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OCTOBER 2016
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THE SKIN I'M IN

The needle vs. the knife, “tweakments” vs. one-and-done: What’s the best ROI when you want to get 10 years back on your face, in your life? **Holly Millea** does the math

Twelve years ago—July 2004 to be exact—pop superstar Christina Aguilera graced this magazine’s cover. I wrote the story. What I didn’t put in the piece is the one thing I will always remember about her, or rather, the one thing I can’t forget.

Allow me to set the scene. Los Angeles, late February, evening. Inside the L’Ermitage hotel lounge, a fire burns in the fireplace. Aguilera sits 20 feet away at a table eating with her entourage—it’s been arranged that she’ll dine with me. I’ve been relegated to wait across the room with her bodyguard Vern, a funny, massive former football player. Forty minutes later, the singer’s assistant approaches: “Christina is ready to see you now.”

With her posse moving to chill by the fire, Aguilera declines switching to a clean table, radiating *Let’s just get this over with*. Less than an hour into the conversation, her publicist pops up, ending the interview, explaining, “Christina only ever gives an hour.”

“Trust me,” Aguilera says, getting up, eager to rejoin her group. “You have enough.” Her eyes narrow: “I’ve done this before.”

“Christina,” I appeal, “it will be better for both of us if you stay a while longer. You gotta trust *me*, I’ve been doing this a *loooong* time.”

Smiling, she goes in for the kill: “You look like it.” *Boom!*

SHE KNEW HER POWER. It wasn’t fame or fortune or a four-octave singing voice: It was youth, punctuated by beauty and the booty to wear black leather ass-exposing chaps. I stood dumbstruck, caught in the high beams of oncoming middle age, feeling naked and alone and afraid—and, adding injury to insult, picking up the tab.

In the 4,536 days since that poison dart hit me like a Botox needle between the eyes, I haven’t gotten any younger, let alone younger looking. Simply put, everything is sinking south of its border: My brow is heavier, my eyes increasingly creasier; my jawline, once tight and defined, is now a pliable impression of what it used to be. My neck? I mean, when did *this* happen?

“So dramatic; cut the crap!” my friend Virginia says over dinner with our pal Joanna. “You look great for your age.” *For your age.*

“I look back at pictures in my twenties and thirties and I know now I was beautiful, but I didn’t feel that way when they were taken,” Joanna says. “I can honestly say I feel beautiful now. It’s about the way you feel. You have such an energetic spirit, Holly—you project young.”

“True,” Virginia agrees. “Borderline immature.”

I feel so young that I catch my reflection in a store window and literally don’t recognize the older woman staring back until I see the long-haired chihuahua next to her. Truman! He’s mine! That’s me!



My friend Renata calls this phenomenon “a failure of the visual immune system—the one that safeguards us from our own reflection.” She explains: “When you know you’re about to look in a mirror to brush your teeth or hair or to put makeup on, you’re subconsciously braced for your reflection. But when you’re zipping around Barneys or Bloomingdale’s, captured in random mirrors, it’s like you’re being struck by reality bullets. It’s like, Who the hell is that? And it’s *you*.”

Personally, I have good days and bad days. It’s the not knowing which one I’m going to wake up to that’s hard. Sooner or later, I’m going to need a head transplant. But in the meantime, I’d settle for a little nip, a little tuck. I just want to take, like, 10 years off.

“Who are you *kidding*?” Virginia says. “You’ve been taking 10 years off for 20 years!” (While it’s true that I am ELLE’s Beauty Adventureess, that I had my hooded eyelids trimmed in 2008, and that I did occasionally dabble in what Virginia calls the “dark arts”—Botox, filler, lasers—I haven’t touched the stuff for five years.)

“Plastic surgery is for people who don’t look good to begin with,” says Virginia, a *Philadelphia Story* girl who drinks Fresca, wears Pucci, bosses around her book club, and plans to “age gracefully” (an expression that to me equals surrender).

“Besides, you’re too young to have a facelift,” Joanna says. “You can afford to wait.”

Can I? In a youth-driven culture, I need to hold my ground, my job, my appeal—which is not unrelated to that job. Trust me, you know your

years are numbered when a 21-year-old Zac Efron hugs you good-bye after the interview and says, “Holly, I hope you take this as a compliment: You remind me of my mother.”

I actually *can't* afford to wait. “Watch this!” I pinch an inch of loose skin at the lower corners of my jawline, tightening my jowls and lifting my neck at the same time.

“Okay, that looks really good,” Joanna admits. Virginia nods, sad-frowning. “I remember when you looked like that.”

WHAT CAN I TELL YOU about time? To say that it flies is inaccurate. It's more of a gallop. Where once days turned into weeks, weeks have begun to pass like days. Somewhere along the continuum, Monday skips Tuesday and Wednesday and goes straight to Thursday; then another weekend goes by, and soon it occurs to you that Saturdays have gone missing, too.

Just yesterday, I jumped on the R train for the first time, excited that my whole life was ahead of me—unaware of the fact I was going through a time-lapse tunnel. Suddenly, over the intercom: “Next stop, AARP station. This will be the last stop.”

Wait. *What?* I must have fallen asleep. Stumbling onto the platform disoriented, I ask for directions. “Excuse me, sir? Could you please tell me, where does a woman go when she is—to quote Rainer Maria Rilke: ‘too young for what is old/and too old for what has never been’? You see, I’m not supposed to be here yet. I missed my stop—the one where I was going to be dating and seeking expert financial advice and writing a best-selling novel and taking up meditation. *That* stop. I’ve got to go back! Just 10 years. Hey, mister! You don’t understand. There are people I haven’t met yet who don’t know they’re expecting me!”

Relaying this sense of lost prime time and missed opportunities to your friends incites an array of reactions. Renata: “If you lived on a desert island without any mirrors, would you still want a facelift?” Yes, if it increased my chances of a circling pilot wanting to rescue me.

Some reveal they’re debating doing a little something, too: “You go first!” Others say things like, “I mean, plastic surgery—are you really *that* person?”

That’s my friend Jackie. Uh, yeah. I’m beginning to think I’m really that person. “But you have a portrait of Georgia O’Keeffe over your bed. You bought it saying you loved the lines in her face and how beautifully she’d aged. She’s in her eighties in that photograph!”

All true, but a specious argument given my total lack of resemblance to Georgia O’Keeffe. Um, excuse me, Jackie? Who went and got her scalp injected with her own platelets at the first sign of thinning hair? Don’t you want to go bald gracefully? And what about that estrogen patch you’re wearing? That shut her up. She still isn’t talking to me.

I relay the conversation to my editor, Liesl, who’s 52 and sympathetic. “I get it,” she says. She e-mails me her theory: “When you are in your late twenties through midforties, your power—sexually, socially, professionally—is a mix of your beauty, your intelligence, your sense of humor, your social skill. So for almost 20 years you go along with that quartet of components, some of them more prominent than others, but all in play. While you may never use your looks overtly, it’s part of



The author, left, and her editor, 10 years ago

your arsenal, part of the total you. Then one day, the beauty part starts to crumble a bit. Suddenly, you’re out of whack.”

(I couldn’t have written it better myself, so I’m glad she did.)

When my friend Claudine had her face and neck lifted, I went along for the ride. Five years later, despite being 10 years older than me, she looks my age, and amazing. “It had to be done,” she says of the moment she handed over her credit card. “I saw a photo of myself in profile and thought, Oh my God, I can’t live with that neck. And my face—I had to wear more and more makeup. My features were softening to the point of just *bleh*.” Deeper than that, “I’d been through a bad breakup years before that sort of imprinted itself on my face. I looked wounded. And then,” she bursts out laughing, “I was walking to work and a kid on a bike called out, ‘Nice tits, Grandma!’”

“But after I had the surgery, the sorrow—*poof*—gone. It took me back to happier times. I feel happier. I’m a braver person.”

The irony is, she almost died during the operation. Most complications from plastic surgery stem from infection post-procedure; in American Society of Plastic Surgeons statistics, based on 400,000 plastic surgeries performed by board-certified members, the mortality rate was one in 57,000. But in Claudine’s case, an allergic reaction to the anesthesia sent her into anaphylactic shock. I was there when she woke up in the ICU, still intubated, unable to speak. Explaining what happened, the nurse handed Claudine a clipboard and pen. She wrote: “Did he finish?”

We laugh about it now. “Going back to England to a family reunion, no one knew what I’d done, but they were falling all over me, saying how great I looked,” Claudine says. “Did I lose weight? Change my hair? All that. The best thing was seeing the look on my younger sister’s face. She was so jealous. She’d always been mean to me growing up.”

I’M IN THE BEVERLY HILLS office of Norman Leaf, MD, crashing his chicken salad-sandwich lunch hour. We first met 12 years ago when I wrote a Beauty Adventure piece on L.A.’s top plastic surgeons. In a town that screams plastic, Leaf, who is soft-spoken and distinguished, with silver hair and bright blue eyes, is known for his subtle way with a scalpel. “We’ve talked about your brows before,” he says. They could use a lift. “Your brows are very low and you squint a lot. You have an intensity to you, which isn’t a bad thing for a journalist. Certainly I see actors and actresses who have that, and we have to talk about that—is surgery going to change their hireability?”

We never *see* good “work,” but we see the work that kills careers. When even the rich and famous can become plastic surgery victims, you know it’s a risky business. (Virginia is always sending me photos of altered actresses with the caption: “I spy an eye job...I spy a forehead lift...”) Recently I saw a photo of a supermodel with her doppelgänger daughter. The girl has her mother’s eyes, or rather, the eyes her mother *once* had, before an aggressive blepharoplasty. It gave me real pause knowing that someone with all that cash and access to the finest surgeons had lost her most defining feature. There ain’t no gettin’ it back.

The best chance to wake up after surgery still looking like yourself, Leaf says, is to “make sure the doctor has taste and not just ability.”

That last sentence is worth rereading, and worth reading the other way around: He might have the aesthetic sense, but surgically might not be technically adept enough to pull off his vision. Then, too, his sensibility might not match your own. It’s a craft, after all. (By the way, some of that bad work may be just what the patient ordered. She may love the way she looks.)

To avoid becoming a casualty, examine the surgeon’s website. You’ll

Beware of what Liotta calls “tech neck—creases from constantly looking down at your electronic devices.”

get a vibe. Look closely at the before-and-after pictures—I was surprised at how many reputed “top surgeons” had pictures of patients who looked “done” and even *overdone* to me. Check Healthgrades, the Yelp of doctors, for reviews. Interview your friends who’ve had good surgery. Then interview their surgeons. You’re probably feeling vulnerable if you’re considering plastic surgery; as you would before any major medical procedure, get at least a second opinion.

Now, where were we? Leaf is saying, “No one likes to hear the word *facelift*. They panic.” I panic. It’s one thing to contemplate, another to hear you’re an electable candidate. “But it would help you tremendously,” Leaf says. “When I say tremendously, I’m not saying that you look really bad; you don’t. And you have very youthful energy—that is by far the most important thing.”

That said, “From my point of view, the younger you do it, the better. That doesn’t mean that people should have a facelift when they turn 21, but the best results are always in patients who don’t really need the surgery. It would be subtle; people would never know. They’ll think you went on vacation.”

There’s more. Leaf suggests a neck lift, too. As we age, the platysma muscle spreads apart, causing that sinewy corded look in the neck, which is why I can no longer wear chokers. “So we go in and tighten the muscles, bring them together like a corset. We pull it up very tightly and we suture it back behind the ear, all under the skin. The sutures last two or three months. But in the meantime the tissues heal together and scar down, and they stay put.” Sounds gross, but effective!

Walking out, I ask him what procedure is top-trending. “Kim Kardashian is the prime mover in buttock augmentation,” he says. According to the ASPS, between 2014 and 2015, the number of patients seeking the procedure rose by 28 percent. What happens to people when that big bottom ages? Leaf chuckles: “Gravity takes over. You don’t want to sit next to them on the plane if you can help it, not in coach.”

It just so happens that around the corner from Leaf’s office is the Kardashian clan’s reconstructionist, Simon Ourian, MD, whose website describes him as a “cosmetic dermatologist by vocation and a sculptor by avocation...they are indivisible.” I’m so confused.

The next morning, I enlist my friend Michael to accompany me on an exploratory expedition, hoping I can postpone the knife and get the lift I need from a needle. Arriving early, we sit in Ourian’s waiting area, sipping cappuccinos from porcelain cups and eating biscotti from a silver tray filled with scrumptious carbohydrates, mesmerized by a video installation of a woman slowly aging backward into her baby self. Michael goes to the bathroom, returns: “I just saw [name redacted] coming in a back door! She had big black sunglasses on and threw her hands over her face when she saw me.”

We wait some more, staring at the wall, watching a time-lapse video of a sculptor’s hands molding a blob of clay into a face that starts out looking like Nefertiti, and ends up being Angelina Jolie. The artist? Ourian. (“She has a lot of the features universally known to be attractive,” he says.) On our way to the examining room, we pass expensively framed, poster-size, museum-quality photographs of Gisele Bündchen, Brad Pitt, Salma Hayek, Johnny Depp...

Ourian, 49, is suave and handsome; he immigrated to America at 15 from Iran. Three years later he had a nose job “right here in Beverly Hills. It was a surgery that happened in a day and changed the course of my life. I became a different person. I went from very introverted, shy, to outgoing and confident.”

I, conversely, went from extroverted to introverted and hope to be reconverted. Ten years. Is he up to the task? “Absolutely,” Ourian says. “I do it all the time.”

I ask him the difference between plastic and cosmetic surgery. “Plastic surgeons are the carpenters of the face; they put things together,” he

FACE PAINTING

On the left, Holly Millea before Simon Ourian, MD, cosmetic surgeon to the Kardashians, Jenners, Lady Gaga, et al., worked on her visage (right) using an app called Facetune. The cost to achieve this via lasers and fillers: \$33,300.



explains. “Cosmetic medicine, the painting is better.” In Hollywood, Ourian is considered a master. (In addition to the Kardashians, the Jenners and Lady Gaga sit for him. As do some of those whose portraits hang on his walls. “Yes, but I can’t tell you which ones.”)

He pulls out his iPhone, snaps my picture, loads it into the Facetune app, and, using his finger as a brush, starts painting my photo into an “after” portrait. “I would lift your eyebrows a bit,” he says, lifting my brows. “Lift your cheeks.... You have a nasolabial line.... I would make the distance between your nose to your mouth a little bit smaller. Make your lips a little bit fuller, turn your smile up a bit.... Your undereyes, we need to get rid of these lines.... Also the hollows under your eyes.... Better quality of skin....” His finger erases the sun damage from my face. “And that’s it!”

Ourian hands me the phone. *Hmm*. Not bad. Not me, but not bad. “It wouldn’t be exactly the same version of yourself,” he says. “But we can fool the human eye to a degree that you can believe that this was the way you looked 10 years ago.”

I ask him to price out the procedures in my picture and send me the bill. A week later, it arrives: “Filler for Lateral Cheeks, \$3,900; Under Eyes, \$3,900; Nasolabial Folds, \$3,900; Marionette Lines, \$3,900; Lips, \$3,900; Mandible/Jawline, \$3,900; Frown Line, \$2,000; Coolaser treatment for Face, Eyes, and Neck, \$7,900.” All in—\$33,300. I write back: How often would I need to do the treatments to maintain the aesthetic benefits? The reply: “Once every two to four years.”

I begin to crunch some numbers. According to 2015 figures from the ASPS, the national average physician’s fee for Botox is \$382 per treatment, so if Botox lasts about four months, that’s \$1,146 a year, times 10 years equals \$11,460. Filler? The least expensive kind of hyaluronic acid averages \$613 per treatment; figure on two treatments a year, for an average 10-year price tag of \$12,260. Total average cost for a decade: \$23,720.

Compare that to the national average surgeon’s fee for a facelift, \$6,652; a neck lift, \$4,497; a brow lift, \$3,280. Total cost: \$14,429, with a shelf life of 10 years.

Given my Manhattan zip code, 10021, the prices for all of this—Botox, fillers, surgery—will be much higher than the national average. Even so, the best return on investment is surgery.

“IN L.A., EVERYONE HAS that poofed-out, full-on craziness. That doesn’t fly in New York. Nobody here wants to look like they did *anything*,” says Dara Liotta, MD, a plastic and cosmetic surgeon.

Back in Manhattan, I’m in her Upper East Side brownstone office. At 37, she majors in young YouTube stars, models, and actresses who keep standing monthly “tweakments” to avoid bruising and overfilling. “My clients can’t afford downtime. They’re Snapchatting, constantly on Instagram. So it’s a little Botox, a little filler, tiny surgeries. I’m more like their face trainer than a surgeon for them,” she says. So much so that Liotta has developed an area of

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BLURRED LINES

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point, five months had passed and she'd acquired some 90,000 followers, though many, it turned out, were fake accounts bought by the artist Constant Dullaart as part of a project meant to highlight the art world's "superficial attention culture." Even some of Ulman's close friends didn't know what to think.

Fast-forward to October 2014, when Ulman appeared on a panel at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and announced it had all been a performance intended, in part, to demonstrate how easy it is to manipulate an audience through images. "How is a female artist supposed to look like?" Ulman asked the crowd. "How is she supposed to behave? How do we consume images, and how do they consume us? Are we judgmental? Maybe? Or not at all? Or absolutely yes."

She'd stuffed her bra with socks to fake the boob job; gotten temporary fillers in her face that vanished within six months; bought clothes that she couldn't afford for photos, then returned them. She'd also isolated herself, telling only a few people about the piece, along with some museums she'd previously interacted with, mostly to protect herself. "I knew some people wouldn't believe that it was a performance," she says. "I have enough experience as a woman in the art world."

And it was true. Some didn't. Ulman says now that one male artist she'd told about the concept early on contacted her midperformance lamenting the effect L.A. was having on her. Why didn't she escape that toxic life, he said, and become his muse instead? Afterward, some still assumed that the whole thing had been a ruse to get sexual attention she was too coy to acknowledge she wanted. Others suggested she couldn't have really understood what she was doing—that it was too accessible, too banal to be art.

Her supporters dismiss these arguments out of hand. "It's like how people originally said abstract expressionism wasn't art," says Fiontán Moran, an assistant curator at Tate Modern. "Her work is continuing the investigation others, especially female artists, have done into how women are represented in mass media. What's new is that now, because of social media, mass media includes everyday people creating their fantasy selves."

But what is perhaps most intriguing about *Excellences & Perfections* is that the persona is not entirely fake. Ulman had been an escort. She does enjoy spas and fashion and shopping at Whole Foods. "Her work could be seen as satirical, but she's inhabiting something she understands to some degree," Moran says. Or, as Ulman puts it, "Whatever I do has to do with my own insecurities. I'm implicated. Much of that piece had to do with wanting to be a type of woman I didn't feel I was really allowed to be."

ULMAN GREW UP working class, the only child of parents in a volatile relationship, and never had the luxury of "playing around as an artist and then going home," she says. Her parents divorced when she was 16; she now helps support her mom, whom she describes as "a *Portlandia* character," and has no relationship with her dad, a tattoo artist.

The ideas expressed in *Excellences & Perfections* began percolating when, as a lonely, bored teenager, Ulman signed up for an account on Fotolog (a Myspace-like site then popular in Spain) and found that semisuggestive shots of herself not only helped her connect with people in other cities but also attracted "fans" who sent her actual presents. The attention was fun at first, but then it freaked her out. "So I stopped," she says. "I wasn't expecting to do anything with my image ever again."

But at Central Saint Martins (a therapist suggested she move as far as possible from her family; it was the first Google hit for "art school London"), she realized that an online profile might help advance her career. She uploaded pictures of herself to Facebook, and soon, in addition to hearing from random men from her past, she was also fielding more show offers. In a 2013 talk, she called the correlation between showing her face and making professional progress "devastating."

The offers didn't solve her money problems, however. After graduating, she went on the dole and struggled to produce work. ("It's hard to make art with no material, no anything," she says.) Finally she posted an ad on a sex-work website and got 200 responses. Sitting in a café after our yoga class, she puts her head in her hands. "It was so depressing," she says. "I'd looked for a job for two years."

The first time was relatively easy. But some men, she soon discovered, were prone to offer dresses instead of cash, trying to make the interaction less transactional; one guy took Ulman to Monaco and, mixed up on drugs, convinced himself she was his girlfriend and refused to pay at all. Things worse than that occurred, too. "Though you can't talk about them," she says. "Because whatever happened, people assume it's your fault." She stopped in late 2013, after the bus accident, but by then had conceptualized a piece that would explore the theater of femininity, and people's often complicated responses. "You're straight-up performing," she says of being an escort. "I'd spend all day getting ready."

The premise that identity is more prescribed than innate, that taste and class are linked, that gender is performed—these are not new ideas. But Ulman forged new ground by utilizing Instagram as a medium, making people's comments—the cheery affirmations, the judgment, the jealousy—as much a part of the performance as the photos.

These days, Ulman's studio is on the seventeenth floor of an office building downtown; in the lobby, her name is listed between a law office and the consulate of Lebanon. Upstairs, in a small room with brown wall-to-wall and a vertiginous view, is a red curtain, scarlet flowers, and a wig, all props in Ulman's second Instagram performance, which she plans to finish this month.

Bob the pigeon appears frequently in the new piece, *Privilege*, along with references to pregnancy and office culture—numerous videos show the artist reflected in the building elevator's mirrored doors, saying, "it's been a *loong* day." *Privilege*

takes corporate blandness and the obsessive nature of pregnancy chat rooms as a starting point, but is, again, more than a critique. It's primarily based upon Ulman's own insecurities, she says, but now they're those of a (slightly) older woman. "I'm wondering if I can be an artist and also have kids, you know?" she says. "Because if you're a good artist, you're supposed to be a shitty mom."

As the summer progressed, the series got increasingly surreal—Ulman's response to a world that felt more violent and unstable by the day. In one video, she appears in a frilly clown shirt, an American flag superimposed on her face, unleashing an aggressive tirade about the citizenship of her unborn baby—inspired, she said later, by the vocal theatrics of real-life Twitter user @rjoyourjoy1919, an ardent Donald Trump supporter.

If it all sounds a bit strange, it is. And judging by the comments, at least some of her 121,000 followers still believe the fiction she's creating. One wrote in July, "How many more months??? Can't wait to see the baby!" As with anything on social media, though, it's hard to know if they're any more earnest than she is.

In May, after Ulman and I said good-bye, I went to Café Gratitude, an upscale organic café where servers greet you by asking, "What are you grateful for today?" After my time with Ulman, I felt keenly aware of the restaurant as the kind of place I gravitate to—entering it was like sinking into a body of water at the exact temperature as my body. It was, in fact, so tailor-made for people like me that I ran into an old friend. I told her I'd spent the day with Ulman; she said she knew of her, kind of. "She's that pretty artist, right?" she said. "She's so young," said the coworker she was with. "She's so cute," said my friend. I felt, in a word, uneasy. ■



THE SKIN I'M IN

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expertise to address a modern plague. Our being tethered to technology has resulted in what she calls "tech neck—creases from constantly looking down at your electronic devices." Heads up, girls!

Walking home down Madison Avenue, I keep my iPhone at eye level, reading a text from Virginia: "Saw Carole at screening last night. I spy a neck lift." Carole is a successful indie film producer we've grown up with in the business. I shoot her an e-mail with the subject line: "Quick question pls call." Pronto, my phone rings.

"I had a neck lift," Carole says. "Virginia told you, right?"

We meet for lunch at Freds at Barneys. Smiling slyly, she swans in, sits, and, still smiling, removes her Burberry scarf to unveil her triumph. Well? Her neck is a thing to behold. And the diamond



THE MORE, THE MERRIER

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said 19 years ago—that he and Nan were stuck in the suburbs with jobs and kids, so polyamory was their version of mountain climbing, something dangerous and transformative they could do at home. At the time, I thought it was poignant and a little sad. But John did end up climbing mountains. And entering triathlons and Ironman competitions. That was his way of breathing up the chaos energy—in fact, the Ironman phase began when one of Nan’s lovers took him up the angular ridges of Mount Snowdon, the highest point in Wales. “We were above the cloud line and it was one of the great days of my life,” he says. “Shame on me for underestimating myself.”

And the kids? How did they turn out? Their son, Adam, 13 when we first met and now a tall and handsome married man with a new baby, a PhD in engineering, and a “superboring” job making semiconductors in Arizona, tells me they were a “superaffectionate” family, so nothing seemed out of place. “It was never weird; it was surprisingly not weird,” he insists. He remembers Tom as a “very cool guy.” His friends liked hanging out at his house for the “free-spirit vibe.” But his own marriage is “100 percent not anything but traditional.”

As for their daughter, Julia, she was so busy planning her wedding I had to corner her at one of her many engagement parties. Twenty-eight now, a therapist in a locked ward for troubled children, she told me she figured out what was going on by observing other parents. “I remember going to my friend Andrea’s house, and her mom was very upset because Andrea tried to wear pajama pants to school one day. And I was like, ‘Well, I don’t have any of *that* at home because my parents are people.’” Of course, there were some hard times, even times when she wondered why they didn’t get divorced. But on a day like today—the banner stretched across the wall of the rec room says, “Congratulations Julia and Kate”—she appreciates them even more. “I guess that in relationship to myself, it kind of gave me this acceptance of ‘It’s okay to do what feels right.’”

“If I can talk about us for a minute?” Kathy says.

“Please,” John says.

When our daughters were well past 21, she says, she told them that we had “loosened the rules” of our marriage a bit (because Kathy is the secret-garden type and doesn’t care to share the details with outsiders, that’s as much as I can say). Being honest with the kids “felt so good,” she adds. “Nobody should go into a marriage thinking these archaic—”

“The Disney idea of monogamy,” Nan says.

“Whereas the expanded marriage is really, if you look at it in a certain way, tremendously romantic.”

“It is!” Nan says. “It’s a romance that you can

be pushed in the wrong direction by those muscles. Botox is especially important while healing.”

He drops his hand and my brow hits the floor. “You see how angry you look?” he asks. Yes, and seeing it makes me feel that way.

Pointing to my undereyes, Rosenberg notes, “I see a shadow of translucency here; this is old filler. It’s a magnet for water, so that can swell afterward.” But it’s been years since I had it done! “Filler can last as long as eight years out,” Rosenberg says. “It lasts where we don’t want it to, and it goes away where we want it to stay. In areas where there’s no expression, like under the eyes, it can persist.”

The solution is a solution: Vitrase, a dissolving agent that can deflate the bag in about 24 hours. Even for those who’ve been “stacking” up their faces—filler on top of filler, which, when there’s a lot of hyaluronic acid in there, creates that glossy, waxy look in the cheek—“it’s completely reversible,” Rosenberg says. “If you want to get back to baseline, inject Vitrase—that’s the emergency exit.”

Going through his before-and-after pictures of consenting patients, elucidating their various procedures, Rosenberg says, “Aging is much more than skin; it’s anatomical layers. It’s muscle and fat, and adjusting the layout of that is what makes people look better. It’s not magic.

“This was a woman who’d become invisible,” he says, settling on one. “She’s a gym person, in great shape, but from the shoulders up, it’s a disaster. Here she is after; she’s got everything back again!” Pretty miraculous. “The scars are invisible; there’s no change in the hairline. This is 12 days out.”

Click! Another miracle. “This is akin to you. She’s 52. Does she look younger—definitely! Does she look 10 years younger? I don’t know. Maybe. She looks beautiful... When we’re talking about aging faces, it’s more of the mismatch that brings people here: ‘I look one way but I feel another, and it drives me crazy.’ People ask them, ‘Why do you look so sad, or tired, or angry?’ And the person doesn’t feel that way,” he says. “Aging changes their face, and they feel out of balance. That imbalance creates sadness, frustration. I almost never hear from women, ‘I want to be attractive to men.’”

“I don’t know how you looked 10 years ago,” Rosenberg continues, walking us out. “You don’t need to look younger to look better—you need to look happy and rested. What I can do is make you look amazing, maybe amazing *and* 45.”

Wouldn’t that be lovely? I walk Liesl to the subway. “You gonna do it?” she asks, smiling. It’s the smile my best friend, Jules, wore when we were 13, looking over the edge of a cliff into Sheridan Lake, in South Dakota, the glittering water waiting below. I feel the same way I felt then—excited, scared, anxious. Then, one Indian summer day, tired of not jumping, I jumped.

Maybe...when I’m ready...sooner or later...probably sooner, given how late it is. We laugh. “I’m right behind you,” she says, throwing an arm over my shoulders.

The thing is, I’ve been living a someday life for so long—“someday I’ll do this, someday I’ll do that.” I spent so much of the last 10 years scared to make a misstep in my work, my personal life. What if I could jump and get that time back? What would happen? What could happen? This much I know: I’d stay awake. I wouldn’t miss a single day. ■

choker it’s holding is impressive, too. “Best thing I ever did,” Carole says. “It was on my to-do list for six years. The best present I ever gave myself. Thank you, Dr. David Rosenberg. It’s completely boosted my confidence. If someone is sitting to my side, I now know they’re not staring at sagging skin. Now...I tell everybody I had my neck done!”

That’s not all Carole tells everybody. Word has spread that I’m mulling a surgical makeover, and before you know it my various inboxes turn into admissions offices, with friends and acquaintances admitting to doing this and that, and who did what to whom, many prefaced by “Off the record....” There are no secrets.

One of the recurring names is that of Rosenberg, a plastic surgeon whose practice, as fate would have it, is three blocks from my apartment.

I wrangle Liesl away from her desk and we go pay him a visit. Sitting on a chocolate leather couch in the waiting room, we watch a video art installation of a man encased head-to-toe in a white latex suit, blindly, impressively sketching a caricature on the camera lens; erasing it; and doing another, until Rosenberg appears. At 49, he’s collegiately handsome, emitting a clean, crisp energy.

He leads us to his wood-paneled office and starts by explaining that there are two schools of plastic surgery: general and facial. “I trained in head and neck, and ear, nose, and throat surgery, and afterward, facial plastic surgery,” Rosenberg says. “So I’m a board-certified facial plastic surgeon. All I do is facial, if you want to be as accurate as possible.”

When Rosenberg started his practice in 2000, he looked around the city and saw an opportunity. “The mantra back then was whoever created the tightest neck was the busiest surgeon,” he remembers. “New York facelifts were severe looking instead of soft and defined and feminine. My goal was to make women look as pretty as possible with no evidence of surgery. To create a lift that was more age-appropriate and celebrate where you are in life right now.”

What if you don’t feel celebratory about where you are in life? What if you feel the appropriate age for you right now was 10 years ago? “Your focus is on age; my focus is bigger than that,” Rosenberg says. “You’re missing so much when you talk about age. There’s so much more than that going on.” He stands, gesturing toward the door. “Come on, let’s go into the exam room, where the lighting is better.”

I jump up onto the examining table and Rosenberg hands me a ponytail holder to pull my hair back. “Close your eyes,” he says. “What I’m doing now is massaging away any expression. Because when you open your eyes, you lift your brows because of the heaviness. Okay, now, open your eyes—this is you at complete rest.” I look in the mirror he’s holding. Wow, my brow is literally obstructing my vision. Which means that unless I’m asleep, my brow is never fully relaxed. Exhausting.

I close my eyes again and now I feel his hand on my forehead, lifting it gently. “This is an endoscopic brow lift,” he says. “See how happy you look? The nicest part of it is the ease of recovery—best-case scenario, three days, you’re perfect.”

But...“if you’re going to invest in this, you should do Botox twice a year to the depressor muscles.” My tendency to furrow my brow is so strong it will literally pull the brow lift back down. “So you’re fighting it,” Rosenberg explains. “Your brow will