

The Age of Seeing

Janine chose the far end of the bench, a place which left space for passers-by to sit without needing to notice her.

For decades she had been noticed every day, a natural beauty towards whom success and love flowed, unquestioned. But the years passed. Events first wounded her, then allowed her to grow a little, into a woman who accepted that, at sixty-five, her beauty had faded.

So she barely turned her head when the elderly man paused at her bench, then lowered himself with the slow precision of someone who had learned to negotiate with his joints. Feeling no possibility of threat, she didn't react. Men no longer noticed her, a reality that sometimes felt like sadness, more often like relief.

He, however, turned his head, and from the corner of her eye she sensed him watching her. Eventually, she returned his gaze, and something in his ancient expression startled her.

"Great heavens," he exclaimed, "aren't you a sight for sore eyes!"

Janine blinked. Compliments had become rare creatures in her life, skittish and easily spooked. "Do we know each other?"

"Sadly not," he said, studying her with a kind of reverence. "Forgive me. I am simply a man admiring a beautiful woman."

She felt heat rise in her cheeks, an involuntary, long-forgotten response. For a moment she was twenty again, radiant and luminous, a trail of admirers swooning and quarrelling in her wake.

He smiled, pleased by her reaction. "You remind me of a girl I once fell in love with. She had that same sparkle. Made me feel like I could do anything."

Janine laughed, the way she once did when she knew she was being admired. An unfamiliar sound, it surprised them both.

He straightened a little, as if her laughter had peeled decades off both of them. "Would you let a silly old fool walk with you? I'm steady enough if you don't mind a slow pace."

For a moment she imagined them walking, him buoyed by borrowed youth, her beautiful again. It held a fragile appeal, an opportunity to be that young woman one more time. For him, it was maybe the last time he would speak to a woman in that way, unguarded, impulsive, risking everything for a smile.

"That's kind of you," she said gently, "but I'm heading home."

He nodded, disappointment flickering briefly. "Well then, thank you for letting me sit with you. For being the woman who made an old man feel young again."