

# SKIN DEEP

## PART ONE OF A THREE PART SERIES

<http://www.toromagazine.com/features/health/009d4484-76aa-37d4-91bc-8cf88d901929/Skin-Deep/>

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As a man I'm expected to underplay the importance of my appearance. If I'm to grow a paunch then I'm to do so, if not proudly, then certainly without concern, without complaint, and without conceit.

I did consider this while on a recent vacation on a Mexican beach. I saw a lot of men happily strutting their protruded bellies with the pride of an expectant mother. They'd slap their tummies with satisfaction, lathering them with suntan lotion, attending to them as if at any moment the rounded globes of flesh would roll off to play in the sun and the sand all on their own.

I doubt I could ever attribute such paternal affection towards my extra bulk.

I've always maintained a reasonable weight through a healthy diet and keeping active. I go to the gym and do my best to avoid foods that list glucose and fructose as ingredients. All that's fine when you're young and have a metabolism that burns faster than a California brush fire.

Then comes 50.

I'm doing well *for someone my age* (a caveat that has its own implications). Women are still kind enough to flirt with me, my wife still finds me attractive and my career as an on-air television host, which has yet to demand me to remove my shirt, continues to flourish. But the ugly truth is, I look better with my clothes on.

There was a time when I was proud of my body. Now, I'm proud of my wardrobe.

My belly is the biggest *offender*, jutting out slightly over my belt like I'm being hugged from behind by a sumo wrestler. My chest, which once gave my upper torso perkiness begins with promise but then bails out like an exhausted marathon runner. And I'm sorry to have to be this graphic, but my nipples now have all the symmetry of an iguana with lazy eyes.

I promised I would never let my body get like this and yet here I am. I still exercise and watch my diet, but it's like trying to pay down an extremely high Visa bill — you get rid of the interest but none of the premium.

So it's back to aging gracefully the way nature intended. Problem is, I've never known nature to be all that graceful. And I doubt nature counted on cheeseburgers, Belgian beer and a constant reminder that we share the planet with the likes of George Clooney and Johnny Depp.

No, I had never even considered elective cosmetic surgery.

I make an appointment with **Dr. Peter Bray**, one of Toronto's leading cosmetic surgeons, at his clinic. Dr. Bray wants to tell me about an advance form cosmetic surgery called **BodyTite**, which he claims to be less intrusive, less risky and offer better results than previous forms of liposuction.

I tell myself that it'll be just an informational meeting, but as soon as I enter the appointment in my calendar I begin to envision the possibility of returning to the body I once had.



A few days later, I arrive at Dr. Bray's Yorkville office in Toronto and home of *Elements* — a wellness and medspa. The statue of a Tibetan Buddha stands outside the door welcoming in the plump, the wrinkled, the cosmetically hopeful.

I am met by Paulette, a woman of an undefinable age, whose energy and warmth defy any preconceived ideas I had about the exclusive nature of cosmetic surgery. She takes me to the waiting lounge, where the furniture is of a cool modern design, leather brushing against tile, brushing against chrome. Flames rise from a gas fireplace, not giving off a great deal of heat but adding warm comfort. Cell phones are required to be turned off and voices are kept low. On the coffee table are the bibles of privilege and beauty — a Tom Ford photo book, the works of Herb Ritt, a photo journal on modern architecture.

I flip through the Tom Ford book, impressed by his most recent success as a filmmaker. Suddenly, I'm struck by an inexplicable feeling of self-consciousness. My salt-stained boots seem out of place and my ski jacket, which I once thought to be pretty damn trendy, is now just a big puffy orange embarrassment.

A strikingly beautiful woman enters the room, blonde and still sporting a vacation tan. I can tell she's a patient, which makes me immediately curious as to what she has changed or what she hopes to change. She glances at me and I can only believe she's thinking the same thing, only that with me there is more to work with.

Then I recognize what we see in each other — our

vanity. I have always accepted that I was vain. I've just never been this upfront about it before.

I could leave now. But I don't. Sure, vanity ranks pretty high on the list of seven deadly sins, but I much prefer it over gluttony or greed.

The young woman and I do not exchange smiles. There is a reason why people wish to remain anonymous when here.

Paulette returns and takes me to Dr. Bray's conference room. From the window is a view of a park where people watch their dogs run through the snow. A picture of a reclining nude takes up most of one wall, a young woman altered slightly by the cubist style imposed by the photographer.

Dr. Bray enters. He's a young man, in good shape who clearly has no issue with maintaining a presentable and groomed appearance. He is soft spoken and thoughtful.

I approach the meeting as a journalist, not a potential client. He describes BodyTite as a major advancement in cosmetic body-restructuring. It's liposuction, he says, with the negatives removed. It's still, quite plainly, sucking out the fat from your body, but this time the recovery rate is faster, the procedure is safer, and the results are better.



It works like this: the needle insertions are smaller than with past procedures, leaving only tiny marks behind. The fat is heated, but regulated to a certain temperature so that it does not heat up too much (has such a thing ever happened before?). The heat also serves as a way of tightening, the result of which is that there is no excess skin left hanging once the fat is gone.

After giving my torso a thorough a once-over where every inch of my flab, fat and excess is pinched and measured, he tells me I'm a good candidate for the procedure: I'm healthy, my weight doesn't fluctuate drastically, and I'm at the right age.

Of course there will be several blood tests, blood pressure and an ECG to undergo.

It's a \$7,000 to \$10,000 procedure. Dr. Bray offers me the chance to try it for myself. Paulette, who assisted in the examination, doesn't say anything but I sense she thinks I can stand to lose a few pounds here and there.

And just like that, I'm in.

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Under the insistence of a friend, I check out the **Elements Wellness Centre's website**. It is an upper-end work of video-making, depicting an impossibly beautiful, and highly privileged woman escaping the hectic cry of a busy city for the solitude of the elements. She walks past the meditative buddha into the cooling running waters, the warm fires and the peaceful surroundings of the Elements waiting room. I can only assume she's there for the spa, for she needs not a speck of work as one can surmise from the hungry look she gets from the only gentleman sitting in the waiting room with her. She is above acknowledging him. As handsome as he is, he doesn't stand a chance.

It's a somewhat misleading introduction to the facility in that Elements is more welcoming than the video suggests. Of course, there is a price tag to all of this, which eliminates any casual storefront walk-ins. And no question that cosmetic surgery tends to appeal to a clientele belonging to a distinct financial bracket. But as medical procedures improve and advance, affordability is slowly becoming less of an issue.

I was aware after my first consultation with Dr. Bray, that I was going to go through with the procedure no matter how the finances were arranged.

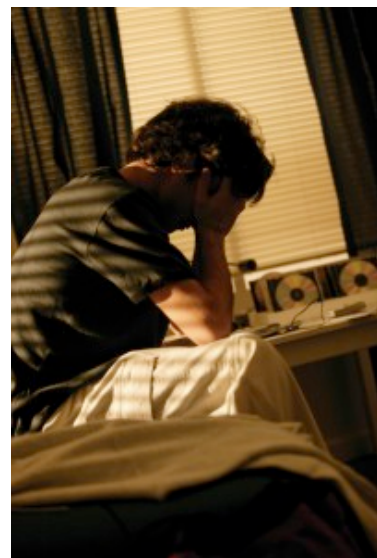
And now today is the day. Whatever excitement and anticipation I had prior to arriving has given way to concerns about pain, risks and the possibility that I will go through all of this and yet nothing will change.

My wife too has gotten cold feet. She's acting in ways that make me think she's growing nostalgic towards my body fat, as if prepping to say good-bye to a love that

can no longer be. And I can't help but feel that I am in some way betraying her, that I am letting part of my body go without her consent. She's even become a bit distant with me and finally admits, the night before the operation, that it's a silly thing to do, that she likes me the way I am. I tell her it's not too late to back out, both of us knowing, of course, that I have no intention of stopping now.

But whatever separation anxiety she might be experiencing, I'm experiencing it too. I walk around the house shirtless, once even answering the door without so much as towel over my shoulders, which, by the way, is a great way to get rid of door-to-door canvassers. Perhaps I am giving my middle-aged flab one last look at the world or letting the world have one last look at it — after all, we've been tight with each other for at least 10 years.

The night before surgery my nerves may not have surfaced in any noticeable way, but they were wreaking havoc on my subconscious. I decided to eat alone that evening. I neglected the courtesy of calling my wife who had dinner



at home waiting for me not knowing that she was hoping that I'd show up and dispel any last remnants of her doubts and fears.

Instead I selfishly gorged on steak smothered with blue cheese, escargot, freshly baked bread dipped in butter, two bourbon sours and a Kit-Kat. What does it matter, by tomorrow it will all be gone?

It was a restless sleep. I wondered about the pills on the shelf ... My medicine cabinet is now crammed with little blue containers of painkillers: Ratio-Lenotec No 3, Ratio-Oxycocet, Oxycodone/Acetaminophen, Ativan Sublingula and an antibiotic, Apo-Cephalex.

Would any of these help me relax? Would one of them get me through the night? Was this how Charlie Sheen started?

The past several days were spent researching the effects, side-effects and dangers of each drug, for it does seem like I have the makings of a great little chemical playground, but I'm cautious when it comes to prescription drugs, and as if fate is helping me along, I happen upon an episode of *Dr. Phil* coaching someone through their addiction to prescription drugs. It appears that an addiction to painkillers is a nasty path to take, and with no access to Dr. Phil, it's not a path I want to travel. I vow to take them only as directed.

But it is the drugs on the counter that are making everything suddenly so real. I am really going to go through with this. I am really going to voluntarily go under the knife to appease some ridiculous vanity I have about my body shape.

It's 7:30 a.m., Thursday morning. An unseasonably warm February. With such little sleep, and so much uncertainty ahead, I am surprisingly relaxed. I credit the Ativan.

I arrange for someone to drop me off and pick me up at the hospital. Oddly enough, the person who agrees to do this is the person who has been vocal against the procedure. She calls herself a cynic, but she's more than that. It almost seems political to her, as if cosmetic surgery is a slap in the face to a God that she doesn't believe in. She made it clear to her boyfriend that it would be a deal breaker should he attempt anything similar. Most of her sentences begin with, "It's none of my business but..."

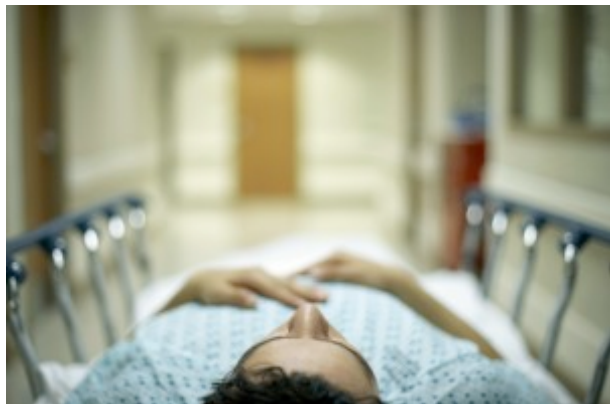
Happily, I am able to supply her with enough information about the clinic and the doctor to ease much of her concern — even to the point that after checking their website she almost allowed herself to consider what work she would have done — if she wasn't so

vehemently opposed to it, of course.

Her boyfriend is intrigued by the idea, which surprises me in that he is the most cautious person I know. It does, however, confirm my idea that vanity is perhaps a stronger motivator in men than any of us are willing to believe.

The facilities beyond the waiting room are even more tranquil. I'm led to a room where overnight guests stay. It has all the fineries of a five-star hotel. I opt to forgo the luxury and return to my home where my four-year-old daughter thinks daddy's getting his bad cold looked after.

My guide, Paulette, is not in sight, instead I'm greeted by Sharon. Sharon too has a manner about her that immediately instills confidence. There is some truth to the concept that as you are being led to surgery you start falling in love with the people who guide you there. Either that, or you've conceded to a level of trust that allows you to put yourself completely in their hands. Who knows? Perhaps that's what love is — trusting a person enough to put you to sleep and operate.



As I'm lying on the gurney, drifting off to sleep, I'm aware that I have never been so phenomenally well cared for. "Please have a nice sleep," Sharon tells me. The anesthetist tells me in his own pleasant manner what he's doing, all the while I breathe in fresh oxygen through a mask. Dr. Bray is there too, he apologizes for the cloudy day that hampers the picture window view of the park. I tell him I like my views a bit dark.

It's all so very nice. I tell myself I will remember falling asleep. But I don't.

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I'm hip enough to professional boxing to know who Mike Tyson is. But when Dr. Bray tells me the first few weeks after surgery will feel like I've gone 10 rounds with Tyson, I figured how bad could that be? It's not like Tyson is still champ. And a punch is a punch, right? I can take a hit or two. Besides, Bray says it's like 10 rounds with Tyson, meaning I've lasted through nine which makes me a pretty good contender myself.

And it's not like I've just had surgery on my ear, which I understand to be the most vulnerable body part in a Tyson fight.

Therefore: cosmetic surgery is a cake-walk.

It's Sunday...

I muster up enough ambition to take a shower. Even now, the idea of anything touching my body let alone a spray of hot water, makes me cringe. I peel off the lycra-like body suit someone squeezed me into while I lay in an anesthetic stupor. The suit is the kind of one-piece skin-tight surfer outfit you hope never to see on anyone older than 20 — black, stretching from mid-thigh to mid-bicep. Between the nylon and my bruised body are sponges cut out into over-sized puzzle pieces, contoured and shaped to fit. It's the sponges, not me, that look pudgy.

Four days earlier in the recovery room...

Sharon is there, smiling down at me. "It went very well," she says being careful to use my name. There is something about hearing your name called when waking from an anesthetic sleep that makes one think of whispered poetry, divinity, a choir of soft voices. "Your abs, your chest, everything perfect."

Her face tells me that it's true — that even by Dr. Bray standards, a miracle has been performed.

I spend the next while recovering. I speak non-stop regaling everyone in hearing distance, about the article I'm writing, about my wife, my daughter and I pray that I stopped somewhere within those parameters, but I can't be sure. But Sharon doesn't seem to mind, listening as if her sole purpose is to be entertained by me. I realize that some of my happiest moments in life happen while coming out of an anesthetic high ... followed by a pain-killer high.

Paulette comes up and the percocets have kicked in. I practically lunge for her. She is my contact, my life-line, my partner through the whole ordeal. I see the sudden look of apprehension in her face, she backs away ever so slightly, then leans in to give me a hug.

"It's the percocets," I explain.

"Yes," Paulette agrees. "You seem very happy."



Back home, I begin to understand the full weight of Dr. Bray's warning: I decide that Tyson must be a helluvah fighter. While on painkillers, all is bearable, although whatever liquid they pumped into me to prevent fat from shifting into unwanted places, seeps from me like water from a pin-prick in a balloon. I wake up several times at night in drenched sheets reminiscent of that guy in *The Godfather* who finds a horse's head under his covers.

TORO editor William Morrassutti emails me wishing me the best. I wonder, briefly, if he might feel some guilt for setting me up on this assignment. I consider, briefly, that he should.

There are messages for me left on my mobile from both Dr. Bray and Paulette. They want to know how I'm doing. Have there been any complications? Am I managing the pain?

Managing the pain...

Saturday night. My family is in Ottawa. I am certain I can look after myself. I take two percocets and two Tylenol 3s. Watching television strikes me as a reasonable diversion. Did I also have a beer? I shouldn't have.

The television starts projecting in 3D. I am watching the Leafs battle the Sens. No one's winning. My basement den rises to the ground level. The floor folds in around me so that all dimension is lost except for the images on television which remain in 3D. I know it's the drugs. I try to enjoy it. Instead I fall asleep. Or maybe I passed out.

I wake up with the need to shower.

I peel off the lycra suit. The sponges, now four days old, stick to me like Post-it notes on a cork board. I peel them off and see my new body for the first time.

Even with the swelling and the bruises I can tell that I'm slender again. My chest is in the right proportion. It frightens me a bit to see me like this. But I like it. There is still evidence of Dr. Bray's art work on my body, segmented and numbered like a carpenter's work plan.

Beneath the shower I can only sense the light touch of water hitting me. There is no other feeling. I am numb and wonder if this is permanent. If I'll ever get back to the sensations and the comfortableness that was once me — flab and all.

A week later...

Showering has become easier. The bruising and swelling is less. I still am confined to the lycra body suit, but the sponges are, for the most part, removed.

I meet Dr. Bray to take out the stitches. He's impressed with the healing, and so am I.

"It will take a few months to achieve the full effect, but we are aligned with the muscle line," he tells me. Muscle lines. When was the last time I had muscle lines? All is good.

A few months seems like a long time. I'm anxious to be free of the body suit and the painkillers (I have weaned to a couple of Advil, extra strength). But I can already see the results and I'm happy of where I'm heading.

Still, I wonder have I done this entirely out of conceit and ego? Are those the reasons people who undergo cosmetic surgery prefer to remain anonymous? No one wants to parade their vanity.

My friend Catherine who picks me up from the clinic tells me she was careful putting on her makeup for fear that if she arrived unkept Paulette, Sharon and Dr. Bray would strap her down and force-apply a facelift.

I laugh, but can't help think how self-image toys with us. Catherine of course is kidding. And she of all people has no need to pine for any alterations — she likely would say the same of me. But there it is anyway: one can't help but consider the possibilities when the possibilities are there.

One sleepless night when the pain seemed excessive and I was not ready to induce another 3D television experience, my wife said, out of sympathy, "I hope this was worth it."

"Me too." I replied.

Several weeks later and I can say that it was. Because I know of no journey, emotional, intellectual, spiritual or physical that doesn't require commitment, action and at least some trepidation and pain.

Now, if I can only keep my pants from slipping off my waist.