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CUE

March 21, 2007

Frozen in Time

A young writer gets Botox — just in case.

by *Carrie N. Culpepper*

Stop making that face!"

"What face?"

It was an exchange I'd had several times recently with my mother.

"That face" was a forehead wrinkled in surprise, doubt, question — a face I didn't realize I was making. I didn't give it much thought until one night I caught myself in a mirror at a restaurant making the face. And it didn't look good.

Then I noticed the lines on my 30-something forehead had gotten deeper lately. Must be that face.

One night a younger friend whispered to me that she'd gotten Botox. She sang its praises. It's preventative! It's temporary! It's nothing!

So I decided to take the plunge — and a little poison. It took about a week before I'd made an appointment with Dr. Joe Niamtu, a local cosmetic facial surgeon. I'd read that he'd performed more Botox injections than any other doctor in Richmond, and that was all I needed to know.

Thanks to baby boomers' resistance to aging and all the new minimally invasive procedures, it's easier than ever to stay young. In 2005, 81 percent of cosmetic procedures were nonsurgical. Botox is by far the most popular of those procedures. Between 2000 and 2005, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, the number of Botox injections performed in the United States increased 388 percent. That's more than 3 million Botox procedures in 2005.

While on hold with Niamtu's office, a recording told me that the average age for face-lifts had dropped from 62 to 45.

A few days later, I was reclining in a leather chair in Niamtu's office with a needle hovering over my head. Niamtu told me that Botox has been revolutionary for the plastic-surgery business; he calls the injections a "lunchtime procedure." (They go for \$400.) He says he's seeing younger and younger patients coming in for small procedures in an attempt to avoid the artificial-looking, late-in-life face-lift that many of their mothers got.

Botox is the product name for botulinum toxin type A, a bacteria that can cause botulism, a potentially deadly type of food poisoning. It was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1989 for treating eye-muscle spasms but quickly showed its cosmetic potential when patients who had received the treatment noticed their wrinkles disappearing. The toxin that blocked nerve impulses could also temporarily paralyze the muscles that form crow's-feet, wrinkled foreheads and furrowed brows.

The procedure wasn't as painless as I expected, but then again, there was a needle pricking the skin of my forehead. I also didn't expect the bumps that formed where the injections had been made. I looked like a Klingon from "Star Trek." The bumps took about 30 minutes to disappear, so when I returned to work, I stayed glued to my computer till 5 to avoid any curiosity.

"What I did today, I will do 60 of this week," Niamtu said as I left the office. It made me look twice around the office and parking lot for any familiar faces.



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Botox doesn't take effect for several days. Each day I looked in the mirror, trying to make my worst version of that surprised/excited/inquisitive face, and each day I looked less exaggerated. Three days later, I'm not making that face at all. My wrinkles are less pronounced, and I'm aware when I'm trying to make that face. I'm hoping that when it wears off in four to six months, I'll be less likely to make that expression because I'll feel it again — it won't be such a spontaneous reaction.

The other benefit for people my age is that Botox can be preventative; the less wrinkling of the face means my wrinkles when they come will be less pronounced.

Do I feel less like myself? Yes. Do I mind? No. I can still raise my eyebrows, slightly, and I still have expression in my eyes and mouth, but I'm not sure I can see paying \$1,200 a year for the rest of my life. Unless, that is, I give up coloring my hair. If only I could just give up making that face.

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