

# PUBLISHED VERSION

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All my best,  
Catherine

**Dr Catherine Noske** FHEA (she/her)  
Editor, *Westerly Magazine*

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## Us Skeletons on a Blind Date, Waiting

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Matthew Hooton is the author of the novels *Deloume Road* (Jonathan Cape, Knopf) and *Typhoon Kingdom* (UWAP), and has written fiction and non-fiction for a number of publications, including *Westerly*, *PRISM*, *Geist*, *Riddle Fence*, the *CBC*, *Aesthetica Creative Writing Anthology*, *Southerly*, and *Sweet Tree Review*. He teaches creative writing at the University of Adelaide, where his research and writing ranges topically from Korean history to Jim Henson's *Muppets* and the stunts of Evel Knievel.

The fine wool of our suit, brown, from the Old World, *please and*, muffles the rattling, the worst of the creaks and groans of bone on bone. We haul we along the strip in Norwood, pretend to check our own reflections in shop windows, when really we're just ignoring the stares and all those heel-nipping canines. Already we've suffered the indignation of a neat row of teeth indentations in our talus that no amount of baking soda can remove, *thanks and*.

We take our designated seat at the designated café. Weathered pine table with a red umbrella. Still ten minutes before the designated time, but we place our copy of Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (also designated) on the table as conspicuously as possible—even let one corner of the book hang nonchalantly off the edge. We are *chill*, this placement says. We are not anxious sitting here, nor are we self-conscious, *please and*. And, as we're doing this, it happens: that moment we wait for, that sinking into the background, barely perceptible, where the other patrons of the café lose interest and return to their own dates and meetings and reunions. Holy moments these, sacred and rare, when we become the watcher.

'Do skeletons get sad?' The voice seems to erupt from thin air, and for a moment we worry it's in our skull. Then the little one clears her throat, and we shift our gaze downwards to where she stands with arms crossed, a miniature version of Olive Oyl from Popeye cartoons, long nose,

impossibly skinny limbs, dark hair pulled back as if to emphasise her one thick eyebrow.

‘Yes,’ we say, because it seems easier than trying to find a beginning.

‘Like when?’ The girl raises one side of the eyebrow. ‘When were you last very sad?’

‘Very sad?’

‘Or just sad, I guess.’ She seems disappointed by this downgrading of potential tragedy.

We think hard on this, because, well, where to start? We came to this suburb of Adelaide to escape the fam’s expectations. *Think of great-uncle Leopold*, they’d say. *All that fame, and still time for a family. Did you know Alastair Sim insisted on a real skeleton for the Ghost of Christmas Future? Handpicked your great-uncle himself for the role.* Yes, we would say. We have seen the 1951 classic seventeen times. Or they would ask if we were in touch with cousin Hendrick, who modelled for Tim Burton and lent a voice to *Nightmare*. To say nothing of various relatives on Broadway, *thanks and*.

The girl hasn’t moved.

We adjust our tie to buy another moment, but this little one doesn’t even blink at the blue silk, nor at the single brown horizontal stripe. Italian, *of course*, we think but do not utter. ‘Fine,’ we say at last. ‘We were sad last month after we looked at a home for sale and the real estate agent froze in the walk-in, and we could see that he was trying to describe it without using the word *closet*, because of what we are. It’s not easy to do, describe a closet without using the word.’

The little one doesn’t get it, so we try to explain the idiom, and how it makes we feel *other*. Even more other.

‘But you’re not a regret, or hidden,’ she says.

‘In fairness, you don’t know much about we,’ we reply.

‘I can tell,’ says this girl, who is both an I and a we in the way this generation can be. Is that hopeful? Or too little too late and utterly sad? Maybe the we that is this girl claims they rather than I or we, which makes we nervous—so much weight on *they*, so much to carry when it’s already carrying plurality.

‘Do skeletons get married?’

We shrug and nod, say sometimes, but already our thoughts spin like a globe, the remembering echoing off the long-ago-fused tectonic plates of our cranium. That first night when we collapsed into we, became us, a tangled pile of rib and metatarsal. Oh archaic ecstasy, oh rattling intimacy and scythe-wielding Cupid, inscribe upon us history and prophecy (we recall thinking this, *please and*), something oracular, like those

shaman-carved human bones that disappeared from China's National Museum a few years back—just stood up and walked off. We with fewer ribs borrowed two, we to we for us. Holy is the clavicle, we learned. Holy the femur. Holy the darkness beyond eye socket, the zygomatic arch. We-us are a love story, *were* a love story, birthed or unearthed from the sexy recesses of catacombs and churches constructed of calcium, the envy of scarab beetles and Egyptologists everywhere.

But even skeleton love stories end predictably. Us had we needs and slipped into a problem of language beyond bone on bone, beyond the rhythms of grinding teeth in the dark, *thanks and*. Us left we for a palaeontologist with a fetish for the taboo. That baby-toothed jackass from Harvard with his terrible lizards held up by iron and steel wire. Nothing holy about these constructions, and, out of spite, we did not tell him his brontosaurus had the wrong head, though any fool could see the uppermost vertebrae didn't match the cranial floor. Let history sort that one out, *please and thanks and*. Let the renaming begin and never end. Let that interfering Neanderthal find no peace in the fossil record. Amen.

'Do you marry other skeletons?'

'Usually, but not always. So,' we pause here for dramatic effect (cousin Hendrick eat your heart out), 'why are we asking if skeletons get sad to begin with?'

The tiny we wrinkles their nose and tilts their thinly fleshed skull as if remembering. Then they blurt: 'Because in school today we learned about Laika the dog from Moscow that the Soviet Union shot into space and the spaceship was too small and too hot and Laika the dog couldn't even turn around and died and I think she's still floating up there in like a capsule thing or pod and is probably a skeleton now, but not talking at a café like you. And in space. Alone. Which is very sad.'

We remember this; 1957. 'Yes,' we say. 'That is very sad.' And we think of all the space capsules orbiting our planet, and even though we know it cannot possibly be so, that surely each satellite and spacecraft eventually drops in a flaming arc to Earth, we picture these pods as glass-lidded coffins, the forever-stranded skeletons of Soviet and American dogs and apes. So forget Yorick, *please and*, poor or otherwise. Even gravediggers must look to the stars now, to these entombed remains, airless, osseous, and oracular in their orbits, marking the entrance to our atmosphere—portents for we's, they's, and any alien species brave enough to swing by.

We check our Apple watch again, the one that keeps sending messages of our failed heart to EMS, to see if the we we are waiting for is late, but we're still early, and there is no escape from this little we.

'What else makes you sad?' we asks we.

We do not say, wow, we're really milking this at-best-adjacent historical trauma, which, *thank you and*, was really only traumatic for the dog. We do not say this because this little we is also part us. We see this, the simplicity of it, its baking-soda polished holiness.

'Lots of things,' we say, 'but lately we have found it upsetting to watch Adelaideans chop down trees. When they don't need to, we mean. We like trees very much. And shade. And it's getting hotter.'

'Which is very sad,' says the little we, nodding slowly.

We agree with the little one's agreement, explain how we miss those who are felled, miss their UV-chewing canopies, limb-like bones that root deep into the earth, those greatest of we's, networked and ligamented, a century or two old, speaking to their own and to we so slowly we don't recognise the language, don't recognise it *as* language, and then, so quickly and ruthlessly, lost forever to another row of particle-board townhouses that'll need demolishing in two decades.

The tiny we nods and says just yesterday their teacher asked the class how many of them felt calm and happy when they thought about the future and *only one kid* raised their hand. 'Then they just lowered it, and their face was bright red,' says the small we. 'And it's big because... because it's like there's not going to be a world soon for anyone who's not a skeleton. Which is very—'

A Havanese yaps at the base of our fibula (brown suede shoes, *please and*, but socks a bridge too far), strains against leash, its owner chatting nearby, oblivious to the taut line and proximity of needling teeth to bone. The little we raises that eyebrow and coughs in the owner's direction, as we recall reading about a perfume invented by Australia Post meant to repel dogs, but which drew them in howling packs to the fragrance. Before we can speak this memory the miniature yapping threat disappears, dragged off on its leash, and the little we asks yet another question.

'Who are you waiting for?' So terrier-like.

We'd like to address this we's anxiety over a future for the non-skeletal, but find ourselves taking the easy route and explaining the nuances of a blind date, which we acknowledge is probably just how dating works now, but we are not from this era of self-marketing, and online profiles are a tricky business. Interests? Mummification. Entombment through the ages. Film studies. What's sexy? The fused fault lines of a skull. Bone discolouration. Also, we are a stickler for straight teeth.

'Will they come? Who you're waiting for?'

We shrug, trying to play it cool, still fighting the urge to straighten the book we placed so haphazardly on the table, and we look to the heavens above that mirror the heavens within, to those orbiting skeleton pods,

considering that oldest of languages and whether there is some truth to share with this little we. Just as English has only twenty-six characters, and fewer shapes, *thanks and*, and so every page contains the code of every other page—can, in fact, be rearranged to *become* every other page—so every skeleton contains the bone code, the IKEA assembly instructions, of every other skeleton. Bones the building blocks of this language, this original written word, before wasted literacy, once read by oracles and shamans and gravediggers. An archaic Morse. A rattling gospel. An ecstatic crackling. We are unsure if it's wise to say what we think now, to this little we, who we fear is both too young and already overburdened with the dusty ecclesiastical truth that nothing, no endeavour beneath our winking stars and spacecraft, neither joyful nor very sad, amounts to anything more than mineral.

And now a rattling and creaking, the tiny we's eyes lifting over our shoulder towards the sound, a whiff of Colgate and myrrh, and us waiting, wondering, hoping.