

# the immaculate deception

Can you be a virgin again? Not really, but that isn't stopping Latinas from undergoing a controversial operation that promises to restore your innocence—at least as *he's* concerned.

It was the kind of summer romance every girl dreams about: A Caribbean vacation. A boy you knew when you were a kid, who's suddenly all grown up—and *my guapo*. And a feeling between the two of you that's so intense, you finally decide you're ready to make love for the first time. But for Sheila—who found herself in precisely this scenario in 2001 when she was 16 and visiting her native Dominican Republic—the fantasy faded almost as soon as her clothes were back on. Though she confesses that “to me, virginity is irrelevant,” Sheila says she went into a mild panic when she realized that a future amor might think otherwise—not to mention her familia. “To Hispanic parents,” she explains, “to have an unmarried daughter who is a virgin is something sacred.”

And so Sheila made a decision: She was going to try to get her virginity back. She had heard of an operation that, when performed, could restore a girl's innocence—but because she was a minor, she needed a parent's permission. Somehow finding the courage, Sheila went to her mother and confessed her sexual experience. “She was shocked,” Sheila says, but her mother was also completely in favor of the surgery, which was performed at the Ridgewood Health & Beauty Center in Queens, New York, a year after Sheila's amorous *aventura*.

BY MIREYA NAVARRO

To this day Sheila,\* now 19 and living in New Jersey, has yet to tell her father about her tryst (which is why she didn't want to give her real name for this article), and she says she probably won't reveal it to a future boyfriend, either. "I know that a relationship should not be based on whether you're a virgin," Sheila says, "but this is our culture, and I have to deal with it."

Increasingly, Latinas are choosing to deal with the lingering *machista* attitude about virginity the same way that Sheila did: by undergoing hymenoplasty, a medical procedure that is stirring up an amazing amount of both demand and controversy. Around the country, anecdotal evidence indicates that reconstruction of the hymen—that thin membrane that partly seals off the opening to the vagina until it is ruptured, typically during a first act of sexual intercourse—is becoming popular in cities with large Latino populations. Among those cities are New York, Los Angeles, and San Antonio, where a growing number of gynecological practices and plastic surgery centers are selling the fantasy of innocence reborn. In fact, medical experts say, even though Korean and Middle Eastern women are among their most devoted patients, it is Latinas who are driving the demand for hymenoplasty in some areas.

The procedure's precise popularity is hard to pin down (one doctor told *Latina* that he sees about 60 hymenoplasty patients a year), in part because much of the medical profession seems somewhat embarrassed—and occasionally outraged—by it. Although the American Medical Association has no policy on the surgery, some doctors have criticized the procedure in publications like the *British Medical Journal*, not only declaring it unnecessary but also claiming that it promotes gender stereotypes and dishonesty between sexual partners. Then there's the most obvious flaw of all: whether or not you undergo hymenoplasty, once you've lost your virginity, there is no way to really get it back.

Still, hymenoplasty continues to be performed by doctors, many of whom brought the technique to the United States from countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic, where it has been popular for years. Other U.S. surgeons—responding to demand—have come up with their own variations on hymenoplasty. David L. Matlock, M.D., founder of the Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute in Los Angeles, for example, has pioneered the use of laser technology in hymen reconstruction. Regardless of the method used, advocates of hymenoplasty insist that the surgery's cost (from \$2,000 to \$3,500) and risks (which include fever and infection) make it no worse than other popular procedures. "This is in the same category as the patient who wants a new nose or new breasts,"

says Luis Palma, M.D., an Argentinian-born plastic surgeon who works at the Ridgewood center. "I don't see an ethical problem."

Neither do the many Latinas who have undergone or are signing up for hymenoplasty, fearful that without their "virginity," they will be seen as used merchandise by potential mates. Even here in the United States, says New York City-based psychotherapist Carmen Inoa Vazquez, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Maria Paradox*, a self-esteem guide for Latinas, "Virginity is still tied to a Latina's status as a good woman."

Just how important that status can become is evident after listening to the story of Serena,\* 24, a Dominican American college student. At 16 she lost her virginity to her Dominican boyfriend in an experience that wasn't exactly an "*entrega de amor*," she says. "It just happened. I cried for days. I felt I ruined everything. I always thought the first time was going to be it." She and the boy-

friend broke up soon after ("I guess he got what he wanted," she says), and eventually she started dating a Puerto Rican man, who was so bothered when she revealed she wasn't a virgin that during their four years together, he refused to propose. And then, in 2002, Serena told him that she was undergoing hymenoplasty at the Ridgewood center. Two months later she had a ring on her finger, and to keep up the virginal fantasy, she and her fiancé were planning to abstain from sex until their wedding in December. "We can share something special," Serena said shortly before walking down the aisle. "I get a chance to relive [losing my virginity]."

Serena's husband knew that she had already had sex with another man, and chose to accept the fantasy of her chastity. In many other cases, however, women with restored hymens purposely lie about the extent of their sexual experience to their husbands, boyfriends, or families, prompting some members of the medical profession to accuse surgeons who perform hymenoplasty of acting as conspirators in sexual deception. "The real ethical difficulty is that the operation involves collusion with deceit," wrote a scholar in the *British Medical Journal*. "Should a doctor participate in this?"

Hymenoplasty's proponents argue that restoring a woman's physical virginity is no more deceptive than, say, giving her fake breasts. Moreover, hymenoplasty isn't nearly so invasive, lasting about an hour (if laser technology is used, the surgery takes 20 minutes) and requiring only local anesthesia. During the operation, a new hymen is reconstructed out of the tissue that was left when the original hymen was broken. "It's like repairing a hole in a fabric," Dr. Palma says. Then, after spending about 30 minutes in the recovery room, a mujer typically walks out of the clinic feeling little discomfort. Although doctors recommend avoiding

\* NOT HER REAL NAME.

When it comes to virginity, 'we may be in the 21st century,' says Esmeralda I. Vanegas of the Ridgewood Health & Beauty Center, 'but nothing has changed.'

exercise for two weeks after the procedure, and sexual intercourse is out of the question for at least a month to allow the vagina to heal, patients can resume all other activities almost immediately. Whatever inconveniences may result, they're worth it, say patients like Gladys Ibañez, a 49-year-old journalist in New Jersey, who recalls that when she finally had sex after her hymen was restored, "there was pain; I bled. It was just like the first time."

Testimonials like those are what drove Cuban American Esmeralda I. Vanegas, 53, the general manager of the Ridgewood center (which averages two hymenoplasty patients a month), into the business in the first place. It was while working as manager of a gynecological center in New York City about 15 years ago that Vanegas first encountered patients who were interested in hymen reconstruction, whether it was to hide the loss of their virginity, relive the feeling of a first sexual encounter, or increase sexual pleasure for their partners. Sensing a business opportunity, Vanegas—who has promoted hymenoplasty on Spanish-language programs such as *Cristina* and *Despierta América* and on ABC's *20/20*—opened her own plastic surgery center in 1991 and found an Ecuadorian doctor who knew the procedure and could teach it to other doctors in the practice. "Women are more than a hymen," she

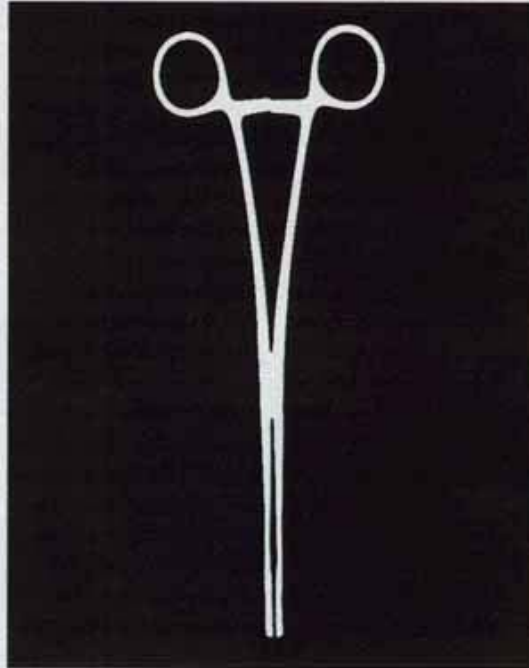
says. "But there is a demand, and there is a need."

Gladys wanted the surgery—as well as an additional procedure, called vaginoplasty, that tightens the vagina's muscles—in preparation for her fifth wedding, to Alex, who, at 40, is almost 10 years her junior. Her "virginity," she says, was a gift that no other woman—not even one his own age—could give him. "It's incredible the emotion the man feels," she says, "when he realizes you did this for him." But she adds that, as an older woman, the experience of reliving the night she lost her innocence was rewarding for her, too, because this time "there was love and maturity."

Of course, as college student Serena has learned, there are many Latinas who don't see hymenoplasty in such glowing terms. "People tried to talk me out of it," she recalls. "My sister said I was crazy, that if my boyfriend really loved me, he'd love me no matter what." But ultimately driven by a desire to please her man ("It bothered me how he felt about me not being a virgin," she says),

Serena tuned out the naysayers. After all, she says, when it comes to matters of the heart, you should listen only to your own. "You're the one," she says, "who has to walk in your shoes."

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## La inmaculada decepción

Era el tipo de romance veraniego con el que sueñan todas las jovencitas. Pero para Sheila, quien perdió su virginidad a los 16 años de edad durante una visita a República Dominicana, su país natal, la fantasía se acabó bien pronto cuando se dio cuenta de que tendría que enfrentar a sus padres con la noticia. "La virginidad de una hija soltera es algo sagrado para los padres hispanos", explica la joven. Por lo tanto, decidió recuperar su virginidad por medio de la cirugía. Al mes de la aventura, y con el consentimiento de su madre, Sheila recurrió al Ridgewood Health & Beauty Center en Queens, Nueva York —una clínica fundada por Esmeralda I. Vanegas en el 1991 después de ver la demanda por esta operación— para que le reconstruyeran el himen. "Sé que una relación no debe partir del hecho de que una sea virgen o no", dice Sheila, "pero nuestra cultura es así". En la actualidad, Sheila tiene 19 años y su padre aún no se ha enterado del encuentro amoroso de su hija.

Cada día aumenta el número de latinas que decide seguir el camino de Sheila para lidiar con las actitudes machistas sobre la virginidad. Se someten a una himenoplastia, un procedimiento médico que reconstruye la pequeña membrana (himen) que sella parcialmente la entrada a la vagina y que, por lo general, se rompe con la primera relación sexual. Esta operación está adquiriendo popularidad en las grandes ciudades con una gran población hispana y donde se están estableciendo centros que venden la fantasía de la inocencia reconstruida. La práctica se ha vuelto controversial y ha sido criticada por miembros de la comunidad médica quienes la declaran innecesaria y, además, que promueve la deshonestidad entre las parejas.

No obstante, muchos doctores no creen que exista un problema ético. "Es algo que se puede comparar al paciente que desea una nueva nariz o senos más grandes", afirma el doctor Luis Palma, quien trabaja en el centro de Ridgewood. "No lo veo como un problema ético".

Así lo ven también las miles de latinas que se

han sometido a la operación temiendo que sin su virginidad, sus compañeros las verán como mercancía dañada. Hasta en este país, dice la psicoterapeuta Carmen Inoa Vázquez, "La virginidad está vinculada al estatus de la latina como buena mujer".

Qué tan importante es esta pureza es evidente en la historia de Serena, de 24 años, quien perdió su virginidad con su novio a los 16. Esta estudiante universitaria decidió hacerse la operación con el consentimiento de su nuevo novio y futuro esposo, quien no le propuso matrimonio hasta saber que ella se iba a someter a este procedimiento. "Mi hermana me dijo que estaba loca, que mi novio me amaría fuera como fuera", dice. Pero impulsada por un deseo de complacer a su hombre ("Me molestaba saber como él se sentía por el hecho de que yo no era virgen", dice), Serena siguió adelante. Porque al fin y al cabo, en lo que al corazón se refiere, dice, tú eres la única que debe decidir qué camino tomar. "Eres la que tiene que vivir con las consecuencias de tu decisión".