

by aimee lee ball



'd rather be




PRETTY



SMART

check one



here is, in my mother's house, a wall of photographs, in frames I once trimmed with seashells and cantaloupe seeds and in fancier sterling settings. The pictures they contain are all me, and I am pretty. I'm a newborn with

saucer eyes and a tangle of fat black curls. I'm a toddler with dimples and a natural blush. I'm a camper with a glaze of tan and straight teeth. There is a whole era in my life missing in these pictures, the era of braces and glasses and Clear-

asil, when I had unaccountably lost my looks and allowed no image of myself to be preserved. It was a time when people heaped lavish praise on my report cards, my spelling bees, my "Moonlight Sonata," and it didn't matter. I wanted to be told I was pretty.

You know if you're smart, but pretty is the perception of others, and it is a tradable commodity, as useful as a second currency, marketed for a date to the prom, or early delivery of dry cleaning, or extra-lean corned beef at the deli. Pretty is an exclusive club, a free ride—you can

go damn far on looks alone. I have been pretty four, maybe five, times in my adult life, so I know. The last time was when I was sent to interview an actor who was, when I phoned, "just-too-busy-but-thanks-for-asking." We happened to eat at the same restaurant one night, I introduced myself briefly, and the next morning his agent called to say, "You've got two hours this afternoon. I hear you're attractive." See how valuable four years of journalism school were?

On the other hand. . . . Smart is also a kind of wealth, an even more valuable

commodity. Pretty women may walk the street with applause, but smart women own the block. Smart may save you hide, whereas pretty will simply leave a good-looking corpse. Smart has to do with talent and application, while pretty has to do with weather and transportation. (The fate of naturally curly hair is a direct function of how humid it is and how far you have to walk to get a cab.) As one woman put it, "I can do pretty if"—and there are a lot of ifs—"I've had eight hours of sleep, if it's not the end of the day or the end of the week, if I don't get lipstick on my teeth. . . ." Pretty is transient and must be acknowledged. We don't say to a friend, "Gee, you're smart today," the way we say, "You look great." You go home, you take off your makeup, you're left with nothing but a Midnight Blue Kleenex, and you may or may not be able to duplicate your good looks the next day. But smart accrues.

"If a girl isn't pretty
Like a Miss Atlantic City
All she gets from life is pity
and a pat"*

It is no good being just pretty or just smart or just anything. I know a woman who depends on her pretty as a bird depends on flight—she has no investment in work or energy or wits. And, yes, her looks have provided her with a great many free rides. But they've all taken her to Queens. She isn't smart enough to realize that the ride is a limousine, so she always gets in the front seat and ends up with the chauffeur. The world is a dangerous place if you're not smart.

On the other hand. . . . There are the women who depend utterly on their smarts and take no pleasure in their physical selves, the ones who abdicate from pretty, like deciding not to cook. They wash their hair, they wear clean clothes, but God forbid a hint of blush should touch their cheeks. They use Vaseline instead of lipgloss, they carry a small black comb from the five-and-ten, they use eyedrops to get the red out. But there is no possibility of enhancement, no nudging of Mother Nature, no reason to take notice. Occasionally, there is a chink in the armor: One au naturel woman I know has long, lacquered nails, polished like semiprecious stones—the hands of a geisha. Another, glimpsed in a communal try-on room at a store, had mouse-brown hair, a scrubbed-clean face—and a spectacular red push-up bra. These are

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small petulances, little acts of defiance.

For anyone who cares, either reasonably or too much, about pretty, it's embarrassing to be with women who don't. Instead of the blusher fading gracefully into your complexion, it is sending out neon flares. You feel . . . overcatered. It's a relief to be with like-minded souls. When my friend Martha was on TV to promote a book, I called to say, "Forget eloquent. Forget gracious or charming or bright. What you mostly were was thin and gorgeous." Her relief was palpable. "Thank goodness," she said, "somebody knows what's important."

But Martha is a perfect example of a woman's craziness over entitlement to pretty or smart—pick one. "I've been pretty and I've been smart, and I know my place," she says. She makes limited peripheral forays into the world of pretty, she flashes a little tooth or thigh, and then she retreats. She's smart enough to realize when she's having an especially good day and her hair is shiny and all's right with the world. But it is a temporary custody, whereas she's never in danger of losing her smarts. Whatever you feel delicate about can be snatched from you at any moment.

It's very high school to know your place, to think in terms of cheerleaders and National Merit finalists, but it is a carry-over from childhood indelibly etched on our brains. Often, in our families, we are given an arbitrary assignment that, like birth order, is a subtle refractor of how we see ourselves and how the world sees us. I know two sisters who accepted, as if by divine decree, which was "the smart one" and which "the pretty one." Each had a specialty, and there was no intruding on the other's turf. Their eventual working out of identity is surprising only in that it happened without benefit of psychiatric couch (fortunately, as pioneering psychoanalyst Karen Horney put it, life itself remains a very effective therapist). Eventually, the dumb one earned six figures a year, the plain one collected six engagement rings, and the divisions began to blur. Now they know: "She's as smart as I am; I'm as pretty as she." It was no small feat.

"Mother always said I'd be very attractive when I grew up . . . 'Different,' she said, 'with a special something And a very, very personal flair.' And though I was eight or nine . . . I hated her!"*

*"At The Ballet" from *A Chorus Line* by Marvin Hamlisch and Edward Kleban, used by permission of Wren Music Co. and American Compass Music Corp.

Parents start working their mysteries or wreaking their havoc on ego and self-esteem from the moment they react to the bald and prune-faced bundle they're presented with in the delivery room. They give us their bushy hair and their brown eyes and their bowed legs, and then they sit in judgment. Their own parents did it to them, and you'd think they would learn, but they don't. They let us think it's important to stretch the mind, but they complain only when our hair is tangled or our posture is stooped. (Actually, fathers do say it's okay to be smart, but mothers make more noise.) Fathers provide the earliest barometer of just whom we're trying to be pretty or smart for—namely, the other sex—and they can tease, praise, ignore or scowl us into a critical mass of doubt or ease. They call us Princess, Poochie, Freckle-Face, Legs. They buy us flowers, they stop asking us to shoot baskets, they go crazy when we fall in gym and come home with a chipped tooth.

But mothers do what no one else does. They do it unconsciously and unwittingly. They do it with nagging and words of approval, with advice and consent and extra allowance for nail polish. Sometimes their efforts boomerang: My friend Joyce was up for an on-camera job on a local newscast. Her mother advised: "You'll have to go to a lighter shade of blonde, get contact lenses, lose ten pounds and do something about those eyebrows." My mother, on the completely other hand, can't understand why Jane Pauley is on TV every morning and I'm not. But Joyce has a survivor's instinct to dismiss most of her mother's impossibly inaccessible standards, while I still move in and out of the possibilities of pretty. Am I a rose? Am I a thorn? Am I the compost heap? Ask me tomorrow.

I have to tell a story that is truly terrible but does illustrate the persuasive power of a mother who believes that pretty counts—a lot. Sara's life was a disaster. Her life was so bad, it didn't even qualify as crummy. She was laid off from work, and while out job hunting she beeped home to her answering machine to hear that her boyfriend had been hit by a car, whereupon she collapsed and broke a wrist in the fall. Her mother arrived on the scene to try to hold things together, and as she stood with Sara in the hospital corridor, she spoke thus: "I know things are very bad. I know you've been through a shock. But I want to tell you things could be worse. At (continued on page 290)

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least you have a good haircut."

"And you know what?" said Sara. "She was right. A bad haircut is a tangible experience, and it causes a kind of grief that, though puny, you don't need on top of a true crisis." Besides, if you're pretty and find yourself in the middle of a disaster, you can quietly lie down like Blanche DuBois and let other people come and do and bring and cope.

On the other hand. . . . If you're smart and you're in the hospital corridor, you interview the anesthesiologist; you make sure they set your boyfriend's right leg, not his perfectly good left leg; you call the papers to rally public opinion against the rising cost of hospitalization; and you sell the rights for an ABC Movie of the Week. Works out nicely.

"Emily: Mama . . . am I pretty?"

Mrs. Webb: . . . You're pretty enough for all normal purposes."

Our Town by Thornton Wilder

The criteria for pretty are remarkably flexible (although there are certain minimal standards: If you are safe on the streets, you are not pretty enough). For Jeannie, pretty simply means that people stop and ask who cuts her hair. It is a significant litmus test: It places the responsibility out of the realm of family genes and into the hands of a qualified professional, and it allows for the possibility of a tragic flaw—a periodic pimple, a too generous mouth. My friend Rachel has felt just slightly off-center of pretty all her life, although—perhaps because—she was once elected Alternate to the Alternate for the Queen's Court of New Haven High. If she'd been runner-up, she could have basked in the glow of pretty, contemplating the death of her only rival, the Beauty. But, as Alternate to the Alternate, what stood in her way to the throne was nothing short of mass murder.

On the other hand. . . . Smart is a narrow field. And we're not talking $E=MC^2$. There are not a whole lot of us out there—we know who we are, hmm?—who can get through the day without breaking a toe, getting ripped off, forgetting our boyfriend's name, insulting our mother or throwing up at an inappropriate time. The world is mostly slow and stupid, except in a few places like Silicon Valley, and I'll bet they don't know how to make popcorn from scratch there, or all the verses to "If the Man in the Moon Were a Lady," so how smart are they?

You wear your smarts on your sleeve. You can camouflage thin hair, you can get a manicure, but no amount of makeover will conceal a pea brain. "Being smart," says a woman I know, "puts me in control. I can negotiate, back down, cajole, woo. I can put up my dukes and fight when I have to. I judge character. I

sidestep doggy ka-ka on the sidewalks. I ask for a raise. I get along." I feel the same way.

On the other hand. . . . If I'm so smart, how come I don't know if I'm pretty?

Men don't ask these dumb questions. I don't know any man who doesn't think he's brilliant and adorable. Can you imagine an article in a men's magazine called "Am I Smart or Handsome?" This is Sophie's choice. There are certain disgraces in a man's appearance, certain unacceptable aberrations that would frighten small children, but mostly men are kinder to themselves, and the world is kinder in return. Dustin Hoffman is short and has a large nose, and he has spent his life seeing how much he can get away with in spite of those failings. He has gotten away with a lot. A woman who looked like that would have had to become a nun.

On the other hand. . . . I don't think I want to be beautiful. Pretty is a huge reward for no very great output, while beautiful is its own affliction. Beautiful implies a complexity—it's opaque, people can't see through it to anything else. And it must be hard to be both beautiful and brainy, like, say, Candice Bergen, to walk into a classroom or boardroom or bedroom and have people responding only to the looks. It must be equally hard the first time those looks fail to work their magic, don't save the day. On a recent talk show, Bergen spoke about flunking out of the University of Pennsylvania, knowing that for the first time in her life, she would reap no special privilege for her blonde mane and splendid profile. No one would call the dean and say, "But have you seen her?"

I don't put out for pretty anymore. I used to iron my hair. I have the sort of hair that people now pay cash money for, but growing up curly I only wanted hair like Cher. I used to lay my head down on the ironing board between double thicknesses of Turkish towel, and my best friend would press me flat. I do not iron my hair anymore. At the age of about 27, you develop something in your soul that says "What???" and you decide: Pretty should not involve the use of heavy machinery. I'll fake it.

I do not iron, but I still schlepp. Unless you are a natural pretty (a rare breed, hardly worth mentioning), you carry the burden of your own good looks around with you. It's a decision, and it's inconvenient, and it makes for a heavy shoulder bag—three different hairbrushes, under-eye concealer, eyelash curlers and an old toothbrush to separate gloppy mascara. My friend Sharon carries an old Windex bottle (filled with water to spray her hair). My friend Sandy carries—so help me—a little pot of Crisco, which she says is a good conditioner, but difficult to transport in two-pound cans. I would sooner tell the intimate details of my sex life or the bot-

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boss wants you to do is inappropriate," Kofodimos comments. "If you think your boss is not using you to your full resources, then a constructive, assertive response is definitely called for." However, a flat statement like "This isn't in my job description" won't win you much sympathy. Instead, try emphasizing something positive. Say, for instance, "I'm glad you trust me to buy a birthday gift for your wife, but couldn't you make better use of my time by putting me to work on that new project?" Or, if the boss insists on asking you to fetch coffee every time he meets with clients, say: "I understand that it's important to be hospitable to our clients, but I'm worried they'll consider me an errand girl only, when I would like to work with them more closely. What if we prepared the coffee beforehand and let everyone serve himself?"

Keep in mind, too, that before you begin a job, it's always best to make sure you and your boss understand what tasks he considers it reasonable to request. Then no one's manners, or bad temper, will be called into question later on.

The Door: An Open or Shut Case?

Q: I was just promoted at the advertising agency where I work—and one of the perks is my own office. It's going to be great to have a door I can shut on all the craziness here! But are there any rules about when to close or not to close?

A: Before you barricade yourself in your office, think about what closed doors (continued on page 292)

tom line on my savings account than reveal the contents of my pocketbook.

I walk the street and do mental makeovers on the women I see. Kill the purple eye shadow, honey, I think to myself, or That hairdo went out when Farrah went off the air. God knows, I don't want another pretty person out there to compete with, but there is, I think, a basic female instinct to spiff up. And, truth be told, there is in me the soul of a cheerleader. I am a feminist and a self-supporting college graduate, and I want to be a blonde bimbo. I know that good looks are temporary—you can't study for them—and we try our teeny best. But if I have to walk into a cocktail party, I want to be pretty. If I have to stay there, I want to be smart. And when I leave, I want three people to ask me who cuts my hair. ●

In her next life, Aimee Lee Ball will have straight hair.

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