

CHAPTER 17

The Ephemeral Passport

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I have benefitted from many unearned privileges in my life. I was born into a middle-class white family in the United States, thereby winning several spins of the roulette wheel. While I may have missed out on male privilege, I didn't face being judged negatively by my skin color or my class. I didn't have to beg for food. I wasn't denied an education or forced to marry a much older man. And I didn't have to swim across the Rio Grande or traverse the Aegean Sea in search of a better life.

There is increasing awareness of many of these privileges. This essay is about a privilege that is almost taboo to mention – the privilege of beauty. Books have been written about beauty, of course, and it has been the subject of some of my own academic work. But this piece is not a treatise, not a scholarly work. It is a personal reflection on how the unearned privilege of beauty has affected my life.

I was born to exceptionally good-looking parents. My mother did some modeling before she married. My father had the dark, handsome looks of a movie star like Gregory Peck or Tyrone Power. I once introduced a friend to him, adding, "Handsome, isn't he?"

My mother told me later, quite sharply, never to say that again. So I learned there was something unseemly, perhaps even embarrassing, about being aware of physical beauty – and certainly it was not to be mentioned.

My mother died of cancer when she was forty-one and I was nine. Throughout my life this has been, in the words of the poet César Vallejo, “my silver wound, my eternal loss.” I watched my mother lose her beauty and then her life within a few months. No one told my three brothers and me what was happening, and people rarely spoke of her afterwards. For several years after that I felt invisible – in my family, at school, in the world. My brothers and I were each in our own private prisons of repressed grief. Sometimes I sat in my mother’s empty closet, just to be close to her scent.

My father, a hero who fought on the front lines in WWII, suffered from unrecognized PTSD, as did so many of those brave men. Often away on business, he was ill-equipped to raise four children on his own. He did the best he could, but my childhood was bleak and sad. I suffered from recurring bouts of depression for many years.

After my mother died, I lost almost all my friends. Other children didn’t know how to talk to me and neither did their parents. Maybe they feared such loss and grief were contagious. I used to say that I was a freak, but freaks are stared at and I was unseen. I had been a popular little girl but I quickly became a lonely one. My companions were my books and my pet guinea pig.

One of the few memories I have of the years immediately following my mother’s death is that I liked to pretend I was walking on the ceilings of my home. I would look into a hand mirror as I walked through the house, carefully stepping over thresholds and walking around light fixtures. Indeed, my world was as upside down and empty as those ceilings. I began having a nightmare that was to persist for decades. In this dream, I am buried alive. I can hear people walking on my grave but when I open my mouth to scream for help, I am suddenly mute.

I used to fantasize that I would find a magic potion that would make people notice me, maybe even love me – some lucky charm that would make me the center of attention. Suddenly, when I was sixteen, my fantasy came true. Seemingly overnight I was deemed beautiful and I became highly visible, especially to men. I first realized this when, to my complete astonishment, I won a beauty contest in my hometown, a contest I had entered on a dare.

From the very beginning, even though I had longed for it, I felt extremely ambivalent about this gift. Being stared at made me nervous, made me feel that something was terribly wrong. The spotlight that focused on me in mid-adolescence was shocking, scary, seductive, compelling. Having “won the lottery,” I went from poverty to riches in less than a year. I never felt that it had anything to do with me.

At the same time, I knew beauty had extraordinary value and that the dread of losing it was the ever-present dark side. As in the old fairy tales, every gift comes with a price, a curse. I was particularly haunted by the fear that any man I loved would eventually leave me for someone young when I grew old. Whatever the reason, I was aware from the very beginning that my looks were not simply a blessing. It was probably this realization more than any other that eventually led to my work of challenging and deconstructing the beauty myth.

I was no Sophia Loren or Elizabeth Taylor, but for many years a day seldom went by without someone commenting on my appearance. I rarely found myself beautiful, although sometimes I thought I might be if I were carefully groomed and polished and the light was just right. Always aware of every flaw, I felt a terrible gap between the way the world perceived me and the way I felt about myself.

Upon my graduation from Wellesley College, I had to go to secretarial school to get a job. Options for women were extremely limited in the early 1960s. People encouraged me to model, which was one of the few ways a woman could make a lot of money. My brief forays into modeling were seductive but soul-destroying, and played a big role in my lifelong interest in the power of the image.

One day I went to New York and modeled for a world-famous fashion designer. I'd never been on a runway before and I barely knew how to move. After the show, the designer invited me back to his home, where he told me that I could have a successful and lucrative career as a model. All I had to do was sleep with him. I went back to Boston and to my eighty-dollar-a-week job as a waitress. My depression deepened.

Through a newspaper ad, I got a job doing some ghostwriting for Al Capp. He was a smart and witty man, but bitter and cynical. He liked my writing very much. He also wanted sex in exchange for the job. His manager called me and said, "Go to bed with him, honey – it won't kill you." I thought it might, but I was desperate. I loved the intellectual challenge of the work I was doing with Capp and was bored with every other job I had ever had. I was also broke.

This was one of the lowest points of my life. I could rationalize that the fashion designer wouldn't hire me unless I slept with him. After all, I thought, modeling is a form of selling one's body anyway. But Capp thought I was brilliant. He thought I could write. But that wasn't enough. I was still going to have to put my body on the line.

After turning Capp down, I had a series of mindless jobs. One of them was placing ads into *The Lancet*, a medical journal. And one of these ads changed my life. It was a typical ad – insulting to women, demeaning. Yet at that moment it somehow crystallized so many of my experiences: the sexist slights, the terrible jobs, the catcalls, the objectification. I thought, "This is atrocious, and it is not trivial." I began collecting ads and putting them on my refrigerator with magnets, gradually seeing patterns and themes. I created a slide presentation which eventually became my first film, *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*, which I made in 1979 (and have remade three times since).

I traveled all around the country, giving more than a hundred lectures a year, mostly on college campuses. People often commented on my appearance – sometimes judging me to be too much like the models in my presentation, as if feminists could present

themselves in only one stereotypical way. I knew that someday, as I grew older, the tables might turn and some people would say that my critique of the image was simply sour grapes. Feminists can't win the beauty game. Gloria Steinem was faulted for being too beautiful, Betty Friedan for being "unattractive."

Pointing out the downside of being beautiful is a lot like complaining about being rich or famous. Oh please. But beauty is unlike most other forms of privilege because it is transient, short-lived, especially for women. A man said to me once, "Your beauty is an international passport."

"Maybe," I replied, "but one day it will be revoked." I often thought that being a beautiful young woman was like being very rich but with the absolute knowledge that someday one would be bankrupt. Beautiful celebrities are shamed for aging, and shamed for attempting to erase the signs of aging. At the end of beauty is contempt, hostility, and invisibility.

I have to admit that I sometimes enjoyed and capitalized on the sense of power that beauty creates. Looking back, I sometimes wish I had enjoyed it more. But the power is mostly illusory. I was hired for virtually every job I ever sought – but that didn't help me succeed or keep the job. I was sexually harassed during most of them. I was often stopped for speeding but never got a ticket. When I entered a party, I was never alone for long. Beautiful women are magnets for narcissistic men and the adulation such men initially shower on women can feel like love...but it isn't.

Beautiful young women learn early on that many men want to have sex with them. Married men, men of all ages. This can easily lead to contempt for men. So many men who were with other women came on to me that I began to wonder if faithful and monogamous men existed. Many are so easily distracted by a shiny new object.

To be beautiful is to be an object and the constant objectification can be frightening and exhausting. Contempt is the flip side of the adoration of the sex symbol. I remember sunbathing on the banks of

the Charles River in Cambridge one afternoon. Some men came by in a boat quite close to shore. They shouted and whistled at me and wouldn't leave me alone. Eventually I got up to leave and shot them the finger. The rage came off the boat like a wake, and their shouts of "bitch" and "whore" followed me all the way to the street.

Another high price of beauty is that it can alienate other women. Fear of this has made me reluctant to write this essay, even though I am writing about the past. Many years ago, I reconnected with a friend from elementary school. I expressed joy that we could be friends again and she replied she could never be friends with someone so beautiful. "I would feel erased every time I stood beside you," she said. This made me so sad. Sometimes other women misinterpreted my essential shyness as aloofness, vanity. Fortunately, many women did not feel this way and I have been blessed with very deep friendships, relationships that have sustained me throughout my life.

Perhaps the highest price is the knowledge that all this power will one day be gone. I was ambivalent about it but I also counted on it, was used to it. I remember reading a passage in Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* in which the protagonist walks past some construction workers and is unnoticed. As I recall, she removes her coat and walks by again and gets sexual comments and whistles. She knows she is on the edge of invisibility. I was in my twenties when I read it, and I shuddered. I knew this inevitably would be my fate too.

I had become visible almost overnight. The invisibility came much more slowly. For quite some time I could turn the visibility back on, with my clothes or makeup or even just by the way I walked. But those days are long gone. Now people walk through me on the sidewalk. I have to ask for help putting my luggage in the overhead bin on a plane. I enter a party and look for other women to talk with (I always did this but men would circle in and they no longer do).

I can't say that becoming invisible is painless, but it has surprised me that it is much less painful than I expected. There is some relief and a great deal of privacy in no longer being a sex object. An old

friend, known more for her candor than her tact, said to me not long ago that she was finding it hard to have “lost her looks.” “But I was only pretty,” she said. “You were a great beauty – it must be terrible for you.” I had to laugh because it was such an outrageous thing to say, and yet so honest.

Perhaps it is not so terrible because I’ve had a lot of time to adjust to it. Perhaps it’s not so terrible because I had a career that didn’t depend on my looks (although my looks were not irrelevant). Most likely it’s not so terrible because I am happy in my life. I’m blessed with an amazing daughter, excellent friends, a sweet dog, and work that I love. I’ve made enough money that I can live comfortably and travel from time to time. Most important, I am visible to the people who love me and I no longer crave the attention of strangers.

I do resent that men don’t go through this. A man my age and in my general state of health and fitness would still be considered sexy and desirable, especially if he had money and authority. He could command attention. The pool of possible partners for men widens as they age whereas it shrinks to a dewdrop for women. Success makes men more desirable and more likely to find a partner. The opposite is true for women.

Sometimes I miss my passport. But more often I realize that it took me to lands I didn’t really want to visit, places that were alien to my true self. Today I choose my traveling companions more wisely. And I feel more at home in my body – my aging, imperfect body – and my life than ever before.

Discussion Questions

1. What role has your appearance played in your life?
2. Have you ever felt invisible? If so, how?
3. Do you think people get unfair benefits due to their looks? Explain your response.
4. What do you think advertising tells us about female beauty?

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