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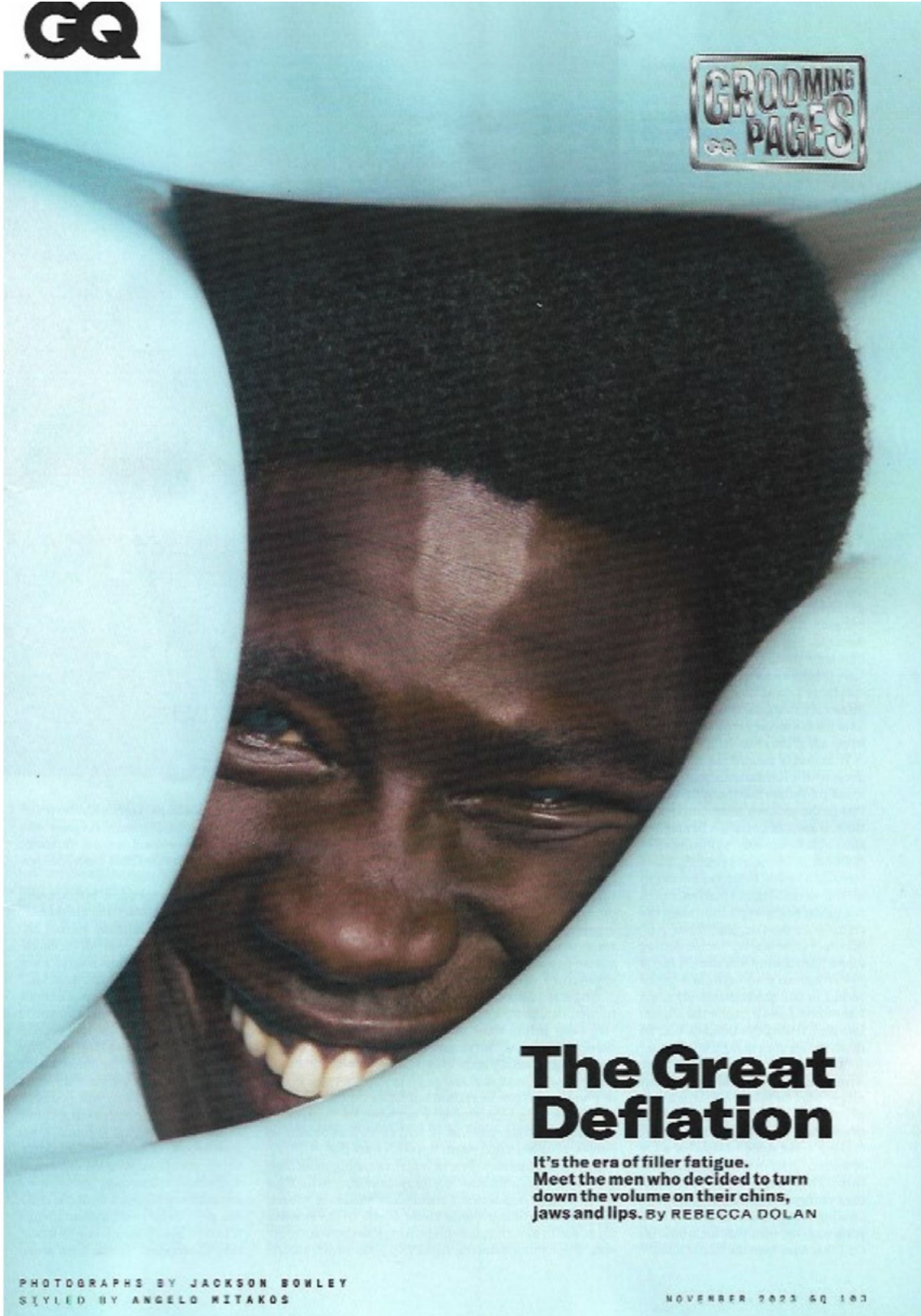
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The Great Deflation

It's the era of filler fatigue. Meet the men who decided to turn down the volume on their chins, jaws and lips. BY REBECCA DOLAN

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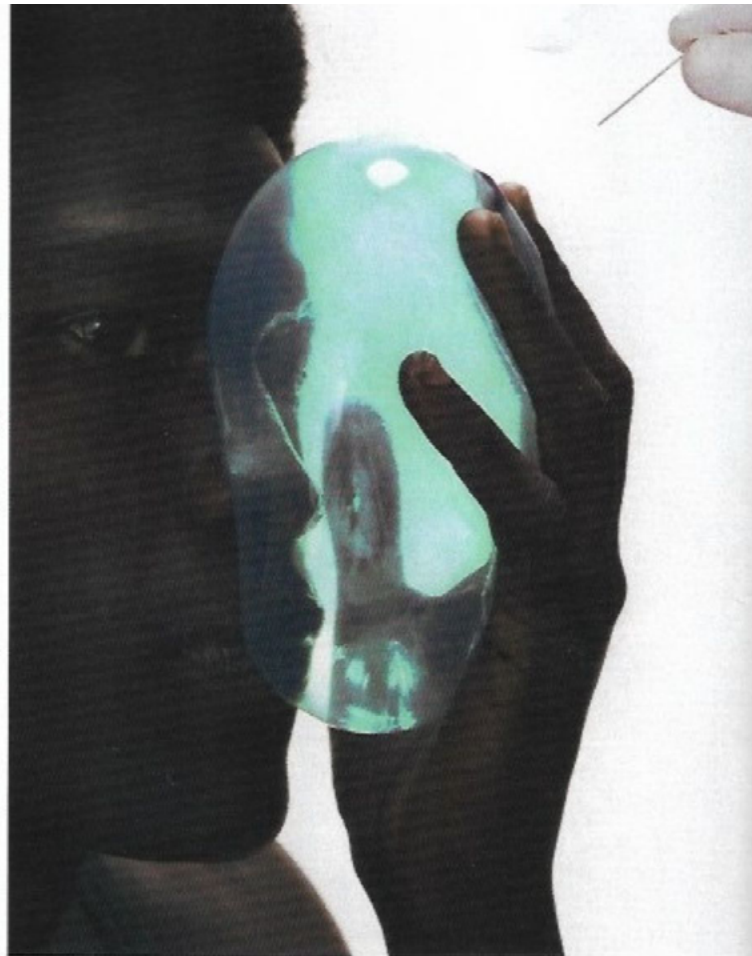
AT 29 YEARS OLD, Spencer Parker wanted a more sculpted face (just like the rest of us). After spending months on a waiting list, he scored an appointment with a cosmetic doctor. “We can use fillers,” he was told. “Technically, it adds volume, but if we put it in in the right way, it’ll add angles.” But £2,000 and 5ml of dermal filler on his chin, cheekbones and jawline later, Parker was disappointed. He felt boxy. Which was perhaps inevitable given the dosage: an average treatment uses only around 0.5 to 2ml of filler, and costs around £200.

“I wasn’t planning to spend that much, and I looked very full all over as opposed to slender and slim in the face,” he says. After the initial sharpness of the filled-out areas faded, he also thought his face looked saggy. He went back to the same doctor to get the filler taken out – costing him another £2,500 – but afterwards, his friends and family still thought everything was a bit puffy. “I got sold a dream,” he says. “The dream of those pictures you see on Instagram.”

Parker is just one of many waking up to the realities of filler – and pushing back. A 2021 survey conducted by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery found a decrease in the demand for dermal filler for the first time in years. And while many have simply chosen not to renew the substance behind their cherubic glow, others are taking active measures to have fillers dissolved entirely. Welcome to the age of the great deflation.

It arguably started, as it so often does, with a Kardashian. A few years ago, Kylie Jenner had the most famous lips in the western hemisphere. But then, something strange happened: she publicly admitted to having all of the filler in her pout removed. More recently, a slew of A-listers have sworn off the volumising injectables, which can be placed anywhere from temple to chin: Courteney Cox, Blac Chyna, Amy Schumer (who wrote, “I tried getting fillers. Turned out I was already full.”). Fewer famous men have gone on the record to talk about dissolving filler, but Simon Cowell broke the silence last year, telling the tabloids that he dissolved his after going a bit “too far.”

“Patients are much more in tune with what isn’t natural-looking any more,” says Dr Wasim Taktouk, one of London’s leading injectors, whose prices start at £595 per 1ml syringe. “I think we’ve ridden a very big wave of over-inflated, over-exaggerated features. Those are the ones that make the headlines, because there’s nothing exciting about someone’s natural face. It’s always the ones that are a little bit OTT that have been the face of filler.”



Dermal fillers – gel-like substances that are injected under the skin to smooth wrinkles, restore volume or create contours – have been around for a while. Some historians posit that humans have been toying with the concept since the late 1800s, but the first FDA-approved filler arrived in the US in the 1980s. Crude early versions, which involved injecting bovine collagen into the face, have undergone multiple upgrades to result in the stuff we have in 2023. The injectable, which is usually hyaluronic acid based, is an easy sell: virtually no downtime, relatively low-risk, and with entry-level pricing (well, in the grand scheme of cosmetic upgrades).

Dr Yannis Alexandrides, the founder of 111 Harley St, treated Parker with a surgical facelift to counter fillers. “We keep seeing more and more over-injected faces,” Alexandrides says. “We’ve seen problems with fillers, such as swelling, especially in the areas under the eyes. You can see the product doesn’t dissolve, and it can create cysts, lumps or granules.” When he started operating on Parker’s face, he found some undissolved filler as a result of “migration”: a complication that causes movement under the skin to areas outside of the injection point. You don’t want that.

Men, while traditionally a lot less forthcoming about their cosmetic procedures, have been big participants in the filler boom. In 2021, management consultancy McKinsey forecast that men’s use of injectables would double in the next five years, and in some LA clinics, men comprise up to half of clients. “If you think about the male CEOs of the world, nobody

has a weak chin,” says Dr Kimberly Lee, a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon with actors, models and execs on the books. “Men are just very hush hush and clandestine about this.”

Gary Thompson, a fashion and beauty blogger who runs the popular account @theplasticboy, started getting fillers at 28 to even out his cheekbones. “When I first had it done, I was like ‘Oh, my God, this looks amazing,’” he says. “It gives you that instant result. And then you’re at home, and you’re like, ‘I want more!’” He had further rounds of injections and top-ups in his jaw, lips, and cheeks, but then he wondered, “Am I looking a bit crazy? A bit puffy? I felt like I didn’t look as sharp.”

He decided to remove the fillers in his cheeks and lips, a process that involves getting an enzyme called hyaluronidase injected into the same spots to dissolve the injectable, usually over a few sessions. Temporarily, it can make you even more swollen than before. “I looked like I’d been stung by a bee,” says Thompson. “It was a bit scary.”



When you've had it in for so long, you forget what your face actually looks like."

Since filler's boom, the big, pillowy look isn't so an courant. People striving for a '90s supermodel face aren't trying to add volume anywhere on their face or body. Some dermatologists also cite the shift from Instagram to TikTok as part of the story. Whereas volume can look great from certain angles in a photograph, an over-filled face can look artificial - or worse, downright weird - in videos. The "Instagram face" phenomenon, coined by writer Jia Tolentino, saw "volume on volume". Now, that's been replaced with a gaunter, more video-ready facial silhouette. "Snatched", if you will.

"In part, this is the Bella Hadid buccal fat trend of the past six months, but it's also so connected to the Ozempic trend, and the story of going back towards a more extreme, thin aesthetic," says Alice Rowbottom. The LA based author found herself leaning into injectables after the death of

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her mother, and later scaled back her filler and Botox use. Her latest novel, *Aesthetica*, tells the story of a former influencer who weighs the decision to undergo a risky procedure that will undo all her cosmetic surgeries. "Everyone was so excited about filler, but now there's almost a disdain seeping in. People are much more interested in surgical procedures, like getting a facelift earlier."

"There's a class element to this as well, where filler is seen as lowbrow, low class. If anyone can get filler, what do we hold over the masses?" says Rowbottom. Filler has become a common allegation thrown around in the Hollywood procedure witch-hunt. Everyone loves the before-and-after videos of celebrities' faces, where obsessive fans - and even some influencer dermatologists and plastic surgeons - list the suspected procedures that have taken place ("Celebrities: they're just like us!"). Because filler adds volume, it's a bit easier to spot than laser resurfacing or microcurrent facials.



"I've definitely noticed clients are now seeing me more regularly than their injectors," says Shane Cooper, a London facialist whose clientele includes Josh O'Connor, Niall Horan and Nick Grimshaw. Cooper's high-tech facials and body treatments don't involve injectables or surgeries. "You can go and have a face full of filler for, let's say, £500, or up to £1,000, or you can go and have some really advanced nonsurgical facials, which might be more costly. But when people were having a lot of injectables, the basics of their skin and their collagen production, their skin elastin, were probably taking a hit." The best thing that money can buy for your face in 2023 is the appearance of having spent none.

These days, any 20 year-old TikTokker worth their follower count could tell you the difference between retinol and vitamin C. "People are doing their homework," says Dr Brendan Khong, a practitioner at London's Dr David Jack Clinic. "I have some patients who will refuse to see anyone other than a doctor." On TikTok, the search term "filler removal" has more than 9 billion views. Fewer people may be getting duped by dubious clinics into overloading on the stuff. "Patients are still requesting dermal fillers," says Dr Taktouk. "They're just being more selective about which practitioners inject them. Five, six years ago, you would find clinics doing the Kylie Jenner package, the Kardashian packaging - all that nonsense."

Filler or no filler, the world of cosmetic and surgical upgrades has no clear endgame for patients. Doctors and dermatologists are continually upgrading their latest treatments. The prolongation of youth is a lifelong pursuit - as Parker is all too familiar with. It cost him another £16,000 in surgery to fix the puffiness he couldn't get rid of, and in the weeks after the operation, he was still waiting for some swelling to go down. "Obviously, that adds volume, and that's what I'm trying to get away from, so it's really hard to see the final results," he says. "But it's a step in the right direction." ❖

REBECCA DOLAN is GQ's editorial associate.