

ADDICTED TO PLASTIC SURGERY

Why age? At 40, writer Elizabeth Hayt is proud to say she has done it all—an eyelift, Botox injections, fat transplants, a breast augmentation, liposuction. And she doesn't plan to stop. Photographed by Melvin Sokolsky

Some mothers pass on chicken soup recipes to their daughters. Others pass on heirloom jewelry. Mine has given me plastic surgery—or, at least, helped to finance it. After a couple of facelifts over the past 20 years, my mother, who looks 50-plus—rather than her true age of ... well, let's not even go there—doesn't waste her time with creams, spa treatments, or vitamin therapy. For her, there's only one thing that works: the knife. You know the old adage that parents tell their children: When you fall down, you've got to pick yourself up and brush yourself off? Well, my mother tells me the same thing, only in regard to my face, and instead of brushing it off, she recommends lifting and lasering. A few years ago, just before my 37th birthday, she held my chin in one hand, using the other to pinch the skin on top of my lids, testing its elasticity.

"The eyes are always the first to go," she said, shaking her head sadly. "Don't be afraid to start."

And so began my induction into the *cosa nostra* world of cosmetic plastic surgery, where bruises, bandages, and dark sunglasses are dead giveaways that you're part of a gang whose ranks have now swelled to 7.4 million annually, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

My initiation first began with a three-pronged assault on aging: an eyelift to remove sagging skin, laser resurfacing to blast away my crow's-feet, and dermabrasion to sand off the spokes of wrinkles around my mouth. I then had my breasts

augmented from a 32A to a 34B, adding cabaret curves to my ballerina frame. To keep my forehead frown lines at bay as well as eradicate sinewy neck muscles, a telltale sign of age, I have Botox injections every three months. My latest sci-fi enhancement involves monthly fat transplants. People often ask, "Aren't you afraid of having a foreign substance in your body?" To which I invariably answer, "Which one?"

In order to make my skin as smooth and fair as an egg, I have undergone punishing laser treatments that vaporize sunspots, broken capillaries, spider veins, scars, and unwanted body hair. Last June, I had liposuction on my thighs to harvest two cups of my own fat, which is being injected into my face every month in order to fill in the nasolabial folds, or so-called "marionette lines" from my nose to mouth. Some call me a beauty Nazi. Others just call me crazy.

"I'm so worried that this is an addiction," says my best friend. "I don't want you to look like Michael Jackson. I think you should go to bed—for a couple of years."

I try to explain to her that since the technology is now available and, thanks to my mother, I have the means, why on earth would I choose to age gracefully? So what that I'm a freelance writer and single mom who works at home where no one but my teenage son and the local delivery guys ever see me? Is there any virtue to looking in the mirror every morning and watching my face develop "character," a euphemism for old age? ➤

I then remind my friend about an 85-year-old grandmother whom we both know. Her greatest regret in life is not that she didn't travel the world, leave her abusive husband, or tell her estranged brother before he died that she loved him, but that she never had a nose job. Imagine that. Going to your grave with the lumps and bumps that have haunted you for nearly a century when you could have had them lopped off in the course of an afternoon.

Now that my personal renovation process is well under way, it's difficult to stop. "It's like washing one spot on the wall," says dermatologist Patricia Wexler. "The minute you wash one, the rest looks dirty."

Not that the overhaul isn't without sacrifices. It does seem as if I spend more time in hiding, recovering from procedures and treating my ink-blue bruises, than I do flaunting the benefits. "No, I can't go out tonight," I tell my friends. "I have a date with a pair of ice packs."

When I walk down the street—my face dotted with scabs and glistening ointment—I do feel like an object of public ridicule. Crossing my path, small children have been known to point.

And don't believe the crap doctors tell you, that you'll feel no pain and be up and at Man Ray for dinner in no time. Needles, scalpels, lasers, chemicals—it all hurts like hell. But that doesn't mean you're allowed to yelp and whine. You've got to grit your teeth and bear it, because moaning about cosmetic procedures is like bitching that your feet are sore after a Madison Avenue shopping spree. No one feels bad for you.

If all this sounds like I suffer from a psychiatric condition known as body dysmorphic disorder—imagined defects with one's physique that interfere with daily functioning—fear not. My cadre of cosmetic specialists, many of whom hold impressive titles at New York's teaching hospitals (admittedly not in psychiatry), have all agreed that I'm a perfect candidate for aesthetic tweaking. I have no expectations of looking like a Hollywood siren, finding my dream guy, or giving up my shrink just because I've been dipped, stripped, and nipped. My goal is simply to erase the damage caused by an adolescence spent with sun reflectors and Hawaiian Tropic, in the hopes of facing the world as a less shriveled, more radiant 40-year-old. So far, I have no regrets, perhaps because I celebrate the fact that my glow doesn't come from within but has been manufactured by the Michelangelos of modern medicine.

In fact, my black book of beauty reads like a list of escorts with annotations of services rendered. Under the plastic sur-

geons, there's David Hidalgo (blepharoplasty, dermabrasion, breast augmentation), Alan Matarasso (Botox), and Craig Foster (Botox). For dermatologists, I have Patricia Wexler (liposuction, fat injections, Botox, shoe-sale tips), Eugene Wexler (a surgeon and Pat's husband, painless sclerotherapy), Fred Brandt (neck Botox, laser toning to build up collagen), Roy Geronemus (26 different lasers for every pigmentation problem imaginable), Arielle Kauvar (spider veins, discolored scars), Eileen Lambroza (everything from rashes to skin-tag removal),

and Brad Katchen (CoolTouch laser for wrinkle treatment, laser hair removal, Botox, peels). And those are just the names under the "Manhattan" heading.

By now, you're surely wondering whether I look like Jocelyn Wildenstein. No, I still resemble a member of the human species. The contours of my eyes, cheeks, and lips are exactly where God intended them. In fact, my appearance is so natural that when I confess to people that I've had "work" done, the reaction is always, "Incredible!", "You look great," or "I'd never be able to tell."

Of course, those in the know now assume that every square inch of me is synthetic. For example, a few months ago, when I discussed the possibility of getting porcelain veneers for my teeth with my dentist, Stephen Sylvan, he pointed

out a plus: "They'll make your mouth look fuller so you won't need collagen injections in your lips anymore."

"That's great," I replied. "But I don't get injections in my lips."

Now, some people might be insulted that the origin of their physical attributes is suspect. But not me. The way I see it, my recent improvements are evidence of my unwavering faith in scientific progress. To compliment my face is really to flatter the men and women who have proved that botulism is a blessing and laser beams do wonders for the skin.

Which is not to say that I hand out a doctor's business card every time someone admires one of my body parts. While it may be okay for a wizened Park Avenue matron to be on a first-name basis with Daniel Baker and Sherrell Aston, it's still unacceptable for someone young and surgically enhanced to admit to knowing her doctor's phone number by heart.

But times, they are a-changin'. Picasso once said that art is everything nature is not. These days, the same could be said of beauty. Slowly but surely, more people are beginning to appreciate that. Recently, my neighbor, to whom I've never said more than two words, stopped me in the lobby of my building. "You are looking more and more beautiful every day," he said boldly. "Would you mind giving me the name of your doctor—er, uh, for my wife, that is?" ■



DEFYING GRAVITY The author, after 12 procedures, confidently shows off her surgically enhanced, well-preserved looks.