

Nathan McClain

The Man with an Extra Heart inside His Bowling Bag

After the operation, he's hesitant about bowling again. Afraid, really, of the first heart collapsing mid-throw, his arm extended, ball drifting off into the gutter. He's worried the eighth pin will laugh at his attempt to save himself from failure. From embarrassment. From the goose egg warming the scoreboard unhatched. His mother says he thinks too much; says he's indecisive as a used car battery, badly in need of a jolt or replacement. Doctors say a man can keep running on fumes for only so long; only so much love he can give before sputtering out of breath, most often stranded somewhere between *now* and *not yet*. How difficult to live in two places at once, split from one heartbeat to the next, checking your pulse for companionship. The soft thumping. Quill-pricks walking the back of your neck. Thus, his reasoning for an extra heart was really quite simple: it was all about nerve—or rather working up the nerve for possibility. For the looming *what if*, the uncertainty beneath every answer. Now his chest throbs with validity, and there she is—standing like a group of pins, waiting to be swept off her feet. He ignores the X-ray and test results and leans into the lane. And yes! He picks up the spare with his blue ball that reads: *Zap me again, O defibrillator! Make me a better man!*