

Content note:
BROKEN HEARTS AND ZOMBIE PARTS
includes references to homophobia
and homophobic slurs



Eighteen hours after the mythic disaster that was prom, here I lie, naked apart from this flimsy gown, a hairy man-mountain leaning over me, caressing my chest. Okay, so that might sound like some weird sex dungeon thing. It really isn't.

A weird sex dungeon wouldn't be this scary.

"All right, Jesse," says Big Si, "take another deep breath and hold it for me."

I obediently gulp down half the oxygen in the room and puff out hamster cheeks. Meanwhile Big Si skates the echocardiogram probe around my left nipple before pressing it hard against my breastbone. The pressure hurts a bit and I wince, whispering that I'm okay when Big Si apologizes for any discomfort.

So, in case you're wondering, I'm lying on my side on a narrow examination table, my face to the wall, the immense Simon seated on a stool behind me.

"Aaaaaaaand breathe," he says.

I exhale and glance down. My skin gleams with the ultrasound gloop that somehow helps the probe see inside my heart. Except you don't need a probe to see how hard it's hammering right now. My chest thrums like a trampoline at a kids' birthday party.

"Everything all right?" Si asks.

"Fabulous." I nod. "Thanks, Big Si... Except." My eyes go wide. "Oh God, wait. I'm sorry, did you ask me to call you 'Big Si' or did I imagine it? I mean, you *are* quite tall. Not freakishly tall or anything. I actually think you're very nicely proportioned."

And I want to die. Except, no! Don't even think that, not while you're wired up to about a million electrodes (actually four, but still) and having your heart examined. I might not be superstitious, and I definitely don't believe in all that tempting fate bullshit, but it's better to be safe than sorry, right? Especially in a situation like this.

Chuckling comes from behind me, so I guess Big Si isn't too offended by my complimenting his dimensions.

"Right, another deep breath, Jesse." The probe nestles back against my ribs. "Here we go."

I'm in hamster-cheek mode again when the monitor attached to the probe starts to whoosh in this weird, rhythmic, *Star Wars* sort of way. I'm pretty sure that's the sound of blood gushing into – or pumping out of – my heart.

"Those noises are perfectly normal," Si assures me. "You're a bit keyed up right now, but your pulse will settle in a moment or two, I promise. Just try to relax."

Relax? You've got to be fu— No, sure, good advice, relax. Because everything is bound to be all right. I've never had any kind of issue with my heart before, so this is probably just a bizarre one-off thing that they'll sort with a pill or something. Okay. Good. Let's concentrate on something *not* heart related. My thoughts flip back to Cas. What the hell was going on with him last night? Out of our entire school, I would probably have been voted Most Likely to Fuck Up Prom, and I guess I kind of did, clutching my chest and collapsing like a total drama queen into Morgan's arms (cue screaming kids, cue panicked teachers, cue ambulance sirens) but that was entirely my best mate's fault. Finding Cas like that behind the bins with Matilda Chen? That certainly coincided with my heart kicking into a weird high gear. And as for Cas...?

Yeah, it's no good. I can't make any sense of Cas right now, so instead I rewind to ten minutes ago, just before I entered the echocardiogram changing room. Big Si had been checking his clipboard and asking yet another of the pre-scan safety questions. For my part, I'd suddenly become fascinated by his improbable arms. So freaking huge! I mean, even his biceps seemed to have biceps.

"Still with us, Jesse?"

“Sorry,” I’d said, blinking, “what?”

He tapped the top of my head gently with the clipboard. “No need to be worried. We’re just going to have a little look inside your chest and—”

“If you find an alien spawn growing inside there, you have my permission to shoot me.” I grinned. “A nice clean headshot, please. Honestly, I’d prefer that to going through the whole birthing-a-monster melodrama. *Such* a chore.”

Si frowned and gave me this all too familiar up-and-down look. People have been giving me this look pretty regularly for the past seventeen years, or at least ever since I’ve been able to speak.

“So what we need you to do next,” he continued, “is to pop off all your clothes and then— WHOA! No, my friend. Not in the corridor. In the changing room.”

“Ah, of course,” I said, rebuckling my belt. “Sorry about that. As you can probably tell, I’m just a *teeny* bit hyper right now. But seriously, I’m not a naturist or anything. In fact, I am stunningly uncomfortable around all forms of public nudity.”

“That’s very reassuring.” Big Si nodded. “So get undressed, in the cubicle, then put on the gown that’s provided. Once you’re done, head through the other door and I’ll be waiting for you in the scanning room. Oh, just one last thing, we have to check – do you have any piercings?”

I stared at him. “Is that a requirement?”

“No.” Si ran his palm across his forehead. “No, Jesse, I just... You see, anything metallic can interfere with the equipment.”

“Oh, is it a magnetic thing?” I asked. “Because there was this kid at school whose older brother had a piercing, you know, down *there*, and he got into this medical scanner thingy without telling anyone and his penis was almost completely ripped off. True story.”

Big Si closed his eyes. “Do you have such an adornment or anything else metallic in or on your person?”

Did I? The prospect of some vital organ dangling from a piece of hospital machinery like a grisly fridge magnet was enough to make me question my entire piercings history. Or lack thereof. Was it feasible that I’d had a nipple or a belly button or a bellend metallicity embellished and completely forgotten about it? I was inclined to say... *No*.

“N-ooo,” I said out of the side of my mouth.

“You’re not sure?”

This was ridiculous. Of course I was sure.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, “of course I’m sure.”

Si made a note on his clipboard and pointed to the changing-room door. I’m pretty sure he’d written something like *handle with care* rather than *no piercings*.

The monitor gives this dramatic whoosh and I’m back in the craptacular present.

“And breathe normally,” Big Si advises.

I breathe – *kind of normally* – and look at the wall a few centimetres from my nose. There’s a laminated poster tacked there, and superimposed over a picture of a diseased heart is a side-on reflection of my face: poodle mop of absurdly curly black hair, big apple-green eyes my mum says are cute, thick eyebrows that keep threatening to meet in the middle, and a mouth on the verge of a scream.

Honestly, with Big Si leaning over me it’s all starting to get a bit much. One of the safety questions was, *Are you claustrophobic?* I guess because the echocardiogrammer, or whatever they’re called, has to get very up close and personal to do their job. But how are you supposed to know what level of claustrophobia they mean? For example, I’ve had a fairly trouble-free history with things like crowded buses and hide-and-seek cupboards. Although there was that spin-the-bottle game at Julia Odili’s Halloween party when Sammy McBride and I ended up kissing in a closet and I developed a never-ending boner and had to walk home still hugging my coat to my groin. But that wasn’t anything to do with a fear of enclosed spaces. That was because Sammy looks kind of like a young Chadwick Boseman from *Black Panther*. So, I don’t think unscheduled erections are a side effect of claustrophobia.

Unless they are. I make a mental note to google it later.

Which is all an attempt to divert myself from a sense

of mounting panic. Thoughts of last night’s prom and Cas’s weird behaviour behind the bins have been like a sticking plaster, holding back the horrible freakiness of this whole scan deal and what it might mean. But now that metaphorical plaster is coming loose and I can feel the walls of this tiny room closing in on me, slowly squeezing my lungs, choking the air out of my throat until I just have to—

“And we’re done!” Big Si announces. “Great work, Jesse. Give me a sec and I’ll get you some paper towels for your chest.”

My mouth clamps shut. My shriek vanishes. I feel strangely cheated.

I turn onto my back and find myself blinking up at Big Si’s glistening lumberjack beard. In everyday life, you very rarely get to check out the underside of a guy’s beard. Unlike me, Big Si is clearly into high-maintenance grooming. I’m almost sure that probably means he’s gay, but that is the kind of assumption my friend Morgan would call “just awful”.

I take some paper towels and start wiping off the gloop while Big Si unhooks me from the electrodes.

“How was it?” He smiles.

I begin to stand up, some cool comment forming in my brain, when all at once I let loose this random sob. Honestly, it’s mortifying! A weird braying sound, like a donkey that’s

swallowed a half tank of helium. I guess it comes from all the stress and sleeplessness, but it's such a ridiculous noise that I feel the mother of all blushes erupt across my cheeks.

"Wow, so I don't know what that was about." I laugh, swapping out the donkey impression for some kind of maniacal hyena. "Just so you know, I watch a ludicrous number of horror movies, so it actually takes quite a lot to scare me. And even if I was a bit freaked by all this, I'm not really a crier, I'm more likely to start jabbering on and on about nothing, which is what my mum tells me I do whenever I'm nervous, though I think she's talking rubbish because I am in fact a man of very few words."

I stop, a little breathless, and allow Big Si to give my shoulder a friendly pat.

"It's all good," he says, taking back the used paper towels and binning them. "Nothing to be embarrassed about. Now, if you want to get dressed again and return to the waiting room, Dr Myers will call you through once he's reviewed the scans and my report."

"Dr Myers?" I beam, my mortification immediately forgotten. "No way! Is his first name Michael?"

"I think it's Julian."

"Oh. So not like the serial killer from John Carpenter's 1978 horror classic *Halloween*?"

"Not entirely."

"Well, that's good. I guess." I'm almost at the changing

room door when I turn back. "But can I just ask – my heart's basically okay, right? That probe thingy didn't pick up anything really sinister? Because, you know, I'm young and reasonably fit, and I've never had any heart problems before, so I'm sure everything must be absolutely fine..."

Big Si makes a final note on his clipboard and throws me a smile from behind his alluring logger's beard.

"Good luck, Jesse Spark," he says. "Meeting you was certainly...an experience."