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Life

How I Became a Dove Girl

I'm no cover model, but this ad campaign I joined.
By [Shannon Melnyk](#), 24 Aug 2007, [TheTyee.ca](#)

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Last year was my grandmother's 90th birthday. As a homage to her, I had a photo taken in the garden green raw silk dress she wore over 50 years ago, when she was my age. She was my model for beauty, back then a woman had an ensemble. Matching, fitted, very Jackie-O with a Ukrainian prairie twist. She was a poor farmer girl whose solution to pale cheeks was mischievously kissing her two fingers with freshly painted lips and spreading the love to her naked apples. I still see her in my mind's eye giggling as she passed along her secret to my mother when she was still in ponytails, and then to me. This morning I found myself dabbing my cheeks as I have been every day for almost 37 years.

And now, faster than you can say *airbrush*, suddenly my photo for grandma has ended up in the hands of an enormous beauty conglomerate, and my face has become fodder for public consumption.

It began with an e-mail forwarded by a friend asking me to cut and paste a photo of myself and express what I defined as beauty; the makeshift scrapbook effort would be posted on a website magazine so friends could share their images and stories.

I saw that it was the brainchild of [Unilever](#), the giant behind the [Dove campaign](#) that has garnered both international kudos and controversy for using real women, and claiming to buck the advertising industry's addiction to computer enhancement, to promote a change in the way we view women. Given my feelings about the power in this message, I was all for a little female bonding amongst friends.

'A choice'

What never dawned on me was the fact that this was Dove's creative idea of a casting call for a real magazine designed to carry their Shine campaign for Dove hair products. If I bothered to read the not-so-fine print, I would have realized I was showing off grandma's wares for the nation.

Virtual arts and craft project forgotten, and writer's block temporarily cured, I was not prepared for the phone call that claimed I was chosen from thousands of women for the Shine campaign, and would I fly to Toronto from the West Coast in a couple of days to spend an undetermined amount of time being limo'd around to interviews, parties and photo shoots in Toronto? Clearly this was a laugh at my expense, and when I realized this woman was who she said she was, I had squeaked out the words "Why me?"

Then I recalled the Internet pyjama party I had attended, and wondered just what it was that I said I thought encapsulated beauty. And then I remembered. "Feeling beautiful is a choice," I wrote. Indeed, it wasn't a birthright, a natural right of passage or even a gradual swell of self-appreciation. It was a choice I had made only recently in my mid-30s after a full-out navel-gazing tirade that took up precious years and included countless regrets.

Agreeing to step on the plane was a reminder of just how far I had come.

The hard road

Some girls start out with a divine spirit, coming into themselves easily, beautifully, naturally. Others are late bloomers whose gifts are born out of soldiering through adversity and self-hatred to come into their grace. And then there are those who take the hard road. The unforgiving road, the road to "Never-Never" Land. Never being enough, never having enough. My sense of self came from the latter two categories.

I will admit to having spent a lot of energy trying not to offend the general public with my body. My behaviour in my youth played out suspiciously like a tragic comedy. It probably started when I refused to bare my shoulders at a very young age. I can't remember why now, but it made perfect sense at the time. I remember my mother yelling, "No one is going to notice! Everyone is too busy worrying about themselves!" But I was on a roll. I started wearing huge sweatshirts to hide what I thought was an enormous pot-belly and lopsided breasts. I also had the joy of christening the new University of Alberta Hospital Burn Ward after suffering severe burns to my face in an attempt to tan the ghost within. I shaved my arms after, one day, I raised my hand in class and a boy shouted, "Give the gorilla a chance!" I curled my lashes and coloured my hair to near baldness. I yo-yo dieted, and yet I did not even have the pleasure of being overweight until my actual 20s.

Better days

Fast forward to my 30s. I have shed almost 50 pounds and a 15-year relationship. I have stopped chasing professional identities that were not meant to be mine. I finally discovered that not feeling good takes up too much energy that is better served enjoying my life and rediscovering my passions.

So Dove's invitation to celebrate, well, myself (!) seemed uproariously fitting. Go big or go home. I toodled off to Toronto and met some equally stunned women of mixed age, race and province, with whom I would break bread for a week: we shopped, we lunched, we bonded; we were treated to the salon and to media-darling school. The most touching experience I had in the process was seeing a child's eyes in one of the women who looked as if, for the first time, she truly saw others view her as beautiful.

The irony of the event, however, was that while we were all busy rejoicing in the idea of reality, the ultimate reality was the sudden attack of vanity we experienced come the day of the shoot. We were increasingly intrigued and paralyzed by the fact that there would be no airbrushing. I, for one, had not slept for a week and was carrying around 10 pounds of water. One young woman had become self-conscious about a break-out; another wanted to shop for a better bra at the 11th hour. We reverted to being the women we know best, in our quietest moments of uncertainty.

It was in this moment I realized how necessary campaigns like this are. No matter how cynical we choose to be about the marriage of our market economy and social responsibility, the simplicity behind the hoo-ha is the more positive and balanced images we see in the media, the more our young girls have a fighting chance in the culture of over-sexualized youth, designer-label-driven peer groups, anorexic heroin chic, booby hooter-girl bar scenes and the cover-girl perfection that drips with the cruel message: "look like me and only then will your life will be perfect."

How're your labia?

Because it is socially acceptable for women to fuss about their shortcomings, there is a cultural misconception that we talk about everything. Most women, for example, do not sit around and talk about their large or sagging labia. I can't say I've been in Starbucks recently and heard "mine look like dumbo ears, how about yours?" But most women also are unaware, however, that labiaplasty has grown to be [one of the most popular plastic surgery procedures](#). Pornography executives say you would be hard pressed to see a woman in a magazine or film without surgically shaped and reduced labia. The result of this practice of course is the misconception of what real labia look like to the male population.

Some kind of pornography is usually a boy's first introduction to the female nude body. So imagine the fall-out when a man sees the real deal. My first reaction to the surgery stats was complete sadness. My secondary reaction? A sort of self-mocking curiosity about whether or not my labia would stack up with the rest should someone put a gun to my head and cast me in a porno entitled Dove Girl Does, say, Dauphin. Laugh, but the embedded comparative gene erupts in us when it is least welcome.

In *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame*, the University of Houston's Brené Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" and believes its spread has been created by conflicting and competing expectations about who women should be. How interesting, then, to see a corporation underwriting the making of [Evolution](#), the Dove campaign's Canadian short film that used time lapse photography to show how grotesque the amount of time, makeup, hair tricks and, largely, computer enhancement it takes to roll a woman out of bed and onto a billboard. *Evolution* seized the Grand Prix this year at the prestigious Cannes Lions Advertising Festival.

The message of the film is one I have arrived at personally. You are enough. Peace at last, peace at last.

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Mocking 'Top Model' was my group sport, but the joke's on me.



Melnyk: 'Feeling beautiful is a choice.'

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