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# What My Face Lift Taught Me About Beauty

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I'm the last woman in the world who would have Vaseline on my lips is about as far as I go for makeup, and wearing heels cripples me. Besides, as a sporty, *au naturel* New York transplant to Los Angeles, I'd grown to abhor the way so many aging women looked with their tight, translucent skin stretched so thin I could almost see their brains.

But I'd just turned 39 and people kept asking me, "Are you tired? You look exhausted." My under-eye bags—a genetic legacy that even my two-year-old niece sported, albeit in a much cuter way—were now overtaking my otherwise pretty face.

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So when a friend mentioned that his doctor cousin needed a volunteer to be filmed for a TV segment having a stem-cell face lift—a procedure that would remove and inject my own cells into my face, done entirely by needles—I told him I'd do it. Maybe the natural procedure would work better than my mother's blepharoplasty, the traditional surgery cutting away puffy eye skin—which didn't seem to work on her. Besides, the \$10,000 face lift was going to be free. What could be bad?

Pain, that's what. *Squish, squish* went the sound of the Beverly Hills doctor pumping liquid into my face. He explained what he was doing to the TV camera's blinding lights: "We're taking these adult stem cells from the fat in her stomach and injecting it around her face, restoring the volume lost with time. The cells will repair that area and she'll look five to ten years younger."

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"Smile!" commanded Gina, the TV producer. But how could I smile when my face was swelling, frozen into the surprised expression of a person who hadn't realized that altering her face could actually leave her face forever altered?

After 19 injections around my eyes, mouth, cheeks and forehead, I stumbled out with a balloon for a head. I was to return in 12 days for my "after" shots. (The "before" shots filmed at dawn, highlighted my face puffy under the unflattering interrogation lights.) But a few days later, I doubted I'd be ready—not for TV or for ever appearing in public again. My face was still purple and lumpy. What had I done to myself? Why couldn't I have left well enough alone?

applied and smooth. God, was I happy that the procedure worked—but even more relieved that I looked like myself again (albeit from a decade prior).

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*Before and after, courtesy of the author*

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When I walked into the doctor's office, Gina grabbed my face in her hands. "What do you think about her lips?" she said, examining me like a thoroughbred. "They're too puny."

The doctor touched my mouth. "I still have your stem cells," he offered.

Looking in the mirror, I noticed my mouth *did* seem out of place now, wrinkled compared to my supple cheeks and wide, unencumbered eyes. "Well, I'm already here..." I said.

Everyone in the room smiled. That's when I noticed something strange: Except for the crease in the doctor's pants, there wasn't a wrinkle in the room. These women had baby-smooth skin, overblown lips, liposuctioned arms, and who knows what else done.

If I rejuvenated my lips, where would it end? I'd need my neck to match, then my cleavage, then I would have to refurbish myself piece by piece so I would be an entirely new model. I suddenly understood why a beautiful woman like Renée Zellweger would alter her adorable *Bridget Jones* visage, or why Nicole Kidman would freeze her forehead for posterity: they lived in an alternate universe where egregious flaws weren't just fixed, but completely *eradicated*—taking their individuality with them.

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In the next month, I would move back to New York, looking exactly the same as when I had left in my early 30s, with the fresh face and bright eyes of a young woman—the picture of Dorian Gray next to my friends' more weathered faces. I would be extremely happy with my rejuvenated face for years to come. But that was enough. Los Angeles would have made its mark on me, but I wouldn't allow it to completely remake me.

Before that, though, back in the Beverly Hills' doctor's office, I stared at the eager faces ready for me to be injected again. "Don't do anything to my lips," I said, holding my chin up high. "I'm fine just the way I am."

