

# The Eyes of the Hunter

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I know exactly when I stopped feeling like a woman, when I withdrew—or was withdrawn—from the playing field. I have now stopped looking at men as a woman looks at them who can be stirred by them and who knows they can be stirred by her.

A woman who is still active as a woman—not necessarily sexually active but potentially sexually active—looks at men and upon men in a particular way, even the ones most removed from her idea of what a man should be like in order to attract her. Often quite unconsciously, she sees the ugliest and the dumbest male as belonging to a sex with some other representatives of which she could have something going at some point.

Not necessarily that she will, mind you, but that she might. And—nothing new under the sun—a woman who considers men in this light sends out vibrations that representatives of the male sex will in turn catch and respond to—even those not interested in her per se—as they would respond to any sexually active woman, or any woman potentially so. Which means that in the way they look at her, in the way they may lightly touch her to stress a point or give her their attention, they will indicate (though most of the time totally unaware of doing so) that they, in point of fact,

recognize her as someone who belongs to a category from which a man might pick a mate, temporary or otherwise.

Attention is the key word here. The surest way to measure the deterioration of a woman as she advances in age is the degree and quality of attention men give her. In her late teens or her second or third decade, a reasonably winsome woman will, at some level, have a man's total attention. The man may not be rolling on his back, audibly purring, or letting his eyes go dreamy, but his hormones will say hi to hers. A healthy man who responds to a young female may not even be aware of it or have the least intention of pursuing her. He may be a perfectly faithful and content husband meeting a friend's wife, a father having a heart-to-heart with his daughter, an autocratic boss berating a secretary, a writer meeting his editor. He may have a calm penis, resting motionless between his legs. But at some level, he will intimately vibrate with the knowledge that he is interacting with a young woman. She has firm breasts and buttocks, smooth lips, a vagina where a man can put the tool that nature gave him for that very purpose. (We are talking nature here, not deliberate lust or wantonness.)

In her fourth decade, a woman may or may not be sexually interesting. It depends on the extent to which she takes care of her looks, it depends on whether the natural aging process is taking place in a flattering or gross manner. It also depends on whether she is in a position of power—she's the boss—or related to someone in a position of power—she's the boss's wife. So a woman in her forties, *if* she's moderately attractive, *if* she's powerful or related to someone powerful, will keep her allure and men's attention. Also, beside her circumstances, the years will have added certain advantages to make up for the fact that her hormones are not calling out as loudly as before: she will be more amusing, more forceful, more secure, or more determined. Enough to earn a man's attention, though this last not as intense as that a younger woman might command.

Now we come to women in their fifties. Some women in their fifties keep in shape, take care of their skin and their diet, and cover the gray in their hair. But under the facials, their skin is dehydrated and men who bother can only imagine how dry the rest of her would be. Although there

may be some surprises there. Individuals vary. A woman may look all right and she may remain tight and lubricated enough to accommodate a man and pleasure him. But for the most part, she will begin to be out of the game and content with a husband growing old by her side.

Not to disparage a cherished companion, but after thirty years or more of seeing her every day, the husband will not, ever, look at her with the eyes of the hunter. If the two form what is traditionally known as a good couple, asperities sanded away so that there's a snug fit and enough likes and dislikes in common, they will be happier than most. If one is difficult, or both of them are, then the bickering exploding from time to time into full-blown conflict will continue until one of them dies. But that's another story.

To come back to our woman over fifty, she will soon realize, without undue surprise, that the quality of men's attention has diminished, that sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, their eyes are drawn to what goes on beyond her, so that she will catch herself turning to throw a furtive look at whatever fascinating situation has developed behind her back. In her fifties, if a woman is in a position of power or is related to someone in a position of power, she still has a fair chance of capturing a man's undivided attention, particularly if the man's livelihood depends on the woman's appreciation of him, but the reasons will no longer be the right ones.

Of course, a man-woman contact of any sort, be it the most casual, has its subtext. But then, so does a black-white contact—or any other combination of races or nationalities—a young-old one, or a fat-thin one. Each individual will remain conscious, at some level, of the other person's difference.

The fifth decade was certainly the decisive one for me. I went so fast from being a woman to no longer being one that I didn't know what hit me. Not because of age, which would have allowed a smoother transition. No. Rejection was what undid me.

A few months after that rejection—of which more later—I was talking to my boss, Alex, when I became strongly aware of the fact that neither of us was using the indicators that I was accustomed to in any conversation

with a man. The realization was so stunning that I believe I stopped in mid-sentence. We were going through spring catalogues. Alex's assistant was there, a pert, bosomy girl with extraordinary curly red hair that fell to her waist. I knew there was nothing at all between them and no intention on either side that there ever should be. Alex had just entered into a raging affair with a model and Lizzie, the assistant, was engaged. Yet, whenever Alex turned to her, a light went on in his eyes that he snuffed out whenever he turned to me.

Alex likes me. We have worked together a long time and his manner is ever friendly and courteous. But there it was. The change that came over him as he went from Lizzie to me and back to Lizzie was unbelievable. Even more startling was my realization that I'd been sitting there as aware of him as a man as I'd been aware of my chair as a chair.

Over the next few days, I gradually became aware of my new status as a non-woman or a no-longer woman. I started testing the fact with salespeople, customers, suppliers. When people came to me, or when I went out to look at the new collections to pick what we needed for our stores, I was transparent. Everybody was welcoming—after all, my position in the chain of command called for deference—but something was missing.

I, in turn, was no longer seeing the men. I heard them, saw their hands that tapped a pencil, pointed to a particularly good sketch, picked up a paper cup, held a door open, but it was all work. In the past, a shapely hand could send me, at some level, into a daydream of it cupping my breast or slipping between my thighs; a full mouth would call for a kiss even as I was discussing numbers or schedules. Or I would automatically check out a man's backside as he walked by. Now, nothing.

So what had happened? How did I go from that to this? Rejection. One morning, months before, Alex tells me that we're meeting with the company lawyer to discuss the Joel G. plagiarism issue. Alex wants me there as I was the one involved with buying the line. Though we all know that in fashion, plagiarism is next to impossible to prove, we still have to cover our ass and make sure we won't be hauled into court if the designer is.

At our lawyer's, things look the same. The watercolors haven't changed, neither has the secretary. But someone else is occupying Jack's

office, Clarence something or other. I've seen him at a couple of parties and I don't like him. For one thing, he's loud. He sneezes loudly, clears his throat loudly, his voice booms, he laughs too much. I jump when his phone rings: the volume seems to be set to the maximum. Plus, he's the least subtle sort of womanizer. Even when he talks directly to Alex, his eyes move back to me, run from my throat to my breasts to my knees to my ankles, again and again.

Now I won't deny that a minimal amount of stroking—not touching, mind you, but some decent spark of admiration in a guy's eyes—does me good. In fact, I need it from time to time, dealing as I do with gorgeous models, the epitome of women men lust after. They may be vacuous, but physically, the competition is disheartening and I often feel like a lump. So male attention, when discreet, is mostly welcome. Now this man is putting it all out for my benefit. OK, he would surely do more for Kate Moss or Naomi Campbell but I don't find him repulsive and, at some level, I start responding. He, in turn, shifts into high gear. There's only the three of us. Alex, ever attuned to his surroundings, listens to Clarence then turns to me and lets his eyes rest on me, telling me he's aware of what's going on.

We have brought a portfolio of drawings and photographs. Seated next to me on the couch, Clarence looks at them, says there's no case there, and rubs his leg against mine. As if that weren't enough, every time he makes a point, he actually puts his hand on my thigh. Christ, I can't believe this guy!

And I can't believe myself. Normally, a gross come-on like that turns me off completely. Now, not because of it but in spite of it, I'm aroused. It's the guy himself. He's sexy, no denying it. I'd like nothing so much as to hitch up my skirt and hoist myself on his lap. Instead of which, as a matter of discipline, I look at my watch, say I have forgotten something important, and leave.

He calls me at my office an hour later. Discipline hasn't been working too well, though I've occupied that hour looking intently at the photographs of my family on my desk, telling myself that I've put three kids through college, that I have grandchildren, for God's sake, that I am fifty-

three years old and that guy is loud, brash, a thigh-kneader, and worse, a name-dropper. In our first five minutes in his office, he mentioned three celebs. One who had called him late last night to ask for advice, one who invited him on his yacht, a third whose biography he was reading. "I have to. I'll run into her in at least a couple of places and she's bound to ask me what I think." Christ! Plus, he's probably a grandfather himself. But when he calls and asks me to dinner, I say yes. Yes, yes.

Though big and blonde and of Dutch origin, Clarence goes by the manual of the Latin lover. When he picks me up, he brings along a box of ridiculous long-stemmed red roses. And takes me to *the* restaurant. Does he think I'm impressed? (Though he does have his own table, I'll grant him that.) What impresses me is his voracious personality. He stuffs himself like a pig, his napkin stuck in his collar, drinks an enormous amount of rich burgundy, his hand at my side keeps going on my knees—I brush it away with less and less conviction (I drink a lot of burgundy myself). He wipes his lips slowly when he's done eating, first with his napkin, then with his hand, looking at me all the while. Then his eyes lock in mine, stuck in a freeze frame so prolonged I feel like fast-forwarding him.

In his eight-room pad across from the Metropolitan Museum, every wall, door, window frame surface is stark white. Everything else is black: leather couch, picture frames, the pictures themselves. The overall effect is depressing, a throwback to the sixties, like walking into a Vasarely. Smooth gray stones, round or oval, about the size of my palm, crowd the smoked-glass top of the coffee table. Clarence sees me looking at them and tells me they're the work of a world-famous Greek sculptor. A close friend of his, he adds. But of course.

Even the sheets are black, but I don't smile. My mind is entirely taken with him. Indeed, I want him more than I've ever wanted a man. That's always hard to establish after the fact, but when we get into bed, a few indications tell me that this one must be different for me. For one thing, I don't mind facing the lamp that no doubt highlights my every wrinkle. Nor do I worry about camouflaging flab but let it spread where it will, nor do I artistically drape the sheet over my breasts that have seen better days. And, a first as far as I can remember in my highly excited state, I'm

not keeping count of moves and countermoves either. Not once do I think, I'll do this if he does that first. I do what I want and take what's offered in good spirit.

Not, I expect, that Clarence is aware of all the finer aspects of my emotions. He pounds away, oblivious, touching all the right spots. No delicacy, but good sturdy equipment and plenty of endurance. I don't even need to rely on fantasies but keep my eyes open and myself firmly anchored in the here and now. The here is where I want to be though I have a brief vision of rolling hills, of wild flowers, and cascading water. Is this me screaming? In the wee hours, I drop, half-dead, into an incredibly deep sleep.

He's gone when I wake up, God knows how many hours later. On the nightstand, a yellow stickie with one word on it, followed by an exclamation point, "Wow!"

Wow! is how I feel too, although I wouldn't have put it as succinctly. I roll this way and that in his bed—*his* bed I keep telling myself with glee—spreading my limbs, running my fingers and my tongue—I'm not ashamed to say—on a couple of wet stains on the black sheets. Lying on my back, legs together, my arms across my breasts, my eyes closed, I thank the dispenser of all favors for this gift. Eat your heart out, Kate Moss.

Worried that Clarence doesn't believe in rubber, saying that people like us are not at risk? No, I'm not worried.

Feeling guilty that I cheated on my husband who's with his group somewhere in the Far East? No, I don't feel guilty.

I make myself some coffee, go back to bed, pleasure myself. Then I take a shower, slip one of the smooth gray stones in my bag, and leave. He'll call me. There's no sense of urgency.

He doesn't that day, nor the next. I wait three days, then call him. He's out of town for a couple of weeks. Although Alex, still anxious about the plagiarism issue, talks to him twice and reports the conversation to me for comments.

I act *déjà* and ask Alex if Clarence is back then. "Back?" he asks. "Back from where?"

"I don't know," I say. "Someone mentioned he was out of town."

"Maybe he was, earlier in the week. I saw him yesterday."

Over the next two weeks, I put myself through every humiliating situation that a woman, smitten and scorned, can put herself through. I threaten his secretary, whine, plead. I send him notes, gifts that I pick to reflect both my taste and my sense of humor and that he doesn't acknowledge. He's not in to take my call, he's not in to take my call, he's not in to take my call. He won't be in to take my call.

OK, OK, I can deal with this. No, I can't. I rationalize that he needs to be reminded of me, of my physicality. One evening, I waylay him outside his office building. What I can't rationalize is his annoyed pursing of lips when he sees me. Nor his greetingless, wary nod as he passes me. OK, it doesn't get any worse. Grovel I will. "Clarence," I call out.

He'd already walked past me. Now he stops and turns around. "You're a grandmother," he says. "Why don't you start acting like one?" and walks away.

Where are thunderbolts when you need them? I close my eyes, sharply breathing in. When I open them, he's nowhere in sight. Not scorched and burned to the ground, or bullet-ridden, with rivers of blood flowing from him. He's just gone.

He did die a few days later though, of a massive coronary. Sentiment is so subjective. Here I was, after a couple of weeks in the throes of binding my fate forever to this man, knowing as if the fact had been handed down with the tablets of the law on Mount Sinai that if I couldn't have him, the sky would remain dark forever and spring would never come again, yet the news of his death brought me nothing but relief. Can one smile inwardly?

Now, two years after my night of half-demented screwing and those countless orgasms that had come chasing one another like golf balls out of an Indian fakir's mouth, I'm dried up as a prune, which is to say that I still have a little flesh on me and hardly any juice to speak of. What the next avatar is, God knows. I'm entering my fifty-fifth year, one of the last legs. Outwardly, all is good. Inside is another story. I hardly remember Clarence and no longer see the smooth gray stone I use as a paperweight, but that one rejection has made everything that came before him a miserable failure. Ah, but we all live. Live long enough, and memory will go, and all memories.