

FADING BEAUTY

When the lights go down on a glamour girl.
By OLIVIA STREN



“D

o you wear mascara?” my 69-year-old aunt asked me last summer, studying my lashes and puffing on a Kent cigarette. We were sitting on her couch, white and fluffy as crème fraîche, in the living room of her sun-drizzled apartment in Paris’s Montparnasse district. “Sometimes,” I said feebly, unsure of the right answer. “Well, you could wear more of it,” she replied, more as a command than a suggestion. She then disappeared for a minute, returning with a gold box full of silver Christian Dior mascara wands. She handed me one, and I dutifully hastened to the closest mirror to apply it, feeling it wise to obey her counsel since to me, »

she has always been the last word in things impossibly glamorous.

When I was little, even her name, Evelyn (pronounced Eveleen) Séléna, was exotic to me, because it was a stage name. But I called her Taty (French for auntie), and she called me lots of pretty-sounding things (*poupée, chérie, bonbon, trésor*). She was far more colourful and intriguing than anyone I'd met growing up in Toronto. Her nails were always tipped in ruby polish, she was perpetually swaddled in Sonia Rykiel, and she'd never even go to the postbox without lipstick, mascara and Guerlain perfume. She'd dress for the supermarket the way others would to dine at Georges V. Imagining her promenading the streets of Toronto seemed absurdist and wrong, like running into Cleopatra at Sobeys.

Taty's theatric, lights/camera vibe was not only her nature—it was her livelihood. She was an actress and movie-star beautiful. When she was in her teens and 20s, casting agents said she was a cross between Sophia Loren and Audrey Hepburn. She had inky hair, cat-like eyes and a honeyed, Mediterranean complexion. There's

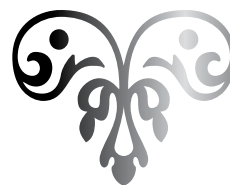
a cryptic French adage: *La beauté ne se mange pas en salade* (You can't eat beauty in a salad), which means, roughly, that beauty doesn't nourish or sustain. But Taty feasted on it, and fashioned a career and a life with it as her most trusty companion. With it she won acceptance into the coveted Comédie-Française, took to the Parisian footlights and starred in local television series, films and theatre productions.

But Paris's version of Hollywood is no more gentle than its Californian original, and as my aunt grew older, she was forced to trade on-camera work for dubbing. Should you find yourself flipping past a French station, chances are you'll hear Taty, her voice a seductive, nicotine-sanded rasp courtesy of a lifelong affection for American cigarettes.

Although it always seemed inappropriate that Taty should shadow anybody (they should shadow her!), she became the voice of such starlets as Meryl Streep, Helen Mirren, Judi Dench and Glenn Close. In film, she took on Streep in *Out of Africa*, Close in *Fatal Attraction*, Mirren in *The Queen* and Dench in *Notes on a Scandal*. On television, she was Kate Jackson's Sabrina Duncan in *Charlie's Angels*, Candice Bergen's Murphy Brown, Linda Gray's Sue Ellen Ewing in *Dallas*, and is currently Close's Patty Hewes in *Damages*. She excels in characters who are haughty, sexy, powerful and sometimes wildly unhinged. The guileless ingenues or sunshine-y romantic leads are not for her.

To me, Taty's life seemed as dramatic as the characters she played. And because of her, I believed that a checkered past was so much more alluring than a harmonious, »

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stable present. My mom—especially compared to all the other moms I knew—was certainly unconventional. She wore capes, was from Casablanca, watched French book shows and cooked lunchbox-inappropriate foods like steak tartare packed in Hello Kitty Tupperware. But compared to Taty, she took a traditional path: She got a university degree at La Sorbonne, and married and had children in safe, comfortable Canada. Taty married once in a last-minute ceremony in French Guiana, but they never had children and the relationship only lasted a month—the soap-opera mystery of it always seemed terribly exciting to me. Even her dog, Peluche, a cottony, well-shampooed white poodle, had a checkered past. Peluche had once been abducted and sold for only 200 francs to Parisian prostitutes. Alarmed that she may have lost her pooch forever, Taty received a call at two in the morning from a burlesque dancer who claimed she had Peluche—Taty ran to rescue him, only to find him in a brothel, staggering drunk, having feasted on a dinner of *epaule d'agneau* and champagne.

Taty is now 70 (Peluche has passed away) and she lives alone in her lovely Montparnasse apartment adorned with framed photos of herself in various stages of youthful splendour. After the mascara incident last summer, we looked at old photos of her in theatre productions, or with different handsome, suntanned lovers, many of whom have since died. She talked to me about her romantic disappointments and her professional regrets. “This is when I was young and beautiful,” she said, flipping through jaundiced newspaper clippings and magazine profiles of herself. “Now, I’m old,” she added, snuffing out her cigarette with particular vigour. She wasn’t wearing lipstick, and for the first time, she looked fragile and small to me. Maybe, at 33, I had grown old too, but at that moment I wished that she had the harmonious present instead of the checkered past. She lingered over the photos, as if trying to reconnect with—or even recognize—that version of herself. “You’re still beautiful and you’re not old,” I offered, trying (I knew, uselessly) to console her. If I let her feel old, it meant I’d have to be old—or at least older—too. But what was really growing old was my fantasy of her as eternally, unflappably fabulous.

Later that afternoon, we watched a classic Hollywood movie—Taty loves old movies and has an armoire full of her favourites, as if she feels she belongs in one—a dream world where beauty and love are loyal and constant, where people never grow lonely or old. She knew all the words, and marvelled at these happy-ending fairy tales the same way I had always marvelled at her: a star in a land more vivid.

Glamour, it seems, always lives elsewhere. Even in Paris. □

1/3 (Vertical)