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Christina Tibbetts

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# ON WRINKLES

Christina Tibbetts



THE PROBLEM WITH BEDSHEETS, mainly, is their rebellion against lying flat. Sheets, for some reason, prefer to crawl across mattresses until they lie in wrinkled bunches of unstarched cotton, dangling off the sides as if they would rather inhabit the dark recesses beneath the bed than the space on top. When I awake in the morning, nine times out of ten, my sheets have migrated to some dark crevice down the side of my bed, or scrunched into crumpled piles at the foot. The same problem arises when putting them on in the first place. The art of making one's bed was the one chore I was incapable of accomplishing to my mother's satisfaction as a child. The sheets slipped and scurried, folding over themselves.

I could not achieve the immaculate smoothness of a well-made bed, and after several unsuccessful attempts as a seven-year-old, I determined that it was, after all, an unnecessary routine and scratched it off my list of obligatory housekeeping practices. Years later, I still attempt it occasionally (knowing very well that many five-year-olds do it with their eyes still half closed in sleep), but it remains hopeless. Each time I try to make my bed, I only end up reaffirming to myself its impossibility due to the stubborn immortality of wrinkles.

Much modern effort has gone into eradicating the wrinkle problem. In 1882, Henry W. Seely patented the electric iron, a great metal machine that breathed heat and steam, and was capable of trampling wrinkles in clothing effortlessly into smoothness in mere seconds. Today, over a hundred years later, brilliant minds focus on wrinkles of another kind. Lining convenience store shelves are face creams of every color, in every sized bottle, tube, or tub, smelling of everything from vanilla to begonias, which promise to wipe away all signs of wrinkles in “three to six weeks of daily use.” No matter if the user is ninety-seven years old and had wrinkles two inches deep before Mary Kay was even born.

“Wrinkles,” said my mother to me in a mantra that I still hear every time I open my closet, “are a sign of sloppiness and neglect. Wrinkles are evidence that you don’t care.” Of course my mother was speaking of wrinkles in clothing, but I thought about this today as I was walking across the street and noticed an elderly woman, with a halo of white hair, cross my path. Her face was covered in chasms of folded skin, lined with tunnels of age. Her wrinkles had wrinkles. It was a beautiful face, and as I looked at it, the declaration that “wrinkles are evidence that you don’t care” echoed in my head. Almost immediately, it was followed by a counter-thought: *Or that you have cared much.* The woman’s wrinkles seemed to me a map of a lifetime of experiences. The troubles of the world, and of people in the world, had probably been tugging on her for more than six decades. As I looked at her, I decided that, as far as *those* wrinkles went, they meant she had indeed cared. A lot. For many years. Cared so much that her skin had formed drain paths for her tears and moved out of the way for her smiles.

Wrinkles are a part of nature—a chronicle—a record of years. The earth itself is wrinkled—earth pushing into earth, creating

clefts and vast ranges of gullied and mounded landscape, mountains that drop into valleys that rise into mountains again. Many people, when they personify “Mother Earth” or “Mother Nature,” picture a beautiful young maiden with a wreath of flowers in her hair. Not me. Mother Earth has been at her job a long time, and you can bet she has the marks of her age. Only her eyes, the heavens, are ever young.

Wrinkles are the signature of time. Time moves swiftly through the world, scrawling its name with wrinkles on faces and rocks and works of men, saying, “This is me; this is my work. I did this.” And it does. Time is an artist that works in lines. Lines crisscross the peeling, cracking, moving earth. They move through the bark of young saplings grown old, and map the pathways of life on faces of men. Lines put texture on otherwise plain surfaces, carving their canvases with individuality and moving beauty. The history of our world is told in lines—in wrinkles.

It seems a shame, then, when we can have our whole life experience engraved on our faces to be looked at and remembered when Alzheimer’s starts to steal our memories, that we choose to slather ourselves with lavender cream and pray for the wrinkles to

disappear like a rabbit in a magic show. But all too often the show is amateur and the rabbit is never really gone, and we wash off the cream and the wrinkles remain. Slightly soggy and smelling faintly of flowers, granted, but as distinct as ever. And too wrapped up are we in trying to make them vanish, that we don't appreciate wrinkles for their own particular beauty.

It was several months ago that I first connected wrinkles with beauty. I was on my first rock-climbing expedition, up in the canyons of central Utah. As we hiked up into the craggy mountains, looking for a suitable cliff, the uneven, folded ground grabbed at my feet, tripping me up, and making the trek difficult. Eventually we selected a cliff to climb, set up our gear, and I began my first ascent. My hands, long familiar with the outdoors, seemed to see the rock better than my eyes did, moving easily over it, in and out of holes and knobs—like a dance. And then, about halfway up, I stopped. My position against the rock face resembled, I am sure, a squashed spider—limbs twisted at odd angles, neck stretched uncomfortably. I squinted up, wondering why I couldn't move further, and saw myself gazing at a wall of smooth granite. Rain had started to fall, dotting the rock with slick water that streamed

down in little rivulets. My hands scuttled across the wall, searching for a crack, a crag, the smallest imperfection in the rock—searching desperately for a wrinkle.

The same uneven ground that had caused so much stumbling on the hike up had now, hanging off the side of a wet, weather-eaten rock, become an absolute necessity. I needed wrinkles—wrinkles that I could shove my hand into to pull myself upward. And as I eventually found them and continued to the top, I was able to stand above the world, or so it seemed to me, and look out across the wrinkles of mountain after mountain, and the beauty that was inherent in their cracked, lined imperfections. How dull it should be if mountains were smooth like glass and the carpet of nature was as even as an asphalt road. What a loss I would feel if the crumpled skin of tree bark shone with the slickness of well-polished oak.

I do not look forward to the sight of my body aging in the twilight of my life, the smoothness of youth lost to the rough record of years. But perhaps if I can look in the mirror sixty years from now and see a beauty like that of the elderly woman crossing the street, like that of the mountains and valleys, perhaps then I

might pass by the anti-wrinkle cream in all its various forms and false hopes, with the confidence of one who is finally at peace with her bedsheets.