

I'm not beautiful and that's okay

Jamie Khoo scratches beneath the surface of her self-described 'rather ordinary' looks and realises it's not so bad being plain

I am not a beautiful girl. I don't turn heads or stop traffic or inspire great poetry. I was never the girl that boys fancied at school. I know I look awkward whether I have long or short hair, and that I'm neither tall enough to be noticed nor short enough to be cute. I don't boast flawless skin and I'm always a bit overweight.

A few years ago, after a significant accomplishment at work, one of the older ladies I worked with stopped me as I was entering the office to congratulate me on my recent success.

After a string of compliments, she said, "And you know what's the best thing about you? It's that you're not stunning." Then she

“Then it twigged. These people weren't beautiful but they were so much more — they were attractive.”

opened the door and walked in, leaving me spluttering in my own inelegant confusion. I couldn't decide if it was a new brand of humour or just a backhanded compliment.

I spent a lot of my teenage years wishing I was beautiful, willing myself to look like one of the models out of the many magazines I pored over. I wished my hair was shinier, my nose was sharper, my eyes were bigger. It sucked being not only ordinary, but in truth, quite a squat and clumsy girl.

But then, at university, I read Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, about how contemporary expectations of beauty have been created as a means of controlling and curtailing women. For if we continue rising in the corporate, financial and political spheres, and threatening the gender status quo, society will need something else to keep us feeling small.

So yes, in the right circumstances, a girl can accomplish anything on their own these days — be a CEO, make millions, have babies. But as long as she feels that her looks aren't good enough, her confidence will falter. No matter how much the bolshy feminist in us may disagree, I know this

to be true because it has been the running narrative all my life.

So I looked hard at myself in the mirror one day — the cleverness of *The Beauty Myth* echoing through my thoughts — and finally conceded that I wasn't a beautiful girl and probably never would be. My plainness was what it was and it was okay.

With this realisation came tremendous relief and the knowledge that I could finally just get on with the rest of my life. I wouldn't have to spend hours wrapped up in this sick shame that I didn't look good enough. I could reclaim the ridiculous number of hours I spent primping, painting and polishing myself to reach some imagined ideal of beauty. My stomach no longer

needed to lurch enviously whenever I stood next to a beautiful friend.

Actually, it helped that many of the friends I met at university were not drop-dead gorgeous, model-type waifs. They didn't stand out in a crowd, but they were people who sure could control a crowd, some of the most brilliant I've met. Funny, smart-talking, politically astute, they could make a whole room come alive just by being in it. I was in awe of them. I was especially in awe of the fact that their power had nothing to do with what they looked like.

Then it twigged. These people weren't beautiful, but they were so much more — they were attractive. And by 'attractive', I mean that even if they were 'too' lanky or 'too' dumpy, had too much hair or not enough, people couldn't help but be drawn to them with a strange kind of urgency. Suddenly, having a pretty face or drop-dead good looks didn't seem as desirable to me anymore. It seemed... ordinary, a low aim. But to be attractive — oh! That would mean having real character, and the endearing ability to charm the (literal and metaphorical) pants off anyone. You see, you

Unconventionally attractive stars we love to look at



can be beautiful for a time, but looks fade and can be easily forgotten; being attractive enough to make an impression on more than just a physical level has a harder, deeper staying power. Now that was something new worth working towards.

So I recall that lady telling me that the 'best thing' about me had nothing to do with my looks, and I think perhaps that comment was a well-meaning compliment after all. □

HOW TO BE ATTRACTIVE

- Understand the difference between being funny and being witty, and learn when to be one or the other.
 - Don't ever talk publicly about your looks — it's boring.
- Read up on things that actually matter, so you can have intelligent conversations about them.
 - That old thing called a personality? Give it some airtime.
 - Take a sincere interest in people other than yourself. Ask questions!
- If all else fails, remember that sometimes all it takes is kindness.