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Inner Beauty
by
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Ellen eyed the wetsuit with loathing. It hung on the towel rack, pretending to be as harmless as a deflated balloon. Ellen knew better. In a sudden fit of masochism, she stripped to her underwear and lunged at the suit. They wrestled. She pulled and tugged at the neoprene. It pulled and tugged back. Her body wriggled and twitched in a dance mix of Watusi and epileptic seizure.

This is like trying to cram a sausage into a Coke bottle, she thought, shoe-horning thigh flab into place. Finally, with breasts squished into lopsided pancakes, a nearly dislocated shoulder, and panting like a St. Bernard in a sauna, she triumphed. The wetsuit was on.

She sat down on the toilet lid to catch her breath, gagging at the odor of moldy seaweed and other people's feet and farts. Now for the real challenge. The terrors of the deep awaiting Ellen on her first ocean dive Saturday were nothing compared to the terrors awaiting on the back of the bathroom door. She stood up and surveyed her body in the full-length mirror. Every lump, every cellulite roll was enhanced, magnified into elephantine proportions by the neoprene. She bulged in places normally hidden by even her tightest pair of jeans.

Good gawd on toast, this is going to haunt me forever.

Giselle squeezed through a gap in the door, jumped on the bathroom counter, and stared hard at Ellen's rump.

"What are you looking at, fur ball? Just because you're named after a super model is no excuse for a superiority complex."

Ellen stripped off the wetsuit, stuffed it into the gear duffel, then yanked up the zipper as if concealing a grisly murder victim in a body bag.

The leak in Ellen's face mask began as an annoying drip. She blinked the stinging salt water out of her eyes and tried to focus on her surroundings.

Oh the magnificence, the wonder of this underwater paradise. She searched for any sign of life in the silty, chilly water. In deeper water to her right, the kelp forest swayed back and forth like inebriated dancers in a gloomy bar.

The trickle turned into a stream, filling the mask. Her eyes burned. Ellen held the mask at the top and exhaled sharply to clear out the water, but she pushed down too hard. The mask slipped off her head. She grabbed for it and managed to catch hold of the strap. Keeping her eyes closed and working by feel, she repositioned and cleared the mask. When she could see again, she was alone.

Those jerks don't even know they've lost me. Fine. I'll do this without them.

She started swimming toward shore but a sudden rip current sucked her into the jungle of towering seaweed. Shifting shadow and light confused her senses. Cables of kelp brushed across her back.

What if I get tangled up? I don't have a knife. Divers die this way!

Trying to reason through her panic, she turned parallel to shore and kicked hard to cut across the current. As she scissored her left leg down, a sharp pain sliced across her ankle. She twisted around expecting to see a moray eel, its daggered mouth ready for another bite. But she only caught a glimpse of gleaming pearly white in the murky water. She fought to swim closer to the branching, freeform structure. It rose one or

two feet above the bottom, quite different from any of the surrounding rocks.

Coral?

Her ankle burned. She knew it was bleeding. The thought of sharks propelled her to the surface. She was still in the kelp, twisting to find the shoreline. Something jolted her from behind. Her attempted scream forced the respirator out of her mouth.

“I’ve got you. Relax, you’re okay,” a voice shouted in her ear.

Ellen was hauled in and pulled up on the beach. Everyone crowded around while the lifeguard bandaged the bleeding gash on her ankle. Overwhelming embarrassment left no room for fear or pain. As if from above, Ellen saw her body sprawled on the sand like a beached whale. She was the center of the entire universe’s attention, the focus of its curiosity, amusement, ridicule and disgust.

Abby blew into the coffee shop, her auburn hair catching the late afternoon sunlight. Then, as if every head hadn’t already torqued around, she called out to Ellen from across the room.

“Sorry I’m late, but you knew I would be!”

Abby ordered a mocha, pocketed the change, and tipped the barista with a dazzling smile. She plopped down on the bench across the table.

“So, how was hang gliding?” Abby asked, licking whipped cream off her lips.

“Scuba diving. I went scuba diving.”

“Oh, right. I knew you were off on some kind of mid-life adventure or other.”

“Yeah, some adventure.”

“That’s great.” Abby never did get sarcasm. She scanned the room for people she knew.

Ellen continued, knowing her friend wasn’t listening. “It’s weird. I went to the ER, but I didn’t need stitches. The wound’s healed up already. My doctor is baffled too. He’s sending me to a Stanford specialist on Thursday, so I guess this might be serious.”

Abby finally looked at Ellen. “What’s serious?”

“Nothing. I was just trying to get your attention.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m listening now. Tell me from the beginning.”

Ellen took a sip of iced tea. “It was a disaster. Monterey Bay was cold and foggy. My assigned dive buddy was this I’m-too-sexy-for-my-Speedo frat boy. The freezing water seeped into my wetsuit and I couldn’t stop shivering. My buoyancy was all wonky and the dive instructor had to grab me so I wouldn’t pop up to the surface.”

“Sounds romantic. Is he single?”

“Cheese whiz on a cracker, Abs, he’s about the same age as that kid behind the counter.” Ellen gestured, knocking over her glass. She jumped up and hurried to the counter for extra napkins, bumping into a man placing his order. He turned and she recognized Alex, a fellow community college teacher. As usual, his thick black hair and eyebrows were coated with clay dust.

“Oh, uh, hi.” Ellen stammered, gesturing over her shoulder with a fistful of napkins. “I’ve got to... uh.” She beat a hasty retreat back to the table to mop up the tea.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” Abby asked.

Ellen looked up. Alex had followed her over to the booth.

“You don’t know each other? I figured in a town this small... This is Alex. He teaches art. Alex, Abby. She’s a teller at Sierra Bank.”

Abby patted the bench next to her. Alex sat down. “I can only stay a minute. I’ve got to pick up my daughter at her mom’s.”

Abby put her hand on Alex’s arm. “I think single dads are awesome.”

Ellen felt a hot flash coming on.

Alex turned to Ellen. “Please don’t let me interrupt your conversation.”

Abby said, “She was just telling me about her wet and wild weekend. Go on, Ellen.”

Ellen organized her thoughts. “Well, even though the dive started out badly, it got worse. Something cut my leg right through the wet suit. I think it was coral.”

“Are you okay?” Abby shoved Alex with her elbow to let him know she wanted to get out of the booth. She knelt down next to Ellen and scooted her pant leg up. “It’s all wrapped up.” She sounded disappointed.

“And it’s going to stay that way until I see the specialist in a couple of days.”

“Why do you need a specialist? Didn’t you get stitches?” Alex asked.

“No. It’s... well, it’s not just a cut.”

Still kneeling beside her, Abby looked up into Ellen’s face. “Then what is it?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t need a specialist, would I? Look, I better get going. My cat will order pizza delivery if I’m not home on time to feed her.”

Ellen gathered her things and started for the door. Alex didn’t seem to be in any hurry to pick up his daughter now. *Chalk up another one for the Abbinator. But I thought Alex was... Looks like I was wrong again.*

Dr. Binder tapped on the door before entering the exam room.

This precious little porcelain doll is a Stanford doctor? Ellen disliked her immediately.

Dr. Babydoll asked a few questions, then gently unwrapped white gauze to reveal a hard, rough area encircling Ellen's ankle like an ace bandage.

Ellen gasped.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No. I'm just surprised. It's so much bigger than it was the day before yesterday."

"Hmmm. You said the wound healed quickly. Now the area around the injury is scarring in this unusual way. Is that right?"

"Yes. At the ER, it looked healed, just a thin white line. Then at my doctor's, there was a patch about the size of a playing card. It's spreading every day. What is it?"

"I'll take a biopsy. A pathology report will let us know what we're dealing with."

The doctor scratched the patch with a scalpel. The coarse, grainy material flaked into white powder which the doctor scooped into a vial. Then she scraped the boundary between the patch and skin.

"Ow," Ellen said as the blade nicked flesh. Drops of blood oozed along the thin cut.

"I'm sorry. I want a sample from the margin in case those cells are more aggressive."

"Aggressive? Isn't that a word you use to describe cancer?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions. That said, something this active might be malignant. I'll send you for blood work, an x-ray, and an ultrasound right away, and rush the pathology report. For obvious reasons, we do not want to waste any time."

She looked at her watch. “Roxanne will let you know where to go next. I’ll see you back here later this afternoon. Hopefully we’ll know more by then.”

The door closed behind her without a sound. Ellen put on her clothes and went to find Roxanne.

The afternoon passed in a blur of professional faces, needles, chilly rooms, machines and scopes. When Ellen returned, Dr. Binder saw her immediately. She carried a clipboard bearing a stack of papers. She was not smiling.

“Your results came back. It’s a bit of a mystery. The good news is, it’s not cancer. The bad news is, it’s growing rapidly. The x-rays and ultrasound show it’s not superficial... That is, it’s all the way through your leg, not just on the surface. The muscles are involved and so is the bone. You probably knew that already based on how stiff your leg has become.”

Ellen nodded although the doctor’s words weren’t sinking in. *Are those colored contact lenses or could her eyes really be that blue?*

“The pathology report indicates the infiltrating cells are organic but that’s about all. I’m the most concerned about your blood work... Cells in your blood match cells from the skin samples.” The doctor paused and waited.

Suddenly lightheaded, Ellen saw red dots whizzing around her field of vision. “So... it’s in my whole body?” she whispered.

“Yes, it’s systemic, like lymphoma or lupus. If it was just affecting your leg, we could perform surgery. However...”

The doctor trailed off, then continued with forced optimism. “We’ll check you into

the hospital for more tests and intravenous antibiotics. I'll meet with other doctors tomorrow for a case review, and we'll decide our best course of action. We may try radiation therapy or treat it like an auto-immune disease. Roxanne has gone home for the day, but I'll go find someone to help you check in."

And then she was gone. Ellen's stomach lurched. She realized she'd been holding onto the belief that a specialist would immediately recognize and cure her condition. Now she knew it wasn't that simple. This was bad... really, really bad. Her skin prickled and tingled. Her heart raced, her mouth was bone dry, her body shook out of control.

The next thing Ellen knew, she was in her car at a Jack in the Box drive-through order window. Her mind felt as numb as the lower half of her left leg. When the voice scratched over the speaker, she ordered a ranch chicken club, curly fries, and a large Oreo cookie shake. For a second, she worried she'd left her purse in the exam room, but it was on the seat beside her. Too bad she'd forgotten to grab her clothes as well. She was still wearing the exam gown. No wonder her butt was chilly. However, the kid at the pick-up window must have seen worse things because it only took a second for his shocked expression to become a smirk.

"Costume party," she said, handing him the money.

Ellen worked her way through the food slowly and methodically for the first 20 miles of the drive home. Then she pulled over onto the shoulder and threw up in the weeds. She vomited until she was empty. Empty of food, empty of fear, and empty of hope. After that, she kept her eyes on the car in front of her and her mind on how hungry

Giselle would be by the time she got home.

Ellen lay on her living room couch, examining her leg with a magnifying glass. Everything below her hip had turned to stone. Viewed through the glass, bright light refracted off pearly surfaces, revealing subtle facets unapparent to the naked eye. She thought of the fractal pattern of coastlines, how zooming in on one part would repeat the same pattern at a different magnification. She was mesmerized, then horrified as she watched one tiny fraction of coast grow a new peninsula. The magnifying glass flew across the room and hit the wall with a crash. Giselle shot straight up in the air, landing at a gallop out of the room.

Ellen progressed through the stages of grief in record time. She'd already done shock and disbelief in the doctor's office. Driving to Jack in the Box instead of checking into the hospital counted for denial. She thought about bargaining with God, but gave that up when she remembered she was an atheist. She spent the most time in the anger phase, examining her body in the mirror, the stark whiteness contrasting obscenely with her normal skin tone. She felt consumed with self-loathing and a sense of betrayal.

Her body had always been against her. Her face bloomed a rose garden of acne just in time for prom night. Her mismatched breasts refused to conform to any one bra size. Her hips, prematurely mature, earned her the nickname "Wide Load" in junior high. Her belly... oh, how she'd envied the flat, taut stomachs of her classmates as they wolfed down burgers and shakes without consequence. Her wild hair, her big

nose, her teeth grey from the tetracycline she'd been given as a child...

And now? What about now? A little cut was going to kill her because her body was giving in without a fight, hoisting a white flag in surrender to parasitic mutant cells clawing their way up her body from one of evolution's bottom rungs. She was in a nightmare or, even worse, a Sci Fi channel original movie, shot with horrific production values on a miniscule budget.

Well, she was done. She was so done. Her body had always been a deceitful, odious enemy. How could she care what the hell happened to it? It had never cared for her or she would have been pretty, happy, successful, loved.

And so, on to the final stage of what might pass for acceptance.

Unable to sleep, Ellen turned on an old movie but couldn't pay attention to the frenetic black and white characters.

These actors are dead. So is the director and the crew. So are thousands of people killed by earthquake and tsunami, Katrina, 911. Dead in a couple of minutes without warning. Every one of them had just as much right to live as I do. What makes me so special that I deserve any different? Nothing. I don't.

She reviewed her life and made up a report card: F in relationships, D- in goal-setting, D in accomplishments, F in growth and development. Without doubt, she had failed Life 101 and there wasn't going to be a make-up class.

Ellen must have dozed because she jerked awake when the telephone rang. The voice on the answering machine said, "Good morning, Ellen. This is Dr. Binder. Where

are you? I don't have anything new to tell you, but I highly recommend you come back to the hospital. We'll do everything in our power to make you comfortable."

Ellen knew all too well what that meant. Her mother lived for a year and a half after the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. The pain was incredible. She lay in a cold bath for hours to keep from clawing her skin off. She submitted to clinical trials, tested every experimental drug, had every possible side effect, and fought tooth and claw for every extra day. It just wasn't worth it.

Ellen called the college and told them she'd been in a car accident. The secretary promised to line up a sub for the rest of the semester. She made a few more calls to take care of her finances. Then she sank back on her pillow, surprised by how easy it was to wrap up her life in a neat little package. She lay in bed, listening to birdsong punctuated by the occasional hoarse bark of a crow. She felt free.

Ellen stepped into the shower with her right leg, then swung her left leg in like a bag of golf clubs. The water was so close to body temperature that skin, water, and even the stony coral seemed to merge into a single borderless entity. She felt her sense of self dissolving around the edges. The water sluiced off her leg like a waterfall over a marble outcrop.

Her eyes followed the curves of her petrified thigh and calf down to her ankle, around her heel and along the arch of her foot, then screeched to a halt when they hit a visual speed bump. That hideous bunion, jutting out from the side of her big toe, a bony growth only removable by surgery the insurance company deemed "cosmetic."

Holding onto the shower rail for balance, Ellen leaned over and tapped the bunion.

She looked at the pumice stone hanging from the shower head. It was good at sloughing off dead skin. *Maybe...?*

She rubbed the pumice stone on the bunion, tentatively at first, then with more vigor when she felt nothing. Bits of coral flecked off and washed down the drain. Ellen kept at it until the bunion was gone. Her foot looked normal for the first time in years, ignoring the fact that it was coral instead of flesh and bone.

She dried off, put on a robe, and made herself as comfortable as possible on the couch. She thought for almost two hours, idly petting Giselle and staring at nothing. Then she made her last phone call.

Alex's garage studio was clean and organized, the cement floor washed down, the work benches uncluttered. Sculptures of all sizes filled the room. From a pedestal in the middle of the floor, Ellen could see a bust of a Native American; a life-size hawk with outstretched wings; a woman's head, the face half-hidden behind a curtain of bronze hair; a sea otter and her pup; an abstract of ropey curves that made her think of muscles. She recognized a few pieces she'd seen at a community art show. Now, as then, she was struck by the way his sculptures looked solid and distinct, hard and eternal, yet somehow soft and yielding too.

"Your work is beautiful," she said.

"Thank you."

They avoided each other's eyes like two kids at a junior high dance. A strident meow broke the silence.

"Do you mind if we let Giselle out of the carrier?"

The cat began a methodical exploration of every nook and corner. Alex turned on the ventilation fans and gathered his tools. He was about to cover his mouth and nose with a protective mask when he paused. "Since we're assuming this coral is highly infectious or parasitic, don't you think Giselle would be better off in the house?"

"Yes, of course," she agreed, then realized with a horrible heart-wrench that she was saying goodbye to her cat forever. She hugged and kissed Giselle over and over until the cat had enough and pushed off, leaving parallel claw marks from her back paws on Ellen's stomach. She joked through her tears. "You'll be able to buff out those scratches, right?"

Alex selected a grinding tip. He attached it to a Dremel tool which whirred into action. He hesitated, then gingerly pressed the spinning tip against Ellen's foot. With many pauses to ask if she was okay, he trimmed the toenails to perfect half-ovals, then smoothed away bumps and ridges. At first, the noise made Ellen cringe as if she was at the dentist but she quickly got used to it. The sound varied with the pressure he applied to the coral, now whirring up like a disturbed wasp nest, now ebbing to a soothing hum. Pausing to change tips, Alex took advantage of the silence.

"I worked with coral when I was in grad school. It's brittle and the dust is hazardous, but it's beautiful material. The Egyptians thought it had metaphysical and healing properties. Yours is relatively soft on the surface but the sub-layers are denser and tinged with an apricot hue."

Alex stared at her foot until Ellen broke the spell.

"Thanks for the lecture, teacher. Will there be a quiz?"

He blinked, blushed, and went back to work, quickly becoming so involved that

when the hem of her robe got in his way, he flung the garment off her with as little thought as if stripping sheets off a bed. She was shocked, then insulted, then confused, but she couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Several days passed in a timeless blur. Alex worked his way up Ellen's body, following the petrification's progress. When the door bell rang, Alex jumped and even Ellen flinched at the interruption.

"What the...?" He hurried through the door into the house. Voices approached, angry and loud. Ellen bent over as far as she could, reaching out in a futile attempt to grab her robe draped over the back of a chair. The door banged open and Abby stormed in. She screeched to a halt when she saw her naked friend contorting wildly on a pedestal.

Alex crashed into her from behind. "You can't go in there!"

He grabbed her and tried to pull her back.

"The hell I can't! What's going on here? Is this why you haven't called me?"

As Abby yelled and Alex apologized and tried to explain, Ellen realized that while she'd be preoccupied with her trivial fatal condition, her friend had dated and bedded the art teacher. Ellen straightened up, realizing any pretense of modesty was beyond ridiculous at this point. She watched them holler and tussle, then interrupted with a shout. They stared at her.

"Sorry for the shock, Abs. But Alex is right; it's not safe for you in here. Why don't you kids go somewhere, have a drink, and calm down? Frankly, after all this excitement, the dying girl could use a little me-time, if you don't mind."

It was dark when Alex's truck revved up the driveway and woke her, but he didn't come in the garage. The street light shone through the window, illuminating the sculptures like submerged treasure.

When Alex did return the next afternoon, he was more interested in sculpting than talking, but Ellen forced him into conversation. He told her Abby agreed to keep their secret even though she thought they were both crazy.

As Ellen's organs ceased to function one by one, her physical needs simply disappeared. She couldn't understand why she wasn't dead or even in any pain. Instead, although she couldn't feel a thing, she found herself experiencing something sublimely sensual. As Alex worked, chipping away a corner here, filing a rough edge there, his intense concentration felt like an aloof and distant kind of love.

His eyes caressed every inch of her body. His hands moved over every part of her, equally attentive to her shoulders, her breasts, her fingertips, her inner thighs. No man had ever focused on her like this before. Perhaps only pure passion or obsession could generate this kind of mesmerized attention. Here was an artist at work. She was merely a spectator, watching as he ground down the creases in her knee, then smoothed away some cellulite to reveal a thigh muscle she didn't even know she had. Her body was sleek and perfect with polished, flowing curves, glowing like a peach held up as an offering to the sun. She closed her eyes and dreamed of spangled fish in a tropical sea.

Finally, Alex worked on her face, gently smoothing her features as they solidified, erasing worry lines and crow's feet, removing the bump on her nose. When she felt her

mouth begin to freeze, she hurriedly expressed her gratitude and wished him and Abby all the best. With her last breath, she barely managed to squeak out, "The lips... I want Madonna's lips."

Then she realized she had one final thing she just had to say...

A mirror, for crying out loud, bring me a mirror!

But it was too late; her mouth had hardened. With a few well-placed touches, Alex turned her frown into a beguiling half-smile.

Abby came in at the end. She looked Ellen over from toe to crown.

"She looks amazing. Absolutely gorgeous. You're a great sculptor."

Alex shrugged. "An artist is only as good as his raw material."

"What do you mean?"

"She was beautiful to begin with. I just gilded the lily, so to speak."

"If you say so." Abby snorted. "What are you going to do with it now?"

"I could display her in my next show. I think she'd like that."

"I can just see the headlines: *Math teacher disappears. Identical statue shows up in art collection. Police suspect foul play.* Alex, we need to talk about this."

She put her arm around him. They watched the light fade from Ellen's eyes like the sky darkening in a cloudless twilight. The statue glowed, illuminating their faces in a sphere of light.

As her brain petrified, Ellen gradually perceived another kind of awareness, dimly at first, then brighter and brighter, a million billion stars coming out as the moon slips

below the horizon. And Ellen became the black velvet sky embracing the stars, absorbing their cold and fiery light. With no brain to process input and create output, there was no middle man to distort perception, no filters to dim nor paradigms to warp. With all inner monologue silenced, the boundary between Ellen and not-Ellen faded away. Through sifting layers of light, one last spark of thought swirled up.

At last I feel at home in my own skin.

Alex chartered a private dive boat out of Catalina. He helped the crew dolly a heavy object wrapped in canvas on board. It wasn't until they were out to sea that Alex explained the goal of the expedition. The captain thought scattering the ashes of the deceased and sinking a statue sculpted in her memory was a lovely tribute.

The boat anchored in a protected deep-water cove off a deserted beach. Abby emptied a jar of ashes, care of Alex's woodstove, over the side. Reverently, they watched them drift away, then unwrapped the canvas. Shielding their eyes, they marveled at the sculpted beauty. The captain said, "It seems a shame to drop that in the ocean where no one will ever see it."

"Well, she was the client so we have to respect her wishes," Abby said.

They hoisted the statue up and carefully lowered it into the water. The glow was visible for many feet, though it dimmed long before they felt the statue bump on the bottom. A diver submerged to unfasten the ropes and make sure the statue was positioned securely.

Abby and Alex moved to the bow out of earshot.

"Now no one will ask any uncomfortable questions," Abby said, snuggling under his

arm. They gazed out over the waves and waited for the diver to surface.

A sunlit patch of sand glimmered in the kelp jungle. Fish flashed and sparkled like a shattered stained glass window. In the center of the underwater glade stood a glorious object made of billions of living creatures bonding together in the shape of a woman. They rejoiced to be back in the sea, each creature singing its own song of being. And yet a misty shroud of Ellen-ness held them all, every miniscule fragment gently gathered into a consciousness as multi-faceted and dazzling as a field of snow. Together, they saw without eyes and felt without skin, loved without emotion, and triumphed without victory. Exhilaration became the norm.