Look

DEEP THOUGHTS ON SUPERFICIAL MATTERS

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BEAUTY AND WELLNESS

Don’t cry for me. Photograph by Miles Aldridge.

KNIVES OUT!

The Revenge Face

The latest divorce trend involves a visit to the plastic surgeon

BY TATIANA BONCOMPAGNI HOOVER

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READING TIME: 4 MINUTES

The divorce lawyers for Kevin Costner and Christine Baumgartner are throwing an awful lot of numbers and allegations around. But the most scintillating detail being thrown around may be Costner's allegation that Baumgartner spent $188,500 on plastic surgery in one month.

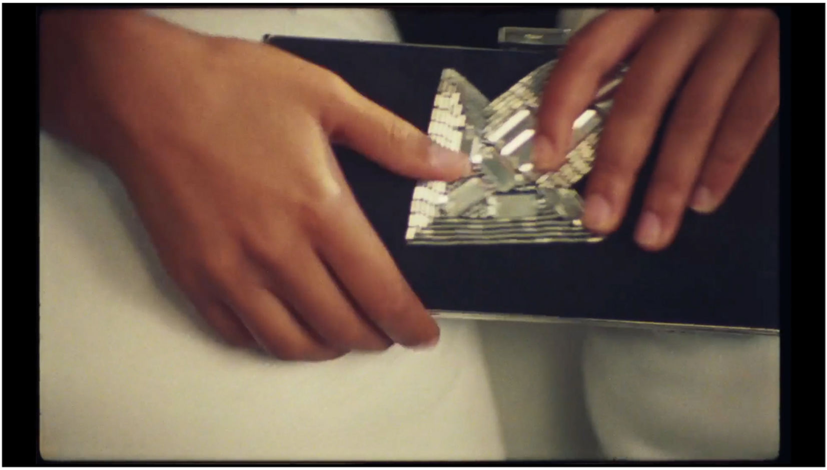
While that sum may seem outrageous, it's actually mind-bendingly fathomable. A face-and-neck lift with a top L.A. doctor can cost as much as $200,000, including fees for anesthesia and a room at a recovery center.

One can only guess how Baumgartner spent the money or whether she did it at all, but it clearly suggests that in this high-stakes war of the Roses, knives are out, as well as scalpels.

When relationships get rocky, there are the couples therapists and divorce lawyers (or 2, or 10 …). But now add the plastic surgeon to the list. Let's call it the "Revenge Face," shall we? It's the mid-divorce face-lift (or neck lift, tummy tuck, breast augmentation, what have you) designed to make use of the last days of disco. One jilted ex-wife pointed out that her ex-partner was still paying her AmEx bill. At least he gets to keep the points!

But as much as the Revenge Face is intended to make the ex remember why they fell head over heels in the first place, it's also about regaining confidence and preparing for a new chapter in life.

Dr. Andrew Peredo, a board-certified plastic surgeon based in Dix Hills, New York, has seen a number of patients at this delicate stage of life. "They want a twofer," he says. "To get revenge and to feel better."



Take Peredo's patient Tricia, a sought-after nail artist on Long Island's Gold Coast. (Patients preferred to remain anonymous, so AIR MAIL is using pseudonyms.) She found out her husband of 25 years had met another woman on a guys' trip to the Dominican Republic. She decided the best way to get even wasn't to throw his clothes out the window but to spend $25,000 fixing the one part of her body that has always made her self-conscious: her neck. She used the couple's joint account to pay for the procedure before the divorce was finalized.

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Revenge Face could be seen as the confluence of two bigger trends. First, the post-coronavirus "Zoom boom" in cosmetic surgery led to a 54 percent increase in U.S. cosmetic surgical procedures in 2021 alone, according to the Aesthetic Society. And then there has been an uptick in so-called gray divorces as increasing numbers of older couples walk away from long-term marriages.

As Dr. Jonathan Sykes, a double-board-certified plastic-and-reconstructive surgeon in Sacramento and Beverly Hills, put it: "We want to enjoy our lives now."

And “the now” starts right after six weeks of recovery. “In the office, we call them divorce makeovers,” says Dr. Thomas P. Sterry, a board-certified plastic surgeon on New York’s Upper East Side. He’s had several patients ask for tummy tucks and breast lifts or augmentations before they “drop the bomb” of divorce paperwork on their husbands.

That’s only partly what Theresa, a researcher and mother of two in Manhattan, did when she discovered her husband of 20 years was carrying on with a much younger person. “He essentially tried to blame the breakup on me,” says Theresa, whose divorce is nearly finalized. She spent $16,000 of their joint funds on her tummy tuck before the separation and $12,000 of her own money on a breast augmentation. “Worth every penny,” says Theresa of her surgeries with Dr. Sterry.

“People might look at what I did and say, ‘Oh, your self-esteem is so low, and you did this to get a man,’” she says. “I didn’t. I go to the gym and work out like I’m in my 20s. I want to be the best person I can and as fabulous as I can be.”

This phenomenon is not restricted to women. Dr. Julius Few, a Chicago and Beverly Hills–based plastic surgeon, says breakups are one of the “two or three” events that drive men into his office. Dr. Robert Schwarcz, a double-board-certified oculofacial plastic surgeon in Manhattan, says that a relationship crisis historically was “the No. 1 impetus” for men seeking consultations. In some cases, they find themselves wanting to attract younger women, and Dr. Schwarcz often hears something along the lines of “I don’t want her to feel like I’m that much older,” he says.

Online-dating profiles are a concern that Dr. Dara Liotta, a double-board-certified plastic surgeon in Manhattan who specializes in rhinoplasty, hears about often. She says she saw a rash of “youngish moms” who found themselves contemplating single life during and after the pandemic and who wanted to change their appearance from the neck up in order to optimize their results on Hinge, Bumble, and Raya. “When you think about how people are online dating, curating your digital presence, the nose has a lot to do with how you look in your photographs,” says Dr. Liotta.

Still, many doctors caution that breakups are not always an ideal time to schedule cosmetic procedures. Especially when these ruptures are contentious, they are accompanied by emotional and physical stresses that can increase the likelihood of post-surgical complications and dissatisfaction.

Dr. Matthew White, a facial plastic surgeon in Manhattan, says he won't perform surgery until a year has passed since the divorce. "A face-lift is very stressful in itself.… There is a lot of healing that occurs, and it's an emotional roller coaster," he says. "We want them to be in a great place, physically and emotionally."

Dr. Few, meanwhile, recalls one patient who regretted getting 425-cc. breast implants during such a time. He ended up downsizing them two years later.

But from time to time, those who achieve the Revenge Face end up with the kind of happy ending they were looking for. Dr. Adam Kolker, a board-certified plastic surgeon in New York City, says for all the post-coronavirus breakups he's seen, "there has been an even greater uptick in new relationships and weddings."

True love is alive and well—and looking (and feeling!) quite refreshed.

Tatiana Boncompagni Hoover is a journalist, a novelist, and the founder of Eat Sunny, an organic, ready-made-meal service based in New York City

Photo: Miles Aldridge/Trunk Archive

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