

# Checks and Balances

“What’s Beautiful Now.”

This was an actual headline on a recent women’s magazine, and suffice it to say, I’m not surprised. I remember the first time I came face to face with the world of divine magazine scripture as a pre-teen chubby child with a desire to imitate my older cousin. She brought three YM magazines to my parents’ house one day, and that night I remember flipping through images of the newly discovered Kate Moss and, for one of the first times in my life, feeling inadequate as a female.

I paused and inhaled as I studied how thin the models’ legs were, how clear their skin looked, how shiny and full their hair was, and how not a single girl wore glasses like I did. All YM left me with was a new dedication to magazines as I committed to solving the mystery of the beautiful ones while developing a deteriorating body image and the realization that my legs would never be that thin. At least I was blonde - that was perhaps the only trait I shared with these celestial beings, and believe me, I noticed.

During my teenage years and into my twenties, I feared no one else felt the same way. My friends and classmates all appeared fit and thin, and I so disliked the curves I possessed instead. I began dieting determinedly my freshman year of high school and found that the number on the scale pleasingly dropped 15 lbs. I was thrilled as people talked to me more, boys asked me out, and I bought smaller jeans. Teachers even complimented me on how much I’d changed. Now, in retrospect, I see how detrimental those words were, however unintentionally so.

I had gone from 125 lbs. to 110. My senior year, I weighed 105. I told the girls at sleepovers that I had eaten a “huge” meal before I came over that night and was just stuffed. I picked at side dishes and moved food all around my plate to give the illusion I’d eaten more than I had. I also developed a general disgust for people’s newfound interest in me. It seemed so forged, and I missed the days when I could not only eat doughnuts at a sleepover, but also had the distinct pleasure of knowing that people liked me for me and not for my waist circumference.

Maybe that’s why, after years of reclaiming my health and mind from the trappings of those adolescent fears, the headline and subsequent article stood out so distastefully. “What’s Beautiful Now” read as a checklist... for everything I wasn’t.

According to the new monthly testament, beautiful meant tan skin and dark flowing hair, perhaps even an accent. Apparently blondes weren’t allowed in this club, not that I hadn’t already noticed this transition and observed the stunning beauty of my raven-haired counterparts. I’d even darkened my hair for a couple of years prior and practically bathed in ill-smelling self-tanners in order to replicate the trend I saw progressing. But I am not a brunette, nor am I anything darker than an alabaster foundation. I do have an accent, but it’s the southern “she’s probably not intelligent” one.

What’s wonderful is that all of that is okay.

While reading this subjective article, I didn't think about myself so much or immediately reach for a permanent at-home hair color. I instead thought of today's children, young women eager to be loved, and insecure girls picking themselves apart in front of mirrors; I only thought of womankind.

I believe that magazines can be useful things. They taught me all the tricks to putting on concealer while waiting desperately for my teenage acne to admit defeat to their recommended skincare products. They taught me how to combine floral and stripes under a blazer with the perfect coordinating shoes and handbag. They taught me how to face my inner demons of self-doubt and begin to trust myself again. They even taught me how to "smize," along with Tyra's lessons, of course. But magazines can no longer define for me what is beautiful. They taught me that, as well.

So to the young beauties out there: you with the fine hair or the big zit on your chin, the ones who don't understand why the boy you like just chose the mean girl, and the ones who just nourished an empty stomach... I encourage you to do your homework and read your magazines. But let them teach you the power of becoming your own voice in a sea of written opinions. Let them remind you that women are more than height and weight and air-brushing. Let them teach you how to love your skin tone and naturally hued strands. Let them make you stronger and wiser along your journey.

I find this a far better checklist for "what's beautiful now."