20/07/2009

Mon, 20/07/2009 - 12:00

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Age before beauty

I am 45 and until now I have always embraced getting older with a hearty indifference. Who cares whether you can no longer wear hot-pants or sport pelmets? You will always be remembered as you were aged 21 by those who knew you then, and those who have met you since, presumably like you for other things than having a complexion like Snow White's. Anyway, isn't there something rather wondrous about the ageing process, rather than it being a cause for shame? One of the most fascinating faces I can think of is Doris Lessing's - whose crinkles resemble one of those igneous rocks you find in a river, scored and polished over millions of years. The grand canyons of W H Auden's forehead denote a depth of anguish in keeping with his poems.
I have a friend who is so terrified of ageing she knocks seven years off her age whenever she makes new acquaintances. Wrong, wrong, wrong, I used to counsel her. Far better to add a decade and then be thought sprightly and well-maintained for an elderly crone, than to be thought a faded bloom.
Last week however, I started to care. I was trying to get into the local swimming pool. It was raining, and about seven o'clock at night, and I had driven three miles to get there, only to discover it was the "over 50's night."
Almost as a joke, I decided to see if I could get in. Just as I was about to pay my fare to go in, the woman at the box office cocked me a glance and asked: "And you are over fifty, right?"
"Yes" I answered, beaming, expecting her to squint again, and say, "Surely not Madam, can I see your ID?" But no. She waved me in. As I slid into the pool, populated by what looked like elderly seals, I expected the odd double-take or hostile glare. But no. Nothing but serene smiles. One man who looked about 246 even tried to help me get onto the steps to get out of the pool before him.
Two days later, in London this time, at a fashionable West End art gallery, the same thing happened again. I was quietly minding my own business musing over the works of Muirhead Bone, when a man of 86 (he told me his age in a rather showy-offy way) started to engage me in idle chat. It emerged that we lived near to each other in the country and he found that rather exciting and suggested we

get together to discuss his etchings. This will never happen, however, on account of what happened next. "Do you know about the bus service from Wincanton to Hammersmith?" he asked me in one of his many opening gambits. I answered that I did, but never took the bus as it makes me sick. "Oh but you should!" he urged me, "the over 50's get a discount of 93 per cent."
I blame it all on the children. Before I had them I used to wonder why mothers looked so frowsy; grey and raddled. Now I have become one of them I know why. They get no sleep and eat nothing but biscuits.

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