Healing Beauty

Life’s indeed a pageant, but you’re the only judge

May 1, 1997 By Dick Scanlan

I was a beauty queen. In New York City, Orlando, even Tokyo. Actually, I was only a runner-up in Japan; blonds apparently reign supreme in Japanese beauty contests, and I was a brunette. My brush with quantified beauty came in the form of a musical--aptly titled *Pageant*--in which six actors competed nightly. Five judges were chosen at random from the audience, and though they laughed at my antics, they scored me low. Why? Small breasts, no hips, mousy hair. Never mind we were men in drag: When it came time to judge, audiences consistently upheld *Pageant’s* promo line: "Let’s face it, looks *are* everything."

In recent years, I’ve encountered a more sobering reminder of the role my looks play in my life: AIDS-related wasting, AIDS-related hair thinning. Only now, when I see pictures of myself a year ago, do I realize how sick I looked pre-3TC. My eyes were sunken, my cheeks hollow, my clothes hanging off my body. When I run into people I haven’t seen since my scarecrow days, they say, “You look wonderful!” in a tone that says little about how I look now but speaks volumes about how I looked then.

Looks are like money where AIDS is concerned, another form of currency upon which it wreaks havoc. As with money, it’s more fun to have looks than not. Portions are larger. Sales clerks are sweeter. The world welcomes you as though you’re good for the environment, the way a stunner can always crash a party. Superficial? Perhaps, but also primal. I once read a study of infants’ reactions to adult faces: Even babies are happier and calmer when held by hot goddesses and hungs--*Baywatch* babysitters.

So, in addition to the loss of energy, loss of libido, loss of independence that can result from AIDS, the loss of looks is something to justifiably grieve for, whether you starter out as Gia Carangi, the supermodel who died of AIDS more than a decade ago, or just the average Joe most of us greet in the mirror. Let’s face it, everyone has a feature they’re proud of.

It’s not as if people look the other way. “You look tired,” say the people who care about you. That’s sort of sweet, but I also encountered more tactless queries. I’m recalling a business meeting being interrupted with a horrified “You look awful! You must be sick!” As if to apologize for his outburst, the speaker--a strictly professional acquaintance--added in that weepy tone Sally Struthers uses in her “Save the Children” commercials, “I don’t want to lose you.”

So what to do as a PWA in a looks-fixated society? It's a serious question, because an unwillingness to confront the impact AIDS made on appearance could find you home alone, afraid to venture out of fear the world will give you a rocky reception--or, worse, treat you as if you're invisible.

Pageant taught me that it doesn't have to be that way. Not that it was real beauty competition, but *you* try having a score--usually low--written in lipstick on a mirror attached to your back eight shows a week for hundreds of performances. You'll see how quickly you extract your looks from your identity. And that's what it's all about: Identity. *Who am I if the boys aren't looking at me? Who am I if people know at a glance I'm sick?*

Yet the answer to these questions can be liberating. The belief in some form of life after death comes from the idea that the body is *not* a person; it's a shell that contains an energy or a soul. I put my dog to sleep last year, and there's no doubt in my mind that the ball of fur I held in my hands moments after the injection was not my dog.

Taking care of our bodies is like taking care of a car--weekly waxing and a checkup every 10,000 miles will keep you going longer, but it doesn't make you more of a person. Nor do purple lesions dimish it.

Luckily, I've avoided KS. So far. But I battle with skin that rages out of control without a daily dose of cortisone cream. Before that, I tried every cream, lotion, mask and astringent on the market. I steamed. I exfoliated. I peeled, fruit and chemical. My skin remained a mess. I'm not talking flaky skin, I'm talking burn victim. Still, at the height of my skin problems, I met the man I'm now in love with. At a diner on a wintry Saturday night, he approached my table and said, "I'm having dinner here alone, and I noticed that you were having dinner here alone, and I was wondering if you'd like to join me." He didn't see the scabs or the blotches. He just saw me.

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