



# Hunting Down the Bunny Tail

MEAGAN CIESLA

THE SUNSTAR 332 HAS PATENTED S2 Advanced Technology. With thirty-two body bulbs and three additional face bulbs sheltered by Xtreme Reflection glass, it's known as the "workhorse" of the industry. A freshly folded hand towel sits on the bed's lower bench with a peppermint and two coupons rested delicately on top. An acrylic table tent with a blue outline of a palm tree and sun reads: *this sun bed has been sanitized*, as if it was cleaned just for me. The tanning pod is reminiscent of a hotel room, freshly cleaned and prepared, rented out for small segments of time. The initial seduction lies in the privacy of the space; standing completely naked behind closed doors is thrilling. Even the most insecure of bodies can control whatever happens next and no one else will ever know. This 7'x9' room is a simulated paradise, a world set apart from that which exists beyond its doors.

After the five minute changing allotment, the SunStar is soon warm to the touch and the cooling fan is as loud as the belly of an airplane cruising at altitude. The bed is like a womb, but brighter. The top canopy and bottom bench emit rays of light that warm the backs of the kneecaps, the bottoms of the feet, spaces that never see the sun, except for the bunny tail—the irksome square at the base of the tailbone that is nearly impossible to darken unless the tanner flips like a rotisserie chicken, bends the knees, or places bubble wrap directly underneath it to alleviate the pressure point that restricts the blood flow. For regular tanners the tail is the sign of imperfection—as pale as cotton. In here, white is a symbol of shame.

WINK EASE eyewear—temporary goggles made from stickers that fold into small cones and rest on the eyes to protect from UV damage—make the world glow gold, iridescent. Radiant. The adhesive material allows everything to shine. Even my face shimmers under the mirrors of the Xtreme Reflection glass—my cheekbones appear higher, jaw line narrower, collarbone more prominent. This allure of beauty, this magnificence seen through the goggles, is blinding.

In the nineteenth century the wealthy spent their time indoors and pale, protected from sunlight, maintaining their ghostly pallor while fanning themselves and fretting over their servants. Until Coco Chanel brought the tan look into high fashion in the 1920s, tanned skin signified the working class, the outdoor laborer, the prostitute. When Chanel returned to Paris from a cruise to Cannes with a sun-kissed complexion, she transformed bronzed skin into something to be desired. A suntan became a fashion accessory instead of a mark of depravity, and with it, tanned skin a sign of affluence. Today, tanning remains the status marker of the privileged class. With more time to lie around on the beach, and more money to seek out artificial tans when they're not by the surf, "rates of melanoma among young white women have more than doubled in the past three decades, and wealthier, more educated women appear to be at greatest risk." Privilege has backfired on us.

People all over are turning orange. From the ten-foot distance between the chalkboard where I teach and the desks where they sit, some of my female students at the University of Missouri have started to resemble Oompa Loompas. Their skin, fluorescent in undertones, has turned a strange shade that registers somewhere between persimmon and basketball hide. To me they look as if they've been dyed, but this is the fashion these days. Decades before their skin should start its descent into aging, it has begun to tighten. It's a microscopic change, but tanners say they can feel their flesh dry out, their skin stretch like animal hide pulled taut. Each of the 32 bulbs in the SunStar 332 emits 100 watts of UV light, which then leaks through the epidermis and fractures the DNA. When placed under ultraviolet rays, the skin starts to desiccate, etching wrinkles and sunspots underneath its topmost layers that will eventually rise up—like the surfacing of sewage—over time. Without the epidermis to block the insides from the "inhospitable environments" of the outside world, the internal organs would shrivel up and evaporate.

In the United States, rates of melanoma are rising faster than any other form of cancer and over 70,000 new cases of melanoma are diagnosed annually—that's enough people to fill the Louisiana Superdome. And while early stages of melanoma can be cured, the later stages that metastasize to the lymph nodes and other organs are likely to be fatal. Over 8,700 people die from melanoma each year—a number that reaches over three times the 9/11 death toll. Exposure to ultraviolet radiation, like other seductive carcinogens, is silent in its infiltration.

Tanning mars the skin's integrity over time, but it boosts the ego much faster. Kristan, a 30-year-old graduate student at the University of Missouri, says when she's tanning she's "more in tune with [her] body." Her hair is cut short, dyed jet black, and its ends are sculpted and spiked with hair gel. She has a round, cherubic face, one of a woman caught in between the vitality of youth and the responsibilities of adulthood. "Even though tanning's damaging in the long run, in the short run, it's helpful." When using an indoor tanning salon, Kristan pays more attention to her skin—exfoliating and using a higher quality lotion. Besides, she says, "My belly looks a lot smaller when it's brown"—like the optical illusion of wearing black to "slim" the body. A tan can smooth out the lumps created by cellulite and other superficial imperfections. Since the skin is dried out from UV exposure, it can also help with acne and psoriasis, clearing up the blemishes that induce aesthetic anxieties. The body releases melanin as a defense mechanism against UV light, which produces a darkening of the skin. It's this pigmentation that makes the tanned body appear thinner, healthier, more toned. For young tanners who haven't seen the long-term leathering induced by UV light, the skin appears even and airbrushed; although the light microscopically breaks down the cells, the symptoms of cellular damage are desirable.

Kelly Pagel, now a 31-year-old neurological nurse in Green Bay, Wisconsin, used to tan two days a week for 10 years, and for two years in college, increased her tanning sessions to every other day. That totals approximately 1,250 visits to the tanning salon, or 250 hours of overexposure to UV rays. Kelly admits that she always knew there were risks to tanning, but for some reason, it never changed her habits. "I didn't think of skin cancer as being something I'm going to die from. I think if I smoke I'm gonna get lung cancer and die, but I didn't think about skin cancer being that evil. And you know, I always used to say, well, at least I'll be beautiful."

There's a trend amongst young women to put vanity before health; 71% of indoor tanners are young girls and young women and melanoma is the most common form of cancer found in women 25-29. Tanners are making cavalier choices about beauty without accepting the responsibility of its consequences. Mortality, a concept perhaps too abstract for us in the first half of our lives, seems a distant repercussion to immediate choices. For some, though, mortality seems so inevitable that there's no use worrying over it. Kristan's doctor recently found two small tumors in her breast. Though the tumors aren't malignant, they have made her reassess her health priorities. "It was the final straw," she said. "Because even if I do everything right, stuff can still happen, so I don't see what a couple of months of tanning could do that those two little lumps cannot."

Kelly is a bit more cautious, though there are still contradictions in her tanning logic. It wasn't until her best friend was diagnosed with melanoma that she stopped tanning on a regular basis, though she still pays a monthly membership fee at the tanning salon. Oftentimes when melanoma metastasizes it develops into lymph, lung or brain cancer, a disease Pagel witnesses at work on a regular basis. Still, she says, "I would be lying if I said I'd never tan again." Rationally she knows admitting that is ridiculous, but she thinks tanned skin looks healthier than pale skin. So do the majority of people in the United States, and therein lies the tanning paradox—sun-touched skin looks healthier than pale skin, yet there's no such thing as a healthy tan. Any darkening of the natural skin color—freckles included—is a sign of damage. We all know this to some degree, but there's an inconsistency between what we know, and the blinders we're willing to put on in search of something more potent than reason, more godly than logic: beauty.

Beth, a petite blonde with cantaloupe-colored skin, bears a close resemblance to Lindsey Lohan's mother. When I go to meet her at 2pm at the tanning salon she's been managing for six years, her eyes are lined with dark smoky shadow and her eyebrows, thin and arched, suggest a permanent state of alarm. With a degree in fashion merchandizing and marketing, she is a wealth of information about fads, tanning, and skin maintenance. She is smart, a firecracker, and is careful about what she says. She sees hundreds of clients each week who use the sixteen tanning beds at the salon. She is also the mother of an eight-year-old girl who she never lets leave the house without sunscreen. She slathers

it on her daughter every day before school and puts a bottle in her backpack along with her schoolbooks. When they spend time outdoors, Beth shields her daughter and herself with broad-brimmed hats. Yet, when asked if she'll ever let her daughter go tanning, she says "I don't know." She knows the damage of UV radiation, and yet doesn't see the irony between her knowledge and her part in the tanning business.

Beth used to manage the tanning salon in the Student Recreation Complex at University of Missouri, where students could put their tanning bed sessions on their student charge account—along with meals in the dining hall and copies at the library—the bill went directly to their parents. One student at University of Missouri went tanning five days a week at the Student Recreation Center for the first two years of college and put hundreds of dollars worth of charges on her parents' bill. When they questioned it, she told them she was taking fitness classes.

The tanning salon Beth manages now is adjacent to a gym run by the same owner, and gym members receive discounts to the salon and vice versa. When people finish their workouts, they spill out of the gym's exit into a parking lot that faces the salon; it must seem impossible to curtail the impulse given this proximity, like candy displays at a checkout line. Many gyms now offer tanning as part of their membership benefits and either have tanning beds in their facilities or discounted membership packages with close-by tanning salons. These gyms are at once promoting wellness and disease. Imagine if Whole Foods had a deep-fried Twinkie stand in the middle of its store.

The appearance of health is more convenient and less taxing than the real thing, and it can be obtained by a quick exchange of cash. Elective cosmetic surgery has torn down the walls of impossibility; facelifts and calf implants are as easy to buy as new cars. Looking natural is no longer a requirement, but an option, and gyms are capitalizing on it. Thirty million people in the U.S. tan every year—a number greater than the entire population of the state of Texas.

Tanning salons are more prevalent in major U.S. cities than Starbucks and McDonald's. Their ease of use provides customers with the instant gratification that's become a cultural necessity. Instead of spending time outside, tanners can pop into the salon and absorb the same amount of UV rays in fifteen minutes they would receive from a full day sunbathing at the beach, then they can continue on with their day, stopping at the Starbucks drive-thru on the way home.

The light is blinding.

“They don’t see they’re dark,” Beth says of tanners who can’t recognize that they have turned an off-shade of orange. Once she had to take a customer aside and tell her that she was too dark. This particular client had opted for the spray-on tan that’s UV free and made of the chemical composition DHA (dihydroxyacetone). She came in four days in a row and her skin looked as if it’d been caked with makeup, the whites of her eyes coming into starker contrast with the rest of her body after each application, like a layering on of old paint. Beth said her client was grateful that someone told her the truth because she hadn’t realized how brown she’d become. “She was tanorexic.”

Kelly Pagel says she was tanorexic as well; she admits that when she was constantly using the tanning beds in college she had no concept of what she actually looked like. There is a fine line between the beautiful and the grotesque. In an episode of *Seinfeld*, Jerry dates what he refers to as a “two-face,” a woman who is beautiful under one light, and ugly under another. Artificially tanned skin has this same elasticity, depending upon who is looking and what she sees. “When I look back at pictures when I was 21, 22 and 23,” Kelly says, “I look orange and gross. If you’re an alcoholic you probably don’t see that you’re drinking too much. Or when you’re skinny and you still think you’re fat. It’s like after a while when your perfume doesn’t smell to you anymore; it’s all in your brain.”

Tanorexia has been likened to other psychological disorders, the most extreme of which are believed to fall into the category of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). A person suffering from BDD is highly self-critical and has a warped image of what he or she looks like. The motivation to tan has also been linked to feelings of “body shame”; tanners attempt to alter their skin coloring as a means to control their outward appearance. This desire for control over one’s unruly, uncooperative body is at the heart of the tanning industry. The sun is inconsistent in how much light it emits, but the SunStar 332 allows tanner to control where, when, and how much of those rays they receive; man trumps nature.

There is more to tanning than the physical darkening of the skin. Electric Beach, a chain of tanning salons in Florida (which seems redundant anyway) claims that the benefits of tanning are more than skin deep. “When emerging from an indoor tanning salon, individual’s skin on [the] outside really only mir-

rors the good feelings indoor tanning gives people on the inside as well.” Along with a change in skin pigmentation, tanners will experience, “increases in confidence and overall self-esteem” and “compliments from friends, family, coworkers, significant others, and even strangers.” This pledge that tanning provides supplementary self-confidence begs the question of why the most privileged and educated young women in the U.S. feel the need to flock to the tanning salon for an ego boost.

The light that emanates from the SunStar 332 is awe-inspiring, like an illumination from the heavens. I am tempted to ditch the WINKEASE and take a look at it with my naked eyes, just once, to see what it’s like. Tanning salons mandate the use of eye protection, but there’s a trend amongst tanners to wave their goggles at the front desk, then not wear them in the booth — the goggles can leave a thin tan line across the bridge of the nose and Kelly admits that “nobody wants the tan lines.” That slim strip of untouched skin is unsightly to most tanners. Instead, they choose to close their eyes, letting the eyelid, the thinnest skin on the body, act as the only boundary between 3,200 watts of ultraviolet light and the soft tissue of the eyeball. There is a chance that the cornea will burn, causing snow blindness that swells the eyes and induces a pain akin to grains of sand caught under the crease of the lid. But that is only temporary. More worrisome is the formation of cataracts, a clouding of the lens, which prevents light from passing through. At first the eye will yellow, as if molding, warping the vision and making it difficult to discern differences in color. Straight lines will start to appear bent or wavy. A thin milky veil will attach to the lens, like a dense fog, blinding all vision, making it impossible to see.