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People Rarely Look

by Tina Blower

People rarely look the way you expect, even when you have seen pictures. The other day I was reading the newspaper in my favourite coffee shop, the one with the 1990's music compilation and where you can paint a clay pot if you wanted to. I saw someone look at me and start to approach. I thought that she had recognised me from my weekly column which I write in the paper and so I opened it to where my photograph stared out at the top of the page and sat up straighter.

Since people have been allowed to comment online, I often get comments about my picture. They say things like 'you look angry today' or 'you could have done your hair today'. It is always the same picture. I guess when people look at you, they are also seeing some aspect of themselves. I wasn't too pleased with the picture but it was something the newspaper insisted on to put a face to the voice. I had dressed very smartly that day and had tried as hard as I could with the crow's nest on top of my head. I still thought I looked like a scarecrow in a straight-jacket, though and was mortified that that was the image to be seen by thousands of readers nationwide each week.

This week I had written about the merits of being a middle-aged woman. The so-called 'invisibility' just meant that you could turn up to events, join conversations and be heard or watch live music and absorb without the self-consciousness of someone sizing you up as another sexual opportunity. The woman who approached me looked like the kind of smart, intelligent woman that I had written about. The kind who would read my column and let me put into words what she had been thinking all along.

Yes, this was going to be a real connection between brilliant, yet under-valued minds. She hesitated then pointed to the paper. I smiled as if to acknowledge, yes, she did have it right, I was Miranda Markle, weekly columnist who gave the clever, successful readers back to themselves in the form of witty and sparkling observations, musings and occasionally, facts. “Have you finished with that?” she said

My smile slipped off my face and was replaced by a kind of nervous tic. I folded the paper and handed it over without looking at her.

“Ta,” she said and walked back to her seat.

‘Stupid picture’, I thought. I picked up a clay effigy that someone had made. ‘That looks more like me, but I bet she can’t write as well’.