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Bowlaway

By Elizabeth McCracken

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 Sal-ford 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."