

SOURCE B

Pretty Beyond Belief

By Amy Tan

I once asked my mother whether I was beautiful by Chinese standards. I must have been twelve at the time, and I believed that I was not attractive according to an American aesthetic based on Marilyn Monroe as the ultimate sex goddess.

I remember that my mother carefully appraised my face before concluding, “To Chinese person, you not beautiful. You plain.”

I was unable to hide my hurt and disappointment.

“Why you want be beautiful?” my mother chided. “Pretty can be bad luck, not just good.” She should know, she said. She had been born a natural beauty. When she was four, people told her they had never seen a girl so lovely. “Everyone spoil me, the servants, my grandmother, my aunts, because I was pretty beyond belief.”

By the time she was a teenager, she had the looks of a movie starlet: a peach-shaped face, a nose that was rounded but not overly broad, tilted large eyes with double lids, a smile of small and perfect teeth. Her skin bore “no spots or dots,” and she would often say to me, even into her seventies and eighties, “Feel. Still smooth and soft.”

When she was nineteen, she married. She was innocent, she said, and her husband was a bad man. The day before their wedding, he was with another woman. Later he openly brought his girlfriends home to humiliate her, to prove that her beauty and her pride were worth nothing. When she ran away with the man who would become my father, her husband had her jailed. The Shanghai tabloids covered her trial for months, and all the city girls admired her front-page photos. “They cried for me,” she avowed. “They don’t know me, but they thought I too pretty to have such bad life.”

Beauty ruined her own mother as well. A rich man spotted my grandmother when she was newly widowed, strolling by a lakeside. “She was exquisite, like a fairy,” my mother reported. The man forced the widow to become his concubine, thus con-



*Glam shot of me at age twelve,
with my cat Fufu.*

signing her to a life of disgrace. After she gave birth to his baby son, my grandmother killed herself by swallowing raw opium.

Although my mother chastised my adolescent beauty, she sometimes lamented my lack of it. “Too bad you got your father’s feet,” she would say. She wondered why I had not inherited any of the good features of her face, and pointed out that my nostrils and lips were too coarse, my skin too dark. When I was nineteen, after a car accident left my nose and mouth askew, she told me she was sorry that she could not afford the plastic surgery to fix this, as well as my misshapen left ear. By then I didn’t care that I would never meet my mother’s standards of beauty. I had a boyfriend who loved me.

In the last years of my mother’s life, when she had developed Alzheimer’s disease, she never forgot that she was a beauty. I could always make her giggle by telling her how pretty she was, how I wished I had been born with her good looks. She whispered back that some of the other women in the assisted-living residence were jealous of her for the same reason. But as she lost her ability to reason and remember, she also came to believe that my face had changed.

“You look like me,” she said. I was moved to tears to hear her say this. Time and age had allowed us to come closer. Now we had the same lines formed by cautious half-smiles. We had the same loss of fat above the innocent eye, the same crimped chin holding back what we really felt. My psyche had molded itself into my mother’s face.

Since my mother died, I find myself looking in the mirror more often than I did when I was twelve. How else is my face changing? If beauty is bad luck, why do I still want it? Why do I wish for reasons to be vain? Why do I long to look like my mother?