



The Laser's Edge: You Won't Believe What These Treatments Can Do

By Jessica Winter

Her friends saw enviably rosy cheeks. She saw 18th-century painted ladies. Her dermatologist saw a skin condition with an unpronounceable name. After a few false starts, Jessica Winter finally stops turning red.

My facial features have never necessarily matched my inner state. My pupils are somewhat dilated most of the time, as if I've just bumped my head or dropped acid. In college I was constantly misplacing my glasses, and I was hopeless when it came to the minimal upkeep required for contact lenses; as a result, I tended to wander around campus squinting at people like the Wicked Witch sizing up Dorothy, even when I was in a Glinda kind of mood. I have a deviated septum—breathing through my nose was a skill I acquired only as a teenager—and a short upper lip, which means that in unguarded moments my mouth hangs open in bovine wonderment, even on days when I feel relatively confident of my three-digit IQ.

Then there are my cheeks. (The ones on my face.) Until recently, they blazed bright red day and night, in every season and emotional climate. I could spend an afternoon curled up on the sofa with a bag of Pirate's Booty and a month's worth of *Us Weekly* magazines and still look as if I'd just run a marathon in 100-degree heat, given birth at the finish line, and felt *really* embarrassed about it. For most people, a deep blush can signal exertion, coyness, shame, anger. For me, it could additionally indicate boredom, happiness, fatigue, or "What's for lunch?"

All my life, my cheeks were an unsolvable problem, blaring at me from every reflective surface in varying shades of cherry blossom, spiced burgundy, and scarlet fever. I've tried every concealer on the market, matched to my otherwise pale skin. Each would throw a translucent veil over the fire, like a shawl over a lamp; hours later, I'd peer into my compact and see Santa Claus staring back at me again, almost as if those overactive vessels beneath my skin could pump fast and hot enough to vaporize mere titanium dioxide and talc.

When I was 21, I stopped by a cosmetics counter at a mall in New Haven. They told me to exfoliate.

"No, it's not zits or irritation or anything," I said. "It's just blood vessels. See, there's nothing wrong with the actual skin." I patted my cheeks reassuringly.

I might as well have dragged my nails across my face. Cosmetics Girl No. 1 actually shrieked. "No, don't

touch it! You'll make it worse."

"No, it's *under* the skin," I said. "It's not *the* skin."

"You're not washing right," said Cosmetics Girl No. 2. "You have to treat your skin better."

"I have *perfect* skin," I said ridiculously.

"Try this scrub," No. 1 said, warming up for a pitch.

I paused. "Would you tell me to scrub a birthmark?" I asked. "Or a mole?"

"Depends," No. 2 said.

I left.

At 24, living in New York City, I visited a dermatologist I'd picked at random off my healthcare provider's website. She had a crispy perm and silvery blue eyeshadow up to her brows, and she attacked my cheeks with a sharp, stinging laser encased in a beige plastic wand. A week later, I looked like I had fallen asleep facedown in a hammock with a sunlamp burning beneath me. Those crusty lumps and bumps eventually healed, while the flush both remained and changed—it was more mottled now, more like an archipelago of splotches and blotches than a smoothly continuous crimson tide.

I tried to undo the damage at a day spa in SoHo, where a beautiful Russian-accented woman told me to lie on a table beneath an enormous camera-like device suspended from the ceiling—for all I know, it was discarded parts from a Proton satellite left over from the Soviet space program. The apparatus flashed in my general direction over the course of three serenely pointless sessions, costing about \$1,200 in total. (Let's put that figure in perspective: At the time, *I worked at an alternative weekly.*)

After the calamity of the \$1,200, I just tried to live with it. The English major in me reached for cultural-historical perspective. I thought of the libertine fops and madams of 18-century France, with their white-powdered faces and crimson-painted cheeks. I thought of John Keats, dead at 25 of tuberculosis, which gave its sufferers a telltale milky pallor with flushed cheeks—a look that actually became fashionable in 19th-century Europe. (Their version of heroin chic, perhaps.) Keats was the bard of the blush: He wrote irresistibly of a cheek "rosy-warm / With the tinge of love, panting in safe alarm," and elsewhere compiled a taxonomy of the versatile blush:

*There's a blush for want, and a blush for shan't
And a blush for having done it,
There's a blush for thought, and a blush for naught,
And a blush for just begun it.*

I thought of the phrase *apple-cheeked*, so sweet and wholesome. I thought of Marge Simpson's mother, dispensing advice on prom night: "If you pinch your cheeks, they'll glow," she rasped. "Try to break some capillaries."

I thought of my friend Julia, who once told me, "I love your cheeks. They're Victorian." I had no idea what that meant, but she said it with such a quintessentially Julia-esque mix of kindness and certainty that there was no need for clarification—my self-consciousness had already been bundled away in a confidence-boosting swaddle of crinolines and velvet and Charles Dickens by the fireside.

And there I stayed for six years, until the good people at *O* spirited me off to the renowned dermatologist Roy Geronemus, MD, director of the Laser & Skin Surgery Center of New York. There, at last, the apples in my cheeks get a clinical diagnosis: *telangiectasias*, or dilated blood vessels near the surface of the skin. Over several sessions, the wonderfully calm and steady Geronemus will zap my *telan-et-ceteras* using a pair of lasers with names straight out of a *Buck Rogers* comic: the Gemini and the V-Beam.

"It works like a smart bomb," he says, with a gentle matter-of-factness that strips any violence out of the analogy. "We're selectively injuring the vessels. They aren't critical to the skin's functioning, so you can shrink them down, constrict the blood flow, and as a result, reduce the redness."

The Gemini feels like hot needle pricks; the V-Beam like concentrated blasts of subzero air. When I leave the Laser & Skin Surgery Center after the first round, I look like a windburned skier; a few hours later, irregularly shaped islands and isthmuses of swelling come out in relief on my cheeks. For a couple of days, I look like I'm storing nuts for the winter. By the third session, the post-zap puffing isn't so bad—it creates a honeycomb pattern that reminds me of the syphilis slides from eighth-grade health class. As the swelling recedes, it leaves tiny, angry purple flowers scattered across my face, which disappear within the week.

I make a total of four visits to Geronemus's office, at three-week intervals. Each time I return, the ruddiness I've worn forever has faded by several degrees. It's like watching a Polaroid develop in reverse. One week after my last treatment, my cheeks simply glow, beaming palest petal-pink.

Upkeep may be required: Geronemus tells me that any major hormonal change—a switch-up of birth-control methods, pregnancy, or, eventually, menopause—could put me back in the red. So could time. For now, I go everywhere without makeup—a first. Sometimes I'll give a little start, as if I've just realized that I forgot to wear a bra or my skirt is bunched in the back. Then I remember that only my face is naked, and I can feel myself blushing.