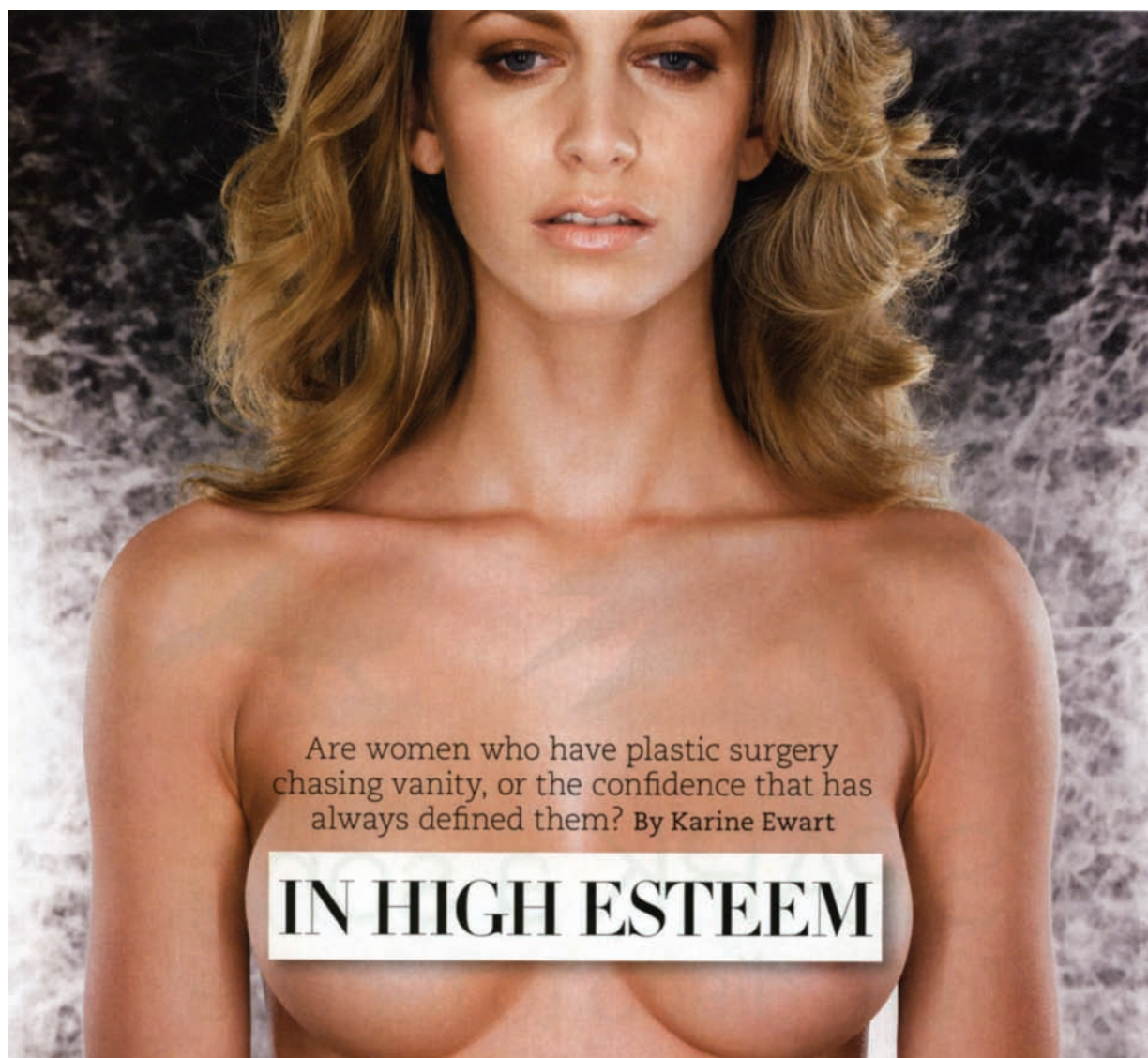


FASHION MAGAZINE

May 2006 | written by: Karin Ewart



beautyimage



My husband has not seen me totally naked in almost two years. Actually, I rarely see myself fully unclothed lately, and when I do, it seriously freaks me out. And not in a “Gee, I could really stand to lose 10 pounds” kind of way—more like an “Oh my God, who are you? I am hideous” kind of way. The reason is, despite my best efforts, my two pregnancies wrecked my body, at age 34, I am in a moral dilemma over having cosmetic surgery. I know, regardless of how much weight I lose and how many hours I spend at the gym, my breasts will never return to their original shape, my stomach will never be smooth, and the veins in my leg will never go away. I am trapped in a stranger’s body, and she is not pretty.

Apparently, many women feel as I do, from those who have lost a significant amount of weight to those who have had breast implants removed to those who have suffered serious injuries or illness. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, about 70 per cent of the early 11.5 million cosmetic procedures performed in the U.S. in 2005 were on people ages 35 to 64, and over 90 per cent were on women. For me (and many of these women,

I am willing to wager), plastic surgery isn’t about reclaiming my youth or attempting to fit into some societal ideal but rather getting me and my self-esteem back. “Most of our female patients feel that their femininity has been stolen. I wouldn’t say there is anger there, but there is a lot of disappointment,” says Dr. Marc DuPéré, a leading cosmetic plastic surgeon in Toronto. “Yes, there is societal pressure, but there is also the image you have of yourself, which is very important. It’s mostly about femininity—to feel like a woman again. I think self-esteem describes it for 98 per cent of my patients.”

It was about six months after my daughter was born when I last purposely stood in front of the mirror naked. What I saw truly frightened me. I vowed to lose the last 10 pounds and get toned again. What I didn’t count on, however, was that once the weight was gone, my breasts would be gone too. They had found a new, permanent home in Sagville, and I could feel my rib cage through them. I felt unattractive, but more important, I did not feel or look like me. The idea of getting my breasts surgically fixed began to simmer, but I knew I wanted more children first, so I bought some camouflaging lingerie, kept the lights off and concentrated on getting pregnant again right away.

Two and a half years later, we had twin boys thanks to in vitro fertilization. We made it to 38 weeks, but my stomach did not. I first noticed the stretch marks at about 32 weeks, and honestly, I wept. I hid them from my husband, Jay, until the nurse opened my gown to attach the baby monitors at our scheduled C-section. “What are those lines from-your T-shirt” he asked, genuinely confused. I just shook my head and said I’d explain later. He has not seen or touched my stomach since. Actually, other than medical personnel, only a handful of my closest girlfriends have seen it, and just so I can visually explain why I need a tummy tuck. I think “stretch marks” is a very misleading term, particularly for those who don’t have them: My wrinkled, accordion-like stomach bothers me much more than my C-section scar and way more than the beige lines I can see when I stretch the flesh flat. I wear a tank top almost 24 hours a day for fear that my shirt will rise up and expose my mid-section. I hate my stomach. There is nothing even remotely feminine about it.

To add insult to injury, during my pregnancy with the boys, I got my first varicose vein. Now that I’m happily but shockingly pregnant with our fourth child, that varicose vein has exploded and multiplied (continued on next page)

FASHION MAGAZINE

...In High Esteem continued...

beautyimage



(continued from previous page) into a throbbing mass of disgustingness that runs from my groin to my ankle. My doctor has suggested support hose.

I know what some of you are thinking: I shouldn't complain—at least I can have children. I know how lucky I am. I suffered unexplained secondary infertility after our daughter was born, and I constantly reprimand myself, even now. I made every deal with God and anyone else who would listen that I would sacrifice/give up/pay anything to have another child. An I hate to admit it, but a few weeks after we found out we were finally pregnant, when the ultrasound technician told us that both of the transferred embryos had heartbeats, my first thought was "I guess there's no way to avoid stretch marks with twins."

I have a little challenge for you: Ask your partner what his/her favourite body part is. Now ask them this: Would you be willing to sacrifice that part—say, have it stretch beyond recognition—in order to have a chilled? This is the type of question I have tortured my friends with lately. One male friend said, "Well, it really comes down to vanity, doesn't it?" Does it? Am I vain? I suppose, to a certain extent. I think it's important to take care of oneself. I think there is truth in the saying "If you look good, you feel good."

"If the way someone looks is important to them, we can't judge that as right or wrong. It's just their truth," says Kerri Dunn, a Port Hope, Ontario, life coach who cautions that putting too much value in appearance can of course be unhealthy. "However, there is the idea of wholeness, and how we look is part of who we are: You may love your kids, your husband, where you live, and where your life is going, but feeling whole can also include your appearance. Are we going to be better people and better to other people—better employees, better wives, better mothers—if we are happier with ourselves?"

"I didn't have big breasts until I got pregnant, and after that, they didn't go down—they kept getting bigger. It just wasn't me. It was an out-of-body experience: I felt dowdy and fat," says Brana Mellon*, who had a breast reduction when her youngest child was in Grade 4. "For sure, it is about self-esteem. I definitely feel better without them—more like myself. I never did get used to the two new additions to my chest."

Like Mellon, my feelings affect me all day long, from the moment I choose what to wear in the morning to the way I feel about myself when I lie down at night. It has seriously affected my relationship with my husband. And this

emotionally unstable person is not who I was, nor the woman Jay married, nor the person I want to be. I don't want to look like Barbie or a porn star; I just want to recognize myself in the mirror and feel somewhat comfortable having my husband touch me anywhere between my shoulders and my hips. Apparently, surgery could do more than help: A new study published in the *Aesthetic Surgery Journal* says that women who choose cosmetic procedures not only like their bodies more but also have improved sex lives. "When women are feeling better about themselves, it makes them feel sexier," says Dr. Richard Ellenbogen, a would-renowned leader in aesthetic plastic surgery who guesstimates that he performs about 1650 breast augmentations a year in his Beverly Hills Body clinic. "I had one patient say something very interesting to me. She said, 'It's one thing to feel beautiful. Beautiful is the way you are. But now I feel hot.' I haven't felt even lukewarm in five years.

Now, I don't want to scare anybody who hasn't yet had children. Pregnancy does not absolutely mean that you will sacrifice any of your better features, but prevention may be a bit beyond your control. "There is not a lot you can do," admits DuPéré, who says that age, genetics and skin's elasticity are the major deciding factors. "And keep in mind that the greater the change in weight, the greater the effect will be," he adds, recommending exercise before and during pregnancy. Also, forgoing breastfeeding does not guarantee that your breasts will return to their pre-pregnancy shape. In fact, one friend I know nursed her son for almost 18 months, and her breasts are still great. On the flip side, another friend did not breastfeed, and her breasts are, unfortunately, similar to mine and I nursed all my kids. And of course, we see those supermodels prancing down runways just weeks after having babies. Genetic anomalies to begin with, mind you. DuPéré, by the way, has a Yummy Mummy deal that includes breast and tummy work, starting at around \$9,500. (For more prices of common cosmetic procedures, particularly those geared to women after they've had

children, visit fashionmagazine.com.) Sounds good—throw in the vein therapy, and I'm there.

All joking aside, I have made my decision to have some work done after this last bambino arrives, and finding a good cosmetic surgeon is not easy. My OB/GYN has even asked me how to find one, not for herself but because so many of her patients want referrals. I don't recommend a Google search using the words "breasts" or "nipples." Instead, word of mouth is the only way I'll go. One person I know found her doctor by getting into an impromptu conversation about breast reduction surgery with perfect strangers at Banana Republic. (For less drastic ways, visit fashionmagazine.com.) I still have a bit of time to find my doctor, though since it is recommended that woman wait for her body to settle down after having a baby.

"A minimum of six months after delivery or six months following the completion of breastfeeding," says Dr. Trevor Born, a Toronto cosmetic plastic surgeon who estimates that about one-quarter of his practice is dedicated to women who have had children and are looking to restore their pre-pregnancy shape. And the consensus is to finish having children before electing to have any work done. I always thought that was because something horrible, like irreparable disfigurement or scars ripping open, could occur, but DuPéré assures me this is not so. "There is nothing wrong with going through pregnancy again, and surgery won't prevent you from becoming pregnant, but the physiology, the changes, that happen with pregnancy will happen again. If you have had your first baby and you know that in a year or so you will try again, I think it's wise to wait. On the other hand, if a woman knows she won't have any more children for even five or six years, and she cannot live with the deformities that she is left with after the first pregnancy, and her self-esteem is diminished, and she knows that she'll need to have surgery again after the next kid, those five years may be important and long enough to make surgery worth it."

A few years ago, a dear friend of mine contemplated getting a facelift, or at the very least some facial work. At the time, I thought she was crazy and told her so. She doesn't need it, and I was glad when she didn't go through with it. However, I have since had a change of heart. Aging may take longer than nine months, but if the stranger she sees in her mirror devastates her as much as mine does, I'd say go for it.

* Name and identifying characteristics have been changed