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## The battle within

***A blind woman struggles to satisfy her own standards for beauty***

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Susan Dunham's profile on the left is before surgery and the right profile photograph is after surgery. (MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH)

Susan Dunham's life is endless darkness and passing shadows.

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She sees shapes, but not people. She makes out images, but not faces. Not even her own.

Dunham has been blind for more than 20 years. A degenerative disease and several unsuccessful surgeries have left her with 20-1200 vision.

Her home on Church Hill is a cave. Dark venetian blinds cover every window, and the only light inside comes from the low glare of the television and a few 7-watt light bulbs. Only at home is Dunham able to

remove her black sunglasses and open her light-blue eyes.

But like most women, Dunham worries about how she looks. She can't study herself in the mirror, so she relies on her hands to tell her what parts are sagging, what parts are loose, what parts aren't as smooth and supple as they were in her 20s -- when she still had sight.

Dunham, 46, exercises daily and diets religiously. Her struggle with her appearance began when she was a child. The middle of three girls, her father chided her almost daily.

"My dad always said, 'It's a shame you can't be as pretty or as smart as your sisters,'" Dunham said.

When she was 14, her father told her she'd have more friends if she "had a better chin." He took her to a plastic surgeon for a chin implant, but surgery didn't help her social standing.

Now, decades later, Dunham is still haunted by her father's words. After two years of diets and regular gym visits, Dunham decided her own efforts to improve her appearance weren't enough.

She turned to cosmetic surgery.

In December, Dunham decided to leave her happiness in the skillful hands of Dr. Joe Niamtu III, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon who nips and tucks Richmonders to a better appearance. Now that all the staples are out and the normal bruising is gone, Dunham is happier with her looks than she's ever been. She can't see her new firmer skin and thinner neck, but everyone else can.

"I love to hear the compliments," she said, a wide grin spreading across her smooth cheeks. "Now, I look as good on the outside as I feel on the inside."

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It's just before 10 a.m. on Dec. 10, and Joe Niamtu's office is abuzz with people covered head to toe in blue surgical scrubs, masks, hats and booties.

Before Dunham undressed and started her anesthesia, Niamtu marked her face with black ink as a guide.

Just before she drifted off to sleep, she whispered to him, "You're a blessing."

In her consultation weeks earlier, Dunham told him exactly what she wanted, "to look younger but not like I've had a facelift." That's what most of Niamtu's patients want.

"They do this because they want to look tighter, younger, fresher -- not to look like somebody else, or to get a promotion, or to save a failing marriage," he said. "As a surgeon, you have to tell people it's a scalpel, not a magic wand."

For the next five hours at Niamtu's Chesterfield surgery center, the doctor deftly sliced, sucked and stitched Dunham's face. He and his surgical staff listen to music during their operations. For Dunham, it was a classic rock collection including "Brown Eyed Girl" and "Sweet Home Alabama."

"One hundred percent of people will tell you they don't want to look like Joan Rivers or Phyllis Diller," Niamtu said, stretching Dunham's cheek toward her ear. "They want a discreet look. A good facelift should whisper, not yell."

Niamtu, who regularly performs free surgeries on needy children and adults with facial deformities, met Dunham several years ago when she saw him because her old chin implant was causing pain. The implant, he found, had worn away the bone on her chin, and he had to perform a bone graft to reconstruct the chin.

At that time, Dunham told Niamtu that she wanted some cosmetic surgery but couldn't pay for it. Niamtu and his partners decided to operate for free.

"Despite her significant disability, Susan wanted to lead as normal a life as possible," he said. "I was touched by her desire to look and feel younger, even though she could not see the results."

After Dunham's procedure, Niamtu and his assistants helped her into a "face bra" to keep swelling to a minimum. When she healed, the only evidence of the facelift would be a few tiny scars behind her hairline.

"The only people who should know are the patient, the doctor and the hairdresser," Niamtu said.

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Dunham was Susie Marie Whitton when she graduated from Douglas Freeman High School in 1976.

She married soon after, had a son and daughter and divorced when she was 21. Dunham was with her second husband from 26 to 33. By her early 30s, her vision was so bad she couldn't read.

"He put an ad in the newspaper announcing that he wanted to divorce me, knowing I wouldn't be able to read it," she said. "Boy, can I pick 'em."

For years, she sat at home alone, trying to make out shapes on TV and eating out of boredom.

"Your hunger isn't linked to sight -- it's more about smell. I had no job, I wasn't busy, and I was lonely," she said.

Dunham suffers from keratoconus, an abnormal bulging of the cornea that causes impaired vision or blindness. She also has surgically severe astigmatism and has undergone three corneal transplants and three laser surgeries. Nothing helped. By the time she was 30, she was legally blind.

The only visual memories she has of her daughter Kala, 24, and son Bud, 25, were when they were very young. Dunham lives with Kala and her faithful guide dog in subsidized housing and receives food stamps. Bud lives in the Fan District.

Now that she's had a facelift and is feeling better about herself, Dunham said she'd like to find a job -- something she has been trying to do for years -- and maybe a date.

"People treat nice-looking people better," she said. "My daughter tells me my skin looks like it did when I was in my 20s," Dunham said.

After "looking like an alien" for a few days following her facelift, the swelling went down and Dunham's new face began to emerge. She doesn't look like a different person, just younger.

Exactly what she wanted.

"When I go like this," she says, shaking her head from side to side, "my cheeks don't wiggle."

She's still hung up on keeping her weight at 127 pounds and on losing the pooch on her narrow waist -- a pooch that only she notices.

"I've got stuff that hangs over my pants. It bothers me," Dunham said, grabbing at her side. "I've been working on myself for two years, and if this isn't gone in a few months, maybe I'll consider a tummy tuck."

Niamtu said he's pleased with Dunham's subtle results.

"Our whole goal was to help Susan feel better, and we accomplished that," he said on one of Dunham's many follow-up visits to his office. "That's my payoff -- when you smile, and I know you feel good. Unlike those makeover shows, my unveiling is a hug or a thank-you or sometimes a peck on the cheek. That's all I ask for."

While Dunham can't see the results, her hands tell her all she needs to know.

"When I feel my face," she said, "I feel like I'm supposed to feel."

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