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opening extract from

On Beauty

written by

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On Beauty

Zadie Smith

Chapter 2

'What, Howard? What am I looking at, exactly?'

Howard Belsey directed his American wife, Kiki Simmonds, to the relevant section of the e-mail he had printed out. She put her elbows either side of the piece of paper and lowered her head as she always did when concentrating on small type. Howard moved away to the other side of their kitchen-diner to attend to a singing kettle. There was only this one high note – the rest was silence. Their only daughter, Zora, sat on a stool with her back to the room, her earphones on, looking up reverentially at the television. Levi, the youngest boy, stood beside his father in front of the kitchen cabinets. And now the two of them began to choreograph a breakfast in speechless harmony: passing the box of cereal from one to the other, exchanging implements, filling their bowls and sharing milk from a pink china jug with a sun-yellow rim. The house was south facing. Light struck the double glass doors that led to the garden, filtering through the arch that split the kitchen. It rested softly upon the still life of Kiki at the breakfast table, motionless, reading. A dark red Portuguese earthenware bowl faced her, piled high with apples. At this hour the light extended itself even further, beyond the breakfast table, through the hall, to the lesser of their two living rooms. Here a bookshelf filled with their oldest paperbacks kept company with a suede beanbag and an ottoman upon which Murdoch, their dachshund, lay collapsed in a sunbeam.

'Is this for real?' asked Kiki, but got no reply.

Levi was slicing strawberries, rinsing them and plopping them into two cereal bowls. It was Howard's job to catch their frowzy heads for the trash. Just as they were finishing up this operation, Kiki turned the papers face down on the table, removed her hands from her temples and laughed quietly.

'Is something funny?' asked Howard, moving to the breakfast bar and resting his elbows on its top. In response, Kiki's face resolved itself into impassive blackness. It was this sphinx-like expression that sometimes induced their American friends to imagine a more exotic provenance for her than she actually possessed. In fact shewas from simple Florida country stock.

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'Baby – try being less facetious,' she suggested. She reached for an apple and began to cut it up with one of their small knives with the translucent handles, dividing it into irregular chunks. She ate these slowly, one piece after another.

Howard pulled his hair back from his face with both hands.

'Sorry – I just – you laughed, so I thought maybe something was funny.'

'How am I meant to react?' said Kiki, sighing. She laid down her kipps and belsey knife and reached out for Levi, who was just passing with his bowl. Grabbing her robust fifteen-year-old by his denim waistband, she pulled him to her easily, forcing him down half a foot to her sitting level so that she could tuck the label of his basketball top back inside the collar. She put her thumbs on each side of his boxer shorts for another adjustment, but he tugged away from her.

'Mom, man . . .'

'Levi, honey, please pull those up just a little . . . they're so low . . . they're not even covering your ass.' 'So it's not funny,' concluded Howard. It gave him no cheer, digging in like this. But he was still going to persist with this line of questioning, even though it was not the tack upon which he had hoped to start out, and he understood it was a straight journey to nowhere helpful.

'Oh, Lord, Howard,' said Kiki. She turned to face him. 'We can do this in fifteen minutes, can't we? When the kids are – ' Kiki rose a little in her seat as she heard the lock of the front door clicking and then clicking again. 'Zoor, honey, get that please, my knee's bad today. She can't get in, go on, help her – '

Zora, eating a kind of toasted pocket filled with cheese, pointed to the television.

'Zora – get it now, please, it's the new woman, Monique – for some reason her keys aren't working properly – I think I asked you to get a new key cut for her – I can't be here all the time, waiting in for her – Zoor, will you get off your ass – '

'Second arse of the morning,' noted Howard. 'That's nice. Civilized.'

Zora slipped off her stool and down the hallway to the front door. Kiki looked at Howard once more with a questioning penetration, which he met with his most innocent face. She picked up her absent son's e-mail, lifted her glasses from where they rested on a chain upon her impressive chest and replaced them on the end of her nose.

'You've got to hand it to Jerome,' she murmured as she read.

'That boy's no fool . . . when he needs your attention he sure knows how to get it,' she said, looking up at Howard suddenly and separating syllables like a bank teller counting bills. 'Monty Kipps's daughter. Wham, bam. Suddenly you're interested.'

Howard frowned. 'That's your contribution.'

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'Howard – there's an egg on the stove, I don't know who put it on, but the water's evaporated already – smells nasty. Switch it off, please.'

'That's your contribution?'

Howard watched his wife calmly pour herself a third glass of clamato juice. She picked this up and brought it to her lips, but then paused where she was and spoke again.

'Really, Howie. He's twenty. He's wanting his daddy's attention – and he's going the right way about it. Even doing this Kipps internship in the first place – there's a million internships he could have gone on. Now he's going to marry Kipps junior? Doesn't take a Freudian. I'm saying, the worst thing we can do is to take this seriously.'

'The Kippses?' asked Zora loudly, coming back through the hallway. 'What's going on – did Jerome move in? How totally insane . . . it's like: Jerome – Monty Kipps,' said Zora, moulding two imaginary men to the right and left of her and then repeating the exercise. 'Jerome . . . Monty Kipps. Living together.' Zora shivered comically.

Kiki chucked back her juice and brought the empty glass down hard. 'Enough of Monty Kipps – I'm serious. I don't want to hear his name again this morning, I swear to God.' She checked her watch. 'What time's your first class? Why're you even here, Zoor? You know? Why – are – you – here? Oh, good morning, Monique,' said Kiki in a quite different formal voice, stripped of its Florida music. Monique shut the front door behind her and came forward.

Kiki gave Monique a frazzled smile. 'We're crazy today – everybody's late, running late. How are you doing, Monique – you OK?'

The new cleaner, Monique, was a squat Haitian woman, about Kiki's age, darker still than Kiki. This was only her second visit to the house. She wore a US Navy bomber jacket with a turned-up furry collar and a look of apologetic apprehension, sorry for what would go wrong even before it had gone wrong. All this was made more poignant and difficult for Kiki by Monique's weave: a cheap, orange synthetic hairpiece that was in need of renewal, and today seemed further back than ever on her skull, attached by thin threads to her own sparse hair.

'I start in here?' asked Monique timidly. Her hand hovered near the high zip of her coat, but she did not undo it.

'Actually, Monique, could you start in the study – my study,' said Kiki quickly and over something Howard was starting to say. 'Is that OK? Please don't move any papers – just pile them up, if you can.'

Monique stood where she was, clutching her zip. Kiki stayed in her strange moment, nervous of what this black woman thought of another black woman paying her to clean.

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'Zora will show you – Zora, show Monique, please, just go on, show her where.'

Zora began to vault up the stairs three at a time, Monique trudging behind her. Howard came out from behind the proscenium and into his marriage.

'If this happens,' said Howard levelly, between sips of coffee, 'Monty Kipps will be an in-law. Of ours. Not somebody else's in-law. Ours.'

'Howard,' said Kiki with equal control, 'please, no ''routines''. We're not on stage. I've just said I don't want to talk about this now. I know you heard me.'

Howard gave a little bow.

'Levi needs money for a cab. If you want to worry about something, worry about that. Don't worry about the Kippses.'

'Kippses?' called Levi, from somewhere out of sight. 'Kippses who? Where they at?'

This faux Brooklyn accent belonged to neither Howard nor Kiki, and had only arrived in Levi's mouth three years earlier, as he turned twelve. Jerome and Zora had been born in England, Levi in America. But all their various American accents seemed, to Howard, in some way artificial – not quite the products of this house or of his wife. None, though, was as inexplicable as Levi's. Brooklyn? The Belseys were located two hundred miles north of Brooklyn. Howard felt very close to commenting on it this morning (he had been warned by his wife not to comment on it), but now Levi appeared from the hallway and disarmed his father with a gappy smile.

'Levi,' said Kiki, 'honey, I'm interested – do you know who I am? Pay any attention at all to anything that goes on around here? Remember Jerome? Your brother? Jerome no here? Jerome cross big sea to place called England?'

Levi held a pair of sneakers in his hands. These he shook in the direction of his mother's sarcasm and, scowling, sat down to begin putting them on.

'So? And what? I know about Kippses? I don't know nothing about no Kippses.'

'Jerome – go to school.'

'Now I'm Jerome too?'

'Levi – go to school.'

'Man, why you gotta be all . . . I just ahks a question, that's all, and you gotta be all . . .' Here Levi provided an inconclusive mime that gave no idea of the missing word.

'Monty Kipps. The man your brother's been working for in England,' conceded Kiki wearily. It was interesting to Howard to see how Levi had won this concession, by meeting Kiki's corrosive irony with its opposite.

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'See?' said Levi, as if it was only by his efforts that decency and sense could be arrived at. 'Was that hard?'

'So is that a letter from Kipps?' asked Zora, coming back down the stairs and up behind her mother's shoulder. In this pose, the daughter bent over the mother, they reminded Howard of two of Picasso's chubby water-carriers. 'Dad, please, I've got to help with the reply this time – we're going to destroy him. Who's it for? The Republic?'

'No. No, it's nothing to do with that – it's from Jerome, actually. Getting married,' said Howard, letting his robe fall open, turning away. He wandered over to the glass doors that looked out on to their garden. 'To Kipps's daughter. Apparently it's funny. Your mother thinks it's hilarious.'

'No, honey,' said Kiki. 'I think we just established that I don't think it's hilarious – I don't think we know what's happening – this is a seven-line e-mail. We don't know what that even means, and I'm not gonna get all hepped up about – '

'Is this serious?' interrupted Zora. She yanked the paper from her mother's hands, bringing it very close to her myopic eyes. 'This is a fucking joke, right?'

Howard rested his forehead on the thick glass pane and felt the condensation soak his eyebrows. Outside, the democratic East Coast snow was still falling, making the garden chairs the same as the garden tables and plants and mail-boxes and fence-posts. He breathed a mushroom cloud and then wiped it off with his sleeve.

'Zora, you need to get to class, OK? And you really need to not use that language in my house – Hup! Hap! Nap! No!' said Kiki, each time masking a word Zora was attempting to begin. 'OK? Take Levi to the cab rank. I can't drive him today – you can ask Howard if he'll drive him, but it doesn't look like that's gonna happen. I'll phone Jerome.'

'I don't need drivin',' said Levi, and now Howard properly noticed Levi and the new thing about Levi: a woman's stocking, thin and black, on his head, tied at the back in a knot, with a small inadvertent teat like a nipple, on top.

'You can't phone him,' said Howard quietly. He moved tactically, out of sight of his family to the left side of their awesome refrigerator. 'His phone's out of credit.'

'What did you say?' asked Kiki. 'What are you saying? I can't hear you.'

Suddenly she was behind him. 'Where's the Kippses' phone number?' she demanded, although they both knew the answer to this one.

Howard said nothing.

'Oh, yeah, that's right,' said Kiki, 'it's in the diary, the diary that was left in Michigan, during the famous conference when you had more important things on your mind than your wife and family.'

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'Could we not do this right now?' asked Howard. When you areguilty, all you can ask for is a deferral of the judgement.

'Whatever, Howard. Whatever – either way it's me who's going to be dealing with it, with the consequences of your actions, as usual, so – '

Howard thumped their icebox with the side of his fist. 'Howard, please don't do that. The door's swung, it's . . . everything'll defrost, push it properly, properly, until it – OK: it's unfortunate. That's if it really has happened, which we don't know. We're just going to have to take it step by step until we know what the hell is going on. So let's leave it at that, and, I don't know . . . discuss when we . . . well, when Jerome's here for one thing and there's actually something to discuss, agreed? Agreed?'

'Stop arguing,' complained Levi from the other side of the kitchen, and then repeated it loudly.

'We're not arguing, honey,' said Kiki and bent her body at the hips. She tipped her head forward and released her hair from its flame-coloured headwrap. She wore it in two thick ropes of plait that reached to her backside, like a ram's unwound horns. Without looking up, she evened out each side of the material, threw her head back once more, spun the material twice round and retied it in exactly the same manner but tighter. Everything lifted an inch, and, with this new, authoritative face, she leaned on the table and turned to her children.

'OK, show's over. Zoor, there might be a few dollars in the pot by the cactus. Give them to Levi. If not, just lend him some and I'll pay you back later. I'm a little short this month. OK. Go forth and learn. Anything. Anything at all.'

A few minutes later, with the door closed behind her children, Kiki turned to her husband with a thesis for a face, of which only Howard could know every line and reference. Just for the hell of it Howard smiled. In return he received nothing at all. Howard stopped smiling. If there was going to be a fight, no fool would bet on him. Kiki – whom Howard had once, twenty-eight years ago, thrown over his shoulder like a light roll of carpet, to be laid down, and laid upon, in their first house for the first time – was nowadays a solid two hundred and fifty pounds, and looked twenty years his junior. Her skin had that famous ethnic advantage of not wrinkling much, but, in Kiki's case, the weight gain had stretched it even more impressively. At fifty-two, her face was still a girl's face. A beautiful tough-girl's face.

Now she crossed the room and pushed by him with such force that he was muscled into an adjacent rocking chair. Back at the kitchen table, she began violently to pack a bag with things she did not need to take to work. She spoke without looking at him. 'You know what's weird? Is that you can get someone who is a professor of one thing and then is just so intensely stupid about everything else? Consult the ABC of parenting, Howie. You'll find that if you go about it this way, then the exact, but the exact opposite, of what you want to happen will happen. The exact opposite.'

'But the exact opposite of what I want,' considered Howard, rocking in his chair, 'is what always fucking happens.'

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Kiki stopped what she was doing. ‘Right. Because you never get what you want. Your life is just an orgy of deprivation.’

This nodded at the recent trouble. It was an offer to kick open a door in the mansion of their marriage leading on to an antechamber of misery. The offer was declined. Kiki instead began that familiar puzzle of getting her small knapsack to sit in the middle of her giant back.

Howard stood up and rearranged himself decently in his bathrobe. ‘Do we have their address at least?’ he asked. ‘Home address?’

Kiki pressed her fingers to each temple like a carnival mindreader. She spoke slowly, and, though the pose was sarcastic, her eyes were wet.

‘I want to understand what it is you think we’ve done to you. Your family. What is it we’ve done? Have we deprived you of something?’

Howard sighed and looked away. ‘I’m giving a paper in Cambridge on Tuesday anyway – I might as well fly to London a day earlier, if only to – ’

Kiki slapped the table. ‘Oh, God, this isn’t 1910 – Jerome can marry who the hell he wants to marry – or are we going to start making up visiting cards and asking him to meet only the daughters of academics that you happen to – ’

‘Might the address be in the green moleskin?’

Now she blinked away the possibility of tears. ‘I don’t know where the address might be,’ she said, impersonating his accent. ‘Find it yourself. Maybe it’s hidden underneath the crap in that damn hovel of yours.’

‘Thanks so much,’ said Howard and began his return journey up the stairs to his study.

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