



The Dangerous Gift of Beauty

a short story by Richard Wiley '67

Mary from the Jaguar agency sometimes thought of herself as Gloria Trillo, who sold Mercedes Benzes on *The Sopranos* and became Tony's mistress for a while. She thought of herself that way because men bought Jags from her much more readily than they did from her male-counterpart salespeople, and because Annabella Sciorra, the actress who played Gloria Trillo, also starred in the movie *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*, which was filmed at 808 North Yakima Avenue, a few blocks away from Mary's childhood home in Tacoma, Washington. During the filming of the movie, in fact, Mary used to walk down occasionally to watch the goings-on, and twice saw Annabella standing in the shade of an oak tree, thinking her actress thoughts.

Selling Jaguars in Tacoma at first seemed oxymoronic to Mary, since Jags were expensive and she'd always thought of Tacoma as a working class town, but the agency's owner said he knew what sold luxury cars, and that her look, which was sexy in the way of a trimmed-out librarian, was it. He said, "You let me worry about oxymorons, and all the other kinds of morons, too." He gave her the job, and the rest is local Jaguar-selling history.

Whenever Mary thought of Annabella Sciorra she also tended to think of Sister Wendy Beckett, the British art-critic nun who, in an interview on television, said, "God did not give me the dangerous gift of beauty." Mary, who'd been in bed with Jim, her lover at the time, drinking wine and eating crackers, reacted as if Sister Wendy Beckett were speaking directly to her. *She* had the gift of beauty, dangerous or not, and this plain woman, this semi-cloistered art-critic, was asking her what she was going to do about it. It was a turning point in Mary's life, and her breasts, as magnificent as the rest of her, swung toward Jim when she pointed at Sister Wendy Beckett's television image and asked the question, "What if she *had* been beautiful? How would it have changed her life, and how would homeliness have changed mine? If I were Sister Wendy Beckett would you be here in bed with me now, drinking this wine?"

She knew she'd said the words wrong but she let them stand.

"What?" asked Jim, sopping up the wine she spilt when she turned on him. And then he said, quite fatally, "You know as well as I do that in the world we live in physical beauty dictates."

Earlier in the evening he had said he loved her like Galileo loved the moon and the stars, but this

told her that he did not, in fact, love *her* so much as the shell she lived in. So she got out of bed, pulled on some jeans and a T-shirt, went outside to the "loaner" Jag she always drove, and cruised on down to 808 North Yakima, where she'd seen Annabella Sciorra those times. There were lights on in the house, but she parked the car at the curb anyway, got out, and walked up onto the lawn.

"Who is the me that I want Jim to see if the me he sees isn't me?" she asked the wrap-around porch. She had the idea that Annabella Sciorra might materialize and answer her, but even when she didn't Mary knew that including Jim in her question was inessential to the power it had for her. "Jim" was just a place holder.

There was a gap in the curtains covering a window on the left side of the house, just beyond what looked to Mary to be a chestnut tree, so she glanced down at the loaner Jag again, tried to remember if she'd locked it, then stepped into the shadows by that window to think about her question and peek through the gap.

"Who is the me that I want Jim to see if the me he sees isn't me?"

Mary froze. How humiliating to be caught like this, a peeping Tom—a peeping Mary—whose beauty screamed loudly that it wasn't peeping, but being peeped at, that she was born for.

It was a serious question, but she couldn't help noting that the cadence of it bore a strong similarity to *How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?* And that, in turn, made her feel a lightness of heart that she hadn't felt since pre-puberty, before the dangerous gift made her a target for boys and men from one side of town to the other. *How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?* In a way it was identical to her "Jim" question.

Inside the part of the house visible through the gap in the curtains, she could see a man sitting reading. He was in jeans and a T-shirt like she was, with his feet crossed on a stool, and, like her and Jim at Jim's house, he had a glass of wine on a table at the side of his chair, with the nice addition of a few slices of cheese on a plate. He was extremely handsome, easily her equal on the beauty scale.

Mary could hear the faint sounds of singing coming from his stereo, and beyond him, through an archway at the far side of the room, she saw a hallway bathed in shadows and light, like in the Edward Hopper picture that hung behind her boss's desk at the Jaguar agency. It was strange, but she got the idea that in the hallway here, beyond

this reading man, and at the Jaguar agency, too, her question—*Who is the me that I want Jim to see if the me he sees isn't me?*—was an integral part of American life, while in the actual room where this man sat reading it was not. Perhaps she got that feeling because he had a reading lamp behind him—its cord led all the way across the room—making it look like he was out of himself, interested in the living world, never mind how handsome he was. Otherwise the room was empty. "That's what I'll do, too, Sister Wendy!" she said. "I won't eschew the dangerous gift but will get busy with other things."

Mary's childhood home was two blocks over and one block up. She'd walked along Yakima Avenue countless times during the years she lived there, stretching back to when she went to Lowell Elementary school. She'd even trick-or-treated at this house a few times, climbing onto its porch while her mother stood waiting on the parking strip, at just about where the loaner Jag was now. Her mother had had the dangerous gift, too, had been bereft when it suddenly left her.

Inside the house the man leaned forward to

put down his wine glass, which he'd apparently picked up when Mary wasn't looking. And now, with his book covering his groin, he was staring directly at the window slightly above her head. Even though she'd been standing still, Mary froze. How humiliating to be caught like this, a peeping Tom—a peeping Mary—whose beauty screamed loudly that it wasn't peeping, but being peeped at, that she was born for. Would he call the cops as readily on a beautiful woman as on an ugly one? Would he call the cops on Sister Wendy Beckett?

When he stood and came toward the window she had the thought that sexual intrusion—which was, after all, the bludgeon of a peeping Tom—really was a crime and that, never mind the shell she lived in, she should be ashamed of herself. What right did she have to intrude upon this man, who had not intruded on anyone, save, perhaps, those who peopled the book he was reading? But she held her ground, her eyes at the bottom of the obtuse triangle formed by the aging curtains. If he caught her she would make no excuses, like saying she had car trouble or needed to ask directions.

Time passed, with Mary outside looking in, and the man, in turn, looking directly at his own

reflection, maybe seeing new wrinkles in his face or asking himself, "How did things come to this?" or perhaps simply pondering whatever it was that had caught his attention in his book. So much time passed, in fact, that Mary's eyes began to water, like in a staring contest, until finally she did the unthinkable, and wrapped on the window with the bent middle knuckle of her left hand. She could see the man's thoughts ride back up into this 10 o'clock Sunday night.

"Hello?" he said, turning toward his front door.

"No, out here!" called Mary. "I'm standing in your side yard."

The man swung around again and pushed back the curtains. "Oh. Hi," he said, as if thinking someone had knocked on the front door had been a silly mistake on his part.

"I was just passing by and remembered *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*," said Mary, "and how I saw Annabella Sciorra standing under your tree a couple of times."

"I didn't live here back then," he said. "Lived up in Seattle."

"Yes, well, that's where they pretended the movie took place. It was Tacoma, though, even

a fan, but had been sent by someone who was probably a fan of the actual Lourdes, Sister Wendy Beckett from TV.

Mary returned to that chestnut tree. The loaner Jag was on the street, the man was in his living room, and under the tree was a chair quite like the one she'd seen him sitting in inside, wicker and comfy-looking, with arm rests and even a plastic sort of all-weather pillow as a backrest. She hadn't noticed the chair when sneaking up on the house, but here it was, ready for either indoor or outdoor use, a chair for all seasons, like Paul Scofield in the movie *he* made that time. Sir Thomas More standing up to Henry VIII and Sister Wendy Beckett explaining the meaning of art . . . Such connections were just plain beautiful, with no element of danger in them at all.

Mary sat down in the chair and crossed her legs and asked herself what her life meant. Down on the street the loaner Jag meant something. It meant fine craftsmanship, precision engineering—or so she'd believed until Ford took over—but was *she* finely crafted, did *she* have precision engineering, past the skin-deep aspect that had made her so much money? Twice she'd gone home with new

thought was, "Oh, great. Here we go again," and sure enough, when she did turn to look at him he was carrying his chair, identical to the one she was sitting in, plus two big umbrellas. Did she have to get hit-on every single day of her life?

"I never got a proper living room set. I just keep taking one of these chairs inside and bringing it back out again," said the man. "I tell myself if I ever leave it in there the battle will be lost."

He put his chair next to hers, but not too close. In fact she got the feeling that he was putting it in the exact spot he had taken it from. When he gave her one of the umbrellas she thanked him, but used her most guarded voice.

"Here's a coincidence," he said. "I was just reading about this time in 1956 when Nat King Cole got beat up on the streets of Birmingham, Alabama. No respect for his greatness among the racists."

"Don't kid a kidder, Mister," said Mary. "You were reading no such thing."

Don't kid a kidder had been her mother's expression.

"I was," he said. "I'm nearly finished with his biography, and I was listening to his recordings when you knocked on my window, too, so maybe you asked yourself that question because you heard it right from the horse's mouth." He sang the line, "*The greatest thing, you'll ever learn, is just to love, and be loved, in return*," making her remember the ethereal tune, very enigmatic about the boy in question. Could it be true? Could her question not have come from Sister Wendy Beckett at all, but from Nat King Cole?

"Well," she said. "It's a good question, no matter who made me ask it."

"I guess," said the man. He had opened his umbrella and was leaned so far back in his chair that he looked like a laid-back lifeguard. He said, "Half of life is disappointments and missed opportunities."

In another situation such a comment would have seemed maudlin to her, even self-serving, but he said it cheerfully enough, and it left her at a loss. She was sitting under *his* tree, after all, as unexpected a place for her to be right then as Paris, France. He was right about the umbrella, too, since a fine rain was now coming down. She opened hers and sat back like he was.

"How long have you lived here, that you don't have a living room set yet?" she asked. "I saw you had your Edward Hopper up, so you must have been here for a while, at least."

She remembered as soon as she said it that the Hopper was in her boss's office and that this man's hallway had only reminded her of it.

"A year last month," he said. "Lost all my furniture in the divorce. That's my half-a-life of disappointment. Married 20 years, and I'm 40 years old now."

"Did you ever even see *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*?"

"Got it on DVD. When I was buying this place that movie was part of the sales pitch. At closing they gave me a copy of it."

Wright Park was in it. No one wants to give Tacoma credit for anything."

The window was double-paned so their voices felt both distant and small, as if coming from people who had said those exact words a long time ago, like maybe during the actual making of *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*. The male star of that movie had been Matt McCoy, he'd been Annabella's husband in it, but Mary couldn't picture him. She closed her eyes to bring him to her but could only conjure the man who looked through the window at her now, who was handsomer than the Matt McCoy she couldn't picture, anyway.

"I know it's an odd request, but do you mind if I stay out here for a while?" she asked. "You know, sort of get my bearings?"

He looked at his chair and lamp, then back at Mary. "This house is the Lourdes for fans of that movie," he said. "You're, like, the sixth person who's come around since I moved in. But knock yourself out. Enjoy, enjoy."

He closed the curtains and went back to his reading before she could say that she wasn't exactly

Jaguar owners, giving them the prize they had hinted that making such a purchase would necessitate.

Ten o'clock on Sunday night. Jim was probably beginning to worry, maybe calling her cell, which, she understood when she felt her jeans, she had left in the Jag. Her own apartment down in Old Town was closed and dark, its view of Commencement Bay not enjoyed by anyone, and rain was threatening and the pleasure of the woodchuck comparison was dissipating fast. "Okay, Sister Wendy," she said, "What's it all about? My heart is so heavy sometimes."

She didn't expect Sister Wendy to answer anymore than she'd expected Annabella Sciorra to materialize, but a shadow came across her eyes when she looked at the rain clouds. It gave her the sense that someone had heard her, plus the strength to ask a second question. "Why can't I just love and be loved in return? Is that too much to ask of life?"

"It's the essential lyric in 'Nature Boy,' the Nat Cole hit from 1948," said a voice.

She knew before she turned to look at him that the man from the house had come outside. Her first

Jim had a living room set and a dining room set, three bedroom sets and a kitchen set, and there was a croquette set out on his lawn.

"Never been married myself," she said. "But I'm 40, too. I mean 40, also. Did you ever even see *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*?"

"Got it on DVD. When I was buying this place that movie was part of the sales pitch. At closing they gave me a copy of it."

Mary's firm intention had been to sit out here late into the night, waiting for an answer to her question. But now she sat back up, like a not-so-laid-back life guard herself, who thinks she sees someone in trouble in the water.

"You mean you've got the movie inside right now?"

They each carried a chair into the house, leaving the umbrellas on a dry piece of patio in back. And sure enough, the book on the table next to the plate of cheese was *Velvet Voice*, Nat King Cole's biography. The TV was on a cheap metal cart with the DVD player on its top. It, plus the lamp and table, a guitar in an open case, and a big green globe of the world, were the only other things in the room. He had plenty of DVDs, though. He looked back at her while he searched for *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, to say he had four loves—movies, books, music, and vino. She liked they way he said "vino," though she would surely have thought of it as an affectation had Jim said it that way.

He took the DVD out, put it in his machine and walked over to hand her its case. A photo of Rebecca De Mornay, torn down the middle to make her seem evil, was on the cover, plus a photo of Annabella Sciorra looking calm and healthy, a lover of ordinary life. Her husband was there, too, but back a little, since his was a subsidiary role.

Mary wondered if the man who lived in this house now had played a subsidiary role in his marriage, and also whether he would like to play a fuller one in whatever life awaited him. How could he not? Who didn't want to be the star of their own show?

"OK" he said. "Ready to roll. This Amarone I've been drinking seems just about perfect for horror films. Would you like some?"

He pointed at the bottle on the table, where two glasses now sat, both of them recently washed, she knew, because droplets of water dotted them. Had he known this would happen, then, had he planned it? She looked at Nat King Cole's biography again.

"Do you really think of it as a horror film?" she asked. "I always believed it was a thriller."

"Thriller—horror film—okay, here's the truth. They gave me the DVD when I bought the house, yes, but I've only been able to watch the beginning of it, never been able to see the whole thing through."

That made her laugh. She wouldn't watch the whole thing through, either, not sitting in the very house where all the violence took place. At least not alone. At least not without familiar furniture surrounding her. *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* would be about the world's worst movie in such a situation. But it would be a great first-date movie, would make a terrific story for a couple to tell their children later on. Her mother and father's first date, she remembered hearing, had been down at the Pantages when it was the Roxy. They had gone to see *Psycho*.

When he asked her what was so funny she said, "I was just thinking of the improbability of everything, that's all."

She meant the improbability of *everything*, of birth and beauty and death, and of all the terrible human mistakes in between, but when he laughed it was clear he thought she meant the evening they were experiencing together now, which, of course, was high up on the improbability scale, also.

He had turned on more lights when he'd been searching for the DVD, so now she got a better look at him. Yes, he was as handsome as a movie star from the old days, nearly as handsome as Cary Grant, and just like Cary Grant, there was no duplicity in his face, no hidden agenda, only this befuddled aspect.

"Well, here we go," he said, pouring them both some vino.

The film's opening shot was a panorama of the outside of the house with its wrap-around porch and large front yard coming up from the street. She saw the parking strip where her loaner Jag now sat, messages no doubt mounting on her cell phone, and she saw the oak tree where she'd seen Annabella, and then, farther up, the chestnut they had sat beneath just a few minutes ago, with their umbrellas open and the rain coming down.

He sat beside her just as the camera moved inside, to the wide and inviting staircase near the front door—oh the idyllic life one might lead in such a place!

There was no speech in the movie for the longest time, perhaps three full minutes, while the camera ventured upstairs and down, outside and in, until finally people entered the frame. First, Annabella, making breakfast for her family. And then her husband and daughter in an upstairs bathroom, singing a song from Gilbert and Sullivan.

Tomorrow, in her apartment in Old Town, Mary decided as the movie got going, she would do her own spring cleaning, perhaps even take her

furniture out on the lawn, so she could better get at the floors and walls. Maybe she'd put a sign up, too, saying "yard sale," then sit out there. Perhaps she could even borrow a lawn chair from this guy. She'd have to call the Jaguar agency to tell them she was taking the day off, and it might be a good idea to make an appointment with her boss for Tuesday. And she would call Jim, too. He didn't deserve the treatment he got from her, but a clear explanation. Who is the me that I want Jim to see, if the me he sees isn't me? She would leave out the part about the woodchucks.

A mentally handicapped man came sneaking around the side of the house in the movie, much like Mary snuck up on the window, at 10 o'clock on this Sunday night. The handicapped man had been sent by a charity organization Annabella's husband had contacted, to do a few repairs in preparation for the arrival of the baby Annabella was carrying. But his sudden appearance made Annabella scream and drop the orange juice class she was holding, shattering it all over the floor. The handicapped man wasn't dangerous—by the movie's end, in fact, he would be the family's savior—but Annabella's initial fear of him foreshadowed the real danger that would be arriving soon in the person of the unquestionably beautiful Rebecca De Mornay.

Mary glanced at the man beside her, reluctant to buy new furniture, unable to watch this movie in the house in which it was made, yet sitting here calmly on a Sunday evening, reading Nat King Cole's biography. *The greatest thing you'll ever learn, is just to love, and be loved in return*. Maybe when the movie ended she would ask him to sing it to her again, or perhaps she would ask him to take that guitar from its case and play her something of his own invention, since she seemed to know that was what the guitar was for. Or maybe they would simply carry their chairs back outside and she would go down to the loaner Jag and drive home.

Whatever might happen later, though, she wanted to concentrate on the movie now, so she could see the beauty of this house and of the street she had walked down as a child.

She sipped her wine and nodded at the man to show him her appreciation for it. It was a delicious and lively wine, a far better vintage than the one she had spilt in Jim's bed, when Sister Wendy Beckett turned to let her know that it was high time her real life got started, and that there was no art at all in selling Jags.

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