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On Glamour - A(n Extended) Prose Poem

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Lucky: tremble, suck the sticky air and feel your shaking silly star-struck hearts, the pulsing throng, the vibrant hush, pop spirits screaming transient love and popping Tylenol to cure their vodka tonic headaches.

Watch the limo as it slides along the carpet, chrome-white, polished rims and engine purring, all-Italian essence, rented chauffeurs tweaking ties and cufflinks—then the crowd erupts.

See her laugh in the cacophony; her eyes are brazen green, her teeth are white and perfect; she is laced with diamonds, sparkling glitter, frosting surrealistic melody in harmony with elegant Dior.

The gown is red, exact shade of her lips: it holds her every curve, a perfect plot, a silken testimony to the power of South Beach and million-dollar trainers—evanescent rhapsody complete with frequent flyer miles on American Express.

She is only one organic aspect of the swaying scene.

The wind is twining, curling with the trees and knocking coconuts and bending palms, in sync with sunlight far too bright for February—it should be cold—but here in Tinseltown the summer solstice lasts all year within the spirits and the souls of guests and press and passersby.

Just beyond the pomp and circumstance the sea is vast, set off by spider lines of melting sand and water, setting boundaries for ships and barges, some of which—though rotting—carried cases of tequila and the stuff of glamour to the work yards weeks before so that the sweaty underpaid blue class could put together all the trappings of this brilliant night.

They made an extra buck for overtime.

It is an homage to both luxury and art, to swirling drinks with sour olives and fresh caviar—the sturgeon flopping, dying in the kitchens, dark blood splatting on the counter ’til the kitchen boys return from break and toss them in the bin, compressing them with liver mousse and apple cores.

Lace and rubies, flash and fizzle, swirling lights and laughing boys and girls in finery a nip beyond their age: at home they lie
around without a thought of makeup; here, they smile dashingly and hope to god their teeth are clean.

Damn accusations, ostentation: this night, all is unified and bright; this night we spangle stripes and shut out static, even if the static is the only sound we ordinarily omit.

This night, we show the world our secret wish.

“Glamour [...] turns the dust of everyday life into a golden haze” (Elinor Glinn). As I have reflected on the nature and the nurture of glamour, I have come to believe that it is far more universal than it might initially seem. For some, of course, it is the pursuit of wealth and celebrity. But for others, it is entwined with art, with sex, with caste, with wilderness, with discourse and style and this abstract thing called love.

Most people chase glamour on the outside; a few have the courage to peer within.

Diana: archetype of the royal elegant effeminate; of grace and glory, princess—also private jet safaris, snowy ski-trips, whirlwind accusations of affairs and heroin and desperation—you stripped off your gowns of monarchy, abandoned your tiara, found instead a deeper element of glamour in your final moments here on earth.

You were photographed by Mario Testino—celebrated by the glitterati for his artful take on nudity—and captured in the archives of his magazine, not knowing that in two short months your heart would freeze, your blood would spill out on the Paris bricks and you would die, stripped down to nothing, not for art but through the desperate act of nameless Frenchmen seeking to enliven you to reign another night.

In the photo shoot they called you just “Diana,” and you went along with it because “Her Royal Highness” sounds pretentious, inconsistent with the barefoot princess you were prone to be, and in this shoot especially you found within yourself the courage to confront the expectations of the British aristocracy and freely smile, lying on a divan, wearing simple white and simple black and simple diamonds—not until I saw these photos could I have imagined that a diamond could in any context be defined by raw simplicity.
In these last playful moments you communicated something that established your psychology, most certainly your ministry, and left a stinging mark on all the artificial stabs at brilliance in society. You showed the world that glamour is an altogether different force than cash or clash or paparazzi. Glamour is defined by who we are.

For some glamour is an external force; for others it has more to do with soul than with appearance. For a few glamour is an albatross, an enemy: “we are greater than that,” they cry in passionate self-deceit.

For me, glamour is less of imminence and more of transcendence. It is, I believe, the thing that fuels rebellion, the organic idea that draws us out of our comfortable constricted existences and into something bigger, broader, brighter, beautiful in the most simultaneously esoteric and intimate sense of the word. Glamour is the link between the mundane and the exceptional.

It is, in effect, a cry for more.

Barista: brew a venti black espresso; I need something strong to keep me wide-awake enough to reevaluate these images whose tips are going golden, blurry in the midst of misty memory.

For years I’ve heard the rhetoric from pros and friends and family and pastors and librarians that God is in the sacred and profane, that every element of life is really worship, that the penultimate question we should ask is whether we are offering a true and living testimony.

Church, they claim, is more or less an outlet for theology, a lucky opportunity to saturate in sovereignty, kenosis, eschatology, nativity and trinity, to take that stuff and somehow implement it in our lives.

When I was seventeen I hopped a Boeing, zipped across the North Atlantic, slept a night in Prague, and then flew on to Turkey where I toured the ruins of majestic cities, kissed Nevadan girls on hotel rooftops, etched graffiti in Ephesian temples, swam in the Aegean Sea.

Part of our excursion brought us to the famous mosques of Is-
Tanbul, a city rooted in religious controversy: threshold of the Eastern Roman Empire, it outlasted Rome and thrived—a final testament to former glory—'til the Ottomans extinguished it in A.D. 1453.

The 'Αγια Σωφία, Church of Holy Wisdom—dedicated in 537 by Justinian and reestablished in the sixteenth century by Mimar Sinan, Turk of Turks and architect of celebrated minarets—became for me a symbol of the bleeding heart of Christianity.

In the dim and dusty, mouldy, musty halls and dips and chambers of the great cathedral-mosque I found the thing that I was looking for: a compact sense of holiness; a place where even tourists spoke in whispers, hushed by crevices of gold and bright mosaics, silky cobwebs, black-eyed mice and spicy breath and death and life-in-death and death-in-life, the Christus Viktor dome the stern triumphant gaze that seemed to fix on every speck of sentience in the ancient room.

If doctrine and religion are synonymous, then hang the institution—but I think that there is more.

I spent just moments, really, in that ancient temple, but those moments have transformed me—even now, I feel the breath of God when I revisit in my mind the Church of Holy Wisdom and the subsequent encounters that have similarly driven me to see God not as systematic nor as “my best friend” but as a sum of art and beauty, as a personal idea, as a being far beyond my best conception, one who moves me to fall down and cry out “I don’t know” but “Holy, holy, holy.”

As we covet the transcendent, so we practice glamour, dreaming that some day we might discover life with colors we have never seen, with sounds we’ve never heard, with things too bright and beautiful for us to hope to comprehend them, so we scintillate and copulate and meditate and work and wait and try perhaps to emulate this crest of our experience, the first nudge of a journey that will truly change our world.