

# Men of Apology

*Brandon Bell*

A double spit is rare, but it happens. Especially at Strike Zone, where the returns often hold onto a ball until the next one arrives, spitting out both balls in a quick one-two. Nights when pins seem stuck to the lane, a double spit provides nice comic relief: your tardy ball pops out of the return, followed immediately by the next guy's. Both of you say, "Double spit."

I had never seen Stu before the spring league of 2004. The league managers placed him on our team—Team Blue—in the 150-and-Up League. Night of the first match, his practice roll caused a paltry five-pin spill that I hoped was the result of jitters. He grabbed his ball as soon as it came out of the return. I knew the double spit was coming and lunged to save Stu's hand before it was crushed by the second ball.

I weigh two-twenty and my bones are rattled to chalk from driving a bulldozer for eighteen years. The double spit mangled Stu's hand, which blackened in minutes.

All of Team Blue—me, Cal, Kevin and Ed, the alternate—begged Stu for forgiveness. "I'm so sorry," we said. "We should've warned you."

"I'm just cursed," Stu said, his hand submerged in a cup of ice. He was in pain, but demanded to stay in the rotation. Ed was sorry he wouldn't get to roll, but he was impressed by Stu's determination. He cheered for Stu, hoping the newbie would gimp into a miracle, crack two hundred, maybe even roll a perfect game. Stu fought through the pain. Each time he winced, we said, "I'm sorry."

"Thanks, fellahs," Stu replied.

The miracle never came. Stu was lucky to graze the endpins. His score of seventy-nine dropped our average to one-nineteen. We hobbled into the season with a loss.

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I joined a bowling league for one reason: I liked bowling. I did not care for camaraderie. I did not want a support group. I never mentioned the hard time I was having with Denise. A year ago, she was promoted to

Chief Engineer at Civil Paving. Her income now doubled mine (and when I was laid off, she was the sole breadwinner in our house). She worked long hours—maybe too long. She came home smelling like bourbon and started taking phone calls in the basement. Sometimes I answered the phone and heard silence and then a click.

Signs pointed to something on the side.

I mention this now so I can say that I did not mention it to the boys at Strike Zone. I bowled because I liked bowling. Then there was Stu. The second night of league, he complained about a garbage truck that had grazed his house.

“It raked off the siding and shucked the gutter off the roof,” he said.

“When was this?” Cal said.

“Last night. When the truck hit, I was digging in the freezer for an ice pack for this,” Stu said, holding up his bruised hand.

“I’m so sorry,” we said.

Since he couldn’t bend the middle finger, he rolled his ball with his index and ring fingers in the holes. He left pins standing every frame.

“I’m better than this,” he said.

“We know,” we said.

“I feel like I’m letting you guys down.”

“No way. Sorry if we made it seem that way.”

I remained cordial to Stu, but the second loss made me worry that our team was on pace for a losing season. Only the top eight teams qualified for the round robin tournament. In fourteen years of league play, I had never missed a post-season.

I arrived fifteen minutes early to the next match, hoping to voice my concerns to Cal and the guys. *Let’s give Ed a crack at it*, I planned to say. Denise was working late, again, so I had to bring Sissy and Devin with me to the alley. After I left them in the game room with ten bucks, I went to the lanes. Stu was crumpled on a plastic chair, surrounded by guys with hangdog faces.

“His mom fell,” Cal told me. “Broke one of her hips.”

Dave, alternate for Team Purple, rubbed Stu’s shoulders. “I’m so sorry,” Dave said.

Stu shook his head. “I told Mom to not walk all that way to the Dairy Mart. But did she listen? No. Now I got to pay her medical bills on account of the legal gambling.”

I gave Dave a confused look.

“His momma’s addicted to scratch-offs,” Dave said. “They’re fun, but damn if they ain’t addicting.”

Cal patted Stu on the back. Dave kept rubbing Stu’s shoulders. I knelt at

Stu's feet. I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I touched his rented shoe.

"We understand if you need to sit this one out," I said.

"Thanks, but no. I need to play," Stu said.

"That's brave of you," Dave said.

"You gotta do what you gotta," Stu said.

"I'm so sorry," everyone said.

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Minutes before the start of match four, the Strike Zone manager came over to say that Stu was going to be late.

"He popped a tire," the manager said. "He said for you to wait."

"I got a final in the morning," said Bill, captain of Team Green.

"Final?" Kevin said.

"Getting my MBA."

"Well that ought to be marketable," Ed said.

"It won't be nothing if I don't study," Bill said.

Cal slouched against the scorer's table and unbuttoned the wrist of his glove. "We're waiting for Stu," he said.

"Why can't Ed take his place?" I asked.

"Because," Cal said.

"Yeah," Ed seconded. "It's fucking Stu."

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By match seven, I felt like I was part of a support group. Cal, Kevin and Ed focused so much on consoling Stu that I had to remind them to roll their goddamn balls.

I tuned out the therapy sessions by listening to an iPod that I had stolen from Denise. The iPod had just appeared one day on the dresser. It was filled with sappy soul songs that Denise had never mentioned, sang in the shower or hummed. A gift from her mystery lover.

When it was my turn to roll, I rolled. Every three minutes I clicked back to the beginning of "Unchained Melody," the only song worth a damn on the iPod.

After we lost, I grunted goodbye to the team and stalked out of the alley. Stu had beaten me outside. Jaundiced by the neon lights, he plagued the sidewalk, cigarette in his mouth and phone to his ear.

"Hey hey hey," Stu said, wagging a finger for me to hold on a minute. I mouthed that I had to go, but Stu blocked my path while talking on the

phone: “Okay Mom. Mom. I have to go. Mom. Okay, bye.”

Stu hung up and pretended to break the phone in half.

“That was Mom,” he said.

“Got that.”

“She’s great,” he deadpanned, miming agony. He took a drag and then dropped the cigarette. “It’s great being able to vent to you guys. With Mom being psycho and then the doctor sending me in for these tests. I told you about the tests?”

I nodded, though I didn’t register the applicable memory.

“Mitch, buddy,” he said. “You don’t seem like yourself.”

“I’m fine.”

“Just fine? Why so short?”

“I’m holding an eighteen-pound ball. And I gotta get to home.”

“Home? Yeck. Don’t get me started.”

But he did get started. He lived alone and his annoying sisters stopped by unannounced. (“Every. Single. Night.”) He mowed the lawn of his elderly neighbor and sometimes got stuck helping her bathe. (“Wrinkly tits’ll keep me single forever.”) He claimed to have created three games on *The Price Is Right*.

“You what?” I asked.

“Yep, I conceptualized three *The Price Is Right* games,” Stu said. “That game where the leprechaun yodels up the mountain? That was me.”

Driving home, I squeezed the steering wheel like I was choking it. Think about Stu, tighten grip. I bet Stu’s mom never even broke her hip. And yelping every time the ball rolled off his spindly fingers? And what kind of asshole lays claim to the yodeler game on *The Price is Right*?

I passed Pauline’s, a strip club that was my second home during my bachelor days. For the past decade, I had passed the club on my drive home and never felt its pull. Tonight I fixed on its red awning in the rearview. Then I u-turned hard, wheels squealing, and doubled back for a drink.

Pauline’s was packed. I sat on a stool, I saw breasts, I watched strangers get lap dances, I felt old among so many naked children. I ordered a Coors Light on a Thursday night. The first of a few.

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I didn’t tell the team that Denise had asked me to move out. I didn’t mention that I was living in a motel and numbed my brain with sitcoms while my wife spent primetime in her boss’s bed. A middle school babysitter spent more time with my children than I did. I began tolerating the slow Boys II Men songs on the iPod.

I missed my children.

My one-twenty average—a personal worst for league play—led our team in scoring. Cal seemed indifferent about his embarrassing one-o-five average. Kevin started dropping his ball on the lane like a man leaving trash at the curb. Ed stopped bringing his ball to matches and spent most nights in the snack bar.

Then there was Stu. He arrived early to every match, ready to drag down the team with gutter ball scores and sad sack stories. I decided to arrive early to the next match and sucker punch Stu in the parking lot.

I planned to ambush Stu as he entered the alley. I envisioned my fist pocked by teeth. Strike Zone didn't open for another ten minutes, but the door was wedged open by a brick. I looked inside. The dim lane lights backlit Stu's pudgy outline. He sat facing the door, holding his face. I unclenched my fists.

"How did you get in here?" I asked.

Stu draped back in the chair. "It's cancer," he said.

"What is?"

"That test I told you about. I got tumors in my lungs like baby fists."

"Shit on me," I said. "They can treat it."

"It's eating me up, they said."

Stu detailed menial horrors known only by someone facing death. ("I'm too broke to even bury myself.") I didn't know what to say, so I kept it simple.

"I'm sorry," I said.

When Kevin arrived, I snuck outside. It had started to rain. I was ashamed of the assault I had planned. I drove to Pauline's, unsure if it would be open on a Saturday morning, but it was. Musty music seeped through the tinted door. I got soaked as I hustled into the club.

The empty lobby pulsed red like a tunnel to hell. I passed through the curtain into the bar/stripper room. On the stage, a paperclip-like dancer bent herself to "Pour Some Sugar On Me" as a golfer stuffed dollars into her thong. Sack-like figures were scattered at tables, their collars tugged by half-naked solicitors.

A large woman wearing a silk robe barreled into me, arms wide. She enveloped me and pressed her waxy lips against mine.

This did not happen during my last visit.

"Why're you so wet?" she said.

"It's raining," I said, trying to iron out my face.

"Buy me a drink," she said.

"Why don't you buy me one?"

"That ain't how it works."

"How what works?"

She put her hands on my butt. I doubted she was obeying the law. She explained: “A lap dance costs fifteen. For twenty you get two-for-one and I’ll do you a private dance. For fifty you get whole bottle of champagne and—”

She slid her hand across my crotch. I parted her arms, more reflex than response. “I’m just here for a drink,” I said and sought the bar for refuge. When I leaned against it, the woman grabbed two fists of my ass.

“Buy me just one drink,” she said.

“Can’t.”

“Well at least tip me for talking to you.”

“Maybe later,” I said. As the woman sulked away, she christened me a cheap-ass bastard. I sat on a stool and kept an eye on the bartender’s cleavage. Suddenly a blonde was straddling my lap. It was the paperclip who had just been onstage.

“Hey sugar,” she said, glittering mouth inches from my face.

“I’m broke.”

“Well hell. That ain’t no hello. Why’re you so wet?”

Her blonde hair shagged against my cheeks. I regretted admitting I was broke. She wouldn’t stay long.

“I’m Mitch,” I said. “Who are you?”

“I’m Sammy.”

I noticed a curtain to the left of the bar. “What’s back there?”

“That’s where the fun happens. Unless you’re broke.”

“I wish I wasn’t.” I fished a mess of soggy singles from my pocket. Even if I’d had money, I did not have the nerve to pay to go where the fun happens. Did “fun” mean sex? No attachment, no emotions, just sex? I needed something, maybe that, but I still hoped to patch things up with Denise. I left the club feeling horny and foolish.

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Stu became a permanent fixture at Strike Zone, surrounded by well-wishers and shoulders to cry on. The success of his chemo regiment gave hope to everyone in the alley. He seemed to relish detailing each treatment to me.

“But you haven’t lost any hair,” I said.

“They say it happens,” Stu said. “I’m not complaining. But to think I almost asked my teamies—you and Cal and the boys—to shave your heads in solidarity.”

Stu’s two months to live stretched to six. I wondered why he sought comfort at Strike Zone. Where was his family? Where were the sisters he complained about? Or the old woman he bathed? Why didn’t they console him?

I avoided Pauline's, drank bourbon alone in my crappy new apartment, ignored the calls from Denise and her lawyer. She wanted to finalize the divorce, sooner rather than later. I wadded up the divorce papers and chucked them in the trash.

*Screw your timeframe*, I thought. *And screw Stu*. The man should have been bald by now. He had a full head of hair and claimed the chemo had the cancer on the run. *Bunk*. I knew he was lying about having cancer, just like he didn't create the yodeler game. He spooned up cancer lies and everyone at Strike Zone opened wide and swallowed.

But not me. Not even after Stu lost fifty pounds. Skin hung from him like a tunic. *Part of the act*, I knew. He was starving himself.

Then his body shut down. He had to be hospitalized.

"It ain't pretty," Cal said. We had met to practice for the winter league. Cal leaned against his truck and rubbed his hands together for heat. The Strike Zone sign buzzed against the white sky. "They got him alive but ain't ventilating him."

"Makes you wonder what's the point of all this," Kevin said.

"I'd trade places with Stu," Ed said.

"Ed now, hey."

"I'm sorry, man," Ed said, trying not to cry.

"Don't be. We're all sorry. Ain't that right, Mitch. Mitch?"

I got in my truck and drove to Pauline's. It started to sleet, and I wondered if something about Pauline's caused rain.

Tuesdays must have been a slow night, as the club was mostly empty. A gaggle of dancers slumped at a table and bitched about money. The bar was cold, but the barely-clad women didn't seem to notice. The paperclip sat with them, head in her hands. I sat at the bar and motioned her over.

"What the hell am I doing," I muttered to myself.

"Evening," she said.

"You remember me?"

"Should I?" She sat in my lap. "Why are you wet?"

"How much is a bottle?"

"More than the two bucks you probably got, wet man."

"I have money," I said. Then I realized I didn't. "I'll go to an ATM."

"ATM's right there," she said, nodding at the small machine beside the exit.

"I'm not using that one. I'll use one at a bank."

Her mood turned cautiously hopeful. "It's fifty for the bottle and a fifty tip for me."

"What's the tip get me?"

"Plenty."

I leaned in close to her mouth. I wanted to flirt. “I want more than plenty.”

“I will fuck you,” she said. I was speechless. “It’s seriously been so bad a night. You get the money right now and I will for real fuck you.”

“Okay,” I said.

“For real?”

When I rose to my feet, she latched onto my arm and rode shotgun to the exit.

“You’re for real,” she said, running alongside me. “Thank you. I really need this. Mitch? God, I need this.”

Her desperation scared me. I tried to imagine that she needed money to take care of children or a sick mother. *Drugs*, I thought. *It has to be drugs*. I sprinted out of her reach and into the rain, ignoring the shrill curses yelled by Sammy. In my truck I sped down the strip, ran stoplights, and cursed myself all the way to Strike Zone.

I needed to bowl. It was Tuesday, a slow night at Pauline’s, Strike Zone, everywhere. I planned to knock down the pre-standing pins in every unused lane. I did not change into my bowling shoes. I grabbed a community ball, passed Ted and Cal, who were rolling in lane two, and lined my shoulders for a roll on lane three.

I stepped forward, swung back the ball, heard the squeak of my wet shoes, and slipped backward. My fingers hung in the ball as I slammed onto the wooden floor.

Bowlers stopped mid-roll. Pins crashed from balls already rolled. I heard the conk of a double-spit.

The room erupted with laughter. I hated them all, closed my eyes, wished I could disappear. Then came the helpers. They held back laughter, smiled in support, told me sorry.

All of the sudden I wanted to let it all out: *I hate myself for going to Pauline’s. I feel like a fool for being cuckolded by Denise. A man tells me he’s fighting cancer and I do not believe him.*

I didn’t deserve it, but I needed someone to talk to. Maybe one of the people helping me to my feet.