

YOUR RINGS AND YOUR WALLET
(March 2001)

My fiftieth birthday present from a wealthy but dear friend arrived in a plastic pouch, clasped with a white feather and a polished stone like a dream catcher. It was nestled in an earth-toned box crafted from hand-made paper and tied with a green satin ribbon. It was a gift certificate for a day at a tony spa in downtown Chicago, which would include a manicure, pedicure, facial, massage and lunch. I saved it for four months before deciding to splurge. The next day I was going to be joining my college girl friends in Santa Fe for a weekend celebration of our half-century milestones. It seemed as good a time as any to spend \$300 on glamour, although the gift certificate itself was not so tacky as to list a dollar value.

AWAKEN, IMAGINE, NURTURE. The words were carved like elegant wrinkles into the marble of the spa's entrance way. Its mission statement, displayed in the elegant brush strokes of a Buddhist monk, promised to nourish my whole body, awaken my spirit, soothe my soul, revere my whole person. Like a Temple, it said, the spa would fulfill my desire for wholeness, healing and peace. It even used the word SACRED. It screamed LUXURY. I was grateful for the word FREE.

I should have known better. There's no such thing as a free day at the spa. And luxury is never guaranteed by a price tag.

My foot bath is bubbling over when Toy directs me to the cream-colored vibrating leather recliner. She brings me cool water with a slice of lemon and sets to work. Zen chimes induce serenity. Toy mixes the sea salt scrub for my pedicure in a gleaming onyx plate.

For my manicure, my hands soak in sudsy water (probably Palmolive) in a glass bowl with colored beads in the bottom. Thankfully, Toy doesn't lecture me about my dry cuticles or my bad habit of picking at them. She looks at my two prize thumbnails, which are longer than the others, and asks if she may trim them. She takes out her clipper and whacks off what I have taken months to grow. Barely one-sixteenth inch of nail remains.

"Let it go," I remind myself. She, after all, is the expert in beauty, and I am not. I am a writer. I am her student. I am ready for the teacher.

At 11:30, I do the wet-nail shuffle to the small, circular waiting room. There are four other guests waiting: two friends spending a spa day together (each deeply engaged in an entertainment weekly), a woman in a terry robe and spa-issued sandals who speaks little English, and a woman still in street clothes who is agitated and in clear need of soul-soothing. Unfortunately, there has been a mix-up. Very bad karma invades the waiting room:

You had an 11 o'clock appointment.

No, I was told it was 11:30.

Wait here.

After a few minutes, a woman in black comes to the edge of our circle and crooks her finger at the jilted patron. At what must be the front desk, we hear:

Did.

Did not.

Did so.

That kind of argument. The mission statement can go straight to Zen hell. The door slams.

Another person comes in and takes the lunch orders of the two friends. I wait. I meditate until my nails are dry enough to open my book. I'm reading David Brooks' *Bobos in Paradise—The New Upper Class and How They Got There*. Sensitized by my reading, I don't want to appear demanding or bourgeois. I don't inquire about my lunch, but wait patiently--monk-like, a model of serenity. When the student is hungry, will the lunch appear?

At 12:30, Toy seats another client across from me, does a double-take, and asks if I've had lunch.

"Not yet," I say.

"I'll tell them."

At ten minutes to one, the lady who takes lunch orders notices me.

"Did you want lunch?"

"Is it included?"

She nods. I choose the tuna salad. Five minutes later, she is back. Out of tuna. OK, the Cobb. In the waiting room, with blow dryers whining in the background, she sets up a TV table at my chair. They will nourish my body there, where the poor guests--those not on the luxury package--can revere me while I eat.

At 1:00 p.m., I begin my lunch, and at 1:07, yet another woman in black stands in front of me.

“You are late for your massage.”

“*I* cannot be late. I’ve been sitting here since 11:30.”

She looks at me as if I’m lying. “Do you want to finish your lunch?”

“As opposed to...?”

“Your massage could be half an hour.”

“How long is it supposed to be?”

“An hour.”

“Well, then, I’d like an hour. I was given this package, and I know it was expensive. I’d like to get the package.”

She looks at my uneaten lunch. “What do you want to do with that?”

I think of a few inappropriate responses.

“I could wrap it for you,” she says, apparently an offer of unparalleled generosity and social responsibility.

“So I would eat it later?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I stare at the cookie, which I hope is chocolate chip, but which is probably oatmeal raisin. She takes my food away. I sit, without food, without a clue, for another six minutes. I kick myself. I shouldn’t have let go of the cookie.

Another woman appears, to take me upstairs to the massage that I was late for, except that it turns out to be the time for the facial. Rosa, a former dermatology nurse from Russia, wants me to take my clothes off, lock my things in the locker, wrap a towel around myself and put on a terry robe and sandals. I feel a little exposed just for a facial. She orders me to relax and lie down on her table.

Rosa trains her bright light and 20X magnifying glass on my face and clucks. She asks about my facial hair—there are a few gray hairs on my chin and lip, although I’ve generally been pleased with the results of recent laser treatments that de-fuzzed me considerably. She says I shouldn’t pluck the grays. She will wax.

“And, we must lift your eyebrows.”

I lift them myself, curious. She explains that the shape is all wrong, too thick in the middle of my face, too bushy. It would make her very happy to make me beautiful—are your eyes really that blue?—and she will talk to the manager—no extra charge—because my schedule was messed up and I missed my lunch.

“It’s like a poor man’s facelift,” she says, without irony. “If you only do one thing.... It will open up your face.”

I don't think my face is "closed," but it’s not Rosa's fault about the lunch and the lateness, and yes, I see her point on the eyebrows. Nervously, I beg, “Please, not too thin.”

Congratulating herself on our progress so far, Rosa evaluates my usually smooth skin. Broken capillaries. Severe dehydration. *Acne Rosacea*. Hormone changes. Stress. She announces the problems like the stops on the train line. She makes me look, again, in a magnifying mirror no fifty-year old woman should ever be required to look into. Rosa recommends three medically formulated products—a moisturizer for under my usual moisturizer, a night recovery complex, and a mask, which should be used three times per week. Retinyl Palmitate (a medicine-y way of saying Vitamin A). Glycolic Acid. Vitamin E. I need these for healing, but she hesitates to recommend them, because she can tell: “You do not take care of yourself.”

The implication is clear: a day at the spa is wasted on someone like me. The truth is, I've never been in better shape. I don't drink. I don't smoke. I cross-train, treadmill, stair-step. I lift weights.

But Rosa has seen right through me. I am an impostor, not a real spa guest. I *don't* take care of myself--I don't pluck, mud, mask or tone. "I even drink tap water," I say under my breath, but she doesn't hear me.

She is concerned about my pores. With my face in this condition, she will not risk opening them in a deep-cleaning facial, the kind I expected. Instead she will do a longevity/collagen facial, which includes a paraffin wrap for the hands.

She looks at me, flat on the table, and in the most spectacular Freudian slip I have ever heard, orders, "Give me your rings and your wallet!"

She corrects herself and puts my rings and my watch in a surprisingly unpretentious *Tupperware* container, covers my eyes, massages my face. When she is finished, she ushers me into a dimly lit room where I am to wait. I don't know for what. In about ten minutes, Patty comes in and asks, in apparent innocence, if I would like my massage now. I act like this would be a lovely surprise and we go to a candle-lit room dense with sandalwood incense.

"Do you have any problems?"

My soothed spirit considers a variety of spiritual responses. What does she mean? Missing lunch and poor customer service at a ritzy salon are hardly "problems."

"Shoulders? Lower back?"

Oh, *those* kinds of problems.

After the massage, Patty says, in a checklist, ka-chink kind of way, “Have you gotten everything you’re supposed to?” I don’t know what I’m “supposed” to, and “supposed to” sounds grabby and clutching, not grateful. It all feels like more than I deserve, yet at the same time not what it was supposed to be—that is, what other people would demand for their money in a place so self-consciously nourishing of body and spirit. At the end of the day, luxury is not in black stones and lemon slices, but in the attitudes of the people who care for you—or not—throughout the day, the person who knows you are in the waiting room and tells you what to expect next, the person who is honored to present you with your gift, that is, all that you are “supposed to” get, the person who would serve your lunch at lunchtime and treat you like the gift-giver intended, “queen for a day.” In other words, the person I didn’t see.

“Here is your basket,” the young man at the front desk says. “Rosa has chosen these for you.” He does not say that she has added \$49 for the free “lifting”/waxing, but he does whisper that the total, over and above the \$300 gift certificate, is \$218.47 and that the little brown envelopes are for the expected 20% tips I will leave to Toy and Rosa and Patty. It’s not their fault that my day at the spa did not relax my spirit or feed my soul. But they did a pretty good job—considering the raw material they had to work with—nourishing the body. Would it be ungrateful of me not to buy the products recommended by Rosa, who was so good as to lift my face, a poor woman's face, supposedly for free?

I buy the basket. I buy the basket knowing that the 20X mirror exaggerates, that the basket is not what my soul needs, that I’m not--as is so obvious to the trained eye--the type to take care of myself, that the luxury is all in the carved marble and the floating

slices of lemon and in that fancy price tag and its fancy packaging. I buy it because part of me admires Rosa, who knows her business and knows that her business preys on the vain and the vulnerable, even as it purports to cater to them, and because I am, at 50, both. And because I do--I really do--want to start to take care of myself, even when it's not for free.

They should chisel this in their precious stone: "Give me your wallet."