

Beauty Queen/1

My Mother the Beauty Queen

By

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My mom saves bees from our swimming pool. You know, the ones that dive in for a drink, get carried away, and drown? I can't remember if she did this before I went away to college, but she sure as hell is doing it now. The worse part is after she rescues one, she starts talking to it. Sure I talk to dogs and cats, but they're vertebrates. Encouraging an insect to get up and fly away, especially one that could come back and sting you, well, that's outright insanity. But that's what she does. The ones that are already dead are carefully lifted out on a leaf. Then she stares at them intently, watching for signs of life. When she finds one that's not dead yet, well, she acts like her world has new meaning.

So when my friends and I have nothing to do on a hot summer afternoon, I don't invite them over to my house for a swim. It would be far too embarrassing. That and the fact my mom is beautiful. Don't get me wrong, I've never told her that. But it's true. I don't like it any better than she does. Fact is, she didn't ask for it. It's not like she can do anything about it, but she is branded. And she is stuck with it for life.

The way it works is like this. If you are very beautiful, you are different. Being different is bad. At the market, men stare at my mother from the corners of their eyes as though my mother has a disease that is contagious. Women stop and squint at her. When they see my mom walk down the frozen-food aisle, they clutch the arm of their husbands. Fat husbands with stubble on their faces and rolls of fat for stomachs. Husbands with sweat on their brow and beer in their gut. Husbands who look nightmares. My mother is lonely, but she's not desperate.

## Beauty Queen/2

I don't like the fact she is beautiful any better than she does. It's not like we've had a conversation about it or anything; it's just that kids know a lot more than they are given credit for. Anyway, I hate when my friends stare at her. They get blinded by her beauty too. She just smiles at them and goes in the house and hides until they leave, letting her little winged friends drown that day. She's not dumb. She knows what my friends are looking at, and what they are thinking. It doesn't matter that she is completely out of their league. Actually my friends know they have less chance than the bees she saves, and that's probably why they look. They know they are safe. I mean if a girl our age was around, they wouldn't look because then they might have to make a move. That's just the way guys are.

The biggest problem is that when you're beautiful on the outside, people don't bother to look on the inside. That's what my dad did. After nineteen years of being a family, he left both of us. It was the fall of my freshmen year at the New England Conservatory of Music when he left. Now I'm afraid that every time I leave home, especially to go back to New England to school each fall, something else bad will happen. I thought I was going to have a heart attack when I first found out. At first, I blamed myself for going away to school. If I had been home, I would not have let him leave.

My mom still doesn't know that I overheard a phone conversation between her and my dad. He called her six months after the divorce papers were signed. He finally realized his mistake. Although I wanted my parents to get back together more than anything else in the world, I knew she was right when she said, "No."

Fact is my dad should have come back before it was too late. Before he dragged my mom through three years of divorce torture. Everyone else on the planet thinks divorce doesn't

### Beauty Queen/3

bother older children much. But by the time you go through nineteen years of having a family, well, it's hard as hell to get used to the spilt-up feeling.

Now my dad has a girlfriend, who I hate. She is creepy as hell and is always friendly in a phony way. My mother did make the right decision though. It was as though my dad was one of those bees she saves. A bee coming back in for a landing, looking for the opportunity to sting my mother. I guess honey bees aren't so bad. They only sting in self-defense, and then they die no matter what. If my dad really loved my mom, he would have broken down the door and begged to come back. But he didn't, so part of her broke down instead. That's why she keeps saving those bees. She is trying to bring back to life what my dad killed in her. Most people don't know it's not easy being a beauty queen. Other people don't know what it's like to watch something so pretty suffer so much. All because she is different. So until it's time to go back to Boston for school, I hang out at someone else's house. Someone whose mother is not so pretty, and who doesn't save bees from the swimming pool.