

LOOKS

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.15

As we walked along Pennsylvania Avenue, Kathy and I had the mother of all arguments and for once it wasn't about American interventionism or my role in the collapse of Western civilisation; it was about some pancakes we'd eaten for breakfast and whether there'd been too many blueberries in them. She stopped at the corner of Jackson Place, called me a deeply unpleasant name and said she wasn't coming inside with me.

'But we're expected,' I told her. 'What's it going to look like if we don't show up together?'

'You think I give a damn about looks?' she snapped as she walked away. 'I married you, didn't I?'

As I turned around I saw one of the agents at the guard booth smiling a little and shaking his head. He was one of those Abercrombie types. He could go fuck himself as far as I was concerned.

When I cleared security an excitable middle-aged lady greeted me and shook my hand violently; she smelled of lilacs. 'Mr Tyler,' she said. 'We're so happy you could make it today. Your wife isn't with you?'

'She couldn't come,' I said. 'Her mother died this morning.'

Why I said this, I have no idea. Her mother is alive and well and living in Boca Raton.

'Well, that's unfortunate,' she replied cheerfully as we started walking. 'It's a beautiful morning though, isn't it?'

I agreed that it was but didn't listen to the rest of her inane chatter as we marched past eager young staffers and tight-suited advisers. All I could think about was Kathy's last comment to me before storming off. Her ex-husband, the guy she was married to before I came along, he was no oil painting. And her son, Bobby, a kid she'd had in college, looks like Beaker from The Muppet Show so I can only imagine the kind of guys she was sleeping with back then. It made me question my own appearance, of which I'd always been reasonably confident.

'Can I ask you a question?' I asked as we waited outside the Oval Office.

'Of course, sir,' she said, looking suitably thrilled.

'Do you find me attractive?'

'I'm sorry?'

'I only ask because my wife made a personal comment earlier today that's left me wondering. Do you think I'm a good-looking guy?'

Her mouth fell open, I think she was quite surprised but before she could say anything the door opened and we were both ushered inside. The president stood up and walked around to shake my hand, that lopsided grin of his reflecting that lopsided brain.

'Dan,' he said, chuckling under his breath for some inexplicable reason. 'Good to see you again. 'Preciate your comin'.'

I shook his hand but hesitated before saying anything. I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate until I had an answer. There was only one person left to ask. 'Mr President,' I said, 'I have a question for you and if you wouldn't mind, I'd like an honest answer.'