

## **The Heart That Stayed (Even Though It Wasn't Meant To) - Elena, Year 6, SA**

I step into the cold room, the air sharp against my skin. Steel shelves stretch along the walls, each one crammed with glass jars holding hearts drained of colour. The hearts like faded photographs, their colors leached, capturing a time when feelings still had meaning. A quiet hum fills the space – maybe a machine tucked away somewhere, or just the sound of stillness.

I move carefully across the sterile floor, my footsteps soft. After a moment of searching, I spot an empty space on the lower shelf. I lower the heart into place, its surface already grey, a distinct contrast to the ones that surround it.

I presume that you are wondering why so many hearts are locked away in this room, each one seemingly forgotten. The answer isn't as clear as you might think. Now, in 2125, people are given a choice – an offer to erase sadness from their lives. It seems like the perfect solution, but once understood, it isn't. Getting rid of sadness means that they also lose the ability to feel happiness. The two emotions are connected, and so if one vanishes, the other does as well.

As the daughter of the famous cardiac surgeon, the one who started it all, Felix Looper, it's my job to gather all of the collected hearts and store them here. But I never really understood why so many people make that decision.

After all, a life with no emotion means a life with no love, right?

Before my mother died, she told me about something called '*The Choice*.' Apparently, being happy is a choice you have to make, and without making it, staying happy forever is never going to become a reality.

I've always wanted to make the choice, but tomorrow I'm getting my heart removed because of my mother's death being 'too much' of an emotional toll.

I've always wondered how people can choose happiness without their hearts and feelings. Maybe there is no choice anymore. So then what will I do?

I leave the enormous room, still shrouded in my thoughts.

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"Cor, you're back from the storeroom! That one was the last for today," my dad exclaims, wrapping me in a hug, careful not to smear my back with the off-white gloves he's wearing.

"Yep, I'm back," I say. Sometimes I get annoyed by my dad's unrealistic enthusiasm for his job. Who genuinely enjoys taking out people's hearts every day, and how can he actually be excited when he doesn't even have a heart to allow him *to* feel emotions?

“Was work great?”

“You know it!”

But I honestly don't. For a second, his smile falters.

“So... what's for dinner?”

“Oh,” my dad's voice suddenly goes quieter as he walks to the taps to wash his hands and throw out his gloves. “Sorry, Cordis, but I couldn't make dinner today, I was a bit busy. But I got your favourite!”

My eyes brighten, and I pull over a lock of my dark brown hair to cover them. “Honey chicken?” I ask excitedly.

“Er, well, maybe your second favourite.” He lifts the lid off of the steaming pot on top of the stove. “Two-minute noodles!”

“Yay.”

My dad is a little bit too 'into' himself to realize that 2-minute noodles are actually my 42nd most favourite food, but I'll allow for his ignorance today.

After all, I've got a lot of thinking to do.

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At the moment, I'm sitting on my bed, with a neat list of the pros and cons of getting my heart removed resting on the blanket in front of me.

My noodles half-eaten and on my desk, I stare at the list in front of me, the words blurring together the longer I look. The "pros" for removal seem cold and clinical: no sadness, no grief, no pain.

But the "cons" scream louder: no laughter, no love, no dreams.

I press the tip of my pen against the paper, leaving a dark inky dot where I hesitate. It feels wrong to make a decision like this when my heart, despite everything, still beats inside me.

Sighing, I push the lists away and curl up under my blanket, the heat from the bowl of noodles on my desk still somehow reaching my ears. Tomorrow is coming whether I'm ready or not – and deep down, I know that if I give my heart away, I might lose more than sadness. I might lose my single memory of my mother.

*Wait.*

*I have an idea.*

#

The next morning, everything feels weirdly normal. The sun is just starting to claw its way over the rooftops, spilling a tired light into my room. I get dressed slowly – jeans, hoodie, sneakers, little purple backpack, like I’m going to school. My heart is thudding so hard in my chest that it feels almost like a warning.

Dad’s waiting by the front door, his car keys jingling in his hands.

“You ready, Cor?” he asks, smiling like this is some big milestone, not the day I lose everything that makes me *me*.

“Yeah,” I lie.

The drive to the clinic is quiet except for the radio buzzing low. Dad hums along tunelessly. I just stare out the window, counting the cracks in the footpath like I can somehow make time slow down.

The clinic looks the same as always: White, forgettable. Inside, it smells like fake lemons and cold metal. A woman at the front desk waves us in like she’s waving us onto a conveyor belt.

“Cordis Looper, right? I love your name! It means heart, you know. In Latin.”

I twist my slight frown into a fake smile. “Yeah, quite ironic, right?”

She giggles in that way that you laugh when you don’t quite know how to reply. “Just this way, to ‘Heart Removal Room 2.’”

No waiting. No thinking. No turning back.

Except... turning back is what I have to do.

They lead me toward the removal room, my palms sweating. The hallway stretches out too long in front of me, like some kind of optical illusion. The door to the operating room looms closer and closer.

And just before they open it–

I fake a stumble.

“Ow,” I gasp, grabbing my ankle. The surgeon jumps forward to help me, and Dad’s right behind her, full of concern.

“You okay?” he says, crouching beside me.

“I think I twisted it,” I say, screwing my face into the best fake grimace I can manage. “I don’t think I can do the procedure today.”

The nurse hesitates, glancing at Dad like she doesn’t want to make a decision without him.

Dad frowns, worried but practical. “I don’t think we should reschedule,” he says, patting my shoulder. “We’re full for the next few months, and so I don’t think that it would be a good idea.”

*Darn it.*

“I’ll be back in a few hours, Cor,” he says. “You’ll feel so much better once it’s done.”

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat.

I’m lucky that direct family members aren’t allowed to perform the surgery.

I walk (well, hobble) into the cold, blindingly white operating room, my sneakers squeaking against the polished floor. The surgeon gives me a reassuring smile I can’t return. Machines beep softly, and a gurney waits under the harsh overhead lights. I lie down stiffly, my heart hammering so loudly I wonder if they can hear it.

A mask lowers toward my face, and I flinch instinctively.

“Just relax,” the surgeon says gently, her voice syrupy, practiced.

I don’t relax. I *can’t*.

The second she turns to adjust the machine, I bolt upright, ripping the mask away. My legs feel like jelly, but I force them to move, to run.

To run down the hallway, through the fake lemon-scented lobby, and out into the too-bright morning.

I hide in a small bush for about an hour, waiting until I see my dad’s car in the car park. I take out of my purple backpack the fake decoloured heart I had created the night before and stuff it into a small glass jar, quickly scrawling my name across it in permanent marker. I run

inside and into the waiting room, tossing it carefully between my hands, my fingers trembling with the weight of what I've done.

Then he walks in.

“Cor! How was it?”

I act like I'm not feeling anything, like my heart isn't about to explode. I stare at him emotionlessly. “Great.”

“Aw, still not up to acting excited, that's fine, you'll get used to it,” he smiles. “When we get back, put the jar in the storeroom next to mine, okay? We can make a little family!”

I remain sure to look straight ahead with no expression as we walk toward the car and get in.

As the city rolls past the windows, I press my hand flat against my chest, feeling the steady thud of my heart.

It's still here. I'm still feeling everything.

And now I have to pretend that I'm not.