

Airbrushed

Red Chinese characters at the bottom of the page catch my eye. An advert for facial treatments—*“Non-invasive Botox. Only £29.99 for new clients.”*

I’m sold.

The past few years have been unkind. Those months I spent sitting at my ailing mother’s bedside and the grieving period that followed have aged me. I see it reflected in my face every morning when I look in the mirror. The grooves across my forehead have deepened; the furrow between my eyes, visible, even when I relax all the muscles in my face. I used to have to smile or deliberately squint to make laugh lines and crow’s feet appear. Nowadays, they are constant features. And those light brown specks across my nose my grandad called “freckles”? My last beauty therapist diplomatically referred to them as “pigmentation” instead of calling them what they are: age spots.

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A tiny Asian lady leads me to a darkened treatment room at the back of the shop. She looks about twenty-five but shuffles her feet like she’s eighty.

‘Will it hurt?’ I ask.

‘No hurt. Only heat.’ She points to a massage table. ‘Lie down. Do you have allergies?’

I hoist myself onto the table and lie back. ‘Not that I’m aware of.’

‘Good. I will begin treatment.’ She turns on soothing music and lights candles. An earthy scent fills the room.

‘This mask feels hot, but not burn hot. You ... close your eyes, relax,’ she says. Her voice suddenly sounds smoky—like a midnight DJ whose playlist only includes Bossa Nova tracks. She applies something syrupy that smells of vinegar on my forehead.

I crinkle my nose. ‘What’s in the mask? It smells like kombucha.’

‘No talk. Sleep.’

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‘Ms Taylor, wake up,’ the lady barks, then switches on all the lights.

I don’t know how long I’d been sleeping. Minutes, maybe. Hours, perhaps. All I know is that I dreamt—the most vivid dream of lying on a beach with the scorching sun beating down on my face.

She hands me a mirror. ‘You want to see?’

I take the mirror from her and gape at my reflection. My skin is radiant, unblemished, and completely wrinkle-free. As if an artist air-brushed away fifty-three years of worry, stress, and grief.

‘Happy?’ she asks.

I'm too astonished to reply, so I nod.

'Okay. You come back in eight weeks.'

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My seventeen-year-old stares at me with disgust. 'Ew, Mum. What have you done to your face? Did you get Botox?'

'Of course not! I got a facial.'

'Well, I don't like it,' Holly says. 'You look ... *weird*.'

'What do you mean, *weird*?'

'I don't know. Something's off. Your skin looks amazing and everything, but it's like your eyes don't match your face.'

She was right, you know.

The miracle treatment might have erased external signs of wear and tear, but my eyes still reflected the memories, life experiences, and gained wisdom of fifty-three years.

I never returned for the follow-up.