
Further Under the Duvet

Marian Keyes

It was like a dream come true. My friend Aoife was made editor of an Irish women's magazine; after I'd congratulated her, I said, 'Give us a job as a beauty columnist,' and she said, 'Okay.'

I stared at her and went, 'HAHAHA!' She said, 'I'm serious,' and for one brief moment the world stopped spinning on its axis.

'I'm serious,' she repeated. 'I was going to ask you but you beat me to it.' And I went home that night, thinking: I'm the luckiest person who ever lived.

The idea was that I'd have my own page in the magazine where I'd 'try and test' half a dozen or so of a particular product type and award them marks out of ten. Usually when I'm doing something new I'm nervous and I doubt my ability to do it well, but not this time - I was born for this. I knew my subject matter inside out. I could hold my own in any discussion on free radicals and sea kelp. I could differentiate between Stila lipglaze and Bobbi Brown lipgloss at a glance.

Aoife had said she'd contact a load of beauty PRs and tell them to send me stuff. So from the very next morning, I began to wait. All week I stood by the downstairs window, my nose pressed to the glass, waiting, waiting . . .

The days passed and no free stuff arrived and then, just when I was starting to think it had all been a practical joke, the Lancôme lorry drew up outside. (Looking back, it was probably just the postman on his bike but it was so exciting that it took on mythical qualities.)

Himself answered the door, then placed a bulky padded envelope in my arms. With shaking hands I opened it, tipped the contents out onto my bed and nearly puked with excitement. I had been sent their latest night cream - expensive and fabulous - but the real prize was a selection of the forthcoming autumn cosmetics. There was a blusher, a quartet of eyeshadows, a lipstick, a bottle of nail varnish and the best bit of all: a new shade of Juicy Tube. I'll never forget it!

I made Himself play 'Lancôme Lady' with me. Sometimes he'd be the customer coming into the shop enquiring about the new season's colours and I'd be the Lancôme Lady demonstrating everything for him. Other times I'd be the customer and he'd be the woman behind the counter. We played for many happy hours. I made him. Even when he begged me to stop.

Then my sister came over to share our joy, but when she saw the Juicy Tube things threatened to turn ugly. Especially when she discovered that it wouldn't be in the shops for another six weeks. 'I'll buy it off you now,' she offered. But no amount of money could have persuaded me to part with it. 'Don't make me have to steal it,' she

said gently. So I emailed the girl at Lancôme, telling her the whole sorry story, and guess what? She sent another!

Two days later, the Clinique lorry arrived, laden with goodies - lipsticks, an all-weather face cream and not just one, but two foundations. Shortly after that the YSL lorry drew up outside with (what seemed like) most of their new autumn range for me to try.

It was like being in love, I was dizzy, giddy, giggly and my free cosmetics were all I could think about. I arrayed them in a little basket by my bed, so they were the first things I saw when I woke up. Even when I could no longer persuade Himself to play Lancôme Lady (or Clinique Lady or YSL Lady), I played by myself. Sometimes I arranged my products by brand name and other times by body parts (all lip products in one little heap, all skincare in another, etc.).

Every Thursday Himself and myself go to my parents' house for our dinner, so this particular Thursday I gathered together all my free stuff, brought it with me and spilt it across their kitchen table to be admired. But instead of being dazzled, my mother was anxious: there had to be a catch. Then Dad came in, found the price lists and began to add up the value of all I'd been sent. (Once an accountant, always an accountant.) When he had everything totted up - it came to over three hundred euro - he could scarcely believe his own sums. 'That,' he declared, 'is shagging well ridiculous.'

The magazine was fortnightly and, with a racing imagination, I began to plan my columns. First weeks, then months ahead. I had a big, big vision for autumn through winter, with the columns as follows: new lip colours, new eye colours, protective winter face care, winter hands, then as we came nearer to Christmas, a how-to-look-like-you-don't-have-a-hangover column, a party make-up special, a gift-buying guide and, finally, an end-of-year thirty best products ever! Moving into January, of course, we'd start off with a detox special, then start focusing on nice stuff for Valentine's Day, then the new spring colours would be out . . . All this I'd already planned in September.

Novels piled up unwritten, promotional work was abandoned and friends and family were neglected, as I took up full-time residence in a delicious dreamworld of time-defying eye creams and lash-thickening mascaras. Because I'm a perfectionist (i.e. insane) I didn't want my column to be just any old beauty column, a patchjob of rehashed press releases. I wanted it to be fabulously funny and witty, and there wasn't room in my head for anything else. (Triumphs included describing Clinique's Repairwear as 'It's night cream, Jim, but not as we know it' and Origins' Gloomaway shower gel as 'Prozac in a tube'.) I wrote and rewrote constantly, cutting, adding, honing and polishing. I admit it: I was obsessed.