

In Just Twelve Weeks

You've probably seen the advert by now. But when my mother brought it up, I hadn't come across it – The Algorithm knew I'm not the target market, presumably, and back then it wasn't everywhere like it is now. My mother pulled it up on YouTube to show it to me.

In the video, two women who are probably in their mid-seventies, both with magnificent heads of grey hair, are examining themselves in an enormous mirror. The mirror is presumably in the toilets of a fancy restaurant, or boutique yoga studio or something – the lighting is phenomenal. The two women's speech doesn't match the movements of their brilliant white-toothed mouths; I assume the actresses are American, but they've been dubbed over for a British audience.

'I don't feel old,' one woman says to the other, in a voice that surely doesn't match those teeth, 'but I'm definitely starting to look it!'

'That's why I've decided that this stops now!' says the other.

'What do you mean?'

'Aging is a choice, and I'm choosing not to! I've signed up for the new Miracular treatment plan!'

The footage switches to a woman in a lab coat. Her name, with a lot of initials after it, appears as a caption. They've dubbed over her, too. She explains the process of this Miracular anti-aging treatment, but she uses a lot of words that... well, I called them 'pseudo-scientific' (I may have used the word 'quack') and my mother got huffy.

'You just can't admit that there's something you don't understand, can you?' she griped. 'If anyone knows something you don't, you assume they're making it up.'

(This is a common subject of disagreement between my mother and me.)

(I was glad I hadn't used the word 'bullshit', which I had definitely thought.)

Back with the woman who said she'd signed up for Miracular: we see a sped-up process of her face changing over twelve weeks. Her wrinkles smooth out, her skin plumps up and becomes rosier, age spots fade away. A line of tiny text scrolls across the screen giving warnings and disclaimers.

'Wow!' says the other woman, meeting up once again with her suddenly-youthful friend. 'Where do I sign up?!'

And then the details for you, too, to sign up appear on the screen.

A lot of things passed through my mind when my mother showed me this video (including 'bullshit'). Having been chastened for my snobbery, I settled on: 'But Mum, you don't need this anti-aging stuff. You look great.'

My mother is fifty-five. Sensitive about this fact, she accepted the compliment as her due from her daughter. I knew, however, that I had not changed her decision.

'They're probably charging hundreds of pounds for something you could get the equivalent of in the supermarket,' I said.

She smiled derisively at me and swiped on her phone to show me Miracular's website. It was a lot of nonsensical terms and chemical formulae, and words with TM and a circled R next to them.

'Patented', 'world-leading', 'dermatologically-approved', 'innovative', and 'secret formula' were all in bold.

'Mum,' I tried to say gently, 'this doesn't mean it will actually work. How much does it cost?'

'I'm an adult, thank you,' she snapped. 'You needn't speak to me like I'm a child.'

I apologised, and tried to sound even gentler: 'Do they want you to sell this anti-aging stuff on to other people? Recruit them to sell it?'

She hassled me out of her house after that, snapping about how much better than her I think I am, have always thought I am. How I'm just like my father.

For the next week or so, her texts to me were cold, sparse and to the point. This wasn't unusual for her when annoyed with me. The next time I saw her, I lead with an apology.

'About what I said last week, Mum... I'm sorry.'

I tried to gauge from her reaction how much grovelling I would need to do, but I couldn't work out her expression. I thought maybe she was also trying to work out how much grovelling I should do.

Then she said, 'That's alright. We'll just forget it.'

I will admit I was taken aback. It wasn't unknown for my mother to deliberately (and performatively) take the moral high ground, especially when she felt she was demonstrating how gracious she was compared to me, and, by extension, my dad. But this felt almost dismissive. It wasn't like her not to mark her victories. In the rest of her conversation, though, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. As I usually judged it best to do, I let it lie.

But her texts didn't warm up. I thought I might be reading too much into them, and shared them with a friend.

'That's just how parents text,' the friend said. She didn't see the shift in tone that to me marked a 'before and after' of my most recent infraction. She laughed, 'Save this overthinking for texts from boys.'

In spite of this reassurance, I braced myself for hostility the next time I visited my mother. I was sure she was playing some passive aggressive game in which, as yet, I couldn't work out the manoeuvres.

When she answered the door, she said, 'Have you done something new with your hair?'

'Uh, no....' Where was this going?

'Oh, it just looks shorter. Maybe how you dried it. It suits you. Very grown up.'

I kept waiting for her to twist the compliment. She never did. At the time – and of course I feel dreadful for this now, but I promised I'd be honest – I thought this was another part of the long game, that she was playing at being more attentive than usual in order to spring something on me later.

That whole visit was surreal, exactly the opposite of what her detached texts had prepared me for – the opposite of what the last few years of visits to my mother had prepared me for, in fact. She asked questions and listened to the answers. She was less critical, only becoming sour when she mentioned my dad, but without extending that to me in the way she usually did. She even complimented me

again, this time for how well I'd 'settled into' my job (though I had been there nearly two years at that point).

Because she was being so nice, I searched for a compliment for her in return. It was only at that point that I noticed that the wrinkles around her eyes seemed shallower, the skin perkier. I grudgingly had to admit that her wrinkle-cream – which I still wasn't convinced wasn't a pyramid scheme – seemed to work. I didn't say that to her, though; I was a little too proud for that. I told her I liked her cardigan.

Oddly, this display of warmth didn't change the way she texted me. She was definitely succeeding in confusing me, but I couldn't work out what her overall aim was.

It was the next time I saw her that I first questioned whether this might not actually be a game at all. But it was my mother, so it was still hard to be sure.

She was making me tea. This in itself was unusual; normally when I went to my mother's house, I made tea for us both (sometimes multiple times until my technique won approval; my mother was often deliberately mercurial, changing what she considered the 'correct' method and strength of brewing, so I could never get complacent). But today, she was making us both tea, and, in doing so, she opened a cupboard door and stared at its contents.

'What?' she said.

'What's wrong?'

'Where are the mugs?'

Even then I thought this might have been a game I didn't understand. But she looked genuinely confused.

'They're in the far left cupboard,' I said, trying not to show any emotion she could pounce on to critique.

'Are they?' she said, still confused, closing the door of dry goods and moving to the far left. 'Oh. Yes. When did this happen?'

I wanted to say that they'd always been there, but it seemed rude. And then I realised they *hadn't* always been there. She'd re-arranged the kitchen whilst I was at university (I suspected it was to throw me off when I came back to visit, but she claimed it was so she could reach ingredients more easily while using the hob). But that was years ago.

I kept my hands around my mug long after it was empty, eking out every last trace of warmth.

Later, she wanted me to remind her of her next door neighbour's name. Maybe they were having a disagreement, and my mother was simply spitefully pretending to forget; it was certainly possible. But once again, the look of confusion was out of place. A puzzled line sliced between her eyebrows, the sole wrinkle now on her face.

It was after that visit that I started looking around online. I selected the words I typed in carefully, terrified of giving it a name, not wanting to make it true.

I developed an absurd compulsion: multiple times a day I would google my mother's GP practice and stare at the phone number, but never call it. Even when I'd memorised it, I'd still go through the process of searching for it, looking at it displayed with the opening hours and the location on the

map. I didn't call it, but I brought it up like this on my phone over and over and over again. The GP's number was up on my phone, in fact, when the screen flashed with my mother's incoming call.

'Hello, Mum,' I said, trying not to show my surprise that she'd called.

She said my name, and I heard the anxiety in her voice that she was trying to squash. 'Have you spoken to Granny?'

And just like that, the world shattered. Despite the sleep I had lost worrying, trying to prepare myself, the blow was no less devastating.

'Mum,' I said, trying not to let my tone betray me. I had so much practice at that with my mother, but never like this. 'I'm going to come and see you now, okay?'

'What? I'm trying to call Granny, but she's not picking up. Have you heard from her? When did you last speak to her?'

'I'll be with you as soon as I can – half an hour at most, okay? – We'll sort everything out then. Don't worry.'

It was an absurd thing to say. But I didn't know what else to tell her. I didn't want to lie to her, but I couldn't, *I couldn't* remind her over the phone that her mother had died over a year ago.

As I hurried to the bus, I hit the number for the GP's surgery that was already up on my phone. I thought, disconnectedly, that I might be hysterical. I was playing some kind of game with myself: *if I move up in the queue to speak to the receptionist before the song loops again, everything will be okay. If I get to the end of the road before I get to number 2 in the queue, everything will be okay. If, before the bus comes, I...* The receptionist's voice broke through the wailing music. When the bus pulled up a minute later, I was sobbing, trying to communicate with the irritated receptionist but just getting snottier.

On the bus, a man with a scary-looking dog handed me a tissue. I thanked him and somehow cried even harder. All I could manage to say to him through my tears when he asked what had happened was, 'A few weeks ago everything was fine. And now...'

I'd just about managed to get my crying under control when the bus reached my stop. I wiped my face again with the dog-owner's tissue, and schooled my features before reaching my mother's door. It was probably too late to hide from her that I'd been crying, but I did my best.

When she answered the bell, such a petty concern was violently washed away.

We stared at one another, with near-identical expressions.

I suppose, because my mother always insisted, even before the divorce, that I took so strongly after my dad, that I had always understood myself as resembling him most clearly. But I was abruptly confronted with my near-double. Looking at her then, you would have thought she must have had me as a teenager. In reality, she had me at thirty. She barely looked forty now. I could only stare at her.

And she stared at me, too.

She said my name slowly, as though not quite believing it was me.

'Mum...'

‘What...’ She bit her lip, then said, with a brusqueness that at least showed it was really her, ‘Something very strange is going on.’

‘Yes,’ I said weakly. I followed her in.

She had trouble telling me what year it was, how old either of us were. She admitted, at my insistence, that she was as shocked by how old I looked as I was by how young she looked.

‘What’s the last thing you remember?’ I asked her.

She pursed her lips. ‘That’s an absurd question.’ Her words didn’t quite have their usual bite. ‘I remember today – getting up, having breakfast, trying to call Mum...’ She tapped the table. Her nail polish was very neat; I hoped that was a good sign. ‘But it’s as though “today” is in a different place than I thought it was. Do you understand?’

She refers to what I did next as ‘interrogating her’. Which is probably fair, honestly. But you can understand why. We ascertained that she remembered my school years quite clearly. With some prompting, she thought she just about remembered me starting university, but did not remember my graduation at all. She remembered the divorce, but not my father getting re-married. She did not remember her mother dying. It was as though the last five years or so had simply disappeared for her.

I’d thought she’d be angry when I told her about the appointment I’d made for her, but in fact she seemed relieved. Somehow that worried me even more; it was so unlike her.

I stayed with my mother all of that week, until the doctor’s scheduled house call. My mother kept complaining I was babying her, though she wasn’t being as acerbic as usual. I tried to perform normality and calm as much as possible. My mother at least seemed able to look after herself for the time being; aside from being thrown by changes she’d made in the house years ago, she was remembering to eat, and quite insistently cooked for us both as I hovered behind her. There was, thankfully, nothing concerning there: she got all the timings right, remembered to turn the gas off, topped up her water as she needed. I thought those were probably all good signs.

When the doctor arrived, she looked between me and my mother, and I knew she was struggling to compute how this woman was old enough to be my mother. I was in the room as the doctor questioned her; I verified things when I was looked to, and filled in what my mother seemed to be missing.

When she was finished, to my mother’s affront, the doctor asked to speak to me alone.

‘Your mum’s memory loss is very concerning, and we’re going to need to look into it further,’ she said. ‘But it isn’t what we’d usually expect to see with dementia. You’ve seen that she isn’t generally *confused* – she’s alert, knows how to do things, follows a conversation clearly. She just seems to be missing chunks of her memory.’

‘So it might not be dementia? It might be... something else?’

The doctor had pulled out her phone. ‘There have been a few reports now, and a preliminary investigation is underway, let me just find the name...’ She tapped and scrolled for a moment. Then: ‘Do you know if your mother has been taking something called Miracular?’

You probably know the rest. The court case has been all over the news.

I sit on the bed with my mother in the clinic where they're trying to work out what exactly Miracular has done to the women who used it. The room resembles a hospice, and I try not to dwell on that.

Looking at my mother is like looking into a mirror. I had hated my face for years – no one seemed to want me, and I blamed my appearance. I didn't know what to do with the fact that my mother had put herself through all of this for what turned out to be nothing more than my face. But I feel fonder of it, now, when I see it worn by her.

My mother's gaze is on our joined hands on top of the bedsheet. Finally, she looks up at me. She says, 'I'm scared.'

'It'll be alright,' I tell her, though I have no idea if that's true. No one knows what will happen next. I keep picturing Benjamin Button, but never bring it up.

Nor do I ever bring up how guilty I feel. Because the truth is, our relationship is the best it's ever been. She has never been so loving towards me. I've never wanted to be with her more.

I say none of this. I only stroke my mum's back as she leans against me.