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# AFTER

I can only tell it sideways. The memory constantly shifts its shape.

I find a set of scrubs scrunched into a ball in the bottom of my wardrobe. In the pocket, a souvenired scalpel, the blade still wrapped in plastic.

I peel back the packaging and connect the blade to the holder, the metal cool and smooth in my hand.

What my hand remembers – an incision on virgin skin, the exhilarating excision of malignancy, the satisfying draining of a tense, pointed abscess.

The scalpel might remember a surgeon waving the bloodied tip at a nurse when he wasn't happy with the lighting, or the diathermy, or how much sex he was not getting.

The scalpel would recognise the rhythm of Verdi's requiem and the tremor in my grip after Liv's first surgery. I wouldn't need to explain the whole messy picture – the scalpel *knew*.

In the mirror, I catch a glimpse of myself, holding the scalpel. I remember hearing its voice as we stood over Liv's paralysed body: *cut with care*.

I know the way.

It's through the darkness.

It is the night of the gala, the 9th of July. The ceiling is low, the walls lean in. I need light, I want light, but darkness surrounds me, pressing

into my back and arms and legs, pinning me here to the floor. I become aware of a word pulsing in my head, *run, run, run*, but my legs won't move, and when I open my mouth to scream, my voice is a hoarse, empty nothing.

The hospital carpet smells of disinfectant and ambition. I want to get away from that smell. I scabble on all fours, this way and that. I don't know where I am.

My fingers find a wall, and on the wall is a switch, and flicking the switch brings light. I sit, back against the wall, breathing hard. Fluorescent light buzzes above me, and I glance around, gaining my bearings. I'm in the hallway outside Prof's office on the sixth floor of Prince Charles Hospital.

How did I get here?

The hall is empty, but its shadows hold secrets, and I can't move but I can't stay. My breath comes in shallow gasps, and I try to slow it.

They are long gone, I tell myself.

I stand on shaky legs. My body feels stunned, my brain refuses to process. Ignoring the stairwell, I take stuttering steps towards the glinting steel doors of the lift, crossing another empty hallway, my heart pounding at the shadows.

I'm a surgeon, who can't operate. I'm a victim, of possibly the oldest crime.

This must be told, and I must say it.

Only then, perhaps, will I find a way through.

# BEFORE

## Infusion

*the introduction of a solution into a vein, artery, or tissue*

November 2014

Early on the first Monday in November, I jogged up the path by the zoo. Against the dull thud of my feet on the asphalt, everything felt sharp – the scent of eucalyptus mixed with elephant shit, the alarm-bell piping of bell-miners, the whine of a tram straining up the hill.

At first, the hospital was a tiny red blob beneath a massive cloudless sky, a buoy on the horizon. But as I ascended the hill, it grew larger, engulfing land and sky, its main building tall and straight like a pointed finger, the others herniating from it higgledy-piggledy. When I reached the rise, the gum trees and zoo fell away behind me, and the hospital was all I could see.

And then, as I skipped up the steps, past the gowned patients sucking the life out of their first cigarette, I could *feel* it – wisdom and authority cemented in the red bricks and cream mortar.

Blood thrummed in my temple. Thoughts circled and whispered and wondered –

Is *this* the day?

I showered in the change rooms and dressed in my work clothes,

checking myself in the mirror, liking the way my skirt skimmed over my hips. That morning, I'd considered the row of neatly hung pencil skirts in my wardrobe. Charcoal? Olive?

Olive, for the rich colour. And for the way this skirt turns heads. Nothing wrong with putting your best foot forward, right? Especially when you're summonsed by your boss.

I climbed the stairs to six, walked the hall, knocked on his door.

The olive skirt made a statement. A bold one.

Maybe charcoal would have been better?

He called me in.

Prof sat at his desk, writing, his head of wavy silver hair bent over the page. I took a seat opposite him, sitting on my hands.

The run had woken me up, but as soon as I sat, fatigue bit at my eyes. I had snatched only a few hours' sleep between cases on the weekend – five, max. Through the window I watched dog-walkers, cyclists and joggers cross the park on paths fringed by opalescent gums and Moreton Bag figs, and my armpits prickled with sweat.

I sat, while he wrote – God knows what – aware of the way his presence filled the room. I both craved and dreaded the moment he would fix his gaze on me. I'd seen it drill holes in residents and medical students, his gravelly voice stripping bare defences and excuses, revealing weakness as soft as skin that had never seen the sun.

Among the junior doctors, he was feared and revered. The word *bully* sometimes fell from surly lips, but though he could be tough, I didn't see it. He was the one the other doctors called on when they were sick, and if I needed a surgeon, I'd want *him*, hands down.

Maybe what filled the room was power. His word could make or break careers. When I was with him, I sometimes caught myself searching for a sign of approval – a tilt of his head, or a smoothing of his frown.

A smile?

No, too much.

He kept writing as if I weren't there, and I wondered how he saw me – how he judged *my* ability to impact a room. It's harder to command a room from a height of five foot two. I worked with what I had, choosing well-cut clothes that flattered my small frame, but my olive skin, almost-black hair, and di Pieta nose stood out in this sea of navy suits and alabaster complexions like a European handbag at the football. That's before we even got to my sex. My impact on a room was: what is *she* doing here?

The boys club had Prince Charles Hospital firmly in its grip.

Eventually he put down his silver pen and the furrows in his forehead softened as he looked at me. 'I've heard good things,' he said, and his deep voice took *good things* from hearsay and made it so.

*Good things.* My breath turned shallow, waiting on his words.

'The laparotomy you did with Phil. He was impressed.' He leaned back in his chair. 'I'd like to see you step up, take responsibility. We need to know you can handle that.'

I was up for it, no doubt, but – did they issue the same challenge to Toby? I pushed the thought away. *Good things*, he'd said. Hearing those words brought forth *the* question, the one I'd cocooned inside me every time I assisted him in theatre, every late night and each weekend on-call, the one I'd carried this morning up the hill and into the hospital and up the stairs and into this room.

'Prof, is there any news – about the job?'

His tight smile conveyed I'd overstepped. 'Nothing yet.'

My hopes deflated like a punctured tyre. He never liked to be rushed, I should know that! But when – when would I know? I'd been working towards this job for nine years. Goddamn Benson, would he ever retire?

'Rest assured, when there is a job, I expect you will apply.'

Over the Moreton Bay figs, I glimpsed a pale morning moon. 'I will.'

'Good. Now, I'm due in theatre next Tuesday but I have a competing

commitment. Will you start for me? Should be straightforward, mastectomy I believe. I'll join you by nine or so.'

This was a sign, Prof delegating to me. I nodded and made a note in my calendar, feeling every bit the swotty schoolkid chosen to collect the lunch orders.

'Toby will be assisting.'

Gold. Pure gold. I smiled on the inside.

'And could you check on Mrs Greenidge today? An intern called, something about her platelets dropping.'

He was entrusting me with his most precious long-stayer, who painted her brave smile in coral lipstick while bacteria ate away her pelvis.

'I'll see her this morning.'

I'd postpone my teaching session. Sleep would have to wait.

I'd do anything.

~

By Thursday a blustery cool change had blown through, and I wore a light trench coat over my pencil skirt – classic black today – when I met Toby, Will and Hamish for breakfast on Errol Street.

Our cafe was a converted warehouse with high ceilings and exposed beams. We were plus for suits and minus for ink, but we liked the feel of the place and the coffee was the best in North Melbourne.

I slid into the seat next to Hamish. His bald head caught the light as he hunched over his Blackberry, mouthing as he typed. Across the table, Will greeted me with a smile and then mimicked the oblivious Hamish's moving lips and fast fingers, drawing a grin from Toby.

I stole a glance at Toby. Thighs splayed, he sat on the edge of his chair like he had somewhere he needed to be. His shirt was the colour of an early spring sky, and I had the urge to lean close and smell the money in



his aftershave, and brush my fingers along the angle of his clean-shaven jaw –

And kiss him, slow, on the mouth.

Instead, I ordered an espresso.

Will asked if anyone had news. ‘How about the job – any updates?’

I shrugged. Anyway, as a consultant, wouldn’t Will know any news before me and Toby? I searched Will’s face and then Toby’s for secrets but found none.

‘Rumour is Benson will finish this year,’ Will said. ‘He must be at least sixty-five. I went to his sixtieth at the club years back.’

Hamish glanced up. ‘Sixty-three, I believe,’ he said, and no one argued.

‘Surely it’ll be soon, then,’ Will said.

Toby snorted. ‘Benson will go on forever. He’ll probably cark it at the table.’

‘Doing the world’s slowest colectomy while he flirts with the nurses,’ Will added, laughing at his own joke.

Something like an oil slump sequestered inside me.

Will looked from me to Toby. ‘When it actually happens, I take it you’ll both apply?’

I sat up tall, met his eye and said of course.

‘You bet,’ Toby added.

‘Excellent,’ Will said, raising an eyebrow. ‘Fun and games.’ His voice was loaded with innuendo, and I froze. Could he possibly know? How, when we were so careful?

I watched Will’s face.

‘Could mean the end of our breakfasts,’ he said, smiling, and I breathed again. *Fun and games.*

‘Breakfast will never end,’ Toby said. ‘Five years we’ve been going. Survived exams –’

‘One-in-four on-call –’

‘Three kids!’ Will said.

‘Not to mention Evil Knievel,’ Toby said.

Evil Knievel. I wouldn’t forget him. Our first breakfast, five years earlier, followed Will and me pulling an all-nighter, trying to save a teenage biker who had mashed up his abdominal organs. By seven a.m. we had to stand back from the table. I’d lost patients before, but they were mostly old and usually sick. Afterwards, we both loitered in the tearoom, Will looking as bewildered as I felt. I wasn’t ready to be alone, so I asked him if he wanted to go and get breakfast and we’d decamped to Errol Street, downing coffee and reassuring each other we’d done everything we could.

The next week, Toby joined us for breakfast and presented us two tiny figurines of Evil Knievel on a motorbike, and I was about to pay out on him for hitting us when we were down when Will guffawed – maybe a little too loud – in an attempt to see the funny side, and so I accepted the Evil Knievel and tried to laugh, pushing from my mind the image of the white-faced pulseless biker and the tormented keening from his mother.

We were all trainees back then – Will a fellow, Toby and me four years out of med school but several years his junior. We met every week, unless we were rostered for theatre, and we kept it up even after Will got his consultant post. The jokes intensified when Hamish joined. He was the newest urologist at PCH and an old schoolmate of Will’s – if being someone’s whipping boy sat within the realm of friendship.

I’m not sure why Hamish fronted up every week, but for me, initially, it was to spend time with Will. Breakfast gave me a chance to be near Toby and I’d always say yes to that, but Will was someone I wanted to impress. He was the youngest consultant in our team, and he played golf with Prof. He had a say in which trainees got the accredited jobs, and I was sure I got on the program at least in part because I laughed at his pranks.

Yes, the banter was sometimes puerile and often boring, but this was my *tribe*. I wanted to belong.

Will turned to Hamish. 'Got anything for us this week, Seacombe?'  
As if by reflex, Toby added, 'Caecum. One great big shit heap.'

Hamish ignored the familiar pun on his name and put down his Blackberry. He pulled a journal article from his bag and gave it to Will. I wondered if Hamish had had old-man eyes when he was swaddled in his mother's arms, and I thought the answer was likely yes.

As Will read the paper, his cheeks turned as scarlet as his tie and his shirt buttons strained against his paunch.

'Take a look at this – they got couples to do the deed in the MRI and took scans while they were at it!' Will rocked back and forth in his chair. 'This is a beauty, H – you really are the man.'

Hamish permitted himself a small smile that almost reached eyes.

'Got this one in the spreadsheet already?'

Hamish didn't see the joke. 'Indeed.'

Will waved the paper around. 'You've unearthed some quirky articles in your time, H, but this could be the best yet.'

Hamish frowned. 'The design is not as elegant as the teaspoon study.'

Toby screwed up his face. 'Who gives a shit about spoons disappearing from tea rooms?'

'Right – this is infinitely more interesting,' Will said. 'Though they do liken the old fella to a boomerang, not sure what I think about that!' His eyebrows danced up and down as he passed me the paper.

'I was merely pointing out the superior design of the teaspoon study,' Hamish said. 'And it is relevant, when you're making a cup of tea –'

'They're *fucking in the MRI*,' Toby said, tapping the table with each word. 'Who gives a shit about tea?'

I threw Hamish a sympathetic look and flicked through the paper, my eyes drawn to the black-and-white image of a man and woman intertwined, the two public bones angled towards each other like elders

leaning heads close to share a secret. Aside from a thin black line separating skin from skin, it was hard to tell where one body started and the other stopped. Strangely beautiful, how they fitted together.

I became aware of Toby, sitting next to me.

I knew how it was when our bodies fitted together.

Toby felt it too. 'It's like porn.' His cheeks flushed.

'I don't believe that was their intention,' Hamish said.

'Who cares?' Toby glanced at me, and I knew what he was thinking: want to do it in the MRI?

He had no limits.

Toby had no limits.

The thought excited and terrified me.

The waiter brought our breakfasts. I sliced into my poached egg, the yolk glistening as it ran over the buttered toast. While we ate, Will and Toby argued about whether the bent penis moulded against the vaginal wall most resembled a banana or a boomerang or the letter S.

Will grinned at Toby. 'All of this is reminding me, you know, of the strap-on! That nearly sent Carla right off. The look on her face!'

I rolled my eyes. Ate another mouthful.

'It was a harsh joke, that one,' Toby said, shooting me a protective look.

'No, not so!' Will glanced at me. 'You're one of the boys, Carla. I wanted you to know.'

'It is important to remember that it has not been easy for Carla to get where she is,' Hamish said. 'Credit to her.'

'Exactly!' Will said. 'Hence the strap-on. You *are* one of us.'

Only Will could think that gifting me a strap-on when I made it onto the surgical program was some kind of perverse compliment. The pink plastic penis and black leather harness had made me seethe, but then and now, I knew the unspoken rule: *go with the joke*. 'Turned out to be a very practical gift. Came in handy just last night.'

‘Fabulous!’ Will said. ‘Get some any way you can, my dear.’

‘Only way I can,’ I said, deadpan, and it was then that I saw Toby flinch, eyes fresh with hurt, and I wanted to take my words back, only – *You’re the one who wanted this a secret.*

An alarm sounded on Hamish’s Blackberry. He turned it off and stood. ‘Eleven minutes until clinic.’

‘I take it you don’t want to talk about the old boy, then?’ Will asked him.

‘Bet he’s still sitting on your mantelpiece at home,’ Toby said.

Blotches appeared on Hamish’s neck, and knowing where this was going, I signalled for the bill. Months back, Will had given Hamish an engorged testis he somehow souvenired during a visit to Timor from some poor guy whose testis had spun like a mirror ball and cut off its own blood supply. To Will and Toby, it seemed like the perfect gift for a urologist, but rule-abiding Hamish had stared nonplussed at the testis in the specimen jar, whispering, almost to himself, ‘But what do I *do* with it?’ His reactions sent Will and Toby into hysterics, and made me want to protect him from every joke he didn’t understand.

A wave of humiliation crossed Hamish’s face, and Will sensed he’d gone too far and handed his credit card to the waiter. I wanted to tell him that paying the bill didn’t make up for jokes the wrong side of mean, but that was Will – tone-deaf and generous, in equal measure.

Hamish accepted Will’s gesture with a nod, and Toby slapped Hamish’s back. I felt a strange fondness for them. I raised my espresso cup. ‘Here’s to breakfast. Long may it continue.’

‘And to the job, if we can ever roll Benny on,’ Toby said. ‘May the best man win.’

We clinked coffee cups and Toby and I locked eyes.

Game on.

~

‘How will you handle it?’ Fleur asked as we stood on our terrace balcony looking over the plane tree canopy to the sun sinking behind Rathdowne Street rooftops.

I took a closer look at the starfish-shaped leaves of the plane trees. Some were plump and rudely green, but others drooped brown-edged from their branches.

‘Look at these leaves. Do you think these trees are getting enough water?’

Fleur nudged me, repeating her question.

I shrugged. ‘It’s not a big deal. We’re adults, our personal life is separate.’

Fleur tied her long red hair into a topknot and sank into a wicker easy chair, her long legs curled under her. I felt her gaze on me. ‘So, if he gets the job –’

Secretly, I didn’t think that was going to happen. ‘I’d be fine. Take it on the chin.’

‘And if you get it?’

I pictured the parched tree-roots, tunnelling downwards deep under Rathdowne Street bitumen, licking at the dust. ‘He’ll cope.’

‘Have you ever, in all the years you’ve known Toby, seen him in a situation where he didn’t get what he wanted?’

I wasn’t going to answer that. A breeze rustled through the plane trees like a stranger making their way through a crowd.

Fleur sighed. ‘Okay. I’ll leave it. You could bring him to my birthday, if you want?’

‘It’ll just be me.’ I knew better than to lie to her. ‘We’re ... keeping it on the down low.’ I stood. ‘You want a drink? I bought rosé.’ I went into the kitchen and returned with two glasses of wine and handed one to Fleur.

She sipped at the clear pink wine. ‘So, you’re really into him – and he doesn’t want to tell anyone.’ Her words were clipped and certain.

I screwed up my mouth. Fleur might be out of the hospital system, ensconced in her cosy community unit, but she knew the risks – the gossip and innuendo, the rumour-mill running all the way to our bosses. All good reasons for keeping quiet.

Fleur caught a glimpse of my expression, and when she spoke again, her voice was softer. ‘He must mean a lot to you.’

We’d both known Toby since uni, but back then he’d hung with a different crowd. Our group always had one eye on the next exam and took the idea of doctoring seriously, while he was in the boozy circle who left lectures early for the pub. He was on–off with Phoebe for years, and in-between there was a stream of other girls, so I’d always viewed him as out of reach, like the curvy ceramic figures Nonna had positioned on the highest shelf in her lounge room, away from the smudgy, clumsy fingers of her grandchildren.

But Toby was a living, breathing version of my dream man – beautiful, clever and with a sureness about him that I wanted a piece of. I heard his exasperated voice as I prevaricated over the menu at Chin Chin. *No second guessing, Carla.* That was how he lived, and I wanted it, too. I tried to find the words.

‘It’s like he has this – aura, this certainty that I want to be around.’

‘Narcissism?’

‘No! He’s not like that, not when you get to know him. He’s actually very generous.’

‘What, then? Is it power?’

I rolled my eyes.

‘I’m not trying to judge ... I want to understand.’

I thought about Toby, walking through the hospital hallways with shoulders free and arms swinging. The image of the intertwined bodies in the MRI floated into my mind.

‘Do you ever think it would be easier if the world was black and white?’

'You're drawn to his dichotomous way of thinking. Very surgical, I guess.' Her eyes narrowed. 'You do know that's a fantasy, right?'

I shrugged. Maybe Toby could make it so.

'Listen, I ... only ask this because I want to make sure he's good to you. Is he kind?'

I grimaced. *Kind* was a great-aunt knitting bed-socks for the homeless, or earnest greenies trying to nudge a beached whale back to water. Not what I looked for in a man. 'He's – well, for starters, he's an amazing cook. And so romantic, you know, he's always thinking of ways to surprise me.'

Fleur nodded, her frown staying put.

'Listen, don't over-think it – we've never liked the same type of guy.'

'You mean, you only date surgeons.'

'Not true! There was, what was his name? Bernie.'

Her frown furrows deepened. 'Who?'

'A boy I kissed in year five.'

She laughed.

'Anyway, you have your own type. Intense, tortured, that's your go –'  
Fleur chewed at a fingernail.

'Richard is driving me insane. You'd think, after eleven years, that it was time to get on with our lives, but no. In his head, he's still nineteen and confused about what he wants. And I've realised – don't judge – I'm ready.' She winced at my confused face. 'To start a family. Before I'm completely ancient. I see Rose and Emily making those choices, and – I want that to be me.'

Ever since I met Fleur in first-year uni, she'd made life decisions through the prism of being a mother. Psychiatry would be a good career to combine with a family. *I don't want to defer a year to travel, not with my body-clock*. So I shouldn't be surprised. But Fleur's sisters, Rose and Emily, were neck-deep in nappies and had stepped sideways in their careers to do that. Is that what Fleur wanted?



‘Thirty-two is not too old.’

Fleur sighed. ‘I’m ready. Don’t you get that feeling?’

The only time I thought about having kids was when I was trying to shut down Gina’s relentless questioning – *when am I going to be a Nonna, why are you so obsessed with work, why did you choose such a busy job?* It felt like a decision for tomorrow – I didn’t know how I’d make it work with surgery, and there was no way I was going to be a stay-at-home mum.

‘I guess I’ve been caught up with the job ...’ I said.

Fleur cast her eyes skywards. ‘It’s not enough. Not for me.’

I hesitated, and then asked her what Richard wanted.

‘He’s scared.’ The sun disappeared behind rooftops, leaving fingers of pink strewn across the darkening sky. ‘You will come to the party, won’t you? It’s important.’

Something about her voice made me suspicious. ‘You’re not springing a wedding on us, are you?’

She squeezed her eyes shut and scrunched up her nose.

‘You are! Spill.’

One eye opened, looked at me sideways. ‘Not a wedding. An announcement, maybe.’

‘Engagement?’

‘Maybe. I’ve called him on it. He’d better get his frickin’ act together.’

It was a risky move, giving Richard an ultimatum, but now wasn’t the time to go there. I jumped up and hugged her, tight. She smelled of frangipani and longing. ‘I hope – I hope it all goes exactly how you want.’ Her body trembled and I silently vowed that if Richard let her down this time, I would triple the testicle collection on Hamish’s mantlepiece.

She pulled away from the hug and thanked me. ‘Oh, and one last piece of advice from your therapist – don’t let Toby sell you short. He should be shouting your name from the rooftops.’

Trying not to sound defensive, I told her he needed time. 'It's not that long since he split with Phoebe.'

She tilted her head. 'It's you I'm thinking about.'

'Yeah, well, be glad for me. The job's coming, I'm seeing a fantastic man.' I smiled at her worried face. 'Trust me, I know what I'm doing.'