

The Death Button

I wasn't supposed to fall for Michelle Hunter. No way. But I did, and that was the first domino.

No sense hiding it: I was in a rough patch. Money? Nope. Studies? Hah. Friends? Don't get me started. And to top it off, I even had to squeeze myself into bed. The apartment was so tight that I slept on a mattress stuffed halfway under the table serving as my desk. In my midget bedroom a louver door opened directly into a shared pass-through closet, one my apartment-mate accessed through a second louver door in her room.

That's right: *her*. Michelle was a dimpled girl with straight hair and a self-esteem problem, toiling to join the ranks of elementary school teachers. After her best friend dropped out, she needed someone to share the rent. And the closet.

Ah, those louver doors! They were like the entrance to the magical wardrobe of the *Narnia Chronicles*—except that instead of Christian allegory it was a world of very different passions I discovered each time Michelle's boyfriend, a first-year medical school student named Brad, spent the night. I didn't own many hanging clothes, so the closet turned into an echo chamber, the louvers leading to the lovers, their romps amplified while I lay with my head under my desk like a mournful hermit crab.

It was so puzzling. What did Brad have to offer that I didn't? I mean, aside from money. And those chiseled good looks. Oh, and a future.

Girls can be so picky.

But it wasn't supposed to matter, because Michelle and I were only *roommates*, you see. Friendly ones. She liked to bake, and on Friday nights, while we listened to loudspeakers belch music from the lawns of Fraternity Row, she'd wipe floury wisps of hair from her eyes while I greased the cookie sheets. She taught me how to make a Bundt cake. To be honest, Michelle's pastime could just as well have been embalming. *What do you say we pump formaldehyde into a corpse tonight*, she could have said, and I'd have mashed my hands together with glee.

I was happy, in a way. It's rent that was the problem: my savings were melting faster than Greenland.

At night we trudged off to opposite sides of the vacant closet, that buffer of nothingness. When I extinguished my own lamp—which I hastened to do, wearied by baking—the louvers quivered like the eyelashes of children pretending to sleep. Sometimes I'd see stripes of Michelle's silhouette moving across the double filter of the doors.

The problem was Brad. Well, Brad and money. That made two problems. And they were related. They traveled together. Probably Brad had shared a room with money when he was a kid.

One day he pulled up in a glossy red BMW.

"Wow," I said. "Nice ride."

"325i," he replied. "High performance. Five-speed transmission."

He had nothing on me: I had a *ten* speed. It was a Schwinn.

He tossed me the keys. "Hey, English Major. You should probably get used to parking other people's cars. Betcha five bucks you can't even figure out how to start it."

My but he was hilarious! Just the kind of budding doctor you'd want to entrust your life to. But he was also right: there was a funny gimmick to the ignition I'd never seen before, and

my wallet ended up shedding its last five-dollar bill.

Often Brad would come over with a hand or foot or other body part—sometimes models, but sometimes the real skeletal McCoy. Recently he'd brought us a human skull, which lived on the kitchen table. I named him Yorick, and every morning while I ate my Fruit Loops, this cranial companion grinned at me expectantly, as though begging for a bite. Brad refused to move him.

In theory he was supposed to study these show-and-tell items to learn their bits and pieces. But he was occupied with other body parts—Michelle's, to be precise. I never saw him crack open a book, so one morning I asked about this, pointing out that some of us dedicated long nights to dense pages.

“Yeah, well,” he replied, “I guess that shows that some people are slower than others, doesn't it?” It was another one of his knee-slappers. I crafted a zinger of comeback, a real killer. Too bad he had left the room by the time I finished.

The only good thing about Brad's insults were the shy looks Michelle slipped me in their wake—an act of sympathy that encouraged me to angle for his scorn. I returned her glances with my hangdog look. But what were we to do? She was trapped. Or maybe I was trapped. Hell, we were all trapped. It was as confining as the tomb-like bed under the table in my room, where I knocked my head every time I jolted awake to spooky sounds hooting through that closet. There were a few mild concussions.

Did I mention the louver doors yet?

Because it was tiny, in poor repair, and not up to the electrical codes of any modern nation, our apartment should have been cheap. But somehow it wasn't. I'd been on the lookout for a job on campus. Not just grunt labor. I had ambitions: I wanted a position that would pay me

to sit at a desk and do my homework, interrupting my reading once every leap year to check out a book or answer a phone. But coveted positions like this had been monopolized by bewitching girls—full-fledged women, really, by the looks of them—hired as decorative pieces by male superiors at the library or departmental offices.

The dwindling of my finances led to a dire realization: if nothing changed, I was going to have to move out. Leave Michelle to Brad.

Desperation is the unwed mother of invention, and that's how I started selling my body. No, I don't mean some cheap and tawdry sex trade, a humble version of *Midnight Cowboy*. I mean the real thing: *selling my body*—as in, *Here's my spleen, how much do you want for it?* It was a principle as old as the Tooth Fairy, that dainty pixie of dental prostitution, who had demonstrated in my youth that bits of me were worth cold, hard cash. Maybe it was Brad who triggered this inspiration, thanks to the chunks of human skeleton that kept appearing *chez moi*. I don't know, perhaps I should have paid him a commission. Brad, my body-parts impresario.

Back then the body-parts trade was innovative—years before people started waking up in bathtubs full of crushed ice after a roofie-laced drink, the left side of their lower backs feeling tender and light. I'd like to think I was ahead of the curve.

There were a lot of ways to go about it, and I followed the principle I'd learned from selling an old bike after high school. Barely operational, the Raleigh had been worth about fifteen bucks on the open market, though I found I could sell the front wheel for five, the back for ten, the chain for two, the seat for three, and the frame for seven. I even traded the bell for a parakeet. In short, it's often best to sell things in parts, and that was the approach I took, starting by hawking my lifeblood.

This transaction took place at a walk-in clinic next to a pool hall. Truth be told, it wasn't

all of my blood they wanted, just the yellow, urine-like stuff they could extract from it. This was the great puzzle: blood you had to donate, but plasma, which involved a much more complicated process, you could sell for thirty-five bucks a pint. Back then such a figure was nothing to sneeze at—though sneeze I did, violently, as the light-headedness from my second weekly visit triggered tickles in my nose.

The plasma center was like the closet between my bedroom and Michelle's—a porous membrane at the juncture of two worlds. This one attracted winos and bums staggering in to finance their next bender. That first day I hopped up on a cot next to a 300-pound vagrant whose nose was a city roadmap of purplish veins. He sported a Walt-Whitman-style beard clotted with bits of partially digested fettuccine. He also had a needle in his arm, but that didn't keep him from scrutinizing my arrival, studying me while I rolled up a sleeve for my deflowering.

After the nurse swabbed me, she skewered the crook of my elbow with the gentleness of barmaid whacking a spigot into a bunghole. While my vital fluids drained through plastic tubes, I lifted my book and feigned nonchalance, but old Walt leaned close enough to count my nose hairs. The sourness of his breath, a generous burp of which he shared, suggested we might soon see more of his vomitous emissions. Leaves of grass indeed.

I inquired about how often he frequented the establishment.

He squinted at the volume of Eliot's *Wasteland* in my hands. "I read that once," he rumbled. Suddenly his cheeks bulged, and with considerable exertion he suppressed a new gastric eruption. "I thought it needed editing."

Thirty minutes later I was buttoned up and heading out, a twenty-dollar bill and three fives flopping in my pocket like live fish. I hadn't told Michelle about this particular venture, but suddenly my future looked bright—though a little blurry, like everything else, for about an hour.

I didn't care. The money kept me in the apartment, only a closet away from Michelle.

Plasma was a good deal. You could sell it twice a week, which was almost enough time for your body to keep up with production. It turned my circulatory system into a kind of ATM, and although my grade point average took a hit because of my occasional afternoon blackouts, I looked for other parts of my body to sell as well. Especially useful were things that regenerated, for they represented a smarter long-term business plan. Fantine had sold her locks in *Les Misérables*, so why not me? It turned out that good hair could fetch a few hundred bucks, even more if it was *pure*—untouched by dyes, straighteners, or other chemicals. My head sported a mop in its most virgin state, rarely even tainted by shampoo. Still, a head of hair was like a US Savings Bond—it took a long time to mature—and the more often I checked in the mirror, the slower the whole business seemed to go.

I needed to diversify, and what was diversification if not a kind of dissemination? There was a sperm bank not far away, and it could pay big bucks. White gold. I applied immediately, but apparently my quality didn't match my enthusiasm.

I heard that breast milk had a market price, but I wasn't lactating.

Then in one of my classes we read *Prometheus Bound*, and while I didn't catch all the subtleties of sly old Aeschylus, I got the big picture. Prometheus was an asshole of the first order—kind of an Olympian version of Brad. But his punishment interested me: an eagle swooped down and gobbled up his liver every day, the organ growing back overnight.

I don't mind telling you that I spent a while looking that one up. The liver *does* regenerate, it turns out. Well, some people prefer to call it compensatory growth, and you have to be careful not to take too much. And when you cut out a lobe, try not to interfere with the biliary tree because, holy cow, that can get messy.

I studied this one pretty closely. The liver's kind of an important body part, so you don't want to screw it up.

As an English major I didn't feel like I'd learned anything in particular during my first three years, but my advisor said I was learning how to learn, and wasn't that the gift of a liberal arts education. So I studied the liver with more gusto than I gave to Chaucer, with the kind of passion I found only in Shakespeare. The more I read, the more I marveled. The liver is *life*, a mystical organ, a magical chamber within the body, transmuting all manner of fluids into gold. Its biles help with digestion, and it generates proteins. It contributes to the very plasma that was paying my rent. But most of all, it detoxifies the blood, filtering out pollutants the way Michelle sifted lumps from flour when baking, or the way the louver-liver ducts of my imagination strained out impurities like Brad. What could it not do, this organ of perfection, this metabolic maestro? A thing of beauty! Oh, liver! Mine eyes dazzle!

Anyhow, I got *all* the details. Anything you want to know about lobes, peritoneal ligaments or celiac ganglia, I'm your man.

However, it turned out I never had to sell a major organ. Michelle heard I'd been hawking my plasma (apparently I mumble when I'm unconscious) and was upset. Brad was there that evening, and he pointed out that leaving my body to science could net me a few hundred bucks in advance, but the glint in his eye was worrisome. He was capable of flooring his BMW to hasten my donation. He mentioned there was a black market for extra kidneys and other things we happen to have in duplicate.

"You could part with half your brain," he quipped. "You're only using one hemisphere as it is."

Boy, I nearly bust a gut over that one.

“It’s true. I’ll bet you five bucks,” he said, offering another wager. “Of course, there’s really only one way to prove it.”

Michelle gritted her teeth with concern, but I’d already put my one hemisphere to work and decided it wasn’t worth the money to sacrifice the other.

Anyway, I finally struck pay dirt. There were medical research teams on campus—even Brad knew about this—and they paid fifty to a hundred bucks to anyone willing to pump himself full of trial medications. Technically you weren’t supposed to participate in more than one study at a time, though I had a tradition of holding down multiple jobs. And it turns out the side effects can be a lot worse when your body is already low on plasma. You get pretty woozy. Trust me on that one.

Then I learned about the projects being done in the Psych Department, mostly by graduate students desperate for data for their dissertations. It was the perfect solution: all I had to do was let them think they were playing with my mind while I messed with their test results. Don’t get me wrong—I was as helpful as possible. As soon as I figured out what they wanted to prove, I aimed to please, performing their word tests and puzzles in ways that would confirm the wildest hypotheses. It felt good to participate in the advancement of science.

Then they got on a new kick and suddenly all the test subjects were equipped with mechanical counters: you pushed a button and the number on the counter clicked up a step. They used these for all sorts of experiments. How often do people nap during the day? Take a counter and push the button every time you wake up. How often do you drink alcohol? Push the button with each glass. How often do you experience déjà vu? How many times do you find yourself daydreaming? With what frequency do you think of home? How often do you experience déjà vu? How often do you find yourself the victim of a cheap joke? Click, click, click—people

would push the button.

The test I really wanted was also the most popular: How often do you think about sex? I had it all worked out: I'd punch it up to thirteen on the first day, and after the two-week test period, when I handed it in, I'd explain that I'd topped the counter out at 10,000, and it was on the second round. But everyone wanted the Sex Button, and despite my excellent reputation for producing desired results, I didn't get in. I don't know—maybe it was because of my sperm. Did I mention that I also had a number of concussions?

Since I didn't get the Sex Button, I got the next best thing: the Death Button. That's right. Well, that was the nickname anyway. Officially it was the Mortality Consciousness Test, the MCT—kind of a morbid version of the ACT with a single question: How often do you think about The End—you know, kicking the bucket, croaking, meeting your maker, biting the big one, pushing up daisies, going out feet-first. At the outset I wasn't so keen, but then I realized that this was even slicker than the Sex Button. I could leave the counter zeroed out and get paid for nothing. I wouldn't even have to lie. After all, I was twenty years old. Why would I waste my time thinking about the back door to my life when I was barely in the front lobby? Sure, you might argue, it's all linked together—just the way my bedroom led to Michelle's through the Magic Closet. But still.

The experiment was simple in design, and over the course of two weeks it would net me a hundred bucks. All I had to do was click the button every time I imagined my own expiration. There were several of us at the training session, a room full of potential lemmings. I skipped out early because of my appointment at the plasma center, which left me so groggy I wondered if the nurse hadn't switched the tubes somehow, giving me my neighbor's inebriated blood instead. It was Walt Whitman stretched out next to me again, and I was going to ask if he'd noticed a mix-

up, but the guy was snoring pretty loudly. It seemed rude to wake him.

All in all it had been a decent week. We were creeping up on the end of the month, but I already had my share of the rent for Michelle. And speaking of creeps, I hadn't seen Brad for a while. The closet had been awfully quiet of late, and I'd started wondering if he was still in the picture. If not, maybe I'd take a crack at Michelle myself. Maybe she'd turned him out because I'd turned her on. Maybe she was just waiting for me to ask. Maybe she'd been dreaming of me. No, it wasn't very plausible, but these were the kinds of thoughts my plasma-free state induced in the one hemisphere of my brain Brad said I used. Besides, no one could deny it was technically possible for Michelle to fall for me, and that very idea put a spring in my pedaling as I zipped home on my Schwinn.

That's when it happened. I was rolling down a street that cut through campus—late afternoon with a lot of people milling about. A squirrel appeared out of nowhere. It was a suicide move, a kamikaze rodent throwing himself in front of the wheels of a bicycle. But then, at the last second, he must have rethought his plan, his rodent life flashing before his eyes, and he realized, despite what you might think, that he had something to live for. Meanwhile, I was bearing down on him. All the little guy had to do was decide: should he jump back to safety, or charge along on the same course to the other side? If he zigged, I could zag, and we'd both get through it in one piece. Forward or back, either way he'd be fine. But instead he chose option C, the in-between choice of not choosing. He twitched forward, stopped, arched his back as if he were turning around, and froze again. He didn't look up at me, but by the way his ears shivered, you could tell that he knew what was happening. He was like a passenger on the Titanic after the last lifeboat has bobbed away.

It was the smallest of bumps, the kind of bounce you get from going over a ridge of dirt.

But this one came with a crack like the snapping of a twig. Before I could even react, I'd gone right over my nut-eating friend. I turned in time to see the last furry spasm. It was over pretty fast. So eager, so beady-eyed just moments before, and now he was toast.

It took a minute before I fully absorbed the scene. Then, as if something cybernetic had taken control of my body, my hand reached for my jacket pocket, withdrawing a metal object. The Death Button. I stared at the counter, at the squirrel, and then at my finger as it reached of its own accord and pressed the button. The tumbler quivered, quivered, until the mechanism clicked: 0001.

That was how it started. An accident. I'd witnessed a squirrel take the plunge, and my wincing had triggered a contraction that extended down my arm to the finger curled over the button. I was just doing my duty. But the fact was, I'd identified with that little guy. All squirrels are mortal, it occurred to me. People are not so different from squirrels. I am a person. Ergo... ergo.... Even I could connect those dots, despite having whacked my head so often on the underside of my desk. The squirrel had been ferried across the river Styx. It had squeezed through the portal between life and death. Its organs were now dis-organized. Its liver was now a deather.

I had to wonder: having traversed purgatory, that existential pass-through closet linking before and after, had he ended up in paradise or damnation?

I felt the breath of the Reaper on the back of my neck, as sour as Walt Whitman's.

Which made me press the button again: 0002.

I could have *not* pressed it. There was no God of Psychology looking over my shoulder, requiring that I record these sentiments. But I pressed it all the same. As if yielding to the inevitable. As if, in the end, I had no choice, fatally, like when your number comes up—and this

line of reasoning led me to press it again. It was crazy. I'd gone very happily for twenty years without thinking about death, but now here I was, my brain entertaining the idea that I might not be long for this world. Which required me to click it again. And again.

I knew how this worked. We'd learned about it in my Physics-for-English-Majors class—the uncertainty principle, the idea that the presence of an observer can change the result of an experiment. I'd trotted through life blithely, but as soon as a device was introduced to register my thoughts, it didn't just record them: it *produced* them. Somebody mentions a *Death Button* to you, and it's hard to think of anything else. Just carrying one in your pocket makes you want to push the thing, and wanting to push it makes you think about what it means, and thinking about what it means leads to the very thought you were supposed to record in the first place. Then the whole thing starts again.

Worse yet, it occurred to me that I'd not been so free of such thoughts in the past. There'd been that day back when I was twelve when I realized science wasn't going to lick the mortality problem in time for my generation—an awareness I had promptly squeezed out of my consciousness. But even more recently, images worthy of Death-Button-pushing had nibbled at the edges of my life. Whenever I pumped out my plasma, for example. Or every time I saw Walt Whitman and wondered if one day he'd stop showing up at the center. Or when I spooned up my cereal in the company of Brad's pal Yorick at the breakfast table. Or read a book for an English class, which were all pretty damned morbid when you got right down to it.

Now the Death Button didn't seem like such a hot idea. Maybe I should have just sold my liver after all—not all of it, of course, just a Couinaud segment or two. You know, like the caudate lobe—something I could spare. Of course, there could be complications during the operation, the very thought of which made me click the button again.

Less than one post-squirrel hour had elapsed, and already I'd reached 0126 on the counter, at which point I declared a moratorium on button-pushing. It was ridiculous. I was caught in a loop. Besides, what counted as a new thought? Let's say you imagine something—ketchup, for example—and then two minutes later ketchup crosses your mind again. Is that a new thought, or just the continuation, after commercial interruption, of the first one? They hadn't covered that little point in the training session—at least not during the half I'd attended. And there's more: what's the difference between a thought and a feeling, between a vague impression and a reverie? If I start making up a list of condiments for my shopping list, and I think, *Hey, we need some ketchup*, that's a bona fide thought. It's not necessarily *brooding*, of course—you're not obsessed with ketchup or anything—but no one will deny you've thought about it. But let's say you walk into a Burger King, and you notice the aroma but don't think of the word. If that happened in the midst of some kind of Ketchup Consciousness Test—a KCT—would you push the counter for it?

The ketchup example was a useful distraction—until I considered how that sauce is also used outside the realm of fast food, how it can substitute for other fluids in plays or movies. It's not perfect blood, of course—it doesn't have any plasma, hasn't been detoxified by the liver—but those little pouches of tomato paste explode convincingly when someone fires a handgun on stage.

The image warranted another push of the Button.

That evening things went from bad to worse. Brad was there, his BMW parked at an angle outside our building. (The fact was, he really did need someone else to park that thing for him.) Inside he was in prime form. Yorick the skull was still there, sitting in the kitchen, grinning at all who passed by. I reach discreetly into my pocket and clicked the counter several times,

though it wasn't always my own death I was thinking of.

I locked myself in my room and tried to think of something else. Anything. But I inevitably came back to the Inevitable. Click, click, click. The counter was climbing. What good did it do for me to trade bits of my body for cash? To tank up on chemicals, or let people play with my mind? Or even to sneak glances at Michelle when Brad wasn't looking? It would all be over soon enough, no matter what. After all, what are we really but indecisive squirrels scurrying for treasures we will hide and forget? Or else future cranial decorations for other breakfast tables in other kitchens in other eras?

That night, stretched out on my mattress in the dark, I listened to Brad with Michelle on the other side of the louvers. At first it was clear she didn't want to. I heard the vague protests, and then his plaintive insistence. I was rooting for her, but finally she caved, and Brad set himself in motion, the bed groaning with every thrust, faster and faster. He was the BMW of boinkers—high speed with good acceleration, and no brakes whatsoever. It all seemed deadly somehow. Click, click, click.

The next morning, Brad was drinking coffee from my special mug, his feet up on the only other chair at the kitchen table, the Sunday funnies open in his lap. Michelle sliced fruit at the counter. And me? I'd not slept a wink, running the counter up to great heights, hitting four digits. My knees wobbled from the shortage of plasma. It was Michelle who begged Brad to take his feet off my chair.

"I was just reading about you," he said, waving the funnies in my face. He'd opened it to Beetle Bailey.

Yorick smiled at me from my place at the table—a skull after my own heart, a happy-go-lucky cranium without a worry in the world. It was like a Renaissance painting: some guy in

flowing robes sits down at a banquet table to have his Cheerios, and there's a *memento mori* palling around with him. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow.... Conveniently, I had the counter right there in my pajama pocket.

When I edged Yorick away from my orange juice, Brad barked at me to leave him alone, and when I didn't cease fast enough, he swatted me with a bludgeon of newspaper, sending our friendly ball of bone on a wobbly roll off the edge of the table, where he smashed on the tile. I looked down to find teeth, occipital plates and pieces of mandible scattered across the floor. It was all over. My breakfast companion was gone! Alas. Poor Yorick. I'd known him so well.

"Look what you've done, you idiot," Brad cried. He said it was medical school property. Actually, he referred to it as *goddamn medical school crap*, and called me a *butthead* to boot. That was his *homework*, he said, and I'd screwed it up. I was going to have to pay.

So there I was, contemplating my own mortality and secretly wishing for Brad's, all the while clicking away on the Death Button to my heart's discontent, when an amazing thing happened—like when a louver door opens, or the clouds part and a goddess speaks from the sky.

It was Michelle's voice, coming out in her tiniest Michelle whisper.

"You weren't exactly *using* that skull," she murmured.

You could barely hear the hint of reproach, but it was there all right, like a blip on a seismograph. Something in the ground had shifted. Brad noticed it too. He rotated like a statue coming to life and stared at her. We both did.

The look in Michelle's eyes, the mix of panic and indecision, was familiar to me. I'd seen it before, just the other day on the face of my furry friend as I bore down on him with my Schwinn. I wanted to help her. That said, I'd also wanted to help that squirrel, and look how that turned out. You have to tread carefully in this world, I realized, or else people who don't deserve

it get tire tracks all over their spine. But what exactly are you supposed to do? I was ready to jump in. Willing to do my part. I just needed to know which way Michelle would go. Would she zig or zag?

And that's when it came to me, the lesson, the epiphany, the revelation: *You can't ever wait for the squirrel.*

I must have said it out loud, because now Brad was squinting at me. "What the fuck?" he said.

I took Michelle's question and ran with it, like one of those crazy batons in a relay race. Hey, I asked him, did he actually *need* Yorick anymore? After all, he'd claimed to be such a quick study. Surely he'd mastered all the parts long ago?

Just uttering the words did wonders. I felt like that ape at the beginning of *2001*, the weak one who picks up a femur and finds that it fits his hand just right—before he starts smashing stuff with it. Skulls, in fact. Preternatural Yoricks.

Brad's eyes got tiny, with the kind of glint I'd only seen in movies, ones with axes and vampires.

What was I implying, he wanted to know.

Any other day I'd have backed off. But for the past twenty-four hours death had become my constant companion, and as all the philosophers will tell you, that's the only true way to prepare yourself for your final hour. Plus, I was sleep-deprived. And overdrawn on my plasma account.

Which is how we got into another wager. He sneered in his charming way, claiming he'd already learned more about human anatomy than I would ever know. He bet me ten bucks he could beat me in a quiz on the human body, on any part I wanted. He stuck out his hand to shake

on it.

I admit it was tempting. There I was, chronically underfunded, with Brad offering me another opportunity to gamble. But, in fact, it's not worth taking chances unless the stakes are high enough, unless it's something you really want, and I told him so.

"Twenty bucks," he spat out, doubling the pot. "Fifty. A hundred."

I turned him down. The sums were both too little and too much, more than I could afford, and also strangely off the mark, like it was all the wrong currency. Then I realized what I wanted. It wasn't Yorick off my breakfast table, or even next month's rent. What I wanted was Brad out of my apartment. Out of my life.

Yes, that was it. I felt like a peasant who just realized how nicely a nobleman's head would fit at the end of his pike.

Brad had a good chuckle when I proposed that wager, though it kind of dried in his throat when Michelle didn't smile.

"You're on, English Major," he said. "But if I win, then it's *you* that gets the boot. You clear out. Today. This morning. You're history."

Touching Brad wasn't one of my favorite activities, but I shook his hand.

"OK, pinhead," he smiled after we'd settled the formalities. "What'll it be? Skeletal? Muscular? Cardio-vascular?" He caressed the names of these bodily systems with his tongue.

I didn't have to think for long. Even if English majors mostly learn useless fluff, every now and then you get a chance to trot out a parlor trick.

"If you don't mind," I told him, "I'm more of an internal organ man, myself. I've always had a soft spot for the liver."

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Brad moved his stuff out that afternoon, taking the pieces of Yorick with him. In some ways, I think he was glad to be gone. Michelle's period of mourning for that particular relationship was abridged, and soon thereafter our courtship began. We baked together on Friday evenings. I learned how to make scones. Not long after, I stopped selling myself. And then, one night, my universe expanded: Michelle opened the louver doors on her side, and she invited me through.

And the Death Button? It took a long, long rest.

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