



Readers Write

VANITY

I'M VAIN. I WEAR A DIFFERENT OUTFIT every day, a compulsion I have rationalized as either a form of self-expression or evidence of a playful spirit. I go to the gym with a devotion that I've rarely shown for anything else in my life. My current role model is not Ruth Bader Ginsberg or Dorothy Day, but an aerobics instructor ten years my senior (I'm forty-one) who has the cut muscles and trim form of a dancer in her prime.

I make little attempt to hide my superficial self-regard and go around telling friends that I'm a face-lift waiting to happen. (Breast job and tummy tuck, too, if you want to know the truth.) I've found I have two kinds of friends: those who have had cosmetic surgery and will therefore indulge my interest in it, and those who haven't and gently dissuade me. There's even one who told me that she wouldn't nurse me or look after my kids during my recovery.

I live in a culture that's only too eager to court my vanity. A year ago, I subscribed to a magazine for women over forty, expecting to see images of older women breaking through the youthful veneer of pop culture. Interspersed with

not fully retouched photos of somewhat-lined models were pages of ads for youth-restoring products.

Each month, this publication offered an article about a different cosmetic procedure. Once, it catalogued them all and described the recuperation process for each, from retin-A to a full, muscle-removing, skin-stretching procedure that takes about ten months to recover from — and that's without any complications. For microdermabrasion (a kind of facial sandblasting) the article advised, without a hint of satire, "Treat skin as wound." Indeed, all the methods that medical science offers put my vanity up against my instincts for self-preservation: Chemical peels are burns. Botox is, as its name suggests, toxic. (Apparently there's no need for newspeak in the cosmetic land of Big Sister.)

In some significant way, I'm surely the creation of such magazines. My vanity is too valuable a source of spending not to be reinforced. Asking whether or not to "have work done" has become as much a part of the aging process as wrinkles themselves. I've told my daughter that she may need a college scholarship because

I'll be using my savings to finance my face. Neither of us knew for sure whether I was joking.

I'm hoping that feminism will save me, as it has many times before. I'm looking forward to a "croning" at fifty — a ritual recognition of a woman's passage into old age and wisdom. I have never seen a crone, real or imagined, with a smooth, tight face.

*Martina Sciolino
Hattiesburg, Mississippi*

I BEGAN STUDYING BALLET WITH MISS Latour when I was six years old. From the start she would press her long stick against my ankle and say, "You, my darling, have the perfect form for ballet and will become famous one day." I reveled in the attention. "Only this one may wear a tutu for the recital," Miss Latour said to the others, waving her stick at me. "Her legs are strong and perfect. The rest of you will wear longer dresses." I soared onstage and lorded it over the other girls.

Five months before my eleventh birthday, I became ill with polio. The doctors said I might never walk again, let alone dance. My left leg was bone thin in comparison to the right. My mother put hot towels on my leg and stretched it while I begged her to stop. I squeezed little rubber balls to rebuild my arms.

Slowly, I regained my strength and was even able to dance. Miss Latour reluctantly gave me private lessons until I was ready to rejoin the others. "You will have a solo part in the recital," she said, "but, my child, you will have to wear a long dress to cover your legs."

I was crushed, until I remembered how hard I had worked just to be able to dance again. The night of the recital, when the curtain lifted and the spotlight shone on my body — in the long dress — I felt no vanity, only pride.

*Mary Jo Olsen
Port Townsend, Washington*

I HAVE NEVER HAD A PARTICULARLY good body, except for my breasts. I always looked great in sweaters — even after childbirth, even after I passed forty, then fifty. Maybe it was the hormones I was taking, but whatever the reason, my breasts held up far better than

the rest of me.

Three years ago, my annual mammogram disclosed a white area. The biopsy confirmed that I had cancer in my right breast. I needed a lumpectomy.

It took all my courage to look down after the surgery. To my surprise, it didn't seem too bad. My lover still found me attractive. And I still had my breast. It could have been worse.

After recuperating from thirty-three radiation treatments, I took a good look at my naked body in the mirror and saw that my right breast was noticeably smaller than the left. I'd had no idea this would happen. I tried to ignore it, but I couldn't. The most attractive part of my body had been altered forever.

The next year's mammogram revealed something suspicious on my left side. Again the biopsy confirmed breast cancer. Reeling from the news, I confessed to a confidante that I was afraid God was punishing me for my vanity. She replied, "God isn't that petty!"

Thanks to more daily radiation treatments, my breasts are again the same size. I also have scars from surgery on each side. They serve as a daily reminder of how fortunate I am.

I think there's a reason this happened to me twice. There was something I was supposed to learn the first time but didn't. Finally, cancer has taught me to appreciate just plain being alive.

Betty Warden
Chicago, Illinois

FOR THE SECOND SEMESTER, I INSTITUTED a new policy with my tenth-grade English students: they were required to write three pages a week in a journal. I instructed them to write without editing, simply to put words down on the page.

Sherry never spoke much in class, but her brown eyes betrayed a fierce intelligence. All semester long, she wrote three pages a week in her neat, rounded script. I marked her page count in my grade book every Monday, but I didn't read her pages until the last week of classes. Her entries all focused on one issue: whether or not to get a nose job.

Now, from where I was sitting, Sherry needed no nose job. Sure, she had a nose that showed her Italian heritage, but it by

no means detracted from her beauty. I'll even admit to having had a bit of a crush on her: nothing I would ever have acted upon, just the sort of crush a teacher sometimes develops on a student.

From her journal entries, I knew Sherry wanted to be a marine biologist. Her role model was a cover girl her age who also aspired to be a marine biologist and had already obtained her license to scuba dive. In her quest to become more like her role model, Sherry faced a dilemma: that summer, she could either take scuba-diving lessons or get a nose job, but she could not do both. Not only did she not have the money for both, but recovery from the surgery precluded swimming.

Reading her journal, I thought, *Maybe I should say something. Maybe I should take her aside and tell her I think she should forget the nose job.* But what about my role as an impartial reader of her journal? And how could I tell Sherry I thought her nose was beautiful? I was her thirty-year-old teacher. She was a sixteen-year-old girl.

I said nothing. I handed back the journals. Sherry got an A. School let out for the summer.

When Sherry returned to school in September, she had not learned to scuba dive.

Kevin Cummins
Johnson, Vermont

AT THE AGE OF FIFTEEN, I HAD STARVED myself to eighty pounds. As I lay in a hospital bed, all I could think about was my dream of being perfect.

I had decided to go on a diet after I didn't get the lead in the high-school musical. I was convinced that the other girl got the part because she was skinny. Now I was in the hospital and couldn't even be in the musical at all.

My parents came to visit me and sat on either side of my bed. My mother started to cry, and my father asked me why I was doing this to myself. I told him that I wanted to be beautiful so that I could be happy.

"There is so much more to life than

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Idealism	July 1	December 2003
Turning Thirty	August 1	January 2004
Small Towns	September 1	February 2004
Deception	October 1	March 2004
Out Of Reach	November 1	April 2004
Second Chances	December 1	May 2004

vanity,” my father said. “Someday you will see just how beautiful you are, inside and out.”

Two years later, having recovered from anorexia, I got the lead in the school musical, but I still did not feel happy.

Upon graduation, I decided to pursue the Miss New York State crown. I had seen the current Miss New York State at a local event, and she’d seemed so perfect and happy. Perhaps if I obtained the same title, I would feel that way, too. Over my parents’ objections, I spent the next few years as a pageant contestant. Every year I came closer to winning. In my last year of eligibility, I stood on the stage and prayed to God to let me win. I almost collapsed when they called my name as the second runner-up.

After that I spent two weeks by myself, thinking about my life. I tried to remember who I had been before I’d decided that my happiness depended upon my looks. I remembered as a child being fascinated by my social-studies class, and that I’d once loved to read books about history. I decided to go to college to study history.

I am now a middle-school social-studies teacher and the assistant director for the school musical. Last week one of my students came to me and asked, “Miss Neil, how come you’re so happy all the time?”

*Tara Neil
Buffalo, New York*

MY EYES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MY BEST feature. When I was a teenager, my glamorous Aunt Jenny, who had once been on a chorus line, taught me how to flirt. “Look down,” she said, “and when you look up, the boy will be struck by how beautiful your eyes are.” I followed her advice and enjoyed the results. Once, in the 1960s, I was at the Playboy Club on a date, and the attendant in the ladies’ room told me that I looked like Elizabeth Taylor. Almost forty years later, though I cannot recall who my date was, I can still remember that compliment.

Twenty-six years ago I had cancer in my jaw: an angiosarcoma that threatened to end my life if I didn’t have immediate surgery. My face was cut open from the inner corner of my right eye, down the

side of my nose, and through the middle of my upper lip.

At the time, my priority was to live to raise my son, who was ten years old. I was his sole parent and could not die and leave him alone. Still, before the surgery, I wouldn’t give the doctors permission to remove my right eye if the cancer had spread that far up. A team of doctors, as well as my family and friends, urged me to give consent for my eye to be removed, but I refused. My fear of waking up from the surgery deformed was stronger than my desire to raise my son.

Luckily, they did not need to take the eye. I am fortunate, too, to have skin that heals well; the scar is visible only if one is looking for it.

Since then I’ve had two cancers in my other eye. The radiation treatments for the first caused all my lashes to fall out. I was thrilled when I saw the dark fuzz of their regrowth. Then I had a melanoma on the lower lid. The doctor had to remove my lower eyelid and reconstruct it with a skin graft from the upper. Prior to the surgery, I peppered my doctor with questions about how I would look afterward.

“Toby,” he said, “I am trying to save your life. Please stop obsessing about your appearance.”

My eye was sutured shut for six weeks while the graft healed. Thanks to my doctor’s skill, the shape of the eye is normal, but my lower lashes are gone, and there is a small bump of scar tissue underneath.

After so many cancers, I should be grateful just to be alive, but I am still upset when I look in the mirror and see that my smudged bottom eyeliner does not re-create the look of lashes on my lower eyelid. I cannot wear false eyelashes because the chemicals in the glue might cause a return of the cancer. I know the change in my appearance is far more visible to me than to others. It makes me sad that I cannot accept my inner beauty as enough.

*Toby Greene
Peekskill, New York*

AS A MURAL PAINTER, I OFTEN WORK in the homes of the very rich, sometimes occupying a guest room, or even a spare

wing, until the completion of a project.

I once stayed in a large mansion in Westchester County, New York. The couple who owned it had an exercise room with a mirrored wall. On the other walls they wanted me to paint a mural of athletes in various poses. The wife asked that I put her face on one of the athletes. She would often come into the room while I worked and strike poses and ask how she looked. She repeated my compliments to her husband to make him jealous.

The grounds around the house were stupendous. During my stay I made a point of rising before sunup to go for a walk and enjoy the tranquil gardens. On reentering the house, I would hear a loud thumping in the distance as my patrons exercised on treadmills while watching incredibly loud televisions.

Three days a week a cleaning crew would show up. Four women from Brazil would vacuum, scrub, and clean the entire house. They carried themselves with great dignity and humility. I somehow got the impression that they were sisters. The only time they dropped their serious demeanor was when they broke for lunch. Then they would talk and laugh, but always in subdued tones.

The day I finished the mural, some guests arrived, and everyone toasted the completed painting. I thanked the couple for their hospitality and complimented them on their beautiful house. Then I put away my last brush and made the long drive home.

The next day I did an easel painting of those four South American women. I call it *The Cleaning Crew*. My wife calls it “The Sisters” and says it’s the best thing I’ve ever done.

*Esmond Lyons
Glens Falls, New York*

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