



‘WHAT, THIS OLD FACE?’

WHETHER IT'S SURGERY, SPANX OR JUST GOOD GENES, SHOULD WE ACCEPT A COMPLIMENT FOR SOMETHING WE HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH, ASKS ARIEL LEVE

Recently, I met up with a friend I hadn't seen in over 10 years. We had gone to university together and reconnected over the internet, so I hadn't considered how she would look in person. Or, more precisely, how much she'd aged.

Turns out, not so much. She looked exactly the same. She appeared so healthy and refreshed and, above all, youthful, I assumed it was natural. What was I thinking? When I told her how great she looked, she thanked me. Then, very matter of factly, she said, 'It's Botox.'

I was confused. Had I just paid a compliment to her dermatologist? I had. Because if she hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have known, which, as we know, is the ultimate objective with

cosmetic procedures. But I was also impressed. She's probably one of the few people who would admit the truth. And then it occurred to me, was it right for her to accept my compliment at all?

It's hard to know any more where the line is. I've never lied about my age, as I don't want to get credit for something I'm not. I want to feel good for who I really am, not who people *think* I am.

But when someone compliments me on my looks, I brush that aside, as well. People say I have a hard time accepting a compliment, but that's not true. It's not that I find it difficult; it's that I never feel complimented when someone mentions something I had nothing to do with.

The way I see it, how I look is down to genetics and so is out of my control. Now, if someone were to tell me I'm funny —

then I would feel truly complimented. But when someone says, ‘Beautiful blue eyes’, I say thank you out of politeness and feel vaguely grateful to my maternal grandmother.

Part of what makes it tricky is that I know the real story. If, for instance, I wear Spanx (the industrial-strength underwear that controls belly and thigh jiggle) under a dress, and then someone pays me a compliment on how nice I look, I have to resist the urge to reveal it’s the undergarment that’s giving a false impression. But is wearing Spanx really a lie? Sure! I’m letting them think it’s my dedication to working out or a devotion to yoga that’s produced a toned figure when, really, I’m wrapped in a sausage casing.

If that’s the case, then what’s the etiquette when someone comments on your hair colour? ‘Thank you, my hairdresser is a genius.’

Given that there is inordinate pressure on us to look ‘our best’ and that youth is worshipped more than ever, this conundrum is peculiar to, and indicative of, modern times. How we appear represents who we are, and taking credit for looking good means we get to feel a sense of accomplishment. Even if we have nothing to do with it, that’s beside the point.

It’s problematic when it comes to misrepresentation. For instance, people who have gastric bypass surgery or liposuction and let people believe it’s down to diet. Or women who have filler injections and let others think their skin glows from ‘drinking loads of water’. Really? I drink loads of water, but I don’t look 18.

All of which begs the question: should you feel complimented for something you had nothing to do with? Perhaps a lot depends on who’s paying the compliment.

A few months ago, I was having dinner with an old family friend who would definitely not appreciate my use of the prefix ‘old’. A seventysomething (I think) very attractive woman, we were having a discussion about plastic surgery, in particular, the procedure for drooping eyelids. I complimented her by saying she didn’t have to worry about this. She thanked me and then said, ‘Well, I try to look after myself.’ The implication being that she deserved credit. This was more



‘If you’re going to deny you’ve had work done, at least remember who you’ve revealed the truth to’

than having good genes – it was down to the time, effort and care she put in. The only problem was, I knew she was lying. She had forgotten that six years earlier she’d told me about having an eyelift. If you’re going to deny you’ve had work done, you have to at least remember who you’ve revealed the truth to. Looks may improve, but memory fades.

I should have changed the subject, but I couldn’t help it. ‘You’ve never had work done on your eyes?’ I said, trying to sound surprised, rather than accusatory.

She looked right at me and said, ‘Nope.’

‘Really?’ I couldn’t let it go. For some reason, it felt personal. Not just because I knew the truth, but also because she was willing to misrepresent herself to me – wasn’t this a statement about our closeness?

It was. The more I pressed her to confess, the more hostile and determined not to back down she became. She knew I knew, and I knew she knew I knew – the betrayal hung in the air and suddenly we were in a scene from a Harold Pinter play.

After that dinner, I told my father what happened and, aside from his annoying and very measured response (‘To each his own’), he pointed out that for most people the whole point of having plastic surgery

is to look as if they haven’t. They don’t want to be reminded of the truth.

Why? Because it rings a bell that tells them that they needed it in the first place.

You have to know your audience. If the intention is to make someone feel good about themselves, there are certain people who enjoy being told they look good, and the source of where that comes from isn’t relevant. If they have paid a plastic surgeon or a cosmetic dentist, they get their money’s worth every time someone flatters them.

What I’ve found is that, most of the time, people pay a compliment to either break the ice (they’re not that invested either way, but it’s a pleasant way to begin a conversation), or are looking for one in return. Therefore, why make someone uncomfortable by telling the truth?

Knowing how much to reveal is tricky. My friend, Lisa, an avid vintage-clothes shopper, says she feels a sense of accomplishment when someone comments on her style.

If someone tells her they like her dress, she’ll cheerfully respond, ‘Thanks!’ and then reveal the price: ‘I got it for £2!’

Why is that necessary? Maybe she feels she’s giving the dress more cachet by revealing how little she paid, and it enhances the compliment’s impact. Everyone loves a bargain.

Well, not everyone. A few nights ago, I wore a pair of designer shoes that I got in a sale. When I received a compliment about them, I wanted it known that I didn’t pay full price. I liked the shoes and they were comfortable, but the status of wearing that particular designer was embarrassing, because it implied I have a lot of money.

When I told my friend how much I really paid for the shoes, the compliment took a turn for the worse. ‘Really?’ she said. ‘You paid how much?’ She looked annoyed. ‘I didn’t know they were having a sale.’

My honest response to an innocuous compliment had backfired. She seemed so hurt – slighted – as if I’d hidden valuable information from her.

There is an art to taking a compliment as well as giving one. Which has led me to believe it’s best just to say: ‘Thank you.’ As my father once said, ‘If I ask for the time, I don’t need the history of Switzerland.’