

## II. The face of a stranger

Over time, a relationship has become difficult. So many areas of conflict have built up; there's much it would be nice to share that stays hidden out of fear that a partner will take the revelations badly; awkward compromises have become entrenched. We're unhappy, but we're so used to things being like this we see it as what we deserve. In our bleaker moments we feel that no one could look at us with gentleness, enthusiasm or delight.

Occasionally, you may see in the face of a stranger the promise of something very different. In the course of a normal glance or two, something about their appearance registers deeply in the imagination. From a few external hints a picture starts to emerge of what they might be like – and of what it could be like to be with them.

Maybe the soft fullness to their cheeks suggests depths of tenderness in their character. They won't judge; if you told them of your troubles they would make quiet compassionate murmurs of sympathy; as you recount something especially painful they will instinctively reach out a hand to cradle yours.

There is a slight upturn at the corners of their mouth – it's not quite a smile; more the look of someone who has just agreed to keep an exciting secret. You would be able to trust them with the odder sides of your personality. Instead of withdrawing, they would come up with intriguing suggestions; they will gladly join a mutual conspiracy to explore the stranger sources of your pleasures.

Perhaps there's a tiny narrowing of their eyes or a slight tilt of the head as if an interesting new thought has just occurred to them. They would see you without the baggage of the past. There would be no legacy of past hurts; no list of resentments and grudges. With them you wouldn't have to be defensive or apologetic.

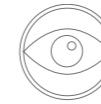
You imagine how life might develop with this person: you would laugh together over a private joke; you would be fascinated by each other's ideas; you would discover unexpected, deep points of overlap in your interests and attitudes; they would be charmed by aspects of your appearance that you had come to dislike. Routine activities would become fun in their company. You'd tease each other while doing the washing-up; it would be charming going up and down the supermarket aisles with them; there are so many places it would be wonderful to visit in their company.

Of course, in reality, you don't know them at all – but the point isn't to arrive at an accurate vision of who this particular person really is; something larger and more important is at stake. A new idea is starting to develop: a better relationship is possible; there will be someone (perhaps there are many people) with whom life could be sweeter and more exciting. The disappointments of the present are not a guide to the future.



IMAGINE

Imagine what a stranger's childhood might have been like. Think of them learning to ride a bike or missing their mother or feeling lonely in the school playground, excitedly opening a Christmas present or feeling shy when introduced to a friend of their parents.



SEE

See the details of their face: a slight furrow across the forehead; the specific outline of the cheeks and chin; a quizzical look in the eyes; the exact shape of the nose; the precise arc of the eyebrows; the texture of the skin. You're not judging; you're noticing.



SAVOUR

Savour the individuality of this person. However ordinary they might appear, they are – in themselves – unique. No one else has, or ever will have, their precise sequence of experiences or exactly the same texture of thoughts and feelings.