

# Skin

## by Michael Olsen

**Characters:** Charles Beach 60s (M)

Margery Fellowes 30s (F)

*In the darkness we hear the following voice:*

**MARGARET  
THATCHER:**

*(voiceover)* “Mr Speaker, sir, the House meets this Saturday to respond to a situation of great gravity. We are here because for the first time for many years British sovereign territory has been invaded by a foreign power. After several days of rising tension in our relations with Argentina, that country's armed forces attacked the Falkland Islands yesterday and established military control of the islands.”

[YouTube ref: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZaP0TgOpig>]

*Again, in the darkness, we hear the sound of planes and bombs, screams and fire: the unmistakable sounds of war.*

[YouTube ref: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeva7zWZJAg>]

*The sounds of war fade, and lights come on the living room of CHARLES BEACH. Newspapers are strewn around the living room. CS there is a coffee table with a pile of newspapers on it, along with a model of a Lancaster bomber from WWII. On one side of the coffee table is a lounge; on the other is an armchair. Entrance is DSR; USR is the doorway to the kitchen; USL is the doorway to the bathroom.*

*Charles, 60s, is dressed in pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers. He paces back and forth with the aid of his walking stick, checking the time. He coughs.*

*We hear a knock at the door.*

**CHARLES:** *(calling out)* It's open.

*Again, a knock at the door, only this time louder.*

**CHARLES:** It's open!

*MARGERY FELLOWES, 30s, enters. She is wearing a dark blue cardigan and skirt and carries a small satchel.*

**MARGERY:** Mr Beach?

- CHARLES:** Charles. Call me Charles.
- MARGERY:** Mr Beach how are you this morning?
- CHARLES:** Who are you? Where's—you know—the other one?
- MARGERY:** Eileen? Eileen's not coming back I'm afraid. You've got me instead.
- CHARLES:** Oh. I rather liked Eileen.
- MARGERY:** Yes, we know.
- CHARLES:** What do you mean by that?
- MARGERY:** Oh I think we both know what I mean by that.
- CHARLES:** Tell me.
- MARGERY:** Eileen just said that you were a—a very friendly person. That's all.
- CHARLES:** She was very nice. I liked talking with her.
- MARGERY:** Yes. Now where's your file?
- CHARLES:** Over there, I think (*pointing his walking stick at the coffee table*)
- Margery puts down her satchel, goes over to the coffee table, and digs out the file. She flicks through it carefully.*
- CHARLES:** And you are...?
- MARGERY:** Oh I'm so sorry. I'm Margery. Margery Fellowes. How do you do?
- Margery holds out her hand emphatically. Charles shakes it.*
- CHARLES:** Fit as a fiddle, me. If Mr Hitler couldn't kill me, nothing will.
- MARGERY:** Yes indeed. (*Noting his hand*) Your skin.
- CHARLES:** Yes?
- MARGERY:** It's so soft.
- CHARLES:** I use moisturiser every day.
- MARGERY:** Really? That's wonderful. You should be looking after yourself in whatever way you can.

**CHARLES:** I try to.

**MARGERY:** OK. Well let's make a start, shall we?

*Charles sits down in his armchair. Margery takes Charles' wrist to take his heart rate.*

**MARGERY:** Terrible news about the Falklands, don't you think?

**CHARLES:** Looks like we're into a bit of a barney with those Argentines.

**MARGERY:** All over a miserable lump in the Atlantic.

**CHARLES:** It's our patriotic duty, you know. We can't have just anyone pushing us around.

**MARGERY:** No that wouldn't do, would it?

**CHARLES:** I wouldn't mind being there, I can tell you.

**MARGERY:** Well my brother Peter is. He flies with the RAF. He's on the *Invincible*. He's heading down there right now.

**CHARLES:** He'd be in Harrier, wouldn't he? Those vertical take off and landing planes?

**MARGERY:** Yes I think so.

**CHARLES:** Magnificent.

**MARGERY:** I hope it's all worth it, but I'm sure it never is.

*Margery places her hands under Charles' chin and inspects his face.*

**CHARLES:** Well?

**MARGERY:** You have spider angiomas.

**CHARLES:** What the hell are they?

**MARGERY:** Blood vessels radiating out from a central blood vessel.

**CHARLES:** In English?

**MARGERY:** Hmmm. Let's see what else we might have.

*Margery continues her inspection, then takes the file and writes in it.*

**CHARLES:** So do I have one foot in the grave and the other one on a banana skin?

**MARGERY:** No, not at all, but from what your skin tells me you like a bit of a tipple.

**CHARLES:** Doesn't everyone?

**MARGERY:** Not this much.

*Margery surveys the room, then goes around the flat and picks up an empty bottle of scotch. She shoots Charles a disapproving look.*

**CHARLES:** One of the few pleasures left me. Are you going to deny me that?

**MARGERY:** I'm only telling you what I see. *(checking the file again)* Is the Serepax helping?

**CHARLES:** I told the doctor some stories about the war and he thought I needed some medication. I don't need medication I just need...

**MARGERY:** Yes?

**CHARLES:** Everything is fine. I'm fine. I don't need it.

*Margery picks up another empty bottle of scotch.*

**MARGERY:** Are you sure?

**CHARLES:** It helps me sleep. And dream.

**MARGERY:** And many other things besides.

**CHARLES:** You wouldn't understand. You weren't in the war.

**MARGERY:** No, thank goodness. Now where is it?

**CHARLES:** What?

**MARGERY:** The Serepax.

**CHARLES:** I think I left it in the bathroom. In the medicine cabinet. *(gesturing to the bathroom)*

*Margery goes into the bathroom. Charles takes out the packet of Serepax from his dressing gown.*

**MARGERY:** *(off)* I can't see it. Maybe I should just order some more in for you.

*Charles swears under his breath, looks around, stands for a moment, then throws the Serepax to the other side of the room.*

*Margery comes out.*

**CHARLES:** It could be—I don't know—over there? (*waving to the Serepax with his walking stick*)

*Margery retrieves the packet from the other side of the room, and checks the packet.*

**MARGERY:** You haven't had any.

**CHARLES:** No.

**MARGERY:** Why don't you have some? It will definitely relax you.

**CHARLES:** Do I look like I need relaxing?

**MARGERY:** Well yes, you do.

**CHARLES:** That's your opinion, based on two minute's worth of assessment?

**MARGERY:** No. That's what it says in the file here.

**CHARLES:** The file! The bloody file! I can handle myself. I don't need medicine to make me feel better.

**MARGERY:** Self medicating on alcohol is not the answer.

**CHARLES:** You can't make me take it.

**MARGERY:** This is true. It's such a small dosage. Just two tablets. I'll pop them out for you.

*Margery pushes two tablets of Serepax out of the blister pack and puts them on the table next to Charles.*

**MARGERY:** Just in case you change your mind. OK? I'll get some water.

*Margery goes into the kitchen. Charles shakes his head. Margery returns with a glass of water and puts it down on the table next to Charles.*

**MARGERY:** Well, there's plenty here that we still need to look at. Like your blood sugar. Have you done your sample?

**CHARLES:** It's in the bathroom.

*Margery goes into the bathroom.*

**CHARLES:** *(calling out)* Not good?

**MARGERY:** *(entering)* No.

**CHARLES:** It's always been high. I'm sure it says so in that file of yours. There's nothing I can do about it. I watch what I eat.

**MARGERY:** You won't mind then if I just have a look.

*Margery goes off into the kitchen again.*

**CHARLES:** *(calling out)* Everything tells a story, huh? Well I know how to cook for myself, OK? I'm not totally incapable.

*Margery enters.*

**MARGERY:** Well, you could certainly do with some more vegetables but I think that goes for everyone, doesn't it?

*Margery again writes in the file.*

**MARGERY:** Last but not least. *(Pause)* Well, are you ready to show me?

**CHARLES:** Oh. Alright. Here goes.

*Charles pulls up a pyjama trouser to reveal a bandaged leg. Margery gets out a roll of bandages and cream from her satchel. She then pulls on a pair of latex gloves and goes down onto her knees. She starts unwrapping the bandage. She almost chokes on the smell. Under the bandage is a red, swollen and infected leg, covered in sores and weeping ulcers.*

**CHARLES:** Not a pretty sight, I know.

**MARGERY:** I've seen worse.

**CHARLES:** Really?

*Margery begins applying the cream to Charles' legs.*

**CHARLES:** It's the same old story. I've had this since the war.

**MARGERY:** Your skin is very delicate.

**CHARLES:** I was in a fire.

**MARGERY:** In the war?

**CHARLES:** Yes.

- MARGERY:** Can you tell me about it?
- CHARLES:** I survived the crash of a Lancaster bomber.
- MARGERY:** My goodness. Here in Lincolnshire?
- CHARLES:** Yes. I suppose that's all on your file there.
- MARGERY:** Some of it. Do you want to tell me about it?
- CHARLES:** We'd made it all the way back from a bombing run over Czechoslovakia, just to hit the English turf at 130 miles an hour. Ironic, huh?
- MARGERY:** And you were the only survivor?
- CHARLES:** Just. The fire got my legs.
- MARGERY:** I see. Do you know what caused the crash?
- CHARLES:** Who knows? Flak maybe? We were leaking fuel all the way back.
- There is silence as Margery continues wrapping the bandages around Charles' leg. Pause. Margery finally stands up, pulling off her gloves.*
- MARGERY:** There, that should do it.
- CHARLES:** So I'm right till next time?
- MARGERY:** Yes. *(Pause)* Where are you from? It doesn't say on the file.
- CHARLES:** Australia. Can't you tell?
- MARGERY:** And you've been here since the war?
- CHARLES:** Did the right thing: married an English lass, settled down, had kids.
- MARGERY:** I see. So what happened? With the plane?
- CHARLES:** We missed the target. Bloody big armaments factory in Czechoslovakia, stood out like dogs' balls—and we missed it. It was a bit foggy, so that didn't help, and Harry Winston, our bomb aimer, wasn't sure if we'd hit the damn thing or not. We couldn't exactly hang around and find out. Turned out we'd dropped our payload on the town next to it. Killed three hundred people. Big ball of fire just exploded and burnt them all.
- MARGERY:** My goodness. And that's when you got burnt.

**CHARLES:** No no not then. The Lancasters were flying petrol bombs. As you say, I was lucky, I suppose. Here, pass me that model.

*Margery passes Charles the model of the Lancaster. Charles demonstrates how it crashed.*

**CHARLES:** I was back here, the tail gunner, the most dangerous position in the whole plane, and Bert Norris, whatever went wrong, he did his best to land it, but at the last moment, instead of landing on its belly, it hit the ground nose first. There was a fire, of course. Got burnt climbing out of that mess. Can't feel a thing now.

*Margery takes the plane and puts it back on the coffee table.*

**MARGERY:** That would most likely be the diabetes. I really don't think you're looking after yourself.

**CHARLES:** That was my wife's job.

*Margery checks the file.*

**MARGERY:** That would be Penny?

**CHARLES:** Wonderful woman. Behind every man should be someone like Penny. You would have liked her, I bet. She was quiet, but also a good cook, a good mother. She was the daughter of a flight instructor so she ran a pretty tight ship.

**MARGERY:** I'm sorry to hear about your wife's death.

**CHARLES:** She was a wonderful wife, but I have a terrible confession to make.

**MARGERY:** What's that?

**CHARLES:** I never loved her.

**MARGERY:** Really?

**CHARLES:** I lay with her for nearly 40 years but I never loved her.

**MARGERY:** I don't believe that.

**CHARLES:** She got pregnant, you see, so I did the honourable thing and married her. That's the generation I came from: you just put up with it. Accepted your lot in life, and that was it. Like it or lump it.

**MARGERY:** You must have loved someone, once. Surely.



- CHARLES:** *(nodding)* There was Alice.
- MARGERY:** Who was Alice?
- CHARLES:** We fucked each other silly before she died.
- Margery coughs.*
- MARGERY:** How—how did she die?
- CHARLES:** In the Blitz. She'd moved out of London, to Manchester, only she died when a stray V-1 rocket hit Abbey Hills Road in the town of Oldham, just out of Manchester. *(shaking his head)* Ironic, again: she got out of London only to be hit where she was seeking safety. *(Pause)* She had skin just like yours.
- MARGERY:** You must miss her very much.
- CHARLES:** I miss her skin. The way it— *(Pause)* I miss fucking her.
- MARGERY:** Really I'm not interested in—
- CHARLES:** *(laughing)* Every generation forgets it's only there because the previous generation had sex too. *(Pause. Charles stands.)* I miss the war. You're never so alive as when you think you're about to die. You wouldn't understand it: the most amazing part was making love during the Blitz, and hearing the V-1 rocket engine fly over and cut off—and wondering if your time was up.
- MARGERY:** I see.
- Margery signs the file and begins packing up.*
- CHARLES:** What's the story with your husband?
- MARGERY:** Story?
- CHARLES:** Your ring finger. There's a faint ring mark there.
- MARGERY:** I don't wear my wedding ring at work.
- CHARLES:** Oh. Right. I thought there might be...something more to it, that's all.
- MARGERY:** Sorry to disappoint you.
- CHARLES:** No, no, I just thought, seeing as I've told you my story. You know. It's only fair.
- Margery pauses in her packing up for just a moment, then continues.*

- MARGERY:** We've split up.
- CHARLES:** I'm sorry to hear that. *(Pause)* There must be a story there.
- MARGERY:** There always is, isn't there? But you don't need to know.
- CHARLES:** We should be honest and open with each other.
- MARGERY:** You think you've been honest and open with me, do you?
- CHARLES:** I don't know how much more honest and open I could be.
- MARGERY:** Mr Beach, it's none of your business, really.
- CHARLES:** Well then, I am the more deceived, as they say. *(Charles stands up.)* I will get someone else to attend on me.
- MARGERY:** No you won't.
- CHARLES:** What do you mean?
- MARGERY:** I'm the only one prepared to take your case. You've had several nurses already. It seems none of them could handle you.
- CHARLES:** But—but—
- MARGERY:** It is your right, though. If you want someone else, you can always ask.
- CHARLES:** Why are you treating me like this?
- MARGERY:** Like what? I've come in, checked your file, told you what you need to do—even though I know you're not going to do it—I've bandaged your legs and that's it.
- CHARLES:** I see.
- Margery begins to leave. Charles goes and picks up the Lancaster model.*
- CHARLES:** We're into another war, you know, with this Falklands thing.
- MARGERY:** What's that got to do with anything?
- CHARLES:** Your brother. He might die.
- MARGERY:** Yes.
- CHARLES:** Pay the ultimate price for Queen and country.

- MARGERY:** I don't want to talk about it.
- CHARLES:** Did you have a chance to see him before he left?
- MARGERY:** I told you—
- CHARLES:** He must be very brave.
- MARGERY:** I've never thought of him like that—he's my brother—but yes, he must be. Flying is all he's ever wanted to do. So—
- CHARLES:** It's a miraculous thing, flying. To do something so wonderful, so—so unnatural. When I was up there I was free, you know, even though I was blasting away at everything that flew around me. Today it's—
- MARGERY:** Indeed.
- Margery goes to leave.*
- CHARLES:** What will you do?
- MARGERY:** Do? Well I've updated your file, signed it, and that's it.
- CHARLES:** Please.
- MARGERY:** Please what?
- CHARLES:** Don't.
- Charles puts the Lancaster back on the coffee table.*
- MARGERY:** Don't what? Mr Beach, you're not making a lot of sense.
- CHARLES:** You should come back. Tomorrow.
- MARGERY:** Why? To get another load of lies from you?
- CHARLES:** Lies? What lies?