MAKEUP FACE

The Not-So-Pretty Truth of Being a Beauty Queen's Daughter

written by MADELEINE DELIEE UPDATED ON AUG 29, 2017

Lots of little girls think their mom is beautiful. But I had empirical proof: My grandmother showed me the newspaper clippings of my mom with her hair piled beehive-high, eyes dramatically outlined, and a sheaf of roses in her arms; people gathered around to bask in her light. She was wearing a tiara. My mom was a bona fide beauty queen.

What's it like being the daughter of Miss Westchester County, winner of the Miss New York swimsuit trophy? It's like waiting for a seed to grow, or for a superpower to manifest itself. It might be nice to have a beautiful mother, if you're just as beautiful. People were always telling me I was lucky to have such good genes. But I was always the "cute" child, and now I'm a cute adult. There were some grim years in between—let us never speak of the frizzy perm or the acne—but cute has always been my narrative. Lots of people would counsel that cute is nothing to turn one's freckled nose up at. Absolutely true. But when you've been convinced that, if you're just patient, you'll someday turn into the beautiful swan, it can feel a bit… inadequate.

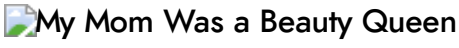
This isn't a story about how I overcame that feeling. I wish it were. Instead, this is a story about how that never quite went away.

MADELEINE DELIEE

I've compared to myself to my mother for as long as I can remember. (Though I never really brought this up with her explicitly.) In our culture, at least, it's inevitable for mothers and daughters to feel competitive. "Doors are opening for daughters as they're closing for mothers," New York City psychiatrist Gail Saltz, MD, told CNN. "That can cause resentment and fights. Also, daughters often compare themselves unfavorably to moms." They might think, *I'll never be as beautiful or accomplished as she is*.

My mother and I had the same dark, fine hair and large, dark eyes. But nowhere were our differences clearer than in my legs. There is nothing technically wrong with my legs. They function perfectly well, sport the occasional bruise or road rash, and are not actually abhorrent in any way. Yet they're not at all elegant either: They are distinct reflections of my

look captivating with a strap across them. I saw a picture of myself in a pair of shoes with ankle straps once and vowed never to wear them again.



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My mom never made a big deal out of her beauty queen days. I think the whole experience was more significant to my grandmother than it was to her—the album with the photos and clippings didn't even reside in our house. My grandmother showed it to me every time we came to visit. When I first learned this piece of her past, it didn't add up: My mom is a feminist. She had a subscription to *Ms.* delivered to our home in rural New England, where we had moved because no one in New York would hire her to be a school administrator. My mom didn't even wear lipstick. "It was a

not rub some Vaseline on your teeth and pose in a swimsuit and heels if it meant that the tuition bills wouldn't be so scary?

I, on the other hand, would have paid for the privilege of having the impartial validation of a crown. **As a preteen, I started bringing home pamphlets and brochures for the pageant circuit.** My mother looked like I'd produced an armload of dead frogs from the mailbox. "What are those?" she asked me, repelled. They were for pageants, I told her excitedly, just like she'd done. There was scholarship money involved in there somewhere, but what I didn't know is that I'd have to get sponsors—just as she had—for entry fees, clothes, makeup. The idea of people believing that my looks were a good investment, followed by judges validating my worth, was like a balm to my frizzy-haired ego. I didn't grasp just how much money was involved; we weren't a household with funds lying around to pay for gowns and accompanists. There had been a time in the not-so-distant past when I'd been eligible for reduced-cost lunch. **My mom said I was welcome to do these pageants if I could pay for them myself. That dream withered quickly on the vine.**

As an adult, I wonder if that was my mom's way of short-circuiting all of it: The commoditizing of beauty, the judgment, the allocation of worth based on appearance—this had costs beyond what a child could conceive. And I had no way of paying them. Or maybe it was just that the car needed new brakes, children required shoes, and money was too tight to even try. **I abandoned my own pageant dreams, but not my hopes that someday I'd look like my mom.** Someday never seemed to come, though.

Lately, however, I'm wondering if it came when I wasn't looking. We recently took a cruise together and near the end of the trip, our waiter took a great family photo. My mom shared it on Facebook—and I noticed that many of her friends commented on how much I look like her. I still don't see it, but maybe that's me, thinking that the magical manifestation of cheekbones and trim calves were the only ways we might bear a resemblance.

It could be that there's a similarity around the eyes or the sharp Cupid's bow of our top lip. And there are certainly at least a hundred immeasurable ways —our determination, our resourcefulness, our focus—in which I am just like her. It might even be true that we are more alike than unlike, yet I seem unable to lose the perspective formed from years of idolizing her.

Maybe I will always look at my mother's pageant picture and wistfully think, *I wish I could be beautiful like my mom.* **Maybe we're not meant to overcome every insecurity we have in life.** Maybe there's a reason they stay

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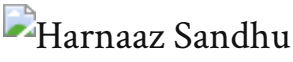
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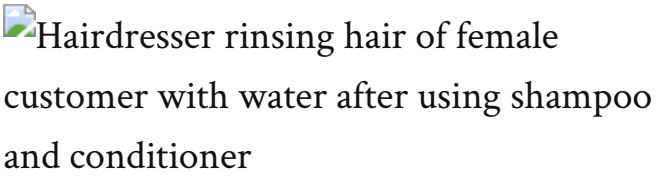
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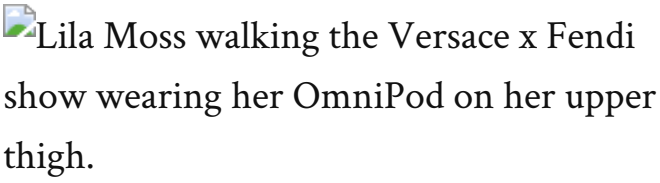
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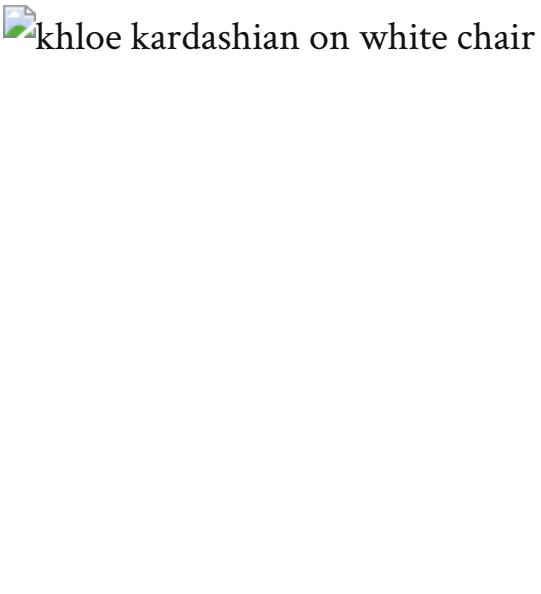

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