
Spray It On; All she wanted was a cosmetic fix for her Sad Left Cheek, but a trip to a tanning salon turned her into a Tangeleno

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Full Text (1160 words)

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Several weeks ago I was driving along Beverly Boulevard, curling my eyelashes, going over some lines for an audition and talking on my cellphone with a casting director friend who was dropping off her carpool and balancing her checkbook while heading out to get a faux tan. I asked her, "Have you noticed lately that the tan is back? Actresses such as Sarah Michelle Gellar and Jessica Simpson--well, they're practically deep-fried."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," she said, correcting me. "First of all, there have always been the California golden girl types. You have to consider the fashions. A tan midriff is much better to look at than a pale belly. And anyway," she added, "cellulite looks better tan, and they can do amazing things now with an airbrush."

I pulled over and started dialing tanning salons.

Recently my husband and I have begun to affectionately refer to a part of my anatomy as my "sad left cheek." I think I look pretty good, but gravity seems to be working more on one side of my lower posterior than on the other, and no amount of Pilates or yoga seems to even it out. So forget exercise--I'm heading for a cosmetic fix.

When I was growing up there was only one major player in the tan world, Coppertone, which when applied had a striking resemblance to jaundice. But this was unimportant to me, because at an early age I had adopted a pale persona--a blend of melancholic Russian heroine and intellectual rock poet. Perhaps the best way to describe my ideal look would be Mimi from "La Boheme"--without the cough.

So I was understandably nervous when I called a few of the several billion tanning salons that dot mini-malls around the Southland. "Can you tell me just one well-known person who comes in?" I implored. "Oh, we couldn't do that, but trust me," one salon representative said. "Our people are in Cannes and we have actors in several TV series." I replied that I too had been on several TV series. She emphasized that her clients were on shows "right now" with an urgency that implied that if I wanted to work again I'd better get right over.

The desk staff at the Beverly Hills location were a golden brown--a look that was achieved, as luck would have it, in this very salon. The receptionist said, "Think of yourself like a car--you can Earl Scheib it or get a custom color." My choices ranged from the old-school tanning bed to getting slathered with cream to standing in a booth and getting sprayed--something that struck me as akin to delousing--to the top-of-the-line airbrush color contouring. This was to be no Earl Scheib affair for me, so I followed the lovely contouring technician into a room.

Her name was Veronique or Monique or some -ique and, big surprise, she practically glowed. "I don't want to be the color of caramel popcorn," I said nervously. "Oh no, we'll do something very natural for you," she replied. The salon I chose was putting its faith in a cornucopia of custom-blended colors: a rich Brazilian Bronze, sensual but so dark that I would need to change the race noted on my driver's license; a Bond girlish golden St. Tropez; and Weekend at the Beach, which gives the appearance of a painful sunburn. I started to wonder if the company offered site-specific colors such as Picnic in the Hamptons for New Yorkers.

"Let's try a little St. Tropez," she said. During the 20 minutes it took to get airbrushed, I assumed various positions that would have made my yoga teacher proud, and while I stood spread-eagle facing the wall, I was reminded of the time I got the full-body search at the airport. I was bending over and thrusting my naked lower

region in her direction when I asked if she could do something about my sad left cheek. "We'll see what we can do," was all she said. "How about my waist? Can that look smaller?" I inquired. "Well, we can shade it more," she replied. This was fun!

In the low light of the salon, I thought my tan looked pretty good, and I set off for lunch. It wasn't until my chicken Caesar salad arrived that it hit me—I was the same color as toasted challah. When I arrived home, I stripped down to see that the contouring made my waist appear smaller. But the shading under my tush just made it loom larger, and my sad left cheek appeared positively droopy. Plus, the color hadn't taken evenly, and when my son saw me he declared, "Your feet look dirty." My husband took one look at my legs and gave his verdict: "Your calves look like alligator skin."

Thus followed one week of intense exfoliating.

Nonetheless, I was determined to lose the SLC. I made an appointment at a salon that claimed to offer a more specific detailing method. In the waiting room, I leafed through a copy of *In Touch Weekly* magazine in which the salon had highlighted that Lindsay Lohan was a frequent customer. The receptionist also let it slip that Paris was a client. Wow, I thought, I've stumbled across the tanning equivalent of the Holy Grail.

When it was my turn, I stripped down to nothing and explained the SLC. "Oh, we can help that," my airbrusher assured me. She got to work, her sprays punctuated with "Oooh, that's good." Like a personal trainer, she suggested we work on my abs and make my arms look more defined. When I asked her to make my breasts look smaller, she laughed, "That's a first!" She drew muscles where my abs would be, carefully shaded my thighs and arms and darkened my tush.

I glided out of the salon. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I felt as if I belonged in L.A. in a way that I'd never experienced. I looked downright healthy. Not only that, but the spray tan had the weird effect of making me want to strip off my clothes and show people. Stifling the impulse, I bought a bikini instead.

It's hard for me to admit this, but I like it. This has been a little disconcerting for me, a repudiation of my romantically pale "La Boheme" persona. It seems to be yet another one of those hallmarks of aging in which you completely change how you define yourself. I didn't know that I would utter the phrase "I love my Volvo station wagon" with the same enthusiasm as I once announced that "My band is playing at 2 a.m. at the Pyramid Club." Or discuss my bathroom renovation with the same relish I once had for debating the Hegelian dialectic. I guess I tan, therefore I am ... a real Angeleno.

Credit: Actress Annabelle Gurwitch is a contributing writer for "Day to Day" on National Public Radio and author of the play "Fired."