



hate them because they're beautiful

**On a scale of one
to ten, they're elevens
—and I'd like to
deep-six the whole lot
by Aimee Lee Ball**

my friend Lizbeth was in a small rage, her sense of decency provoked and challenged. She'd bumped into a former colleague she hadn't seen in a year, and during that time, the woman had undergone a remarkable transition: a weight loss, a hair gain, a sea change, revealing (goddamn it) a conspicuous beauty. "I felt a dagger in my heart," fumed Lizbeth. "Who would have known she had a little cat-shaped face and the kind of red ringlets Tom Cruise just married? I felt betrayed—I thought I could count on *her* not to be a beautiful woman. But there's another one in the world."

There is a strong and prevailing resentment about great beauty among the rest of us garden-variety, my-mother-and-my-boyfriend-are-satisfied-but-the-movie-offers-are-sparse types. Pretty is almost universally attainable, but beauty is something else. It's about power and the certainty of that power. Women who are beautiful in a particular way know that their looks con-



The faces that launched a thousand inferiority complexes: Botticelli's Venus; Marilyn Monroe, the ultimate sex symbol; and Claudia Schiffer, cover girl. If looking at them fills you with rage and depression, join the club

stitute a passport to someplace where the rest of us are stopped at the border. Beauty insults our sense of democracy and fair play. It's not an American concept—more like a class system.

“When I see an extremely beautiful woman, I feel like a mutant excuse for a human being,” explains Lizbeth. In a slight twist on what the Germans call *schadenfreude*, or taking pleasure in someone else's troubles, a confrontation with great looks makes us feel miserable about another's good fortune. Beauty is a magnetic field: People get it, and they get more things because of it, things that are just drawn into the field. It's the ultimate scam—so intoxicating that people will project whatever they want onto its possessor, like talent or wisdom or goodness. And it doesn't matter that famous beauties almost always say that they were plain as teens, that they never had dates. Bone structure triumphs, no matter what.

Beauty is as much about *knowing* it as *being* it—the privilege must be handled properly. I used to work with a stunning wom-

an whose attitude was a shampoo commercial (“Don't hate me because I'm beautiful”) and who wore her beauty like Superman wore his “S,” always positioning herself against felicitous backdrops and seeking out flattering light. She became the Salman Rushdie of our office, a reviled and abominated creature, and her female associates would have cheerfully taken out a contract on her life if we'd had an in with the Ayatollah. Beauty as a commodity irritates people, and there is a bit of a curse about such women. They often make bad choices in men because men choose beautiful women for the wrong reasons. Unless they're perversely insecure, they're threatening and impossible friends; and women that other women hate can't have much of a life.

“Gorgeous people sometimes have problems finding friends of the same sex,” write psychologists Elaine Hatfield and Susan Sprecher in a book called *Mirror, Mirror . . . The Importance of Looks in Everyday Life* (continued on page 236)

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(State University of New York). "People are jealous of them, feel ugly and awkward in their company, and worry they will steal their dates." One beautiful woman in the book laments, "Many men assume, even before they've met me, that I am interested in romance. When men I don't even know start up with me, I get nonresponsive and irritable. I know what it will lead to. It's embarrassing."

Oh, shut up. I'm pretty irritable myself. I do not care about the inner life of the astonishingly beautiful, about the great burden of their gorgeousness, any more than I care about the troubles of the filthy rich. As Nora Ephron wrote in *Crazy Salad* (Knopf), "I recognize that people who are beautiful have problems. But so do people who get upset stomachs from raw onions, and men with blue-orange color blindness, and left-handed persons everywhere. I just can't get into it." Beautiful women may be suffering, but not as much as we would have them suffer. We want them to feel some sense of women's global insecurity, to know that when nobody's around, they're touching their toes. But they're not down among the women—they're part of the ruling class.

There is an aristocracy of beauty, and at the top is blond. The power of blond hair is undeniable, and it is disgusting. People go after it like coinage—even dirty blond, even when the blond person would be eminently forgettable as a nonblond. (Imagine Daryl Hannah minus the Clairol. Have I made my point?) When I sit with a group of friends, contemplating the beauties we might like to be and imagining the painful deaths of others, I notice that all the women we're willing to let live are brunette, with the possible exception of Candice Bergen, who at least has the decency to wear glasses on TV. (Diane Sawyer is okay, too—we're willing to convey the seal of approval after the age of 43. Besides, she worked hard, although for Nixon.) Michelle Pfeiffer makes us crazy. I do not want another word (or sigh or drool) about Ms. Pfeiffer from my Significant Other, although I can agitate him in the same way by talking about how rich and successful some other man is. It's sick that I think of another woman's beauty as a personal affront. But sometimes it seems as if there's only a limited amount of attention in the world, and with her around there might not be enough for me.

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Traditionally, beautiful women have pooh-poohed their most obvious assets, trying to convince the rest of us that their other, less superficial qualities are more important. "I feel beautiful when I am making my friends and the people I love comfortable and happy," Jacqueline Bisset said in a book called *Body and Beauty Secrets of the Superbeauties* (Putnam). "Isn't it better—far better—to be able to relate to the people around you and communicate good feelings about yourself? To me, that's the real fulfillment. That's the truest beauty." I do not believe this for a second. I do not believe she believes this for a second. Just once I would like to hear a famously beautiful woman honestly admit to the glee of being one leg up on the rest of the world, the way that Woody Allen confesses to the pleasure and privilege of being rich. ("Money is better than poverty," he says, "if only for financial reasons.")

Some women get their beauty in their teens and live on it, the way other people live on good college boards—their personas crystallized when they made their debut as women. It's like winning a sweepstakes: When it happens, it changes your life. But such a woman can be sad: an aging beauty at 21. Getting older is a double whammy when what you're worried about losing is so much of what you were to begin with. When beauty is attained so effortlessly, requiring no aptitude, it must seem tenuous indeed: If God smote you beautiful, He could smite you plain.

Some other women who traffic in their looks have simply made a decision to be beautiful, or have been convinced of it—they act like great beauties when they aren't even great cuties. Kathleen Turner, so sure of herself—how dare she? Kathie Lee Gifford and Loni Anderson? The nerve of them! Ivana Trump? Give me a break. And this is not a matter of subjective opinion. Beauty may be in the eyes of the beholder when it comes to love and lust, but great beauty is indisputable and nonnegotiable.

For women, that is. What incites our deepest feelings of jealousy and competition may not move men the same way. In a novel called *Slow Days, Fast Company* (Knopf), Eve Babitz describes a character who dazzles the rest of her gender: "Women fell in love with Mary. They thought of her as unattainably beautiful and adopted as many of her mannerisms as they could. . . . It was forever fascinating to me that men never noticed much

about Mary other than, 'Well, I mean, she's pretty and everything. . . .' That high gloss, which floored women, went right over men's heads. It was as though they had no receivers for her particular wavelength."

The "Over Men's Heads" category of beauty is best personified in real life by Stockard Channing, Christine Lahti, Mia Farrow, Annie Potts—like that. Men are more susceptible to the "Just a Slut" category (Marla Maples), the "Hollywood Low-Rent" category (Heather Locklear) or the "Babes" category (Kim Basinger). In the "Fake Beauty" category, you have your Mary Hart, your Vanna White, plus the woman in the Crocodile Dundee movies—all related to the "Room to Rent Upstairs" category (Paula Abdul, Jane Seymour, Catherine Oxenberg) and not unrelated to the "It's All in the Hair" category (Kirstie Alley, Farrah Fawcett and Julia Roberts, who apparently did not have rights to final cut). The truly hard to take is the "Smart/Real" category of beauty, exemplified by Winona Ryder, Jodie Foster, Susan Sarandon, Julie Christie, Blair Brown. I'm somewhat more tolerant of the "Thanks to Daddy's Genes" category (Jane Fonda, Shari Belafonte).

And by the way, models don't count.

A model is like a race horse—just another beast (or it is convenient to think that way). One friend struck up a conversation with a celebrated model while waiting for smoked fish at a deli counter in New York and, for a time thereafter, included her in a circle of friends, intoxicated (like everyone else) by the woman's dazzling looks. "Unfortunately," she reports, "dumbness is contagious, while beauty is not."

Civilians, as opposed to professional beauties, are the most stressful to the non-beautiful, particularly when they're talented. We hate the multigifted. "If you're beautiful and you've written a book," says one of my colleagues, "there is murder in my heart." Beauty is, or should be, disqualification for other marketable assets: You can have it, but you can't have anything else. I understand that when Jodie Foster went to Yale and wanted to make friends, she sensibly downplayed her looks. There's a tastelessness about beauty—it seems excessive. Nice girls don't. Arguably, there is more honor in acquired rather than natal beauty—as it says in the Constitution: life, liberty and the pursuit of beauty (or something along those lines). If it's self-created, it's like having been poor and paying your own way to the top.

It's funny to realize that Marilyn Monroe probably wouldn't be considered beautiful today unless she had the worked-out body of Madonna, that Audrey Hepburn would have been thought too gamine. In a new book called *The Beauty Myth* (William Morrow), Naomi Wolf proposes that the standards for beauty vacillate from one era to another in reaction to male expectations of how women should act. "The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that period considers desirable," Wolf writes. "The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance."

When my friends and I debate whether, given any say in the matter, we'd trade brains for beauty, we finally come down on the side of smarts, but I don't know if it's a true choice or a lifetime of rationalization. With maturing comes less fretting. There will always be someone more beautiful, so why bother? And now with technology. . . I will even concede, if I must, that beauty changes the way its honoree is perceived in the world—and not always for the good. But I can't help feeling about great beauty the way the Fiddler on the Roof felt about great wealth as he pleaded with God: If it's a curse, curse me. □