

HOW TO BE BEAUTIFUL: THE THINKING WOMAN'S GUIDE

Extract: Chapter Seven: The Crab with the Spinning Eyes

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The phone rings in my hotel room in New York.

“Hi! Is that room 1609?”

“Yes,” I say, not recognising the voice.

“Hi, my name is John D. Michaels, and I’m calling to schedule a time for the massage that was booked for you.”

“What massage? Are you sure you have the right room?”

“1609, that’s the one! It was booked for you as a surprise gift.”

This is a surprise all right, it’s 8.45am. Still, it’s not totally inconceivable that someone – perhaps a public relations beauty person who knows I’m in town – could have done this for me. It is a little odd though.

John D. Michaels continues his spiel. “The massage has already been paid for, but unfortunately I didn’t catch the name of the person who booked it for you - they paged me.”

“Oh. Well, this is very strange... what kind of massage is it?”

“Well, madam, I come to your room with oils and candles, and you can have any kind of massage you want: shiatsu, tantric... Tips and gratuities are of course up to you.”

“Tantric?”

“...but whatever you choose, relaxation is guaranteed...”

“Tantric?” I can’t help laughing. Last time I read about tantric it was a form of sexual yoga, designed to encourage a man to delay his moment of pleasure (if you’ll excuse me).

“Yes madam. I am five foot eight, white Caucasian, with brown curly hair..”

“Listen,” I say laughing. “I really don’t think you have the right room, but thanks anyway...”

Well, they’re obviously all at in New York, unlike us prudish Brits. They even have their own show about it: *Sex and the City*. It seems appropriate that my “personal masseur” should have called this morning, as today’s the day I take my life into my hands and visit the shrine of all bikini waxes: the J Sisters.

If you haven’t heard of the J Sisters by now, you’re probably still wearing one of those swimsuits with little modesty skirts attached. I don’t know why, but a few years ago, something happened in the usually dull world of the bikini wax. A small salon near Central Park, owned and run by seven Brazilian sisters, achieved a notoriety based solely on the ability of the sisters to remove any shred of pubic hair from their clients. How did this happen? They stripped off all or most of the hair in the bikini area, their clients

loved it, beauty editors heard about it, celebrities endorsed it, and hey presto, they had a cult following that went far beyond cult. The Brazilian wax is now asked for the world over – except in Brazil of course, where it’s just a normal wax – a short back and sides, I suppose.

The salon itself is curious. Flanked by huge department stores and office blocks, you enter the Vanderbilt townhouse by a tiny door and walk down a corridor that borders on shabby, up in a big clanking elevator you think you might never get out of. It is a Saturday morning, probably one of their busiest days. The receptionist greets me and shows me where to hang my coat. There is a tiny loo the size of a cupboard on one side, and lots of marble, gilding and mirrors everywhere. It’s a million miles away from the slick, modernist beauty salons of today, and utterly different from the serene order of the Elizabeth Arden Red Door day spas. I can immediately understand why the first bikini wax pioneers – those people who came here before the reviews and the celebs – would have felt they had stumbled on something unique. There is that general sense of efficiency being maintained somehow through complete chaos, and while I sit down to have my nails done I can’t help but notice how the clientele – a mix of up-town, well-to-do society ladies, younger women, fashionable dressed, and a couple of tourists from Germany (which puts paid to the myth that German women are all furry) - are all looking relaxed, smiling benignly in total acceptance of whatever will happen next.

Which is just as well, because when it does happen, it bloody hurts. After the manicure, I am shown to a seat at the back of the salon. Everyone sits comfortably flicking through the glossies, but all eyes flit to and from the two white cubicles at the end. Are they soundproofed? I wonder, as I can’t hear much screaming. A client, who looks Brazilian herself, comes out of one. She is wearing impossibly tight trousers, her hair is dyed blonde, her skin is tanned, and her lips are pale pink with a darker lip line (my pet hate incidentally). She looks great, flashy, but fun rather than tarty, and she looks like she has fun with that bikini line. I’m in next.

Okay, here goes. You lie on your back on a massage bed with your jeans, tights, knickers – everything from the waist down removed. It’s a massage bed in name only. Joyce dusts you with powder and asks whether you want everything off, or whether she should leave a “landing strip”. If you’re at all like me you will probably start giggling hysterically – which is better than crying, I suppose. She grabs you by the ankles, and lifts them towards your face, as if changing a nappy on a baby. She pours hot wax on to your nether regions (yes, YOU READ THIS RIGHT), puts a muslin cloth on top, presses it down, and then RIP!!! Up it comes, hairs and all. The ripping bit happens over and over until finally it’s done. It’s not the most dignified of procedures, and in terms of pain, it is definitely up there with childbirth, and in a sense the results are almost the same – one leaves you with a baby, the other leaves you as soft as a baby. It’s all a little odd actually, and I feel and look a little peculiar. But still, Gwyneth Paltrow has it done all the time – her signed photo is on the wall to prove it, complete with the line, “You changed my life.” I’m a little intrigued by this. How? How can a bikini wax possibly change someone’s *life*? What is she doing with this bikini wax? Where am I going wrong? Cindy Crawford, Christy Turlington, Naomi Campbell... they’ve all got their photos on the wall too, although they don’t testify to it having changed their lives. Maybe they’ve got something better; an eyebrow plucker or a manicurist. But let’s not pick on Gwyneth.