

Two kinds

By Amy Tan

Amy Tan is an American writer whose works explore mother-daughter relationships and the Chinese-American experience. This vignette is an excerpt from her novel *The Joy Luck Club*. It recounts a young woman's memories of her difficult relationship with her mother.

PLEASE NOTE: The following text contains an offensive term. Please review the text and consider how to address this directly with your students.

Note: Although it is not mentioned in this story, it is clear in the novel *The Joy Luck Club* that the narrator's name is June.

My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous.

"Of course, you can be a **prodigy**, too," my mother told me when I was nine. "You can be best anything. What does Auntie Lindo know? Her daughter, she is only best tricky."

America was where all my mother's hopes lay. She had come here in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family home, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. There were so many ways for things to get better.

We didn't immediately pick the right kind of prodigy. At first my mother thought I could be a Chinese Shirley Temple. We'd watch Shirley's old movies on TV as though they were training films. My mother would poke my arm and say, "Ni kan — You watch." And I would see Shirley tapping her feet, or singing a sailor song, or pursing her lips into a very round O while saying "Oh, my goodness."

"Ni kan," said my mother as Shirley's eyes flooded with tears. "You already know how. Don't need talent for crying!"

Soon after my mother got this idea about Shirley Temple, she took me to a beauty training school in the Mission District and put me in the hands of a student who could barely hold the scissors without shaking. Instead of getting big fat curls, I emerged with an uneven mass of **crinkly** black fuzz. My mother dragged me off to the bathroom and tried to wet down my hair.

“You look like Negro Chinese,” she **lamented**, as if I had done this on purpose.

The instructor of the beauty training school had to lop off these soggy clumps to make my hair even again. “Peter Pan is very popular these days” the instructor **assured** my mother. I now had bad hair the length of a boy’s; with straight-across bangs that hung at a slant two inches above my eyebrows. I liked the haircut, and it made me actually look forward to my future **fame**.

In fact, in the beginning I was just as excited as my mother, maybe even more so. I pictured this prodigy part of me as many different images, trying each one on for size. I was a dainty ballerina girl standing by the curtain, waiting to hear the music that would send me floating on my tiptoes. I was like the Christ child lifted out of the straw manger, crying with holy indignity. I was Cinderella stepping from her pumpkin carriage with sparkly cartoon music filling the air.

In all of my imaginings I was filled with a sense that I would soon become perfect: My mother and father would **adore** me. I would be beyond **reproach**. I would never feel the need to sulk for anything.

But sometimes the prodigy in me became impatient. “If you don’t hurry up and get me out of here, I’m disappearing for good,” it warned. “And then you’ll always be nothing.”

(...)

It was not the only disappointment my mother felt in me. In the years that followed, I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn’t get straight As. I didn’t become class president. I didn’t get into Stanford. I dropped out of college.

For unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could be only me.

And for all those years we never talked about the disaster at the recital or my terrible **accusations** afterward at the piano bench. All that remained unchecked, like a **betrayal** that was now unspeakable. So I never found a way to ask her why she had hoped for something so large that failure was **inevitable**.

And even worse, I never asked her about what frightened me the most: Why had she given up hope?

For after our struggle at the piano, she never mentioned my playing again. The lessons stopped. The lid to the piano was closed shutting out the dust, my misery, and her dreams.

So she surprised me. A few years ago she offered me the piano, for my thirtieth birthday. I had not played in all those years. I saw the offer as a sign of forgiveness, a tremendous burden removed.

"Are you sure?" I asked shyly. "I mean, won't you and Dad miss it?"

"No, this your piano," she said firmly. "Always your piano. You only one can play."

"Well, I probably can't play anymore," I said. "It's been years."

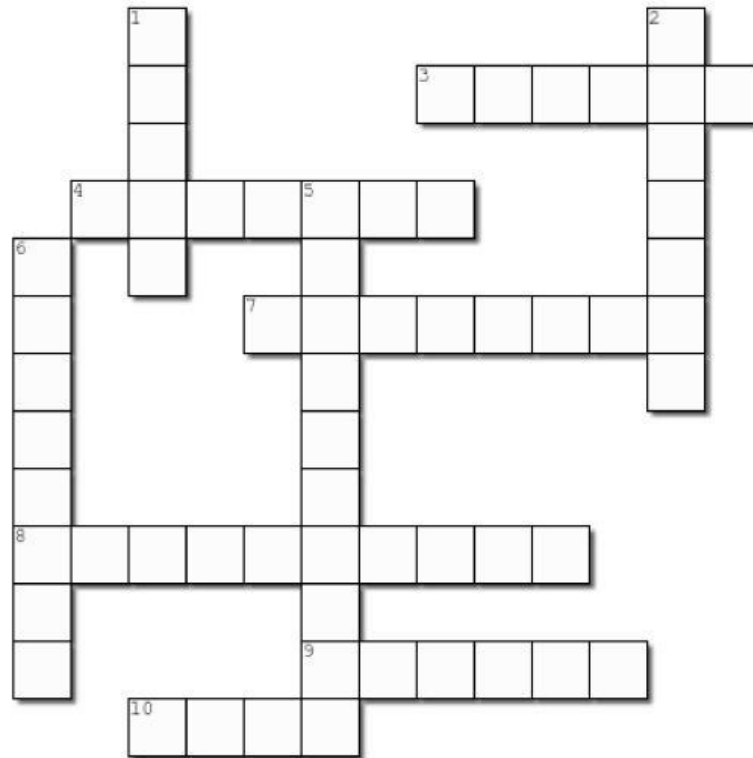
"You pick up fast," my mother said, as if she knew this was certain. "You have natural talent. You could been genius if you want to."

"No, I couldn't."

"You just not trying," my mother said. And she was neither angry nor sad. She said it as if announcing a fact that could never be disproved. "Take it," she said.

But I didn't at first. It was enough that she had offered it to me. And after that, every time I saw it in my parents' living room, standing in front of the bay window, it made me feel proud, as if it were a shiny trophy that I had won back.

After reading the story, find the words in **bold** and complete the crossword.



Created using the Crossword Maker on TheTeachersCorner.net

Across

- 3. to declare or affirm positively, often to dispel doubt or fear
- 4. is a person, especially a child or young person, endowed with exceptional abilities or qualities
- 7. is the act of violating the trust or confidence of another
- 8. is a formal charge of wrongdoing
- 9. to express sorrow, mourning, or regret deeply and audibly
- 10. is the state of being widely known and recognized by many people for notable achievements

Down

- 1. to love and respect deeply, to worship
- 2. means having many small creases, folds, or lines in it or on its surface
- 5. means certain to happen and unable to be avoided or prevented
- 6. is an expression of disapproval or disappointment

Choose the correct answers.

1. The narrator's mother was:
 - a. Pessimistic
 - b. Optimistic
 - c. Unrealistic
 - d. Eccentric
2. The narrator watched Shirley Temple's old movies because...
 - a. Her mother wanted the narrator to have the same hair style as Shirley Temple.
 - b. Her mother loved Shirley Temple's works.
 - c. Her mother thought Shirley Temple was the best actress.
 - d. Her mother thought the narrator could become a child prodigy.
3. Is each of the following sentences true or false?
 - a. My mother believed in the American dream. **True / False**
 - b. I was never excited about the American dream. **True / False**
 - c. I failed my mother's expectations more than once. **True / False**