

Permanent

You're only a man. You never claimed immunity to the power of beauty. While the stuff is only skin deep, that's deep enough: what else can you see across a crowded room? Superficial jerks and poetic romantics alike are obliged to make first impressions based on physical appearance, and nothing can be done to change that.

You have been working in middle management at a big corporation for a few short months when a young woman called Tess gets an entry-level position and becomes a part of your life. What is there to say about Tess? Her beauty strikes you first and foremost. Where to begin?

Tess. This is a woman whose eyes sparkle like magical gems from another dimension. They are jewels with the supernatural power to warm one's heart and soul. Those eyes could see every nook and cranny of your mind and perceive every emotion that slips across your consciousness. Her smile acts as an accessory, creating a comfortable world where joy has no opposition, instantly shifting from a devilish grin to a schoolgirl's blush. Her body, petite and slender, could be sensibly occupied by a young lady in her early teens. Tess, however, expresses a casual knowledge of her body that comes with maturity: displaying good posture while avoiding

stiffness, swinging her hips without appearing cheap, keeping her hands at rest during idle moments, making intimate conversation without standing too closely. A youthful body like hers can seldom display such grace. It is a delight to watch her move. Her hair is straight and neat, tumbling to her shoulders on those occasions when she lets it down. It resembles spun gold, if such a thing exists. Does her hair reflect light? Does it generate light? When she uses two fingers to push stray hairs behind one ear, it feels as if flowers are being arranged by a master of the craft.

Tess is beautiful. You are not so fortunate. All of this is true and obvious.

Like most employees in your workplace, Tess is a graduate of the state university with a reputation for breeding hard drinkers. Without delay, Tess is accepted into one of the office cliques: the boozier society, obviously enough. You came from out-of-state and had no such fraternity background. You only became a member of the boozier society after struggling to earn their goodwill. All things come easily to the beautiful people. You resent Tess, and believe that you have good cause.

As time passes, you find no reason to question your feelings. You keep a close eye on Tess. You notice how she brims with self-confidence and attribute her poise to the constant attention she receives from single men in her department. She is an attractive woman, and looks go a long way in this office. You are offended. You want nothing to do with Tess, and go out of your way to avoid her.

The boozier society gets together at a local pool hall for a few beers to celebrate the end of the week. The table is nearly

R U B B E R N E C K E R S

full when you arrive; the only empty seat is across from Tess. You sit down and say hello. She nods, but does not reply. The situation is uncomfortable, so you nervously start to relate a few anecdotes about your hometown. Her attention is careful and complete. You consider this to be a pleasant surprise.

Before long, the two of you are sharing college experiences.

"My residence hall was next door to the university hospital," you say, "and it was the only real hospital for a hundred miles. Every day, I saw cripples walking down the street. It freaked me out at first but I got used to it. Wheelchairs, missing limbs, blind people. I never see people like that anymore."

"Did you ever see a burn victim?" she asks.

"All the time," you say, "but I never grew numb to that. It's one of my greatest terrors. I wouldn't want to survive being burned."

"Yes, you would," she says.

"I don't think I could handle looking in the mirror every day with the knowledge that I was once without scars." You think for a moment. "Why do you ask about burn victims?"

"No reason."

"One time I saw this woman—this totally hideous woman—waiting for a bus. She wasn't burned. I don't know what her story was. I was at the bus stop and this lady showed up with big lumps all over her body, like peanuts stuck under her skin, and little tufts of hair growing out of the lumps. She was wearing a sundress. Yellow.

"She smelled bad too, like her flesh had already started to rot. I was shocked to see someone like that out in public. She

had every right, of course, but it took a lot of guts. She looked so sad."

Tess is nodding.

"What if she used to look normal?" you ask. "What if she had a husband, and then these hairy lumps started to appear—do you think he would bail out?"

"It depends on the husband," Tess says.

"Somebody for everybody," you say.

Tess begins a monologue: "Even people who weren't blessed with a perfect appearance have positive qualities, you know? An overweight woman could have lovely smooth skin. A man with a hairy back could have a movie-star smile. Almost everyone possesses an attractive feature."

"That's all true," you say. Your eyes are locked in contact with hers.

"But there are exceptions; maybe one in a hundred. On rare occasions, I'll see a person and look at them for a long time and start to think—wow, there's nothing. Absolutely nothing." She takes a quick drink of beer. She gestures to herself with one hand, loosely holding the beer bottle with the other. "I'm no beauty queen," she says, "but no one could ever be attracted to a person like that. It makes me sad."

I'm no beauty queen. You attempt to process that statement and come up with a suitable response. Nothing in Tess's voice indicates a shred of irony. Can it be that she does not recognize what she is?

"But there's a comfort in that," you say. "If one of these wholly unattractive people can find someone who loves them, they need never ask the reason why. That kind of love comes