

**BEHOLDER**  
**GRAHAM MASTERTON**

“Once upon a time in a faraway land a princess was born who was so beautiful that nobody was allowed to look at her for fear that they would be so jealous that they would try to harm her.

“She was so beautiful, in fact, that nobody could paint her portrait because the paints would burst into flames as soon as they were applied to the canvas, and no mirrors could be hung in the palace because they would shatter into a thousand thousand pieces if she were to look into them.

“The beautiful princess had many servants, but they were all blinded before they were allowed into her presence by having their eyes spooned out of their sockets.”

Mummy had read Fiona that story so many times that Fiona knew every word of it by heart, and her lips used to move in silent accompaniment whenever Mummy read it. She loved it, because it made sense of her life. She would sit cross-legged on the end of her bed with the windows open, her eyes closed, feeling the sun on her face and listening to the chirruping of sparrows in the garden below. The garden into which she was never allowed to go further than the patio, in case one of the neighbors saw her, and were so envious of her beauty that they climbed over the fence and tried to disfigure her, or even kill her.

Mummy closed the book. It wasn't a proper printed book, but an exercise book with a purple marbled cover and the story of the beautiful princess had been written by hand. Fiona thought that Mummy was beautiful, although she knew that she herself was even more beautiful. At least Mummy could go out and meet other people, without them shouting at her or chasing her down the street or throwing acid in her face, which Fiona knew would happen to her, if *she* ventured beyond the front door.

It was a warm morning in the middle of May, and Mummy came into Fiona's room and said, “Why don't you take Rapunzel into the garden, Fee-fee? I have to go to the shops and it's such a nice day.”

Rapunzel was Fiona's doll, which Mummy had made for her. Rapunzel had a completely blank face, with no eyes or nose or mouth, but she had very long fair hair, like

Rapunzel in the fairy-story, who had been locked up in a tower by an evil enchantress. When she had first given Rapunzel to her, Fiona had asked why she didn't have a face, and Mummy had said, "You don't need a beautiful face to be beautiful. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"Who's The Beholder?" Fiona asked her.

"Anyone who looks at you. Anyone at all. They're all beholders."

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Mummy called out, " 'Bye, darling, won't be long!" and Fiona heard her close the front door behind her.

Fiona picked up Rapunzel from her pillow, where she had been lying between Paddington Bear and Barbie. She went downstairs and out through the kitchen door, onto the York stone patio. The sun had moved around behind the horse-chestnut trees at the end of the garden, so the patio was in shadow now, but the stone was still warm. There was a low wall around it, with steps in the middle that led down to the lawn, and on either side of the steps stood two square pillars, with geraniums growing in them. Fiona thought that they looked like the towers of a fairy-tale castle, so she always knelt down and perched Rapunzel on top of one of them, amongst the geranium stems..

A breeze was rustling through the trees, as if they were whispering to each other, and she could hear the children next door laughing as they ran around their garden. Fiona sometimes wondered what it would be like if she hadn't been born so beautiful, and could play with them. She knew that the boy was called Robin and the girl was called Caroline, because she had heard them calling out to each other, but that was all. She had never seen them, even from her bedroom window, but she imagined that they were probably quite plain. Ugly, even.

"Rapunzel! Rapunzel! Let down your hair!" she repeated, in a creaky voice that was supposed to sound like the evil enchantress. In the story, there had been no door in the tower where Rapunzel was imprisoned, and no steps that led up to her room, so the only way in which the evil enchantress had been able to visit her was by climbing up Rapunzel's twenty-foot tresses.

Fiona took the hair-grips out of Rapunzel's silky blonde braid and hung it down the side of the pillar. Then she started to make her fingers crawl up it, spider-like, to

represent the evil enchantress. But her fingers were less than halfway up to the top when a yellow tennis-ball came flying over the fence from the next-door garden, and bounced in the middle of the lawn.

She heard Caroline saying, “*Now* look what you’ve done, stupid! You’ll have to go round and get it back!”

But then Robin said, “There’s somebody there...that girl we never see. I heard her.”

Fiona stopped her fingers from climbing Rapunzel’s hair. She knelt up very straight, listening. She could hear Robin approaching the fence, and then he called out, “Hey! Can you throw our ball back, please?”

Fiona stayed where she was, hardly daring to breathe. She knew that she couldn’t go down the steps and onto the lawn to pick up the tennis-ball because then Robin and Caroline would be able to see her, and realize how beautiful she was. Before she knew it they would be clambering over the fence with kitchen knives or broken bottles or bleach or who could only guess what, to ruin her face.

Very, very carefully she stood up, lifting Rapunzel out of her flowery tower. Then she tip-toed backward toward the open kitchen door.

“Hey! Can you hear me?” Robin shouted. “Can we have our *ball* back, please?”

“There’s nobody *there*,” said Caroline, impatiently.

“Yes, there is, I heard her. All she has to do is throw it back.”

“She’s probably gone inside. You’ll have to go round and knock on the door.”

Just as Fiona was stepping back into the kitchen and closing the door behind her, she heard Robin shouting out one more time, “*Ex-cuse* me! Deaf ears! Can you throw our ball back?”

Fiona locked the kitchen door and went through to the hallway. Over the front door there was a semi-circular stained-glass window, so that the hallway was lit up with green and red and yellow light, like a small chapel.

“Mummy!” she cried out. “Mummy, are you back yet?”

Silence. Fiona held Rapunzel tighter. “Mummy?”

At that moment, the doorbell rang, one of those jangly rings that left a salty taste in Fiona’s mouth. It must be the boy from next door, Robin, wanting his tennis-ball back. What if she opened the door and he saw how beautiful she was and attacked her? She

stood in the hallway for a moment, clutching Rapunzel, not knowing what she should do, but then he rang the doorbell again and she ran quickly and quietly upstairs.

“Mummy!”

She stood on the landing outside Mummy’s bedroom. The doorbell rang again and she was so frightened that she wet herself, a little bit.

“*Mummy!*”

“I can *hear* you!” said Robin. “I know you’re in there! We only want our ball back!”

Mummy always locked her bedroom door, when she went out, but all the same Fiona pulled down the handle, and to her relief, it opened. Mummy must have come home and perhaps she gone to the toilet and hadn’t heard her.

“Mummy?” she said, stepping cautiously into her bedroom. There was still no reply. Mummy wasn’t here, in the bedroom, and the door of her en-suite bathroom was open. She wasn’t in there, either.

Fiona made her way around the bed, with its pink satin quilt and its array of lacy cushions. On the left-hand nightstand stood a gilt-framed photograph of Daddy, with his hair receding, but smiling all the same. Daddy had died when Fiona was only nine months old, although Mummy never said why he had passed away so young. There was a smell of talcum powder in the room, mingled with that distinctive dustiness of people who live on their own.

The doorbell rang yet again, but in Mummy’s bedroom Fiona didn’t feel afraid any more. She touched the quilt, which felt so cool and silky, and she went to the window and looked out, and saw the street outside, with its neat front gardens and cars parked in everybody’s driveway. She felt like Rapunzel in her tower – not imprisoned by an evil enchantress, but by the beauty with which she had been blessed as an accident of birth. She was sure that one day a handsome prince would come to rescue her, just like the prince in Rapunzel.

In the story, the prince had tumbled from the top of the tower into the thicket of thorn-bushes that surrounded it, and both of his eyeballs had been pierced, so that he had been blinded. Perhaps Rapunzel had been too beautiful for anybody to look at, too..

She went over to Mummy’s built-in closet. Even with the doors closed, it smelled of Mummy’s perfume and Mummy’s clothes. Mummy had never let her look in her closet

before, at all of her lovely clothes. She was sure, however, that Mummy wouldn't be cross if she had a quick peek. She needn't even tell her.

She turned the little key and opened the right-hand closet door. Hanging neatly inside were Mummy's dresses, in order of color, and Mummy's skirts, and on the shelves were all of Mummy's jumpers and cardigans, neatly folded. On the floor of the closet were Mummy's shoes, her sandals and her court shoes and the high heels she never seemed to wear these days.

Then Fiona opened the left-hand door. Immediately she gasped in shock, and jumped back, almost stumbling over. Standing in front of her was a girl, wearing exactly the same pink gingham dress as Fiona, and with her blonde hair tied up with two pink ribbons, exactly the same as Fiona's hair.

This girl, however, had a hideously distorted face, with a bulging forehead and eyes as wide apart as a flatfish. Her nose was not much more than a small knot of flesh with two holes in it, and her mouth was dragged down as if she were moaning.

Fiona was about to demand what this monstrous girl was doing, hiding in Mummy's closet. But when the girl raised her hand in exactly the same way that Fiona was raising her hand, Fiona began to realize, with a growing sense of horror, who she actually was. On the back of the left-hand door there was a mirror, and the girl with the hideously distorted face was *her*.

She touched the surface of the mirror, and the girl with the hideously distorted face did the same, so that their fingertips met.

"But I'm beautiful," she whispered, and the girl with the hideously distorted face whispered it, too. "I'm so beautiful that nobody can look at me, because they'll be too jealous.

"I'm *beautiful*."

It was then, however, that everything started to make sense. The reason why she could never go out, and meet other people. The things Mummy said to her. *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. She hadn't really understood what that meant, but now she did. She *was* beautiful. She was very, very beautiful. But too many beholders had looked at her, and every one of them had stolen a little bit of her beauty away.

Her beauty was still there, but now it was inside their eyes. Somehow she had to find a way of getting it back.

She took one more long look at herself and then she closed the closet doors and locked them. Her heart was beating very fast and she was breathing quickly, too, as if she had waded chest-high into an icy-cold swimming-pool.

What could she do to get her beauty back? Mummy always kept her protected, inside the house, in case any more beholders saw her, and made her look even more hideously distorted than she was already. But had Mummy ever tried to confront those beholders, and demand that they return her daughter's looks? Perhaps she didn't know whose the beholders were, or if she did, perhaps she was afraid to ask them. Anybody who would deliberately steal a young girl's beauty would probably be very selfish and vicious.

Fiona went downstairs, and as she did so the front door opened and Mummy came in, carrying a bag of shopping.

"Why aren't you out in the garden?" Mummy asked her. "It's so lovely out there."

"The boy from next door threw his ball over the fence and he came to the door to ask for it back."

Mummy put down her shopping-bag. "You didn't open it, did you?"

Fiona shook her head, and now she was conscious of how loose and wobbly her lips were. "I went upstairs to see if you were there, but you weren't."

"Well, I'm here now. I'll throw his ball back over for him. Would you like some lunch? I can make you some sandwiches, and you can eat them outside, like a picnic."

"Mummy -- " Fiona began. She wanted to ask her about the beholders, and how Mummy had allowed them to take her beauty away, but then she thought better of it. Mummy always took such good care of her. She had probably done everything she could to keep the beholders away, and Fiona didn't want to upset her or make her feel guilty about something that she had been powerless to prevent.

There were many times when Fiona had heard Mummy sobbing in the middle of the night, or she had come downstairs late in the evening for a glass of water and Mummy had quickly torn off a sheet of kitchen towel to wipe her eyes.

They went outside. Mummy picked up the tennis-ball in the middle of the lawn and threw it back over the fence. There was no reply from next door. Robin and Carlime

must be inside, having their lunch, too. Fiona knelt down on the patio and put Rapunzel back on top of her tower.

“Rapunzel! Rapunzel! Let down your hair!”

As she said that, she saw a large brown snail creeping across the patio, leaving a silvery trail behind it. It had only one pair of tentacles sticking out from the top of its head, and she knew from her children’s encyclopedia that the shorter tentacle was for feeling its way around, while only the longer tentacle had an eye on the end of it. All the same, that single eye was definitely looking at *her*.

She hesitated for a moment, and then she stood up and went back into the kitchen.

“Won’t be long, darling,” said Mummy, spreading butter on four slices of bread. “Would you like tomato in your cheese sandwich, or brown pickle?”

“Brown pickle, please.”

Mummy was standing with her back to her, so Fiona was able to slide open the drawer next to the cooker and quietly lift out the black-handled scissors which Mummy used to cut the tips off chicken wings. She dropped them into the pocket in the front of her dress and went back outside.

The snail was still only a third of the way across the patio. Fiona knelt down close to it, and peered at it intently. Its eye was unquestionably swiveling in her direction, so in its tiny way it, too, must be a beholder. Even if it had taken only the minutest part of her beauty – a pretty little dimple from her chin, perhaps -- she wanted it back.

“What do you want to drink?” called Mummy. “Orange squash or lemon barley water?”

She would be coming outside in a minute, so Fiona couldn’t hesitate. She took the scissors from out of her pocket and snipped the snail’s eye from the end of its tentacle. Instantly, the snail rolled both of its tentacles back into its head, but it was too late. Fiona had its eye now, and everything that its eye contained.

As Mummy stepped out of the kitchen, carrying a small tray, Fiona popped the snail’s eye into her mouth and kept it on her tongue. It felt very small and bobbly, and it tasted *beige*, if there was such a taste.

“Here you are, Fee-fee,” said Mummy, and set the tray down on the top of the steps that led down to the lawn. “Cheese-and-pickle sandwiches, and a strawberry yogurt.”

Fiona nodded and tried to smile. Mummy affectionately scribbled her fingers in Fiona's hair. "You are a funny girl, aren't you?" she said, and then she went back inside.

With the tip of her tongue, Fiona pressed the snail's eye as hard as she could against her palate, but it refused to pop. In the end, she maneuvered it between her front teeth, and bit it in half, and swallowed it. It was far too miniscule for her to taste any optical fluid, but she knew that she had taken back at least a tiny part of her beauty, and that was a good start.

The snail stayed where it was, not moving, as if it had been paralyzed by the shock of losing its eye. Fiona watched it for a while, as she ate her first sandwich. After five minutes, when it still hadn't moved, she stood up and stamped on it, with a crunch. *Serve you right*, she thought. She touched her chin to see if she had regained a pretty dimple, and she was sure that she could feel some indentation. This seemed to work, taking the eyes from her beholders. She wondered how many more snails were carrying images of her beauty around in their eyes; or how many birds, for that matter.

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As if in answer to her question, she heard a tinkle, and a gray tortoiseshell cat jumped up onto the fence, with a little silver bell around his neck. He belonged to old Mrs Pickens, who lived on the other side of Fiona and her Mummy. Fiona knew that the cat's name was Zebedee, because she had heard Mrs Pickens calling him in at night. Zebedee was always sitting on top of the fence, staring at her unblinking with his yellow eyes, so he must be a beholder, too.

"Here, puss!" Fiona called him. "Come on, Zebedee! Come here, puss!"

Zebedee remained aloof on top of the fence. Fiona stood up and walked across the patio until she was standing directly beneath him.

"Come on, puss! Come down and play!"

Zebedee stared at her for a long time but still stayed where he was. Fiona took the top slice of bread off her half-eaten sandwich and threw it out into the garden, so that it landed on the lawn. Zebedee yawned and looked the other way.

Less than minute later, however, two fat pigeons landed on the lawn, and strutted toward Fiona's sandwich as if they had ordered it specially. They started to peck at it, and



that was when Zebedee crouched himself down and arched his back and scratched at the fence with his claws as he re-positioned himself, ready to strike.

“Go on, puss!” Fiona urged him. He ignored her at first, as he tried to balance himself in the best position for leaping off onto the lawn. But then – as the pigeons started to squabble with each other over the last remaining fragment of crust -- he sprang off the fence and landed less than two feet away from them, making a southpaw lunge for the nearer pigeon and catching some of its tail-feathers.

The two pigeons immediately flapped up into the air, and were gone. Zebedee circled around the lawn, looking up at the sky as if he had intended only to chase the pigeons away, and was just making sure that they didn’t have the temerity to try to come back.

Fiona was sitting on the top step now, watching him. He came toward her, climbed the steps and started to sniff at her sandwiches.

“Cats don’t like cheese-and-pickle,” said Fiona. Zebedee stared at her and licked his lips, as if he expected her to offer him something else, like sardines. Or maybe he only wanted to show her how much he relished the beauty that he had taken from her.

“You’re a beholder, too, aren’t you, Zebedee?” Fiona asked him. “I can tell, because you’re so beautiful. ‘What a beautiful pussy you are, you are.’”

Zebedee came up closer to her and sniffed at her. She reached out and stroked his head, so that he half-closed his eyes and flattened his ears back.

It was then that Fiona suddenly snatched his green leather collar and twisted it around tight, so that it was almost strangling him. He yowled and struggled and scratched, jerking his body wildly from side to side, but Fiona held onto him, and pressed her thumb into his furry throat until he was whining for breath.

Gradually, his convulsive kicking became weaker and more spasmodic, and at last he stopped struggling altogether. Fiona laid him on his back across her knees, and tried to feel if he still had a pulse, but she couldn’t find one. His eyes were closed and his upper lip was raised in a silent snarl.

“*Now* let’s see who’s beautiful,” she said. She picked up the small stainless-steel spoon that Mummy had given her for eating her strawberry yogurt. Then, with her thumb, she raised Zebedee’s sticky left eyelid, so that his eye was exposed, with its sunflower-yellow iris. He didn’t try to blink, so she assumed that he must be dead. She felt that it was a

pity, in a way, that he was dead, because she would have liked him to be aware that she was taking back her beauty. He had stared at her. A cat may look at a queen, she thought, but that doesn't mean that the queen won't be angry for being looked at.

Very carefully, with the tip of her tongue clenched between her teeth, Fiona dug the tip of the yogurt spoon underneath Zebedee's eyeball. The eyeball made a slight sucking sound as she lifted it free from its socket, but it wasn't difficult to lever it out. Soon it was hanging on Zebedee's cheek, staring sightlessly at his whiskers. Fiona picked up the scissors and cut the optic nerve, and then she carefully placed the eyeball on the tray next to her plate of sandwiches.

She took out the other eye the same way, and then she had both eyeballs side by side. She couldn't help smiling because they were squinting, like cartoon eyes.

"Fee-fee!" called Mummy, from the kitchen. "Have you finished your lunch yet?"

"Nearly!" Fiona called back. She lifted Zebedee off her lap and stood up. Then she carried his lifeless body over to the side of the house, where the dustbins stood. He was surprisingly heavy, and his legs swung from side to side like a pendulum. She opened the lid of the dustbin and dropped Zebedee into it, on top of a black plastic bag.

She had half-closed the lid when there was a frantic rustling of plastic, and a scrabbling sound, and then, with a screech, Zebedee came jumping up the inside of the dustbin, blindly scratching at the sides in an attempt to climb out. He managed to get his front legs and his head over the rim of the dustbin, but the plastic was too slippery for him to get any purchase with his back legs.

Fiona slammed the dustbin lid down on his neck, and pressed down as hard as she could. Zebedee spat and hissed at her, his eyeless face contorted with fury and pain. She pressed down harder still, and at last she heard a snap as the vertebrae in his neck were dislocated. He stopped hissing, and when she lifted the lid up a little he dropped back heavily onto the plastic bag full of rubbish.

*Serves you right, too,* thought Fiona.

She returned to the steps and sat down. She picked up one of Zebedee's eyes and held it up, so that she could stare into it. It stared back at her, sightlessly, with a shred of optic nerve hanging from the back of it. In there, that's where my beautiful face has been hiding. She hesitated for a moment, not because the eye disgusted her, but because she

was so pleased that she had discovered how to get her beauty back, and it was a moment to savor.

She placed the eye on her tongue, and then she slowly closed her mouth. The eye felt like a grape, although it had a strange taste to it, oily and slightly musky. She waited a few seconds longer, and then she bit into it, so that it popped, and this time she could actually feel the small blob of optic fluid sliding down her throat.

She picked up the other eye, and bit into that, too. This eye had a longer string of connective tissue still attached to it, which stuck to the back of her throat and made her gag. For a few seconds she thought she was going to be sick, and lose all of the beauty which she had retrieved from Zebedee's eyes, but then she took a mouthful of lemon barley water and managed to swallow it.

She finished the second half of her cheese-and-pickle sandwich, and then she ate her strawberry yogurt. The sun flickered through the leaves of the horse-chestnut trees at the end of the garden and made Fiona feel as if she were an actress in a film. She kept touching her face and she was sure that she could actually feel her beauty coming back to her, little by little.

She sang, in a high, reedy voice, "I feel pretty...oh so pretty! I feel pretty and witty and bright!"

From next door, she heard old Mrs Pickens calling out, "Zebedee! Zebedee! Where are you, you naughty cat?"

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Later that afternoon, when Mummy was busy in the kitchen, Fiona crept upstairs again and went into Mummy's bedroom. As quietly as she could, she turned the little key in the lock and opened the closet doors.

There she stood, in the mirror, the girl with the hideously distorted face. Fiona peered closely at her, so that their lumpy little noses almost touched, and she was sure that she wasn't quite as ugly as she had looked before. So it *did* work, finding beholders and swallowing their eyeballs. But it wasn't working as dramatically as she had hoped. She needed more – many more – and the bigger the eyeballs, the better.

*A person*, that's what she needed. A person who had seen her.

But who had seen her? Daddy was dead and presumably buried, or cremated, and Mummy had never taken her out of the house. She had never been to school, because Mummy taught her everything. She had never been to a shop, although she knew what they were because Mummy had shown her pictures of them.

She thought she could remember a man and a woman looking at her. They had both been wearing white coats and said things which she hadn't been able to understand. But that had been a very long time ago, and she had no idea who they were or where she could find them.

She carefully closed the closet doors and went back downstairs. Mummy was Hoovering in the sitting-room so she was able to go through the kitchen and out onto the patio without Mummy seeing her.

She sat on the steps with Rapunzel and started to braid Rapunzel's hair, in the same way that Mummy braided *her* hair. The sunlight was still flickering through the trees, but it was much lower now, and the shadows across the lawn were much longer. After she had pinned up Rapunzel's braids, Fiona turned her around and looked at her blank, featureless face.

*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.* That's what Mummy had said. And it was then that it occurred to her. *Mummy*. Apart from those two people in the white coats, Mummy was the only person who had seen her, all these years. There had been no other beholders, apart from the insects and the animals and the birds in the garden. Mummy was the only one.

Mummy came outside and sat beside her on the steps.

"Phew!" she said, with a smile, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. "That's all *that* done!"

Fiona stared at Mummy's eyes. Her irises were pale blue, like hers, but in the late afternoon sunlight her pupils were only pinpricks. But now Fiona knew. Inside the blackness of Mummy's eyes, that was where her beauty was hidden. It must be. Nothing else made sense.

"What shall we do this evening?" asked Mummy. "What about a film? We could watch *The Cat In The Hat* again, if you like."

Fiona thought of that stringy shred of tissue sticking to her throat and shook her head. "I've gone off cats."

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Once she was in bed, she was allowed to read for half an hour, but this evening her storybook remained unopened, because she was too busy thinking.

Mummy had always done everything she could to protect her and take care of her, ever since she was little, so she was sure that Mummy would understand why she needed to take out her eyes. Mummy would be blinded, yes, but blind people could still go shopping, couldn't they? and Fiona could help her around the house, cleaning and cooking. Fiona could roll out pastry and she knew how to make baked potatoes with grated cheese in them.

Perhaps they could get a guide dog, so long as the guide dog didn't look at her, and become another beholder. A guide dog with no eyes wouldn't be much good. The blind leading the blind!

The main problem would be keeping Mummy still, while she did it. And quiet, too. Zebedee had fought like a demon, even though he must have known that what was in his eyes belonged to her, and not to him.

At eight-thirty, Mummy came into her bedroom to tuck her in and give her a goodnight kiss.

"Sleep well, darling. Pleasant dreams."

"Mummy?" said Fiona, as Mummy switched off the light.

"What is it, Fee-fee?" she asked, standing in silhouette in the doorway.

"If I did something terrible, but I did it because it made me happy, would you forgive me?"

"What do you mean by 'something terrible'?"

"If I hurt somebody, really badly."

"I don't know what you mean, darling. You don't *know* anybody, do you, apart from me?"

Fiona was tempted to tell Mummy what she wanted to do. Perhaps Mummy would agree to gouge out her eyes voluntarily, so that Fiona could be beautiful again. She had

already given up her whole life for her, what difference would it make if she gave up her sight?

But then Fiona thought: what if she says no? What if she finds the idea really horrifying, and refuses to do it? After that, she will always be on her guard, and I won't be able to sneak into her bedroom in the middle of the night and take out her eyes, even though she doesn't want me to.

"I know, Mummy. I was just being silly."

Mummy blew her a kiss. "You are a funny girl sometimes. You know that I'd forgive you anything, don't you? Since Daddy left, you're all I have."

"Daddy *left*? I thought Daddy died."

"That's what I meant, darling. Since Daddy left us, and went to Heaven."

"Oh."

Mummy closed the door, leaving Fiona lying in darkness, except for the illuminated green numbers on the digital clock beside her bed. For some reason, she thought that Mummy had sounded strangely unconvincing when she had said that Daddy had gone to Heaven. Perhaps he hadn't gone to Heaven at all. Perhaps he had gone to Hell.

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She waited for over an hour, trying hard to keep her eyes open. She could hear the television in the sitting-room below her, as Mummy watched the news and then some comedy program with occasional bursts of studio laughter.

This is the last time she'll ever be able to watch TV, thought Fiona. But she can listen to it, can't she? And she'll still have the radio in the kitchen.

At last she heard Mummy switch off the television and come upstairs. Mummy closed her bedroom door behind her and a few minutes later Fiona heard the bathwater running. The water tank in the attic always made a rumbling sound like distant thunder, followed by a high-pitched whistle.

Fiona waited for another half-hour, and then she sat up. She went across to her door and opened it. Mummy had switched off her bedside lamp, and the landing was in darkness. She knew that Mummy almost always took a Nytol tablet before she went to bed, so it was likely that she was asleep already. Mummy said she took Nytol because she found it difficult to get to sleep, and even when she did she had nightmares about monsters.

Fiona closed her door and turned on her light. She went over to the window and unhooked the pink braided cords that held her curtains back during the day. Then she took a small blue plastic-bound dictionary off her bookshelf, and a brightly-colored cotton scarf from the top drawer of her chest-of-drawers.

Last of all, she picked up a dessert-spoon which she had taken from the cutlery drawer in the kitchen, as well as the poultry scissors.

She switched off her light and opened her door again. She stood there for a few seconds so that her eyes could become accustomed to the darkness. She didn't want to trip over something and wake Mummy up too soon.

In her head, over and over, she could hear Marni Nixon singing "*I'm so pretty...oh so pretty! I'm so pretty and witty and bright! And I pity...any girl who isn't me tonight!*" and she softly panted the words under her breath.

Very gently, she pulled down the handle of Mummy's bedroom door, and then opened it. When it was only a few inches ajar, she stopped, and listened.

At first she couldn't hear anything at all. But then Mummy turned over in bed, with a slippery rustle of her satin quilt, and muttered something that sounded like "*never!*" After that, Fiona could hear her breathing quite steadily, with a slight sticking noise in one of her nostrils.

Fiona crept across to Mummy's bedside. By the light of her luminous clock, she could see that Mummy was lying on her back, with one arm raised on the pillow beside her, and that she was deeply asleep.

With great care, she lifted Mummy's upraised arm a little further up the pillow, until Mummy's hand was poking through the brass rails of her headboard. She took one of the curtain cords and tied Mummy's wrist to the nearest rail, using the double knots that Mummy had taught her when she was showing her how to sew.

Next she walked around the bed and climbed up onto it so that she could gently tug Mummy's other arm out from under the bedcovers, and tie that to the headboard, too.

Now she lifted Mummy's head up from the pillow and slid the cotton scarf underneath it. Mummy stirred and said "*what?*" and then "*never!*" but still she didn't open her eyes. However, Fiona knew that what she did next was certain to wake her up. She took three

deep breaths to steady herself and made sure that she had the little dictionary ready in her left hand and the spoon and scissors waiting on the bedside table.

*I feel pretty, she breathed. Oh so pretty.*

She parted Mummy's lips and then she pried her teeth apart. Mummy almost immediately opened her eyes and jerked at the cords that were keeping her wrists tied to the headboard. Without hesitation, Fiona jammed the dictionary between her teeth, as far as it would go, and then she took hold of the two ends of the scarf and tied them quickly in a tight knot over Mummy's mouth, so that she couldn't push the dictionary out with her tongue.

Mummy's eyes rolled in panic and bewilderment. She pulled at the cords around her wrists until the headboard rattled, and when she couldn't free she began to twist and kick and bounce herself up and down on the bed – all the while grunting and mewling at Fiona to untie her.

Fiona leaned over her, almost as if she were about to kiss her. Mummy stared up at her and stopped thrashing and kicking for a moment.

"Mmmm-mmmmfff-mmmmff," she said, through the dictionary. Saliva was beginning to run down on either side of her mouth.

"It's all right, Mummy," said Fiona. "I'll try not to hurt you, I promise."

"Mmmmmfff!" Mummy retorted, and this time she sounded angry.

Fiona pinched Mummy's left eyelid between finger and thumb, and pulled it upward as far as she could stretch it. Mummy started kicking again, and trying to shake her head from side to side, but Fiona was holding her eyelid too tightly. She reached across to the bedside table for the spoon, turned it upside-down, and pushed the tip of it into the top of Mummy's eye-socket. Mummy let out a harsh grating scream, and bounced up and down on the bed as if she were suffering an epileptic fit. But Fiona dug the spoon in deeper, until it curved around the back of the eyeball, and she could easily gouge it out onto Mummy's cheek. Blood welled out of her hollow eye-socket and slid down onto the pillow.

Mummy started shaking uncontrollably. The mattress made a furious jostling noise and the bedhead banged repeatedly against the wall behind it.



“Mummy! Mummy! It’s all right, Mummy!” Fiona pleaded with her. “I promise I’ll be quick!”

She hadn’t realized how violent Mummy’s reaction would be, and she started to sob. But it was too late now. She couldn’t push Mummy’s left eye back in and pretend that nothing had happened, and she so badly needed her beauty back. She reached across for the scissors but Mummy jolted her and she dropped them onto the floor.

Weeping, she climbed off the bed, but she couldn’t see the scissors anywhere. She felt underneath the bedside table, but they weren’t there. She felt underneath the bed, too, but there was a gap of only about an inch off the carpet and she couldn’t feel them there, either.

Mummy was quaking and snorting now, with her gouged-out eye staring at Fiona accusingly from her cheek. There was only one thing that Fiona could do. She climbed back up onto the bed, and grasped Mummy’s hair with her right hand to keep her head still. Then she took the eye between the thumb and middle finger of her left hand, leaned forward and bit it in half. She sucked the clear optic fluid out of it, and swallowed. Her eyes were still filled with tears, but she could almost feel her lost beauty slipping down her throat.

Mummy was still trembling, and she felt very cold, but she had stopped kicking and struggling. Fiona lifted her right eyelid, picked up the spoon, and gouged out her right eye, too. Again, she bit it in half and swallowed the fluid inside.

She knelt on the bed for a while, feeling slightly sick. Then she climbed off it again, untied the scarf that covered Mummy’s mouth and gently wiggled the dictionary until it came out from between her teeth. Mummy had bitten almost halfway through it.

Next she untied her wrists and dragged up the bedcovers to try and get Mummy warm again. She didn’t know what to do with the empty shreds of half-bitten eyes that were hanging out of each socket, so she carefully poked them back in again, and closed Mummy’s eyelids, and then she tied the scarf around Mummy’s head like a blindfold.

It didn’t occur to her to call for an ambulance. She had seen ambulances on television, but they were only in stories. She had never seen a real one, and she didn’t know that you could call one yourself, and it would actually come to your door.

Besides, the most important thing was that she had regained her beauty, and in spite of being so beautiful, she would risk going out into the world, no matter how jealous other people might be. Mummy might be blind now, but she was so beautiful that she would be able to become a famous actress, and become rich, and support them both.

It was only now that Fiona realized what a sacrifice Mummy had made for her – keeping her beauty in her own eyes for all of this time, in order to keep her safe. She must have known that one day the time would come when she would have to give it back to her.

She crossed over to Mummy's closet and unlocked the doors. There she was, in her pink pajamas, which were spattered with a fine spray of blood. But something was badly wrong. She wasn't beautiful at all. She looked the same as she had before, with that bulging forehead and those wide-apart flatfish eyes and that dragged-down mouth.

Perhaps it took time for the beauty to make its way into your body, she thought. After all, if you ate a bar of chocolate, you had to digest it first, in your stomach, before the sugar went into your bloodstream.

She sat down cross-legged on the bedroom carpet in front of the mirror, and waited for Mummy's optic fluid to work on her face. It *had* to work. Mummy had said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and she had swallowed the beholders' eyes. What more could she have done?

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She woke up and the bedroom was filled with sunlight. She glanced over at Mummy's bedside clock and saw that it was 7:17 am. It looked as if Mummy was still asleep, with her blindfold over her eyes. It was the blindfold that reminded her what had happened last night, and what she was doing here in Mummy's bedroom.

She looked in the mirror. She hadn't changed at all. She was still just as hideously distorted as she had been before. She couldn't understand it. She had swallowed those eyes for nothing.

She slowly stood up.

"Mummy?" she said. "Mummy, are you awake?"

She went over to Mummy's bedside. Mummy was very pale and she didn't appear to be breathing. Fiona shook her shoulder but all she did was joggle unresponsively from side to side.

"Mummy?"

She realized then that she must have misunderstood what Mummy had said to her. The snail hadn't been a beholder, and neither had Zebedee, or Mummy. *She* – Fiona -- *she* was the beholder. It was *she* who had seen her own face in the mirror and thought that it was ugly. That was why Mummy had kept her away from mirrors, and stopped her from going out to meet other people. So long as she didn't know what she really looked like, she had remained incandescently beautiful.

She went back and stood in front of the mirror. Her hideously distorted face stared back at her. It always would, for the rest of her life, every time she saw her own reflection.

There was only one remedy. She went over to Mummy's chest-of-drawers. In the second drawer down, there was a purple biscuit tin with a picture of Prince Charles and Lady Diana on it, to celebrate their wedding. Mummy kept her sewing things in it – her spare buttons and her button thread and her needles.

Fiona picked out a large shiny darning needle and went back to face the mirror. With her fingers, she held her left eye open wide.

*I feel pretty*, she whispered, and stuck the needle into her pupil.

She felt nothing more than a sharp prick, but her eye instantly went blind. She held her right eye open in the same way, and stuck the needle into that eye, too.

She stood there, in total darkness. She couldn't see herself now. She couldn't see anything at all. But she could imagine how beautiful she was – so beautiful that if anyone tried to paint her portrait, their paints would burst into flames, and mirrors would shatter into a thousand thousand pieces if she ever looked in them.

She started to circle around and around, and as she circled she sang *I Feel Pretty*, over and over, until she was so giddy that she dropped to her knees. Outside, in the street, she could traffic, and people talking, and her blind eyes filled with tears again, although she no longer knew why she was crying.