

The Day I Kicked Ol' Barbie Out

(Unpublished short story, by Aphrodite Matsakis Ph.D., 2002. Any resemblances to particular individuals are purely coincidental.)

Coping with Barbie dolls, whether they are live women or media images of super slim women with oversized breasts, tight tanned skin, and no stomach at all, is more than a challenge. It's impossible!

Such images of beauty are not only sexist, but ageist and racist as well. They also oppress larger women, women who by genetic predisposition, choice, or circumstance, do not look like skinny nine-year-old boys.

Most cover girls have almost perfect northern European noses and high cheekbones or are African American, Hispanic, or Oriental women with highly anglicized features. Yet most women in the world do not have such faces and most women, for some strange reason, do not stay twenty-five years old forever.

Most women aren't 102 pounds either. In fact, in the United States the average woman is 20 to 30 pounds overweight—by cover girl standards that is. One would think that if the average woman did not look like a pencil, then that would not be adopted as the standard of beauty or considered the “norm.” Some feminists contend that the slim/young look fostered by the media as the one and only possible manifestation of female beauty is a guised conspiracy against women. These feminists argue by establishing as a standard of beauty a body image that is impossible for most women to achieve (unless they are wealthy and can spend five hours a day in a gym), most women can never feel good about themselves.

Unless a woman can break free of the pressure to look like a half-starved galley-slave of old and come to regard her unique body and face as “beautiful” in their own right, she may struggle with a sense of inferiority all her life. Even worse, her negative body image may have a “spillover effect,” in that it colors her evaluation of other parts of herself and areas of her life where she may be extremely confident and successful.

Alas, too many women have sacrificed significant portions of their physical and emotional health, their vocational development, and their relationships on the altar of thinness. When a normal weight or large woman tries to look like a Barbie doll, she must often expend a great deal of time, money, and effort to do so. This usually means she has less time and energy

for other parts of her life. Think of it like this: if Thomas Edison had been preoccupied with the size of his hips, would he have ever invented the light bulb?

Women who become anorexic or bulimic in pursuit of slenderness can develop severe medical problems, biochemical depression, memory problems and difficulties with concentration. They can also die young. For example, approximately one out of every four anorexics die either directly or indirectly as a result of their self-induced starvation. The number of bulimics who died prematurely has yet to be tallied. Women who persistently diet weaken not only their heart muscles and other organs but are subject to premature aging due to the breakdown of the collagen of their skin due to poor nutrition.

In summary, trying to achieve and maintain an artificially low weight so one can look like a cover girl is physically unhealthy. In addition, the images are also psychologically offensive in implying that a woman can't be considered beautiful unless she is super-thin and (preferably) has blue eyes, blond hair, a tiny nose, or otherwise exudes that "Barbie" look. Certainly, such women can be beautiful, but why can't other kinds of women, for example, older women, ethnic women, larger women, be considered desirable too?

According to some feminists, there are important reasons for the thinness mania and the bias against large women. They note that, in recent years, women have been making strides in the social, economic, and political spheres. Yet, at the same time, women have been pressured to maintain lower and lower body weights. These feminists argue that when everything about a woman is small (except her breasts perhaps), the woman projects an image of helpless weakness and the vulnerability and pliability of girlhood, rather than the strength and maturity of womanhood. Therefore, they conclude, the increased pressure on women to become thinner than ever, as symbolized by "Barbie" looking cover girls is a way of undercutting women's gains.

By reducing women to thin waifs, men can once again feel stronger and more powerful than women. They have a harder time feeling superior when confronted by a larger woman. In addition, thin waifs salvage the male sexual ego. In our society, through some distortion of thinking, thinness has been equated with sexiness. However, the external trappings of sexuality, e.g., thinness, seductive dress, etc., are not measures of true sexual passion or sensuality. If anything, reduced caloric intake and preoccupation with body image usually militate against true sexual responsiveness.

Anorexia nervosa not only damages sexual organs, but greatly reduces sexual interest. Like survivors of concentration camps, anorexics (and some extreme or chronic dieters) are more interested in food than in sex. Consequently, in dealing with abnormally thin women, men do not have to deal with sexually alive and mature women, but rather with little girls in women's bodies—women who are more likely to passively accept the male and less likely to make sexual demands on them.

Cover girls keep women “in their place” in other ways e.g., by perpetuating the myth that “looking good” will guarantee a safe comfortable life. Yet one out of four American women are sexually abused before the age of 18; at least one-third of married women are beaten by their husbands; and violent rape is on the rise. Barbie's innocent look seems to imply that such horrors do not exist and ignores the psychological torment and physical scarring which women can suffer as the result of such abuses, for example, weight gain as a form of comfort and defense.

I could also make caustic remarks about how probably many cover girls lack brains, not to mention spirituality and emotional maturity. After all, if they can get by on their looks, why should they bother learning how to communicate with or listen empathetically to others, or developing virtues, such as patience, self-sacrifice, or humility? Some can even pass learning the skills necessary to get a job done by counting on their looks.

Because of their miniskirts, their cleavages, or their long or appropriately messed up blonde (and sometimes brown) hair, they can sidestep the development of both interpersonal and vocational abilities, abilities which the rest of us “slobs” (you know, us average-looking, or below average looking, dark-eyed, dark-haired, so-called overweight women)—are forced to learn and practice daily to survive. All too often people—especially men in power positions—gladly overlook the cover girl's shortcomings simply because she is, for them, a trophy.

“Are you jealous?” I can hear you chuckling.

Dare I admit it? Of course, I'm jealous. Wouldn't you be? But beyond the jealousy, I'm angry.

It's not fair. It's just not fair that in too many circles, even circles that purport to be intellectual or spiritual, women with certain arrangements of flesh and genetic heritages will generally command a degree of respect, power, and attention that larger women might never get, no matter how much they contribute or achieve. In some situations, not only do women who

look like cover girls tend to be better treated than their less Hollywood looking counterparts, but less is expected of them too. This means that the rest of us are not only less appreciated but have to work harder too.

Am I distorting reality, or am I touching right upon it?

One of my male friends thinks my reactions to cover girls are extreme. But how would he feel if he were judged by his weight? Imagine magazines and movies bursting with pictures of eternally young Kens with tight tan twenty-year-old muscular bodies devoid of wrinkles and fat. Imagine, in addition, that woman held the power and that most women, regardless of their age, would preferentially hire, promote, and choose as companions and lovers, a Ken over a hard-working honest man, regardless of the Ken's moral character, educational level, or level of emotional maturity.

"But I can't help all of my shape and size," men might lament.

Many women can't help some of their measurements either. Take me, for example. As the granddaughter of short, stocky women with generous hips and thighs (and prominent noses), I could do aerobics every day and still look like two people: a little one on the top and a big one on the bottom.

In fact, for years I've exercised almost daily, but my nose is still bumpy and my thighs, large and lumpy. So, I've given up. Besides, doesn't God want me to develop my head and my heart too, not just my pectorals? After all, looks aren't everything.

But, alas, sometimes it seems so, like when the man I love cast his eyes on some boney wonder. At that moment, a part of me feels like an obese, pimpled hunchback destined for a life of loneliness. Yet, standing back from my reaction, I note in amazement how encountering a cover girl can dent the self-confidence it has taken me years to acquire.

That said, I suddenly feel glad to be me. Sitting on the gym floor after class, I gently caress my unfashionably sized thighs, and think, "Hi legs. I love you. Yes, you are big and parts of you are hangy. But that's because eating was your way of coping with all those years of struggle."

"But you survived, didn't you? You came out of those hard times with a head on your shoulders and love left in your heart."

"Many were against you, but you didn't give up. Your somewhat misshapen body is not a sign of failure, but a testimony to your strengths. And if your breasts are saggy, it's only

because you nursed your children with all the love in your heart. Don't be ashamed. Be proud of yourself, girl."

Overcome with tears that I can finally feel good about even the most despised parts of my flesh, I start sobbing on the gym floor. Afterwards, I'm certain that I will never resent another cover girl, as long as I live. Nothing, but nothing can take this feeling from me.

But as I wait in line at the water fountain, out of nowhere, a little blonde, pushes ahead of me. "Ma'am, there's a line," I say.

She laughs.

Her bleached blond hair is piled so high, it could almost reach the sky. "She's not even pretty," I think. But her legs are thin, and she is wearing an outfit that makes her breasts stick out as much as possible.

Acting as if she hadn't heard me, she leans over the water fountain in a semi-seductive pose.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I repeat. "But some of us have been waiting a long time."

"What's the big deal?" retorts a man behind me. "Let the little lady go ahead. Just looking at her makes me thirsty."

The other men in line begin to titter.

Suddenly my rage at cover girls resurrects itself. I then began to tremble and lapse into fearing that no matter what I do, because I'm what my doctor's call "well-nourished," I'll always be discounted or ignored.

That night I dreamt I was having lunch with a skinny-mini Barbie Doll. She was dressed in all pink, with matching nail polish and lipstick, and a pink flowered belt around her tiny waist. She seemed like the sweetest little girl until she shook her adorable blonde curls at me.

"You know what everyone says about you? That you are a scatterbrain because you don't wear a girdle, even though your hips waddle," she scoffs.

"But I have broken capillaries all around my upper thigh, from wearing girdles as a teen," I retort.

"And you don't bother to blow dry or mousse your hair, either," she snaps back.

"I don't have time," I mumble. "I have children and one and a half jobs."

"You're due for a manicure, too!" she grins. "Everybody knows that long painted nails help detract attention from chubby arms."

“Ma’am, do you work?” I ask sharply.

“Why, I’d be ashamed to walk out of the house if I looked like you,” she snickers.

“Ma’am, do you know how to spell the word work?” I reply.

“You’d have to do a hundred sit-ups every morning and night, aerobics 4 times a week to get in the halfway normal range. Then you’d probably need a tummy tuck and liposuction,” she scoffs.

“I told you,” I try to say in a civilized tone. “I’m raising two children on my own, have a full-time demanding job, and write on the side. I exercise daily for health. That’s all I can manage.”

She giggles. “I hear your house isn’t always dusted either. And you don’t visit the neighbors and do their grocery shopping for them when they’re sick either.”

“I don’t have time,” I roar.

“Your arms, Hon. They shake when you talk that loud. Weights could fix the flabby parts, but it would take at least a year,” she smiles.

“Every woman in my family has flabby arms. It’s genetic and I don’t have an hour a day to fight nature,” I roar back. “Look lady, I survived an unhappy marriage and years of caring for a sick child.”

“Darling, your elbows!” she shrieks. “I can recommend the best little pumice stone. It takes away all the grey uglies. Use it at least twice a day on the elbows. Use it on your heels too,” she adds, “You want to be smooth and soft everywhere, don’t you?”

By now I’m so angry I can’t talk. Yet as she begins to munch ever so daintily on her lemon chiffon pie, Barbie continues to give me advice.

“And your breasts. Don’t you need a little help there? There are these great new bras, only \$35.95 each. Everyone will think it’s you. And for just fifty dollars more you can get a control body corset that will do wonders for that tummy of yours. I might get one today because I’ve gained two pounds lately and am totally frantic.”

With that, I stand up and command Barbie to leave.

She looks at me in amazement and hands me a piece of paper “Here’s a new diet for you. It really works.”

“No thanks. Diets don’t work. Everybody knows that.”

“But you need to lose weight badly.”

“Sorry, but dieting is fattening.”

“You’re just saying that because you can’t stick to a diet.”

“That’s right, and research has shown that precious few people can stick to diets. That’s why diets are fattening because they lead to bingeing, which leads to more dieting, which leads to lower metabolism and weight gain.”

She grins. “You just want to stay fat forever.”

“I’m fine the way I am. Now please leave.”

She chuckles. “You aren’t fine, and you know it.”

“I’m just fine and, as a matter of fact, I’ve never been better.”

“You aren’t being very nice to me,” she whimpers.

“And you have never been very nice to me,” I growl. “Now get out of my life and never set foot in my house again.”

With that, she wipes her little pink lips with her little pink napkin and walks away.

When I wake up I feel happy, joyous, and free and ever so glad to just be me.