

Frankenstein On The Cusp Of Something

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Chapter One

Frankenstein Doesn't Play Ball

Frankenstein sat near you in the fifth grade. You've forgotten him. If he played on your kickball team, he stood so far out in the right field weeds that you couldn't see him. No one in the history of the game ever booted one out that far. He was safe there. He could think his thoughts.

He wasn't safe in the lunch line. You stepped on his foot and didn't notice. You jabbed him with a back swing of your elbows, the punch line of a joke he didn't hear. You left him with no place to sit except with the girls. He remembers that. He remembers you.

He remembers high school worst of all. Same deal but no girls. He still played obscure positions in obligatory ball games. He never sank a basket, never made it to first base, never knew what to do when the center hiked the ball. It didn't seem to matter what he did. Usually he just stood there. Once, in gym, during a basketball scrimmage, the ball came into his hands. Somebody loomed over him,

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huffing and puffing, preventing any throw or movement. He looked up into the hairy maw of the kid's armpit and said, "You want it that bad? Take it." And he handed the boy the ball. Remember that? The boy looked back as you dribbled away, ran as if he had water in his shoes, tried an easy lay-up but flubbed it.

Somebody might remember the time Frankenstein threw up in the hall between classes. Somebody might remember the time in the cafeteria when he slipped in somebody else's tapioca, fell beneath his own ravioli, green beans, creamed corn, juice. Somebody might remember the empty seat in the SAT exam. Frankenstein forgot to go. At the moment the proctor said, "You may now begin," Frankenstein was lying under a thicket of laurel, wondering if there was a God.

While waiting for the next SAT exam to come around, he held a few jobs. He hosed the dog dew out kennel cages until somebody told him what he smelled like. He dried cars at a car wash until the skin came off his hands. He was the janitor of a big Catholic church until he applied full-strength Mr. Clean to the grime of an ancient crucifix. The paint wiped right off. He actually had Christ's blood on his hands while a priest blessed him out. He just stood there feeling stupid and guilty. Stuff like that happens to Frankenstein.

Nails bend under Frankenstein's hammer. Toilet paper has never ripped straight for him. Computers crash. Silent crowds give him hiccups. Dirt seeks him out, attaches itself where he can't see it but others can. His father left him before he graduated from kindergarten.

He went to college, barely crawled out. Somehow they let him graduate without a major. Then his diploma didn't have his name on it. Somebody in Registration had thought his name a joke. They get a lot of forms filled out for Mickey Mouse, Al Einstein, Chuck Wagon, Moe Rhon. Nobody's really named Frankenstein, so they left it blank. Before he took the diploma and photo ID to

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Registration, he lost both. Last he saw of them, they were on his mother's Oldsmobile. Not in. On. Registration, personified by a pasty-faced gum-chewing lady with bright red hair and a New York accent, wouldn't give him a new one. It's kind of like a blank check, she said. Anybody can write their name in there. And it's kind of not like a blank check because you can't cancel it. Somebody out there had a nice new diploma. Frankenstein didn't.

Love? It's not in the cards for Frankenstein. His nose, mashed to a mailbox at an early age, sits off to the left at the top, off to the right at the bottom. One ear definitely sticks out a little too far. It looks like it could flap. His teeth buck out a bit, and there's a dark gap between the incisors. His mustache looked pretty wispy for the its first two years. He grew a beard to hide the lack of meat in his chin, but somehow it got longer without getting thicker. Maybe his eyes are a quarter-inch too close together. He's worn glasses since the fourth grade, which only magnifies the weirdness of his eyes. His pupils are too dark to read. He seems to be hiding behind them. His mother described his hair as the color of a mule looking the other way. She's from West Virginia. She knows these things.

And he's short. Modeled after the common concrete block, he's squareish, open-faced and seemingly just knee-high. He's the kind of person you could practically trip over. But he's quick. He stays out of the way. He knows you won't see him. With your head up there in the rarefied air of conceit and self-concern, you don't notice much of what goes on below your haughty sight line. He's essentially invisible, and he knows it. He sees you coming and keeps to the side. You go by without noticing. Waitresses do the same. Right to his face they say, "Oh, I didn't see you."

Funny how he has the opposite effect when he hitch-hikes. Drivers see him on the side of the road, standing behind his dirty white duffel bag. He doesn't hold

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out a thumb. He just shows them the palms of his hands. Cars pull right over, at least on good days. He tosses his bag onto the back seat, hops in front and off they go.

Sometimes it's a drunk, sometimes a homosexual, sometimes a Jesus freak, a lonely person, a sleepy driver, an angel who can't help but help. Once it was a guy AWOL from the army and just as sad as could be. Once it was some yoga maniacs on their way to a festival. Once it was nine or ten Mexicans in an old Lincoln. Once it was a guy who had a rifle across his lap. One guy had no legs. A lady with a big yellow airplane propeller on the back seat, one end sticking out the window, had no voice. She had to honk through a little hole in her throat, but that didn't stop her. She yakked and yakked and yakked, even laughed, even sort of started to cry.

Frankenstein went right along, taking cues when to laugh, look surprised or give a moan of sympathy--empathy even; he found himself beginning to imitate her huffy little honk. But he never knew if she was talking about her yellow propeller, her throat problem, the price of sow bellies, the weather or what. When it came time to leave the car, he kissed her hand. Her honk became a coo. As he pulled his duffel bag from the bag seat, he ran his fingers along the propeller, the only time he'd ever touched one. For the rest of his life he would squint at any low-flying aircraft to see if the propeller is yellow, to see if it's her.

It's the Mexicans who drop him off across the street from a bowling alley. Big red letters across one wall say "Bowling." A flag over the door says "Bowling," too, its letters laden with blue icicles. This is in Arizona. The building is a refrigerator in a vast spill of lava. Frankenstein goes in. High-pitched thunder and bleating pop music fill the place. He hasn't bowled since the eighth grade, when he quickly learned that it was not his sport. It's safe to try again. He's not going to see how well he can bowl. He's going to see how long he can milk one game.

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Can he bowl in sandals? A woman doesn't think so. She's just the cleaning lady sweeping up behind the counter, but she takes a look at his feet. They're filthy in their tire-rubber sandals. She hands him a pair of purple bowling shoes with a zippy little yellow lightning bolt across the instep. "You got socks?" she asks.

"Sure do." They're a thousand miles away, in Delaware, at his mother's house, neatly folded in a drawer, just in case.

"Good. You gotta wear socks."

No he doesn't. He sets up camp at Lane 21, stuffs his naked, swollen feet into the shoes. They don't like it in there. It's hot and stuffy. But he knows that if he bowls in his Guatemalan Goodyears, he'll leave tread marks on the hardwood floor. He remembers a bank teller on the outskirts of Chicago. He left tread marks on the linoleum of her bathroom. Until that point, things had been going well.

He relaxes before choosing a ball. He thinks about it before giving it a roll. When he finally develops a satisfying strategy, he prances on up to the line and lets 'er go. The ball walks a tightrope down the middle of the lane, plows straight into the center pin. Everybody topples each other over like clowns.

Frankenstein fills with a scary satisfaction. He really doesn't want to get the knack of this. He doesn't want to be a bowler. He stalls around for a long while, then tries a shot with his right hand rather than his usual left. The ball sweeps wide, veers in, attacks from the side. The pins fall with a clatter of urgency.

He aims for the gutter but the ball won't go in. He sticks a wad of gum to it. No problem. It just rolls a little funny, a Caribbean two-step, tickwhump/ tickwhump/ tickwhump, all the way. They shouldn't all fall down on a shot like that, but they do as the ball pivots on its sticky little pink spot. He rolls it regular one time, tippy-toeing forward, sliding on his lead foot right up to the line. Even that

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works. A gathered crowd gasps with amazement, cheers at each strike. One ball to go and it's a perfect game.

The hush presses on him. Knowing he will fail, he refuses to do it right off. No time limit in bowling, right? Time segments. It stops and goes. It stops while Frankenstein goes to the bathroom. With his ball. He goes alone, assumes the solitary stall, a dented, black-enameled room neither clean nor dirty. His belt remains buckled, his zipper zipped. The global weight in his lap almost sparkles--*pretends* to sparkle--with golden flecks on a field of dusty black. He caresses it for the glory it has given him. It is so round and heavy, a model of the world, of heads, of atoms, the planets and distant suns, blow-fish, helium balloons, cantaloupes, milk-laden breasts, globs burped up in lava lamps, bubbles, cannon ammo, the dots of I's, monkey-fist knots--so much depends on the form of bowling balls. No wonder the pins fall! How could they resist? Who are they to stand when the holy sphere rolls in? Frankenstein uses spit to clean a spot on the ball, then curls his torso forward to set his lips to the cool plastic surface. *So much depends.*

The bathroom door swings open, swings shut. Feet appear below the stall door. Tutti-frutti bowling shoes, slightly duck-towed. Their owner says, "You all right in there?"

It's a woman--a big one by the sound of her.

Frankenstein says, "No problem."

"You got a ball in there?" The shoes don't move.

Frankenstein pleads guilty.

Big pause. Then, "I'm sorry sir. No balls in the men's room."

Frankenstein refrains from the obvious comment. He holds in his lap the model of the world, the universe and all that's equidistant from a point. An eleven-twelfth's perfect game awaits his final roll. He cools his forehead on the ball, a slow

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rock from left temple to right. He says nothing. It's her decision. The ball, so to speak, is in her court.

“Sir?...Sir, I'm afraid I must insist.”

It's *still* in her court. She can't get rid of it unless he talks. He feels his bowels and bladder swell. They know what toilet stalls are for, so, here, atop the round-holed seat, they assume what they've been brought here to do. Like hounds in a cage at the edge of the field, they're ready to cut loose. Frankenstein would love to drop his drawers and accommodate them. He'd like to a lot, but he has a bowling ball in his lap and danger at the door. If he puts the ball down--between his feet is the only space--she might see it and snatch it away. Then he'll have to go out and confront her. On full bowels and bladder, maybe even with his pants down. He doesn't want to confront her. He wants to take a dump, a leak, and be done with it. He wants to go back to Lane 21 and finish his game.

“Really, sir,” she says, not unkindly. “Either give me the ball or I call the cops.”

Nice try, thinks he. What's the crime? Taking a bowling ball into a men's room? Wouldn't that make a dandy court case. Almost worth getting arrested for. He'd insist on a full jury. He'd call in the TV cameras. He'd represent himself, present charts, diagrams, photographs, the single piece of solid evidence, the gold-flecked ball, plucked from obscurity and raised to legal fame, right up there with O.J.'s gloves and Liz Borden's ax. When the woman again says, “I'm going to call the cops,” Frankenstein thinks, *good*. But when she says, “I really mean it,” he knows she won't.

He takes the easy way out. He surrenders. He just rolls the ball under the door and says, “Save it for me, would you? Lane 21.” He's glad he doesn't have to see her gloat.

She picks it up by the finger holes, strides out the door. Frankenstein does what he had to do. It doesn't take long.

Back at Lane 21, he finds, to utter horror, that his ball is nowhere in sight and that a bowling league team has set up camp. Four flabby people have re-set the pins, done away with Frankenstein's score sheet, rolled a few balls down his lane, busted his karma like...like.... They've lit cigarettes, shed shoes and jackets, draped their socks over the back of the long, fiberglass bench, dangled a large, stainless steel crucifix, of all things, from the overhead projector. The bowlers' names glow on the overhead screen: Marilyn, Bob, Bill, Debbie. These people are plain vanilla to the core, but they've moved in and taken over. According to a red-on-blue nylon jacket, they are the Cindy's Country Skillet Sharks. They have seized his territory. If bowling alleys had historians and if these invading hordes had left any evidence of him, Frankenstein would be history.

What's he going to do--take on four flabby people? Not only do they fancy themselves sharks, but they have a whole bowling league behind them. Frankenstein's alone, a wimp out of Delaware. The hierarchy of authority here begins with the woman in the tutti-frutti bowling shoes. Above her, he supposes, are the police. Above the police are their grandfathers, the Supreme Court. Above them is God, if any. Given the incident in the bathroom, the embarrassment of police action, and the big, steel cross, Frankenstein has no hope. He has lost his lane, his ball and his last shot at a perfect game. Grounds for murder? He figures it depends whether the judge bowls. He treats himself to the image of a black-clad man billowing up to the lane line like a thundercloud, delivering his shiny black ball like a finely honed legal brief.

So Frankenstein can start a ruckus or just pay up and move on. Paying won't be easy. The lady at the counter is his friend in the tutti-frutti shoes. Now he knows

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more than her feet and ankles. She has the shoulders and broad back of a heavy-duty bowler. Her hips and thighs show signs of diet grazed at the bowling alley snack bar, fat rendered suet by lackadaisical exercise. Her face shows a certain ingrained sadness, perhaps a touch of shame for reasons he cannot guess. He feels a little sorry for her. Her face, he is sure, has never, at least since childhood, been gazed on as an object of beauty, an object of desire. If a man ever told her she was beautiful, he lied. For reasons that cannot be called reason, men avoid the pointed nose, the concave face, the down-turned lip line, the fatted underchin, the overbite of a suppressed IQ.

Frankenstein walks away from his lane, approaches the flier-and-warning-strewn glass counter. *Socks required. No practice frames. Balls waxed: \$1.00. Bowl a perfect game? Get one free!* He leans into the counter, grips its cold chrome edge, looks up at the lady and says, "Nice eyes."

Taken aback, she shows surprise, then a second thought, the possibility that she might indeed have nice eyes. Frankenstein says, "I like brown," but that pushes it too far. She has indeed been told she's beautiful, it seems. Someone said that, ejaculated, and left. Now she looks at Frankenstein as if it had been him.

"Lane 21?" she says in cold business terms. He knows she really means to say, "You the guy with the ball in the bathroom?" From behind the counter she lifts his sandals and score sheet. "One game," she says. "One shoes. Plus tax. Five fifty-eight." She scans the lanes behind him, her clay-brown eyes unavailable for argument.

"I didn't get to finish," Frankenstein says. "The Sharks took my lane. I would've bowled a perfect game and you'd owe me a free one. Know what I mean?"

She glances at the score sheet, checks a machine that counts the frames of all the lanes. "Says twenty-three frames here. What do I look, stupid?"

Eighty-two percent pissed is what she looks. He's sure she's been pursuing the perfect game since she was waist-high to a bowling ball. He walks in out of nowhere and does it--boom, boom, boom--almost. No wonder she wanted his ball so bad. She probably thinks there's something about it. He searches her heavy, concave face for signs of stupidity. It's in there somewhere, he can tell. He wonders how it is possible to see ignorance in the topography of a face. He almost feels like asking, but he knows he'd be barking up the wrong tree. He just wants his sandals back. "Damned near a perfect game," he says. "*Look.*"

She does, giving the score sheet but a flicker of attention. "Yeah, right," she says. "You come in off the street, take twelve practice shots, which you're not supposed to do under penalty of law, then bowl eleven strikes, then take your ball into the bathroom. A *house* ball. And house shoes. Sure. I'll let you get away with five fifty-eight if you cough it up now and," she drops to a whisper, "never show your miserable ass in this bowling alley again."

Maybe she *is* ugly. To the core. Ugliness on the hoof. Ugliness defined, the very quintessence of the stuff. Right before his eyes and miserable ass. In a way, it's an honor. Why hurry through the experience? Better to linger in her shadow, savor the moment, milk it for all it's worth. He searches for her eyes, but they dodge him. They *are* beautiful, as all eyes are, and they accent her less palatable parts. They float like little brown lifeboats in sea of bloodshot moonlight. He wants to save those lifeboats. He knows what it's like behind them. "I'm sorry about the ball," he says. "I didn't want anybody to take it."

"Still gotta pay five fifty-eight." She keeps her eyes high in their sockets, pretending to check scores on the bank of screens above the lanes.

What's he supposed to do? Stand there and keep refusing to pay? Abandon his sandals, walk away, out the door in bowling shoes, forcing her to do something

painful? Cough up the five-fifty-eight and call it a day? Tough choices all of them, each pitting his ego against hers. He wishes he knew the magic formula that would enlighten her eyes and let her love him just because for a moment he had loved a bowling ball that for eleven frames had done exactly what bowling balls are supposed to do. She runs a bowling alley! She wears bowling shoes to work! She probably knows the names of the ten best bowlers in America and their averages. Can she feel nothing above disdain for the house ball that made good? She says, “Five fifty-eight or I call the cops.”

Frankenstein forks it over. Six bucks, keep the change. He pulls off his bowling shoes, tied, and holds them to her low and not quite far enough. Just as her fingers touch them, he retracts them an invisible bit, pulling her an invisible bit closer. He leans in and slides her a whisper audible only because it’s on a frequency not reached by the rolling thunder and gentle explosions of bowling games. He says, “Want to know the secret?”

He senses her breath stop short. Their eyes meet. They are just as brown as can be, shot with black radii and glazed with melted glacier ice. The shoes between them conduct a certain juice, a voltage sufficient to make his face buzz hot. “Just roll the ball,” he says in a sincere and caressing tone. “Just let it go.”

She jerks back as if he he’s just nipped her with a hickey. His sandals fly from her hand as if bursting with roaches. “Get the fuck out of here,” she says, eyes burning. “Just get the fuck out.”

With great relief and no regrets, young Frankenstein steps out of the stale cold air and into the warm humus of a summer’s afternoon. The glass door closes on the explosions of devastated pins and the relentless bleating of popular earwash. Frankenstein will never bowl again, of that he is sure, not if he has to do it in a bowling alley. He wonders how far he’d get if he invented cross-country bowling.

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Would people bowl in the woods if their balls drifted across pine needles and silently toppled logs into a bed of moss? Would they know they were having fun if they weren't pounded with pop tunes and parting with cash? Would the lady with the brown eyes and tutti-frutti shoes find happiness in a place that didn't need its rules posted? So many questions for just one bowling alley, but Frankenstein must move on.