

WOULD A FACE-LIFT BRING BACK THE REAL ME?

After losing half her body weight, *Karen Hogan* was left with an unnaturally aged face. Here she reveals why, in order to look herself again, she decided to go under the knife

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH *David Poole*

SEVEN YEARS AGO, I achieved a major goal in my life: I reduced my body weight by half to 10st. People's reactions towards me changed immediately – the slights and slurs I had endured for years suddenly stopped. At my former weight of 21st, I did everything I could to become invisible – rarely venturing out and hiding under drab, shapeless clothes. Over time, I had practically become a recluse – unable to embrace life while burdened with unnecessary fleshy ballast. Now size-10 slender, I could finally step out from the shadows. Losing such a significant amount of weight in just a year was drastic and I achieved it the simple (some would say hard) way, by cutting out the things I loved most, namely anything – food or drink – containing sugar. It worked.

As the weight melted away, I harboured great expectations for life after obesity. I was convinced that my dramatically altered appearance would unveil a new, beautiful me. But the rapid weight loss combined with lack of exercise (due to obesity-related osteoarthritis) left me with an

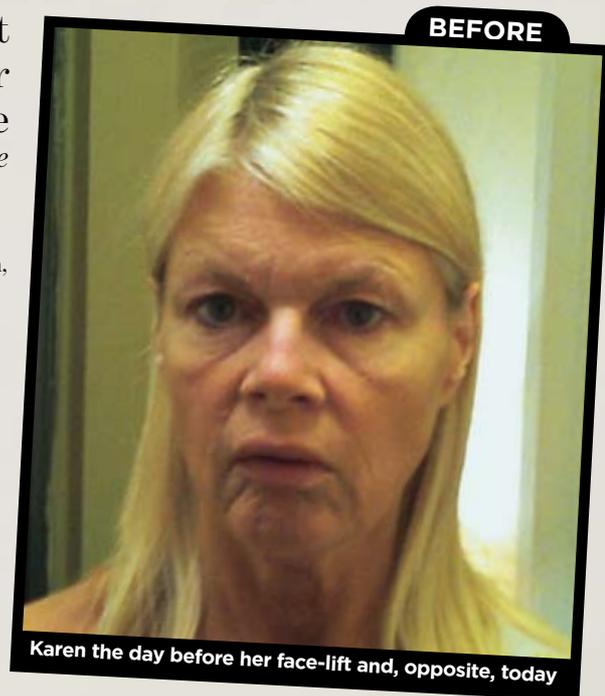
unnaturally aged face, complete with sagging skin, deep lines and droopy eyes.

I invested a fortune in expensive face creams which I applied several times a day, but every year I just looked more haggard: nothing could restore my skin's lost elasticity. If you'd met me then, you'd have thought I was much older than my 56 years. Of course, there are worse things than looking old for your age – and my weight loss had restored my health and sanity – but I looked tired and anxious all the time, to the extent that concerned people would ask what was wrong and tell me to 'cheer up'. I'm not a vain person, but no amount of

smart clothes or hairdressing appointments could help. Whatever miracle bodily transformation I'd managed to pull off, my face resolutely displayed the scars of more than a decade of morbid obesity – an unwelcome reminder of fat, unhappy Karen every time I glanced in the mirror.

As I was about to hand over my credit card in exchange for yet another 'miracle' firming cream, it dawned on me that only the removal of the loose

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skin – in other words, a full face-lift – would be the answer. I'm not a wealthy woman by any means, but through sacrificing holidays over the years and rarely buying clothes or shoes, I had amassed a small savings pot. And I had the support – emotionally and financially – of my family, who saw me struggling with a face which, although slimmer, I could not learn to love.

I set about doing my research meticulously, and over several months met an army of cosmetic surgeons, some well-known and others less ►



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◀ so. First, I investigated clinics offering budget packages abroad, in countries such as Poland and Thailand. Many did not return my calls. The ones that did offered the world, but also suggested that at my age I might like to think about breast enhancement and an abdominoplasty (also known as a ‘tummy tuck’) as well. To my astonishment, I was being hard-sold surgery, choosing procedures from a checklist with no personal consultation. I wasn’t aiming to look like Charlize Theron; I just wanted to look my age, or a bit younger, and have a nice smile. Two surgeons offered to make me look 30 years younger which, with my arthritic body and aged hands, would have been ridiculous. I also worried about the post-surgery aftercare in other countries. I have blood pressure issues, and needed the reassurance that if any complications arose I would be properly cared for. Would I need to keep flying back for post-operative treatment?

Eventually I met Mr Alex Karidis at the Hospital of St John and St Elizabeth in London. I was aware of his reputation as a ‘surgeon to the stars’, and wondered if I belonged there as an ordinary woman who had saved hard for cosmetic surgery. But I’d done my research thoroughly and it was difficult to find a derogatory comment about him. Years of being overweight have led me to avoid full-length mirrors, but he stood me in front of one and we both studied my reflection. What I saw made me want to run away, but he held my head in order to show me the face that surgery would accomplish.

With gentle fingers, he raised my facial skin and brow towards my forehead and ears. The difference was dramatic and I glimpsed the pre-obese, happier Karen. We talked more, and he explained what he could do. He was not going to make me look like Cameron Diaz, nor could he guarantee how much younger I would appear afterwards, but I would look fresher,

less exhausted. He would remove the sagging skin around my eyes, chin and neck where turkey-wattle folds hung. He asked about my weight loss and whether I smoked, then told me to take my time and think about it. At home I contacted a woman who had undergone a lower face-lift with Mr Karidis. Her positive response to my questions sealed the deal.

A word of advice: if you are considering a face-lift, stay away from face-lift forums. The scare stories are chilling. I’d frightened myself into believing I would be left with huge blood clots, that my mouth would sink to one side and I’d have to sleep with my eyes taped closed for evermore. I admit I was terrified of having surgery and the quandary of the cost – a full face-lift starts from around £15,000 – went back and forth in my mind. But I knew that I was in good hands and, towards the end of last year, I submitted to the knife.

After six hours of surgery, I awoke with my head swathed in bandages, my legs in inflatable stockings attached to a pumping machine that prevents blood clots forming in the calves. I was also hooked up to a Hilotherapy machine, which pumps cold water around a fitted cuff to keep skin at a cool, soothing temperature. The nursing staff stayed by my side throughout the night. I could barely see or hear, and had very little voice. I couldn’t consume solids, even though I was starving.

The following day I returned home and rented a Hilotherapy machine to take with me to help with the healing. The tightness in my throat was

frightening at first, but when the bandages were removed after a couple of days the discomfort eased, and I was amazed at the huge difference when I looked in the mirror. Yes I looked like a nightclub bouncer after a drunken fight, with bruising and swelling all over my face and neck, but already I could see my new tight jawline and a small smile on my lips.

I looked after myself carefully for that first week, resting, watching my face change every day, and trying not to panic over every new little bruise or hard spot that appeared, or at the deep bruising around my eyes. Five weeks on, I still had some light bruising but was thrilled with the newly defined shape of my neck and chin. At last I could smile naturally and feel the real me shining through. If I look younger, then that’s a bonus. Another bonus is that unlike Botox treatments, which

need to be repeated every few months, my face-lift should last for many years to come.

It feels amazing to be freed from my permanent scowl. After 30 years of not leaving the house without being caked in make-up, I dash out now with just a touch of lipie and mascara. I’m delighted at how quick the recovery time has been. After years of suffering casual abuse from strangers, the reactions I get now are the opposite. People smile at me. A friend I hadn’t seen for a while asked me if I’d taken a lover. She told me I looked ‘glowing’, and her compliments moved me to tears.

Like many people, no doubt, reading this article, I was sceptical about cosmetic surgery. I still can be if it seems unnecessary. But having been, in my eyes, ugly, it is amazing when my sister marvels at the beautiful texture and alabaster tone of my skin. In shops people stop to talk to me randomly with a smile and a joke because I look approachable. My daughter is treating me to a weekend at a health spa and has paid for me to have a make-up lesson. The other night she hugged me, and whispered, ‘I loved you before the operation, but seeing you so happy afterwards makes me even happier.’ What more could I want?

I now feel ready to grab life by the horns, and travel, first of all to Florence. Many years ago, I studied 15th-century Italian art but lacked the confidence to leave home, let alone travel to a foreign country. Now nothing will stop me. And after Florence, who knows? All I know for sure is that I am going to maintain my healthy weight, enjoy my face and greet the world with a natural smile and joy of life. ■

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Above: Karen in bandages the day after her surgery and, right, five weeks later