

BOWLING NIGHT

Peter slumps in the rough fabric chair, looking along at the scoreboards above the other lanes. "Marvellous." He mutters to himself, "Another brilliant management team building idea. Team bowling match." He sighs, "Well, I suppose it beats paint-balling." He takes another look, but he knows the scores won't have changed. He's wrong. His team is now even further behind.

"Hey, Peter! You're up!" George calls. Peter sighs. It's not George's fault they're losing. Well, not entirely. Granted George has been lucky to score anything all evening, but the rest of the team aren't a lot better. Peter's scoring the best and he's barely got above a score of six all evening. Peter pulls himself up from the chair, considering, yet again, that using magic to avoid complete humiliation wouldn't be that bad an idea. But again, he dismisses the idea. This really isn't that important. Besides, he's on the programmers' team. No one expects programmers to be good at sports. He'll just have to endure a few more taunts for a while before people get bored. He picks up his ball and swings it slowly as he walks to the lane. He sights down the lane and trots up, pulling his arm back. He releases the ball, sending it rolling down the middle of the lane. Almost. The ball slams home, pins clattering. All five of them. All of them on the right hand side. He sighs, walking back as the pins are pulled up. He looks down the scoreboards. Management isn't that far ahead of him, just a little too much to make beating them likely. Personnel are also doing fairly well and so are tech support and sales. But out in the lead is marketing. He takes a better look and breathes a sigh of relief. At least Lisa isn't heading that up. He picks up the ball as it rolls along the rail and bowls again. The other five pins clatter. "Yes!" Peter punches the air. OK, so it's only a spare, but it's his team's best result all night.

The evening continues in similar vein until the time comes to collect the awards. Peter picks up the wooden spoon for the programmers, with an average score of 47, to much clapping and applauding. He watches as Lisa's boss, Lorraine, takes the trophy for marketing, average 83, with a polished smile. Lisa grins at him.

The teams retire to the centre's bar, where the marketing team really goes to town. Peter and the other programmers sink into the corners, perfecting their look of resigned dejection while getting merrily drunk.

Lorraine makes several tours of the bar in a bright red jacket and skirt that match her brilliant lipstick, heavily tinted hair stuck in place with enough spray to open another hole in the ozone layer, brandishing the trophy in smug triumph at the others. It's not even that good a trophy, just a plastic paperweight with a small plastic bowling ball stuck on top of it. But it means Lorraine beat everyone else. And that is very important. To her, anyway.

Halfway through the drinking, when George, Mark, Paul and Mick are all well into the blurry, falling over stage, and after Lorraine's rubbed their noses in defeat for the fourth time, Lisa sways towards them, sliding in beside Peter, snuggling up against him. "You alright?"

"Yeah, it's just a bit of team-building bollocks. It's not like I had any real hopes of winning. I just wish we hadn't lost quite as badly. And, no offence, Lise, I really, really wish you hadn't won. 'Cause it means she won."

"Aaaah, poor baby." Lisa giggles from his shoulder, her hand gently squeezing his thigh. "Maybe I can make it up to you later." Peter grins down at her.

"Promise?"

"Nope. I said maybe." She grins back, eyes sparkling, "You weren't thinking of taking advantage of me

when I'm a little tipshy, were you, darlin'?"

"Of course not. But you're not drunk; you're barely even tipsy. You haven't had more than three glasses of wine all evening." Lisa sits up.

"Yah. I know you well enough not to let my guard down."

"Don't worry, Lise. If you're not in a fit state, I won't do anything to you."

"Cool." She grabs his beer off the table, "Can't let this go to waste then." She tips the bottle to her lips, finishing off the last of the beer. "Now, let's go home. Before Lorraine gets back and regales us all with her victory, again."

"What if I want to hear how she whipped you lot into shape for this? For the thirty-first time?" Peter grabs his coat, absently walking a coin over his knuckles, disappearing from one hand and reappearing on the other to continue the walk.

They make it to the door, before they're spotted, although not by Lorraine, fortunately, but Tracy, the new marketer whom Lisa's mentoring for, "You're leaving?" Tracy asks, her brown curls hanging around her shoulders. Alright, so she's really 19, but she looks younger, with her huge dark brown eyes, her tiny voice and her slim, severely underdeveloped body. The fact that her eyes are a little puffy isn't helping.

"Ya, Trace. You want a lift?" Tracy nods. "Think we can fit her into your car, Peter?"

"Probably. There's room in the glove compartment, I think." Tracy doesn't smile, sniffing, seemingly on the verge of tears, "But, seriously, she'll have to sit behind you, Lise. Anyone behind me has to have no legs. Or they do after the journey's over, anyway. Come on, Tracy. Let's go." He leads them both out into the spring air, still walking the coins between his hands, one arm draped over Lisa's shoulder. "So, Tracy, how's Lisa treating you?"

"Oh, she's been great."

"But Lorraine's being her usual charming self." Lisa finishes. Tracy nods, sniffing slightly.

"Ah, nice to customers, hell to staff. And I bet this bit of fun has been taken a wee bit too seriously, too."

"Depends on what you mean by too seriously. Personally, I think trying to make us practice five nights a week is quite reasonable."

"She's not that..."

"Sorry, Tracy. But, yes, she is. She's a bitch. Wait till she starts taking the credit when you put in a dozen hours overtime a week, you'll see what I mean."

Peter unlocks the small car, folding the passenger seat forward. "In you get, Tracy." Tracy climbs into the back seat carefully, pushing a pair of suits wrapped in the dry cleaner's plastic wraps onto Peter's side. Peter puts the chair back and lets Lisa in.

"This is a lot more comfortable than I thought. You're not squashed are you, Lisa?"

"Nah. This thing's a lot bigger than it looks." She and Peter exchange a quick grin, Peter still walking the coin around his hands as they sit on the steering wheel.

Half an hour later, the car pulls up to a large house well into the suburbs. It's taken a lot of cajoling to get the directions out of Tracy, who keeps insisting they can 'just drop her off here, it's not far' for about five miles. "Nice place. How can you ..."

"It's my parents'." She says quickly, and blushes, "Here really will be fine."

"Sure." Peter pulls over. Lisa helps Tracy out of the car.

"Ummmm..."

"Whassup?"

"I'm, um, looking for a place to live. You don't know someone who needs a flatmate, do you?"

"Sorry, but I've already got one and Peter's a lonely, taken bachelor. If we hear something, though, we'll let you know."

"Thanks. Well, I'll see you at work next week."

"See ya, Trace. Don't let Lorraine bother you."

"OK." She starts walking up the drive, waving over her shoulder. "Thanks for the lift."

"Well, that's our good deed done for the evening, I think. You want me to drive you home or back to yours?"

"Depends. What do you have planned?"

"I've got a few ideas." He grins, "But I thought I'd start with the guillotine, and move on from there."

"Sounds like fun." She pulls a thick black rod out of her handbag. "Just remember I'm not helpless."

"After last time, I'm not likely to forget, am I?"

"Probably not. But I don't feel like taking chances."

Some time later, Peter leads her into the magic room, standing before the huge guillotine. It stands seven feet tall, carved out of black oak with the blade gleaming. "Now, how do you want to do this?"

"What are my choices?"

"Kneeling, lying face down and lying face up. And if you're lying down, I'll need to tie you up so you don't move too much and get hurt."

"Yeah, right. You just love seeing me tied up and at your mercy."

"That, too." Peter grins.

"OK. I don't want to see the blade coming. Not this time, anyway, so I guess I'll take the lying forward option."

"OK, just hop up onto the board." Lisa lies down on a wide metal strip, with half a dozen leather straps hanging from each side. Peter pulls the straps tight, pressing her into the metal.

"Oww! That hurt!"

"Sorry." He lifts up the top half of the lunette and lowers Lisa down. "Comfortable?"

"Fine."

“OK, just tip your head forward, so your hair doesn’t get in the way.” Lisa tips her head as far forward as she can without crushing her windpipe into her spine. Peter gently strokes her hair, pulling all out of the way as he lowers the lunette into place. “You can look up now.” Lisa looks up. Peter stands over her, his face covered by a thick black executioner’s hood. He is stripped to the waist. Lisa giggles as Peter’s pale, thin frame is not the tanned muscled figure needed to pull it off. “Lisa Joanne McCagherty,” Peter intones solemnly, “you have been found guilty and sentenced to death. Do you have any last words before sentence is carried out?”

“Yeah. Your bowling sucks.” She sees a sparkle in the eyes behind the hood and is pretty sure Peter’s smiling.

“Then I guess I’d better get some more practice, hadn’t I?”

“Peter, what do you” Peter releases the rope holding the blade aloft “me” there is a large, heavy thunk as the blade slams down “an?” Lisa finishes. For a moment, nothing happens. Then, slowly, she falls forward, her head landing on the padded floor of the wicker basket. Peter reaches into the basket, pulling her out by the hair and holding her up to an imaginary crowd.

“Behold, the criminal is no more.”

“Your acting could do with some practice, too.”

“Everyone’s a critic.” Peter pulls off his hood, unwrapping it into a jet black cloth about three feet across.

“What are you doing now, Peter?” Peter grins.

“You know the zombie ball trick?”

“Not really.”

“It’s the one where a ball floats under a cloth, pulling it this way and that, and then rolling along the top edge.”

“Oh, yeah, I know that one. What’s it got to do with...”

“I just thought of a variation.” Peter grins. “You up for it?”

“What variation?”

“Well, what do we have around here that’s vaguely ball-shaped?”

“Sure, that sounds OK. As long as that’s all you do. No vanishing me under the cloth.”

“Curses. Foiled again.” He grins, “I’ll just set something up.” He leaves Lisa’s head floating in the air and rushes into the lounge. When he comes back he’s carrying small camcorder.

“What’s that for?”

“Well, half the time you’ll be under the cloth, so you won’t get a proper look at the whole thing. I figured you might want a look at what I’m doing to you later.”

“Very kind. How are you going to operate that and do magic?”

“By magic. How else?” he lets go of the camcorder, letting it hang in the air, perfectly level and perfectly still. “And no wobble in the picture, either.”

“Very smart. I’d applaud, but someone has me tied up.”

“This won’t take too long, Lise. Don’t worry.” He flips the cloth out, draping it over Lisa’s face. Under the cloth, Lisa smiles as she feels something gently pushing her forward, pushing the cloth out around her. This continues for a while, the cloth pushing out and falling back as Lisa’s head meanders around.

*This is a bit dull. Maybe I can make it a bit more interesting.* Before she can do anything, though, she rolls out from under the cloth and starts sliding along the top of the cloth, moving slowly between Peter’s hands. “Peter, I’ve got an idea to make this trick a bit better. Let me back under the cloth and let me see if it’ll work.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ll love it.” She rolls back under the cloth. “You can let go now, Peter.”

“But, you’ll fall.”

“I doubt it. Just let go.”

”But...”

“Peter, let go, now!” The light touch of Peter’s magic fades away, leaving her hanging in the air under her own power. She smiles under the cloth. *Leaking magic my arse. I think Peter and I are going to have to have a little chat about this sometime. But for now, I’ve got some more enjoyable things to do.* Lisa slowly lowers herself down and moves in close to Peter. She looks at the flies of his trousers and they slowly unzip themselves.

“Lisa...”

“I told you not to worry. You do trust me, right?”

“Sure. About as much as you trust me.”

“Tough. You agreed to this. No backing out now.” Peter’s pants pull down.

“Lisa, what are you planning?”

“Nothing nasty. Promise.” Peter takes a sharp intake of breath as Lisa gently guides him out of his trousers. “Peter, just relax and enjoy this.”

“I’ll try. But not knowing...”

“Drives you crazy. I know. Same as me, but I can see why you do it. Power is an aphrodisiac, after all, I guess.” She drifts in closer, and gently kisses Peter on the tip of his stiffening manhood. It starts to stiffen more quickly as she licks him softly, and slowly takes him into her mouth, sliding gently up and down his shaft.

A short time later, Lisa floats out from under the cloth, licking her lips, “Told you you’d enjoy it.”

“Yeah. You could say that.” Peter pants. “I guess you want to be put back together now?”

“Yeah, this is fun, but I’d much rather be back in one piece. And anyway, my left leg’s starting to cramp up.”

“Oh, sorry.” He snaps his fingers and the shackles uncoil. Lisa pushes her headless body off the metal, leaving a sweaty outline on it. Her head floats over and settles down on her neck, taking a sharp gasp as her skin rejoins.

“Now, what did you mean when you said you needed more practice with the bowling? You weren’t thinking of using me as the ball, were you?”

“Well, for a bit, yeah. But I’ve got a better idea now.”

“Which is?”

“First, what happened on your team tonight?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tracy. She’s been crying pretty recently and she wasn’t like that in the office, so it must have happened after that.”

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me. But it’s something to do with Lorraine, I’m pretty sure of that. She’s been more unpleasant to Tracy than to everyone else since she joined. But Tracy won’t tell me what’s wrong.”

“So how do you know it’s Lorraine?”

“I, I don’t know. I just do.”

“So, how would you feel about a little revenge?”

“What, on Lorraine?” Peter nods. “And what are you planning?”

“Same sort of thing I was planning for you.”

“I thought you weren’t allowed to do magic on just anybody like that.”

“We’re not. But there are exceptions, and magicians appreciate little revenges like everyone else does; you’ve just got to make sure it’s proportional. Anyway, she’s asleep now, and I can keep her that way, so she’ll only remember things in her dreams. It’s not what I’d really like to do, but it’s a start. And it’s arguably proportional.”

“So how are we going to get her here, asleep, without waking her up?”

“Leave that to me. Actually, could you come and give me a hand, the bed’s pretty heavy, even on casters.”

“The bed?”

“Yah. Trust me. Now come on.” He leads Lisa through the boxes to a huge four-poster bed, complete with thick black curtains, with red trim naturally. Together they manage to wheel it down the narrow aisles and into the empty gap by the door.

“OK, now what?” Peter holds his finger to his lip and closes all the curtains. He claps his hands and opens the curtains, to reveal Lorraine lying curled up on the mattress in a bright red nightdress. Without her makeup she looks older, more tired and a lot less aggressive. “OK, so what do we do now?” Lisa whispers.

“Just do what I say. First, stand back, I need a bit of room.” He reaches in, carefully taking hold of Lorraine’s head, one hand on her hair, the other under her chin. Lorraine murmurs but doesn’t wake up. Peter pulls. Lorraine’s head pulls free with a soft sucking sound, like pulling your foot out of thick mud. “Hold this. And don’t make a noise.” He hands Lisa Lorraine’s head. Lisa shivers. Holding your own head was one thing, but the fact that Lorraine was still sleeping, mumbling softly, is just creepy. Lisa looks up as she hears the sucking again and watches as Peter takes Lorraine apart, taking off her arms, her shins, thighs,

stomach, hips and pulling her chest in half.

“Peter, what are you doing?”

“Trust me.” He unfolds the small black cloth until it is the size of a small sheet and swings it out to cover the bed. Lisa watches as it settles over Lorraine and sinks flat onto the bed. Peter takes a tight hold of the sheet and pulls. The sheet whips free and Lorraine’s body is gone. In its place are ten bowling pins, which Peter quickly pulls off the bed and positions in a triangle a little way up one of the aisles. “Give me back her head now Lise.”

“You’re not going to just bowl her at those are you? I mean, I know she’s a pain in the arse, but that would really hurt.”

“Just give me the head. Trust me, Lise, I’m just teaching her a lesson, not trying to put her in hospital.” Lisa hands him the head. Peter wraps Lorraine’s still sleeping head in the black cloth, covering it completely. He starts rubbing the hidden head slowly. After a few minutes, he takes the bundle in his left hand and pushes his first two fingers and thumb into the cloth, making three deep holes in it. He pulls the cloth out and unwraps the shiny black bowling ball in his hand. “Now then, Lise. How many rounds should we go for before putting her back?”

“Oh,” Lisa runs her hand over the ball’s smooth black surface, it feels warm, but apart from that it looks and feels exactly like a normal bowling ball. “I’d say we should go for a half-match and see if we want to continue.”

“Fine by me. Flip you for first bowl.” He pulls a coin out of his pocket. “Call.”

“Tails.” The coin spins in the air, flashing in the lights. It lands on the floor, clattering to a stop: Tails.

“You go first.” He holds out the ball. Lisa slips her fingers into the holes and steps up to the aisle. She looks down and sees a line along the floor, marking the edge of the aisle. She steps back and bowls. 7 pins clatter to the ground. They and the ball vanish, the ball reappearing by Lisa’s feet.

“What happened to the other pins?”

“They’ll be back when you’re done and it’s my turn.”

After five bowls each Lisa leads 44 to 36. They continue on for another five. Lisa wins easily, but on Peter’s last bowl, the ball keeps perfectly straight and scores a perfect strike, vanishing with the pins. “What just happened?”

“I sent her back to bed. She’ll have had a very interesting dream, one she’ll remember tomorrow. She might be a bit sore, too, but that’s about it.”

“And you think this will make her nicer?”

“Probably not. I’m just trying to keep her from bragging about bowling for now. Nicer will take a lot more than one night’s bowling. But until Tracy let’s us help, this is the best we can do.”

“In that case, shall we put that gorgeous bed there to a better use than kidnapping my boss?” she grins, kissing him quickly with a giggle.

Lorraine blinks at the clock, the room spinning. She must have really had a lot to drink last night. Her head pounds; the weak, early sunlight searing her eyes; her whole body aches. She looks around the bedroom, her dream of last night still vividly in her mind. She glances at the trophy, and feels dizzy again,

the dream coming back, her head rolling down a bowling alley, scattering pins all night long. The dream comes flooding back. The thundering noise as she rolls over the lane's polished surface; the spinning of her head, her vision sweeping around and around, seeing nothing more than a blur of colour; the sharp crack and the blunt pain it produces as she hammered into the hard wooden pins; and she can remember the feeling of being picked up, her head held and fingers reaching into her eyes, blocking out all her light, while a thumb forced itself into her mouth, tasting of sweat. She slaps the trophy off her bedside table. The plastic hits the hardwood floor of her bedroom hard and the ball drops off, rolling away under her wardrobe.



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