

BEAUTY

He loved lying in bed, watching her get dressed in the morning. She moved quickly, efficiently, peeling off her pyjamas as she walked across the room. Her hair - bobbed now, she insisted it was more flattering on an older woman - skimmed across her shoulders as she stepped into her knickers and pulled them over her thighs. Her hands fumbled with the straps of her bra as she hastily put it on, turning towards the wall as she did so.

She always turned away. He couldn't understand why she wanted to hide those breasts, which he knew so well and had loved for all these years. They were a little less rounded now, certainly, hanging lower on her chest. But still beautiful.

Once the bra was in place she seemed to relax a little, her shoulders dropped and she moved across to the chest of drawers, rifling through neatly folded clothes until she found what she wanted. Years ago she used to wear pretty tops with spaghetti straps, which showed off her back and shoulders. He'd always thought how well they suited her. But more recently her tastes appeared to have changed - now all her T-shirts had sleeves, so the tops of her arms were never bare.

He watched as she walked across the bedroom; when she reached for her jeans, he could see the network of purple veins running across her thighs and clustering around the back of her knees. She never wore short skirts any more, which he thought was a shame. Her legs were still shapely, the calves taut and tanned.

When she stood up again, he could see the gentle swell of her stomach. On their wedding day it had been smooth, almost concave: ribs showing at the top, hip bones jutting out lower down. The ivory dress had hung slightly loose on her toned, twenty-something body. Two children and a couple of decades on, that sunken flatness had gone and now there was a rounded belly which no amount of dieting and exercise - or fretting about - could shift. Although for the life of him he couldn't understand why it bothered her so much.

This was his indulgence, lying in bed watching her morning routine. At the start of each day it made him happy to study his wife's familiar form. Her skin and all it contained had weathered and aged, softened and drooped, and there was a layer of plumpness that hadn't been there twenty years ago. She wasn't fat, just fuller than before, which he liked - it was a better look on an older woman. And she was still so feminine, her movements and the way she carried herself, graceful and precise.

He loved her middle-aged body. Her skin was silky, well cared for, and all the more interesting for being mapped out by a network of interconnecting creases and wrinkles, bearing testament to the pregnancies and a little too much time spent in the sun. It was a body that had done its job well, and she should be proud of that.

She was the most gorgeous woman he had ever known.

She hated the way he lay in bed and watched her getting dressed in the morning. It made her feel like an exhibit, a mannequin in a shop window. He didn't say a word, but his eyes followed her around the room as she found her clothes and wriggled her way into them. It was unsettling, irritating. It made her

aware of every physical fault: every bruise or dent on the surface of the skin, every bulge of unwanted fat.

Her body had changed so much over the years, sometimes gradually – the slow march of spidery veins across the skin of her legs – and sometimes terrifyingly fast. She could still remember the horror as she looked down and noticed stretch marks during her first pregnancy: silver slug trails winding their way around the bottom of her belly, inching across her hip bones towards her thighs. She had caught her breath sharply, running her fingers along the streaks, hoping to smooth them away, but instantly understanding that this skin would never be the same again, would never feel so perfect.

She always turned away as she fastened her bra, embarrassed that this body no longer looked the way she wanted it to. Sadly, at this age saggy breasts were a fact of life, but she hated their heaviness. At least a well-made bra put some bounce back into them, placing them higher than they could naturally hold themselves. Thank god for Marks & Spencer.

But there was nothing to be done about the bingo wings, those irritating flaps of skin that hung down where her biceps had once been toned. Years ago she had decided that the only way to deal with those was to avoid sleeveless tops. It was a shame, because she used to love the warmth of the sun on her exposed shoulders.

She tended to live in the same pair of jeans, day in, day out. There was no point wearing skirts any more, she didn't have the legs for them. The skin on her shins was still unblemished but, higher up, the protruding veins were ugly – like a network of roads inked out on a map. Sometimes she caught sight of the backs of her legs in shop mirrors, the ones in changing rooms that show your body

from every angle. It was always a shock to see herself as others must do, to realise the visibility of those unattractive veins.

She had to suck in her stomach as she tugged up the zip. Every year it got harder to do this, and waistbands - even in a larger size - were uncomfortably snug. She tried to eat sensibly, and did furtive sit-ups on the floor of the bathroom. She walked to the bus stop at a cracking pace that left her breathless, took the stairs where possible. It made no difference. In her twenties she had been able to drop half a stone with ease, but in middle age this soft mound of belly refused to flatten itself out.

And every morning he lay in their bed, just feet away, staring at her naked body. He was undoubtedly comparing it to the one he had held close all those years ago - missing its firmness and vitality. Wishing she hadn't grown so old.

How she hated this ugly body of hers and the way it had changed; she felt heavy, wrinkled and sullied, like damaged goods.