

THE FOUND WOMAN

They found a body in the Salford Cemetery, but aboveground and alive. An ice storm the day before had beheaded the daffodils, and the cemetery was draped in frost: midspring, Massachusetts, the turn of the century before last. The body lay faceup near the obelisk that marked several generations of Pickersgills.

Soon everyone in town would know her, but for now it was as though she'd dropped from the sky. A woman, stout, one bare fist held to her chin, white as a monument and soft as marble rubbed for luck. Her limbs were willy-nilly. Even her skirt looked broken in two along its central axis, though it was merely divided, for cycling. Her name was Bertha Truitt. The gladstone bag beside her contained one abandoned corset, one small bowling ball, one slender candlepin, and, under a false bottom, fifteen pounds of gold.

The watchman was on the Avenue of Sorrows near where the babies were interred when he spotted her down the hill in the frost. He was a teenager, uneasy among the living and not much better

among the dead. He'd been hired to keep an eye out. Things had been stolen. Bodies? No, not bodies: statuary, a stone or two, half a grieving angel's granite wing.

The young man, being alive, was not afraid of body snatchers, but he feared the dead breaking out of their sepulchres. Perhaps here one was. Himself, he wanted to be buried at sea, though to be buried at sea you had to go to sea. He'd been born on a ship in Boston Harbor, someone had once told him, but he had no memory of his birth, nor of any boat, nor of his parents. He was an orphan.

The woman: Was she alive or dead? The slope worried him. He'd had a troubled gait all his life—the boat, or an accident at birth had caused it—and between the slick and the angle he might end up falling upon her. “Hello!” he shouted, then, “Help!” though he believed he was the only living person anywhere near.

But here came another man, entirely bundled, suspiciously bundled, dusky wool and speckled tweed, arboreal. From a distance, dark, and the young man expected him to brighten up the closer he got but he never did.

“What is it?” the stranger asked.

The young man said, “The lady,” and pointed. “She dead, you think?”

“Come,” said the stranger, “and we will see.”

The slope, the frost. The possibility she was dead. The young man said, “I'll call a doctor, shall I.”

“I'm a doctor.”

“You?” He'd never heard of a colored doctor before. Moreover the stranger had on his back an immense duffel bag more vagabond than medical, and looked as though he'd been sleeping rough for some time. He had a refined accent from no region the watchman could place.

“The same.”

“Better get another.”

“Now, now,” said the man, and he took hold of the young man’s sleeve, and the young man resisted. “How strong a fellow are you?”

“Enough,” said the watchman.

The foreigner, the doctor—his name was Leviticus Sprague, he’d been educated in Glasgow, but raised in the Maritimes—caught him by the wrist, to tow the boy—he *was* a boy, his name was Joe Wear, he was just nineteen—skitteringly down the hill. Almost immediately Dr. Sprague regretted it. The boy was unsteady on his feet and cried out as he slid. “Careful,” Dr. Sprague said. “Here, take my shoulder. Difficult for any man.”

How in the world had the woman got there? The frost around her had not a footfall in it. With the green grass beneath, it looked like a foam-rough sea, jade and fatal, and she going under. If she *had* dropped out of the sky, she’d been lucky to miss that obelisk.

“Look in the bag,” Dr. Sprague told Joe Wear. “See if that tells us anything.”

Dr. Sprague knelt to his patient. He saw the curve of one eye tick beneath its lid. The eyelashes of the dozing are always full of meaning and beauty, telegraph wires for dreams, and hers were no different. Dr. Sprague marveled at their fur-coat loveliness. He took hold of her bare wrist, which was, against logic, warm.

She blinked to reveal a pair of baize-green eyes and the soul of a middle-aged woman. When she sat up from the frost it was as though a stone bishop had stepped from his niche.

“Hello,” she said pleasantly to Dr. Sprague.

“Yes,” he said to her.

Then she turned to Joe Wear, who had fished from the gladstone bag a small wooden ball and a narrow wooden pin, and was regarding them, then her, wonderingly.

“Ah good!” she said. “Give here.”

He did. She held them like a queen in an ancient painting, orb and scepter. She was alive. She was a bowler.

“A new sort of bowling,” she declared.

“Madam,” said Dr. Sprague, but Joe Wear said, “Candlepin.”

“Of a sort,” she said, with a papercut tone. She set the pin and ball on the ground beside her. Then, to Joe, “You’re a bowling man.”

“Have been. Tenpin. Worked at the Les Miserables house.”

From the Avenue of Sorrows a voice called, “Ahoy!” A policeman, a middle-aged anvil-headed man, with gray hair that shone just a little, like hammered aluminum.

“Let us get her to her feet,” Dr. Sprague said to Joe Wear, and they pulled her upright as the policeman doddered down the frosty hill on his heels. She left her dead shape behind in the grass, a hay-colored silhouette, as though she’d lain there a long time. The dead grass persisted weeks later, seasons. From the right angle in the Salford Cemetery you might see it still.

“What’s your name, missus,” the policeman said to the woman, once he’d got there.

She got a thinking look.

“You haven’t forgotten.”

Still thinking. At last she said in an experimental voice, “Bertha Truitt. Yes, I think so.”

“Better get her to a doctor,” said Joe Wear.

“*I’m* a doctor,” said Dr. Sprague, and he took her by the hand, where her pulse was, her blood, her bones.

She smiled. She told him confidently, “There is not a thing wrong with me.”

“You were unconscious,” said Joe Wear.

“We’ll take her to the Salford Hospital,” the policeman decided.

Joe Wear couldn’t shake the alarm he’d felt upon seeing her in the morning frost, the pleasure when she’d opened her eyes. She had been brought back from the dead. Her nose was now florid with life, her little teeth loosely strung. He wanted to slap the grass from the back of her dark jacket, as though she were a horse.

“But what were you *doing* here,” Dr. Leviticus Sprague asked her. Poor man. She admired how their hands looked folded together. “Darling sir,” she said. “I was dreaming of love.”

Our subject is love because our subject is bowling. Candlepin bowling. This is New England, and even the violence is cunning and subtle. It still could kill you. A candlepin ball is small, two and a half pounds, four and a half inches in diameter, a grapefruit, an operable tumor. You heft it in your palm. Candlepin bowling is a game of skill: nobody has ever bowled a perfect string, every pin with every ball, all the way through, till you’ve knocked down 130 pins in a row, multiplied and transformed by math and bowling into a 300 game. Nobody’s got more than five-sixths of the way there. Nobody, in other words, may look upon the face of God.

This is bowling in New England (except Connecticut). A game of purity for former puritans. A game of devotion that will always fail. Tenpin balls (what most people think of when they hear the word *bowling*) are the size of hissing cartoon bombs. Tenpins are curvy and shaped like clubs. Candlepin balls are handsized. Candlepins are candle-shaped. Bertha Truitt’s gravestone would eventually read INVENTOR OF CANDLEPIN BOWLING, THE SPORT OF LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, and so she was, no matter what the history books say, if history books care at all for the game of candlepin. Most don’t but this one does, being a genealogy.

Maybe somebody else had invented the game first. That doesn’t matter. We have all of us invented things that others have beat us to: walking upright, a certain sort of sandwich involving avocado and an onion roll, a minty sweet cocktail, ourselves, romantic love, human life.

Our subject is love. Unrequited love, you might think, the heedless headstrong ball that hurtles nearsighted down the alley. It has

to get close before it can pick out which pin it loves the most, which pin it longs to set spinning. Then *I love you!* Then *blammo*. The pins are reduced to a pile, each one entirely all right in itself. Intact and bashed about. Again and again, the pins stand for it until they're knocked down. The ball return splits up the beloveds, flings the ball away from the pins. *You stay there*. The ball never does, it's flung back by the bowler, here it comes flying, *blammo*.

You understand. It only seems unrequited.

The policeman brought the so-called Bertha Truitt to the Salford Hospital, where it could not be determined whether she had amnesia or a privacy so pigheaded it might yet prove fatal. Did she want to stay in the hospital? Of course not. How old was she? She wouldn't say. Did she know anyone in town? Possibly: she hadn't gone door-to-door to ask. How long had she been in the cemetery? If they didn't know, she surely did not. Where *had* she come from?

"I'm here now," she said.

Lie down, lie down.

"Will you let me go if I do?"

All right.

The Catholics came to see her, and members from the Hebrew Ladies Sewing Society, and some Presbyterians. She didn't need or seek charity; they just wanted a gander. Newspapermen came to interview the curiosity but found only a pleasant plump woman whom nobody could account for. Those the city was full of. The mayor visited; his deputy had suggested that the recent reports of a strange creature stalking the fens on the north edge of the city—the newspapers called it the Salford Devil—had been this woman, looking for a place to lie down. The Salford Devil had red eyes and brachiated black wings, was the size of a dog, or a swan, or a malnourished child, had a long tail with a tassel (like a zebra or giraffe or a sphinx) or one

that opened like a fan (like a bird). Bertha Truitt had none of these things, and on the second day of her hospitalization Moses Mood, the owner of the hardware store, swore he saw the still at-large Salford Devil steal a poodle where it had waited for its owner outside the public library. A real poodle, a pony-size one.

Bertha Truitt confounded people. She was two things at once. Bodily she was a matron, jowly, bosomy, bottomy, odd. At heart she was a gamine. Her smile was like a baby's, full of joyful élan. You believed you had caused it. You felt felled by a stroke of luck.

Nobody who knew her came to visit, though the nurses noticed she was always peering down the ward with a hopeful expression. She had no recognizable accent, no regional manners, no cravings for a certain cabbage salad known on only one side of the Mississippi. When asked about her past, she waved it away. "I'm here," she said. "Wherever that is."

People began to dream of her. Not just her fellow patients, though they were the first, they dreamt of Bertha Truitt sneaking into their beds, lowering the mattress, raising the temperature, dissolving in the daylight. She got into the dreams of the nurses and doctors, then people through the town. One man swore he saw her fly through the air on her back, naked as a piglet, using her impressive breasts as wings.

Really?

Well, maybe more like rudders, he allowed. Otherwise I stand by it.

It was just a dream, his wife told him, as wives did everywhere in Salford, husbands, too, parents who could not imagine where their children had heard of the smiling lady who whispered in their ears at night, *I have a game for you*. And, *it is possible to bowl away trouble*.

The other patients hung around her bed to be smiled at. This included Jephtha Arrison, a lumpheaded young man who'd been hospitalized after swallowing a bottle of aspirin, one pill at a time, like

consuming a tree twig by twig. Soon enough he was found sleeping under Bertha Truitt's bed. "Let him stay," she said, and though it was the woman's ward he was left alone. Jephtha Arrison began to sleep abovedecks at the foot of her bed. "I like it here," he said to Bertha Truitt. "The hospital. My ma told me I once nearly died in a hospital but now I think they do me good."

"You have a fine head," said Bertha Truitt. She gave him a look of admiration.

"Ought I become a doctor?" he asked.

"Heavens, no," she said. "No, you're not suited for that at all. I meant the shape of it. I was speaking phrenologically." She touched his temples with the gentling tips of her fingers. He would have done anything she suggested.

It was the early years of American sports. She weighed the ball in the palm of her hand; she got Jephtha Arrison to set up her single pin, thin as a broomstick, all the way at the end of the ward. Again and again she knocked it over. "You have a problem," she would say. "Bowling can take it away like this." Knock it over again. It was impossible, the floor tilted to the south, the agitated footfalls of the sick sent vibrations through the boards, yet she managed it every time. Bertha Truitt told her visitors that the pharaohs bowled, of course they did, the pharaohs did everything first. Martin Luther bowled, before he was devout; Henry VIII had lanes built at Whitehall Palace. Rip Van Winkle was watching his neighbors bowl at ninepins when he fell into his famous sleep.

"As for me," said Bertha Truitt, "I'll build a bowling alley. What is this place?"

"This place?" Jephtha asked. He pointed at the bed he sat on. "Salford, or—"

"Salford," Bertha Truitt said. "Massachusetts, then. Yes."

THE BOWLING ALLEY UNDER GLASS

Salford was a city hard north of Boston, with a sliver of coastline just big enough to ramshackle the houses and web the occasional foot. Like Rome, it had been built among seven hills; unlike Rome, it was a swampy place, a city of fens and bogs. Eventually the founders knocked over most of the hills, shoved them into the bogs, declared them to be squares, and named each for the former hill at its heart. Pinkham Hill became Pinkham Square; Baskertop Hill, Baskertop Square. As for the bogs, they were nameless, then gone.

Former bog dwellers were left to wander the municipality. Prosperous beavers in their beaver coats muscled around Gibbs Square, looking as though they meant to withdraw their funds from the local banks; nesting birds lamented the coarse new immigrants in their neighborhood, like them bipedal but unwilling or unable to fly. Frogs hopped like idle thoughts past the saloon. Sometimes they

went in: you had to check your bucket of beer before you poured. Animals, flushed from Salford's pockets, were everywhere. Perhaps the Salford Devil was only some Yankee platypus whose habitat had been replaced by the dime store.

A whole colony of little bogbirds had been ousted from the swamp that became Phillipine Square. In their place was a vaudeville house, a grocery store, and a trolley stop, though the whole demesne still smelled of bog: damp and up-to-no-good.

Here Bertha Truitt declared she would build her alley.

"I am at home in a bog," she said. "A bog is a woman by its nature."

"And hills?" asked Jephtha Arrison worriedly. Jephtha of the Hospital! He had a sack of a head, damp eyes an eely gray, and a face that altogether seemed something caught in aspic. He stood next to Bertha on the new sidewalk of Phillipine Square, though the road wasn't yet paved, and looked down at his shoes, frilled at the edges with mud. "That'll make me sick."

"What will?"

"Filth," he said. He asked again, "What's a hill?"

"Also a woman. There is no part of the earth that isn't. Yes," Bertha Truitt repeated, "I am at home in a bog."

Hire Irish to lay brick, a doctor had told her in the hospital, and now she believed it like a superstition. The Irish called her Truitt, which they made a single syllable, *Troot*, and so she was known by most people: not Bertha Truitt or Miz or Mrs., not The Truitt Woman, not Mrs. Sprague once her husband arrived. The lack of honorific *was* the honorific: Troot. Troot runs a good house.

It took her two months to build the bowling alley. Nobody had seen a building go up with such speed, brick by brick, like knitting a sock. Truitt walked through every day, a distracted but bemused look on her face, as though she were looking not for progress but for a particular person long missing, and was preparing her face for

the joke: *What took you so long* or *I knew you'd turn up eventually* or *Hello, you*.

Two stories and a cellar to the Truitt House. Look through the glass windows at the front, like the historic dioramas at the Salford Public Library. The title of *this* diorama is the Bowling Alley at Dawn. Eggshell light outside; inside, murky workingman dark. No windows except at the front: neither the rising of the sun nor its inevitable setting matter here. Balls turn. The earth (being a woman) might or might not.

There are six lanes to bowl upon. The floors are built of rock maple. At the end of the lanes is a ledge—a high wooden bench that runs the length of the wall—for the pinboys to alight upon while the bowlers bowl. Once the bowling alley has opened for the day, the pinboys will sit on the ledge like judges, or vultures, but not yet. Between lanes are three elevated cast-iron tracks—the ball returns—so the pinboys can bowl the balls back to the bowlers. The Bowling Alley at Dawn is a tidy place. The pins have been set. Only one pale matchstick pin has fallen over in the first lane. Impossible to know whether this is the carelessness of the pinboy, or the artist who made this diorama.

Nobody watches or waits. Nobody stands behind the wooden counter at the front—a large oak structure like a pulpit, with a spectacular cash register that looks ready to emit steam-powered music, a calliope of money. Nobody sits at the bar along the other wall, though the jar of pickled eggs glows like a fortune-teller. The tables and chairs in the middle of the room await lollygaggers. The ceilings are warehouse high, so that the eventual smoke coming off all those eventual people (cigarette, cigar, desire, effort) might be stored aloft. Six fluted iron columns for support, three left, three right. In the corner the first of the coin-op entertainments, a standing sculptscope. Drop in a penny, bend to the brass goggles—you

might expect to see a stereoptical Niagara Falls or Taj Mahal, but in the Bowling Alley at Dawn you see instead the Bowling Alley at Dawn in further miniature, complete with diminutive sculptoscope with its minuscule stereoptical view of the Bowling Alley at Dawn.

Below, the cellar is divided into rooms for storage. It smells of bog. The only thing of note is a broad-shouldered cast-iron safe, painted with flowers and the name of its maker (EXCELSIOR SAFE & LOCK CO., SALFORD MASS.) in excruciatingly beautiful cursive.

Upstairs, above the alleys, storage rooms east and west, with an apartment in the middle. When the sun rises—if the sun ever rises in the Bowling Alley at Dawn—the light will fall through the immense sash windows at the back onto the good furniture: an East-lake sofa, an enamel table with turned legs, an iron bed. Even this room feels like a storehouse, the domestic objects in it arranged like unused furniture, the bathtub near the kitchen sink, the stove near the front door, the toilet in one of the closets. At the front of the building, the staircase down to the alley's foyer, every step white, every riser green.

“For *you?*” the Irish foreman had asked Truitt, when shown the plans for the apartment. She had sketched them on what seemed to be the grease-stained wrapper of a sandwich; her governing aesthetic was symmetry. The foreman was embarrassed by how protective of her he felt, to own this emotion for which Truitt would have nothing but contempt: *I do not need protection, Mr. Dockery, I look after myself.*

“For pity’s sake,” she said. “No. It wouldn’t suit me at all. I plan to install a man.”

She’d found her man already, of course: Joe Wear, late of the cemetery. She had known from the moment she’d met him that he was a bowler to his very soul. He had that knack for pointless devotion; his body was built on bowling angles.

He'd visited her once in the hospital, had told her, "I won't pinset. I pinset at *Les Miserables*. I could manage a house." She turned to him with a gleaming expression, bright and greedy and promising as a collection plate. He said, "I never meant to end up in a graveyard. Bowling"—his voice broke, he repaired it—"is what I got."

She hired him on the spot. All during construction he came to the alley, to give advice, to shake Bertha Truitt's hand. Every handshake was a test, he knew. She was a prophet of bowling but she needed other people to love it, too.

"Jeptha Arrison will be the Captain of the Pinbodies," she told him. That was her own word to describe the boys and men who set the candlepins. "Everyone else is yours to hire or fire. Do a good job," she told him, "and one day the alley will come to you."

There was something wrong with Jeptha Arrison—he was minuscule but had an enormous and lopsided head—and Joe Wear wasn't sure he wanted to be joined to him in an alley wedding. There was something wrong with Joe Wear, too, but he knew how things worked. Everywhere else women bowled behind a curtain, to protect their modesty, to protect men from the spectacle of feminine sport. A steel curtain, so that you couldn't even see the outline of waist or ankle.

"You want women in here, you'll need a curtain," he said.

"Well," said Bertha, "I invented the game, so I suppose I make the rules."

"How's that?" he said.

"I invented this strain of bowling."

She was older than he was, and would pay his salary, and for a moment he thought about agreeing, then found he was already saying, "Looks like ordinary candlepin to me."

"It is not."

"In Worcester—"

Truitt barked. With laughter? Not quite. With anger? No,

she *barked*, a noise that meant *who's there* and *I'm here* and nothing at all.

"I have never been to Worcester," she said.

"Anyhow," said Joe Wear. He could feel the long muscles of his arms spasming, and he crossed them. Not everyone would give him a job, never mind one of authority. He should be grateful and agreeable. But hadn't he saved her from foolishness once? Hadn't he been hired for his knowledge? "You'll need a curtain," he said again.

Bertha Truitt knew it was wrong to protect somebody else's modesty. Your modesty was your own. "No curtain, Joe."

"You'll get gawkers."

"Let 'em gawk."

That was that.

Gawkers, gapers, gogglers, oglers! She couldn't see them, she was ogle-blind. She rode a bicycle around the city in her split skirt and never wobbled even when the sidewalk boys hooted at her. She still found her way into people's dreams, still dissolved in daylight. Perhaps she was a succubus or a vampire, the way she snuck into dreams and returned to Salford in daylight, reading the funny papers on the sidewalk, laughing so loud the pigeons scattered. She even appeared in the Salford *Bugle* itself, beneath the headline NEW BOWLING ESTABLISHMENT INVITES ALL WOMEN. In the photograph accompanying the article, Truitt seems to be in mourning, as all women of a certain bustline do: her very bosom grieves, and is brave, and soldiers on. Upon this bosom a bowling alley was founded.

She must have had ancestors. Everyone does. She seemed to have arrived in Salford *sui generis*, of her own kind, though of course genealogists don't believe such a thing exists. No generation is ever spontaneous. We are none of us our own kind.

"I have been parented by pamphlets," Bertha Truitt liked to say, not thinking that a bad thing. The pamphlets were outdated, quaint,

quite often hateful. She was the oddest combination of the future and the past anyone had ever met.

Every month she opened the alleys for a fete. Beer and beef, oysters, pints of ice cream, brandy, a cake riddled with cherries, pies of all sorts (pork, treacle, kidney), more beer. Each fete lasted the entire day, was serially every kind of gathering: in the morning, a party for children, then a ladies' lunch, then a tea, cocktails, then (as the day began to unravel) a light supper, a frolic, a soiree, a carousel, a blowout, a dance, and as people began to drink themselves sober, a conversation, an optimistic repentance, a vow for greatness, love. Sometimes the party circled around and began again, though on those days you had to be careful Bertha Truitt did not offer beer to your child: she liked children, but she made no concessions to them. These were the stories told later. Married people would say, Well, we got married three years ago, but we first met—we really *met*—at Truitt's at either 10:00 or 2:00 A.M.

Truitt herself told no stories. In the middle of each party, she stood and picked cherries out of her slice of cake and looked hopefully at the door, happy enough at who she saw but never, it seemed, satisfied. Month after month, whoever she waited for stood her up.

The women of Truitt's Alleys bowled right out in the open, a spectacle: LuEtta Mood, Hazel Forest, Mary Gearheart, Nora Riker, Bertha Truitt.

Nora Riker was a round-headed square-bodied woman of twenty-nine, as alfalfa-scented and jostling as a goat. She was married to a similarly sawed-off hard-cornered man named Norman. In public they wrestled. There didn't seem to be anything carnal in it nor any meanness; they tumbled like goats, like Airedales. Even playing whist they shoved each other, guffawed. Even dancing. She was looking for a game she could beat him at.

Hazel Forest was a suffragette like Bertha. At least, Hazel thought Bertha was; they had met on a march, though she later realized that Bertha would join any march at any time, if she happened to be nearby: she liked the chance to walk and holler simultaneously. Hazel had the spectacles of a suffragette, and the bitter sense of humor, made bitterer by her job as a surgical nurse at the Salford Hospital. She'd surveyed the inside of bodies and was always threatening to tell other women what she had seen.

Mary Gearheart was the youngest, seventeen. Her father owned the vaudeville house. She had small eyes and a big mouth, like a carnivorous mouse. She bowled to keep her hands busy. To keep the throwing, smashing part of her brain busy, too.

LuEtta Mood was beautiful. She'd heard it was possible to bowl away sorrow.

Truitt bowled because the earth was an ocean and you had to learn to roll upon it.

"I do not wear the corset," Truitt told LuEtta Mood, Mary Gearheart, Hazel Forest, Nora Riker. They had never met a woman like her. She spread her wings to display herself. "The corset confuses the organs. Besides, the game of candlepin is a boon to the female form. It trims the waist, firms the arm, and lifts the bust. Regard me."

The women did, worriedly. Bertha Truitt was a plump five and a half feet tall, her uncorsetted torso rhomboid, sensual. They all knew the story of her arrival in the cemetery; Mary said she'd heard she'd been found with the body of her dead child, and that candlepin bowling was the peculiar way she'd gone mad with grief.

"Sorry," Mary had said to LuEtta Mood, who had her own dead child, and LuEtta waved the apology and the fact away.

They had no idea how old Truitt was. Older than them, younger than their mothers, mesmerizing.

“Now watch my form,” Truitt said. They did, they did. Her shoes were off, her hat was on—already she was famous in Salford for her hats, which she had special made. Today’s hat was navy blue and waffled; today, she was a member of a foreign navy. She bowled in rolled shirtsleeves. Her right forearm was carved of oak, her left one of marble. Seven steps, and then delivery. Jephtha Arrison, up on the pinboys’ shelf, wrung his hands. They all watched the ball make its way down the lane.

“You got a wrong foot approach there, Troot,” called the orphan Joe Wear. What he meant: usually a left-handed bowler makes her last step with her right foot; Bertha Truitt bowled and stepped with her whole left side. It shouldn’t have worked. She knocked down six pins. Joe gave a low whistle and Jephtha Arrison echoed it, like bird-call, a nervous avian declaration.

“Thanks, Joe,” Truitt said lightly, to the pins—Joe wouldn’t have been able to hear her—then turned to look at her team. Like Nora Riker, she wanted to win. She just wanted to win everything of all time.

The invention of a sport: here is a ball, now throw it through that net, if those other guys’ll let you. Here is a bat: somebody’s going to throw a ball at you and you knock it away and run, if those other guys’ll let you. Here is a tiny ball and a stick and out of view beyond that grassy hill is a ball-size hole: you figure it out.

Here is a ball. Heft it in your hand. Nobody’s going to stop you. Some man might call out with advice, too much advice, but in the end it’s your game to play and your game to win.

Bertha Truitt picked up the second ball of the frame and tested the weight in her hand, a little toss, then brought it up and touched just the plump underside of her chin with just the cool curve at the top of the ball. She looked at how the pins lay, four standing, interlaced with the dead wood. Then she bowled.

The ball knocked over three more pins, and Joe Wear whistled again, lower, graver. He came over to watch; he stood behind the women, who sat on the rush-seated benches as though at church. LuEtta Mood asked, over her shoulder, "Is that good?" In the dark of the alley her hair shone like polished brass. It irked Joe Wear.

"I'd say so."

In those days to knock down nine pins in candlepin bowling was a feat, no matter your age or sex or waistline. The balls were smaller, the pins narrower, the approaches not oiled or even varnished, just rough fricative wood.

The third ball knocked over the last pin. "Ten box!" said Joe Wear.

Jeptha Arrison dropped down to the wood to reset, fetched the balls and bowled them back along the return, started resetting the pins on their metal deck.

"Good roll, Troot!" he called. "A real good one."

"All right, pinbody," she called back fondly. Nobody had a more interesting head than Jeptha. "Set 'em up."

The women watched Bertha Truitt bowl an entire game till they fell into the rhythm. You set your brain to bowling time and got caught up in the serial nature of it. Three balls a frame, ten frames a string. They hadn't realized that bowling was so full of suspense. A story: our hero (the ball) sets out on his journey (the approach), travels the length of his world until he runs into trouble, acquits himself well or badly, end of chapter.

Turn the page!

The only pause was at the end of every frame, when Jeptha Arrison jumped down to pluck the balls from the pit, then set the pins back up on the plate.

"Seventy-seven!" Joe Wear called out when Bertha had finished her first string.

“No thank you, Joe!” Bertha Truitt called back. “No score, thank you!”

Well, that was like a woman, wasn't it. No score.

What she wanted was a kind of greatness that women were not allowed. If they were allowed a small measure of it, they had to forsake love. She forsook nothing.

CEMETERY MATTERS

Of course she was looking for somebody in particular. She looked for him in the hospital—he was a doctor—and as she built the alley, and as she rode her bicycle along the streets of Salford. She had built a building and put her name on the front as advertising. Naturally she went to the cemetery, where they had first met, and looked for him there. All of the details were not clear in even Bertha's mind, though she remembered the cold of the cemetery and the decision to lie down, to open her coat to let in the chill like a guest. Some days she could conjure up the whole Bertha-shaped stretch of the cemetery where she'd lain and think of it with affection. Her birthplace, in a way. No need to reflect upon what had come before. She'd been found. Marching forward had always been her habit. Only in a bowling alley did back and forth get you anywhere.

She was looking for the other man, the fellow her own age or a little younger, whose name she did not know. He had got into her head, though all he'd done was take her pulse. Still, he did that

caressingly, the tip of his finger a bow against the stringed instrument of her wrist.

PHEBE PICKERSGILL, HERMANN SWETTMAN, SUSANA PETERSON, DELILAH FOREST, wife of, daughter of, aged 81 years, aged 18. Bertha Truitt thought they, the dead, were just the same as her, they'd also gone onto the next life. Or else the dead were the people she'd left behind, all life spans ending this date, this year, everyone she'd once known dead except her, a convenience. She could astound herself sometimes with the sudden iron of her heart. Cast iron, ringing like an anvil. Not all the time. At all important times her heart was flesh.

She thought, *When I finish building Truitt's, that's when I'll find him*, and that was true, nearly to the day.

She saw him in the cemetery, walking the avenue of willows that led to the ornamental pond at the center of the park, and then her heart was neither iron nor flesh but pond, ready to receive and conceal anything tossed into it. He was a handsome, tubby, mustachioed black man, in a green suit with an orange windowpane check. The expression on the man's face—he hadn't seen her yet—was thoughtful and pleased, full of a self-kindled light. She felt a plunk in the pond of her heart and went to him.

June. The sun whetted its rays on the gravestones. The fish in the ornamental pond didn't know they, too, were ornamental. They swam up to catch the light.

"Hello," she said.

He said, in a voice quiet as a comb, "I knew you'd turn up eventually." One wing of his black mustache was longer than the other. There was nobody looking after him. "I am glad to see that you are well."

"I am." She couldn't think of the next thing to say, so she offered to give him a reading. A reading? Of your head: phrenology.

"No thank you," said Doctor Sprague.

"Why not?"

He gave her a careful look. Later she knew all the angles of this particular expression, the subtle widening of the eyes, his condescending affection, the way he bore the burden of knowing too much. He was a man of facts. Even his poetry was highly accurate. He said, "Phrenology is not science."

"But it is!" said Bertha Truitt. "There have been many words written on the subject."

"Words are not facts. A man who requires inferiors will find his own head superior, he will write encyclopedias on the subject."

"But you have a splendid head," she said.

"Your Dr. Fowler would not say so, on account of my race."

"Oh!" she said. "Truly? Then he would be mistaken."

She was giving his head a look of admiration and hope, and nervousness, so he took off his derby and aimed his head at her. His splendid head. He liked to think he was immune to compliments, but he wasn't.

This was a long time ago but they were still not young. Bertha, particularly, was not. She would be older till she died.

She read the territory of his scalp not through the close-cropped hair but beneath it. The back of his neck smelled of bay rum, his windowpane coat of tobacco. No, don't smell, she reminded herself. That tells you nothing.

People misunderstood phrenology, thought Bertha. It was exercise. The stevedore, lifting a great deal of weight, changes the shape of his torso; the philosopher who lifts heavy thoughts, the shape of his head. Look at the portraits of Benjamin Franklin in his early years and at the end of his life, see the difference. Look at Dr. Sprague's magnificent forehead, knotted with thought, evidence of all his education, the poetry he wrote, the patients he saved. She went to the knobs at the back of his head, to the prominences, as was her habit.

His area of Amativeness was well developed, as was his area of

intelligence. His Alimentiveness was worrying. His Self-esteem was very bad indeed. His Hope—but now she could discern nothing abstract. Was that a scar? What had happened to the man?

“That bad?” Dr. Sprague asked, then, “I told you.”

“Hard to say,” said Bertha Truitt. She wanted to dally. Her belief in phrenology was draining from her, she could feel it spin down the drain. And yet: as her fingers circumnavigated Dr. Sprague’s skull, she *did* know him, there was no way to know him but through his head. She hadn’t taken off her kid gloves, a mistake she recognized as her little finger grazed the apex of his ear. So she removed them, tucked one in each armpit. She worked the ambits of his skull. He was kind, and lackadaisical, devoted, careless. He was melancholy. He liked to drink (this she determined from the smell of sweet ferment coming through all parts of him). He would do anything for her, to the best of his abilities. He would love and disappoint her.

“Now you,” he said, and doffed his gloves.

She pulled the pins from her hair. Maybe this was really how you read somebody. You applied your head to that person’s fingertips, and the person poured themselves into your brain, chin, neck, shoulders—and you knew everything. She stared at his shoes (good brown brogues, one toe scuffed across the perforations) and felt the mechanism of her soul flutter and falter. He was unconvinced, but what if her skull revealed her to be venal or petty or dumb? He was not touching her as though he believed her to be venal, petty, dumb. She closed her eyes. The two living people touched only fingertip to scalp; the dead beneath them lay foot to foot and head to head.

“All right,” he said at last.

She opened her eyes, squared her shoulders. His lopsided mustache twitched fondly. “You needn’t have taken your hair down,” he said, plucking the pins from her hand. She felt the heat of his forearms against her neck, through his jacket, as he tacked her hair back up. She could tell it was a bad, tender job.

She was not beautiful, thought Dr. Leviticus Sprague. Not in the way he had been raised to think of beauty. Her skin was custard. Her hair was the color of bruised fruit. Her face looked like an anthology of other faces: an odd nose with a bump halfway down its slope, a thick upper lip that cast a shadow over its thinner downstairs neighbor. Narrow chin. Broad forehead. Even her eyes were mismatched, the right one bigger, prone to widening to show the white all around the iris, he would never stop noticing. It always made his heart chime.

He had been alone a long while. He had never lived with a woman he was not related to—his grandmother, his mother, his sister—which is to say he had never been regarded the way this woman, this Bertha Truitt, regarded him, with an ardent curiosity. In his way he had loved her not from the moment he saw her in the frost but from the moment she had looked at him and he understood she might love him back. *Love him back* came first: he was a cave, happy to be a cave, and she a swung lantern come to light him up. When he'd heard her tell the policeman her name, he'd thought she was lying: she'd read it off some headstone. But he'd walked the cemetery a dozen times since then, and never found a single Truitt. The unsteady boy with whom he'd found her had gone. He could not go to the Salford Hospital to ask what had happened to her, not because he would be turned away as a visitor but as a doctor. He would not ask.

But here she was. She was so *odd*. Mismatched in her soul, and pleased with the effect.

"It's a humbug," he said. "A lie, start to finish."

"But tell me your findings."

She would always be stubborn in the face of his reason. He would always surrender.

He said, "I could not find a single flaw."

"Do you bowl?" she asked him.

He laughed then, with his whole head. She wouldn't have known he was a laughing man. "Well," he said. "I *have* bowled."

"I mean candlepins."

He nodded. Candlepins existed also in Oromocto, New Brunswick, Canada, where he was from. An elegant sport, he'd thought when he'd watched it, and like most elegant things that white people favored also essentially feeble-minded.

"*I bowl*," said Bertha Truitt. Then she touched him behind his ear, beneath the brim of his hat.

MRS. MOOD

Everyone talked about what a merry person Truitt was, but LuEtta Mood could see that the merriment was trained on a trellis of sorrow. It was a companionable sorrow, the sort you might never have to discuss. It drew LuEtta Mood in. Sorrow had interested her since childhood, long before she had any sorrows of her own. Then she met her own unhappiness and wondered where the earlier interest had come from, ignorant as it was.

Her husband, Moses Mood, was known almost reverently as the homeliest man in town. As a child he'd been shot in the ear by his brother, and the resulting scar made him look not blown apart by violence, but as though something deep in his head had tunneled its way out and, famished, lapped and then gnawed at the basin of his ear. When he'd woken up after the injury, age eight, his father said into his good ear, "Well, Mo, this will be the making of you," and Moses Mood decided it wouldn't. He would not be kinder than he might have been, but neither would he be ruined. The scar would