



HOW TO BECOME BEAUTIFUL

I was eight years old when I started getting acne. I knew what it was and I knew that I wasn’t supposed to like it. Somehow, I didn’t care. I knew that I was more than my pimples and nobody worth my time would make me feel bad about them. How did I know that? I’d like to think that I was wise beyond my years. Ten years later, and I still don’t have the answer. All I know is that I have never felt more beautiful than when I was eight years old.

When I was 11, I started to look at myself — really look at myself. My skin, my teeth, my height, my weight. It was all fair game. Nobody around me looked quite like me, and I started to take notice. Every moment I spent in my predominantly-white hometown reminded me of what I was not. Not pretty enough, not skinny enough, not light enough. Quickly, I forgot what beauty felt like.

At 13, I discovered the term ‘beauty standard’. Suddenly, I understood why I didn’t feel pretty anymore and I thought I knew exactly how to fix it. I began to analyze and emulate girls that fit these standards, following the prettiest celebrities I knew on social media in hopes that their beauty would somehow rub off on me through my cell phone screen. My worth became determined by my proximity to this unattainable benchmark and I became obsessed with hiding the parts that didn’t

fit my standards. I did everything in my power to make myself prettier and smaller, because I thought that was how the world of appearing feminine worked. My relationship with femininity became more about my desire to fit beauty standards and less about my personal identity. I sacrificed everything that made me uniquely me to avoid being masculinized as a tall, Black woman, and it worked — until it didn’t, and I lost who I was.

By the time I turned 16, I was tired. Sure, I felt accepted, but I didn’t feel like myself anymore. I didn’t even feel beautiful. I wore clothes I didn’t feel comfortable in, curated a 10-step skincare routine, and followed trends that I didn’t like — for what? Unfulfilled and exhausted, I knew that something needed to change. I needed to move, to learn, to grow. I wanted my eight year old brain back — the one that loved every inch of myself unapologetically, even if nobody else did.

I knew that I had to focus on the things that made me feel truly beautiful. It took a lot of time, effort, and tears, but once I found those things, everything else became easy. Once I realized that my body was the least interesting or beautiful thing about me, I got to know the rest of myself. I found beauty in my passions and interests, likes and dislikes. After years of shielding my eyes from mirrors, I



forced myself to look at my body in all of its glory and I have never felt freer. I allowed myself to love the parts of me that I once hated, becoming infatuated with my beautiful dark skin, my powerful height, and my bouncy curls. I felt feminine and womanly without forcing myself to fit into society's narrow perception of what a "beautiful woman" is. I finally felt secure and comfortable in my own skin.

In prioritizing myself, I had to let go of my obsession with others' perceptions of me. I had to refocus my attention from external validation, especially the idea of male validation that often feels like a prerequisite for womanhood, where I was constantly awaiting approval from my male counterparts. I took to social media, a tool that I once used to fixate on others, to help me fall in love with myself. Once I started curating my social media feeds to be more inclusive and align with my new values, I understood the triviality of these external pressures. If others can be beautiful without looking like (or forcing themselves to look like) Barbie dolls, so can I.

Becoming beautiful is an incredibly long journey and one that I am still embarking on. It requires constant effort and sometimes, I mess up. I still get jealous of other girls, anxious about my body, and uncomfortable in my skin. Especially as a

first-year college student, I feel like I'm constantly performing, trying to put my best foot forward with no room for error. But, that's part of the human experience and forward growth. Through all of these blips, I still love and forgive myself because my faults do not negate my beauty.

I am proud to say that 18-year-old me and eight-year-old me have a lot in common. We have the same tiny gap between our front teeth and acne scars on our cheeks. Most importantly, we have the same definition of beauty. Beauty is simple. It is smiling in the mirror even when my skin is breaking out. It is dancing in a bikini even when I'm bloated from eating. It is spending time alone with myself because I love and appreciate my own company. Beauty can be anything I want it to be because, at the end of the day, nobody needs to find me beautiful but me.

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