

Connection 55+

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Where beauty is...

An Essay By MICHAEL ROWE

BEAUTY, GREAT beauty, is elusive enough to be truly thrilling when found unexpectedly. I rarely find it in the pages of fashion magazines, because it has usually been so intensely powdered, primed, and treated so intensely that it reflects almost everything except the woman being photographed.

I say this with the utmost respect for some of the truly brilliant fashion photographers I have known. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, ask anyone. In my eye, beauty is Doris Sterland, a refined Englishwoman of the old school who would not care to have her age banded about as though it is common currency. Suffice to say she can look back at her 70s and 80s secure in the knowledge that she is more luminous today than she ever was in her younger years.

I first met this remarkable lady at my graduation from boarding school. She is the grandmother of my friend Barnaby Ellis-Perry. Barney and I have the sort of forged-in-steel friendship that brothers should be lucky enough to enjoy. It has survived the loneliness of prep-school life, young love (and all its attendant misery), the death of one of our friends a week before his graduation, and, ultimately, the separation of time and many miles. Two lives; mine, here in Milton, and his in Vancouver, where he lives on a boat in Coal Harbor. When we were in school, Barney spoke of his Nana often, so often that I felt I knew her well.

My first glimpse of her, I remember, was on a brilliant June day, the kind that only the prairie provinces truly know, when the wide expanse of land seems almost to mirror the sun and endless sky. Among the milling crowd of boisterous graduates drunk on the promise of life without high school, and their parents, drunk with relief that whatever happened to their sons, they would at least have their high school diplomas, she moved serenely, with the native grace of an aristocrat, greeting other parents and teachers here and there with a smile and a nod.

I remember very little about what was said, due probably to the fact that callow 18 year-olds rarely say memorable things to their friends' grandmothers, especially on graduation day. But I have always retained the image of her eyes, piercing, direct, and utterly serene. And I remember thinking, "God, what beauty." At 18, it was a revelation; nothing like my crush on the madcap Buffy twins with their airborne hair, or my girlfriend Lisa

back in Ottawa, but a powerful new standard against which I would always judge women, based upon what they radiated. From that moment, I have carried this with me.

When I met her again last December, she invited Barney and I for tea at her small, elegant flat in West Vancouver. While many 27-year-olds might have considered tea with a post-octogenarian lady an unnecessary adventure in claustrophobia, I was eager to measure my impression of her at 18 against the reality of almost a decade later.

If anything, it turned out, she had become even more radiant. In her eyes, I was now an

adult, and she entertained Barney and I with her wit and sophistication, freely lacing the patter with her laughter, by turns low and vibrant or light and girlish, depending. I knew, as Barney drove me back to the hotel, that I would have to photograph her, if only to validate what I had seen in her face.

This past summer I locked myself in my office while I worked on an article for Ottawa Magazine, breaking only for iced coffee at the Golden Griddle in the Milton Mall, where the waitresses are happy to accommodate this eccentricity. In August, the article was completed, and I flew to Vancouver.

Barney's grandmother had suffered a series of heart attacks (typically, they occurred while hiking in Europe instead of at bingo, where someone with less flair might have suffered them.) I was told that she tired easily these days, and must not be disturbed. When I asked her permission to take the photographs, she expressed amusement, citing her age, but graciously consented. On the appointed day, I arrived, weighted down

with the photographer's paraphernalia, and Barney in tow. She was wearing a flowered summer dress, which she had affixed a cameo brooch to. As we set up the lights, she pointed to a table that one of her grandchildren had brought her.

"They think I'm going into my second childhood," she said tartly. As she sat in her chair, watching with amusement the extraordinary mess that Barney and I were making of her tidy apartment, she murmured, "this is all very interesting."

As the camera clicked, I watched her smile and pose for me, and I was once again struck

by the beauty of her, the dignity that age lent her in the winter of her life. The lines in her face are all soft, her eyes sparkle brilliantly with fierce, uncompromised intelligence, and only a passing nod to her years. Age was supposed to have robbed her of something; instead, she has taken something from it, and she wears it as comfortably as a yellowed cashmere sweater. She posed for a series with Barney, who has become a large, handsome man. She did not look frail and ancient beside him. They shared a secret smile, more like conspirators than grandmother and grandson.

As we left, I thanked her profusely for putting up with what must have been a vexing intrusion on her privacy. She, with an utter lack of vanity, thanked me warmly and graciously for my interest. After a week in Vancouver, I flew home.

It's winter here in Milton. The snowflakes billow around my red house on Martin Street. I love winter in this town, the age of the year, the holy black darkness of the night lit only by street lamps visible through a veil of softly falling snow.

I have the photograph of Doris Sterland hanging above my desk as I write this. I think about the frantic girls I know, desperate for an identity, a man, a life. They diet, stuff themselves into acid-washed jeans, tease their hair until it cries. And as I gaze into the sepia-toned eyes of the photograph, I think about the beauty I see there; the lines of joy and sorrow. The eyes that have seen the best and the worst of the century. The face of a woman who was a girl, who fell in love, married, raised a family, buried a husband, and went on facing life's challenges with aplomb, never taking herself too seriously in the process.

For some women, I realize, great beauty is an elusive makeup trick that they never quite master. For others, bless them, being a woman is enough. Living courageously is enough.

Michael Rowe is a writer and photographer who lives in Milton. His work appears regularly in magazines across Canada. This essay first appeared in *Halton Magazine*. Copyright 1989, by Michael Rowe.



Photo by MICHAEL ROWE

What's Happening

Members of Milton Senior Citizens' Recreation Centre (SCRC) can look forward to a wide range of activities. New members are welcome to participate.

Registration for spring programs will be held from Monday to Friday, March 26-30. Spring sessions run from April 2-June 8. The following is a listing of the programs and activities that operate at the centre.

Monday

A gentle form of exercise, **Tai Chi** is offered at two levels from April 2-June 11. Sessions for those at the intermediate level are held from 10-11 a.m. and beginner classes run from noon to 1 p.m. Drop your stress level to zero during **Relaxation and Visualization** classes from 11 a.m. to noon. Get your blood pumping as a participant in the **Fitness for the Fun O'Fit** program that runs from 1:15-2 p.m. One of the ongoing activities at the SCRC are **Shuffleboard** games. They happen Monday between 2:15 - 3:30 p.m. **Table Tennis** also continues on a regular basis in the same time slot.

Tuesday

The **Blue Birds Choir** makes the rafters ring at the SCRC every Tuesday morning from 10-11 right through until June 12. Explore your love of music by joining the **Music Appreciation** sessions from 11-11:30 a.m. If you own a microwave oven and aren't sure how to get the most out of it, join the **Microwave Cooking** classes that run from 10 a.m. to noon from April 3-23. Work off all that great microwave cooking by **Square Dancing** later the same day from 1:30-3:30 p.m.

Wednesday

Take time out for a game of **Bridge** at 9:30 a.m. Games end at 11:30 a.m. There's a place to share one's talents at the **Craft Club**. The group meets from April 4-June 6 from 9:30-11:30 a.m. The first Wednesday of each month is **Movie Day**. Curtain time is 1:30 p.m. The **Walking Club** meets at the SCRC on May 2, 9, 16, 23, and 30. Depart at 1:30 and return at 4:30 p.m.

Thursday

Beginner Line Dancing is held from 1:30-3 p.m. and in the morning from 10-11:30 there's a session for **Intermediate Line Dancing**. Improve your listening skills at **Come Hear, Level 1** sessions running from 10 a.m. to noon. Join the **French Conversation** program offered from April 5-June 7 from 11 a.m. to noon.

Friday

Bingo and Euchre are offered on a continuous basis. Bingo games are held from 10 a.m. to noon and euchre players are at the tables from 1:30-3:30 p.m. Join a **Yoga** program offered from 1:30-3:30 p.m. Budding artists are encouraged to join the **Drawing and Painting** program that runs from March 30-June 8 from 1-4 p.m.

Special Events

There will be **Open House Euchre** at the SCRC this Friday (Feb. 9) beginning at 1:30 p.m.

In conjunction with the Milton Winter Carnival the SCRC will open its doors to the public for a performance by the **Fifty Plus Cloggers** on Sunday, Feb. 11 from 2-3 p.m.

Spend some time socializing at the SCRC on Tuesday, Feb. 13 from 4-8 p.m. It's the day before Valentine's Day so the event is being called a **St. Valentine's Day Dance**.

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