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I'm tan. Ask me how



A brush with a bronzing artist changes this pasty skeptic's mind about faux glows

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When I sheepishly wrapped a beach towel around my legs before dashing into a swimming pool a few weeks ago, my friends had no qualms about pointing out why. I don't tan easily.

While I'm not particularly proud of having a ghostly skin tone, I was never interested in "fake" tanning. You know the kind, "walking carrots" and "Klingon women."

Beneath my sarcastic remarks, I secretly wanted that healthy, tanned look, as long as it would pass for natural. Besides, I'd been given an assignment: tan.

I made an appointment for an airbrush tan at the Eclipse Sunless Tanning salon on Westheimer. As soon as I put the phone down, I thought to myself, would I look more ridiculous with a fake tan than without one?

An image from *There's Something About Mary* suddenly flashed through my mind. Remember the old lady?

The horror.

Fears abated once I met Eclipse's friendly owner, Scott Hendrickson, who greeted me at the door and showed me to the tanning space. Tanning has proved to be quite the departure for this former Enron trader, who said he started this business four years ago.

"Don't worry, I won't turn you into J.Lo," he said.

I felt encouraged but not completely won over. I wanted results first.

I changed into shorts and a tank top for the treatment. While the coloring rubs off on clothes for the first day or so, it's water-soluble. The staff recommends wearing a bathing suit or something dark but reports that 80 percent of Eclipse's customers are sprayed in the buff.

Hendrickson assured me the tanning would be painless as he slipped on latex gloves and turned on the rumbling airbrush gun. He then asked me to stand with legs shoulder-width apart in the center of the tiny circular room.

Was this a tanning salon or a torture chamber?

A few seconds later, bursts of cold exfoliating spray hit my arms and legs. The spray brings sweat, oil and grime to the surface of the skin, which allows for easier color absorption.

The bronzer coats came next. The bronzer's main ingredient is dihydroxyacetone (DHA), which is derived from sugar cane and sugar beets.

Like a drill sergeant, Hendrickson ordered me to turn left, right, around and back to the front again as he sprayed on the first layer in long strokes. Afterward, he asked if I wanted a second coat.

I hesitated. Taking my fair complexion into account, Hendrickson suggested stopping after two coats. After the second bronzing layer, he sprayed on a moisturizer to seal the tan.

The final layer left my skin sticky for several hours, but the moisturizer is essential for prolonging the color.

Examining the even, brown tint on my face, shoulders, arms and legs, I felt like a whole new me. I couldn't remember the last time I looked that dark without fussing over suntan lotions and beach chairs. And those times often were followed by burns.

I am no longer critical of the fake tan. And countless others agree. On busy days, Hendrickson paints as many as 30 customers.

While the color fades after eight to 10 days, I don't look like a I'm from a faraway galaxy, and better yet, I avoid burns.

If anyone could explain the airbrush tan's surging popularity, it's Hendrickson: "It's like liquid crack for people."

Wouldn't you love to see that slogan on a billboard?