

Playing Scrabble with Mom

*By Kevin S. Buck, with permission for one-time use only by the Idaho Wellness Project.
Author reserves all rights and privileges associated with this literary work.*

“Do you want to play Scrabble, mom?” Louisa asked after dinner.

“Of course, dear,” I replied, remembering back to my days playing Scrabble with my own mother. Mom and I played 378 games of Scrabble over our lifetime together -- typically hunched over the kitchen table late at night. From the age of 11, the game taught me how to formulate thoughts, emotions, adventures, mysteries, behaviors, attitudes, and dreams on seven miniature wooden tiles that measured no more than a half an inch along any dimension. It taught me about strategy; about fair gamesmanship; and – most importantly – about the art of conversation.

It was all mom’s idea, really. She saw that my brother and dad preferred to play chess and backgammon alone and that I was an outsider to their private, testosterone-laced world of strategy. It was their way of intimate bonding. My brother was older and awkward in his body. He needed a strong man’s influence to help guide his future life trajectory. Alone time with dad allowed him to learn about being calm, reserved, and even-tempered. While the two of them hooted and hollered in the living room at night as each trumped one another with a strategic move, mom and I would typically sit watching TV. I felt left out, and mom knew it.

In 1973, mom brought the Scrabble game home from Woolworth’s on the corner of San Francisco Avenue and Aspen Street in Flagstaff, Arizona. She set it in the center of the kitchen table and unwrapped the shiny plastic

encasement. She arranged the pieces carefully inside the box lid with the letters facing down and said, "Okay, Kev, let's give this a go, shall we? I'm going to teach you the beauty of a word. Pick seven tiles. While neither your father nor brother can spell worth beans, you are an excellent wordsmith. This will be our special game." And, with that, we embarked on a journey together that lasted over fifty years.

Those first few games were a struggle for me, and mom was so patient and forgiving. After the first dozen or so games, I suddenly started forming lengthy, more sophisticated words with the random tiles dealt me. Even though my vocabulary was impressive for my age, mom taught me how to play ruthlessly and strategically for maximum advantage. While mom applauded my contribution of the word 'phoenix' to the scrabble board, she taught me how to increase point value of the word from 19 points to 39 points through strategic placement of the word on the board. 'Double Letter Score' and 'Triple Word Score' squares on the board made a good Scrabble player a champion.

The pressure of forming words with an unfortunate selection of letters – like all vowels and no consonants – would typically result in me throwing up my hands in utter frustration. Mom delighted in my intellectual agony and would ask me to show her my embarrassing letters whenever I was stuck. Invariably, she would instantaneously form a high-scoring word on my behalf. She would grip my hand and merely say, 'You win this game by keeping your cool. It won't be long before you consistently skunk me. After all, you are my brilliant son with a brain as big as a basketball.'

When mom passed away from lung cancer, crumpled atop her bed in a morphine-induced coma and smelling of rotting flesh from poorly treated bed sores, I made sure to snatch our Scrabble scoresheet from her nightstand before anyone else in the family could haphazardly throw it away. While no one outside our nuclear family unit would ever understand its significance, that coffee-stained scorekeeper's log was a tally of countless spontaneous giggles; tearful confessions; monumental revelations; and whispered secrets.

Whenever I was home for an extended stay, we would typically play Scrabble every other night or at least once a week. There was the one time when mom received an unheard of 330 points in one game in 1979, and there was the one time when I beat her five times in a row in 1999.

When playing Scrabble, the rules were that we could only create real words, which then precluded the use of the actual Scrabble Dictionary; it claims a bunch of strange combinations of letters as words that have likely never been uttered in anyone's daily vernacular. If either player questioned the legitimacy of a word placed on the board, we could only rely upon our trusty, dog-eared American Heritage Dictionary. It was the objective voice of Scrabble authority, and as such, its veracity could never be questioned.

It was serious business when Mom and I pulled out the Scrabble board, and it was understood by all who knew us that no one was to interrupt us during a game under any circumstances. Each of us would situate ourselves with iced water, snacks, coffee, and ashtrays. The TV was turned off, but we would often play mom's vintage phonograph records on

the old mahogany RCA stereo softly in the background, such as 'Whipped Cream' by the Herb Alpert Band; Burt Bacharach; or that soulful Hispanic songstress, Vikki Carr.

When mom and I were immersed in a Scrabble game, we weren't competing to win; we were exploring the limits of creating the longest, most elegant words imaginable. When one of us would form a seven-letter word, using a 'Z' or 'Q' and also span a 'Triple Word' score square, we congratulated the victor as if they had just struck gold in Alaska.

Make no mistake about it, Mom and I were advanced-level Scrabble players, well-versed in all of the tricks to maximize win points with our word contributions to the fertile playing canvas. Placing an 's' at the end of the horizontally-positioned word, 'Zebra', and then continuing vertically with the word, 'squirmed', in one play could garner a player a champion-worthy score, most assuredly.

I remember perusing mom's age-weathered photo albums and studying at least a couple of dozen photos that were taken of us playing Scrabble in interesting places and far-off lands. In some photos, we would be pensively studying the Scrabble tiles laid before us. In others, we would be laughing hysterically. There were even a couple of photos snapped right at the moment when one of us succeeded in winning a Scrabble game. I remember one with mom fake-crying while I was standing up, hooting and hollering in victory.

I recall photos of us playing Scrabble nestled inside camping tents at Whitehorse, Knoll, and Ashurst Lakes in Arizona along the Mogollon Rim;

stretched out on chaise lounges by the pool at a high-end resort on Cheju-Do, a private island off the coast of South Korea; balanced awkwardly on our suitcases smack dab in the middle of all of the hustle and bustle at the Tokyo International Airport; perched precariously on a catamaran at Waikiki Beach; and huddled on mom's death bed twenty years ago at the family home on Lake Michigan in Traverse City.

Mom had a quick wit, and like so many severely depressed people, she was prone to the most hilarious and awkwardly lengthy giggling fits. A robust giggle spell during one of our Scrabble matches might last several minutes and was invariably a consequence of some observation one of us made about silly things we'd done in the past; goofy people we had encountered; or odd situations we had experienced in our lives.

Although we were serious about our Scrabble words, many of our games were marathon giggle fests. On occasion, however, our discussions during Scrabble play would hit on topics of a more serious nature. We would share, for instance, our memories of the calamitous and the evil that inevitably cloud any typically sunny human life. My dad's many infidelities or my difficulties in keeping my gayness secret from a 'don't tell' world were often topics of conversation.

Mom and I cherished our intense matches, and never once was an unkindness uttered. Word play was our contribution to the literary ethos. Although my trips back home became more infrequent because of work commitments, Mom would set up the Scrabble game in advance of whenever I did return home so that a single moment wasn't wasted.

In 1977, mom and I invented a 'Memory Trivia' game that spiced up our Scrabble encounters considerably. Each active player was given three opportunities during a given game to require the passive player to recount a real-life situation related to the most recent word played by the active player.

As the active player, I once formed the word, 'special' and asked mom to recount a situation when that word was somehow important. When I started to grin, she knew exactly what I was expecting as an answer. She offered, "Kev, when we flew in 1979 to see good old 'short-in-the-elbows' Uncle Gill in San Francisco, we stopped at the Sky Harbor Airport restaurant in Phoenix. The waiter came to our table and asked if we would like to hear the 'Specials of the Day'. We said, 'yes', and as he was repeating what he had memorized about a fresh water fish with a gooey glaze sauce, I got the giggles, which then, of course, made you start to giggle. We simply couldn't stop. In total frustration, the waiter stomped off to the kitchen." We both started giggling again as if we were back in that embarrassing moment. I added ten points to mom's score.

In another game that following summer while we were traveling to Finland for a first-time meeting with mom's relatives in Helsinki, she formed the word 'valley' and asked me to recount a situation. I thought about this for a moment, and it suddenly dawned on me. "One day when I was six or seven, we were living in Globe, Arizona, and you took me to a doctor's appointment after dad had given me a black eye. I remember that you were dressed like Doris Day in 'Don't Eat the Daisies' with a bright yellow dress, sunburst earrings, and yellow spectator pumps. I was so thrilled to be alone

with you, riding in the front seat of the car next to you. You opened a pack of Wrigley's Spearmint Gum. While you took three sticks, you handed me one as a treat. I felt so grown up."

"As we were driving through downtown Globe, a song came on the Buick Electra radio with some considerable fanfare from the local DJ. As the song started to play, you exclaimed, "Oh, my goodness," and immediately pulled over on the side of the street to listen more intently without distraction."

"It just so happened to be the premier release of Bobby Gentry's 'Harper Valley PTA' on national radio. You turned the radio up full blast so that we could hear every word, every note. The tune was quite catchy, and you were soon belting out the chorus in your melodic contralto voice while strumming the steering wheel with your delicately polished fingernails. I just kept staring at you, marveling how your face lit up when you were truly happy."

As I recounted the memory for mom, tears welled up in my eyes as I recalled yet another memory related to Bobby Gentry. It was the story about my eight months as a teenage runaway in 1977. "Mom, I'm so sorry about Hollywood. When I ran away, I wasn't running from you. I was running away from my own lack of purpose in life. I wanted to be something special, and my drama teacher encouraged me to follow my dreams of becoming a performer. Give me a minute; I want to read you the poem I wrote about that time in my life."

I went in the back spare bedroom and found the dog-eared poem crammed inside a folder with all of my old paperwork. Mom went to the kitchen and poured herself another drink. I imagined she was steeling herself for what she was about to hear. When I returned with poem in hand, I began to read:

Smoke Gentry

“Romantic comedies are pabulum for the emotionally uninformed. I knew this even as a 15-year old runaway.

The desert banshee, Maiden Wildfire, mourned the loss of my innocence.

I hitched a ride to Charlie’s Drag Revue.

The old coot groped me in his green Datsun pickup on the way.

With a bus ticket to LA burning a hole in my patent leather purse, dad shouted, “Drag queens go to hell”, into the telephone.

Mom’s life was reduced to a single dusty sea chest of hardly-worn high heels.

I picked bright white gogo boots to match a faded lime-green mini skirt.

A puddle of sweat, my hands shook as I repositioned the dirty mirror, lit my fifth smoky cigarette, and stared at my reflection as Noxzema dripped off my chin.

With the ‘Harper Valley PTA’ record album cover propped against the urinal, I painted Bobby Gentry’s country western face, with tangerine lips.

I fished for my makeup bag in my childhood tackle box and air-brushed smoky eyes.

I asked the bartending walrus to run a tab until I became a martini with two green olives for eyes.

A juke box in the empty bar blared Vikki Carr's "It Must Be Him" for the third time.

Across the postage stamp stage, I strutted with five other queens singing Dolly Parton's 'Nine to Five'.

We were prize heifers, and the drunk cattlemen appreciated us with applause and dollar bills.

Kelvina, high school chum and Charlie's headliner, introduced me as drag star, Smoke Gentry.

With a rusty, crackling microphone clutched in my hand, I wobbled about the stage in righteous country western indignation, belting out Bobby's hit single in high falsetto.

For a drunken month, I was the Pied Piper for the lonely and inebriated.

Kelvina drove me in her yellow VW rollerskate to the bus station, cautioning me about all things evil in Hollywood.

John, the dumpy little man who would be my host for nine months picked me up at the LA bus station in mildewed penny loafers.

His apartment was tidy and filled with imposing mahogany antiques.

He handed me a dog-eared map of Hollywood.

He hit on me constantly.

Every morning, he made me cucumber and butter sandwiches cut up into little squares to put in my lunch pack.

After several auditions in LA, I landed one gig as a jean's butt model.

I learned a different trade on Sepulveda Boulevard where it always smelled of piss and a dollar could always be made.

Two heroin addicts christened me their 'drag baby', and we plied our wares on the boulevard where the sun never sets.

I woke up to no furniture in John's spotless apartment one morning.

He was dead in the bloody bathtub.

I should have loved him at least a little.

The newspaper article about his suicide said he rented a booth at a local antique store.

My train ticket home read, "Arrive at Flagstaff Train Station at 9 pm."

I sat next to an old woman smelling of patchouli oil and knitting a pot holder.

I saw an old high school acquaintance who didn't recognize me with black eyeliner.

Dad picked me up at the station in the family's burnt-umber Buick Le Sabre wearing his forest ranger's uniform.

The woman at Arizona Public Service with bad breath told me I was nine months late on my electric bill.

I once won a fifty-point bonus in 2001 with the word, 'dancing', and I asked mom to remember. "Gordy, we had no idea that ballroom dancing became more than a pastime for you when you were living in Dayton, Ohio. We were surprised to receive your invitation to attend Ohio Star Ball in

Columbus, and you put us up in the nicest hotel. When we arrived at the convention center, you greeted us with four lovely ladies who turned out to be your ballroom dance partners. One was Luana Drande', reigning champion in International Standard dancing; Angie Klevenaugh, your sultry partner for American Smooth and Rhythm dancing; Svetlana Valensky, your Latin professional partner; and Weasie McCloy, your amateur dancing pal from Miamisburg, Ohio."

"You handed us a program, and we circled all the events in which you would be competing. There were 234 circles. In every event, whether it was the International Quickstep or American Mambo, you won every time. We witnessed you advance from preliminary, to quarter final, through semi-final, and to final rounds in every dance."

"PBS was broadcasting live for the final rounds. I will never forget your dramatic Tango routine with Angie and your Paso Doble, when you portrayed a bullfighter while Svetlana characterized an enraged bull. You were artistry in motion."

Mom's eyes welled up with tears, "At the final awards assembly, I will never forget when the emcee announced that you had won the national championships in all four styles of ballroom dancing. I couldn't have been more proud of you!"

In 2005 and on mom's death bed, she played the word 'bully'. She looked at me hopefully, praying that I would finally share the details surrounding my ex-lover Roderick's imprisonment. I stared around mom's bedroom. It was only October, but I had decorated three large Christmas

trees and positioned them with all their glittery lights in every color of the rainbow around her death bed. Mom loved the holidays. “Mom, are you sure you’re up to this? It’s all in the past. I am okay. I survived, like I always do.”

She looked at me and simply said, “Tell me what he did, son.”

“It wasn’t entirely his fault. I expected him to be a different person when he moved in with me, and I suffocated him. When I picked him up hitchhiking, he was just a wandering spirit. I should have known that you can’t cage a wild animal and expect it to suddenly become tame. I moved him in way too soon. I was having a romance with him, and he was romancing my money.”

“About a month into it, he started texting other men and offering to give \$300 erotic massages to strangers. I confronted him about it, and he exploded. In the upstairs bedroom, he grabbed me by the throat and dragged me to the balcony. I snatched a potted plant and hit him over the head. Incensed, he threw me over the balcony ledge. Badly injured and bleeding profusely, the neighbors called for an ambulance.”

Mom gasped and gripped my hand feebly. I continued, “He was charged with attempted murder.”

Mom looked at me with tears in her eyes. “Son, you have been the sunshine of my life.”

I started to weep, “Mom, please don’t die.”

She kissed my cheek and responded, “Game over honey. I just used up my last Scrabble tile with a 30-point bonus on the word, ‘bully’.

When I was in prison years ago and sitting in the day room watching inmates argue with each other while gambling for money with cribbage, pinochle, poker, hearts, and spades, I wondered whether I might be able to get permission from the warden to bring in a Scrabble board. Looking around the day room, I saw so many sad-sacks like myself sitting around doing nothing who refused to partake in the raucous card games. Perhaps those inmates longed for more intellectual and gentle forms of recreation like I did.

From my own experience in prison, I knew how challenging it could be to form meaningful relationships with other inmates while incarcerated. There was always the fear of sharing too much information that might be used against you by those with sinister intentions or of being viewed as too vulnerable and intellectual. Forming bonds with other inmates in prison, however, can be extremely productive. Meaningful connections can be made that might help formalize realistic plans for parole. I met people in prison, for example, who were willing to help me find a place to live; a place to work; and social-minded community groups that focused on wellness and recovery. Conversations motivated through a Scrabble game in the prison recreation room might indeed help socially awkward inmates form such meaningful bonds and perhaps find a friend for life.

Kevin Buck is incarcerated in Idaho State Prison and will be up for parole in 18 months. He has written for novels in a series, “The Inspiring Adventures of Glo, Drag Queen Detective”, while imprisoned for the past 18 months. He is currently seeking a publisher.