

101 THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU DIET

— BECAUSE —

LOOKING GREAT
ISN'T JUST ABOUT
LOSING WEIGHT



MIMI SPENCER

1



CHANGE YOUR MIND TO CHANGE YOUR SHAPE



BODY BRILLIANCE STARTS IN YOUR HEAD

First things first: Do not stop eating! Isn't that a relief? But you *do* need to start loving—not that pretty cupcake, not those great ankle boots with the stacked heel, not J. Lo's new bangs, but *yourself*. Your head needs to be in the right place from the outset. So get it out of the sand (or out of the fridge—or, now that I think of it, out of that celebrity tabloid) and look in the mirror. This is where your journey begins; a little love and a lot of honesty will be your guides on the road to glory. This chapter is about reassessing your relationship with the world. It's about seeing sense, gaining perspective, and understanding what works for you. Not the girl in the lemon yellow sweatpants, but *you*.

I DON'T READ DIET BOOKS*

It is a dispiriting fact that the greatest preoccupation of our age is with weight and its loss. As the world grows ever richer and rounder, we seem to grow ever more fascinated by the heft (or lack thereof) of our fellow men. Though, of course, we're far more interested in the women.

Think about how dieting and all its attendant nonsense have saturated our culture. How much time and effort it absorbs. We've trained ourselves to size people up in the blink of an eye. We're constantly aware of weight—its cruel lack or its licentious excess. We're hooked on A-list diets, quick-fix pills, self-help miracle cures, and the latest celebrity-endorsed regimes to issue from Los Angeles.

This, dear friends, is Diet Porn, a perverse phenomenon that undermines us all at a critical, visceral level. It gnaws away at our self-esteem as it sucks up vast tracts of time and energy that could be usefully expended elsewhere. While other eras basked in the Renaissance, the Golden Age, the Belle Epoque, we're lucky enough to have a TV schedule that boasts *America's Next Top Model*. Look, I'm not expecting us to spend our evenings ruminating upon the complexities of our being. But a little bit of thought beyond "Has she had a tummy tuck?" would make for a pleasant change.

The first thing you need to do, when building the platform upon which you will stand as you tackle the flabbiness that has crept into your life, is to Think Straight. You *have* to rid yourself of the dysfunction that marks our modern dance with diets. It's a ludicrous, exhausting gavotte, and it has to stop. You have to be in the right frame of mind. You have to sidestep the wild promises and wicked propaganda of an industry dedicated to keeping you in its grasp.

So stop staring at Gisele's butt and wondering how she does it, and start living. Stop measuring yourself against a warped societal norm, and start enjoying what you've got. Stop believing the barrage of misinformation

* *This, I hasten to add, is not a diet book. It is a "not-a-diet" book, designed to help you develop positive relationships—with your jeans, your butter dish, your waist, and your world.*

and what Susie Orbach calls “the fictions that dominate our culture.” Start reading something edifying, instead. Get your sustenance from poetry, from Plato, from dancing the tango in platform heels, a red rose clenched between your teeth. Just don’t get it from cake.

2 BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL

You are already gorgeous. You just don’t know it yet. To truly absorb this fundamental fact, you may well need to reset your Fat Goggles and recognize that carrying a few extra pounds is not a cardinal sin, no matter what the more pernicious quarters of the media would have you believe. Kerry Halliday, PhD, a London-based psychologist specializing in body-shape issues, says she regularly encounters women who are a perfectly normal, decent size, “and yet they’ve convinced themselves that a size 6 is fat! So many of the people I see are a healthy weight, but they have a fat head, full of fat thoughts. There’s this constant dialogue of guilt. It’s there when they go to sleep, it’s there when they wake up, it’s internal and introverted and isolating.”

Enough already! Embark on the new-you project from a position of *strength*. Loving yourself doesn’t make you a narcissist, it makes you a realist, armed and ready to resist the onslaught of our bizarre, thin-obsessed culture.

You do, however, need to be realistic about your expectations. I’ve known for years that I’ll never be a size 4, let alone a size 0. I know that Kate Moss can do hot pants and I can’t, that my thighs sometimes brush against one another like old friends, and that a miniskirt somehow makes me look maxi. There’s something very liberating about recognizing these small facts, accepting them, and then—whoosh!—letting them go, like so many shiny helium balloons. You’re suddenly free.

This doesn’t mean letting *yourself* go, though. This project is not about giving in and giving up, installing yourself in the shadows and waiting for oversize sweaters to come back in vogue. No. This is a plan of action, a quest for change, a manifesto to celebrate all that is great about being a woman.

So accept yourself, right now. Don’t live the dream, live the reality.

You're not Katie Holmes. You have a soft tummy. You wish you looked better in a bikini, but you accept that you don't. Watch those shiny balloons go, one by one. Pretty soon, you won't even know they were there. And remember all the while that the fat-cat dieting industry is founded upon the expectation of failure; you, my dear, should start with the bracing power of hope.

3 OPEN YOUR EYES AND RECOGNIZE YOUR WORTH

By and large—unless you have some karmic reason to believe otherwise—you only get one body. It may wax and wane, ebb and flow, but broadly speaking, you've been given those legs, that chest, those buttocks, this mortal coil—and you're not going to be issued another set upon request. Rather than poke your body in the eye with a fork, wouldn't it be better to love it, even just a little bit? But how can you love someone you don't really know?

Before you get started, you really need to understand exactly what shape you're in. Unless you turn on the lights right now, you'll never grasp the truth—so it's time to get a grip. Sneak a look; you won't bite. I'm not expecting you to conduct a microscopic investigation of every inch, but you do need to have a handle on how you really look, who you really are, and whether those wide-legged palazzo pants are really such a good idea.

So stop ignoring your reflection—in shop windows, in the mirror, in those brutal changing rooms where you catch a rare glimpse of your unfamiliar buttocks . . . because none of it is going anywhere unless you take notice. Look through vacation photos. Don't shy away from the truth—it's never as bad as you expect. (Though that bikini in Bermuda really *was* a shocker.)

Once you have had a proper gawk—yes, naked, with the lights on—you can start to weigh your options. I don't suggest you install vast mirrors on every available surface—the aim is not to make your home resemble a gentleman's club—but do administer a good dose of exceptional honesty. If you're the kind of person who likes to keep scrapbooks



SHIFT YOUR SHAPE, NOT YOUR WEIGHT

It's worth noting early on that you—yes, *you*—don't really want to lose weight at all. What you want to do is *change shape*. If you are round and bottom-heavy, you want to be leaner. If you are wide and wobbly, you want to be taut and toned. I know, I understand—because I do, too.

The issue, then, isn't how much you weigh, per se. It's not even your BMI rating. This score (mine happens to be 21.9) is necessarily abstract, a general theory that cannot hope to measure the particulars and peculiarities of the individual. The equation used to calculate a person's BMI is:

$$\text{Weight in pounds} / (\text{height in inches})^2 \times 703$$

Note that nothing in there accounts for body type, ethnicity, or composition—and as such this equation should be treated with informed caution. A perfectly fit, lean athlete can easily be classified as obese using this system. Need proof? According to his BMI, Brad Pitt is technically “overweight,” while Arnold Schwarzenegger and George Clooney are both “clinically obese.” Even Leila Ali clocks in as a heavyweight.

If you're seriously overweight, or just desperate to have a number stamped on your size, a BMI score may be of use to you. (Indeed, there is no real alternative that does the job any better.) But for a run-of-the-mill, slightly-on-the-chubby-side person, knowing your BMI is about as much use as knowing how to do quadratic equations. And when was the last time you had to solve one of those?

Far better to feel the real. Use your eyes. Use your pants. Use your unforgiving and not-entirely-kind mirror. We all know, for instance, that muscle weighs more than fat. We all know that fat located in certain areas is more troublesome to the eye than others. We all know that one woman's 150-pound hell is another's 150-pound paradise. Find your happy place.

and ticket stubs from amazing journeys, you might want to take “before” photos (it’s probably best to keep these to yourself, though) so that you can marvel at the “after” shots in a couple of months’ time.

Whatever you see, don’t be mirror-miserable. If you face the music and feel fat, don’t binge on shame and finger-pointing. You’re only on Step 3. We’ve barely begun! Instead of seeking out and dwelling upon the downers, look for, and emphasize, your positive points, remembering all the while that you’re never as fat as you feel. Your task—with the help of the next 98 steps—is to stop feeling fat and start feeling fabulous. Understand now (and recall often, as you read the next 10 chapters) that a gentle softness, a Rubens roundness, is feminine and beautiful and *absolutely* fine. It is infinitely more appealing than a desperate yearning for a flat stomach and toothpick thighs. (And if you find yourself doubting this for even a second, just ask a man.)

4 STOP WORSHIPPING *THIN* AND LOVE THE SKIN YOU’RE IN

It is hardly a revelation to note that as a society we are obsessed to the point of distraction by thinness—associating it, as a recent survey found, with “success.” By the tender age of 6 years old, most girls are dissatisfied with their bodies and want to be thinner, according to research published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*; almost half of those girls believe they need to go on a diet to lose weight. “Girls seemed particularly aware of teasing and likeability on the basis of weight and shape,” the report concludes.¹

The psychologist’s explanation of this body-bashing is that, in these egalitarian times, when there are few remaining hierarchies based on religion, background, money, or education, we tend to judge people in terms of their appearance. Image is currency. Consider this fact: Until the seventies, only overweight women dieted. Today, only overweight women don’t.

Of course, this book is all about putting an end to that. While there’s nothing sinister or odd about wanting to feel fit and healthy and look great in a pair of shorts, there is certain danger in persuading yourself

that all the troubles of your world could be eliminated if only you slimmed down. Life—fat, thin, or somewhere in between—will always have unpleasant surprises in store, whether you are 160 pounds or 115. Even at your fantasy weight, you'll still have to deal with your husband/teenagers/aggravating mother-in-law. There will still be bills and traffic jams and that annoying stain on the rug where you spilled red wine. You won't enter nirvana as you finally break into the 120s, so stop putting all of your hopes and dreams into one skinny little basket. Recognize that being thin is not the same as having a good body. Once you've gained perspective, you'll probably lose weight. Life's weird like that.

5 USE YOUR BRAIN, NOT YOUR FORK

Kooky as it sounds, you can “reprogram” your brain to eat well. Along with physiological demands, hormone surges, and social pressures, there is another influence at work on your appetite: Psychology.

A human mind is a lot like a human child. Tell it not to do something, deprive it of something (anything, really—*High School Musical* stickers, Spiderman lunch boxes, chocolate-covered macadamia nuts), and it will want that thing *more than any other little thing on the face of the earth*. It will obsess. Ever tried telling yourself “I must not have that cake”? Works about as well as telling yourself “I must not think of pink elephants,” right?

In a study by psychologists at the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom, dieting was actually found to *increase* cravings for “forbidden” foods, such as chocolate. In their experiment, researchers showed 85 women a series of images of enticing chocolate cakes and desserts drenched in fudge sauce—and they found that subjects showed significantly more desire for these than for other covetable objects displayed, such as perfume or a Mercedes-Benz. So far, so what? Well, among *dieting* women (those who had dieted in the last year or who were on a diet at the time), the responses were even stronger. They experienced heightened cravings and feelings of guilt. “Dieting appears to make a difference to how people perceive food, in this particular instance, chocolate,” the study concluded. “Instead of helping people to



FAT DAYS MAKE YOU HUMAN, NOT HUMUNGOUS

You know how it feels. You wake up all wrong. Your face stares bleakly out from the mirror, demanding to know why you even bothered emerging from the sack. Your wardrobe is a freakish obstacle course, a land of booby traps and trip wires, filled with oddly shaped jackets and cheek-sapping colors. That dress you looked *amazing* in last Friday? Nightmare. The sexy, sultry siren shoes? Slutty. The red V-neck sweater, the one that made you feel like Marilyn Monroe? More like Marilyn *oh no*.

There are those days when the very same clothes you wore yesterday (on the very same body, of course) can feel inordinately different—and that difference depends entirely on something as insubstantial and subjective as your mood. We all have days like these. No one is immune to bad hair days, bad skin days, big butt days, days that seem to be full of snagged stockings, broken nails, and dashed dreams. They arise because we're human.

More to the point, they arise because we're women.

They're the unfortunate consequence of hormones, emotions, perception, a chance comment, an off look. These unfathomables can't be put on a slide and studied under a microscope. They can't be analyzed, dissected, and diagrammed. But intangible or not, they can have a potent effect on your day and how you feel about it. Accept them. Don't fight them. Today will become tomorrow, and that dress that makes you look like a pumpkin today may turn you into a princess then, just because you've *changed your mind*. Even Hamlet knew that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." So don't read too much into your mood swings. Read Shakespeare, instead.

eat more healthily and to cut down on products which are bad for their health, the negative effect induced by dieting appears to have the opposite effect in that it can increase the desire for the actual foods they are trying to avoid. . . . If we constantly deprive the brain of the food we most desire we crave it even more.”²

Clearly, you need to nip that right in the bud—first by allowing yourself just a little of what you fancy, and then by moderating your behavior around foods that will make you fat. As it turns out, “think thin” is not such an empty phrase. According to another recent report, it *is* possible to think yourself thinner. The study involved 47 women who were each asked to spend one half-hour thinking after having consumed a large lunch (something I’ve always found delightfully easy to do, though falling asleep is a constant threat). Researchers found that encouraging the subjects to remember the details of their last meal made them one-third less likely to eat snacks.³

Suzanne Higgs, PhD, of the University of Birmingham, who led the research, submits that this could point to a stronger connection between memory and body weight than previously thought. According to Dr. Higgs, “How well people can remember could be a factor in explaining why some eat more than others. There are certain things that we do now which are rather distracting and could stop people recalling quite as well what they have eaten.”⁴

So pay attention. Watch what you eat, in a noninvasive, laid-back way—like a chilled-out parent keeping an unintrusive eye on their kid in a wading pool. Some people uncover the truth by writing a “food diary,” believing that detailing their intake limits it and helps avoid “unconscious eating.” You can try it; it doesn’t work for me. (I did once write a food log covering the period between breakfast and lunch, and I found the experience so tedious that I turned to shortbread for solace and to add texture to my day.) But it may work for you. The idea, really, is to be conscious of what you eat and to know where your foibles lay, waiting to trip you up at the first tummy rumble.

Even if you don’t buy the psychobabble, you can at least recognize

that your ego, superego, and id need to be pulling in the same direction: toward a healthy, balanced, confident new you. You'll do much better if you stop punishing yourself about your body and the space it occupies. Punishment will only lead to rebellion and a recidivist streak, hurling you senselessly back toward the open fridge. Be kind. Think good thoughts. (But don't add fudge sauce.)

6 LAUGH AT CELEBRITY MAGAZINES

Open any weekly celebrity tabloid and you'll come across the usual parade of unnaturally thin women, their brows set in grim determination to avoid lunch. Over the past decade, many of our contemporary heroines seem to have reduced like stock on a stove until there's nothing left of them but skin and bones. It is this look, this *lack*, that has become an aspiration and inspiration for a whole generation of girls.

We've always admired icons, of course. Jennifer Aniston herself remembers idolizing actresses as a child. "Their hair, their clothes, their makeup were perfect," she told the *Observer*. "Looking back, I realize it wasn't a good thing. I was wanting to become this unattainable person." The consequence, she later confessed, was an eating disorder that wrecked her health. "I started taking vitamins and exercising and went too far. You get into that Zone Diet thing and you kind of get addicted to that." Similarly, Sarah Michelle Gellar has said that being a celebrity means inhabiting another space, another dimension—and that for a civilian to attempt to join in the charade is hopeless. "Look," she told *Vanity Fair*. "It's crazy for people to try to be as thin as we are. We have personal trainers and personal chefs. It's our job to look this way."

Clearly, there's no point even attempting to keep up with the weightless A-list—though many mere mortals, seeing the absence of proper female flesh up there on the pedestal of fame, will try. I've known this truth for years, of course—ever since, well over a decade ago, I stumbled upon the art director of *Vogue* magazine using a scalpel to carve a few centimeters off Claudia Schiffer's ankles. It was, I hasten to add, a transparency he was working on, not Schiffer herself, which would have made

an awful mess of the parquet floor. But even so. I have always been pretty miffed that even Claudia—an original supermodel and all-around babe—wasn't deemed quite good enough for public consumption in her natural state.

In real life, of course, celebrities have to work their butts off (literally) to look even halfway gorgeous. If they ever stopped making an almighty effort, everything would fall apart, like a popsicle left out in the sun. I promise you, this is the truth. With all of the preening, pummeling, and primping that goes on, it's little wonder that most of them don't speak a second language, make their own jam, or play the piccolo. Keeping themselves thin simply takes up all of their time.

They do, however, have the time to follow zany diets based on spirulina (blue-green algae—sounds yummy, right?), bee pollen, and obscure Amazonian berries unavailable on the open market. It's all cayenne-pepper cordials and Myoplex protein shakes out there in the Hollywood Hills. Fridges are locked at night, and the key is sent home with the housekeeper. Trainers are on the doorstep at dawn, armed with grape seed extract and a 14-hour exercise schedule.

Sure, the bodies these women end up with are, very often, stupendous. But at what cost? Not long ago, an engaging picture turned up showing the chance meeting of Cameron Diaz and Victoria Beckham at the MTV Music Awards. Both had poured their golden-brown bodies into tiny little tubes that were, briefly, doing duty as dresses. At one end of the dress, the women were all naked necks and shoulder blades, taut faces, bronzed skin, and perky breasts. At the other end of operations, both wore painful-looking silver shoes, with heels and toes so pointy that that you had to wear safety goggles just to look at them. This, it struck me, is the modern uniform for celebrity dress-up. Perfect skin, muscular boobs, long limbs, wicked heels. And maintaining a body in such a streamlined state is clearly a full-time, staff-required, relentless job.

Such extreme maintenance has lately become the stock lifestyle in Hollywood and beyond, leaving folk like us languishing in the slow lane. Bombarded daily by these images of physical perfection, we've come to view these bionic women as normal. And so, while our glossy magazines



THE SIGH OF SIZE: HOW WE LOST OUR WAY

Twenty-five years ago, the average model weighed 8 percent less than the average American woman. (Yes, Twiggy was abnormally petite in her day.) Today's model weighs 23 percent less than the national average.

As long ago as 2000, the British Medical Association, in its report *Eating Disorders, Body Image, and the Media*, noted that the extreme thinness of celebrities was “both unachievable and biologically inappropriate,” observing that the gap between the media ideal and reality appeared to be making eating disorders worse. “At present, certain sections of the media provide images of extremely thin or underweight women in contexts which suggest that these weights are healthy or desirable,” it stated, recommending that normal women in the upper reaches of a healthy weight should be “more in evidence on television as role models for young women.” Television producers and those in advertising should review their employment of very thin women, and the agency responsible for regulating what is broadcast on TV should review its advertising policy, the report recommended. Almost a decade on, and the opposite has happened.

Every now and again, someone inside the industry will take up the fight. Emma Thompson, for example, is known to be on a crusade against the idiocy of thin that plagues her profession—and she intervened when Kate Winslet (on the set of *Sense and Sensibility*) and Haley Atwell (on *Brideshead Revisited*) were encouraged by producers to shrink a couple of sizes. But this rebellion is the exception, not the rule.

Maybe it's time to step back and think about what has historically defined beauty. Back in 1913, *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* defined the word thus: “properties pleasing to the eye, the ear, the intellect, the aesthetic faculty, or the moral sense.” Hmm. I'm not sure that a size 00 permanently hungry woman with a lock on her fridge door fits any of those criteria. Are you?

are populated almost entirely by waif-thin models and supernaturally tan celebrities, the back pages are dedicated to fat-busting fad diets, liposuction ads, and articles describing how meals that wouldn't satisfy a rabbit can turn you into a Glamazon in a single lunch hour (as long as you don't actually have any lunch).

In the process, many of us have lost all perspective, developing freakish ideas about what women are supposed to look like. Think of our screen stars, our pop-stars, any model on any catwalk anywhere in the world—I've got handbags that weigh more than they do. I could fold up someone like Eva Longoria and pop her into my pocket. In this Looking Glass world, a 90-pounder is a heavyweight. True perspective can be gained when you consider that the pinup of the 1890s was Lillian Russell—*all 200 pounds of her*. I don't even have to mention Jayne Mansfield, Rita Hayworth, Jane Russell, Sophia Loren, Raquel Welch—none of whom would get the job today—to prove that something's up.

To maintain this abnormal body shape, our icons—whether or not they're brave enough to step up to the plate and admit it—are permanently hungry. Elizabeth Hurley has admitted as much. Marcia Cross, who plays Bree Van de Kamp on *Desperate Housewives*, recently confessed that staying thin was “a living hell,” and that she felt she had been banned from eating since joining the show. Actresses, models, singers, presenters—all are subject to the dictatorship of thinness enforced by the minders, molders, and producers who know very well what sells. It happened to Courtney Love and Carrie Fisher. I know from my experience in the fashion industry that it happens to hopeful young girls from the moment that first Polaroid is taken at the modeling agency. Christina Ricci recalls the favored put-down for wannabe actresses in Hollywood: “They say ‘She looks too healthy,’ which means ‘She needs to lose weight.’”

It's a strong current, this grim undertow of the image game, and it's almost impossible to resist. Some try. When British model of the moment Daisy Lowe arrived in New York for her first season of shows, she was called “a little hefty.” Her response? “I am who I am. My old agents in New York suggested I lose weight. So I moved agents. I'm extremely proud of the fact that I am two sizes bigger than most models. Being a stick is so unsexy.”

Too true, though it's something that magazine editors are only slowly, gingerly, coming to realize. Says Sophia Neophitou-Apostolou, editor of *10* magazine: "The designers I work with now are demanding a more womanly girl (our struggle to find this is like searching for the proverbial



IT'S YOUR BODY, BUDDY: HOW TO NEUTRALIZE THE NEGATIVES

- * **Heavy in the hips?** Well, so was Sophia Loren in her heyday. The trick here is to go for the cling, making a fuss of your bust and whittling away at the waist for that classic hourglass appeal.
- * **Blocky in the shoulder?** Try a wrap, a plunge neck, or showing off some killer cleavage. It's how Jessica Alba and Helen Mirren get by, poor dears.
- * **Short in the leg?** A boot-cut pant, a skirt that stops dead at the knee, a neat short-line jacket to lengthen a leg . . . all will help to stretch your proportions and add an illusory lift. It goes without saying that heels are your loyal ally. Eva Longoria in flats? I don't think so.
- * **Piggy in the middle?** *Me too!* You don't need a tummy tuck, you need a tummy tamer, one of the many practical ways to scoot diplomatically over the issue. So drop your waistband or raise it to the empire line; choose tops with either a forgiving swing in the hem or the firm tailoring you want to keep you safely tucked in.
- * **Broad in the beam?** Didn't keep Beyoncé and J. Lo off the map. Go an inch or two wider at the shoulder and the hem to make your waist work harder.

We'll expand on these issues—and dozens more—in Chapters 5 and 7, where you'll discover exactly how to dress to play up your personal positives.

needle in a haystack), and art directors are complaining that, these days, they're adding curves rather than shaving them off."

They do, however, want those curves in the regulation sexpot places, as Elizabeth Hurley recently discovered when her breasts were electronically enlarged for the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. "On my last *Cosmo* cover," she told *Details*, "they added about 5 inches to my breasts. It's very funny. I have, like, massive knockers. Huge. Absolutely massive."

Right. So let's just admit that the inner sanctum of fame is a weird, airbrushed world. You, however, are not an inflatable doll, to be pumped up and down at will. Your challenge is to ignore these extremes and reacquaint yourself with the bell-curve of normal womanly weight. Real women are soft in places, and good to cuddle with. If the celebrity template starts to look reasonable to your eye, then stop looking. Shut the magazine. Go for a jog, instead.

7 FIND YOUR STRENGTH AND PLAY TO IT

While our forebears occupied themselves with the knotty issues of universal suffrage and how to feed a family of seven on a single turnip, we lucky, lazy 21st-century women spend a great deal of time pondering our own navels. A recent survey in *Grazia* magazine uncovered quite how spectacularly our bodies dominate our lives. Seven out of 10 of us apparently think life would improve greatly if we had a "good" body (world peace is so *passé*), and half of us think that our body shape and size spoils our sex life. (It's worth noting that most men would probably beg to differ; as Phil Hilton, former editor of the British men's magazine *Nuts*, once said on the subject of perfect boobs, "Men think all breasts are good and are delighted to have access to any at all. The idea that they are connoisseurs is inaccurate.")

Yet most women—and it matters little how educated, successful, or, indeed, beautiful we are—despair about arms that wobble, chins that double, and thighs that meet in the middle. Rather than look for strengths—our own and others'—we are continually on the lookout for weakness: the sweat-stain on the shirt, the spinach in the teeth, the cellulite peeking from beneath the miniskirt.

University of Leeds Professor of Medical Psychology Andrew Hill, PhD, believes that disliking particular body parts in this piecemeal, picky way is a modern phenomenon. “Now we have the technology to change specific areas of the body,” he says. “We can be more hypercritical simply because we can fix the problem. It’s all part of the new culture of self-improvement which wasn’t around 30 years ago.”

And so we chip away at ourselves, undermining our own confidence, sinking our own ship. The point is that we *all* have our unbecoming bits, the stuff we’d prefer to keep under wraps. Madonna, for instance, despises her chubby “Italian” thighs, inherited from her mother; George Michael’s face is always pictured half in shadow because he doesn’t much like the other half. And Kiefer Sutherland admits to keeping only one mirror in his house because he doesn’t much care for his looks.

Drew Barrymore has mastered the art of strength-playing. “You learn to love your body,” she says, with the wisdom of one who has been in the public eye long enough to get real. “You can’t look at models and feel bad about yourself. I’m not the kind of girl who can stuff her face with pasta all the time and not gain weight.”

Don’t you just love that? Don’t you want to give her a hug and buy her a hot chocolate (skinny, no cream)? Now then. On a personal note, seeing as we’re all sharing, I’d like to introduce my not-quite-but-almost-perfect ankles. I got them genetically, along with a good ear, a decent singing voice, and a nose that gives generous shade on a hot day. So I wear fancy shoes, cropped pants, and lots of dresses, giving these ankles a lead role in my life. I’m comfortable in the knowledge that while they’re dancing center stage, my less-excellent regions can fade unnoticed into the background.

My middle, for instance.

I am one of those women with a soft center. My stomach is squashy and yielding, like freshly baked bread, though resolutely stubborn in its refusal to budge despite the occasional desperate burst of sit-ups, curls, and the odd stern talking-to. It is my *bête noire* and cross to bear, this belly of mine. But have I mentioned my fabulous ankles?

See? Take a tip. You may loathe your shoulders, knees, or toes

(though I'll put good money on it being belly, boobs, or bottom). But before you start prodding yourself with the vicious little stick of self-hatred, find the bit you love the most. Not the least. The *most*. If it's calves, show them. If it's cleavage, take the plunge. Don't point out your thunderous thighs and just hand ammunition to your adversaries; emphasize your pretty wrists, those full lips, that smile. Believe in your beauty, don't fixate on your foibles. And if you can make the most of what you've got with the judicious use of candlelight and high-waisted dresses, then so much the better.

8 DISCOVER YOUR OWN STYLE

What you wear is of absolute import and impact, your passport to a whole new world of thin. For every questionable bubble skirt, for every poncho in the “must-have color of the season,” there's a piece of clothing that will make your body sing, simply because it nails your own unique presence, your sense of self. This, incidentally, may have very little to do with the trends of the day. Discovering clothes that work *with* you rather than fight against you is the fundamental principle of great style, and it's the linchpin of weight-loss dressing.

It's not just what you wear, but how you wear it that matters. It's in the tilt of your hat, the nonchalant throw of your scarf, the purpose in your stride. It's about risking a clash (it never did Yves Saint Laurent any harm) or perfecting a classic. (A tux for evening? A cashmere crew? There are very good reasons why these superior staples have been loved for so long.) Everything you put on gives off subtle signals, coded impressions that can captivate or caress a room—or turn it off like a switch. Your mission is to convey a message of confidence and ease. By the time you reach Step 101, I can guarantee that you'll have this self-possession, this poise, stashed in your pocket like a lucky charm.

For the moment, you need to know that, like much in modern life, it's all in the sell. Walk into that room like you own it, or at the very least like it owes you. Behavioral Analyst Sue Firth agrees that style is the consequence of confidence—available to anyone willing to make the effort, no matter what their age or shape. “It is about time-taking,” she

says, “about attention to detail. The whole impression sends out a message of charisma, and that is what we are drawn to. Projecting style is a function of confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect.”

Rather than trying to find a new patent leather tote bag, try to find your *style*. Be true to you. As legendary raconteur and wit Quentin Crisp once said: “Fashion is what you adopt when you don’t know who you are.” So, if that trendy sweater makes your chest look like a sack of ferrets, ditch it. If the catwalk calls for white pants and your tush calls for mercy, give it a break. If you always get compliments in that subtle gray pantsuit, the one you’ve had for years, the one that adores you, like a faithful hound, then wear it, regardless of what the catwalk has to say about the matter. Don’t be in thrall to fashion—instead, hum gently to yourself that just because it’s in, it won’t make you thin. As Ingrid Bergman wisely said, “Be yourself. The world worships the original.” One of the best ways to do this is to embrace Step 9.

9 DEVELOP YOUR TRADEMARK LOOK— HATS, HAIR, CLEAVAGE, RED LIPS, YOU CHOOSE

A few months back, over coffee, my great friend Carla went through something of an existential *crise*, right here in my kitchen. “Who am I? Who *am* I?” she wailed, head in hands and one strand of hair (I couldn’t help but notice) dangling perilously close to the cold coffee at her elbow.

“Ah, Carla,” I said in my least patronizing tone, “As you get a tiny bit older, you can no longer experiment with every fashion trend, changing your haircut every third minute and expecting your body to settle into jeans or capris just because Marc Jacobs tells you to. No. What you need, as you age, is a Thing.”

“A Thing?”

The congress of cold coffee and hair was now complete, and Carla was dabbing at the result with a Kleenex.

“Yep. A Thing. Like Debra Messing has all that fabulous red hair. And Jennifer Anniston’s forever showing off those wildly perfect legs.

Nicole Kidman's got that ethereal white skin, and Anna Wintour has her blow-dry and . . . you need to find yourself to project yourself."

I was quite pleased with myself for coming up with this, but Carla seemed unimpressed. She sniffed loudly into the caffeinated tissue.

"But what's *my* Thing?"

"Go monochrome," I suggested brightly.

This is always my best advice to the lost sheep on the fashion farm. It's a tip I picked up years ago, when working alongside a particular fashion editor. Like all top-of-the-range stylists, this woman had access to almost anything her heart could desire. Trunks of Dior, towers of Versace, truckloads of Armani. Rhinestones, cashmere, wild silks from Samarkand, snakeskin handbags, Gucci shoes, Pucci pants. And what did she choose?

Black pants, white shirt. Every day. Religiously. She had obviously taken a vow, quite early on in her career, to "have a look"—a look, it has to be said, that owed more than a nod to the Albert Einstein school of dressing. (He kept seven identical suits in the closet and wore them in strict rotation, thus allowing his brain to settle on more taxing topics than whether his pants made his butt look big.)

This particular editor worked at the magazine every day in black pumps, exquisitely cut coal-black pants, and the kind of shirt that would glow in the dark, so clean and fresh was its whiteness. She always looked immaculate. (I actually suspect that she changed into an identical outfit after lunch, or whenever someone sneezed near her, or opened a purse.) There was none of that dizzy wheeling about in search of the next big trend; she did that for a living, so her own wardrobe simply maintained a calm decorum. It helped that she was gamine and adorable to look at, but her approach would pretty much suit anyone of a certain age who knows that her days as a hot, young thing are in the past.

Finding your Thing bestows upon you a sense of arrival, a feeling of strength and self-awareness. It feels like coming home. After much deliberation, Carla and I divined her Thing. Turns out she's a jingly jewelry sort of girl. She's going to wear charming bracelets that chime and clink as she walks, set against a sort of blank canvas of jeans, white T-shirts,

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WHO TO HIJACK: TOP CELEBRITY STYLE STAPLES

A trademark fashion staple is a little like having a personal assistant you can trust, or your own eyebrowist who understands the ins and outs of your face. They can draw attention to your fabulous bits or run interference for your dodgy bits. Think for a moment about the inhabitants of the world's "best-dressed" lists and you'll soon see that a signature is very often the element that separates them from the forgettable masses. The trick is to find—or steal—a style and stick to it, a bit like . . .

- * **Elizabeth Hurley's white jeans.** She's worn them through thin and thin—even when they were about as fashionable as a paper bag. "I probably own 30 pairs," Hurley admits, "I love it and I know it works." Elizabeth is, of course, glossy and groomed enough to make white jeans look St. Tropez chic rather than shopping-mall trashy. But why does she wear them all the time? Because they have a strong style message: "I'm thin!" they cry, "And rich! I dry clean!" White jeans may not be quite your cup of tea—so experiment until you discover exactly what is.
- * **Anna Wintour's classic bob and Chanel sunglasses.** If you are the most observed fashion plate on the planet—and, as editor of *Vogue*, how could you not be?—you need to manage the tightrope walk of style with consummate ease, and Ms. Wintour does, chiefly by relying on a signature triumvirate of big, bad shades, dead straight bob, and haute couture. I'm guessing your wardrobe is a little light on \$40,000 couture pieces from Chanel—but a sleek haircut and a signature accessory? Those can be yours in a flash.
- * **J. Lo's hipster flares.** Lopez, as we all know, has a glorious Latina butt, and hipster flares are a way of putting it up there in lights. We've all been fascinated with that rump for years; it's J. Lo's trademark. The flares maximize attention on those buttocks,

and—thanks to the additional material dancing about at ground level—exaggerate curves and generally look great.

- * **Kate Moss's Very Important Pieces.** Consider what makes Kate's wardrobe tick: the Ossie Clark coats, the vintage rock 'n' roll jackets once worn by Keith Moon and bought at auction, the vintage thirties nightgowns, the "statement jewellery" that talks a hell of a lot more than she does. For all her style dipping, Kate is remarkably constant. She relies on quality, not quantity; buys originals, not knock-offs; and goes for authentic, timeless pieces, not poppy trends. She invariably attends business meetings in a Chanel power suit, "like Jackie O, but with a T-shirt, a power watch from Rolex, and my Vivienne Westwood Sex shoes." The point here is that she doesn't patrol the fashion landscape desperately picking up the latest bits of fluff to tumble off a catwalk. She knows her brand and she sticks with it.
- * **Elle Macpherson's blazer.** An anachronism, perhaps, but being tall, Elle has the ideal figure for the coolly classic blazer. (Let's face it, she has the ideal figure for a Saks garment bag.) A blazer is, though, a forgiving staple for *any* shape—a snappy, practical wardrobe workhorse that can look particularly hot if it's worn a shade too small. (Shove up the sleeves for extra sass appeal.) If you're looking to copy Elle, avoid brass buttons and fire up your sober jacket with attitude; whatever mood you go for, avoid *smart*—you don't want to look like a prep school boy. The look you're going for is a bit AC/DC performing "Highway to Hell" in front of a stadium audience.
- * **Audrey Hepburn's capri pants.** Cropped pants—to the shin or the knee—are a good way to show off delicate ankles and a pair of coquettish pumps. They're cute, too. Ever since capris first took off in the fifties, thanks to Audrey in *Sabrina* and *Funny Face*, the cropped trouser has suggested a carefree, run-along-the-beach sort of fashion freedom. If they could talk, they'd giggle and then smoke a cigarette (but not inhale).

and well-cut, expensive pantsuits. Genius, I think you'll agree.

No need to go mad, you see. Your signature could be something simple and chic (diamond studs, a slash of red lipstick) or something quirky and cool (high-top sneakers with your prom dress, a beehive with your ballet shoes, a bit of glitter and a lot of kohl). Personally, until I hit 38, I was all tawny hair and push-up bra. Lately, though, it's French navy, a becoming shade of teal, and an aquamarine ring that could double as an offensive weapon. For you, it may be a trench coat or perfectly tailored suits. It may be corsage and corsetry, or a crisp fitted shirt and bangles to the elbow. Whatever it is, find it. Wear it. Often. Not always—but often. Be remembered as the woman in white, the lady in red, the one most likely to succeed. Think of Diana Vreeland's rings, Katharine Hepburn's trousers, Coco Chanel's bouclé jackets, camellias, and pearls. If in doubt, find your icon—Monroe, Stefani, Jolie, Winfrey—and copy her. Style-jacking your heroine is no sin; it's the very axis of intelligent dressing. If Karl Lagerfeld can do it, then you can, too.

Don't, however, set your signature in stone and simply wait for death. Let it evolve, sticking to the general trajectory, but taking in the view along the way. Developing a Look, you'll soon find, is like developing armor; whatever the slings and arrows hurled at you, you're safe.