

the  
**girl** with the  
butterfly  
tattoo

a girl's guide to claiming her power



Dannielle Miller

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# 1

## The Battle Within



A young English girl who called herself ‘Mememolly’ started a phenomenon on YouTube when she posted ‘something of an apologetic love letter’ to her body. She listed parts of her body – her feet, arms, ears, eyes – and talked about why she appreciated them. A flood of people responded by posting their own video responses, telling the world how they feel about their bodies.

Inspired by them, on the morning that I turned 38, I sat down and wrote my own letter of thanks to my body:

*Dear body,*

*I am really happy with the way we are growing old together.*

*Thanks, feet, for being so pretty. I love the way your nails look when they are painted. I haven't always treated you so well, though. I have stopped wearing killer heels quite so often, but hey, we both know the damage is done.*

*Thanks, legs. You are fabulous; you're so long and you rarely change shape, even when I eat loads of junky foods. You have made me feel glamorous on many occasions.*

*Belly – what can I say? You are a podgy, bloated little thing, aren't you? I have tried exercising you, sucking you in and constraining you in special 'Bridget Jones' style bloomers – but you just will not be denied.*

*Breasts – you will not be denied, either, but you are lovely. You make me feel so feminine. And you fed both my children; that was truly amazing. I will be forever grateful.*

*Arms. My special body parts. Lefty – you are a bit of a non-event really, aren't you? I don't write with you and you are quite nondescript. But righty – yes, you have tales to tell. I love your burn scars now. Really. I do. You make me strong, unique and show the world I am a girl*

*with a history of bravery. I am sorry that I hid you for so many years when I was young, but I just hadn't learnt how to deal with something so large. We both had to grow into the tight, twisted and melted flesh.*

*Face – you are just fine. Elegantly shaped eyebrows, a few wrinkles that show I have lived, laughed and worried.*

*Hair – I am sorry I bleach you. You do well to hang in there – but I do treat you to great shampoos and head rubs from my girlfriends.*

*Thanks, body, for getting me this far. You are so resilient and so strong. You rarely get sick and you can withstand great pain. You are an Amazon's body.*

*Happy Birthday. xxxx*

## **Scarred and scared**

When I was two years old, I was badly burnt. I received third-degree burns all down my right arm and neck. As is often the case with burn victims, I also suffered two major secondary infections, German measles and the potentially life-threatening golden staph.

My great-grandmother burnt me. She poured hot cooking oil down on me as I sat watching breakfast being prepared. As a small girl, I was always told this was an

accident, yet I questioned why no one ever spoke of this woman again, let alone saw her. *Why hadn't we forgiven her?* I wondered. After all, accidents do happen.

It was only when I was older that the truth emerged. Great Grandma had been unstable and had shown signs of violence towards my beloved grandmother when she was a small girl, too. Everyone felt instinctively that she had burnt me deliberately.

I don't remember whether it was done to me deliberately. Ultimately, as it cannot be undone, I have chosen not to focus on that question. It happened.

What do I remember? I remember my grandmother's face as she came through the doorway in response to my screams. I recall thinking I must be very badly hurt as she looked devastated.

I remember my doctor, too. As I was hospitalised for almost six months, he became a central figure in my life. He was kind, gentle and doting. I was his special girl. Heaven help any nurse who dared keep me waiting!

I remember gifts, in particular, books. Perhaps this was the start of my love affair with words. I loved being read to. I escaped pain and boredom through tales of princesses with power and adventures of other little girls who faced great dangers and emerged triumphant.

I soothed myself with words, too. I could not yet read, of course, but I would talk to myself when frightened, repeating over and over the mantra 'You'll be okay, you'll

be all right.' It was my secret spell and I would cast it to give me strength.

How fortunate that these are my memories: of being loved, spoilt, protected and strong.

For my family, other, darker memories remain as well. Memories of me writhing in pain as my dressings were changed, of being told that my arm would need to be amputated, of being advised that I would need yet another skin graft, of being told time and time again that I would not live.

But live I did. And I kept my arm. With its red, raised, twisted flesh, it looked different to the arms of my friends. There was a flap of skin near my elbow that was taut when my arm was stretched out and hung loose when my arm was bent. Yet as a small child these differences did not concern me – I was so much more than my body!

I was a busy, bossy little girl. I had a younger sister to organise, lollies to eat, Barbies to collect and, once school started, more books to devour. In childhood, my body was merely an instrument to carry me from one adventure to the next. When I wanted to join my friends at the beach, I just had Mum cut the toes out of one of my father's socks and popped that on to protect my arm from the sun. Problem solved!

## Hiding

Around the time I turned ten, things definitely changed. I started noticing boys. And I started noticing the girls the boys noticed. At school, the boys preferred the alpha girls: popular, pretty, often good at sport. I was a pretty enough girl and had a few close friends, but as I was more interested in reading than netball, I was definitely not alpha material. It wasn't just at school that I received messages about what defined beauty and sexual attractiveness. My Barbies, *Charlie's Angels*, ABBA – all of them taught me that to be a desired woman, I would need to be thin, beautiful and immaculately groomed. No scars allowed.

I entered adolescence and, like most girls, began a new internal conversation. I was no longer casting spells to heal myself. Instead, I was engaging in darker, self-destructive thoughts and telling myself that I was not enough. Not pretty enough, not thin enough, not popular enough. My feelings of inadequacy due to my scarring became quite overwhelming. I was still bright and ambitious but my main preoccupation was how best I could hide my scars from the world.

I hid. I hid my arm. I wore skivvies underneath my summer uniform, wore jumpers all year round. I avoided pools and beaches. My arm no longer seemed small; it seemed enormous. A huge, horrible, disfigured limb I would be forced to drag through what had been my oh-so-promising life.

Yes, teenage girls have always been good at drama.

I vividly recall my daydreams at age 15 about what my life would be like if I had not been burnt. I was tall and had very long legs, so I fancied that I could have been a bikini model if it had not been for my arm. For many girls it is not the actual job of being a model that appeals. It is the kudos, the knowledge that one's body has been declared special. Worthy of attention. 'If I looked that way, then they would love me . . .' Sound familiar?

At school, I hid my scars not only with the sleeves of my jumper but also by seeming self-assured. I knew that if I appeared vulnerable, I would be targeted. So I spent my free time joining in with other kids rating one another. I went to an all-girls school and at lunchtime it was as if the magazines we read, which told us what clothes were in and whether a celebrity was hot or not, had sprung to life. We may not have been able to control many elements of our lives, but we could definitely control one another through ridicule. The ratings we gave one another might not have been held up like scores in a talent show, but they were branded on our psyches.

The rules in girls' rating games were the same then as they are now. Be considered hot by others, in particular by boys, and you score points. Getting a highly desired boyfriend means an instant advance to the top of the club. I was lucky enough to land the school hottie from the boys' school next door and was elevated from

classroom nerd to the girl everyone wanted to know, almost overnight.

He dumped me a year later for a girl considered hotter. At 14, she was a fashion model appearing in women's magazines and parading in women's designer labels. My dream run at the top of the charts was over. I had all my deepest fears confirmed. The prettiest girl did win. In my mind, the break-up was all about me not being beautiful enough. It seemed all the more tragic because I had elevated him to godlike status for loving me despite my scars.

Looking back, I see how ridiculous all this was. I was funny, bright, passionately in love with him. He was not doing me any favours by being with me!

It seems strange to me now that at no stage did I stop and think that perhaps my relationship with this boy had broken down for reasons other than my appearance. Possibly it had been the pressure of us getting too serious too soon (the reason my boyfriend gave me at the time) or maybe we were just growing apart. He may have just been a jerk. And the truth is, while the new girl certainly was beautiful, she may have been so much more than just her looks, too.

## Healing

It was only when I became a teacher that I finally explored ways in which I might come to terms with my burns. If

I could not accept myself, how could I possibly ask my students to accept themselves?

I searched once again for soothing words, and found them in the writing of women such as Naomi Wolf, who wrote in *The Beauty Myth*: 'We don't need to change our bodies, we need to change the rules.' In women such as Sofia Loren: 'Nothing makes a woman more beautiful than the belief that she is beautiful.' And in the words of the young women I now taught: 'I love how you wear your scars, Miss, you don't let them wear you.' How amazing were my students?

Words healed me. And my self-talk once more became focused on my strengths rather than my perceived weaknesses. I *was* okay. It *would be* all right.

And everything was okay. And it was more than just all right. Life without self-doubt was magnificent. I loved and I was loved. As a confident 20-something, I shone.

I have a picture of me taken back then, when I went to the Amazon, in South America, for my honeymoon. It captures the authentic me. I look strong, fit. I am wearing a singlet top and grinning from ear to ear. I had been trekking in the jungle with my new husband and we had stumbled upon a village.

When the local children saw my burn scars they ran and hid from me. Our guide explained that they feared I would die soon, as they were not used to seeing large scars. In the Amazon, as there is no running water or

electricity, if you get a major injury you will most likely die from infection. I assured our guide that he should tell the children I was fine. And one by one, they came across and touched my arm, played with my hair and started telling me in the local language that I was a strong, brave girl. A warrior girl.

Yes. I am an Amazon warrior. I am more than my body. It is such a small part of the entire Dannielle Miller story that it has again been relegated to a co-starring role. I have managed to move from hating my body to not just accepting it but loving it, scars and all. I don't think it is perfect, but I am okay with that. This is me.

Sometimes I choose to indulge in the trappings of conventional beauty, such as heels and hair dye. I do so knowing that these things may be fun, and they may make me feel pampered or be just what my outfit calls for on a special occasion, but they do not make me worth more or ensure I will be loved. I feel equally as valuable when I'm at home wearing my ugg boots and track pants, with my hair pulled back in an un-brushed mop.

And though I may get occasionally frustrated with my tummy, I cannot bring myself to hate it for a moment. It is part of me. My body is like a dear friend: not perfect, yet lovable and comforting, quirks and all. Despite what advertisers say, diets, surgery and cosmetics do not have some mystical power that will bring us eternal happiness. I know this.

How liberating! And, unfortunately, how rare. Many girls will not grow to be women who love their bodies. They will believe that if they just had the right-shaped breasts, or a flatter tummy, or a smaller nose, their life would be complete. They will bare scars of their own for many years – it's just that their scars may not be quite as obvious as mine.



## **At war with our own bodies**

Many girls are enslaved to their bodies. Their supposed imperfections – be they scars, weight or bust size – take on monstrous proportions. This deprives them of finding that Amazon power within. Statistics tell the story bluntly: 94 per cent of teenage girls wish, some of the time, that they were more beautiful. A quarter of teenage girls want to change everything physically about themselves.

The problem with statistics is that it is easy for us to be emotionally detached and for the numbers to become somewhat meaningless. But each number is a real girl. A girl who wakes up hungry and chooses to stay that way all day. A girl who is deeply sad. A girl who feels that she is unloved and unlovable. A girl who limps through her days hiding, through actual physical withdrawal, or by assuming an 'I am sooo fine' facade, or by ridiculing others to deflect attention away from herself. Living with a sense of

inadequacy hurts. Occasionally this girl will take the ache from within her own chest and throw it at other girls, allowing herself just that little bit of breathing space. This girl might tease and belittle others, hoping that then no one will notice her own perceived flaws.

I have cried for, and with, many of the girls I have worked with, as they shared with me the pain of being at war with their own bodies.

*I have struggled since I was six with weight and body image . . . I haven't eaten for a week in an attempt to be beautiful.*

*Katia, 15*

*My whole life, I have been called just 'that fat kid'.*

*Lucy, 14*

*I think I am not as pretty as other girls. I hate the way I look, as it means I can't make friends.*

*Samantha, 12*

*I don't like to look in mirrors or get my photo taken, 'cause I am not beautiful. None of the girls I see in magazines look like me, because my skin is really dark. I wish I could make it whiter.*

*Stephanie, 13*

Often, I do not cry out of sadness. My workshops are incredibly joyful. I cry tears of joy and gratitude, too. I try to help heal and soothe and show girls that there is another way.

You *can* silence your inner critic and begin a new conversation within, a conversation that is affirming rather than destroying.



## **The war waged on our bodies**

If you are at war with your own body, you are far from alone. Many girls and women are sucked into the same body-hating vortex. Even us ‘big girls’ (your mother, teachers, aunts) tell you that you are beautiful the way you are, while we angst over our weight and wrinkles. Have you noticed that happening? It is not only hypocritical of us, it is sad, isn’t it? Self-doubt is exhausting.

We all – girls and women – have to make this right. We have to move beyond this. If you already have, well done. If you are dealing with body issues, then let’s attempt to shift things.

In my workshops, I ask girls to look at the source of their feelings of inadequacy about their bodies. Girls may have their own individual reasons for feeling uncomfortable with their appearance, such as experiences they had

in the past. Body image is also shaped by social, political, racial, age and gender factors.

But there is something all girls and women share: we are at war with our bodies because there is a war being *waged on* our bodies. We are surrounded by words and images dictating what beauty is. The television shows we watch, the websites we browse, the music and radio stations we listen to, the newspapers and magazines we read – all of them bombard us with messages about what makes girls and women beautiful, desirable and worthy. Almost none of these messages offer a healing or empowering idea of feminine beauty.

Advertising is perhaps the worst offender. The average person sees around 75 ads every day. We see them on television, in newspapers and magazines, on the sides of buses, on our streets, when we are surfing the net and on the backs of toilet doors. One in every 11 commercials has a *direct* message about beauty, while countless others carry *indirect* messages about what makes girls and women beautiful. An overwhelming number of times each day, we are told what we should look like.

And the definition of beauty presented to us has become very narrow. It is now one colour, one shape, one size. The standards are impossible to obtain.

*For a long time I have really hated the way I look. Some mornings before school when I look in*

*the mirror I feel like crying as I am so ashamed of the fact I have so many freckles. My mum tells me they are cute but I know they mustn't be as I never see anyone else in magazines or on TV with freckles. Lindsay Lohan had them when she was small but they are gone now. I wonder how she did that? I would do anything to get rid of mine.*

*Maddie, 14*

*I know the size that appears on the labels on my clothes is just a number but it feels like a score. And my size says 14. And that's an F for Fail.*

*Juane, 16*

The only reason we no longer see those gorgeous freckles Lindsay Lohan had in her first film, *The Parent Trap*, is that the actress and the people who have airbrushed her photos have gone to a lot of effort and expense to get rid of them. And the idea that size 14 is not good enough is a myth – actually, the average Australian woman is a size 16!

## **Slaves to fashion?**

Most fashion models have an ultra-thin waif-like look. But did you know that during the last three decades,

fashion and advertising models have grown steadily thinner, yet the average weight of women under 30 years of age has actually risen?

*Australia's Next Top Model* (ANTM) provides an insight into what goes on behind the scenes in the modelling world and the fashion industry, and it seems we are very curious. ANTM rates well. Really well. In fact, the premiere of series 5 entered the record books and became the most watched show on pay TV. Many of the viewers are teen girls and many of the contestants are teen girls. In 2010, of the 16 contestants, only two are out of their teens and the average age was just 17.

What type of messages about beauty does the *Next Top Model* brand pass on to us?

I will never forget an episode of the American version of the show in which the contestants had to pose as victims of violent crimes for a fashion shoot. They were depicted shot, bashed, pushed down stairs. The images were graphic and deeply disturbing. But apparently, violence against women is so hot right now. The judges made remarks like: 'What's great about this is that you can also look beautiful in death' and 'Death becomes you, young lady.'

Even more disturbingly, the 'victims' were all meant to have been killed by other models. It was so over the top that it would have been laughable if it wasn't so creepy: 'Diana poses – organs stolen by a model.' What was the

other model meant to have done with the stolen kidneys? Sold them for a Prada handbag?

The modelling industry is infamous for cattiness and the Australian series has seen some awful bullying. A few years back, the judges reprimanded contestants who had bullied Alameda Rowan, though they stopped short of punishing them. The main bully, Demelza Reveley, ended up winning the series and going on to receive lucrative modelling contracts – there, that showed her, didn't it?

The judges have sometimes been less-than-ideal role models, many of them doling out harsh criticism and calling contestants things like 'wild pig'.

In 2009 there was a revolution of sorts at *ANTM*, when a 'plus-sized model', Tahnee Atkinson, won. She was a size 10. I say this was a 'revolution of sorts' as the average Australian woman is a size 16. It was hardly an earth-shattering move, was it? And even then, 'in the fickle and unfair world of modelling it probably won't equal a long-term fashion career. As casting agents politely explained in the show, she just doesn't have the matchstick-thin figure required by most top designers,' wrote Georgia Waters of the *Brisbane Times*.

There has been so much general concern over poor body image among young people that the minister for youth in 2009, Kate Ellis, put together a Body Image Advisory group, which was chaired by Mia Freedman, who used to be the editor of *Cosmopolitan*. It featured big names in

'mandatory' =  
compulsory; required

the fashion industry and media, such as the producer and host of *ANTM*, Sarah Murdoch, children's health and psychology experts and leaders of youth organisations.

The group set a Body Image Code of Conduct and asked the fashion industry to adopt it. One of the things they asked was for designers to offer a greater diversity of sizes. The next season, *ANTM* chose not to adopt that recommendation. In fact, one 16-year-old contestant wasn't allowed on the catwalk because she was 'too big'. She was a size 8. She says the experience left her feeling embarrassed and shamed into changing her eating habits. How crazy is that?

Mia Freedman became so fed up with the lack of change that she came out and publicly admitted that the advisory group got it wrong by not making the code mandatory so that the fashion industry would be forced to follow it. She wrote: 'Apart from a few notable exceptions (*Shop Til You Drop* consistently feature a diverse mix of "real women" of all shapes, sizes and nationalities on their shopping pages as well as a plus-sized monthly column-ist) NOTHING HAS CHANGED. The Body Image Code of Conduct has been given the fashionable middle finger by those it was aimed at.'

Good on her for speaking out. I wish the government would not only join her in saying they got it wrong, too, but

would start to act, because you know what? The definition of beauty hasn't always been this narrow.

'voluptuous' = sensual  
and curvy

Various shapes and sizes have been considered ideal throughout history. In the seventeenth century, the time that Rubens was painting his masterpieces, fuller-figured women were highly desirable as their curves were an indication of wealth. Only poor working women were thin, so thinness was associated with being lower class. In the 1950s, the voluptuous actress Marilyn Monroe was considered the ultimate sex goddess (although even she was not happy and lived with constant self-doubt). She dated presidents, sports stars and gangsters, was adored and imitated but today would probably be told by movie executives to lose weight.

## Diet crazy

Fast forward and what do Hollywood celebrities look like now? I found a T-shirt online with a saying that I think sums it up perfectly. It was by designer Patricia Field and it was called the Trash and Luxury Celebrity Diet shirt: 'Another amazing celeb inspired tee. The celebrity diet, and our diet. Complete with a balanced cigarette, and some pills . . . any pills.' No doubt it was meant as a joke – but it actually does represent the current celebrity stick-thin female ideal, don't you think?

Hollywood stars are literally banking on their looks, but they aren't the only ones who are obsessed with the body beautiful. Many of us have dieting down to an art form, too, substituting cigarettes, pills and weird diet supplements for real food. Some purge through vomiting or using laxatives, or have surgery.

Our relationship with food, which surely should be so simple, seems to have become incredibly complex. Health experts warn that we are in the midst of an obesity epidemic. Up to 54 per cent of the adult population may be overweight. Meanwhile, large numbers of us routinely go on diets: as many as 50 per cent of teenage girls say they have been on a diet.

Did you know that tragically, all this dieting and suffering does not even work? Within two years, 95 per cent of people who go on weight-loss diets, including commercial diets, regain all the weight they lost, plus more. No wonder the weight-loss industry is worth billions of dollars each year: once its slave, we are forever in its service.

Then there is the even darker side of weight loss: the eating disorders anorexia and bulimia. Many of us have self-doubt and days when we wish we were more attractive. For some, however, mental illness and a serious body–mind disconnect may arise. Although people of all ages and both sexes are affected by eating disorders, they are most common in adolescent girls and young women.

It is estimated that between 2 and 5 per cent of

teenage girls could be anorexic or bulimic. However, the true number is probably much higher because many cases of eating disorders, particularly bulimia, go undetected. Some recent studies have shown the real rate may be as high as 20 per cent – that's one in five – among students. At least one in five teen girls resort to extreme dieting measures, such as laxatives.

A Victorian study of kids aged 12 to 17 years showed 38 per cent of girls and 12 per cent of boys were intermediate to extreme dieters – that is, they were at risk of an eating disorder. A Sydney study of children aged 11 to 15 reported that 16 per cent of the girls and 7 per cent of the boys had already used at least one potentially dangerous method of weight reduction, including starvation, vomiting and laxative abuse.

It has become accepted that we should all be dissatisfied with our bodies and should all be striving to become thinner, more toned, a more 'perfect' shape. As Courtney Martin says in her book *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*, 'We can be well educated, creative, capable, experienced, and still not have the capacity to figure out how to free ourselves from guilt over every little thing we put in our mouths.'

The new normality of hating one's body is evident everywhere. It certainly rates well on TV. The advertisements for the Australian version of the ultimate diet show, *The Biggest Loser*, have featured sad, lonely-looking

people – depicted in shades of grey – who want far more than just a healthy body, it seems to me. ‘I just want to be like every other girl,’ one contestant, Nicola, declared. Nicola did lose weight, dramatically. Yes, after much blood, sweat, tears and a good dose of public humiliation, she got her ‘reveal,’ a night when all the contestants paraded their new bodies to gasping audiences. I don’t know whether she got the acceptance and love she so obviously craved, but the irony was that Nicola already was like every other girl: she saw her body as the enemy.

That year, *The Biggest Loser’s* theme song was Beck’s ‘Everyone’s Gotta Learn Sometimes,’ which includes the lyrics ‘I need your lovin.’ Isn’t that what we all really crave – love? It’s just that some of us get lost and think we may find love in food and then get bewildered when society tells us we will find it only through our hunger. There is a known link between our emotions and what we eat, yet it seems to be largely ignored by all the hype that surrounds each diet fad or regime that seductively promises a new life through a new body.

Becoming skinny doesn’t guarantee us happiness or love.

*There is a huge amount of pressure on girls to be thin.*

*Anon., 15*

*The hardest thing about being a teenage girl is living with the media telling us continuously how to look.*

*Anon., 15*

## **Body battle on the sports field**

It seems obvious that we should all try to get regular exercise to stay fit and healthy, but so often advertising and the media focus on a less healthy motivation. Being a woman itself is portrayed as a competitive sport. Exercising is not so much about being fit as about trying to perfect our appearance. This, we are told, will make us more desirable, give us an advantage over other women and make them envious.

Skins, a range of sportswear for women, offered some ultra-destructive messages in one of their campaigns: 'Men will love you, women will hate you. Lucky you're not a lesbian. Skins delivers immediate results for the woman who wants to look and feel like a complete bitch.' Or how about: 'Get a body to die for. And watch women queue up to help with your funeral arrangements. Skins are perfect for the woman who loves the feel of claws sticking into her back.'

The emphasis on playing sport or exercising just as a means of obtaining the perfect body is ugly enough, but pitting woman against woman? Gross.

Also ugly was the Brooks Sports ad that promoted the company's support of breast cancer treatment. This is a great cause, but their promotion featured two female runners with their breasts bouncing and the caption 'Nice pair!'

Sportswomen already don't get the recognition they deserve. Did you know that horse racing receives more TV airtime in Australia than all women's sport combined? The last thing women need is for advertisers to trivialise us as just a pair of tits in sneakers!

Because the message of these ads is to exercise just to look hot, hot, hot, they feed the very real risk of girls overexercising as a means of controlling weight. Research clearly shows that overexercising and eating disorders go hand in hand.

These ads also alienate girls and women who may not be comfortable with ruthless competition, nor with being viewed as sex objects while exercising. It is not always easy to get motivated to exercise and messages such as these really don't help.

When the Australian Senate had an inquiry into female participation in sport, it concluded that female sportswear might be stopping some girls and women from exercising. They called for sportswear that is flattering, comfortable and practical.

If your sports uniforms are a cause of body anxiety for you, try speaking to your school to see if you can have

some input into designing them. Perhaps options could be provided to allow more personal choice, such as looser designs. (I know you might be thinking that your school won't listen, but if you put together a strong proposal and deliver it respectfully, they should at least hear you out – true?)

Girls and women urgently need more positive messages about being fit and healthy and participating in sport, such as this Adidas women's campaign: 'Play a sport where the rewards are respect, self-belief and inner strength. Play by your own rules. Play gym. Impossible is nothing.' Yes!

## **The camera always lies**

So much of the idea of beauty that we are trying to live up to is not even real. The trend towards digitally manipulating away supposed imperfections – including those features that make us unique and interesting – affects virtually every image we see in advertisements and many of the images we see of celebrities. Once the photographer's job was to capture what was beautiful and individual about a model or star. Today, their photographs are altered until they fit a socially accepted standard of flawless beauty.

But it is not just the glossy magazines and advertisers that crop, colour, erase and enhance their images.

Ordinary people want a bit of the action, too. There is a roaring trade in touching up photos for Facebook and other social networking sites, and in airbrushing school photos. Cheekbones are elongated; freckles are banished; braces are even removed. A Melbourne school made news when some of the female students found their school photos had been altered without their permission. How would you feel if your school photos came back and your hairstyle had been adjusted or your earrings covered over?

I know I have plenty of school photos of me in which I look awkward, yet I love them as they offer an insight into what I was like as a growing girl. In fact, I always start my work with girls in schools by sharing with them my Year 4 class photo. We all laugh at my tragic cut-with-a-bowl-on-top-of-my-head haircut and the skivvy I was wearing under my uniform to hide my arm. The photo was not perfect, but it was me!

How much longer until all the images we see of women will blur into the one uniform, unobtainable version of beauty?

We play the 'compare and despair' game, comparing images of women who seem perfect, but are not real, to our bodies, which are real. And for some, despair turns to a desire to cut and paste – not on a computer screen, but in real life.

## Plastic not so fantastic

Our differences, our imperfections and our physical scars make us unique. Yet the messages we receive through the media tell us that our differences set us apart for all the wrong reasons.

Celebrities are beginning to morph into one another. Many feature the same bee-stung lips, chiselled cheekbones, wide eyes and wrinkle-free brow. Just think of Madonna, Demi Moore, Liz Hurley. Women are no longer permitted to age and must remain forever taut and trim. Cosmetic surgery is being sold to women as just being 'refreshed' and 'rejuvenated'. And can it really be so bad when it seems that just about everyone is doing it?

Yes, it really can be. Take Heidi Montag, who was an ordinary teenager when she appeared in *The Hills*. She became famous simply as a result of being famous. And in her quest for even more fame, she had at least ten cosmetic procedures... *in one day*. That was in addition to a number of other times she had already gone under the knife. She had a chin reduction, a brow lift, buttock augmentation, her ears pinned back, two nose jobs, two breast enhancements and more. By 24, she was broke and wishing she never had the surgeries.

'Sometimes I wish I could go back to the original Heidi,' she said. For Heidi, fame brought with it enormous insecurity – and she believed that surgery could fix that. Once she was on TV, she had to hear strangers

'rejuvenation' = the process of being made youthful again

talking about her 'horse face' and big chin. When she appeared in *Playboy*, the magazine said her breasts were too small, and then digitally enhanced them.

After two boob jobs, she got the breasts that *Playboy* wanted – but she was miserable. 'If I could take it back, I would,' she said. When she was asked for her advice to other young women planning to have cosmetic surgery, she said, 'I would tell them not to do it. You risk your life when you go under the knife every time, so is that worth your life?'

Unfortunately, plenty of women do still seem to think it's worth it. I was asked to go on television and discuss the self-confessed British plastic surgery addict Sarah Burge, who gave her seven-year-old daughter a voucher for a breast enlargement for her birthday. Crazy much?

While it is easy to dismiss these women as wannabes, the fact remains that plastic surgery and other cosmetic procedures are being used by women in the mainstream as a means of seeking the attention and validation they crave. And it seems that it is no longer enough to have a facelift or a boob job, or to have some collagen injected in the lips. Vaginal 'rejuvenation' procedures are now popular, too. It seems everything female needs to be reshaped.

It is not that hard to understand why women might want faces and bodies that look more like the stars', but

why the desire for a designer vagina? Researcher Karen Roberts McNamara notes that ‘in years past, women rarely had the opportunity to see other women’s vaginas and thus had no sense of how a typical vagina might look. Yet with the mainstreaming of the adult entertainment industry, the situation has changed dramatically. Now, a beauty standard has emerged, one established primarily through porn actresses, nude models and strippers.’

She argues that women are going under the scalpel to have their vaginal openings tightened and their labias made smaller because they have been convinced this will ‘normalise’ them and give them confidence. The plastic surgery industry’s ‘sanitized ideal of the clean, delicate, discreet vaginal slit’ casts the bodies of women who have not undergone these procedures ‘as necessarily dirty and unsightly’.

Speaking of overly groomed vaginas (now there’s a phrase I bet you weren’t expecting to read when you started this book!) reminds me of one of the most astounding moments in talk-show history. It was when Jennifer Love Hewitt discussed on American TV that she had devoted an entire chapter of her book on relationships to decorating her hairless pubic mound with jewelled decals – a practice known as ‘vajazzling’ that is gaining in popularity here, too.

Hewitt told her host, ‘Women should vajazzle their vajayjays . . . It really helped me.’ She went on to say, ‘After

a break-up, a friend of mine Swarovski-crystalled my precious lady . . . and it shined like a disco ball.' It really 'empowered' her, she insisted (although apparently she was not quite empowered enough to use adult terms for her anatomy).

Forget the war on terrorism – if the amount of ads for decorating, shaving, waxing and electrolysis are anything to go by, it is the age of the war on women's vaginas.

Of course it's not just grown women who are being told they should doubt their own genitals. During recent formal seasons, beauticians have noted a huge increase in the number of young women wanting 'intimate' grooming treatments. Girls as young as 14 are asking for Brazilian waxes. A school in New Zealand for students from Year 1 to 13 ran a beauty salon's ad for Brazilian waxing in the school diary. Imagine pulling out your five-year-old sister's homework diary and an ad for Brazilian waxing jumping out at you!

With all the pressure to wax and vajazzle and 'rejuvenate', we seem to have lost sight of what 'normal' is. In an episode of the UK's *The Sex Education Show*, when teens of both sexes were shown images of women with pubic hair, they gasped in what seemed to be shock or disgust. The producers had set out to show that in reality 'we all come in all different shapes and sizes. From penises to pubes, bums to boobs whatever you've got it's all perfectly normal.'

I am taking up this call-to-arms by blogger Amanda Hess :

For now, the more extreme performances of femininity, like breast implantation, vaginal 'rejuvenation,' and Vajazzling aren't considered the norm for women. I'm not going to be met with shock when I remove my pants and reveal to my sex partner that I haven't converted my pubic mound into a shiny disco ball. But these days, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for him to be shocked that I'm not perfectly waxed. The body hair ship may have sailed, but vaginal modification is at a point right now where we are still in a position to fend off the tide. And my greatest fear is that someday, we will wake to find that our girls are being routinely Vajazzled upon puberty, and realize that we never stood up to say, 'This . . . is . . . *ridiculous*.'

It is important to realise we have the power to resist and change the harmful stereotypes presented to girls and women as the ideals for which we must strive.

We have the power to create our own new body-loving reality.

We have an obligation – to ourselves and to our friends – to end the madness.

You with me?



## Action plan

**Focus on more than just your looks.** When I tell my daughters they are beautiful, I make sure I praise at least two other qualities in them that I also admire, e.g. 'You are beautiful *and* smart, funny, kind-hearted, passionate, strong, brave, intelligent . . .'

Tell yourself this message, too. When you look at a picture of yourself, don't assess its Facebook worthiness based only on how hot you look in it. Ask yourself: 'Do I look happy?' or 'Was that a day I really showed how strong I can be?'

Australia's sex discrimination commissioner and the commissioner responsible for age discrimination, Elizabeth Broderick, told me she has long chats about body image with her daughter, who she believes is far more concerned with body image than she was as a girl. Elizabeth told me, 'I asked her once "Who loves Lucy the best?" She answered, "Mummy, Daddy." I corrected her: "No, Lucy must love Lucy the best."'

When I was at school, the ultimate girl-crime was to love yourself. The insults would fly: 'You so love yourself!' 'She thinks she's all that.' 'She is so up herself.' Isn't that bizarre? Seems we are threatened by a girl with inner-Amazon powers.

Break the mould. You don't need to think you are better than the other girls around you, rather that you are unique and have worth.

Tell your friends you love them because they are beautiful *and for reasons other than just their looks, too*. During our Enlighten workshops, girls write their friends positive affirmations. I cannot begin to tell you how much these notes mean to the girls who receive them. There is always at least one girl who is so happy that she cries! Don't you just love happy tears? I get emails like this one from Lillie all the time and they rock my soul:

*I loved you, you seriously changed my life forever i will remember you, ! you probably don't remember me as you have meet probably a million girls, and the day i saw you i cried, but i didn't want to because i thought the other girls would laugh at me but when we got on the bus to go back to school all the girls were telling me how pretty i was and how everyone loves me and a lot of other really nice comments, and it made me feel a million dollars. and now i am myself for ever and always not afraid of what people think, and if they like who i am, well i know they are liking the real me !!! thank you, I love Lillie. So thank you ! And when i got home i told my mum and yet i cried again and now i feel i can really tell my mum everything. xxxx*

*Lillie, 14 years*

**Choose your words carefully** when you talk about your appearance and the way other girls look, too. Don't put yourself down just to get validation. I want to scream when I go on Facebook and see a girl upload a really beautiful picture of herself that you just know she loves, and she writes a description like: 'Not sure if I like this shot, what do you guys think?' She is obviously desperate for external validation. Would it be so bad to just upload the pic and then add a smiley face perhaps? Or 'Am happy with this!'

I will admit most of my Facebook profile pictures are fairly glam (in my mind anyway!) as I am fortunate to have had a number of professional photo shoots done through my work in the media. Just to show I do not need to define myself by these glossy snapshots, I once uploaded a picture my son took of me having my teeth checked at the dentist. I look gruesome in this image – hello, does anyone look hot with their mouth wide open and dental instruments hanging out? I loved the fact that many of my friends then uploaded images of themselves looking real, too – after they'd applied a face mask, or with morning hair. It was really liberating! I started a Facebook page where girls and women could upload their kick-arse Amazon-confidence pictures. It's called 'Lovin' me – whether I'm looking feral or fab!'

Whether we are looking rocking or shocking, let's agree that the ultimate girl-crime should not be to love ourselves! Accept compliments graciously and give them

generously. And don't forget, all girls and women can be hypersensitive about references to their bodies and are excellent at picking up even subtle messages. Any snide remarks you make about another person's weight or appearance will be absorbed into the soul. No one wants to be a soul scarrer.

**Engage in healthy diet and exercise** rather than pushing yourself to lose weight. One of the most practical ways to boost your body image is to become involved in sports. Research both here and in the United States has found that women who participate in sports and physical activity have a more positive body image than those who don't. Participation in sports brings approval from peers, family and friends, and helps women feel that they are capable and competent. These positive feelings produce a positive body image.

Find a sport you enjoy. I was never a team player as I was not very physically coordinated (in other words, I was unco). But I discovered I love doing weights and running. Pop me on a treadmill with some cool tunes (hello, Paul Dempsey) and I can go at my own pace and I am happy. Find what feeds your body and soul.

**Watch for early warning signs** of a serious body-image crisis in yourself and your friends. Signs of an eating disorder may include any or a combination of the following:

dramatic weight loss, constant dieting, excessive exercising, social withdrawal, a fixation with food, a change in appetite (either refusing to eat or bingeing) and insomnia.

Some girls self-harm, cutting their bodies, especially arms or upper legs. Girls who self-harm may also burn or hit themselves. Warning signs include scars or frequent unexplained injuries. This is often a response to stress and anxiety about body image, academic expectations or destructive relationships.

If any of the above sounds like you, or you have a friend who is showing any of these warning signs, it should be brought to the attention of an adult you trust.

**Navigate the media.** Although I do not think the media are solely responsible for the objectification of women, I do think they play a key role. Pay attention to what you read, watch and listen to. Be a critical viewer of popular culture. Deconstruct media messages. Be an active viewer and reader, rather than passively absorbing media.

Ask yourself, 'Why are all the actresses on this show the same body shape and size?', 'How do I feel about my body after reading that magazine?' or 'Will it be easy for this contestant to maintain that body shape after they leave the program?'

**Start a Detox Diary.** Despite what the media tell us, our bodies are not toxic. We do not constantly need to detox

to purge and rid ourselves of poisons. Yet our minds may be in need of a cleanse. A Detox Diary is a record of healing and of your journey from hating to loving your own body. The following are just some of the things that can be included:

'cathartic' = bringing a feeling of renewal or release, through purging or cleansing

- images of women who inspire you
- notes and letters from friends that make you feel good about yourself
- affirmations such as 'I am happy with the way I look' or 'I accept my body the way it is'
- quotes that motivate you
- photographs of you looking and feeling happy.

Your diary should not focus on negative thoughts, fears and insecurities about your body. While writing such things down can be cathartic, I believe there is also a real risk that it encourages you to obsess on the negatives, revisiting them over and over and reopening old wounds. It is kind of like vomiting into a bag and keeping that vomit forever so that you can occasionally reopen it and have another sniff. Let. It. Go!

**Appreciate your body.** Women's bodies are amazing. I could not believe it when I first breastfed: how did my

breasts know how to create milk? My body instinctively held the secret to nourishing life. Instead of critiquing yourself, celebrate the parts of your body you are pleased with. Focus on the positive aspects and give them a new emphasis.

**See yourself as a whole person.** You are more than just your breasts, your butt, your thighs – just as I am so much more than my arm. When we see ourselves and other girls and women – including our friends, mothers and teachers – as just bodies, we forget that we are all actually *somebodies*.

I was once shocked by a conversation I had with a teacher after I had just spent an amazing day with her students, who had been captivated and loved every minute of it. This teacher had sat talking (loudly) to other members of staff the whole time. I thought she had not listened to a word.

I was only partially correct. That evening, as I was about to address the girls' parents, she said to me, 'I heard parts of your opening talk to the girls this morning. You were burnt? Doesn't matter. At least your face is still pretty.' What could I say to this? She had missed the point entirely: my real beauty has very little to do with any physical part of me.

Fortunately, it seemed her students had heard my message. Each of these girls had lined up to kiss and hug me at the end of the day. When they told me I was beautiful, I knew they had seen all of me.

See all of yourself and all of the women in your life.

**Seek out healthy role models.** In a world where trashy celebrities adorn most magazines, it can be challenging to find good female role models, but it is an important quest. Find girls and women who seem to be at peace with their bodies and watch, listen and learn. I am a huge believer that you become like the people you hang around – insecurity rubs off, yet so does confidence. I love it when teens I work with tell me about some of the celebrity role models they have sought out:

*Jessica Mauboy; she's just so chill, with a BIG self-esteem; she's so beautiful and has an amazing voice.*

*Stephanie, 16*

*Pink – she is a great singer and she doesn't care what other people think – she is just herself no matter what people say.*

*Emma, 13 (well, I'm turning 13 lol)*

*Kate Winslet – she is stunning and intelligent, and most importantly, she has spoken out against being Photoshopped in magazine shoots.*

*Claudia, 17*

My daughter Teyah and I have both been drawn to a fictional female role model, Wonder Woman. And we do not love her just for her star-spangled ensemble. Wonder

Woman is one very smart sister. When all the other superheroes lined up for their superpowers, they asked for things such as X-ray vision, the ability to sling webs or superhuman speed. Wonder Woman, an Amazon, asked for the 'lasso of truth.' Her gold rope surrounds the bad guys and forces them to speak words of truth to her. Words do have such power, the words we are surrounded by and those we use ourselves.

Claudia made a great point: actress Kate Winslet is one of the few Hollywood stars who tells it like it is. She once said in an interview:

I don't want the next generation, your daughters and mine, growing up thinking that you have to be thin to look beautiful in certain clothes. It's terrifying right now. It's out of control. It's beyond out of control . . . I feel an enormous responsibility to stay normal and true to myself and not conform and all those things. You know? To be healthy. And normal. And to like to eat cake.

May the truth set us free from the myth of the ideal woman. We all deserve to eat cake.



### Affirmations

I am more than my body; I am my heart, soul and mind.  
My body is strong, unique and beautiful.