

Style Wise
Expressing Your Unique Self

Shearing
Narcissus

Public speaking: The very thought brought up all her worst insecurities. Until this happened . . .

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Every public appearance feels like the first. Stomach lurches usually strike days or even weeks before the actual event, as, gripped with stage fright, I imagine standing metaphorically naked before an audience that expects me to enthrall them.

I recall the old Boy Scout motto: Be prepared.

Never a Boy Scout, being a girl, I was in fact thrown out of Brownies at age seven for some act of insubordination. Sure, I wore the uniform and beanie, but it was a ruse.

Some years ago, preparing for an important public appearance, eager to look the part of a first-time author delivering wisdom to her audience, I decide to visit a hair salon for some advice on what wisdom looks like.

“Do you think,” I ask the hairstylist, “I should cut off all my hair?”

It’s long, blonde and naturally wavy. A lot of fluff, which, attached to my petite physique, inevitably consigns me to the “Little Miss Princess” stereotype; not at all me.

The hair stylist backs off a yard or so and looks me over, head to foot, before shaking his head.

“Naw,” he says decisively, “you should keep the hair because you’ve really got nothing else.”

Really.

Before this, I’d been told on occasion that I was intelligent, beautiful; my photograph had appeared in magazines and newspapers; my ideas and opinions were quoted, and a stint on the *TODAY Show* drew offers of everything from posing nude for Penthouse (thanks, no) to writing another book about the exploitation of American workers. I was proclaimed a “real author,” and no one had ever told me that the only asset I possess is my hair.

Deeply stung, I succumb to a mere color tweak by the hairstylist, and then hurry home to wallow in this newfound “meh” identity. I am nothing but a tress, and not so glorious at that.

The upcoming presentation isn’t to Brownies or Boy Scouts. I figure a gaff or two will be overlooked. Yet I want to deliver something palpable, unforgettable; but driven by the hairstylist’s

curse, I fear my audience will take one look at my “meh-ness” and fall into group coma.

Maybe I was having my period that day, but the hair stylist’s words brought me to my knees, making me considerably smaller than I already was.

Just hours before the presentation, I obsess over what to wear on this “meh” little body to lend it a heft of importance, a certain stature and some height of brilliance. The Brownie uniform long ago discarded, I fret.

Then I remember a man who, on observing my clothed bum, had told me I could be a model for a certain brand of blue jeans. Maybe, despite the hairstylist’s disparaging analysis, I possess something he missed. In certain circles, a nice bum goes far. Alas, speaking with my back to an audience strikes me as, well, asinine. But that memory set me on a reckless sartorial path, starting with my tightest pair of faded blue denims. At least the folks backstage could glimpse my “model’s” bum.

What else would attract an audience? I slip on a scarlet velvet shirt, reminiscent of a Shakespearean actor, then trash the effect by unbuttoning it to the sternum between two “meh” bumps that can barely be found with a microscope. Shoes? Tallest platforms I own to add height, and finally, making the most of my hairstylist’s advice, I mousse the only special aspect of my being until it resembles a furry white rabbit caressing my head.

Thus assured that the audience will definitely notice me — I work in a few body moves to show off the scenic ass — I feel ready to confront the dragon. I dare not approach a mirror as I wait in the wings.

I am being introduced, about to walk onstage. A two-star general, I recall, has been harnessed to do the honors. I don’t think he has read my book, or even knows much about me, but he’s managing to hem and haw and entertain the audience. I can hear their obligatory tittering as, backstage, I tighten the strap on my platform shoe and ruffle the bunny hair. Then — too suddenly — it’s time.

From the backstage darkness, an arm appears; its hand grasps me and whisks me forward. In one swift jerk, I now stand alone on a titanic stage facing 3,015 men and women, all wearing the same uniform.

They are US Army Materiel soldiers, and their uniforms somewhat resemble jungles and swamps. A welcoming applause breaks out, and that’s when, with a sick gut, I remember that I’ve failed to prepare my talk.

At the time, being as green as those soldiers’ uniforms to speaking before audiences of any size, my youthful vanity fired by a sappy hairstylist’s shaming remark had detoured me from my life’s purpose.

I agreed to give this talk hoping to dispel popular stereotypes about this nation’s most poverty-stricken, exploited and disadvantaged people, the people whose life stories are featured in my book, the *raison d’être* of this appearance.

Yet, that slashing — if true? — remark by a hairstylist has thrown me off my mission into a quagmire of self-deprecation and sartorial folly.

The audience stops applauding and waits politely. An uncomfortable silence ensues.

Whoa there, Miss Tarnished Brownie, I tell myself. Time to face the dragon, and he isn’t the audience; he’s my brittle pride manifested in the form of a stranger whose life’s work is to make people look better than he thinks they do.

Despite its fuzzy fur garland, my brain ramps up. Words form. When I finish speaking from the heart about things nobody — let alone US soldiers — cares to hear about their own neglectful government, their own corrupt politicians, *our* own uncomfortable, intentional ignorance of other people’s suffering, the audience stuns me with cheers and a standing ovation. I don’t think even one of them noticed, or if they did, cared, that I wore a rabbit on my head instead of a beanie.

On the day I sit down to write the next book, fingers poised over keyboard, something feels wrong. As if in a trance, I rise from my desk, locate a pair of scissors, and cut off all my hair. ♦