

Beauty to Ashes

*Essay*

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There's a district in my city that I call the "haut monde." I love beauty, so I like to hang out in the Wescott district. Wescott has that European flavor so attractive to young Americans. Daytime commerce caters largely to feminine capriciousness, nighttime commerce to masculine desire. Wescott by day is flowery and flirty. Wescott nights can mean a pair of dice, a glass of Pimm's, or an open-air concert. For young American women, like me, Wescott is not just a place but a state of mind.

"Varié" is "my" beauty salon in Wescott. Though many conservative intellectuals, like my father, disparage the apparent mindlessness of those who prioritize façade, I have always enjoyed the pleasantries of fashion and modernity. What American woman doesn't? "In a beauty salon," I told my father, "one may participate more fully in the social sciences within the space of five minutes than in five days at the university." I didn't change his mind by saying that. But, then, I didn't care.

One sunny afternoon, I settled into a shiny vinyl chair at Varié. I breathed in perfume and listened to the sweet-husky voices of hairdressers blend together like wind chimes. Overhead, dance music pumped in synchronization with frosted lights along the ceiling. High heeled shoes echoed on the floor. All along the walls, framed images of wanton-eyed models sprawled in luxurious display.

Waiting for attendance is usually nonexistent at Varié. But that particular day, my personal hairdresser suffered a reaction to some chemicals and was rushed to treatment. The

episode heightened the usual energy in the salon. Soon, my new hairdresser stood reflected in the mirror before me. "Hi, I'm *Stay-cy!*"

Stacy was a deeply tanned, blonde woman with a wide, white smile and dark makeup. Underneath her smock, she was fashionably dressed and impeccably manicured. Gold charm bracelets dangled from both wrists. Somehow, she sparkled with every movement.

I greeted her cordially and explained what I wanted. Stacy set to work in the mixing lab. I reached for a magazine. It was a beauty magazine, full of the same bits of popular entertainment news that my mind sifted from the conversations going on around me. I noted that a caption listed some very cute ideas for margarita charms. Also, I noted happily that the shoulder bag I had hesitantly purchased from a Nepalese vendor during Wescott's humanitarian art fair definitely *was* on trend with the color.

I turned another page. The layout was unusual. It was a two-page collage of portrait photographs. Each photograph depicted a woman in a military uniform. There were no names—just rows and rows of faces, which seemed to stare into my eyes. One photograph especially held my attention. The servicewoman in that photograph was strikingly beautiful. Her glossy brown hair was swept back from a perfect, oval face. Her mouth, a bright coral pink, parted in a snowy half-smile. Her eyes seemed hopeful—most eager—expectant of life's promise.

Suddenly, a phrase underscoring the layout gripped my attention and seemed to shake me. "Women who have died in Iraq . . ." it read. At first, I stared at the words in unconscious denial. I reread the words. It was true. That beautiful life was gone.

I swallowed hard and scanned the other faces. Though not as outwardly striking as the girl described, each face displayed the same delicate earnestness. Each one looked hopeful, dedicated, and brave. The U.S. military had become their path to the better life each one hoped

for since, surely, not even soldiers dream of death. Had these women truly desired a military career? Or, for some of them, had the military been the only road which circumstance had left them?

I must be more like my father than I ever thought. For, all at once, each face became, to me, the face of one woman. She was a vulnerable, hopeful, real, American woman—Her soul and the dreams of Her life just as beautiful as any outward vision.

Spellbound by the layout, my mind broke through space and time. I watched Her take her first breath in infancy. I heard Her labored first cry, heard Her first laugh, felt Her tiny fingers grip my hand. With Her, I cherished safety, wept with Her first experience of pain, watched Her give love and care to Her first kitty.

I watched Her talents grow as She grew, wondered with Her at the dawn of each new day, delighted with Her in the beauties of every season. I saw Her wrestle joy and sadness as She learned American cultural mores and norms. With Her, I felt the pressures of a culture who values youth, beauty, and status above all else. I saw Her hang Her head at Her reflection in the mirror, felt rejection with Her, hoped beyond hope with Her, cried with Her about that high school dance.

I knelt with Her beside Her kitty's grave as I saw Her deal with death in a uniquely female way. I felt pressured with Her to succeed, wondered with Her about the future, and my heart broke when a young man broke Hers.

I watched her read the U.S. Army ad which promised breast enhancement surgery to female recruitments, wrestled with the idea with Her, traced Her mental paths to compromise. I sat with Her in the recruitment office, watched Her slender hand shake as She signed Her name, felt Her inner tears as home vanished from sight. I felt Her drive to succeed, recognized Her

competition, and hated the weakness that She hated in Herself. My lungs burned with Hers as She ran; my arms and legs ached with Hers; my spirit broke with Hers in the dead of a desert night.

I felt uneasy with Her, wondered who to trust with Her, fought with Her the urge to never trust again. I felt Her fear—a surreal terror restricting air and paralyzing mobility. My soul screamed as She screamed. My mind exploded with Hers—unable to withstand the ignorance and fury. I felt hope die when She died—dominated, destroyed, and desecrated. The angelic being flew to her final rest.

I sat for several minutes in that chair at Varié, futilely trying to wrap my mind around the enormity of my emotion. Long nails brushed my scalp. "Sorry about the *way-it!*" Stacy said in my ear. "We just can't seem to keep on schedule *to-day!*" She giggled, and I felt the height of my chair adjusting. "Anything good?" She motioned to the magazine in my lap.

"Actually," I said, not sounding like myself, "I was just reading a very powerful article here. It's about servicewomen who have died in Iraq."

"Oh my gosh!" Stacy said, loudly, peering at the magazine, "That is like—so *say-ad.*" Then she called over her shoulder, "Is that Jessica on the phone? Tell her to write better when she takes my appointments. I had to call that girl *bay-ack*, you know? And I couldn't read her number. I was *to-tally* ticked!"

I felt alone in my emotions. Yet, one thought recurred. How could I honor Her life and tragic death?

A more sober version of me spent the next few days searching for an answer. I still saw Her in everything. I saw that beautiful baby girl exploited on a sign outside a fashionable Wescott pub. Did it matter that the sign depicted Her as an adult? To sell their product to men,

advertisers had wrapped Her around a bottle of ale. At Varié and other salons, She regularly walked into closed chambers of harmful ultraviolet rays. She scheduled painful surgeries, pierced Her body, waxed Her hair.

On television, She shivered on the sidelines of a football game, wearing nothing but a swimsuit and waving pom-poms. She modeled underwear and manmade feathered wings. She sacrificed her honor for the title of actress. And to me, in every case, she died all over again—dominated, destroyed, and desecrated.

With what could I honor Her? I searched vainly for the answer. One pitiful way I found was to light a pure white candle and join a group that gathered at the corner of Marston and Camrose streets. Wescott is liberal enough to benignly tolerate such demonstrations. It is also liberal enough to unswervingly continue its pursuit of youth, beauty, and status.

A young man in fashionable dress swept past me, causing the flame of my candle to waver. With him was a darkly tanned, highly decorated woman in a fluttery, low-cut dress and stilettos. I wanted to grab her hand and to tell her earnestly what I had learned. A youth-beauty-and-status-crazed America exploited female beauty for male desire, ego, and financial gain. It pressured women so intensely that they would destroy their own bodies and beautiful souls. A war men instigated sacrificed women to keep men living. It turned true beauty to ashes.