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You know you've had a heavy night when you can only move your eyeballs. And even that hurts.

From my squinty perspective, I deduce that Beth and I chose to create an impromptu rag mattress by piling every available costume on the floor. I've got a wool frockcoat over me. Beth's top layer appears to be a starched apron. Cosy.

I take a moment to process my memories of the night before – the fantasy job ad and the subsequent hysteria of wigs, padding and sepia make-up . . . Well that would explain why I dreamt that Beth dressed as me for Hallowe'en.

My dress was actually perfect on her, the flexibility of the fabric gave her a soft outline while the distracting swirly pattern disguised any unevenness. It was just the posing for the picture that was tricky – trying to get her to switch off her beauty pageant face and bow that perfect posture. For a while, I was concerned about the blurriness in her eyes—

'You look drunk!'

'I am drunk!'

But we managed to find a headshot and full-length that worked and sent off the application. I sigh to myself. I meant to stop her, honestly I did. I meant to suggest I read through for *Moulin Rough*-style typos and then somehow divert her application to drafts. But she was too quick for me. That's the trouble with emails, they're so much worse than drunk

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dialling because the next day there is documented proof of your misdemeanour.

Water. I need water. I'm just wondering if I had the presence of mind to set a glass within reach when I spy something damp and straggly. Ah yes. Sometime in the wee small hours, Beth decided to adopt one of the toupees as a pet. She named it Gerald and the last thing I remember was her giving it its own saucer of champagne.

I close my eyes, somewhat daunted by the clean-up that lies ahead. Not just of the Wardrobe, but of our lives . . .

'Beth?' I wheeze while attempting her name.

I go to give her a wake-up prod but all I feel is fabric. Still lying flat on my back, I start flipping back layer after layer – a.k.a. hour after hour of ironing – wondering if Beth did some kind of a reverse 'princess and the pea' scenario, sleeping *beneath* rather than *atop* this material mountain. Resilient tweeds follow scrumpled silks until, ultimately, I find the pea – in this case, a gentleman's fob watch – but no princess.

Maybe she went home already but didn't want to wake me? I look over to the computer, half expecting to find a note but instead see the plastic surgery page on the screen. *Please say that's just a leftover from last night . . .* I scramble too fast to my feet – forced to wait a moment for my head to cease the sensation of hanging backwards off a playground roundabout – then stumble through to the kitchenette.

Empty. I feel the side of the kettle. Cold plastic. I tap the loo door. No reply. My concern grows as I feel my way along the corridor to the stage.

Perhaps she has decided to take a symbolic last bow?

But no, the boards are bare.

I sigh, my heart heavy. There is nothing sadder than an empty auditorium.

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A decorative graphic consisting of several small icons: a star, a heart, a circle, and a square, arranged in a loose cluster around the author's name.

Belinda Jones

I wonder if this is how Beth feels about her life? Here she stands, the willing performer, but no one has come to see her. There's not even a panel of judges sitting seven rows back, waiting to critique her. No music, no one to cue her. No man to lift her and spin her, no chorus line to link arms with.

Tentatively, I leave my default position amid the drapery of the wings and tiptoe to the very centre of the stage. Even with no one watching, I feel exposed. I've never once felt comfortable out here, even during humble school productions. All those eyes upon me . . . I suppose you hope the audience is assessing you favourably but there's no guarantee. They could just as easily be preparing to denounce you. So what is it that drives these people to put themselves up for such scrutiny? What is this need in them that cannot be sated in any other way? I used to think it was simple exhibitionism – even the great Lord Olivier defined the compulsion as *'Look at me, look at me, look at me!'* But as I stand here now I can't help but admire the performers' bravery for stepping into the spotlight. The way they are willing to make themselves vulnerable, all for our viewing pleasure . . .

'Let me entertain you!' I murmur and then remember Beth telling me about the endless dance performances she prepared as a child, how she would tie long ribbons to her wrists and borrow the cats' collars so her ankles would have little bells that tinkled as she sprang around the carpet. All this for the benefit of a row of teddy bears and dolls – because her mum seemed incapable of staying conscious long enough to see the whole show. Suddenly it all seems so obvious . . .

'Ta-daaaa!'

A clunking of glass announces a presence stage left. I turn to find Beth brandishing three new bottles of Moët & Chandon.

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‘Oh God, I couldn’t drink another drop!’ I crumple.

Beth rolls her eyes. ‘It’s to re-stock Vaughn’s dressing room, you ninny! Your personal beverage awaits at your desk . . .’

She beckons me with perplexing jauntiness. Can all the angst of last night really be so easily dismissed? Then again, maybe she’s still drunk.

‘Chai latte,’ Beth hands me a steaming cardboard-jacketed cup.

‘Thank you.’ I gurgle appreciatively as I inhale the spicy-sweet aroma.

‘Blueberry muffin—’

‘Oooh, yummy!’ I coo, sinking my fingers into its yielding, purple-stained sponginess.

‘Havana Brown.’

The third package set on the table gives me pause. It’s a box of Feria permanent hair dye.

No need to over-react, I tell myself. Lots of women decide to radically change their hairdo in a crisis and compared to surgery—

‘Do you see the name?’ Beth cuts into my rationale, tapping the lettering. ‘*Havana* Brown. Of all the names on all the boxes – the Garniers, Clairols, L’Oreal’s – not one other city was mentioned! No Stockholm Blonde, no Marrakech Mahogany—’

‘No Burgundy Burgundy?’ I get strangely sucked into her game.

‘Nope.’ She gives me a triumphant look. ‘So how’s that for a sign!’

Oh God, that’s why she’s so perky. She still thinks she’s in with a chance with the TV show.

‘And how cute is this – they give you a little aroma ampoule to make everything smell nice!’ Beth sings as she sets out assorted bottles, nozzles and protective gloves.

‘Don’t you think it’s worth waiting until you get the call?’
 ‘I already did,’ she says as she opens the outsize instruction sheet. ‘While I was out getting the champagne.’

‘What?!’

She looks up at me and gives a whinnying shriek, unable to conceal her euphoria a second longer. ‘They want to see me!’ she squeaks, casting aside the sheet and clutching at my crumb-coated hands. ‘Lucy from Experience TV rang and said I sound exactly like the kind of woman they are looking for.’

My jaw gapes further as she adds, ‘We’ve got approximately one hundred and eighty minutes to make me a curvy brunette with two left feet!’

First comes the dye – pasting purplish goo onto her angelic tresses feels borderline sacrilegious. ‘You’re absolutely sure about this?’ I hesitate before applying the concluding dollop.

Beth gives an affirmative nod but, as we watch the colour deepen to a murky aubergine, she gives an involuntary shiver and murmurs, ‘I have officially entered the dark side . . .’

While my slept-in dress churns suds in the washing machine, I set to work streamlining and securing the padding. I don’t want to crumple any more of the show costumes so I’m now sporting the handyman’s work dungarees, causing Beth much mirth.

‘You’re so Dexy’s Midnight Runners!’ she hoots as I re-enter the bathroom to check on her hair.

It’s a look I’ve been deliberately avoiding my whole life – my middle name being Eileen, after my grandmother on my father’s side. No big deal? Try saying my first name and my middle name in quick succession . . .

‘Carmen Eileen!’ Beth can’t resist a quick sing-song.

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‘Time to rinse!’ I growl.

In the minutes it takes for the water to run clear, I realise I am now as much invested in this process as Beth. Her optimism is contagious. This may be the most ludicrous project we’ve embarked on but I find myself blowdrying her hair with that bit of extra care, as if she really has finally won the leading role.

‘Tawny eyeshadow and a soft peach lipgloss complete the transformation,’ I simper, pretending I’m hosting a make-under show.

‘Wow!’ Beth marvels at her new reflection. ‘I look like a nice person, don’t I?’

‘You looked like a nice person before!’ I tut.

‘Yes, but now women won’t be gripping their boyfriends a little tighter in my presence.’

‘Right, let’s amp you up a few dress-sizes . . .’ I lead her through to the fitting area.

I’m much more nervous about the makeshift body suit today, knowing she’ll have to be walking around in it and, worse yet, dancing . . .

‘What are you doing?’ Beth looks bemused as I take her on an experimental waltz around the room.

‘I just worry that all this wadding might feel weird to your dance partner – they’re bound to give you a test spin—’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that.’ She swats away my concern. ‘What woman feels real any more? It’s all Wonderbras, Spanx and support tights!’

She has a point.

‘Besides, I’ve got jiggle in the area that matters most.’

I can’t help but smile. At least all notions of a breast reduction have passed.

‘So,’ Beth reaches for my hands and inhales deeply, ‘Wish me luck!’

My brow rucks into a frown. ‘You don’t want me to come with you?’

‘Of course but I know you don’t approve.’

‘Well . . .’ I falter. ‘It’s not just about that, is it? I mean, you didn’t approve of Lee but you were still there for me when I was fool enough to carry on seeing him.’

‘Yes but that wasn’t borderline illegal.’

‘No, it was a lot worse.’ I let go of her hands and reach for my coat. ‘I want to come.’

Still she hesitates. ‘You’re not worried about how this could affect you professionally?’

I survey the avalanche of formerly pristine clothes, the empty champagne bottles and Gerald the drunken toupee, and give a hapless shrug. ‘In for a penny, in for a pound.’

‘Or about thirty pounds in this case,’ Beth mutters as she manoeuvres her newly ample physique out the door.

We take a quick cab via my flat so I can change out of the handyman’s dungarees and then twenty minutes later we’re at the studio, by which time Beth is starting to sweat.

‘Jeez, what’s this padding made of – insulation fibre?’ she bristles as we take our squeakily-synthetic seats in reception.

‘You’re just nervous,’ I tell her, trying to gloss over the fact that she is essentially wearing Puffa underwear. ‘Here, let me get you some water.’

I glug out two plastic cups from the spherical dispenser featuring optical illusion goldfish, noticing a slight tremble to my hand as I do so. The sheer glare of this place is unsettling me – after the olde worlde creakings of the theatre, all these shiny white surfaces and acid bright furnishings are like a flick to the eye with an elastic band.

Even more agitating is the vast wall of TV screens simultaneously broadcasting the production company’s full

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repertoire of shows. I don't know how the receptionists cope with this excess of stimuli – their call desk alone resembles the control deck of the Starship Enterprise. And whatever happened to writing your name in the visitor's book using a biro attached to a piece of string? Here an angle-poised camera takes your photograph (face-on and profile), then scans it onto a laminated card, which in turn triggers the security gate. At the time, Beth joked that these passes could later double up as our mugshots. But she's not laughing now.

'I wish you hadn't made my bum so big!' She struggles to detach herself from the orange rubber cocoon seemingly suctioned to her rear.

I give her a concerned look. 'Do you want me to ask if that chair comes in a larger size?'

She narrows her eyes at me. 'I just feel so bulky.'

'Welcome to my world,' I mutter as a walkie-talkie touting redhead approaches, only to stall in front of us, seemingly unsure who to greet first.

'Beth Harding?'

'Hi! That's me!' Beth springs to her feet, mercifully without the sound of a cork popping loose of its bottle. 'This is my friend, Carmen, along for moral support.'

'Oh for a minute there, I thought you two were sisters!' she chuckles. 'You probably get that a lot—'

'Actually, it's a first,' I note, diverting my gaze to the floor, taking in her orange leggings and run-everywhere pumps.

'Well!' She takes a rousing breath. 'My name is Lucy, I'm the researcher for the show, why don't you come through and we'll have a little chat?'

For all the peppiness in her voice, Lucy's twenty-something eyes show signs of seventy-something fatigue. I wonder if Experience TV employees are ever allowed home to sleep?

They probably just slot them into a pod for a twenty-minute power nap and then blast them with fake daylight.

‘So, just to fill you in, you’re auditioning for a reality show looking at the origins of dance in three Spanish-speaking countries as part of Channel 4’s *Living LaVida Loca* special.’

‘I think I’ve seen posters for that!’ I chirrup.

‘Yes,’ she grimaces. ‘Always nerve-racking when they start promoting something you haven’t made yet!’

‘Have you worked on many of these programmes?’ I nod to the digital gallery lining the walls.

‘Nearly a dozen, but this will be my first time getting a researcher credit,’ she reveals, before inhaling the words: ‘Fingers crossed!’

I want to clarify this element of uncertainty but Beth is clawing urgently at my elbow.

I turn and see a dark-haired man in a Fedora fast approaching us.

‘Just nipping out for a quick ciggy, Lucy.’ The man gives a courtesy tug to his hat brim as he passes.

‘It amazes me how many dancers smoke,’ Lucy tuts as she holds open the door for us to pass through. ‘That’s Benicio.’ She addresses Beth. ‘He’s your test partner.’

Beth jerks back from the door. ‘I’ll be dancing with that guy?’

‘Yes but it’s not like we’ve got Len Goodman standing by to critique you!’ Lucy tinkles. ‘It’s just to assess your natural aptitude. Or ineptitude!’ she quips. ‘Either way, I’m sure you’ll be fine, please don’t worry.’

‘Um,’ Beth gulps, continuing to look stricken.

I give her a quizzical look. I need to know if she’s planning on bolting because I’m not sure I’m up to hurdling the reception gate.

‘Beth?’ I try to bring her round.

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‘Do you mind if I just quickly nip to the loo?’ she blurts, clamping onto my hand.

‘Of course not.’ Lucy directs us down another corridor. ‘Don’t be put off by the fact that it looks like you have to walk through a waterfall to get in there, it’s not real, it’s just a hologram.’

‘I can’t believe it!’ Beth wails.

‘Did something come loose already?’ I fret as she hurriedly closes the door behind us.

‘I know that guy,’ she hisses at me as she begins pacing the floor. ‘We worked together on the *Footballers’ Wives* musical.’

‘Oh. Well. That was a really short run,’ I remind her. ‘Do you think he’d remember?’

‘I slept with him.’

‘Ah.’ For a moment I wonder if the bathroom air vent leads to one of those crawl-along escape tunnels oft found in the movies but then it dawns on me: ‘You’ve got absolutely nothing to worry about – Blonde Slim Beth slept with him! He’ll never recognise you as you are!’ I thrust her in front of the full-length mirror, just to emphasise the point.

‘Oh my God!’ Her face falls as she takes in her reflection anew. ‘I can’t do this! I can’t be this *hologram!*’ She jabs at the glass. ‘I don’t know what I was thinking.’

‘I do,’ I speak softly. ‘You were thinking that this could be your last chance to show the world what you’ve got. You were thinking of balmy nights in Buenos Aires and Seville and Havana.’ I remind her. ‘You were thinking of how it might feel to have a man who wasn’t partnering you because he was cast in that role, but simply because he wanted to move with you to the music.’

For a second she pauses, her chest inflates and all the former dreaminess returns to her eyes but just as quickly the light dims and she exhales. ‘No.’ She shakes her head.

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Belinda Jones

‘Look how nice that girl Lucy is – I’d feel awful misleading her on her first big job. We have to make an excuse and leave.’

‘Everything alright?’ It’s Lucy, popping her eager head around the door.

‘I’m so sorry.’ Beth rushes to her side. ‘I’m probably messing up your whole schedule, please go onto the next candidate.’

‘Well, as a matter of fact, you’re it.’ She tries to maintain her former pep but her voice quavers as she adds, ‘My last hope.’

‘There’s no one else?’ My brows knit together.

‘Not today. There have been many, many others. *Many.*’ She looks pained.

‘What happened to them all?’ Beth and I chorus.

Lucy checks the corridor and then scoots inside to join us. Leaning on the trough-style sink, she explains how their first ad was less detailed and consequently a number of applicants had second thoughts when they found out exactly what was involved – all of a sudden husbands didn’t like the idea of their wives being pressed groin to groin with some ‘sweaty Latin lover type’ six thousand miles from home or their employers couldn’t hold their jobs for three weeks or they’d only applied in the hope of getting to dance with a celebrity or they worried about getting caught up in another revolution in Havana . . .

‘Plus, several of them had heard the rumour that they serve cold Brussels sprouts at breakfast in Cuba.’

‘How ridiculous!’ I tsk.

‘Actually, that is true,’ Lucy admits.

‘But to let that put them off?’ Beth splutters. ‘This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!’

‘You’re right and plenty of them were ready to embrace

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it all but when I narrowed the list down to what I thought were the twenty-five best options, the producer vetoed them all.'

'But why?'

Lucy sighs wearily. 'Most of them weren't "camera-friendly" in his eyes.'

'Not pretty enough?' I translate.

She concedes a nod. 'Half a dozen were too skinny, others too well-off, three of them lied about their age, four were too good-looking and thus not relatable for the audience, a couple swore too much when they made mistakes which would just make for one long bleeeeeep and the rest didn't have the right accent—'

'What *is* the right accent?'

'Whatever doesn't grate on him that day.' Lucy flicks the antennae of her walkie-talkie. 'You know, one woman ended up shagging Benicio!'

'Imagine that!' I hoot, stealing a look at Beth.

'Actually, that was in her favour, they love a bit of scandal here but when she came back for her second interview, Rick – that's the producer – decided she was too gummy when she smiled.'

As our eyes widen in disbelief, Lucy gets blabber's remorse. 'I'm sorry, I'm being incredibly unprofessional. It's just that when your application came through, I thought, "*That's her! That's our dancing queen!*"'

'Really?' Beth blinks back at her.

She nods and then hangs her head. 'But what do I know?'

'Oh, Lucy, just because this guy Rick doesn't share your vision doesn't mean you should doubt your abilities.' Beth reaches out with a comforting hand. 'I'm sure you're very good at your job.'

'I thought I was going to be,' she sighs. 'I thought I just

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needed the chance to prove myself but now I've finally got that chance . . .' She swallows down the lump in her throat. 'It's not exactly going according to plan . . .'

I can practically hear Beth's heart twang in sympathy. 'You mustn't give up. Not yet.'

'I don't really have a choice any more. Today is it – my final deadline.' She tries to buck herself up. 'But it's okay, they said they'd always have me back as a runner on *Stars Behind Bars*.'

'Oh no! No, no no.' A suddenly brusque Beth takes her by the arm. 'Come on, we're going to make this last chance count.'

'Then you'll do it?' Her eyes brighten with hope.

'We'll do it,' she asserts.

I follow behind the two of them, smiling. Maybe in some warped way this is all meant to be.

But then we enter the studio and there stands producer Rick – the one man standing between Beth and her dream.