Beneath the Skin

I have a picture of my grandmother when she was in her early 80s. Our family had gone to a country inn for dinner on New Year's Eve, and we were in the sitting area waiting to be shown to our table. She is sitting in an armchair, smiling. Her face radiates with her love of life. Her eyes are shining with pleasure and with fun. Her teeth are very white, her skin is smooth, her face framed by a full head of gray and white never-dyed hair. She owns that chair. She fills it—her back straight, her hands draped over its arms, her full-length skirt fanned out, elegant, colourful flowers embroidered onto its black background.

I've shown that photo to many people, wanting to share with them the beauty of my grandmother. Their response is invariably something to the effect of "she looks wonderful for a woman of her age." A woman of her age. My heart sticks on that. To me she looks wonderful, period. Can they not see her beauty? What makes them qualify it? The gray and white hair? Their knowledge that they are looking at a photo of a grandmother? What then constitutes beauty? Is it age-specific? Skin- deep? Taught to us, as many allege, by culture, trends, fashion magazines? To perceive a beauty that transcends those things must we know a person from the inside-out?

My grandmother, herself, would have laughed to hear me call the image in that photo beautiful. "Not bad for an old fart," she might have joked. She would most likely have meant it, too—that's how she would have perceived her octogenarian self. But why would she even jokingly call herself an old fart? And how does the world come to see someone that way? How do we come to view ourselves in such a light?