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THE LASER'S EDGE

This month, our adventuress drafted her boss and her buddy into serving the beauty cause, enlisting them to test the new MiXto skin-resurfacing laser. At first misery loved this company, but in the end victory was theirs: They took their faces back in time. **By Holly Millea**

smile, “Your next column is a new procedure that *could* leave you hideously scarred and undatable for life—but I’m sure you’ll be fine.” While that quote is not verbatim, it is close in the way that Alaska is close to Russia—very.

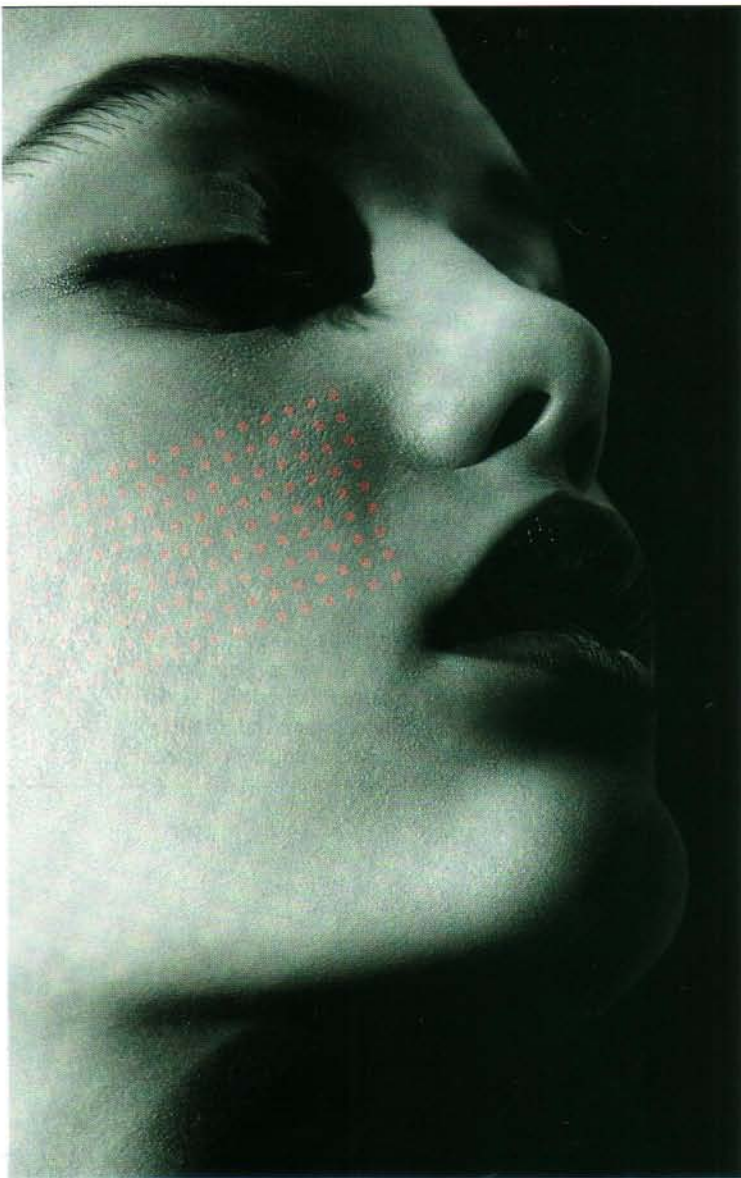
Sweet Emily. Should I send her to get a hot-rock massage at an exotic spa in a fabulous foreign country? Oh, I don’t think so. How about a makeover! Bor-ring. Teeth whitening? Nyet. Nipple waxing? Getting warmer. I know! Let’s send Em on an adventure to test the new MiXto Micro Fractional CO₂ skin-resurfacing laser, which will burn off her entire face! But I’m sure she’ll be fine.

Seriously, I love Emily. So much so that I’m here with her in the office of our dermatologist, Dennis Gross, MD, patting her hand while the topical anesthetic cream takes effect. And here is where I’ll be when she has second thoughts as the laser is fired up and aimed at her face. Because if Emily has second thoughts, my first thought will be: You’re not going anywhere.

Dr. Gross enters, followed by an assistant named Ken, who I assume will be the one holding Emily down. “No,” Gross says, not amused, explaining that Ken operates the machine so that he can stay focused on the face at hand. To protect her eyes, Emily is given a pair of small egg-shaped metal shields, while the rest of us don big plastic safety goggles.

“This new laser is going to have as big an impact on the cosmetics industry as Botox had a decade ago,” says Gross, holding a steel wand-like instrument fitted with a one-inch square at the end. CO₂ lasers have been around for almost 20 years, but until this latest iteration, using them to take off the top layer of skin as a means to level deep wrinkles and erase skin damage was risky. “Previous lasers, like the Fraxel, generated too much heat,” Gross says. “It was a much harsher, deeper wounding procedure, with a much longer recovery time and a possible risk of increased scarring—not to mention the pain. Those people who did it in the late ’90s? You see them around with that white upper lip because their melanocytes were disrupted, causing hypopigmentation.”

Melanocytes are cells that when stimulated by the sun produce melanin, which makes the skin tan. The number of melanocytes



First, let me say how excited I am to be the newly elected vice president of PETA: People for the Ethical Treatment of Adventurers, which is not to be confused with that other PETA group—unless the confusion elicits a donation. I am proud to be part of an organization that includes so many brave pioneers. I salute my fellow adventurers who, like me, have gone where no one has gone before, and especially those who have gone and told everyone not to go there, and in particular those who have gone and never come back. Wherever you are—thank you for going.

Many of you are wondering why I ran for VP as opposed to P, and the answer is EZ. As second in command, I will attend state funerals and get to wear black, which is slimming. I will also be free of any real responsibility unless, for whatever reason, I want to start a war. And then, hey, don’t look at me, look at the P!

I have already begun to fulfill my promise of change. Note the highlighted hair. And, hello, new reading glasses. I’ve also honored my pledge to lower faxes, saving us trees and the need to read. But the biggest change I’ve made since becoming powerful is the outsourcing of my job as ELLE’s resident guinea pig to Emily, our beauty director, who for years has looked at me and said with a

varies from person to person, which is why fair people freckle in the sun, some people burn, and others tan a rich Hershey's chocolate. "This laser is not going to destroy those cells like the old lasers," says Gross, who, until MiXto, refused to perform CO₂ procedures. He picks up a piece of paper and zaps it to illustrate. Within the one-inch-square beam of the laser is a uniform matrix of microdots, each about the size of the period at the end of this sentence. By fractionating the surface blast, "the laser bounces around so that one little area of skin is heated up, and by the time the laser hits someplace else, it has already cooled down from the previous event," Gross says. So there's a lot less thermal damage.

At 35, Emily has black hair, green eyes, and geisha-white skin that's never been brushed or kissed or slapped by a sun ray. While she's devoid of the age spots and solar damage the MiXto nix-tos, the laser reduces pore size and fine lines; contracts collagen fibers, reducing skin laxity; and induces collagen production for up to half a year. "It turns the clock back," Gross says. So four to six months from now, "you're going to look four, five, six, seven years younger—that will be your new baseline."

Emily lies back. Ken turns on the machine. Gross places the square on her forehead. Now ready and armed, he steps on a pedal, firing a low-level test zap to introduce her to the sensation before turning up the juice. The beam shoots through the square's center, sending a small puff of smoke and the scent of burning skin into the air. Ken holds a rubber vacuum hose near her head to suck up the creepy smell.

"I'd say the upper third of the face is most sensitive to pain, so let's start with the forehead and get that out of the way," Gross says. Em holds her breath as the laser flashes sparks at three-second intervals, Gross inching the steel square across the surface as if he were tiling a floor. She's smokin' now. The lasered skin cinches up, turning ash white. As he lasers around the eye area, tears slip out from under her shields, running down the sides of each temple.

"Does it hurt, Em?" I ask, truly concerned.

"No, my eyes are just watering. It feels kind of like laser hair removal, like a thousand teeny rubber bands snapping." She exhales deeply: "Could I get a glass of cold water? My mouth feels dry." Pam, Gross's physician's assistant, returns with water. Gross stops, and Emily, beads of sweat on her upper lip, takes a long drink and lies back down.

Forty minutes later, her face is finished, branded in a matrix of what Gross estimates to be "300,000 microdots." Pam applies Catrix, a healing ointment and protective barrier, to her singed skin. "I can really feel the burn setting in," Emily says. (The burning feeling lasts between 30 minutes and three hours.) Today is Thursday. Gross estimates she'll be back to work on Monday. By the time Emily leaves, her face has started swelling. Monday might be wishful thinking.

"Here I am today!" reads Emily's e-mail on Saturday. She's attached a profile photograph, the sight of which gives me a guilty pang. Poor Em. "Still swollen," she continues. "Skin almost bubbly—grid marks are cool-looking. Not in any pain tho to Vicodin, but look awesomely grotesque. I definitely couldn't go out in public today. Fingers crossed that I won't look as scary by Monday."

Tuesday, Emily writes: "Hi! Blotchy but healing! Finally crusted over last night. I think it will be good, tho. Downtime was a little longer than I thought—definitely won't look normal till next week. Still have laser matrix marks in some spots, but very cool to see healing skin peek thru. One problem. I am addicted to

Vicodin now. It is so wonderful!!! I only have three left, so somewhat short-lived addiction." Uh, oh: "I went on Travelwise.com and bought all these clothes that roll up to pack! Now I can roll up my entire wardrobe! This is the future!!!!" Em is in serious trouble. She's also developed an addiction to exclamation points—and *those* she won't run out of!

That's it. I cannot in good conscience leave Em to go where I haven't gone before. I can't leave her out there on her own, stumbling through the MiXto recovery maze from which she could emerge screaming for Vicodin, looking like a checkerboard, wearing roll-ups, and doing this—!!!!—for the rest of her life. Thus, without further ado or the approval of the president, I pick up the Red Phone, call my friend Liesl, and enlist her to test the MiXto laser too. That way Emily won't have to survive it alone.

I arrive at Gross's office and find Liesl waiting for me, slathered in numbing cream, eyes wide with fear: "I thought you said I was getting a facial." Clearly we've had a miscommunication.

Gross enters the room, points out all the sun damage Liesl's accumulated from her outdoorsy, nature-loving lifestyle, and assuages her anxiety by saying, "By the time you're healed, you'll notice that a lot of that discoloration will be gone. And these large pores on your cheeks and nose will be greatly reduced in size." Liesl, 44, who has long lamented those large pores, gives him a skeptical look. "Pores run really deep; they're like canals," Gross explains. "So what the laser does is heat up the cells and stimulate them into producing more collagen fibers that shrink the pore tun-

It's a hot, prickly, tickly blast of energy in three-second bursts. My eyes do not water, my feet do not flinch, my fingers do not clench. Pain is, after all, in my contract.

nels. This also creates a notable amount of firming—though that effect will take some time."

Ken comes in and flips the MiXto switch. Liesl puts the metal goggles on, muses about whether her vanity will result in permanent blindness, and, being a laser virgin, accepts the blue squeeze ball Gross offers, which when the going gets rough will keep her from grabbing one of *his* balls.

Liesl is such a trouper. "It feels like that jet of water the dentist squirts in your mouth, only you're squirting electricity into my face," she says as Gross makes his way across her forehead. "It's not so bad." Her undereye area and nose are another story. With every laser pulse she white-knuckle grips the ball, her legs go stiff, and her toes curl. I know this is evil, but I have to keep myself from giggling. After a decade of testing some pretty ouchy procedures, I can't tell you how great it feels to have someone else feeling the pain for once—twice, including Emily. Ken holds Liesl's head steady so Gross can stay on exact track as he does one inch, next to another inch, and another....

When it's over, Liesl removes her metal shields, gets up, and looks in the mirror. "Oh my God," she says, staring at the ashen, dotted landscape of her face. She's both fascinated and freaked out. "Holly," she says, eyes imploring, face swelling, "You're doing it too, right?" Misery loves company.

ELLE BEAUTY ADVENTURE

Covered in the numbing cream and metal goggles, I recline, press "Enya" on my iPod, and tell Gross to wake me when it's over. What felt like snapping rubber bands to Em and a dental irrigator to Liesl feels like a Fourth of July sparkler to me. It's a hot, prickly, tickly blast of energy in three-second bursts. My eyes do not water, my feet do not flinch, my fingers do not clench the blue ball. Pain is, after all, in my contract.

Being the true beauty adventuress, I have to outdo the others and take the MiXto to its outer frontier. Gross warns me that the neck area is much more sensitive than the face and takes longer to heal. Are we mice or are we men? I give Dr. G the thumbs-up. But funnily enough, the neck—mine, anyway—hurts less. And the farther down he goes, the easier it gets, because he lightens the amount of energy to "feather" the burning so that there won't be a visible demarcation between the resurfaced skin and the old-surfaced skin.

While he's at it, Gross narrows the beam width and does a second pass over a few acne scars and a chicken pockmark to generate extra collagen growth in the depressions.

As Pam greases me down with the Catrix, Gross hands me postprocedure instructions and says healing in my case will take seven to 10 days because "I lasered you at a 25 percent higher level of energy than Emily and 15 percent higher than Liesl, given the older condition of your skin and your scarring."

In the cab the burning begins. Like I'm holding my face over a gas flame. Liesl calls my cell phone. She's on fire too. "This is good that it's hurting, right?" she asks. "That means it will do something. No pain, no gain?" I tell her that tends to be the rule.

But I have no idea how this will turn out—we're all guinea pigs now. I think of my parents and all the times growing up I panicked over something and how they'd soothe me: "It's going to be okay," and "Everything will work out—I promise." The truth is, they couldn't actually promise anything, and beneath the comforting words they were scared too.

As I step out of my taxi, the May sunshine strikes me (literally and figuratively) as malevolent; this is a procedure that should be done in the gray, cloudy, cold dead of winter. Taking out my aftercare sheet, I shield my face from the rays that stoke what now feels like a flash fire.

As Gross predicted, the burning subsides over the next three hours. Unlike Emily, Liesl and I have no need for anything stronger than Tylenol. I post the

aftercare instructions on my refrigerator: "Sleep with your face elevated above your heart for the first day after procedure."... "Wash with Cetaphil, and avoid hot water. Apply a thin layer of Catrix after washing."... "Rest. Avoid strenuous exercise, bending, straining, stooping, or lifting heavy objects."... "If the skin around the mouth is tight, minimize facial expressions."... Like Edvard Munch's screamer, which is what you're going to want to do every time you look in the mirror.

Liesl and I call each other constantly and e-mail macabre MacBook pics of ourselves back and forth. "I kept thinking I was smelling cat pee," she e-mails, two days in. "And then I realized—it's my face." She is referring to the Eau de Catrix. "Do you know what is *in* this stuff? Cow cartilage." Refined bovine tracheal cartilage to be exact—an ingredient that was originally discovered to accelerate healing of chronic wounds like bedsores and ulcers. The smell gives new meaning to the phrase "put out to pasture."

The patient information sheet states that "redness may persist up to two days. At this point, makeup can be applied." Ha! "Within three to four days your face will get darker, and then near the fifth day peel. More intense treatments take up to seven days to heal." But in our Day Five photos we look like nuclear-blast victims—our faces (and my neck) are brown and molting in some areas but still ruby red in others. We feel encouraged by Emily, whose face recovers more quickly, "although every time I squeeze a zit"—and this procedure brought out whiteheads in all three of us—"the matrix dots reappear," she says.

Ten days later, Liesl and I are peeled and our color is fading from MiXto rouge to fuchsia to pink. We begin to venture outside. And then we commit crimes for which we will both have to do more time. Liesl quits the Catrix and applies first Eucerin (dumb), then vitamin C lotion (crazy), and her face blows up, covered in a quilt of angry red welts. Meanwhile I have an acne flare-up and—never one to resist temptation or an opportunity to self-destruct—I pick my face; after which I add insult to injury, washing it with a soft sea sponge. The result is a mass of brilliant matrix spots and angry maroon streaks. Totally my bad.

Wearing sun hats the size of circus tents, Liesl and I slink into Gross's office. She, being good, confesses her acts of stupidity. I, being a politician, sort of own up. Gross, being patient and kind, gives us a gentle scolding and reassuring words ending in "I promise," which do not prevent me from skyrocketing into anxiety space. "Holly,

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THE LASER'S EDGE

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trust me," he says. "You are going to be so psyched in the end."

The end, my friends, was a long time a comin'. A month later we were still MiXto malcontents; skin marbled shades of red, extremely sun sensitive. Liesl breaks out in anxiety. Emily breaks out in freckles. I break out in "Cry Me a River," only no one's cryin' for me because I'm the one to blame. I can't say sorry often enough. "I'm just happy you're freaking out too," Liesl says during Week Two. "If I were going through this by myself, I don't know what I'd do. My boyfriend won't talk to me anymore."

Gross puts Em on Aclaro, which contains the skin lightener hydroquinone—an organic compound found in the defensive glands of bombardier beetles. (Don't ask me.) Liesl is put back on Catrix duty. And I resort to wearing the pancake makeup worn by professional drag queens.

One day, a few months later, I wake up relieved to see that I am looking like my old self. It is a tipping point. By the next week I look like my not so old self. And the next, I am looking younger than myself.... Like in *Death Becomes Her*, every day it seems my face is going back in time. Liesl's too. Em, not so much. (Because she is so young to begin with.)

Four months later the three of us are circling Gross in his office. "I still have some lingering brown spots, but they're fading," Emily says, pointing to something I really can't see. "My tone and tautness are much better." Will she forever be sun sensitive? "Absolutely not," Gross says. "Only the first three to four weeks of healing. This laser does not injure the skin pigmentation system."

"The bagging under my eyes is gone," Liesl says, pointing to where her bags were checked. "Also, my eyes seem somehow lifted." Gross calls this the "incidental eye lift"—the tightening of skin on the forehead cinches up the eyelids. "I'd say I look about four years younger," Liesl says, smiling. Her proof? "A guy tried to pick me up at Home Depot."

For once, I'm thrilled to be the oldest woman in a room. I am the biggest beneficiary of our MiXto CO₂ laser adventure.

"The more severe your problem, the higher the percentage of improvement perceived," Gross says. "This was a big victory for you." He kept his promise. I feel guilty I ever doubted him. "I just remember you looking so miserable, and I was so excited inside because I knew how great your skin was going to look."

I've never been happier returning from an adventure—emotionally and physically. The recovery was a long haul, longer than I'd been prepared for. But my skin is completely revolutionized—pores tighter, scars smaller, oil production cut in half. The end justified the means.

Which is why I'm holding this press conference. Unlike most politicians, I've learned from my mistakes and have repealed the outsourcing of my job: Never again will I send a civilian into uncharted beauty territory. The buck stops here. ●