

## The bone factory

I work in the femur department of the bone factory at 45-52 Turnip Lane in Shirt Creek. There was never much demand for femurs until last year. But since 'Collision' was introduced as an Olympic sport it's tough keeping up with supply and demand.

Collision's a stupid game. The larger and stronger the bone you break in your opponent's body, the more points you earn. So, now I handle more bones than I ever have. After they've been cleaned, tested and analysed, I sort them into categories according to size, density and blood group. Then, I attach a label, strap them together in pairs and send them down the line to be boxed and stored in the ice room.

### Day one

Today's the day I stop taking the anxiety pills. I don't need them anymore.

### Day one point five

Jucy is my sister. She's sitting at the kitchen bench in my apartment, turning her coffee cup; left, right, centre, left again. She's left-handed, so now she picks it up and pauses, and before the cup meets her lips she says, 'How *is* the shit factory?'

I start to answer, but she cuts me off as she sets the cup down. She's now peering at her phone. Swipe, swipe, swipe.

Jucy works at the heart factory. It's a nicer job than mine, and she earns more money than me since the government introduced the subsidy for HGC\*. She's certified. 'Look at this,' she says pushing the phone toward me.

I start to answer, 'OMG, it's beau ...'

She grabs the phone back before I can focus and says, 'I don't like the edges. Do you like the edges? I think I'll tie the ribbon over the top. What do you think? Should I put in a bow? Anyway, you didn't answer my question. How's the *shit* factory? Can I have a bikkie?'

Hers is a gentle job, a kind job. She gets to see the faces of the dead after the bodies have been harvested for parts. She makes the heart-shaped pillows that fill the chest cavity so the top part of the body can be embalmed and encased in resin and then returned to the family who will make their loved ones into chairs or coffee tables. Sometimes bedheads.

I decide to answer the question about the bow. 'Maybe you could ...'

Again, she cuts me off. 'She was a hundred and twenty-four!'

Young. I suppose.

Jucy moves the phone around on the benchtop, looks at it, then turns it back toward me. I grab it and slide it toward myself. The picture of the red heart-pillow on the clear-glass screen contrasts with the white of the kitchen bench. The pillow is divine: hand-stitched edging, embroidered white lilies, soft, delicate spiderweb lace draped sweetly around the bulges of the heart.

Jucy talks. And talks. 'She used up her allowance and they couldn't let her have another transplant. One hundred and twenty-four!' she repeats, to make a point.

Yes, very young, I nod in agreement.

Her voice shakes. I try to ask if the family of the dead girl had seen the heart my sister made. 'Did ...'

Now, she's crying. Shit!

'Why?' she sobs. 'Why do people ... die?'

I see her forehead crinkle into an expression that reminds me of something. I try to remember what that something is. The memory turns to mist. I shake it off.

'Are you taking the anti-anxiety meds, Jucy?'

She crinkles her nose. 'They give me diarrhea.'

'Try them, sis. They'll help.'

## **Day two**

I get it too. The diarrhea. They make me poop all the time, but that's not the reason I've stopped taking them. They make me feel ... nope. I can't remember what I wanted to think. The thought melts away.

The traffic.

'Hey Siri ... 'I lean toward the mic. 'What's the holdup?'

In the lane beside me, cars slowly roll toward the traffic lights. The last car in the queue, a classic '23 Tesla, red, slides to a halt. I glance at the driver: a girl with long hair tied back in a 2020s style ponytail, an impressive effort it seems, to match the era of the car. Without warning, she jolts forward as an unexpected vehicle bonks her from behind.

The girl seems calm, despite the extensive damage to the rear of the classic car. The Tesla slides to the right and stops in the emergency lane. The vehicle behind follows and pulls to a halt. The girl is fine. I drive on.

‘A forty-minute delay,’ says Siri. ‘You’ll be twenty-one minutes late for work. Would you like me to divert?’

‘No.’

‘Calling the bone factory.’

‘Siri, stop call!’

Siri shuts down and fades away. So, I’m late. It doesn’t matter.

### **Day three**

Jucy is now taking the medication. Good.

I arrive at work, pull on my hair net and snap on the gloves. I’m feeling fine so far, since I stopped taking the tablets. The urge to poo has eased a little and I wonder if I’ll get constipation instead. Everybody has bad days, I tell myself. Everybody has good days. It’s normal to worry sometimes. I’ll be fine.

‘Hey Corey. Hi Jonathan. Another day another bone to pick.’

We chuckle and move to our posts.

### **Day four**

The bell goes to send us home, and as Corey passes by me on our way out, I tell him, ‘I couldn’t match a single pair today. I got nothing done.’

‘Who cares?’ Corey says as he rolls off his hair net and balls his gloves before shooting them into the hazbin.

‘Score!’ I say, ‘Good for you.’

He pats my arm and then heads for the door. ‘Another day ... ‘

Tomorrow will be a good day.

## Day seven

I'm not telling Jucy that I'm off the meds. I don't want her getting any ideas. *She* needs them.

'Are you feeling better, Ju?'

Jucy's wrapped up like a hotdog, but me, I can't feel the cold.

'It's hard to tell,' she says. 'I don't know.'

'It can take a good thirty days before you notice anything.'

She pulls her coat collar tightly around her neck as she cuts in. 'What if I just have bad days sometimes?'

I want to tell Jucy that it *isn't* normal to want to be near your child, your adult child, 24/7. He's just on a holiday. He's fine. He probably won't fall off a cliff, get caught in a cyclone, disappear under an avalanche or run away with a Swedish girl and leave Australia forever. It's fine to worry but ...

'What if I have a better day, tomorrow? I don't need the pills. What if it's all normal?'

'It *is* normal to *worry*, Ju. Everybody has bad days and good days, but this is insane. Nobody imagines those terrible scenarios like you do.'

I think of my own child. He's had two of the allowable twenty-five transplants and he's only forty. What if ... ?

Jucy's about to cry again and with an effort to hold back a sob, her voice goes nasal: 'I don't know, Sis. I just don't know why I'm like this.'

'Keep taking the pills, Jucy. It'll be better. You'll see.'

Now. I feel something. It's in my for-arms. It reminds me of biting into tinfoil. Coppery. Irritating. I shudder it away.

## Day ten

There it is again. It's like a current of electricity buzzing down the backs of my arms from my shoulder blades, through my triceps, making circles around my elbows and down through the outside of my for-arms and into my pinky fingers. It's in my thighs as well.

I flex my ankles and stretch them back, flex and stretch, flex and stretch. God, it feels good. It feels good to be alive.

You see, this is why I don't like taking that toxic rubbish. I'm thinking I should throw away the prescription.

Not yet.

### **Day fourteen**

Jucy is staring at her phone.

'What's wrong?'

'I can't ... think,' she says.

'Think?'

'Think! It stops in the middle of a thought. I forget things I started thinking.'

She tentatively points her phone toward me. I reach out, keeping my gaze fixed on her face for a clue. A small frown causes her eyebrows to dip in the middle. The phone is warm to the touch. A picture of a heart dominates the centre of the screen.

'Yeah?'

She sighs and makes a face that seems concerned and frustrated.

'It's plain.' I say, cautiously.

'Plain?'

'Yeah, but not in a bad way. It's nice.'

'Nice?'

'Yeah. Nice.'

We face each other like reflections. I smile and take her hand. She shrugs.

We both drift off into our own daydreams.

## **Day seventeen**

The human thigh is a rich resource. Fat from the buttock is melted and piped over to the energy factory across the road. Muscles and flesh are ground and minced and dried into pellets to sprinkle along the roadside to fertilize the trees.

I pause, allowing my mind to picture the movement of the human body as it walks, runs, bends, manipulates itself into yoga poses, makes love. I am conscious of the weight of my own, wide butt.

I clack the pair of bones together in the same way that I've done for the past nine years, day after day, working here in the femur department, sorting bones. Crack. This time, though, the dry, dead sound triggers a sharp sting of adrenaline that I feel in an instant as a pleasant tingling sensation of pins and needles that glows its way through me. I straighten, feeling light and warm. Rattle. To the left of me, Jonathan rummages through a small box of labels. Snap. Corey tightens and tests the bands around a set, two bays up. Rumble. Another pile of bones tumbles off the conveyor belt into a big, tin box.

In my hands the pair of bones seem short, delicate. How beautiful must she have been to have had these bones. And what about her face? Was she pretty? Was she intelligent, kind, loving? Did she have a ponytail and drive a classic red Tesla? Why did she die?

I remember Jucy's creation, the spider silk, the white lilies lovingly embracing the memory of a girl whose husband might now, at this moment, be sitting on a chair made from her face.

In the middle of my belly, my solar plexus throbs. I'm confused. It feels wonderful, almost sexual, terrifyingly nice and horrible at the same time as the feeling races downward through my groin and upward through my chest, across my shoulders.

I take a deep, shuddering breath and then ...

'What the fuck?'

Was that a sob?

## **Day twenty**

Siri increases the volume on the car speaker as Jucy answers the phone.

'Hey! Jucy! You're coming for coffee on Wednesday?'

'Yeah, I want to talk. I want to change jobs.'

‘I don’t like my job anymore, either’ I reply.

‘Bye.’

#### **Day twenty-four**

I’m crying and the traffic moves smoothly. I spot the red Tesla and turn my head as I pass, peering at the driver. It’s her. Same girl. Car all fixed. I’m relieved for the moment, but then, the pain starts.

An irritating current that feels like electricity buzzes down the backs of my arms and shoots in uncontrolled pulses through my thighs. It starts at the base of my skull and zaps me in irregular bursts. My chest hurts.

What if she got hurt? What if her quota is low and she had to use some of her allowance? Did she cry when she had the accident? Does she have a mum to hug?

Sunshine warms my hands as I rest them on the steering wheel, the sky is topaz with a golden orb of a sun, burning like a hole in the sky. Tall, very healthy, emerald trees with gorgeous shiny leaves tower above the road, thriving on the fertilizer pellets.

The human thigh is a rich resource.

Sob.

‘Why? Why do people die?’

#### **Day twenty-five**

I dry myself up and get on with the job. By lunchtime I’ve pulled myself together.

The lunchroom does nothing to muffle the noise from the factory.

Crack, snap, pop.

I’m hungry but I can’t eat.

Jonathan can.

I hate him.

I hate the way he *chews*.

I hate this.

This. Them.

I hate all of it.

Eating. Right near my ear.

‘You ... okay? Bit quiet today.’

‘I’m fine. Thanks for asking. Corey!’

My face tells another lie.

What I really want to say, is Fuckoff!

### **Day thirty**

‘I dreamed I was in a huge peanut shell, rowing down a river. The oars were made from dried pasta, but they were slowly dissolving the further I went, and was losing control. There was a waterfall ahead and I was scared.’

Jucy is watching my face. ‘It gets like that. The dreams are ... ‘

‘... psychedelic. Jucy, It’s crazy how much I dream these days. And sex! I want sex all the time. I mean *all* the time. Jonathan’s a weirdo you should hear how he eats. I hate that. Did you see the news yesterday? Want a bikkie?’

Jucy is looking for something in her handbag. She glances up and starts to talk slowly as she scrabbles amongst a Tardis full of junk. ‘We have a negative population ...’

It’s taking too long. I bite down hard. Hurry up and say what you want to say for Heaven’s sake. I already know all this.

I finish her thoughts for her. Through clenched teeth I growl: ‘... growth! The negative population growth! People aren’t having babies! They’re making artificial wombs. Soon we’ll all be robots with AI. Why would anybody want to have kids? They’ve increased the HGC subsidy. *Jucy*, why’d you quit your job?’

‘I can’t ... think.’

‘Yes, you can. You’re amazing. You make things. You’re great. You’re, you’re *creative*. I could never dream up stuff like that. Jucy, what are you going to do? Where are you going to work?’

She starts to reply, ‘I was thinking ...’



‘No!’ I’m shouting. ‘You can’t work in the bone factory. Don’t go there. It’s awful. I hate this. I hate it. I just ... ‘

Now I’ m crying. ‘Jucy ... Why?’

Why do people have to die?

I realize now I’m on the floor, my back pushed up against the corner walls. The pain. The pain in my arms and legs and in my stomach.

Jucy hands me a glass of water.

And a pill.

\*HGC – Human Generated Creatives.