

Skittle Bowling

I sat quietly on a lumpy twin bed that had been squeezed into my Dad's office, with a blue spiral notebook on my lap, and a now gnawed-to-the-bone plastic pen in my mouth. Deep in thought I stared out the window at a vaguely familiar scene: a lone shade tree, perfectly round and covered in purplish leaves, thick green grass cleanly clipped in neat rows, mailbox-sized limestone rocks that line the edge of our property, and a couple fenced-in fields of grazing cows separated by the curvy and cracked asphalt of Catalina Lane. I'd lived here in Smithsburg, West Virginia from birth until age nineteen, but after returning home from a mission everything felt so surreal; it seemed almost like this place was from a past life, or maybe even a dream. But whether I still had my own bedroom or not, indeed this was home, and it was time to figure things out. I had the rest of my life to plan, and an identity to redefine.

My name was no longer Elder Doe, and I was no longer a representative of the Savior sweating it out on the streets of Las Vegas. Just a week ago life was so much simpler. The days were long and hard, but my purpose and direction were clear. Every single morning for two consecutive years I would crawl out of bed at 6:30 and know exactly what I would be doing for every hour of the day until returning home that night. I knew that by 9:30 P.M. my companion and I would sit across from each other at the island in our kitchen, loosen our ties, and carefully plan proselyting activities for each hour of the day to come. Then we would collapse into bed, sleep for what seemed like a few winks, and do it all over again. Over the course of the mission I had developed a twitch in the fingers of my left hand from stress, and the ability to fall asleep within seconds at any given moment, but frankly this rigidly structured and demanding life suited me well. With the sacrifice and struggle came great blessings. In the back of my mind I was always perfectly confident that I was where I needed to be, and that everything was in control. Never in my life had I been happier.

But now it was over. After the initial whirlwind of the first couple days had died down, I felt misplaced and without direction. I also had that depressed, "wish it wasn't done yet" feeling that some of us get after finishing a good movie, or returning from a vacation at the beach—except multiplied by a million. After a week or so of pondering, praying, and forcing that gnarled pen onto some paper, I had grabbed ahold of at least a general bearing for the course I would take. In late August I applied to attend Brigham Young

University-Idaho, and two weeks later I was on a one-way Delta flight to Salt Lake City. From there I took the Salt Lake Express to Rexburg, and I remember the four hour bus ride along brown desert-like roads feeling a lot like the drive we'd take on the old transfer bus when we were assigned to move from Vegas to Reno or vice versa. I tried to sleep through it, but spent a lot of time just thinking about the future, planning out how I would regain that sense of balance and control in my life.

So I began the fall semester of 2009 in this dot of a town called Rexburg, and I had decided to study computer information technology. There was much to learn as I transitioned into a new life, but I was willing to give it my best shot. There were plenty of awkward and funny moments that followed as I relearned how to be a "normal" person. I happened to live with one of my former companions, Brad, who had actually left the mission field on the same day that I had, and in a lot of ways it definitely felt like we were still companions during those first couple weeks. In the mornings and at night we'd kneel across from each other by our beds and say our personal prayers, just like we had done less than 3 months ago while living with the Jones family in the Goldcrest ward. After morning prayers we would immediately and neatly make our beds and prepare for the day, just as is outlined in the missionary white handbook. We'd often joke about our moments of relapse into goofy mission-imbedded habits. While grocery shopping we would feel strangely awkward leaving each other's range of sight and sound to go and grab a box of Honey Bunches of Oats or a fresh set of Zebra ball-point pens, and then as we left there would be sudden urges to hop out of the faded-red Toyota Camry to safely back the driver out of his parking spot. As time went on there were some improvements made. I began to settle into my classes, make new friends, and sometimes I would even go grocery shopping by myself. I was starting to pull things together, but even still, there were moments when I felt a frustrating sense of uncertainty about my direction in life. I wanted to have a tighter grip on things—a clearer picture of my plans for the near and distant future.

Later that semester on November 18th my apartment and I had put together a group date for the evening, and I had been counting down the hours. The plan was to go Skittle bowling, which is where you take a bag of skittles to the bowling alley, and before every frame the bowler reaches into the bag and grabs a

single skittle. Based on the random color that is selected, the frame is bowled in a particular way—like backwards, two-handed, or between your dates' legs. The whole point is that you can't control what happens; you just have to have fun and roll with what you're given.

At seven o'clock that night our group piled into a caravan of cars, and we were on our way to the Rex on Second Street. I was riding in my roommate Ryan's tiny silver Hyundai Elantra, sitting in the back driver's side seat next to my date Amber. From the dim of the street lights I could tell she was more dressed up than normal; she was wearing a headband with a pretty little bow on its side. Ryan's date Jenny was seated next to him in the passenger seat, and she was cracking jokes and fueling the conversation as always. We were all laughing and smiling as we began the final left turn towards the entrance, but then the girls started to scream and point. I looked up just as the blinding headlights came bearing down on us, and in a split second began the thought, "It's ok, we're going to get out of—" but suddenly I was slammed against my seatbelt and shattered glass was flying all around me. We slid across the road in a ballet with the overpowering green truck until we reached the curb. When it all stopped my entire body was throbbing, but I seemed to still be intact. Ryan yelled and asked if everyone was alright, and Amber started to cry. She screamed and asked twice where she was bleeding from. Pumped full of adrenaline we dragged ourselves out of the car, but Jenny didn't move and wouldn't respond. Just in front of her door was the point of impact—she was pinned inside.

The next several minutes were a blur. Our friends and passers-by came to help first, a crowd of strangers gathered around, and amidst flashing lights of red and blue the police and medics arrived to direct the rescue effort. As a precaution the three of us who had escaped were asked to sit down, so we kneeled beside the curb in the wet grass, and I assured Amber that the gash just beside her right eye was a small one. I put my hand through her hair to get a better look and found that her headband had been replaced with blood and specs of glass. She reached over and grabbed my leg, unconsciously leaving smudges of red from her fingers. Within minutes she was approached by a medic and led to the first ambulance, and Ryan and I were brought to share the other with the man and woman from the truck. They had chattering teeth and took long heavy breaths as we did, but luckily were void of any major injuries. While the four of us had our vitals

checked Jenny was removed from the car, and she and Amber were transported to Madison Memorial Hospital.

Ryan and I were released from the ambulance, so we traveled to the hospital separately in our friends' vehicles. I felt powerless as I rode silently in the backseat. Every turn along the way was frightening, especially left turns when I could see oncoming headlights shining, even if they were a hundred yards away. I arrived later at the hospital than the others to find a mass of our ward's family and friends gathered in the waiting room. There weren't nearly enough seats, so a cluster of people camped against an open wall and down into the hall. As reports from nurses filtered in we learned that Amber was being x-rayed, and then had five stitches sewn in beside her right eye. Ryan, who was basically scalped, needed 12 staples in the back of his head, but still no information was being released about Jenny. The flatscreen T.V. hanging to the right of the receptionists was of little comfort, but some pretended to be interested in the excited newscaster's description of how to deep-fry a Thanksgiving turkey. Our evening grew into a long night of phone calls and praying, with lots of awkward conversation and jokes told over jittery legs and sniffles.

As more time passed and the numbing effect of the adrenaline wore off I hesitantly agreed to be examined as well, so I finished my police report and was led back to a hospital room. I soon learned that this room was already occupied by Ryan and Jenny, but we were separated by thin blue curtains hanging from metal tracks in the ceiling. As I lay in an inclined bed beneath warmed yet stale blankets, I could hear Jenny's mumbled replies to nurses, and Ryan hovering around her asking about her condition. The nurses answered that she had a major concussion and lots of bruises and cuts, but assured him that no injuries were permanently debilitating. No fractured bones or injured organs, and her head, neck and back had all checked out fine. Finally I could begin to breathe easier. Twenty minutes later I heard Bishop Wells enter the room, and I was able listen in as he gave her a priesthood blessing. Such a peace came over me as I heard him deliver comforting promises from the Lord. I can't remember the words that were spoken, but I remember the Spirit filling the room. I felt absolute confidence that the Lord was in control. I knew everything was going to work out alright, and that this experience was for my benefit.

Jenny was released from the hospital the following evening and now three months later is perfectly healthy and as chipper as ever. Amber's cut healed up nicely, and she is in the MTC preparing to teach the gospel in the Iowa Des Moines Mission. Ryan's doing great as well; he is currently serving in the Chile Vina Del Mar Mission with a full head of hair. I'm now enjoying my second semester of school, and I still don't have life perfectly planned out, but I realize that I don't have to. I have a general idea, and I'm going to work hard towards it, but I know I can't control what happens. In a way it's a lot like Skittle bowling. Sometimes I'll reach in and grab bright yellow sunny days, others may be orange-colored exciting days, and still another might end up like that night last November, with a big green truck and some flashing blue and red. No matter the case, as long as I'm doing my best and keeping the commandments, I know the Lord will provide. He is in control, leading me along with gentle promptings, and allowing me to struggle through and feel things out. I am confident that all will turn out as it should, because it will go exactly according to *His* plan.