

Pretty Woman

A Monologue by Rebecca Kirk

When I walk out my door in a skirt and heels, my hair thick and wavy and my best face on, I know it's a social game of showing off parts of me and concealing others. When I walk down the street in an outfit like that, people notice. Men notice. I get a certain kind of attention. Last week, I walked down Mass. Ave in a stylish fall dress with tall boots on my way to grab the T to the theater. Every guy I passed stared. Someone in a car honked. Even a woman stopped me on the street to ask a question. "Diane Von Furstenberg, right?" I smiled, nodded, and continued on my way. It feels good to know I look good. I feel sexy and feminine. But, I am also very aware of the hard lump in my stomach that sometimes jumps up to my throat for a second, making my heart beat faster, before sliding quietly back down.

On the other hand, when I leave my house in comfortable stylish jeans and my favorite shirt, sneakers and my hair pulled into a pony-tail, most people don't notice; they don't give me a second glance, and sometimes not even a first. But I'm the same me! I walk with the same confidence and poise. And yet I can relax, feeling some how safer.

At some point, different for every woman, we discover that moment when men notice us in a different way. It's a cultural rite of passage into womanhood. For my best friend Claire, who developed early, she was 13, and barely able to comprehend what was happening. She had gone shopping with her mom for new clothes to wear on the first day of 8th grade. They picked out and tried on a scoop necked fitted red shirt that Claire loved. She was so excited to wear it, and couldn't understand why, only two months later, her mother wouldn't let her. One day she managed to sneak out of the house in the shirt without her mother noticing. At school though, others noticed. Namely her math teacher, who was in his first year teaching. Claire was oblivious, but after class, a friend pulled her aside to inform her: "Claire, didn't you notice that Mr. Thorton was staring at your chest all during class? He couldn't take his eyes off you!" Suddenly mortified, Claire never wore that shirt to school again.

For me, it didn't really sink in completely until college. Sophomore year I was living in the French Language House and decided to dress up as a French maid for Halloween. I was excited about my costume. I'd spent weeks collecting all the pieces for it in various trips to the thrift store. On Halloween night, I put on a tight black low-cut top that squished my breasts to reveal cleavage, a short black skirt, fishnet tights and black heels. I topped it off with tiny white non-functional apron and matching white doily hat. I teased my hair and made up my face in smoky eye make-up, fake lashes, and full bright red lips. I walked out of my room proud to show off my costume. I didn't get far. In the hallway, I ran into David, my housemate, who did a double-take, paused, and looked me up and down... twice!

Our house (6 girls and 3 guys) had a mini Halloween party later that evening. I tried to enjoy myself while all three pairs of male eyes were glued to various parts of my body. Then Charlotte exclaimed: "You look SO great! I'm taking you out where you can show off your costume." She took me to a party of mostly seniors. I didn't know anyone there except her, and could feel everyone "checking me out." I don't remember ever being noticed in this way before. I wanted to retreat to my comfortable, safe invisibility. It was extremely unnerving. The next day, walking across campus in my cords and college sweatshirt, everything was the way it had always been. Confused, I thought about this moment compared to the night before.

I still don't completely get why our culture is this way. I know some of it is biological and some of it is social. I get that it's a game that is played between men and women: a dance of power. Sure, it can be a thrill to balance, tipping precariously over the edge. To be in the middle of that tug of war between a feeling of exposure and control; it makes people feel alive! Sometimes, I take a deep breath, scrunch my face into a scowl, straiten it into a fake smile and "suck it up."

Other times, I smile secretly to myself, toss my hair to one side, and hold my head a little bit higher.