



(ABOVE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) MY AUNT, MY COUSIN AND I WHALE WATCHING IN AUSTRALIA. LAUREN (RIGHT).



# Lauren

## The real risks of cosmetic surgery

BY LAUREL MILLS

My cousin is the only woman I have ever known to stop traffic.

More specifically, she is the only woman I have ever known to stop traffic in that mythical way one thinks of when imagining great beauty or a stunning smile. I'm sure that I, too, could stop traffic, but it would more than likely involve taking a header into the hood of a speeding car because I missed the curb crossing the street.

But, my cousin Lauren always was far more graceful than me.

The summer after my high school graduation, Lauren took me shopping while my family was visiting hers in their adopted homeland of Melbourne, Australia. We had just left a noodle shop near Collins Street when a racing, out of breath Aussie approached.

"Hello," he panted, doubling over at the waist

from the effort his running required. "I know you don't know me, but my friend thinks you're beautiful. He's at the stop light right now, but he wanted me to give you his phone number before he had to keep going."

"Thank you," Lauren said, as we both heard the first car horns sound edging this infatuated stranger on. "But, it seems you better get back to your friend."

"Yeah, OK, but you should totally call him sometime."

"Uh-huh."

As her admirer's messenger turned to go, Lauren tucked the phone number in her pocket (so he wouldn't see her throw it away), and we continued down the street.

"Does that happen to you a lot?" I asked, still amazed at the scene I had just witnessed. At 18, I was the very definition of a late bloomer and had always had my fair share of difficulties attracting members of the opposite sex, and certainly no one had ever spotted me from afar and just come running.

"From time to time," she said. "Now, let's get moving and find something to match those great

pants you just bought."

And, again in the way that Lauren was also always graceful, she turned the attention from herself back to me.

While I might have seemed stunned to see my cousin stop traffic that day in Australia, I wasn't really all that surprised. I, too, often found myself enchanted by Lauren's beauty. She was simply breathtaking and always had been. With the proximity in our ages (I was the older one by four whole months) and names (I still answer to "Lauren" because of how often my great-grandmother confused the two), it seemed that there was a constant basis for comparison between us, even if I was the only one doing it.

For as brunette and blue-eyed as I am, she was equally as blonde and brown-eyed. And, for as much as I tend to be cynical, clumsy and consumed by my own little world, she was kind, poised and always looking out for others.

In short, she was so thoroughly captivating because she made it absolutely impossible to hate her for how truly beautiful she was.

I can remember standing next to her at the bar as we were celebrating her brother's wedding and



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knowing without a doubt that every eye in the place was on her. The boys who came to talk to me did so because they were either intimidated by her or were hoping that I might have an "in" to introduce them to Lauren. Growing up, I thought the worst thing was having to be constantly next to the most gorgeous woman I have ever known at bars, family gatherings, in photos and in life.

I was very, very wrong.

In January of 2007, around 8 in the evening, my cousin climbed out of the bath, collapsed to the floor and never took another breath. She was a few weeks shy of her 27th birthday.

It is not only Lauren's death, but also the cause of her death, that completely shocked me. Lauren died from the complications of liposuction. (What killed her was the combination of an infection at the site of insertion as well as a build-up of fluid and fat in her lungs that were released during the surgery.)

I spent years thinking that if only I had Lauren's features or her trim thighs or flat stomach, I could look in the mirror and really like what I saw there. If I looked like Lauren, I could stop thinking about diet plans and ways to get rid of my gut or buying so many Spanx I should look into wholesale pricing. How Lauren could have found a single fault with her body is beyond me. I'm not sure the rest of us — cellulite, love handles, smile lines and all — have a chance in this diet-obsessed, over-sexualized, PhotoShopped-magazine-covers world if a woman who could stop traffic wanted liposuction.

In the last thirteen months, I have learned that the worst thing is not having a cousin that can easily outshine you. It's also not not being the prettiest or the skinniest person in the room. The absolute worst thing is not having Lauren here. The worst thing is knowing that I will never see my cousin get married, or meet her babies or have her to turn to as our parents age. The worst thing is the hole in my heart that misses her and wants to know why I'm here when she isn't and if this hurt will ever heal.

A few weeks ago, my nearly nine-year-old cousin (another stunning blonde with legs so long she'll probably tower over me by the time she enters the sixth grade) was lying across my lap at a family get-together.

"You have a pointy nose," she said.

"Yes, I do."

"And you have freckles."

"You're right again."

"I don't have a pointy nose," she added. "But I have some ugly feet."

Why is it that, as women, almost from the moment that we become aware of ourselves and our bodies, we look to find fault there? Why are we so hard on ourselves and what are we saying to the women and young girls around us when we criticize and nit pick every perceived flaw and extra pound?

What all are we risking and sacrificing in this seemingly-relentless pursuit of "beauty"?

When pseudo-celebrity Heidi Montag of "The Hills" recently appeared on the cover of *US Weekly* to talk about her plastic surgery, I was appalled. "If I don't wake up, it's worth it. I just wanted it so badly," Heidi said of her breast enlargement and rhinoplasty.

No, Heidi, dying from plastic surgery isn't worth it — to you or those that love you.

To all the women who might be reading this, I encourage you to love your body just the way that it is. Tell your mothers, daughters, sisters and friends how great they look today. As long as cosmetic companies and vanity surgeons and fashion magazines are making money by making you feel inadequate, they're going to keep doing it. We also have to stop beating ourselves up. There is so much more to all of us than hair and bits of cellulite.

And the price of perfection is just too high.