

Lip service

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When it comes to lipstick, I have always been more Queen Victoria than Victoria Beckham: I have, throughout my life, Just Said No. I understand, of course, the anthropological imperative – we are drawn to red lips for the same reason baboons are drawn to red backsides; it triggers our mating instincts – but this accounts for my reserve. In my twenties, having been assaulted on numerous occasions, the last thing I wanted was to signal my procreative readiness. I also never really liked the feel of lipstick, or the taste, and neither does my husband. So for two decades, with the exception of TV appearances and special occasions, I went about my life blithely bare-lipped.

But now, safely older and invisible, I see photos of myself and cringe. The last straw was a photo taken at a Joshua Radin concert, where we were the oldest people in the room by a decade. Behind me? A sea of beautiful red lips. On my face? Hard to tell: my mouth blended right into my chin. It was time to find a lipstick I could at least tolerate, if not love.

I gathered two dozen or so tubes – Dior, Tom Ford, Guerlain, MAC, Estée Lauder and Bobbi Brown – in hues ranging from dark reds to nude pinks. I placed them in a bowl in my bathroom, figuring I'd try one a day. Before I could even begin testing, however, the Bobbi Browns started to disappear. My sister nabbed the Bare Pink; my 14-year-old daughter snatched the coral Guava; her blonde friend asked for the ultra pale Bikini Pink and a redhead house guest seized the electric Rose Blossom.

As for me, I decided to test colours rather than brands, starting with the deep reds. This was not easy for someone with blue eyes and an olive complexion. Identifying a flattering colour is the hardest part, as what appears in the tube is not the hue you see on your lips. You have to try them all, which is time-consuming and annoying if you are, as I am, impatient. But omitting that crucial step will cost you dearly. Raise your hand if you've purchased lipsticks in haste that you never ended up wearing. Guilty as charged.

Estée Lauder's Pure Colour lipstick in Red Tango (£18, www.esteelauder.co.uk) was almost perfect, but a tad too bright. Christian Dior's Addict felt really creamy and applied beautifully, but turned too pink on my mouth. Rouge Dior in Ara Red (£22.50, www.dior.com) prompted my 16-year-old son to say, "Ugh. No. Take it off." The beautiful white and gold packaging for Tom Ford's Cherry Lush red (£35, www.selfridges.com) made me swoon – Oh! To pull that out of a purse! – but looked neon on my lips.

I nearly didn't try Guerlain's Rouge Automatique in 121 (£24.50, www.guerlain.com) because I couldn't figure out how to open it, but after discovering a secret compartment fit for Hogwarts, I found that it clashed with my complexion. MAC's lipstick in Lady Bug (£13.50, www.maccosmetics.co.uk) won out in the red family, as it looked the least shocking. But I wanted something I loved, not just something I tolerated. So I moved on.

To Bobbi Brown. The products went on flawlessly, were neither too creamy nor too stiff, and stayed on for hours, but finding the right shade took some work: Mod Pink was too mod; Sweet Nectar too orange; Cosmic Raspberry made me look like I'd eaten a popsicle – but then, hallelujah, I tried Rich Lip Colour in Heather Pink (£16, www.bobbibrown.co.uk). Somewhere between pink and red, it suited my colouring perfectly. Best of all, I could barely tell I was wearing lipstick. I've hidden it in a drawer, safe from future house guests, so it's there if I need it. And I never have to endure the lipstick marathon again.

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