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I don't remember how I used to look before surgery. I don't remember my face before the cocktail of cosmetic treatments that has, surely, changed it for ever. Before the fillers, volumisers, plumpers, injections, lasers and peels. I've never liked having my photo taken, so there's little evidence to remind me, but I am certain I don't look the same as I used to. This is the thing about cosmetic surgery: once you start, it's impossible to retain any sense of perspective about the whole messy, painful, expensive business.

The miracle workers of Harley Street can now rid us of every imperfection. It's hard to resist that kind of offer. One little tweak here, one more there... And then, suddenly, you look in the mirror and everything appears to have shifted almost imperceptibly, the natural harmony of your face somehow unsettled. The solution? Another tweak. The more you have done, the more you feel you *should* have done. It's a compelling, addictive process.

If you embrace these cosmetic procedures, it takes commitment. It takes time, money, energy, and what medical practitioners call proactive maintenance, which means regular upkeep every few months. It also takes self-awareness to know when to stop. But who can recognise when enough becomes enough? Internet sites such as *awfulplasticsurgery.com* make you realise that what constitutes *too much* is an entirely subjective matter. Sure, in Britain surgeons still have a relatively conservative approach to such things, but if you can't remember how your own face should look, how do you know when it's no longer you looking back from the mirror?

I'm thinking seriously about these aesthetic questions, but not enough to stop me thinking about what I might want to do next. I am in my thirties. Ever since having the fat under my chin sucked out through the magic of Vaser Liposelection — by far the worst thing I've done in the name of beauty — the bottom half of my face has seemed wrong. I know it would be sensible to acknowledge that a woman is more than the sum of her external parts and learn to accept myself as I am, but I am still dissatisfied. My chin is fine now. So, obviously, something else isn't. I think it might be my lips.

I've had my lips done before. I went to a respected cosmetic doctor in a posh part of London and had Restylane injections. It

BEAUTY EXTREMIST

HAVE I BECOME ADDICTED TO SURGERY?

After a series of tweaks and tucks, Avril Mairis struggling to remember her original FACE. As chin lipo leads her to lip implants, she wonders where — or if — it will end

Photograph by LUKE KIRWAN

was eye-wateringly painful, jaw-droppingly expensive and left behind big black bruises. But I liked it. It disappeared after a couple of months, though – my body metabolises stuff fast (except cheese and wine, apparently). So I went back and had Perlane instead, another hyaluronic-acid derivative designed to add volume and fill out the lips, which is thicker and supposedly longer-lasting. It hurt a whole lot more to have it injected. It cost £500. And it lasted about four months. So I went back again and had Restylane Lipp, a filler especially for the mouth. I cried when it went in. I had some anaesthetic cream, but it didn't have much effect.

This time, though, I had the lips I wanted. And so I kept going back for top-ups, despite the pain. Without realising, I crossed the line between seductive and pornographic. I had adult-industry lips. It's the only time anyone has ever commented on my beauty adventures. During lunch at a restaurant where the walls are mirrored – my reflection multiplied, my vanity reflected back from every angle – a friend, beautiful and untouched by anything other than a tiny amount of Botox, said gently, 'I don't think you need to do any more.' I let the filler dissolve. But I never stopped wanting bigger, better lips.

So when I hear about a new product claiming to enhance lips permanently, safely and without pain, I arrange a consultation. Permanent lip treatments have a terrible reputation. Courtney Love had to have the silicone surgically removed from her mouth when she realised it didn't look right. Her story is not uncommon. So what makes PermaLip different? Available since 2007 in the UK, it's the equivalent of breast implants for the lips: a soft silicone shape that is inserted rather than injected. Its makers claim that the materials used to make the implants are ideally suited for use in the lips, and that the implants can be removed easily if required.

Roy Ng is one of only a small number of surgeons in the UK who carry out the procedure. He has a Harley Street address, a glossy office, a gorgeous receptionist. He also has a laptop full of pictures of the women he's treated. They all look normal, not worked on. The enhancement is subtle, skilful. Implants come in three different sizes, but even the biggest (which, obviously, is the one I seize) isn't *that* big. Mr Ng tells me that after PermaLip, some women still want filler. I hope I am not one of those women.

The treatment itself takes just 15 minutes on a bed in a corner of the office. The worst part is the local anaesthetic, which is

injected around my top lip and deep into the sensitive tissue itself. I'm only having an upper implant – if I were doing both, this process would be repeated in the bottom lip, too. I feel sharp little scratches and soon my face is frozen. Then Mr Ng makes a tiny incision in each corner of my mouth and cuts a tunnel through the lip into which he will insert the implant. I feel a bit of tugging. And that's it. Two dissolvable stitches and PermaLip is over. It's the quickest and easiest cosmetic procedure I've ever had.

It's still a shock when I sit up, though. My lip is swollen obscenely, the flesh puffed out and bloodied. I clutch at an ice pack until a cab arrives to take me home. The receptionist gives the driver my address – I can't speak. Swallowing the prescribed antibiotics and painkillers later is almost impossible. I suck water through a straw and dribble down my chin. I can't eat. I spend the night propped up on pillows, sleeping only fitfully.

The next morning, I am still swollen. I am also developing deep, dark bruising. I can't leave the house without a scarf wrapped around my mouth and I can barely move my upper lip. It takes 10 days before the bruises go, three weeks for the swelling to subside and a month before I can whistle again. The scarf becomes part of my daily uniform. At least it's cashmere.

It doesn't take very long before I get used to my new lips. They feel oddly cold when I'm outside – a strange side-effect that Mr Ng can't explain and which gradually goes – but I soon forget I've had anything done. The same can't be said for other people. Although everyone in the ELLE offices is used to my adventures, they're visibly shocked by my new puffy pout. I think it's because past procedures have addressed problems, real or perceived, but a lip implant crosses the boundaries of moral justification. I grow accustomed to the stares until my swollen mouth returns to normal.

But what does normal mean? My friend Tom says my lips now look 'slutty' – to his mind, this is a good thing. There's something sexual implied in a voluptuous mouth – red lipstick makes my pout too overt, overripe. A slick of Carmex is all I need. My boyfriend, initially disapproving, is merely non-committal. This is the closest he will come to acceptance. I can still feel the implant with my fingers, firm and unyielding, but it will soften soon. I am forgetting it's there. If you weren't familiar with my face, you wouldn't know I've done anything at all. This is what pleases me most.

I don't remember what I used to look like. But I have discovered that I don't want to look like someone who is lost to cosmetic surgery. Maybe I do know myself, after all.

'I had the lips I wanted, so I kept going back for top-ups, despite the PAIN. Without realising it, I crossed the line between seductive and PORNOGRAPHIC'