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December 2011

marie claire

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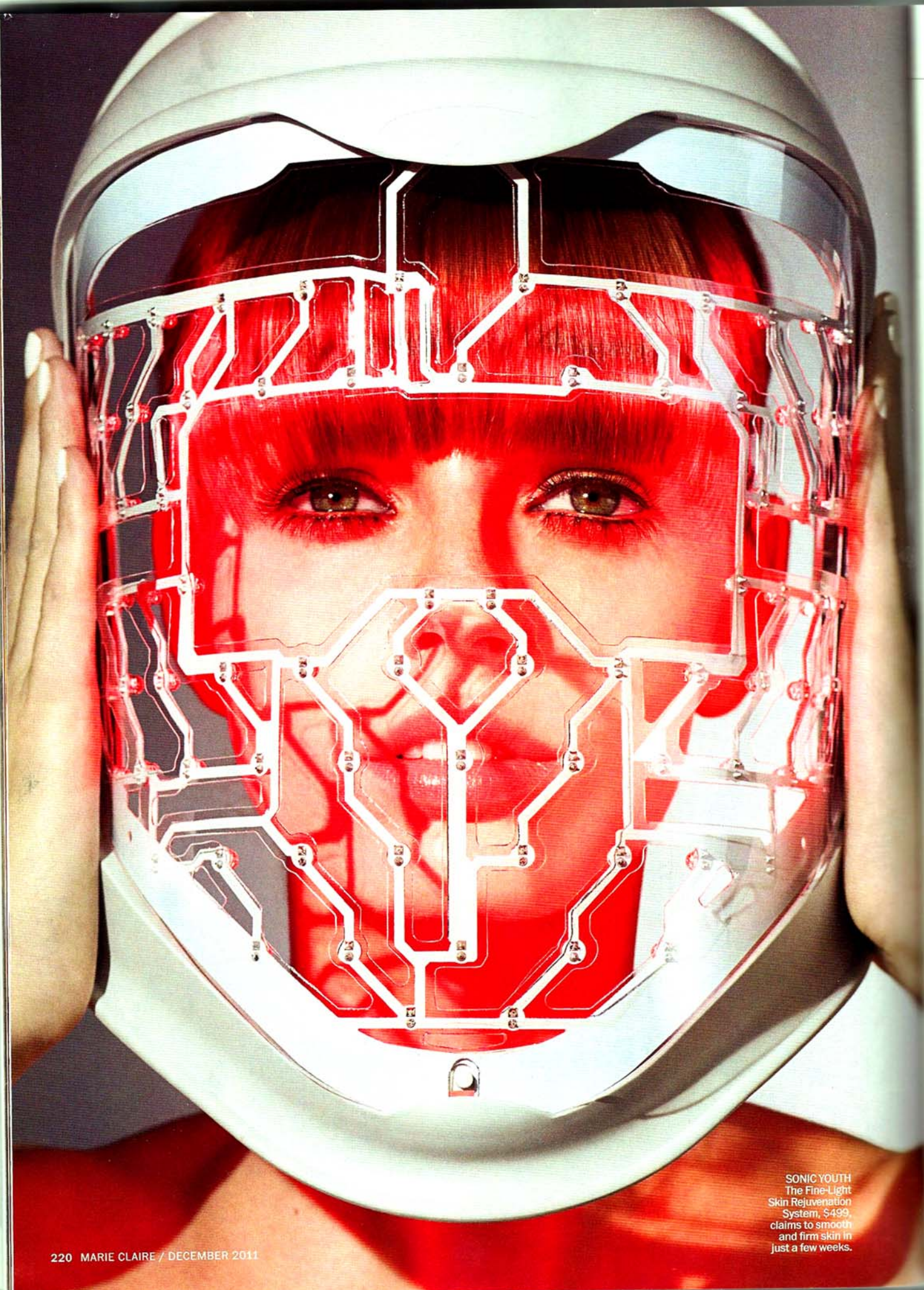
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SONIC YOUTH
The Fine-Light
Skin Rejuvenation
System, \$499,
claims to smooth
and firm skin in
just a few weeks.

MACHINE AGE

Can the new tech-happy beauty gadgets really zap zits and shrink pores with the proficiency of a cosmetic doc? **Meredith Bryan** plugs in

A few years ago, after a decade spent tithing embarrassing portions of my meager salary to the French face cream gods in an attempt to soothe symptoms ranging from dark circles to boyfriendlessness, I quit products cold turkey. I'd like to credit this to some new sense of perspective or at least a hobby, but what really happened is that I read several articles about parabens in breast tumors, and my fear of cancer trumped my fear of wrinkles. I threw out my ultrarich night creams and serums and replaced them with jars of pure almond oil from the health-food store. To my surprise, my cheeks didn't immediately sag in protest. But I did notice a creeping psychological lightness. I was no longer desperately fighting aging; I was just aging. It felt liberating, and a little dangerous. My newfound beauty asceticism really took the edge off my birthdays.

But eventually, as I fell upon my 30s and the crinkles around my eyes started taking up permanent residence, I began to reconsider: Had I equated righteous abstention with laziness? Surely it was possible to not buy \$300 eye cream *and* not have chin hair.

It was my wedding that finally tipped the scales. A few months of concentrated vanity before the big event enlightened me to the cosmetic world's technophilia: a class of paraben-free beauty gadgets, LED systems, electronic masks, and zappers whose

promises would make La Mer blush. Could they possibly work? I was skeptical. But fresh off my honeymoon and eager to retain at least the appearance of well-restedness, I decided to find out.

I start simple, with the Olay Professional Pro-X Advanced Cleansing System, a less-expensive version of Clarisonic, the popular motorized exfoliating brush. But first I call Dr. Debra Jaliman, author of *Skin Rules: Trade Secrets From a Top New York Dermatologist*, to find out what benefits, if any, to realistically expect. Surprisingly, she proclaims herself a "big believer" in some at-home devices. "Is the Olay as good as what I can do with the diamond-tip microdermabrator in my office?" she says. "No. But it still helps." What about as good as my own washcloth? I ask. "I'm not a fan of washcloths," she says. "People don't wash them enough. They put bacteria back on your skin."

I proceed with my trial, applying cleanser to my wet face and pressing the little white gadget's On button. It purrs softly to life, its bristles rotating slowly in a circular direction. My electric toothbrush could eat this thing for lunch. But it produces a pleasant tickling sensation that eventually lulls me into a deep relaxation, not unlike a face massage. Mmmmm-hmm. When I finally set the device down, my face does feel exceedingly clean.

Next, I try a sleek, compact gadget that borrows its shape and design from the >>

Photograph by Christopher Griffith

Beauty



IGROW Hair Rejuvenation System, \$695.

LIGHTSTIM For Wrinkles, \$299.

WRINKLEMD Eye System, \$129.

CLARO IPL Acne Clearing Device, \$195.

GLO BRILLIANT Personal Teeth Whitening Device, \$275.

iPhone: the Claro IPL Acne Clearing Device, a handheld zit-zapper that promises, through a combination of heat and light, to shrivel pimples within a matter of days. When I press the gadget to a blemish on my chin, it starts beeping loudly and unleashes a series of flashing red lights. Convinced something scientific must be happening here, I'm soon loudly zapping my entire body—ingrown hairs, back zits, a bug bite on my forearm. How this gadget might have transformed my adolescence! While I don't see any instantaneous results, I'm interested enough to give this device another go-around.

The Claro makes me excited to try the Glo Brilliant Personal Teeth Whitening Device, which is not so much inspired by Apple products as trying to pass for one—it can even be charged through my MacBook with a USB cable. It looks like a white iPod attached to a lacrosse mouthguard. I apply a "G-vial" of whitening gel to my teeth; I bite down on the plastic. It glows a trippy bright blue, signaling that its special "Guided Light Optic Technology" is turbocharging the effectiveness of the gel. After eight minutes, the device shuts off automatically, and I reapply the gel and start all over again. The company suggests you do this four times in succession (32 minutes) every day for up to 10 days. Unfortunately, I haven't even cleared the first eight minutes when I'm drooling heavily and my jaw feels slightly warm. The light makes me feel like I'm in a tanning salon. My husband walks in and says I look like the sexy robot lady from *WALL-E*. Maybe so, but after four applications, my teeth don't feel sensitive—which is my main complaint about whitening strips and ampoules.

I'm more skeptical about LightStim for Wrinkles, a little palm-size number that promises to use "LED light therapy to stimulate cells, thereby increasing the production of collagen and elastin." While LEDs have been used in dermatologists' offices for years, these claims seem specious coming from what looks like a fancy flashlight. When I turn it on one evening, its tiny lights illuminate my face, yet I don't feel anything. Zits are one thing, but can squelching wrinkles really be this easy?

I call Jaliman again—who says, basically, no. "We use LEDs on acne, but even the more powerful machines we have in the office are not that effective for fine lines. It's possible they help your products penetrate." She explains that the light doesn't go deep enough to stimulate collagen production. For that, you need a stronger laser.

Still, I can't help trying one last LED device: the Fine-Light Skin Rejuvenation System—if

only because it takes its aesthetic cues from Hannibal Lecter. A huge, clunky plastic mask barnacled with tiny lightbulbs, its box includes a rechargeable battery pack and tinted safety glasses. I read the instructions three times before I'm even able to put the damn thing on. Once it's affixed to my head via adjustable headgear and I've secured my goggles, I plug the cord into the battery pack—and am suddenly overcome by the sensation that my life has ended and I am walking into the blinding light à la *Ghost*. I sit on my couch for the suggested 35 minutes, during which I feel nothing—no heat, no prickling, no tingling. I am either irradiating lines or just taking a nice meditative break from my day. This time, when my husband catches me mid-treatment, he is more alarmed: "You. Look. Terrifying!" he declares (before snapping a few pictures with his phone).

When I'm finished, I call Simon George, the U.K.-based doctor who developed the mask, to hear his side of the story. He compares LEDs to "photosynthesis for humans." "The light is absorbed by the mitochondria in your cells," he says, "which creates energy the cells then use to produce collagen." He admits that Fine-Light "is not going to give you a face-lift. But you'll see gradual textural changes, a tightening of the skin, over a couple weeks." He also claims his product is just as effective as doctor's office versions; while the light isn't quite as strong, the longer treatment time makes up for it. (Hmm, but Jaliman had said that in-office LEDs weren't even that powerful.) I begin to wonder if I should forget these confusing, time-consuming gadgets and just try Botox. It may be poison, but its results are hard to argue with.

Dutifully, I keep zapping zits and wrinkles anyway out of some almost superstitious faith. Stacked high with my various wands and mouthguard and mask, my bathroom starts to look like a war zone. After a couple weeks, I can't say my crow's-feet have noticeably diminished, but my teeth are getting whiter, and my chin zit is gone. Were the various light frequencies effective? Who knows. But between the soft hums of the Olay brush and my half-hour interludes with Fine-Light, I'm feeling strangely yogic. I've been forced to slow down and pay attention to myself.

Even Jaliman, who says she'll put her money on at-home exfoliators versus light devices, admits that radical results are almost beside the point. "Do beauty creams really get rid of deep lines?" she asks. "Maybe not. But I love my creams. They give my skin an incredible glow." **mc**