



BIOGRAPHY OF A FACE

THE STORY OF A WOMAN WHO LOOKED IN THE MIRROR AND SAW SOMEONE MUCH OLDER STARING BACK. SUSAN GAINES

Julie Shomin, 40, sits atop a small stool. The photographer adjusts the light, stands back and looks at her through the lens as she adjusts her skirt that she already wishes she hadn't worn for this day of "before" photos. It makes sitting on a stool somewhat awkward, but the skirt shows off her legs, which are tan, strong and youthful.

Her face, however, tells a different story. Years of intense, unprotected sun exposure have aged her, she says, making her look older than she is—and much older than she feels.

"About two years ago at the end of the summer, I looked in the mirror. I saw what I call my mask," says Shomin. A "hard" of darker skin had begun to surface, fingering up towards her temples. She was alarmed by this hyper-pigmentation.

Shomin started with microdermabrasions. She was "religious" about getting them, but it was not aggressive enough to address the photo damage in the deeper layers of her skin. So just after her 40th birthday, Shomin consulted with Dr. Beth Hagberg at the Skin Rejuvenation Clinic in Edina and booked a series of cutting-edge, non-surgical skin treatments recommended by the physician: three MicroLaser-Peels, microdermabrasions and Restylane injections.

The photographer asks Shomin to flash that "smirky" smile again. She straightens her back and offers a guarded smile. "I'm not normally a shy person," she says, "but I feel a little shy about this." Indeed, this journey to reclaim years lost to the sun



ABOVE: After a series of rejuvenating skin treatments, Shomin feels more confident, like she's reclaimed her face.

SCENE + SEEN

LEFT: Before she embarked on treatment, Shomin was alarmed by the darker skin that blotched her face.

is a very personal one, and it's not easy.

This is her face, after all. *Her* face. "By a certain age, our biographies show on our faces," the writer Cynthia Ozick has said. Shomin is proud of that fact. "All those lines mean something," she says. "This scar between my brows I got when a swing hit me when I was a kid."

Shomin doesn't want an airbrushed face. Nor does she want to look 20, or even 30, again. She is not a Hollywood star. Indeed, she spends more time under the bright lights of the operating room as a nurse anesthetist than she does wearing designer clothes on anything like a red carpet. When she's not at the hospital, she and her husband enjoy a busy nightlife and an active daytime life of golfing, running,

writing and playing with their three Weimaraners on the hobby farm the couple recently bought.

Shomin typifies the growing number of “ordinary” people who, Hagberg says, have made non-surgical cosmetic treatments a priority right up there with haircuts and regular exercise. The American Society of Dermatologic Surgery reported that minimally invasive cosmetic procedures, in particular, increased by 58 percent from 2001 to 2005.

Though some of the treatments cost a lot more than a haircut—a MicroLaserPeel costs \$650 for a single treatment at the Skin Rejuvenation Clinic—a growing number of people are rearranging their priorities in pursuit of a few more years of youthful appearance.

“This is an investment,” says Shomin. “I felt like my face was worth it. If I have to work an extra shift, if I have to not buy something to do this, I will.”

Shomin doesn’t only want to *look* healthier. She was rightly concerned about the health of her skin as well. “If it looks like this, it probably isn’t healthy either,” she says.

In Europe the “weekend skin peels,” as laser peels are referred to, are used to treat basal and squamous cell carcinomas, the most common forms of skin cancer. While in the U.S. they are still used cosmetically, Hagberg says that a laser peel “actually improves the health of the skin and takes away underlying skin damage,” while dramatically improving wrinkles, scars, acne scars, keratoses and pigmentary problems.

CHANGING FACE

The waiting area of Skin Rejuvenation Clinic, furnished with plush couches and adorned with paintings, looks more like a living room or a spa than a doctor’s office. Perhaps that’s because it’s both. With a background in family practice, Hagberg is able to “appreciate the whole person,” she says. Though almost anyone in Minnesota can perform laser procedures in Minnesota—if they cut hair, they can remove it; Hagberg says there are advantages to going with a physician over a beautician or esthetician. She can pre-treat patients who have a history of cold sores, for example, and takes past medical history into account. Shomin, who comes straight from a night on call at the hospital, is wearing her blue scrub pants. She is exhausted and her allergies have flared up, leaving her eyes red and puffy. She wants to get on with it.

But before the nurse applies topical anesthetic to Shomin’s face in preparation for the peel, Hagberg wants some “before” photos of her own. The clinic is trying out a fancy new camera that shines a brief glow

of ultraviolet light on the face, penetrating deeper than the human eye can see to the layer of skin that tells the real story. The image appears instantly on the computer screen. The team leans in to admire the camera's technological capabilities. There is Shomin's face. The camera does not pull any punches.

When Shomin sees her picture on the computer screen, she quickly withdraws as though she's seen a ghost and slumps back onto the small stool, wiping tears from her face.

"It's like looking at your underlying skeleton," says Hagberg, putting a comforting hand on Shomin's shoulder. "It's shocking."

Days later, while she recovered in the sunless safety of her home, Shomin explains her reaction: "I was grieving my youth a little bit. For a moment I thought, 'You are so ugly.' It was a loss for me."

After the topical anesthetic is applied to Shomin's face, she heads down a short hallway to a lavender room that is quite cold to help offset the heat Shomin will soon be feeling. Hagberg places some goggles over Shomin's eyes and puts on some of her own. She adjusts the depth of the laser electronically, pushing a couple of buttons until the display reads the way she wants it. Hagberg is proud of her laser, calling it "the best on the market." The equipment, she adds, is

almost as important as the practitioner, but not quite.

She puts the laser on standby and then sets a wand with a rectangular head over Shomin's face. A rapid-fire click sounds as the laser "paints" precise lines, back and forth, leaving a gray rectangle of skin. She moves slightly and fires the laser again, rectangle by rectangle, until, about 15 minutes later the entire surface of Shomin's face has been "ablated."

The smell of burning skin fills the room. "Ab-lation," after all, is just a nice word for a precise, controlled burn. The control is not only due to the laser itself, but also to Hagberg's steady hand and keen eye. She doesn't miss a spot on Shomin's face. And, for the most part, Shomin appears not relaxed, exactly, but fairly comfortable. Hagberg adjusts the laser down as she moves it to Shomin's neck and chest. Because the laser will not go as deep, cold air instead of anesthetic is used, hence the name "arctic peel."

Soon after Hagberg finishes, Shomin's face begins to redden and the feeling of heat grows intense. About 10 minutes later, the intensity is at its peak, "like the worst sunburn you've ever had," she says.

Four days later, after the first hot weekend of the season spent indoors, dutifully avoiding even the most indirect sunlight through windows while healing, Shomin reflects on the emergence of her new skin.

Day of laser peel: Redness subsides quickly. "But I was swollen. I looked like I got in a fight. The rest of that day, I took ibuprofen."

Day Two: Almost no pain. "Still felt sunburned, drank a lot of water and stayed away from windows. Swelling was still profound, especially around my eyes."

Day Three: The peeling starts. "It wasn't all at once, not like a big mask coming off, but it started."

Day Four: "Today is the best. The skin is looking like a face again."

Her face. A fresher, brighter face. Two weeks later, when Shomin returns to Hagberg for her first Restylane injections, the change is already apparent. Her skin looks more vibrant, the texture smoother. And Hagberg says the best is yet to come. The heat of the laser stimulates the production of collagen, but that takes three months or so. Hagberg suggests Broad Band Light (BBL) therapy to accelerate this process. Shomin agrees to do BBL following her injections.

Hagberg numbs the folds from the nose to the corners of the mouth, called the nasolabial folds, with a topical anesthetic and waits for it to take affect. Then with a fine-needled syringe, Hagberg begins carefully injecting the filler a little at a time, reinserting the needle in several different places along the fold, until the crevice becomes a shallow line. Then she does

the other side. Shomin seems to experience a lot of discomfort with the treatment, which Hagberg says is not typical. However, some patients do require a dental block, particularly for the lips and lines above them. Shomin then heads back down to the hall and enters the other room for BBL therapy.

On this road to skin rejuvenation, Shomin is only at the beginning, but taking the first steps has already given her a new perspective and sense of gratitude. "I feel blessed for many things," she says as she recovers at home with her husband Tim. "It's motivating. It is a second chance to take some responsibility."

With a fresher face, Shomin is committed to taking care of her skin. The prescription Obagi Nu-Derm skincare system will support the effects of the procedures. And she is already vigilantly protecting her skin from the sun, a lifestyle change that Hagberg says is one of the most important for her patients.

Fortunately, Shomin has always loved hats, especially vintage ones. Floppy hats weren't exactly her thing, but all that's changed. Sunglasses, floppy hats, whatever. As Shomin says, "I don't care if I look like a dork." Now she's a fresher, healthier, younger-looking "dork," and that's what matters. +