

The Way We Live Now: 7-4-99: Urban Diarist; Tanning and Authenticity

By CATHLEEN SCHINE JULY 4, 1999

Monday: Leaving for a beach vacation next week. Thinking about tanning and authenticity.

Tuesday: Decided to use an instant-tanning lotion. That way, by the time I get to the beach, I will already be tan. I announced this at dinner. My older son suggested I apply the tanning lotion and stay home. I could have a virtual vacation, he explained. His contempt was not unmingled with pity, but he has posed a disturbing, stark philosophical challenge.

Friday: The more I ponder this question, the less clear the whole concept of "the tan" becomes. Is it a color? Is it a process? Is it a Platonic ideal? Does its own Aristotelian end define the tan? Or is a tan perhaps a Freudian mask? Since a tan is an alteration of one's original skin color, can there even be such a thing as an "authentic tan"? And, most important, if I use an instant-tanning lotion, will my skin turn orange?

Saturday: Anticipatory tanning anxiety has unleashed a torrent of beach-vacation memories. When I was 3 years old, my family took a trip to Florida with the family next door, the Winnicks. Some of us drove, some flew, some took the train. The transportation varied according to phobias and economic demands I did not understand, nor did I care, since I got to ride all the way there on a soft foam mat in the back of a station wagon with Wendy Winnick, three years my senior, incalculably my superior. Many wonderful things occurred on that trip. My toy handcuffs got tangled in my hair. I saw Gabby Hayes feed leaping dolphins. But most memorable were the few moments every day when Wendy's mother, Ruth, applied Sea & Ski to the children. The creamy chill of the lotion; the color of it, green, paler than a melon; the smell, which is and always will be the smell of the beach. On my back, Ruth

would spell out my name in lotion squeezed with wonderful gasping noises from the green plastic bottle. Then I would run off and swim and play. And burn.

I remember my most gruesome sunburns in alarming detail. Solarcaine, aloe, oatmeal, cornstarch, pain, more pain, sleepless nights of raw, feverish pain interrupted only by self-recrimination and vows of solar temperance. Still, year after year, the appeal of a tan did not diminish. Elusive, seductive, dangerous -- the tan beckoned. The tans of others mocked me. Why George Hamilton? Why not me? The discovery that the sun causes skin cancer provided an excuse for my pale, pasty body, but little satisfaction. I have told myself that at other periods in history, a tan was a sign of low station. But to no avail. This is not a time of pampered aristocratic ladies with plump white shoulders. This is a time of athletic, smooth-muscle investment bankers. With tans. Who am I? Where do I fit in?

Sunday: Tomorrow we leave. Despite my philosophical difficulties, as well as some traumatic early experiences with QT and Man Tan, I bought some instant-tanning lotion. It was packaged in a handsome, bright citrusy-colored bottle that was much the same hue of Cheeto orange as the neon QT streaks of yore, but it was French and expensive, and the woman behind the counter, who was neither athletic nor smooth-muscle, had a sickly greenish complexion and had never tried the stuff because what if she turned out to be allergic, recommended it highly.

Monday: "Man is least himself," Oscar Wilde wrote, "when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth." I read that in Lionel Trilling's book "Sincerity and Authenticity," which I thought I should look over along with the insert in the instant-tanning-lotion package reminding me to exfoliate before applying. I don't know if Lionel Trilling tanned easily, or at all, for he neglected to mention tanning in that book.

The tan, let's face it, is a mystery. Trilling doesn't examine it. Probably even de Tocqueville doesn't have a mention. It is the great unexamined American quandary of modernity. I have searched literature. I have searched my heart. And still the answers to the questions inspired by my son's impatience with inauthenticity and vanity elude me. Is it a color? Carpets used to be tan. Skirts used to be tan. I actually remember the day tan stopped being a color. Twenty years ago, I was visiting a friend who had become an interior designer. He referred to the color of a tan fabric as "sand." Since then, of course, we've moved on to "wheat," "stone" and "parchment," but that is the day, a cold, windy day in Cleveland, when the color tan

died. Yes, Freud said the ego masked the authentic id, and in just that way the golden tan masks the authentic pallor beneath. But surely there is also an ideal Platonic tan that cannot ever be known and yet defines every summer vacation, and is not that the definition of authenticity? The tan is a paradox.

Sunday: For one week, I have been applying gummy S.P.F. 45 and sitting in the shade debating the meaning and provenance of the tan. Now it is time to go home. The orange bottle of instant-tanning lotion is lying untouched in the bag with the calamine and Imodium A-D. Digging around in that bag to find something, I pushed the instant-tanning lotion guiltily, sadly, out of my way. I have, once again, failed to get a tan, even a fake one.

Monday: Home at last. And I have made a rewarding discovery! On the palm of my hand, in a blurry patch that resembles the mark on Gorbachev's forehead, I have developed the most striking vibrant orange tan! The bottle of instant-tanning lotion must have leaked before I pushed it out of the way. This sparkling object I hold out before me is the palm of my hand, and yet, it is not. It is something new, something radiant and glowing. Something phosphorescent, even. I know it will fade in time, leaving me once again in the uneasy grip of philosophical uncertainty. But for now, I can say, with sincerity if not authenticity, "I, whoever that may be, am tan, whatever that may be." Next I'll have to work on my investment banking.

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