

Face Off

With the latest laser-resurfacing technique, the love of a good man, and a couple of

My decisiveness was uncharacteristic. I called to schedule my face for laser resurfacing in a flurry of efficiency, as if it were nothing at all. Maybe it was the dread I had begun to feel every time I looked in the mirror. My face was a road map of wrinkles: Here, the blistering June I tramped through Turkey looking at archeological ruins. There, the spring break in Florida when I got such a searing sunburn that I shook all night with fever and broke out in hives like squashed tomatoes.

No matter that I have fair hair, pale eyes, and dry skin. Or that my mother's face resembles an alligator purse. Twenty years ago, I thought sunscreen deterred progress, not damage.

Now, at forty-four, sitting in the office of a well-respected Manhattan dermatologist, Laurie J. Polis, MD, I see my folly. Polis looks closely at my face. "You have surface wrinkles," she says. "For these, the laser is perfect." She'll be able to erase the crow's-feet around my eyes, the furrows between them, and the vertical "marionette" lines that appear when I smile. It will cost about \$4000, on the low side for New York, where a full-face resurfacing can run up to \$6000.

We review the risks. Though I've been impulsive, I *have* visited several doctors over the past year, including a tony Upper East Side dermatologist with an outsize celebrity clientele. On that visit, I was put off, not only by the doctor's brusqueness—she barely gave me five minutes before turning me over to one of her minions—but by her mention of scarring, which occurs if the laser is passed over the same spot too many times, causing a burn.

Polis tells me she's never left a scar. "You get a sign this is going to happen," she assures me. "If you are astute, you can see the color of the skin changing, turning a buttery hue. The

skin starts to look abraded, like a chammy. That's when you know to stop. . . .

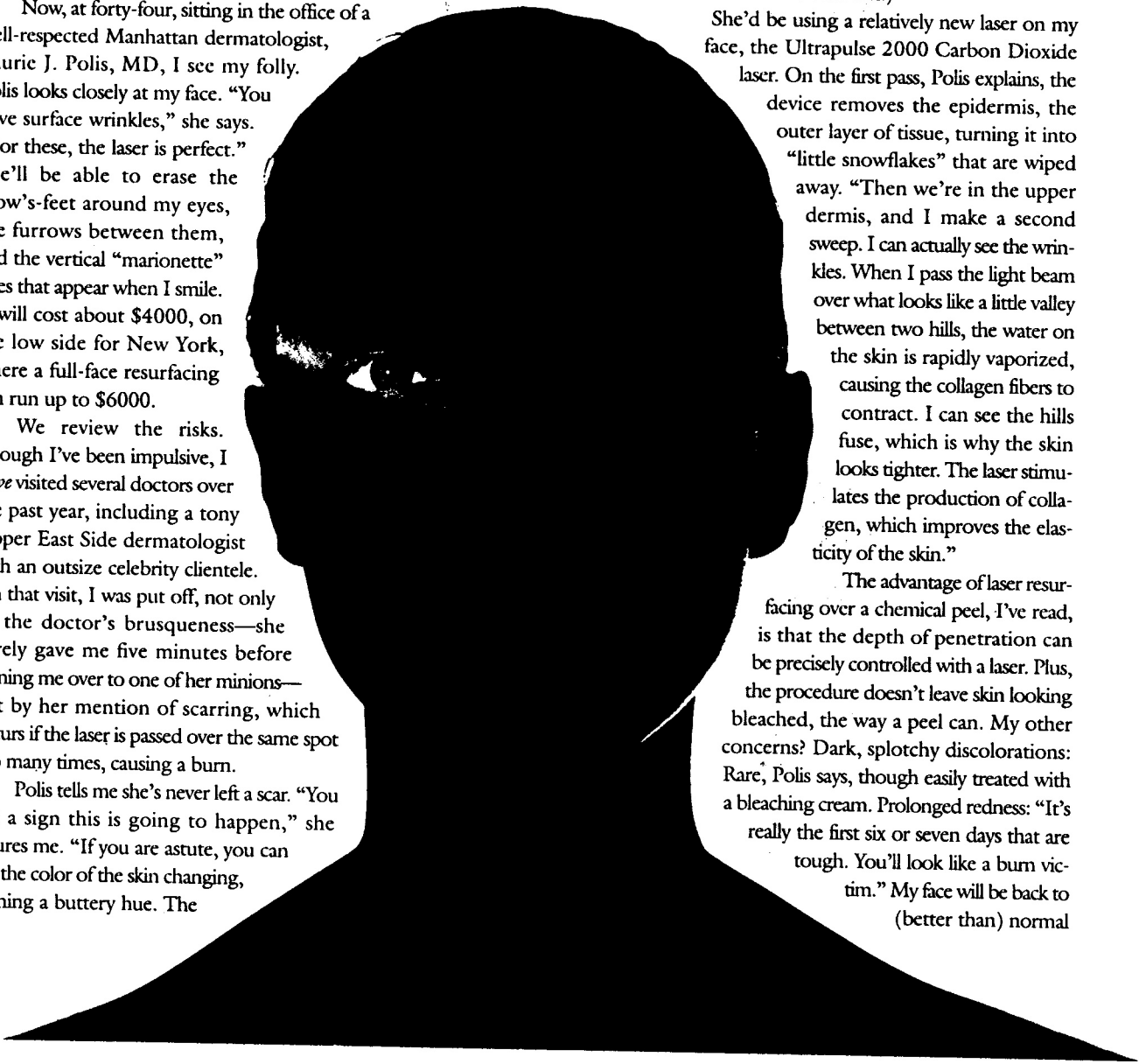
"I never forget it's *your* face."

Perhaps the scariest aspect of laser resurfacing is that any doctor can legally do it—regardless of training. Polis, however, has what I'm told one should look for in a doctor: She's a board-certified dermatologist (plastic surgeons are also recommended), she's been working with lasers for thirteen years, and she's done facial-resurfacing specifically since 1994, which means she's had enough experience to be able to show me a whole slew of before-and-after photos. (She also said I could call a few of her former patients if I wanted to check her out.)

She'd be using a relatively new laser on my face, the Ultrapulse 2000 Carbon Dioxide laser. On the first pass, Polis explains, the device removes the epidermis, the outer layer of tissue, turning it into "little snowflakes" that are wiped away. "Then we're in the upper dermis, and I make a second sweep. I can actually see the wrinkles. When I pass the light beam over what looks like a little valley between two hills, the water on the skin is rapidly vaporized, causing the collagen fibers to contract. I can see the hills fuse, which is why the skin looks tighter. The laser stimulates the production of collagen, which improves the elasticity of the skin."

The advantage of laser resurfacing over a chemical peel, I've read, is that the depth of penetration can be precisely controlled with a laser. Plus, the procedure doesn't leave skin looking bleached, the way a peel can. My other concerns? Dark, splotchy discolorations: Rare, Polis says, though easily treated with a bleaching cream. Prolonged redness: "It's really the first six or seven days that are tough. You'll look like a burn victim." My face will be back to (better than) normal

beauty



bags of frozen peas, Andrea Barnet attempts to turn back time

in four to six weeks, Polis says, though there may be residual pinkness for as long as three months.

Before I leave, she goes over the supplies I'll need: A healing ointment called Aquaphor; moist dressing pads; prescriptions for antibiotics, to guard against infections, and for painkillers—just in case. One other thing, she adds, as I reach the door: "You should be prepared. Ninety percent of husbands freak out about a week after the procedure."

But my husband seems game. He agrees to pick me up after my appointment and drive me to the country, where I'm planning to hide out for the week I expect it will take before I can show my face. The surgery is scheduled for February 5, so I'm sure I'll be ready for a dinner out on Valentine's Day.

I arrive at Polis's office around noon. "We're going to put you into a twilight sleep," she explains, as I settle into what looks like a dental chair. She introduces me to the anesthesiologist, then points to her extensive collection of CDs. "What'll it be?" I choose Van Morrison's *Moondance*, and by the second song, I'm out.

When I awaken, Polis and my husband help me out to the car and fold me into the backseat like a rag doll. I giggle at how disoriented I feel and drape waiting bags of frozen peas over my eyes. The ride passes in a flash. I slip in and out of sleep, periodically rising to try to catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. It's terrible. To keep down the swelling, I'm masked in white plastic, with a net over my entire head. I look like a terrorist. "Sit back," my husband says, as we barrel along. "If someone sees you, I'll be arrested."

That night, dinner is both ghastly and poignant. My husband and I keep slipping into manic laughter, caught between horror at how I look and the absurdity of it. Our mirth barely saves us: These are motions of civility in the midst of a freak show.

The first thing I do the next morning is take off the mask, a delicate business since it's stuck to my skin. This is a nightmare, like waking up after a car crash to find your face has been destroyed. I'm beet-red and horribly swollen, especially around the eyes and nose. I reapply a new coat of ointment; keeping my face greased will help prevent scabs, I've been told, so I am dutiful.

My eyes continue to swell. It's so bad, I can't even concentrate on watching a movie, let alone read. There's too much pressure from my leaden lids. No pain, though. And my spirits are fine.

When I wake on day three, my face looks raw, swollen beyond recognition. Nothing I've heard or read has prepared me for this. I lean in toward the mirror. Parts of my forehead and cheeks are mucousy. I flash back to a story my pharmacist told me. He'd gone to deliver supplies to a woman who'd been lasered the week before, and when he rang the bell, only a bony arm emerged to grab the package.

My husband rents movies for me, then stocks the refrigerator with food for the next week. Though he doesn't say it, I can see he finds it painful to look at me. >



building a better laser

While writer Andrea Barnet was wondering whether CO₂ laser resurfacing was worth the lingering pink skin, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery was also questioning the technique. "Our doctors were telling us

about patient dissatisfaction with lasers," society spokesperson Nancy Kobus says. But in May, before lasers could become a PR disaster, a new, supposedly improved technology, the erbium laser, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Erbium, an elemental gas, gives the doctor more control than CO₂, decreasing the chances of thermal damage. Surgeons who've tried erbium lasers say patients usually recover within a month and rarely experience discoloration. The downside is that erbium-laser treatment may not work as well for people with deep wrinkles.

Most surgeons who work with CO₂ can also wield the erbium and the as-yet-unapproved "Nd:YAG" (neodymium-doped yttrium aluminum garnet) laser, developed by Thermolase, which may further cut recovery time. But don't expect either device to be immediately available. Notes Virginia Beach dermatologist David McDaniel, MD: "There are a lot of expensive CO₂ lasers lying around that haven't been paid for yet."—Amy O'Connor



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"If someone sees you, I'll be arrested."

On Saturday, the fourth morning, my face feels tender. It's burning in places. I remember a movie I once saw about a beautiful woman who had battery acid thrown in her face. I re-read the laser literature I saved from the uptown doctor: "Sleep with your head elevated on several pillows to help decrease swelling. Or sleep in a lounge chair. Please do this for seven to ten days." Maybe that's why I'm getting worse. No BarcaLounger. Lying back in bed, I listen to talk shows on NPR and ice, always ice.

On Sunday, there's a thin, honey-brown glaze covering my face. An alarm goes off in my head. Is the tint slightly green? Green means infection, Polis said. Oh my God—but I'm too scary-looking to see a doctor. I call Polis immediately, and though she suspects I'm imagining things, she prescribes a new antibiotic, which calms my fears.

This process, I keep thinking, has less to do with physical healing than with psychological endurance. I'm beginning to feel demoralized. And I've got cabin fever. Maybe I should venture out. I decide on a trip to the local dump. I realize how painfully self-conscious I am as I skulk up to the recycling bin. But it's okay. Despite my dark glasses, my swollen, scalded face, no one seems to notice me.

I'm scheduled to see Polis the next day. I thought I'd be presentable by now, but I'm not. And today I have a new problem: inch-long, crescent-shaped bruises under my eyes.

"Look at you!" Polis exclaims when she sees my face. "You're doing fabulously."

Fabulously! I ask about my scabbed skin, the burgundy splotches on my forehead, my black eyes, and she snorts dismissively. They'll disappear in a matter of days, she says. Hours perhaps. I'm thinking, There'll never be an end to this.

But there is. Polis ushers me in to see Sylvia, the resident aesthetician, who works

magic. Mixing up a potion that includes carrot oil, a green neutralizer, and various beige-toned hues, she shows me how to cover the red. When I leave the office, I look a little like Morticia Addams.

By day fourteen, my skin feels tight as parchment, but my chin scabs are gone, as are the bruises under my eyes. Yet the redness remains: On most days, my face looks as crimson as a Persian carpet. Perusing our calendar for dinner parties, I try not to panic.

"You've gone skiing," a friend says, a month in. "Vail," I nod. Another friend asks if I have been down South. How did she know? The problem is that the red breaks through the beige foundation by the end of each evening, like sun burning through the clouds.

At the eight-week mark, I enter what Polis describes as "the sour-cream-in-the-borscht phase": There are little islands of white amidst the pink. "Don't smile like that," a friend chides over lunch. "I feel like I can see your wrinkles coming back."

But the good news is that this means most of my lines have disappeared, making me look ten years younger. For the first time, I'm beginning to feel it might have been worth it. Wrinkles will inevitably return, Polis has told me, but my new "young" face could last up to fifteen years, if I'm diligent about protecting my skin.

Nine weeks post-laser, I decide, on a lark, to attend a workshop on how to combat aging with exercises intended to tone facial muscles. For two hours, fifty women sit on folding chairs contorting our faces to the instructor's commands. "Imagine a string at your temples, pulling away from your face," she instructs. "Pretend you're kissing the ceiling, to alleviate a double chin. Now stick out your tongue!"

That night at dinner, I tell my husband I feel I'm back to normal. He eyes my still-pink skin and swallows, looking askance. "Not yet," he says. □

