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# JOURNEY BACK TO THE SHADOW LANDS

**She is the Oscar-nominated star who quit Hollywood nine years ago. Now she's back, putting her fiercely protected privacy in the spotlight – all because of a teenage incident that caused her 'trauma and shame'. Ariel Leve meets Debra Winger. Photographs: Jenny Matthews**

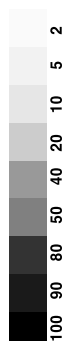
She is standing beneath the giant clock inside Grand Central Station in Manhattan, reading a newspaper, with a rubber yoga mat tucked under her arm. Smaller than her screen presence, 5ft 4in at most, she is wearing sunglasses and no make-up. Perhaps it is to defend the privacy she prizes; perhaps it's just the fact that she's on a mother's busy schedule. Between her yoga class and the school run, she has a 3.30pm train to catch back to the home in upstate New York that she shares with her husband and children.

In spite of the architecture of a face that can freeze at a hundred paces with a glare and melt with a smile, nobody recognises Debra Winger. Like her, New Yorkers are beginning to fill the vast concourse of the station to escape the city, and they hurry past. But this commuter also happens to be an Oscar-nominated actress. Winger has upstaged Travolta, Gere and Malkovich, but today she's in the role that she treasures most: she's "one of us". Being

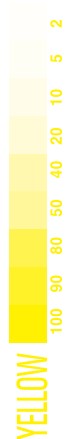
"one of us" is something that she has worked hard to protect. Maintaining the no man's land between nonentity and notoriety has earned her a reputation for being "difficult", which usually means that she has guarded her privacy and resolutely refuses to court fame or dance to its tune. That she is also prepared to speak her mind and tread on egos and toes while avoiding the spotlight hasn't helped to endear her to the media.

"I'm definitely not for the faint-hearted," she says. "But I say that upfront. When people say, 'What do you think of your reputation as being difficult?', I used to say it keeps people at arm's distance, but that just made it worse. The fact is, I don't get it. I don't get what they're talking about."

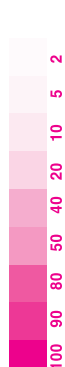
For her, "difficult" is the media's way of saying that she refuses to let them trawl over her life, and she doesn't see why she should co-operate. That's partly the reason we're here now: at our first meeting she was reluctant to meet in the no man's land and talk about herself. But today she has agreed to explore the terrain. It's Friday afternoon, and she has ➤➤➤



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time for a drink in the mezzanine cafe that overlooks the cathedral-like ticket hall, but she wants to be home in time for the sabbath. Her schedule is filled with the duties of mom and working actress; tomorrow it's children and football. A few weeks earlier it had been Africa, where we'd first met, on a trip that was off the beaten path of Hollywood actresses, a departure for a woman whose life has been punctuated with contradictions and deviations.

She was born in Ohio, grew up in California, lived in Israel for a year or so on a kibbutz, occupied the A-list heights in Hollywood and then, nine years ago, abruptly announced her retirement from the screen.

In Africa she was on a mission, as much to do with her past as it is to do with her future, a past she'd rather not talk about but must at some point, because her current plans are defined by it. As much as she fiercely protects her privacy, she realises she must remove the veil to reach people with a cause she cares about. She is used to the discomfort of exposing herself to promote a film, and it is still difficult for her not to be wary; her cautious nature is in overdrive.

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Four weeks earlier, Debra Winger waits in line at Nairobi airport for her visa to be checked and her passport to be stamped, so she can enter Kenya. She jokes, somewhat caustically, that under "Occupation" on the entry form she has written: "Retired".

She is dressed for comfort and function. She is in her forties but she looks like a youthful university backpacker. She wears a rumpled straw hat, and the only hint of extravagance is her designer sunglasses. She carries her own suitcase and, as we ride in the van that will take us to the hotel in Nairobi, she opens a black notebook and passes around photos of her home in Westchester County, where she lives with her husband, the actor Arliss Howard, and their three sons: his son Sam, 16, by a previous marriage, her son Noah, 16, from her first marriage to the actor Timothy Hutton, and their son Babe, 6.

Debra Winger, the Hollywood actress – the wild, feisty woman riding the mechanical bull in *Urban Cowboy* (1980), nominated for Oscars for *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), *Terms of Endearment* (1983) and *Shadowlands* (1993), and the outspoken critic of the business of Hollywood – is not along on this trip. Debra Winger who wants to be "one of us", who believes that her private life is her own, has made the journey, and was unaware that a journalist would be along on the trip. Over dinner the first night, she makes this abundantly clear. She has come to Africa on a journey, and she is not interested in an interview. She is nervous, afraid her celebrity will overshadow her mission.

Her concern is tangible. She is here for a week, and there is a lot to take in. She has agreed to make a documentary about the work of the charity Sight Savers International, and over the course of seven days she will witness cataract surgery, meet countless visually impaired children and adults, observe the way schools implement the help that Sight Savers gives, sit in a car sometimes for up to eight hours a day, commit her thoughts to camera and connect with people whose lives are a million miles from Westchester County.

And yet there is a connection between Winger and the patient she speaks to soothingly as he lies on the operating table; she seems to have a genuine interest in him and compassion for his welfare. But when she is asked to explain the connection, she is immediately distant, bristling even at



**Winger's starry heights (clockwise from left): in *Urban Cowboy*, which co-starred John Travolta; in *An Officer and a Gentleman* with Richard Gere; in *Terms of Endearment* with Shirley MacLaine and Jack Nicholson; in *Shadowlands* opposite Anthony Hopkins**



PREVIOUS SPREAD AND THIS PAGE: MAIN PICTURE: JENNY MATTHEWS/NETWORK PHOTOGRAPHERS; MOVIE STILL, RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE (TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM LEFT); AQUARIUS COLLECTION (TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM RIGHT)



**Winger meets workers on a tea farm in Kenya who have been helped by the charity Sight Savers International. Supporting the cause has given her the chance to see 'the transformation of lives'**

## ‘The chasm widens, between the warm, funny, playful Winger – and the pricklier version?’

the prospect that her life might somehow detract from that of the man who's lying on the operating table.

Winger dislikes the press. This is what the press clippings tell us. When she is asked to describe her feelings on the trip to Kenya, her response is to label the questions “invasive”. She does not feel comfortable. It should be about them, she says, the people that Sight Savers International are helping. She does not want to be the centre of attention. Except that raises the question: why is she here, making a documentary and lending her name?

Why would a famous person, with a lifestyle and level of comfort many would aspire to, leave the cherished role of motherhood, the relative sanity of a comfortable, enriched domestic life to tread the dirt tracks and flyblown mud huts

of Africa? At the end of the long days, she retreats to her room to write down her thoughts in a journal. She wakes up early and does yoga. It is apparent that she is processing something personal and profound on this journey, that there is a catharsis, a hidden depth, but she is not able or willing to communicate what that is. It is frustrating; she is willing to open up, chat, tell anecdotes about Hollywood, discuss current events, plastic surgery, her life, her kids – providing she feels it is safe, off the record. Thus the chasm widens – between the warm, funny and playful Winger and the pricklier version, who is guarded and circumspect. She has been prompted for days to share her story, and she promises to do so “when the moment is right”. But for now she maintains her silence. So we talk of other things.

When she was first asked by Sight Savers to travel to Kenya and see its work at first hand, she was receptive to the idea. She has always done volunteer work. She was always looking for something to balance her celebrity, which she found, at times, frivolous and embarrassing. She read extensively about the work of Sight Savers before the trip.

“The turning point was reading the statistic that 80% of blindness in developing countries is preventable or curable,” she says. “I have never heard a statistic like that about anything. I just found that staggering.” It also offered the opportunity to see an immediate result. “To me, the fact that you could find something that you could see the result of, not only in your lifetime but in the moment (such as the cataract surgeries), to see the transformation of lives, is pretty cool. A lot of work I've done in the past is, ‘Gee, I hope this made a difference – but we won't know for a long time.’”

Late one afternoon, under an unrelenting sun on a tea farm in Kericho, Kenya, Winger inadvertently proves her point: that the lives of the people she is visiting are more important than her own. Raymond, a small-scale farmer, has opened his home to us. In 1983 he lost his sight from a brain tumour, and Sight Savers helped retrain him. Now, he is not only a farmer but also a role model in the community. Winger bonds with Raymond and especially with his wife, Sadie. They are both mothers, married with three boys. So, on that particular afternoon, after all the tension building up to her talking about herself – while casually yanking a tea leaf from the branch and tossing it onto the pile in the basket on her hip – she feels the moment is right. She begins to tell Raymond about herself and her reason for being there. But Raymond continues picking his tea, not particularly interested. The irony of this is not lost on her. “There you go!” she shrugs, a mix of amusement, triumph and relief in her voice.

Throughout the trip, the rest of us are wondering when she will open up. Even during those exhausting journeys, Winger kept her thoughts for her journal. On the schedule is a primary school where children without sight are integrated into the mainstream school because Sight Savers provides them with the tools they need to participate on the same level. Another day includes a visit to a home-based programme in the slums. Everywhere we go, Winger interacts with the people, focuses on them and how they've been helped: the Ushindi visually impaired choir; the sunflower-oil farm in Kiptere; the Saoet dairy farm.

Joyce, who teaches Braille English, is flattered that Winger has come to her school. “It's not every day we meet a real-life actress. It is noble of her and it shows that she cares.” She has not seen any of Winger's movies, yet she is impressed by the willingness with which a famous person has come to ➤➤➤



# At 17, Winger had a cerebral haemorrhage, causing blindness for nearly a year

see them. Winger is embarrassed by it, and cringes as she is introduced as a movie star, dismayed that it distinguishes her presence. She is not shy, so shyness does not explain it. Maybe she feels it is dismissive of what she's doing; it's as though the fame has hijacked the moment and taken over. Whatever the reason, there is a paradox at work there. How do you use your fame for service without having your fame be part of the equation?

As the trip begins to wind down, there remains an empty hole in the story. I am still wondering: what deeply personal matter has brought Winger here? The gap has grown: the more we have tried to bridge the no man's land that she has marked between her life and notoriety, the more it has widened.

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One month after the Kenya trip, Debra Winger and I meet again in Grand Central Station. The meeting has been arranged to see if the gap can be filled.

She explains that she has had time to reflect on what happened in Africa, and that she is prepared to share her thoughts and motivation. But not now: there isn't enough time with the 3.30pm train waiting.

She consults her schedule, suggests we meet at her home in Westchester, then realises it might not be practical. So a few days later, sitting in a Japanese restaurant in New York City's West Village, she opens up and admits that she was going through "something" – a journey she was not able to define as it was happening. She likens it to talking about a movie while in the process of making it. But only after she has had time to reflect, do things become clear. The thing she has avoided talking about, the obvious connection, is this: she was once blind herself, after an accident.

Winger has never wanted her experience of temporary blindness to be the link to her involvement with Sight Savers and her resistance is not about an unwillingness to share the experience, but about the representation of how important it is, and how much it will become the main story. She is concerned that a glib association will emerge. She is worried, she says, about the idea that "this isn't going to be an interesting piece unless I spice it up with some big revelation about myself".

She remembers little about what happened, and it is not because she is blocking it out, but because it was over 30 years ago and she has moved on. "The connection, it's valid, but not dramatic." The accident itself is not why Winger is here – but the effect it had on her life and the way it impacted on her later is the connection she has made. The physical effect of losing her sight was only one consequence. But what transformed her experience was the idea of trauma and shame. This, she explains, the burden of shame – spurred perhaps by the sudden vulnerability, fear of being unable to be "normal", to stand alone, strong and resourceful, to be dependent in some way – is a shame that many suddenly handicapped or impaired people understand. The emotional disability.

20 And perhaps that shame, no matter how incomprehensible

it might be to people who have not experienced it, is not something a very private woman like Debra Winger wants to expose or expand upon. "My experience has been that with any trauma comes some shame. You think that you deal with something like shame once, but it's a process that continues throughout your life. It needs upkeep. Maintenance."

The details of the accident are revealed in a matter-of-fact way. She was thrown from a moving vehicle and landed on her head. She was 17. She had a cerebral haemorrhage, and it caused blindness that lasted for nearly a year. "It was profound at that age to have your mortality pointed back to you," she says. "And also to include in the picture of who you are the possibility that you could be infirm, challenged, sick, damaged in any way."

"To be perfectly honest, I could really wax poetic but it's a kind of lie: I don't really remember what I felt as a 17-year-old. I was angry, I was scared. I remember at one point I wanted to die. And I remember at another point I had this false bravado. And when I got rehabilitation care, so that I was not in crisis any more, the idea occurred to me that I wanted to tell stories about life – and before that I had never thought to be an actress. So it changed my life. I think of my life before 17 and after 17, and I don't remember a lot of it before. But I do remember what I felt like to be cut off."

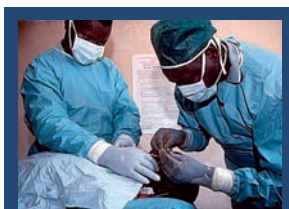
It becomes clear why she has not wanted her story to become more important than those of the people she has met in Africa, why she was able to connect with them so effortlessly, but also why she did not want to revisit the past. "As Eminem would say, 'I've cleaned out my closet.'"

Seven years ago, Winger said she would not read any more scripts and she signed the Screen Actors Guild's retirement form and sent it in. It had been taped to the mirror in her bathroom for two years, so she'd been wrestling with it for a while. She had wanted to create an opening, a space in her life for other interests. And just as this happened, her mother became ill. She nursed her for three months before she died, and she might not have been able to do so much for her mother if she had been making a movie.

She says she never looked back. She had a teaching fellowship at Harvard for a year, and taught a course called The Literature of Social Reflection, reading great books and discussing them. She was commuting from her home in Westchester County, going up to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she did some plays with her husband, Arliss, at the American Repertory Theatre.

The reaction to her leaving the business at the top of her game was curious. People seemed to resent it. As with J D Salinger's decision to stop having his writing published, there was a collective sense of outrage and deprivation. "I didn't see it as walking away from something," she says. "I saw it as the door opening and I walked through it. I didn't want to be in the room I was in any more when there was this beautiful garden on the other side."

On the trip, her reaction to talking about herself surprised her. She was rubbed up the wrong way. She admits she "would have said no" if she'd known a journalist would have been along. "I would've said, let's do it after the trip. But I'm glad in a way. I'm always glad for some opportunity to see myself. Albeit painful. Because I was not very pleased with my behaviour. But I'm intense, I'm in the moment, and I don't like to be interrupted when I'm investigating something. And I have an allergy to talking about my life to anyone but a psychoanalyst." She glances at her watch and realises she has to go or she will miss her train. She is ready to get back to her home, her family, and her privacy ■



## SAVING THE SIGHT OF MILLIONS

Forty-five million people in the world are blind, and 80% of all cases can be prevented or cured. Sight Savers was founded in 1950 and works in 32 countries. To date, it has restored the sight of over 5m people and given preventive treatment to 70m more. Last year alone, it restored the sight of 240,000 people and treated 12m others. It has trained nearly 2,500 eye-care specialists in Third World countries. It costs £17 to perform a sight-saving cataract operation, and just 75p protects a family against eye disease for one year. For more information, visit [www.sightsavers.org](http://www.sightsavers.org) or write to: Sight Savers International, Room ST02, FREEPOST, Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH16 4BR