

A large, light blue watermark logo for 'Original Works Teo' is oriented diagonally across the page. It features a circular icon with a right-pointing arrow at the top right, followed by the text 'Original Works Teo' in a serif font.

## marrying strangers in coffee shops

“You’re beautiful, ya know that?”

I’m halfway through shaking cinnamon sugar on my mocha-latté, when I hear the thick Irish notes from the man next to me. I briefly glance in his direction and feign a smile, before turning back to my 7.30am hot rush in a cardboard cup. I try as I can to pay no attention to him, but it’s just not my day.

“But not just any kind o’ beauty. You *know* you’re beautiful, aye that’s the difference ya see?”

I turn my head to look at him in earnest. Not bad looking, a bit scruffy—but he’s Irish, right?—and perhaps a little on the paunchy side. Nothing horrendous. Except for the baggy beige

chinos. I bite my lower lip and wince slightly at him, because I have no idea what he's just said.

He leans in close, as if he were an age-old friend, a confidant, maybe even a lover. At first his proximity alarms me, but he doesn't look into my eyes. Instead, he talks to my hands. I start to think I made a mistake by hitting the Starbucks while the loonies are still around, but he stops me.

“When ya look in the mirror, ya see yerself as beauty. No confidence problems with you. Your life is perfectly on track. And when others look at you, you know it's because you're beautiful.

“You can see it in their eyes, can't ya? The ones around you. Look at the women lookin' at you, who envy your calves, your perfect hair, your slim waist. You are what they wish they could be.

“A person who is pretty and self-assured, not someone who needs to settle for anythin'. You have the pick of the masses. But nobody will approach you. You know why?”

His words ring true in many ways. There's something about them, not just *what* he's saying to me but *how* he is, that makes me swallow all sense of response or rebuke and listen to him. I actually want to hear what he has to say next. Why is that?

He picks up my hand, but I don't flinch or pull away. Takes a pen out of his pocket. Looks hard at my fingers. For a moment,

he stares intently into my eyes. Not in lust or envy or anger, but possibly, of all things, in pity.

“Because you’re an untouchable. Your smile is cold. Ya might go through yer entire life not really knowing anyone, or letting anyone have the pleasure of getting to know you. Untouchable.”

He singles out my ring finger and lightly begins to colour in a band, where two hands hold a heart that is wearing a crown. The traditional Irish wedding ring.

“Do you really want your life to turn out like that?”

And with those final words, he spins on his heels and walks out, leaving nothing but the lingering warmth from his hands—and the slight smell of ink.