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SOMETHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

For the third time in four months, I am abjectly collapsed across my sofa, with CNN droning in the background, passing the hours cupping frozen gel pads to my puffy, flaming-red face.

I'm not suffering from an allergic reaction or an injury from kickboxing class; my condition is, rather, the temporary result of an appointment at the New York Dermatology Group, where, driven by my neurotic fear of one day waking up to find myself a dancing sun-dried California raisin—my comeuppance for a quarter century of now-forsaken tan-aholism—I submitted to the stinging wand of a Fraxel laser machine, one of technology's latest and best remedies for sun-damaged skin.

My misspent youth of heliotropism began on the North Shore of Long Island. Unlike the South Shore, where the mighty waves of the Atlantic Ocean crash upon an endless sweep of beach, our home stood a mere 500 feet from a strip of sticky, fishy-smelling sand littered with washed-up old tires, broken bottles, used condoms, driftwood, dead horseshoe crabs, and boulders slick with briny brown seaweed. Mean, green horseflies circled for blood.

But a beach is a beach, and I—a pasty preteen growing up in the era of "Who can top this tan?"—fanatically embraced the movement. Come late March, when it was still a shivering 50 degrees out and felt even more frigid due to the steady onshore breeze, I trudged across our still-lifeless beige lawn to that uninviting shoreline. Stripping down to my string bikini, I would prostrate myself on a towel under a wan sun. Though my teeth chattered and I was covered in goose bumps, I would stubbornly stay put for a good four hours. How else would I become the Bain de Soleil girl with the Saint-Tropez tan?

I wouldn't, or rather, couldn't: Being fair and freckled, I succeeded only in repeatedly scorching myself beet-red from head to toe, blistering, and then molting my parchment-dry dead skin. But that didn't stop me. On family road trips, I'd roll down the window,



They only come out at night—the growing tribe of the *seriously* UV-averse. Zealous convert **Elizabeth Hayt** searches for treatments and remedies for her once-sizzling sins and finds redemption—younger-looking skin!—under a more benevolent beam

stick out my head like a hound dog, and tip my face toward the fireball in the sky.

I was envious of my best friend, Barea, who by age 13 looked like a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model at 5'10" with her 36-24-36 figure and skin that turned maple brown whenever the sun shone upon her.

"Wanna lie out?" she'd ask over the phone. Her house had a pool, so I would jump on my Schwinn and pedal over. We

smeared ourselves with coconut-scented Hawaiian Tropic oil, created homemade three-sided tanning reflectors by wrapping our favorite double-album covers (for Barea, the Allman Brothers' *Eat a Peach*; for me, Neil Young's *Decade*) in foil. Propping them under our chins, we would float on inflatable rafts, the pool's reflection multiplying the intensity of the rays; then we'd flip over to cook our backs, too.

"I would keep rings on my fingers so when I took them off, I'd have tan lines. It was so cool," Baree remembers wistfully, despite recently having had two basal cell skin cancers removed from her upper lip.

During our adolescence, skin cancer was the last thing on our minds. As for wrinkles? We were still in high school! And SPF? Never heard of it. During the next decade, I reached a new level of heliolyatry when I lived in Paris and, one summer day while walking along the Seine, discovered the Piscine Deligny, a public swimming pool built on a brass and carved-wood barge where near-nude sunbathing was allowed, a sybaritic rite in which I (surprisingly) had

Meanwhile, the media was issuing red alerts about how the sun's harmful rays age the skin, causing wrinkles, discoloration, and malignant cellular mutations. Sunscreens flooded the market in a kind of SPF arms race—though how we use these products matters more than the number on the bottle: "Most people do not put enough sunscreen on to meet the SPF label," says Leslie Baumann, MD, director of the University of Miami Cosmetic Center. "So higher is better. An SPF of 60 put on the way most people do equals about a 30."

As for self-tanners, the latest word is a sharp "Watch out!" Their tan results not from a dye, a stain, or a paint, but from a


against a salvo of solar buckshot. But it was never officially available stateside because it wasn't FDA approved. Meanwhile, Europeans had been slathering on products with Mexoryl, a chemical screen, since 1993 (why does everything that's truly beautifying start over there?). In 2006, Mexoryl was finally given a thumbs-up for sale in the U.S. (It's now available in a wide range of L'Oréal products, including Kiehl's, Lancôme, and La Roche-Posay's Anthelios line of sunscreens.) "I found Mexoryl to be the most heat- and photo-stable chemical on the sunblock market," says David Colbert, MD, of the New York Dermatology Group. "It has the broadest UVA and UVB range, which means it prevents wrinkles as well as direct damage even under harsh conditions. I recently returned from a surf trip to Brazil without a tan by using Anthelios. A great sunblock needs to go on smoothly, absorb quickly, not wash off easily, and be stable in strong sunlight. Mexoryl has all of these properties."

I also accumulated a wardrobe of wide-brim, coolie-style hats and gauzy long-sleeve tunics, as well as linen shawls and scarves. I never left the house without a lightweight cardigan, just in case I needed to wear it backward in order to cover the décolleté of a sundress, protecting my ever photosensitive *poitrine*.

But that was the catch-22: The longer I stayed out of the sun and the more I protected myself, the fairer I became and the more vulnerable to burning if exposed. So I added an extra, albeit kookily Victorian layer of defense: colorful, whimsically decorated parasols rated at SPF 50, from Rain or Shine. Yes, people stared at me strolling along, holding aloft a pagoda-shaped pink canopy trimmed in coquettish black lace. But better to be seen as a madwoman than to be covered in melanomas.

A resolute sun-phobe will also do more than just dress the part: She'll change her entire lifestyle. I trained myself always to cross to the shady side of the street. I remained indoors from 10 A.M. till 4 P.M., the peak hours of the poisonous rays, and during daylight hours I refused to swim outdoors or even ride in open convertibles, no matter how sexy it seemed. As for boating, biking, hiking, gardening, and everything else? Who cared? I hated it all!

I went so far as to reprogram my circadian rhythms in order to become a high-functioning nocturnal being. I tend to work well into the wee hours and then slumber till late morning. Extreme as my behavior may seem, verging as it does on a kind of agoraphobia, I am no lone weirdo. The population of "mole people," as I call us, is expanding and diversifying, crossing



"You're going to look reptilian if you keep on baking," my boyfriend warned. "Once your skin ages, it gets crepey, and that's a real turnoff."

never engaged. I quickly found a cheap boutique and bought a cherry-red topless bathing suit—a monokini—and returned to the Deligny. Claiming a chaise, I spent the day utterly transfixed by a nearby gaggle of transgender Brazilians. When the sun set and the pool closed down, I departed with yet another unforgettable memory: My bare nipples had burned to a crisp.

Finally, just before I turned 35, vanity and love conspired to eclipse the grip of my addiction. My decade-long marriage was over, and I had a new boyfriend, the hairdresser Mark Garrison—a man who knew a thing or two about female beauty. "You're going to look reptilian if you keep on baking," he warned with brutal honesty. "Once your skin ages, it gets crepey, and that's a real turnoff because you'll turn into a premature hag, and you'll have to keep adding tan over tan because what looks worse is untanned over tanned skin...."

"I love virginal skin, the kind that's been untouched by the rays of the sun, because that's the skin that's going to hold up for the long haul," he added. "My grandmother always wore a kerchief and a hat. At 86, she still had the skin of a baby's butt."

That did it: I wanted the baby's-butt skin of Mark's grandmother. I quit the sun cold turkey, though in truth, I did have a little help: Guerlain bronzing powder got me through the fadeout phase, sparing me the sallow complexion of a consumptive.

chemical reaction between the active ingredient, dihydroxyacetone (DHA), and the amino acids in the dead layer on the skin's surface. Last year, four German scientists published a study indicating that the combination of treatment with a sunless tanner and exposure to sunlight can release free radicals. The solution? Stay the hell out of the sun! Apply your tanner at night—or, if you must expose yourself, at least baste your skin in a high-SPF sunblock.

The statistics linking the sun to skin cancer are hair-raising. Today, according to the American Academy of Dermatology, melanoma is the most common cancer among young adults 25 to 29 years of age, and more than one in 75 Americans can expect to contract the disease in their lifetime—up from one in 600 in 1960. And five or more sunburns in a lifetime doubles your malignancy risk. While I've aged out of the former demographic (finally, a reason to celebrate getting old!), the latter risk factor's got my name on it.

But I'm not dead yet. So long as I'm free of creepy growths and irregular moles, there's still a chance to stave off the inevitable. The only way to go, I decided, was to do a total reversal from sun-idolater to sun-phobic. I didn't even bother with sunscreen but headed straight to total prevention: a chemical sunblock, Photoderm Max SPF 100, the equivalent of bulletproofing my face

gender, race, and age lines. Colbert wears sunblock under his T-shirts because the cloth is only the equivalent of SPF 2 or 4. And since standard glass, such as office windows and car windshields, does not filter out all UVA rays, Diane Higgins, a fiftysomething New York City aesthetician, always brings a newspaper along to cover the windows on her side when her husband drives, rolling them up to hold the news-

My career and skin care are all tied in."

But prevention is only half the story; a far greater challenge is beating back the ravages long ago inflicted upon my UV-pyrolized skin. For the past 11 years, I have been consumed by all procedures and devices of cosmetic medicine that promise to revitalize my subdermal layers of decrepitude. To be clear, I'm not referring to plastic surgery and injections of Botox, fat, Hylaform, Perlane, Restylane, Juvéderm, or the like—all of which are part of my current repertoire to keep my skin free of wrinkles,

Fraxel, a laser technology introduced in 2005 that takes its name from the fact that it works only on a fraction of the skin's surface at a time. The device shoots a cluster of tiny light beams to create a pattern of pinpoint burns, each one surrounded by skin that is left untreated, so only 15 to 20 percent of the tissue is affected. That's why multiple treatments are recommended—three to five, performed every four or five weeks, the time it takes for collagen to grow and therefore for skin tightening to occur. The burn is relatively light and heals within a day, compared with seven to 14 days for a



Sun days: (From left) Powerful **Neutrogena** UltraSheer sunblock SPF 85 contains Helioplex to shield skin from UVA and UVB rays; with its sheer but potent formula, **RéVive** Filtré de Soleil SPF 45 works well under makeup; **VMV Hypoallergenics** Armada Face and Body Shield 60 defends against melasma-causing visible-light rays.

paper in place. (Because who really cares if you get blindsided as long as you're dodging the sunlight.)

Alexis Feldman, 28, who lives in Manhattan's TriBeCa and works in real estate, always wears stockings, even in the heat of summer, so her friends don't make fun of her legs, the skin of which she describes as "see-through." Clara Goldman, 17, a junior at New York City's Beekman School—who looks like a porcelain doll, her complexion starkly contrasting with her Goth raven hair—has been carrying a large black umbrella for sun protection ever since the age of 12. "I have OCD about it," she says. "My friends think it's freakish. But I would like to keep my skin nice and not get cancer."

And though Alina Cho, 36, a CNN correspondent, prefers her face to have a little color from the sun since it looks more natural than the heavy makeup often worn by people on TV, tanning finally caught up with her when she saw herself in high definition. "I started to notice I'm getting sunspots," she says. "I took action. The solution is SPF 40—whereas before I wasn't wearing anything. For New Year's, I went to Harbour Island and came back tan and healthy looking, but miraculously, everything blended in because of the sunscreen. The sunspots weren't as severe. The bottom line for high-def is that every little imperfection shows.

The Fraxel laser shoots a cluster of tiny light beams to create a pattern of pinpoint burns, so only 15 to 20 percent of the skin is affected.

lift sagging flesh, plump withering lips, add volume to hollowed-out cheeks, and rebuild facial convexities and contours, like the cheekbones, that are collapsing by the time a woman edges upward of 35.

Instead, I'm talking about less invasive but no less essential ways of achieving a shimmery, dewy, radiant complexion, like the flesh of an odalisque basking in a post-orgasmic glow. With Joel Kassimir, MD, an unfancy guy with a drab little office and an eye for good shoes, I underwent a four-month course of monthly microdermabrasion followed by chemical peels made with TCA, or trichloroacetic acid (it smarts!), and daily use of his private-label creams—an antioxidant in the morning and an alpha-hydroxy acid at night to slough off my dead skin cells and regenerate new ones, moisturizing as well as improving my skin texture. Lo and behold, after following Kassimir's regimen for 16 weeks, it happened: I got the postorgasmic glow even when I hadn't earned it.

But then, last fall, I stuck my head in a Visia Complexion Analysis machine—a gizmo that relies on computer readings of a high-res digital photograph of your face to rate the condition of your skin more accurately than the naked eye can see. Although I got high marks for texture (wrinkle-free!) and pore size (tight!), I flunked when it came to UV spots, which appeared as a blurry web of jaundiced pockmarks. My nemesis—the sun—had won.

That's when I decided to submit to

traditional peeling laser.

The device has already undergone two upgrades. Fraxel re:store has made the procedure more comfortable for the patient and easier for physicians to use. More recently, Fraxel re:pair has combined the standard Fraxel treatment with a CO₂ laser that penetrates deeper into the skin, tightening tissue without the long recovery time—one week rather than two. There are also fewer risks of scarring and pigmentation problems than with the old-fashioned CO₂ laser, which requires anesthesia because it basically firebombs your face.

According to New York City dermatologist and laser guru Roy Geronemus, MD, Fraxel "is a major advance in treatment of a variety of skin conditions, such as sun damage, which includes wrinkling, mild changes in pigmentation, and early signs of laxity. Precancerous changes can be reversed as well, and it's also good for acne and surgical scars.

"There are reasons why Fraxel works well," Geronemus adds. "The most important is that it creates thermal damage deep in the dermis, which is the second layer of the skin, without any injury to the epidermis, which is the top layer. This device creates a pixel-like effect on the skin, delivering discrete columns of thermal injury interspersed among normal skin so as to allow for remodeling of damaged skin without visible wounding."

Sounded good to me. Hence my three treatments, each of which began with me lying on my back on an examining table at

the New York Dermatology Group's offices on lower Fifth Avenue. A physician's assistant first prepped my face, coating it with copious amounts of a topical anesthetic cream, forcing me to put up with looking like a glazed doughnut for the hour it took to achieve the desired numbness. Step two involved wiping off that gunk and replacing it with a clear gel, enabling the doctor to glide the laser apparatus gently and smoothly across the surface of my skin.

The Fraxel re:store machine is a very unsleek contraption consisting of a bulky, off-white computer monitor that charts the energy level of the laser and measures the areas of skin to be treated. It sits atop what appears to be a plastic picnic cooler—actually a cooling system that pumps frigid air through a tube resembling a vacuum-cleaner hose to your skin as it is zapped.

After my eyes were covered with protective laser shields, Shilesh Iyer, MD, began to roll the electric-shaver-like device back and forth, starting at my forehead and working his way down to my chin. The lasering felt like splatters of sizzling bacon fat flying from the pan and landing on my flesh. Were it not for the mercy of the physician's assistant, who sure-handedly guided a spray of the cold air to chill the laser's split-second searing of my skin, I would have made like hot grease and flown from the room.

After the half-hour procedure, Iyer prescribed me Biafine, a cream for wound healing that moisturizes and creates a barrier against germs and contamination without clogging pores. I was sent home with a sample-size cream, a sheet of aftercare instructions, and a quartet of frozen gel pads. All I needed was a scented candle and my goodie bag would have been complete.

It took only one day of looking like a burn victim before my skin was on the mend. It went from raging red and swollen to a tender and golden tan, a lovely shade that ebbed all too soon before my face started madly itching, the skin cracking around my nostrils and chin and flaking off, like chips of dried-out varnish from an old master painting.

Since the appearance of my skin was pretty good to start with, the improvements from Fraxel treatment were hardly radical—more an enhancement than a makeover. What really struck me about it was a new quality that I can describe only as ripeness: tighter, brighter skin with an underlying plushness. Is it the return of my long-lost collagen? I'd like to think so. But one thing's for sure: I'm going to skip the Visia. The last thing I want to find out is that Fraxel failed to kick some life into my vestigial UV-wasted tissues. It might compromise my commitment—my commitment to me.

Why do I go to all this trouble (and why might you, dear reader)? The bottom line is, I do judge a book by its cover. First impressions do count, and I want mine to convey a certain vitality—not youth but rather a youthful outlook, open and ready for whatever comes next. Beyond that, I want my face to announce that the woman behind it takes extremely good care of herself, because she's learned that it's better not to rely on someone else to do it for her. Neither an ingenue nor a cynic, she sees through the reigning cultural dissimulation and condescension toward women that begins to sink in on the far side of 30; in this unforgiving part of the world, age most definitely does not come before beauty. The choice? Either you rot, or you rise to the challenge of aging beautifully.

To me, skin, an externalization of one's sense of self-worth and social identity, is anything but superficial. And surrender is not an option. The war goes on, and the show must go on. Latent wrinkling and festering carcinomas will never see the light of day—not on my watch. As a 46-year-old self-confessed narcissist and perfectionist, I'm proud to admit that my skin is excruciatingly high-maintenance. It's no small achievement to be able to look in the mirror and say, "Not bad for a Bain de Soleil girl who failed."

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