

LIVING

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BEAUTY RITES AND WRONGS—

The only thing that hasn't changed is the ocean. It still breaks dependably in fierce gray waves on the sands of Atlantic City while the sea gulls circle overhead. But nothing else is the same. The boardwalk stores that used to sell postcards are selling vibrators and coffee mugs shaped like breasts. The fresh crab claws have given way to bad pizza; the wondrous frozen custard I remember (half-chocolate, half-vanilla, in a swirl on a cone) now seems anemic next to Häagen-Dazs; and I'm suddenly scared to read the list of ingredients when I unwrap my saltwater taffy. Every hotel is a casino—an assault on all the senses: It sounds like a bank is being robbed all the time, it smells like the bottom of a dirty ashtray and it looks like there is no day or night.

No, the only thing in Atlantic City that hasn't changed in 5 or 10 or 20 or 50 years is the ocean.

And Miss America.

It is a rite of fall, like mothballs and storm windows. Fifty young women, lean of limb and stout of heart, descend on Atlantic City with their bathing suits and bugle beads and batons, and 70 million people watch them walk down that runway on TV. The compelling thing about it is that it does remain the same—the bad production numbers, the “evening-gown competition,” the look-alike hopefuls. They are pretty women,

these 50. God or Mother Nature or whoever you like to believe is responsible for these things has been generous to them in the cheekbone department, and in noses and teeth. But they put on four inches of pancake and tease their hair into geometrical shapes, and they all end up looking like Farrah Fawcett or Lynda Carter or Loni Anderson.

The Miss America people are proud of the sameness, the history. The pageant, they will tell you, has survived three wars, labor strikes, the Depression, feminist protests, casino gambling and the losses of Bert Parks and the theme song. The pageant people are also extraordinary in their ability to ignore the anachronism and the silliness around them—the irony, for instance, that the pageant is a den of purity inside the den of iniquity called Atlantic City. Convention Hall, where it all takes place, sits between Caesar's Palace (where the waitresses are wearing thigh-high gold-and-white togas) and the Playboy Club (where you know what they're wearing). The contestants themselves are not allowed anywhere near a casino—they have to take circuitous routes out of their hotel rooms—but the no-gambling rule pales next to the others: no drinking, no smoking, no cursing and no men in their rooms, including their fathers. This is the only place in the world, with the possible exception of aboriginal Africa, where a 24-year-old woman may not go anywhere, say or do anything without her chaperon.

Most everyone else, of course, is

by aimee lee ball



COLLS

THE MISS AMERICAN WAY



PHOTOS (EXCEPT VANESSA WILLIAMS): UPI/BETTMAN ARCHIVE, VANESSA WILLIAMS, NBC, 1984

in Atlantic City for the gambling—they will stop long enough only to eat four inches of turkey breast between two slabs of rye, then back to the slot machines. People arrive in buses every day from Harrisburg and Cincinnati and Atlanta and places much farther away, clutching cash and good-luck charms. Miss America sets up a temporary rivalry, to divert attention, to see if beauty can upstage blackjack—a competition that verges on neck-and-neck by the end of the week and the Saturday-night fever of the televised show. On each of the three preceding nights, the imminent Miss Americas put on a gala show—a third of them each night for a packed house of their parents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, home-state folks and half the population of greater New Jersey. All 50 of them walk the runway in their bathing suits, tottering precariously on three-inch heels. All 50 of them slither into sequins or yards of organza to parade proudly in their evening gowns. And all 50 of them, God help us, perform their talents.

Five minutes after the television show starts Saturday night, the ten semifinalists will be announced and the others will never be seen or heard from again, but for three days they are stars of equal

billing. They will pose for photographs. They will suck in their stomachs, set their hair, stop smoking. They will wave. They will smile. And last September, I saw those smiles, live and in person, when I covered the Miss America pageant for four unforgettable days and nights. All of what follows is true. I don't invent stuff this good.

Wednesday

There is a big room just off the main hall of the Convention Center, and one wall is covered with a map of the United States that's been autographed by all 50 contestants. "Greetings, America, from the sunny state of California" (with a smile face); "From potatoes to Atlantic City, Idaho loves you"; "Hi from Iowa, a place to grow"; "A hearty Hoosier hello from [of course] Miss Indiana"; an enigmatic "Naturally Miss New Hampshire"; and my favorite: "Faith knows no disappointment—best wishes to you all from Miss Oregon."

They all have three names, of course—I think it is a law. Miss Americas must have the sort of name that conjures up images of sitting on a veranda with a mint julep. Laura Lynn Watters. Wanda Gayle Geddie. Shari Anne Moskau. Wendy Sue Nelson and Wendy Lynn Wagner. I myself have the perfect Miss

America name: Aimee Lee Ball, to be uttered at a rapid velocity in a Southern drawl. There are a few renegades—Dakeita, Laronda—but there could never be a Miss America named Blanche. It wouldn't do.

Trelynda Ranea Kerr, sporting a pink *Flashdance* sweatshirt and a big white ribbon proclaiming her Miss Oklahoma, is giving an interview to a reporter from a small Midwestern paper. With a name like Trelynda, she must have established some endurance in her young life, but this guy would try anyone's patience. "Do you believe in reincarnation?" he wants to know, and before leaving, he says, "I'm not sure if I should say, 'Good luck' or 'Break a leg,' so I'll just say, 'Break your leg.'" Miss Oklahoma is weary. She eyes a dish of candy, fingers it, reconsiders. "I might as well tape it to my thigh," she says, "'cause that's where it's gonna end up." She's brought a scale from home so she can weigh in a couple of times a day. (Another reporter says she wanted to ask contestants about anorexia but imagined they'd respond, "Where's that?")

Miss Oklahoma collects trees because her nickname is Tree. These and other tidbits may be found in a cornucopia of information gleefully distributed to the press. Miss Connecticut is "a wedding and funeral soloist." Miss Georgia "trained her own horse to do tricks." (Could I make this up?) Miss Illinois was "a National Maid of Cotton finalist" and "a blood services volunteer as assistant phlebotomist." (I had to look that one up, too; it means (continued on page 318)



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opening a vein. Miss Idaho's father is "a technical writer for the nuclear industry" and "her father's occupation allowed her to visit Three Mile Island." Miss Indiana's parents' families "are all from Germany, and she has a relative who hid artifacts in piles of sheep manure." Miss Michigan was "employed as a weed puller." Miss Hawaii's ambition "is to be a cruise director aboard a passenger liner." Miss New Mexico "has chosen a minor in psychology because she wants to help others with their problems. She feels it is her duty." Miss Maine "is protected by weimaraner attack dogs" and "received an invitation to President Reagan's inauguration." (I wonder if the two items are related.) And Miss Wisconsin was "reared and educated in a private coed school . . . called Mooseheart . . . for families of departed Moose members. . . . Mooseheart trains students to be responsible and productive citizens in society."

The contestants are rehearsing for the first of the talent competitions tonight. Miss Rhode Island, Pamela Jo Hoff, in green sequins from collarbone to ankle, is belting out "For Once in My Life," punctuated by the terrible squeal of a malfunctioning microphone. She keeps on singing (to 14 people in an empty auditorium). There is "a vocal interpretation of the Minute Waltz" by Miss Iowa, Karri Lynne Nussle. Miss Minnesota, Vicki Plaster, does a medley of "I Could Have Danced All Night" and "Just You Wait, Henry Higgins," and when she gets to *Just you wait until you're swimming in the sea*, she drops to her knees and starts doing a land crawl.

Most of them sing. You can't pretend to play the piano or pretend to tap dance (although one contestant who claimed 14 years of ballet class prompted an observer to comment, "She didn't say she ever made it to Intermediate"). Singing you can fake. But whoever told them they could sing? They don't have real voices—Carly Simon voices or Dolly Parton voices or even Rosemary Clooney voices. They have elevator-music voices. They sing about as well as I do, and I don't. An occasional talent makes a surprise appearance: Miss Missouri has obviously studied violin, and she's good. But she's playing "Listen to the Mockingbird" (the big hit of 1855, we're told), attempting to keep the damned thing under her chin while trying to move seductively in a white fringed pantsuit. I mean, it's embarrassing.

I must remember not to stick my fingers in my ears or roll my eyes at fellow sufferers in the auditorium—the fellow sufferer could well be the singer's mother. By this evening's performance, there will be a respectful—no, adoring—audience for every high C. If the contestant can stay on key, she gets applause, and if she can hold a note, the house goes wild. Perhaps

their talent is on a level I can't perceive, like that whistle only dogs can hear.

Thursday

The 50 women are wearing Mickey Mouse hats this morning—a gift from Miss California—and a hostess dressed as Strawberry Shortcake is circulating in the crowd, directing traffic. ("They told me she needed me," says Miss Mississippi's hairdresser, arriving in a huff. "I'm supposed to do her hair *right now*.") Last night, among the performers, we actually heard a Miss Louisiana who wants her own construction company, a Miss Alabama who may someday design a space shuttle and a Miss Arkansas who thinks "a woman's place is in the House and in the Senate and in the Supreme Court." Have the feminists infiltrated? I wonder. Louisiana explains how the "girls," who all just love one another, pray together before they go out. Alabama confesses she came to Atlantic City with 12 pieces of luggage. And Arkansas, who is not a women's libber or anything, thinks "we need things to look up to, like religion and Miss America."

It is hard to get anything real out of them. Louis Toscano, a veteran UPI reporter, remembers hearing about the Miss Florida in 1982 who told an Orlando reporter that one of the people she admired most was Adolf Hitler. "I wanted that story," says Toscano. "So at the interview, I asked her a lot of bullshit, innocuous questions, and then I said, as subtly as possible, 'Tell me whom you admire.' Well, she knew exactly what I was going for, 'cause all the while this bozo from the Orlando paper was sitting there scared to death that I was gonna say, 'Ah, bozo here told me you admire Adolf Hitler.'" Miss Florida's chaperon was also sitting there, squeezing her arm and nudging her in the ribs to prevent further outbreaks of foot-in-mouth disease, and the flustered contestant mumbled something like Sandra Day O'Connor.

There is always one major source of controversy and contention—in 1983, it is the Yom Kippur caper: The pageant is being held on the holiest day of the year for Jews. "The Yom Kippur situation is unfortunate and very much regretted, but there isn't anything we could do about it," says pageant chairman Al Marks, Jr. What he's not saying is that if the pageant were delayed a week, the display of nubile young things in bathing suits might be marred by goose bumps from the cold, and if it were pushed forward a week, the union labor required for the live telecast would have to be paid time and a half for Labor Day Weekend. (This year, the date of the big night, September 15, is mercifully holiday-free.)

"This is what we call an extremely heavy show," says Marks. He is referring to the fact that there are 30 former Miss Americas in the show this year, and he is

not referring to their added poundage, although almost everyone else is. "Miss Americas," says Donna Axum, the 1964 winner, "are not allowed to get fat," but some of them apparently haven't read the rules. It is always the "former" Miss Americas or the "returning" Miss Americas—never the "old"—although Rebecca King, the winner in '74, likes to refer to herself and the others as the "has-beens." But Becky was always a rebellious sort, the one who admitted Miss America would pay her way through law school and to hell with the rest of it.

"I was looked upon cross-eyed by the pageant people," Becky says, "because I felt I was interviewing for a job that paid \$100,000 a year. The 'scholarship' is a foo-foo way of saying money. You take away the gowns and the crowns and you're left with the dollars." Becky was, and is, bedazzled by the will to win among contestants. "The year I was here, they all arrived with their hair in flips, and as the week went on, their flips got flipper—it was a competition of flips. But now they're finding more things to do. I never thought of taking a diuretic. It didn't dawn on me to lift weights. I backed away from the molding of an image—it's already fairy tale enough. And by the end of a year, you do get tired of people trying to take a piece of your life."

Most of the former winners are considerably more reverential, leading charmed and beatific lives out in the heartland—an *overwhelming* number involved in evangelical church work. Miss '62 "recently recorded an album of inspirational songs she and her gynecologist husband wrote." Miss '80 "runs a Christian charm school and has two singles on the Christian music charts." Miss '66 has five children: Brock, Bryant, Bridget, Brent and Christian. Miss '79 opened a fashion boutique in Palm Beach. Miss '72 "lives in Burbank, California, and has made guest appearances on *Three's Company* and *The Rockford Files*."

The reigning Miss America, Debbie Sue Maffett, is holding court today, fielding questions about the need for a killer instinct ("I tell the girls: Relax. We all have good stuff inside of us"), her statement that this is the year of the black Miss America ("Do you believe everything you read in *People*?") and the relevance of the pageant to modern women ("If the Miss America Pageant is irrelevant, then so are the Olympics and so is 4-H and so are the Girl Scouts"). A reporter asks Debbie Sue to autograph her picture on a box of cornflakes, and her father steps up to have his picture taken, arms laden with the cereal boxes with his daughter's face (and bobbed nose) on every one. Until recently, he tells *Atlantic City* magazine, he thought this country was going to hell in a hand basket. "But, since Ronald Reagan's in, and since Debbie won that, I'm begin-

ning to feel a little better about it."

Friday

A complaint. Richie Bemelman, age 14, from Camden, New Jersey, is at the pageant with his parents, and he has a complaint: "Why do they wear those dumb bathing suits?" Richie wants a little sex in his Miss America, but he shouldn't hold his breath waiting. Oh, there's more cleavage to those bathing suits now, and the contestants fairly make love to the judges from the stage, turning and posing, all arched backs and stiletto heels. But this is clean, toothpaste-ad sex—T and A and gleaming smiles.

The swimsuit competition used to be the part where they described the women's measurements in a whispered voice-over ("Sally Jo Smith, 36-24-26, is a 20-year-old brunette from the University of Kankakee"), but it was deemed to be undignified, so now there is a noticeable silence during the whole event. "How do they get their breasts to stand up?" I wonder aloud. A woman next to me in the audience asks, "How do they get their breasts, period?" Everyone is staring at the chest of Miss Texas, the first (admitted) instance of breast enlargement, although nose bobs, artificial tanning and dental bonding are practically common. I am totally distracted by trying to figure out whether they wax, shave or pluck to get their "bikini line" so hairless. You can see the strap marks on their tanned backs from the kind of suits they really wear when they're not trying to win beauty contests. Miss Mississippi wore a shameless two-piece for a group portrait on the beach, but by this evening she's in the conventional stretchy maillot, which she says she bought secondhand at a garage sale.

This is the last night they will be able to cradle a microphone and tell the crowd in ten seconds or less why they're there. Miss Connecticut, with cleavage front and back, hopes "to find the happiness of a totally successful woman." Miss Nevada says "being a college graduate has made me realize how vast and interesting the world can be." And Miss West Virginia expounds that "success and accomplishment are joint ventures. You can widen your life by yourself, but to deepen it you need a friend."

Saturday

I call my friend Julia at ten minutes to ten, E.S.T. "Just thought I'd tell you that Miss Mississippi is going to win tonight."

"How do you know?" she asks.

"Everybody knows."

"You mean it's fixed, right?"

Listen, any panel of judges that includes Rod McKuen can't be all good, but that's not it. It's a look. A stature. A bearing. Besides, Miss Mississippi looks just like Phyllis George.

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Two hours later, Miss Miss. is smiling through her tears (and, perhaps, crying in her beer) because Miss New York, Vanessa Williams, is the first black Miss America, albeit one with green eyes and tawny hair. Vanessa's family looks like a slightly tanned version of *The Donna Reed Show*, she goes to a college that costs \$10,000 a year and wears gowns that could cover the defense budget for an emerging nation, but at her victory press conference a reporter asks, "Did you come from a poor family?" Poor Miss America—she may be a savvy New York kid who feels gutsy enough to support abortion rights and use her winnings for Manhattan rent, but I don't think she has any idea how many Archie Bunkers were sitting in front of their TVs tonight saying, "Good lord, Mildred, Miss America is a spade." The lucrative bookings usually open to a Miss America—paid appearances for commercials and conventions and such—may be reduced for her, but she's not worried: If she's not invited to the John Birch Society, maybe she'll go to the Urban League. Tonight, Vanessa is getting calls of congratulation from Coretta Scott King and Lena Horne. A month later, she will get less benevolent messages from an unidentified caller threatening to throw acid in her green eyes. People take their Miss Americas, and

their prejudices, very seriously.

Much was made of the news of the black Miss America—it was a coup for the pageant people, who were getting a little testy about defending what they do, so much so that they printed a little brochure asking: Is the pageant relevant? (Answer: "Is it relevant to bring a smile and some pure joy into your community life, to dream a thing of beauty and bring that dream to reality?") I am grateful we are past the time when blacks were not only barred from entering, but were dressed up as slaves during the crowning ceremony. I am glad little black girls, as well as little white girls, can grow up wearing T-shirts that say "Future Miss America." I just can't figure out why they want to.

The scholarship is a diversionary tactic. Sure, Miss America is well paid for her efforts—so are prostitutes and circus clowns. The women are celebrated for having prettiness and niceness—eggshell qualities that would please our grandmothers, but are not worth too much on the open market. Today, you have to be a liberated woman or die, and these women are sleeping in curlers.

Watching all those years on TV, with a mixture of admiration and contempt, feeling proud when Miss Pennsylvania was pretty (that was my home state), comparing my height and weight to the

winner's statistics—I never realized that Miss America is a luxury of youth, before social consciousness sets in. There are a few traditions in television: the Academy Awards, the Bob Hope specials and Miss America. No one is going to be hurt by a few annual hours of silliness and boredom from Hollywood, or by Hope doing "But I wanna tell ya . . ." one more time.

But Miss America is more insidious—precisely because it's on TV (if it happened in anonymity somewhere outside the media glare, it would be innocuous). We listen and learn and take our cues from such stuff—about smiling our way to success, and killer instincts winning the day, and the importance of breasts. I'd rather see a daughter of mine wearing a T-shirt that says "Future Norma Kamali" or "Future Ambassador to Mars" or even "Future Homemaker of America." In 1984, Miss America just doesn't cut the mustard. ●

On September 15, Aimee Lee Ball will not be among the 70 million people watching the pageant on TV. She has a date.

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