

Beauty

by Alison Earls

Her hair was blowing in the breeze. Her eyes were soft with contentment but brightened by a flash of light that glowed with energy and purpose. With her lips slightly parted, she might have been gasping at some new revelation or immersed in an idea that took her far from the depiction of her face. There was velvety texture, warm colour, life. She shone through the room like nothing else. And, in reality, she wasn't even there.

Flawless, the man thought. She has everything. Don't you think? Of course, the woman thought. And on closer examination, you can't help but see even more exquisite features than at first glance. But perhaps those are the artist's embellishments.

They stood.

The gallery was busy that day. People came and went, glancing at the scanner so that it could deduct the admission fee and log their location. The soft beeps of registration played, as always, beneath the day's movements.

But still the man and woman stood.

Others moved behind them, each stopping to linger at the same exhibit. Most kept their thoughts but a few couldn't help but convey.

If only we could all look like that, a willowy twenty-something thought. The woman shrugged in passive response.

The skin ... the hair ... if she's not simply a product of the artist's imagination, this won't be the last we see of her.

Truly lovely ... such a perfect face.

The man and the woman finally moved on but before they left the gallery, the woman stopped to have the price of the souvenir image deducted from her account and downloaded her purchase. *It's better if I get it,* she thought, smiling ruefully as she turned to the man. *Then you can only see it when I let you.*

She's stunning, he reassured. But she's not real to me. You're real. And she might not be ... all the things that you are ... beneath the skin.

The woman sighed. And as they transferred home, she let the image sit in her mind. But she kept it to herself. And she kept her thoughts.

The man did the same.

Later, when she saw a reflection of her own gold hair, her thin face and young, smooth skin, the woman wondered.

Who decides? she thought.

What do you mean? the man returned.

Who decides what people think of as attractive?

I don't know, the man thought in response. Sometimes things just are. It's personal taste too, of course. But some things are clear. To everyone.

Later, as the woman slept, the man opened the image. His purchase had been so quick and efficient, the woman hadn't noticed. He had felt guilty about hiding it — ridiculous as well — but he didn't want the woman's insecurities to take over. A piece of art was no threat to her. To them. But it had been so strikingly perfect that he'd been unable to resist.

And in the dark, his thoughts — carefully kept, even though she lay asleep — were that face. *The grey hair in its errant patches. The thick deep wrinkles and folds of limp, mottled skin. She must have been eighty at least when the artist had captured her. Or more — she was so etched with life and incident and history. Her eyes lit with layers of the past, her lips with their ragged edges and crisp creases set in soft easy lines free of self-consciousness and guile. She glowed with the dual depth and wry lightness of real understanding.*

He sighed and suddenly he heard the rare sound of his own voice, opened by the intensity of the moment.

The words rang through the emptiness. “Beauty ... a timeless beauty.”

