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Storylines

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CARRIE COX



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For Emily, Lara and Carlton

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By beauty I mean that quality or those
qualities in bodies, by which they cause
love, or some passion similar to it.

Edmund Burke, 1757, *A Philosophical Enquiry
into the Origin of Our Ideas of the
Sublime and Beautiful*

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1

It sometimes happens on night four, like this, at dinner. The circling birds all land at once. Bodies unwrapped like shrouds, inner wounds dabbed, sometimes ripped open. Tired. Missing something, someone. Dying for a drink.

I look upon them from the corner of the long table, both our positions privileged: mine as observer, theirs as women who can afford to spend five days caring only for themselves.

They'd hiked a mountain (a hill, really, but that doesn't work for the website), breathed through old traumas, found new ones behind the sternum, rubbed rocks and stepped on stones. They'd been massaged, twisted, assaulted by vibrations, brushed, hushed and massaged again. They'd painted, mostly badly, and some had cried with the release of it all. By night four, it's usually time to find most of this at least a bit funny.

I like this group, and not just because there have been minimal complaints: requests for softer pillows, longer massages, for less birdsong in the surrounding trees, none of these. Just one woman,

Helen, had suggested the floorboards in the yoga room were a little creaky and I agreed. ‘Creakier than my own bones,’ I’d replied, later realising I should have said joints, and that these aren’t creaky yet anyway.

Tonight they’ll want to laugh and be laughed at. To sigh and cry. To connect after so much wilful disconnection. They’ll want to share their stories of workaholic partners and sociopathic supervisors and infertility and high-school reunions and #MeToo moments and dry vaginas. The things that had brought them here: addictions, affairs, anxiety, apathy. Boredom and bitterness and milestone birthday presents. They’ll want this, but it doesn’t always happen. Every group is its own constellation.

‘Maybe you can share with each other what brought you here,’ I say, hoping it’s all I’ll need to do, that the kindling will ignite.

At the very first retreat four years ago, I’d tried initiating this conversation on night one, but the answers were perfunctory and no one was ready to talk. Tonight there’s a small pause, just long enough for my mind to hurtle through the movie montage of everything it’s taken to create this place – a bush haven for strangers – and how brittle it all still feels.

‘Basically, I wanted rehab without the bare walls,’ says Jenna (36, *political advisor*, I recall from her questionnaire). ‘And no men. No tight hallways. No eye contact. I tell you what the worst part of politics is, the actual worst bit? The nasal hair. So much of it!’ The other women laugh carefully. I try to find even the slightest twitch in Jenna’s jawline, any hint of asymmetry, but there is nothing askew.

‘Are you a politician?’ asks Isha (28, *school careers counsellor*). I have been admiring this woman all week: the gentle way she moves through

a room, her quiet escapes before dawn to the dam, no doubt assuming she's the only one awake at such a lonely hour.

'No,' Jenna says, 'I just advise a politician. I can't say who – you'd know right away who I was talking about.'

'And who advises you?' Sonia (45, *paediatrician*) puts to Jenna. I can see she means this benignly, genuinely curious, but it takes Jenna a few seconds to threat-check.

'Well, everyone, everything,' Jenna answers. 'Like, the whole internet, all day every day. That's why I came here, to make it stop for a bit.'

'Me too,' says Lexi (she'd written 22, *nutrition student*, but I'm almost certain she's a wellness blogger here to spy or review). 'It's like, how far do I have to go to not hear the noise?'

The skin on Lexi's face is like chiffon pulled across a bodice. How many people will softly brush the back of a hand across it in her lifetime, I wonder, unable to resist?

Lucy (52, *caterer*) tells the group this trip was a gift to herself for getting through breast cancer treatment, and then the sudden death of her mother, alone on a packed ferry. 'All the noise I hear is in my own head,' she says as I move to refill everyone's drinks. 'Just my own voice bringing me thoughts I don't want, one after the other. I thought I could escape that by coming here.'

'Mindfulness is a crock,' announces Sonia, sipping hard from her glass. 'I want my head empty, not full. The only time I switch off is when I'm sleeping, which is never. Is there such a thing as a sleep retreat?'

'Death,' says Jenna. 'That's what death is. I'm booked in.' There's laughter, a snort and then harder laughter, the real kind.

I steal across to the kitchen to replenish the grazing board just as Ursula (*61, not currently employed*) speaks for the first time. By the time I get back to the table, laden with fruit and cheese, a sober stillness has taken over the room and every head is angled her way. She is telling them about her father – how his Alzheimer’s had saved their relationship, formed it out of nothing. He’d been an awful man, she says, the sort of old-fashioned brute that works on cruelty like a shed project – like it’s never quite finished, not yet perfect.

‘But then, somehow, it did finish,’ Ursula says. ‘The hardness faded when the other things started to, and love came rushing in. And it must have felt so good to him, like a food he’d never tried before, that he just kind of embraced it. He let it become him. He would reach over from his bed and pick up my hand and hold it like a bird, not a thing he wanted to crush. He would tell the nurses, “This is my daughter, isn’t she beautiful.” The same man who used to call me Fester Face – you know, after Uncle Fester? I spent my whole life feeling ugly because he told me I was, that it hurt his Irish eyes to look at me.’

I look across at the line of women on my side of the table. Lucy’s shoulders are shaking and Sonia’s mouth is fixed open in disbelief. A ripple of sniffs pop the air like bubble wrap. Young Lexi is stealing a glance at the phone on her lap, no doubt googling Uncle Fester.

‘And after all those years of seeing myself through his eyes, unlovable even by a father,’ Ursula continues, ‘he’s become another person completely, his entire brain reassembled. Like his head got tipped upside down and everything fell out except these nice bits that had been stuck at the bottom the whole time. Sometimes I would think, don’t let this be a trick, Dad. Don’t let this be the cruellest thing you’ve ever done. And other times, I would just give in to it. I’d pretend that

this was him, that this version of him was the real one, not a bizarre gift from a disease. The sixty years before this were the aberration, not *this*.’

We believe what we need to, I say, just to myself.

‘And he died,’ she finishes, ‘while holding my hand under his and smiling at me as though I were truly beautiful. And his last words were, “Love, I could *really* go a pickled onion.”’

Isha lets out a spray of wine from her mouth, or possibly her nose. The room exhales, released by Ursula’s kindness: a punchline. Probably untrue or embellished, I think. Bless her for knowing how to do this, for carrying everyone through and then letting them go.

Sometimes this night, the last supper, feels like yet more ‘group work’ – like something to be wound up within an hour, a couple of takeaway points per person. Information is laid down like facts, not blown into the air like truths. But Ursula’s story is an invitation and everyone at the table accepts. The room begins to rearrange itself, to close in around the table like a stage. Now the stories become more earnest, more honest. ‘Dying words’ become a theme, for everyone has a pickled onion tale, even if it’s borrowed or overheard or imagined.

Nothing seems off limits and everyone is safe, including me, at least for tonight. And I feel grateful, once again, to witness this. To be party to the stories, with no requirement to share any of my own. To have bought myself a seat at the table just by creating Navada.

2

Maya has great hair, so life tends to work out for her. Some things are that simple, not exactly linear but impossible to disconnect.

I'm not being unfair – of course Maya is much more than her hair. She is also tall and pretty and smart (all of which amplify the impact of her hair) and she knows innately how to be a big sister, what to say and how to feel. She is, I think, that perfect first printout of a pair of siblings.

You'll think I'm exaggerating – about hair, I mean. That one aesthetic thing could shape a life, tilt good fortune. But maybe you haven't seen it up close as I have, the way a person, like Maya, can rearrange an entire scene rattle an orchestra probably, just with the sway of her head. People don't say no to Maya. They assume she's in the right lane.

I'm not jealous of Maya; that would be pointless. I'm fascinated by her, and I do spend a lot of time wondering what it must be like to be her, but that's not jealousy. It's something else.

Navada was Maya's idea, which is ironic because she's not a wellness

retreat kind of person. Self-development is her default state, not something she needs to schedule or outsource. But she could see what it might do for me – all the ‘woo-woo’ stuff, as she calls it – and that it might be a way to finally make use of Dad’s ‘guilt voucher’.

Nine years ago, Dad gave me the property near Bunoola Dam, a couple of hours south of Perth, that had been given to him by his own father who inherited it from an uncle who won it in a bet. None of these men knew what to do with it – a rapidly ageing homestead on 160 acres of sloping paddocks – and simply assumed the next person would.

My father was probably the least likely in the generational conga line to be seduced by the prospect of rural life. An accountant by trade, by identity, he likes the sort of certainty that a farming life could never provide. The weather is a dodgy investment (though fascinating – he’s obsessed). Animals are unpredictable. The land is needy. You can imagine how angry he was, and still is, about getting bone cancer just six months into retirement.

He gave Navada to me not long after the accident. It wasn’t called Navada then, just ‘the dam land’ (or possibly ‘the damn *land*’). He worked hard not to make a big fuss about it, didn’t provide any helpful context bar, ‘I thought you could do something with it, Nessa.’ I’d signed the papers in hospital and he’d looked out the window as I did so, at the orange wall I’d come to know brick by brick. I could see he’d been crying. ‘What about Maya?’ I asked, and he looked at me with a confused expression.

If Maya minded that our father had given me a substantial financial asset when he was still alive and well, not part of any will or dying wish, and that she hadn’t received anything commensurate, then she didn’t

show it. Or I never saw it. Her only dig, if that's what it is, is to call it 'the guilt voucher', and I never laugh when she does.

But we do laugh a lot, often when we're not together and just thinking about something the other said or sent. She acts like she's not funny when she's around me, like there can only be one funny sister and it's me, but we both know you can be the funny one *and* the pretty one because life's assets aren't dished out with measuring cups.

(‘But what if they *are*?’ my colleague Campbell once said of my measuring cup rationale. ‘What if it *is* all fairly divided? Not individually, of course, but across humankind? So there's, like, four billion cups each of goodness and beauty and greed and meanness and humour and all of it, just spread across the species. And life is just a matter of working out where and how it's divvied up, finding people with the appealing proportions, and knowing at least that the bad stuff isn't bottomless; that a measure of optimism about humanity is justifiable.’)

‘Oh, that's gold,’ Maya says when I tell her about Ursula's pickled onion story, the way she'd pried open the group like an old paint tin. ‘Maybe Mum will get Alzheimer's one day and say something nice about someone.’

We're sitting on either side of Maya's polished kitchen bench – our regular debrief after a retreat. It's Friday night and Maya's husband, Rohan, is at a basketball game with their son, Jack. The eldest, Lily, is upstairs in her room.

‘Everyone got real after that,’ I say. ‘One woman, Sonia, told us that her husband – he was much older than her – had died on the job. Like, while they were having sex. He was *inside her* when his heart began to seize. And he got really angry and confused in the moment, with all

the pain, and the last thing he said to her was, “Why does he have to fucking mow on a Sunday morning?” About their neighbour.

‘Right,’ says Maya and squeezes more lime into both our glasses. ‘That’s a weird thing to share with strangers.’

‘Well, they’re not really strangers in that moment.’

This is the part Maya doesn’t understand about the retreats, not just because she’s never been to one (in fact, she’s been to Navada just once since it became the retreat, to drop off some old chairs from Mum and Dad’s several years ago). The promised ‘wellness’ usually happens by accident: a chance observation in nature, an unexpected reflection, a conversation you would never have otherwise had. It comes from the moments you don’t expect, often on that final night of simply talking, when newly nourished bodies offer up their secrets. When stories unlock stories.

‘Did everyone fill out the feedback forms?’ Maya asks now. ‘What did they say?’

I tell her the feedback was mostly positive, bordering on gushing. The only negative comment was from young Lexi who said the lighting in the bathrooms was too dim. *I had to use my phone light to really see properly*, she’d written.

‘God,’ laughs Maya. ‘The trials of the young. She won’t want to be looking into the black holes of her pores in ten years’ time.’

I stare at the last of my gin and tonic, wondering if it’s one sip’s worth or two.

Lily lands in the kitchen, long brown hair covering most of her face. She is arresting like Maya, the same dark features with a squarer jaw, but never looks convinced. Her eyes dart nervously to the shadows of every room. Stuck in the dark corner of late adolescence, Lily sometimes

looks how I always feel: out of place and time. I can't remember when she last let me hug her, when I felt that I could.

'There's some pie left in the fridge,' Maya tells her. Lily opens the fridge door and closes it shortly afterwards as though she's picked the wrong box on a game show.

'I'll just get Uber Eats,' she says. 'Hey, Ness.'

'Hiya, Lil!' I say, probably too enthusiastically. I start to tell her about Lexi, how I think she might be a wellness blogger with retreat aspirations of her own, spying on Navada.

'She probably is,' Lily says, not looking up from her phone. 'When are you going to let me take over your social media? I can sort out all that stuff.'

'You should do that,' Maya says. 'You should let Lily do her thing, build up the online profile, finally grow the business.'

I hear the sting in *finally*. Maya has been hinting for some time that Navada should be more successful than it is, that I should have been able to wind up nursing by now and run the retreats full time. She thinks I have a reductive *Field of Dreams* attitude about the whole thing (and look, maybe I do), but she also can't appreciate the amount of work I had to do just to make Navada safe and habitable, the two years I spent navigating the completely foreign landscape of building codes and compliance reports and licences and permits. It would have been so much easier to walk away, to sell the place for land and timber, if I could have brought myself to do that to Dad.

I don't doubt that Maya could have set the place up much quicker than me, and far better too, not because she has any more business nous (she runs a high school English department) but because, like I said, things just work out for her. She would have found better tradespeople

– they would have found *her* – and difficult local government people and building inspectors would have paused in their objections to admire her hair. I generally assume that Maya has used the seven extra years she has on me mastering how life actually works.

‘Maybe I should,’ I say now, about recruiting Lily’s social media skills, the skills she has acquired simply by virtue of being seventeen.

I hadn’t wanted to wade too deeply into social media when it came to Navada, when it comes to anything for that matter. I made a business Instagram profile and Facebook page (and a Twitter handle before quickly learning that Twitter is Dante’s Fifth Circle of Hell). I occasionally upload photos to them when there’s a particularly pretty sunrise over the dam or a smoothie that doesn’t look revolting. Sometimes I share a quote that isn’t too naff. But I generally keep the whole domain at arm’s length like a two-faced friend.

‘Unless you want to keep showering old men forever,’ Maya says just as Rohan and Jack walk through the kitchen door, all sweat and clatter.

‘Eww,’ Lily says. ‘Rusty balls. Do you have to touch them, Ness?’

‘Only with my bare hands.’

Rohan tosses his keys on the counter and kisses Maya’s cheek in one swift movement across the room. ‘Hiya, Ness,’ he says. ‘You look nice today.’ It’s what he always says.

Shorter than Maya and less likely to draw attention in a crowded room, Rohan nevertheless conveys a similar detached self-assurance, as though he knows he won a major prize and has looked after it well. He’s been good to me since the accident, having barely registered my existence before it, always running his eye over contracts and providing sound legal advice. Unlike Maya, he’s been to Navada many

times, even helping Dad clear all the walking trails before cancer broke down the front door.

‘Do you want to stay for dinner?’ Maya asks, and I say no, just as she knows I will. I never stay for dinner. I figure their family time is increasingly rare and sacred and I won’t know where to look. I prefer each of them on their own. Even so, I feel that familiar stone in my gut that reminds me I’m about to leave the white noise of a busy home for the silence of my own.

‘I’m all good, thanks,’ I say, gathering up my handful of things. ‘You guys enjoy, but I’m going to head. I’ve got an early start in the morning.’

Which is true, of course. I always do.

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3

If you google the Nile River, you'll find images of its enormous delta where the waters drain into the Mediterranean Sea. From about Cairo, the river breaks up into a giant fan of tributaries racing towards the sea, as if suddenly it's every man for himself. The shape from above looks like a striated triangle if you're an old-school geography teacher, a flower if you're a poet.

However you choose to look at it, the Nile delta is the best way for me to describe the twisty tangle of large angry red scars that cover the entire right side of my face, radiating from the outer corner of my eye (Cairo) towards my nose, mouth and chin (the Mediterranean). It continues a little onto the left side of my face too, but progress was presumably halted by the terrain of my central features.

Across the bridge of my nose is a large skin graft, flesh lifted from somewhere less urgent but permanently affronted by the displacement. It will not be drawing blood from this well. Zero vascularity. Like an inexplicable ice sheet on the delta.

And there's a separate scar feature on my forehead, equally vast and

angry, for which I haven't yet found a comparable geographical feature to aid its description.

I say angry scars, but I guess they're not so angry anymore. They're resigned to their existence, far more so than I am. Deep and permanent, like family. It's been ten years.

Like fingerprints and tumours, every scar is unique. You won't find the handy reference guide on how to treat your own: it doesn't exist. But treatment is no longer the goal for me anyway – that ship has sailed. Now, it's all about coverage.

If something like this happens to you (Relax! It won't), you will at some point want to travel through the entire deep space of the internet looking for advice and videos about the most effective ways to cover very bad scarring, to hold its head under the water. About ninety-five per cent of the material you find will be from people with acne scars and you'll want to send a photo of yourself to each of them captioned, 'Bitch, *please*'.

You won't find what you're looking for (don't let that stop you), but you will find a lot of helpful tips and random product plugs that, when tried and combined and bastardised over enough time, will collectively deliver you what I unimaginatively refer to as The Routine.

The first thing you'll need to invest in is a high-end dimmer switch for your bathroom lighting. You'll want one with considerable range, so that between pitch black and God No, you've got at least five or six distinguishable shades of brightness. You'll move back and forth through these like streaming services, ultimately starting and finishing at the same setting, the kindest one.

Because every morning is a rude awakening, even after all this time.

I often think about the nurse who removed my bandages after the

final operation, when nothing more could be done. She held up a hand mirror to my face and jumped back a little as I exploded into tears. ‘You will come to love your scars,’ she said, all calm and practised and movie-ready. ‘They’re the lines of your story. *They* are who *you* are.’ I imagined her later recounting this scene to other people, how she’d offered up beauty and wisdom in the face of pain, how she’d mended me with words. I’d become her warmest anecdote, one she’d never have to physically look at again. And I won’t lie: I still want to punch her.

Start in the dark, lights off. Grab a stainless-steel brickies’ trowel and slough away all the serum and oil and clay and imported miracle gel that you coated on your face before bed last night because when does hope end? Where’s the line?

(I’m kidding about the trowel. Just use wipes, lots of them.)

Turn on the light to its dimmest setting. Reach for your hydrating primer: water is your friend, always, at least when you’re alone. Slowly fill in all the tributaries like spackle. You can do this with your eyes closed and I recommend that you do. The goal here is to minimise texture, to work your fingers like a Zamboni.

Now colour-correct using a green concealer. You’ll need to open your eyes for this but keep the lighting relatively dim, perhaps the second-lowest setting. Resist the urge to rub concealer all over your face – just attend to the scars. Pay close attention to the redness around them, where the blood still mobilises against the trauma in hope of a late rescue. Cherry moats of promise.

Try to think about what the day has in store. Now’s a good time to pop the kettle on. This gives the green concealer some time to settle right into the grooves and also gets you out of the bathroom for a bit.

Next, cover the green with a heavy-duty cream concealer, ideally the

same colour as your final foundation. You'll want the kind of concealer that can cover tattoos, that has no other purpose in life but to hide, hide, hide. The one I buy contains rich, impermeable titanium dioxide from a layer of the earth's crust way beneath Mexico, or so I like to think. Again, just apply this to the scars, ignoring the rest of your face for now, just as the world will if you don't get this right.

Make yourself a coffee and leave it on the kitchen bench to cool. You don't want it steaming off your groundwork.

Turn the lighting up a tad and apply a solid layer of foundation to the whole of your face and neck. Opt for a matt finish rather than dewy as it helps minimise texture and will last longer – days are long when you're in a race against your make-up. Take your time with this and try to buff rather than swirl. Breathe deeply as you go (apply this to life more generally).

While the foundation sets, go check on that coffee and the state of the world. Dive deep into your phone.

It's time for more concealer, this time using a 'make-up blender' (that most aspirational of damp sponges) and actively avoiding the scar areas. If you do go over the scars, whether by accident or panic or desperation, you'll pull up all the good work you've already done. So maybe don't do that.

You can probably turn the lights up a little more, now. Have a good, close look in the mirror at your handiwork and if you're happy (ha!) then the good news is the coverage phase of The Routine is complete. Your new analogue filter has been dispatched!

Time now for the distraction phase.

Why distraction? It's pretty clear to anyone who looks at you that you're wearing a lot of make-up, too much for what you do, for who

you are. There's no concealing all that concealer. No hiding the hiding. But look over there! Shiny thing! Distraction is your friend.

Start with a cream contour, gently dabbing it onto your outer cheekbones, the bottom of your chin and the top of your forehead. This is when you'll first start to glimpse the whole of your face (and it's only taken fifty-five minutes!), not just its many splintered parts and whichever 'hot spot' has decided to step into the light today. You've done well. You're *doing well*.

Give the contour a little time to set (finish that cold coffee, devour some toast) and then go over it with some bronzer powder on a soft brush. I forgot to say that you should just go ahead and buy yourself a shitload of make-up brushes in every shape and size and colour and keep on pretending they do different, special things.

Apply some blush. I don't want to tell you how to do this because I suspect I'm doing it all wrong anyway. Blush feels ridiculous and probably looks it too. Anyway, blush.

You're just about done now, only the eyes and lips to go. A few diversionary tactics. No doubt you've reached that sweet spot between appreciating what you've achieved in front of the mirror this morning and hating yourself more than you've ever hated anything. Lean in to the former. It's harder but also easier.

Finally, apply some setting spray and walk quickly about the bathroom fanning yourself like a Roman empress.

Take one last look in the mirror before switching off the light: there you are.

There you are.