

Q *Is STRONG the new thin?*

After years of aspiring to be thinner, ELLE's beauty director discovers that it wasn't her ideal, after all. Hallelujah!

Words by EMMASTRENNER

a: 'This is not what it looked like on the model,' I muttered, as my friend tried to zip me into my Monique Lhuillier sample-sale wedding dress in the changing room of Rigby & Peller. It may have been my lowest pre-wedding moment yet, as my C/D-cup chest tumbled out of the plunging neckline of the unforgivingly tight hand-stitched, lace Miranda dress. This was not the plan, with five weeks to go to the big day.

When I had found the dress four months before, for a snip of the original price, I'd already been seduced by the catwalk pictures of it hanging gracefully off the toned, slim shoulders of the model, with her non-existent bust. And I'd convinced myself that by the time I was walking down the aisle, I'd look the same. But then, there I was in an underwear shop with *The Day* around the corner and, well, it was safe to say, I did not resemble a model.

I wanted, I'll admit it, to be thin. Rake thin, even. But I am not thin. I am curvy, medium height, used to be a size 10 about six years ago and now a 12, tend to hold the weight around my stomach, and my legs are not long and slim, so remain firmly in trousers all year long. And if I'm being

completely honest with myself, I've never really reached my body ideal.

But why do I care so much? Because I equate body-happiness with being slim enough not to get a muffin top over the edge of my J Brand jeans, to perhaps wear a short skirt and look OK, and maybe even see the muscle flanks down the sides of my stomach. Don't get me wrong, I'm certainly not overweight. I'm just not thin.

And being thin was never really going to happen to me because's here's the catch: I like food, in the foodie sense of the word. My holidays, or, in fact, any given day, is 50 per cent less good if my food isn't up to scratch. So reaching my body beautiful has to be a short, sharp exercise to ensure I don't lose everyone I love around me due to my food-deprived foulness.

As a result, I've always marvelled at Hollywood A-listers who can devote hours to exercise while surviving on smoothies and scraps. But that never stopped me craving my ideal figure (although I probably craved a good bowl of pasta a little more!). I suppose I lived in a fantasy world of perpetual hope – not actually really doing anything to change my figure, but at the same time believing that if Charlize Theron could transform herself from a frumpy, overweight killer in *Monster* to the glamazon beauty advertising Dior perfume, I could do it, too. I just forgot to factor in that she's just half an inch short of 6ft (compared to my 5ft 6in), with a 36in leg (I'm more of, ahem, a 30).

And I finally had to confront these impossible body fantasies five weeks before my wedding in an underwear changing ►

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room. I also had to ask myself this: why was I so obsessed with being something and someone else, particularly when it was a genetic impossibility that I could ever look like Gisele? Why couldn't I just come to terms with my natural shape? In short, what was so wrong with simply being me?

At this crisis point, I got in touch with Dalton Wong, founder of TwentyTwo Training and one of the most in-demand personal trainers in the world right now. Why, you might ask, did I think I'd find the answer to my woes in yet another weight-loss, get-thin attempt? But shifting the pounds wasn't the reason I was so keen to meet him. It was his list of celebrity clients, including current heroines Jennifer Lawrence, Amanda Seyfried, Zoe Kravitz and Alice Eve – all young, gifted actresses who represent a different image to the model ideal. All of whom have beautiful bodies, remarkable for their natural shape that remains feminine and real, while being desirable to us. I particularly loved what he'd done to Jennifer Lawrence's figure in *X-Men First Class* (she spent half the film virtually naked) and also in *The Hunger Games*, where her oozing athleticism as Katniss Everdeen was enviable.

'I hated exercise before,' says Lawrence. 'Dalton totally changed my attitude. I felt strong, fit and confident, even while wearing the most vulnerable costume on [the *X-Men*] set.'

Perhaps I, too, should be searching for a way to make myself stronger – the better of myself, not the thinner. But what could Wong do for me? 'Many women have unrealistic expectations when it comes to their body,' says Wong. 'Someone who is naturally curvy and 5ft 8in is not going to look like Rosie

Huntington-Whiteley, no matter what they do. It's my job to be honest from the start.' He tells me that many of his clients arrive at his gym, which sits discreetly in an airy mews in London's Kensington, with photographs of celebrities who they would like to look like. He carefully talks through the clients' goals, explaining to them what is possible and what isn't, while reminding them that some of these images are airbrushed.

'While you can reduce your fat percentage, slim down your waist, thighs, bum, you can't fundamentally change certain areas,' says Wong. 'Your bone structure and genetic make-up dictate too much. Your calves, for example, won't change shape, but you can tone them, making them appear slimmer.'

Exercise psychologist Dr Michelle Segar, from the University of Michigan, says, 'Society seems to promote exercise in order to emphasise the fact that we don't look attractive enough. These days, being fit, strong and athletic seem fairly low down the list of reasons why women exercise.'

But Wong wants to harness those reasons. 'As I'm training my clients, their expectations begin to change,' he says. 'They start to see the difference in their body shape. Yes, they're losing weight, but that's incidental because they're mainly feeling stronger, not just physically but mentally, too.' And as you look around the gym on any busy weekday morning, the women working hard on the versa climber (a torturous machine that works your entire body as you essentially climb great heights with hands and feet at maximum effort for short bursts of cardio) with Wong standing by in his uniform of black shorts and baseball cap, encouraging them in his no-nonsense

fashion, there isn't a single woman there who doesn't look confident, fit, strong and full of energy – and they look great.

So back to my wedding dress – and the panic that led me into Wong's arms. Could my body insecurities really be cured in such a short period of time? He assured me they could but I would have to do exactly as he said.

Wong's first rule is, 'You have to be more disciplined in the kitchen than you are in the gym.' I followed the diet rigidly, the pressure of photographs that

will stay forever suddenly instilling a sense of discipline I never knew I had. I followed his diet, sent him a food diary every day and trained with him five days a week doing metabolic circuits – at one point I was even managing 100 burpees, which I never thought I would be able to do. More importantly, I stopped thinking about Gisele on the billboard, and the model in the picture of my dress, and felt great, as the excess fat around my stomach shifted and my dress began to fit properly. I also realised that this was *my* body, and I began

to like it. I was never going to be model-thin, but I wasn't trying to hide a multitude of sins any more. It was liberating.

The best part? I walked out after each session feeling fitter, stronger, on a high that can't compare to anything, not even stepping on the scales that tell you you've lost the weight. And five weeks later, as I walked down the aisle in my Miranda dress, I felt strong, powerful and happy with my lot. Because I was me – not thin, not a supermodel, but strong on the inside and out.

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ELLE.COM *Get your optimum body with Dalton Wong's programme at ELLEUK.COM/BEAUTY*

Five steps to strong – by Dalton Wong

1. Only eat foods that you know have been sourced from the ground.
2. Get a dose of healthy fats (essential fatty acids, nuts, avocados) but no more than half a cup a day.
3. Mix up your metabolic circuits with resistance training, so you are doing cardiovascular circuits and weights together.
4. You should be out of breath after these circuits, and not able to talk.
5. Leave at least three hours between exercising and going to sleep.