barred youngsters from being in a taproom. I was a lone girl, in early elementary school, carrying the schoolbag my dad made for me, walking up the stairs to the only quiet place there was. The bar's black-and-white checkerboard floor made a hopscotch for inebriated male bowlers carrying female bowlers drunk enough to let them. When the night leagues went till midnight, I'd cry, wanting to be home.

I learned that bowlers believed adultery was an acceptable way to ease the pain of a miserable marriage; that men hit their wives and cheated on them; that women sought comfort from their unloving, unfaithful, abusive, or boring husbands in the company of other men.

Their children sometimes came to our house to eat, hungry enough to eat an entire new box of cereal, leaving none for me or my brother. Their children lived with the uncertainty of no moral framework or guidance on how to behave. They feared being hit. They were saddened by

parents who argued because affairs were easier than resolving problems out of love and commitment.

As a child, seeing all the alcohol, unhappiness, infidelity, and neglect, I resolved to never become an adult. I refused to ever become a grownup, more so as I learned that even people outside of bowling behaved this way.

Three months before turning 26, I experienced the earth-shattering realization that that number would never go back down. I stayed 29 in my mind for years. I was too afraid of turning into people I knew as a child. On an internship abroad, my supervisor wrote to my husband telling him he was so impressed with what a devoted wife I was and that my husband was lucky to be married to me. Responsible, hardworking, all bills paid on time, community service continuously since second grade, law abiding citizen – none of these overcame my fear of being an adult.

At 37, finally having my first baby, I could longer pretend I was a young person. My mortgage, home, manager position, good connections -- none of these marks of adulthood had affected my belief that I was still really a child. My soon-to-be baby was undeniable proof I was an adult.

With my husband two thousand miles away at work, my mother was with me when I delivered. In labor for seventeen hours, I begged for a second epidural. I sobbed, "Mom, it hurts, it hurts." She clasped my hand between both of hers and told me, "When the baby's born, you'll be so happy you'll forget all the pain."

The doctor handed the scissors to her and asked, "Mom, you want to cut the umbilical cord?" Mom did. "It's like cutting thick rubber bands," Mom said, surprised. Of her five grandchildren, this was the only birth she was there for.

With sheer joy my mother saw my little moppet born, a head full of thick black hair, like Ernie from Sesame Street, taken to the cleaning table nearby. My Mom laughed, giddy, full of happiness at the entrance of this new life, the first daughter of her first daughter. My Mom stayed with me in my hospital room, sleeping on the small couch along the window, playing with my baby, her beautiful new granddaughter, until my maternity stay was over.

And so it was that at 38 years old, I finally confronted and accepted the inescapable, uncomfortable fact that I was an adult. My beautiful baby's birth meant that my life would never be the same. She was my child. I now was the grown-up, entrusted by God to take care of her.

I was not the adult who as a child I feared becoming. I turned out to be nothing like the grown-ups of the bowling alleys I grew up in.

My daughter never played unsupervised. She was always fed. She was home at bedtime. She knew her moral boundaries. She was surrounded by caring adults. And she never once had to do her homework in a dark bar next to the windows so she could study by the light from the bowling alley downstairs.

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There are three things I don't do.

I don't drink.

I don't bowl.

I don't carouse.

The long wall of our dining room

From one end to the other

From ceiling to floor, were lined with
Shelves all filled with bowling trophies.

Shiny gold plastic bowlers
Sometimes alongside trophy clocks, The
league inscribed on a gold base plate.

My mother's fragrant sandalwood box
Was the only trophy I liked.

My parents and my brother were champions.

My childhood was spent
In bowling alleys around the city.

Days and nights surrounded

With the clamor of pins

Knocked down by the force

Of a fast-moving heavy ball.

With guffaws and friendly banter

Of league members.

With the noise of children talking, laughing,

Playing chase master or tag, or other

games. With the aroma of beef patties

frying In the bowling alley restaurant

To be hamburgers on buns

Or atop mashed potatoes drenched in
gravy. With the smell of cigarettes from
bowlers Resting them resting in metal
ashtrays
When they picked up their ball
To aim it hard at the ten pins standing Under
the rack at the far end of a narrow lane
Darted and framed by gutters.

The bar upstairs was the only place
Quiet enough for a little child
Anxious to study and finish homework
To get "A"s in all subjects.
The dim lighting made me sit next to
the Windows overlooking the bowlers
For the bright lights downstairs
Shining upward so I could read and write.

The bar's black and white checkerboard
floor Made a hopscotch line
For male bowlers who were inebriated enough
To carry female bowlers who were drunk enough

To let them.

I learned from all these bowlers

That adultery was an acceptable way

To ease the pain of a miserable marriage,

That men hit their wives and cheated on
them,

That women sought comfort from their

Abusive husbands in the arms of other
men.

Their children came to our house to eat,

Sometimes so hungry that in one sitting

They could eat an entire new box of
cereal, Leaving none for my brother.

Children who lived with the arguing of

Parents who were too stubborn to

Change their behavior in love and

Commitment to marriage and family.

Children who lived with the uncertainty

Of having no moral framework for How
to behave in life.

As a little child seeing all the

Drunkenness, unhappiness, and
infidelity, I resolved I would never
become an adult.

And so when at 38

I was finally going to have my first baby

I couldn't keep believing that I

Could avoid being an adult.
No home in a respectable town,

No mortgage,

No manager position,

No good connections,

No marks of being grown up

Altered my view that I was still really a child.

This baby I was going to have was finally

The undeniable proof that I had grown up.

With my husband far away at a job interview,

My mother was there when I gave birth.

Begging for a second epidural,

I sobbed, "Mom, it hurts, it hurts."

She held my hand with both of hers and told
me "When the baby's born, you'll be so happy

You'll forget all the pain."

The doctor handed the scissors to
her Saying, "Mom, you want to cut
The umbilical cord?" Mom did.
"It's like cutting thick rubber bands,"
Mom said, surprised.
This was the only birth of her five
Grandchildren that she was there for.

With joy my mother saw my little moppet born,
A head full of thick black hair,
Like Ernie of Sesame Street,
Taken to the cleaning table nearby.
My mother laughed full of happiness
At the entrance of this new life,
The first daughter of her first
daughter. My mother stayed with me
in my
Hospital room, playing with my baby,
Her beautiful new granddaughter,
Until my maternity stay was over.

And so it was that I, in my mind,
Finally admitted that I was an adult.
I was not the adult who as a child,
I feared to become.
I turned out to be nothing like the
Grown-ups of the bowling alleys I grew up in.

My baby never had to play unsupervised.

She was always fed.
She always knew her moral boundaries. She
was surrounded by grown-ups who cared.
And she never once had to do her homework
In a dark bar next to the windows to get The
light from the bowling alley downstairs.