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remember the day vividly, when I came to terms with my own mortality. I was at a downtown spa desperately trying to keep myself from drowning during a “relaxing” hydrotherapy treatment. In the deep tub full of orange-scented water, strong jets pulsated in no discernible pattern, making it impossible to anticipate the next forceful stream. It could be targeting my feet, my hips, my kidneys. Clinging to the hand bars, I frantically felt with my feet along the smooth bottom for a toehold. At 5 feet 2 inches and 108 pounds, I bobbed around the tub like a cork, praying my 30 minutes of relaxation would soon end.

As a spa reviewer and veteran pamperee, I’ve learned that not all experiences are relaxing and self-indulgence has its pitfalls, including poignant moments of awkwardness and outright pain.

For instance, what started out as one of the best facials I’d ever had was delivered by a hefty-armed Russian woman with a thick accent. She massaged a fragrant lotion into my cheekbones and brow as I reclined on a heated featherbed and drifted in and out of consciousness—until a wasp (or so I thought) stung my cheek.

“What was that?” I cried in pain.

“Eet keels germs,” she said, showing me the penlike device used to deliver electrical current after extractions to prevent blemishes. I’ll take the blemishes.

I do wonder sometimes about unusual spa equipment and its purpose, but, frankly, some of the most painful experiences I’ve had have come at the hands of the spa therapists themselves. One massage I recall bordered on the physically abusive. I should have gotten a clue when I entered the spa’s dark reception area, decorated with faintly medieval overtones—heavy burgundy curtains and a silver chalice I eventually drank from. I sat down on the hard surface of a massive carved wooden bench to fill out my life’s history, dutifully marking X’s on the human-figure drawing to indicate areas of pain or tenderness in my body. Probably not a wise move as I think back on it—nor was telling the therapist that I like a firm hand.

What followed made the rack look like a Disneyland ride. Was that a drill he was using on my ass, or his elbow? Give the guy cred-



Spa Schmah

If **Kathy Schultz** gets one more exfoliation, they just might hit bone Illustration by **Stan Shaw**

it—he had to have considerable strength to penetrate several inches of fluffy adipose tissue and cause so much pain. “How are you enjoying the session?” he asked enthusiastically. “The pressure’s a little deep,” I managed,

as my eyes rolled up into my head. Afterwards, I gave away my two-for-one coupon.

But my most memorable—and humbling—experience was the bathhouse incident. A woman in my book club recommended a spa in Lakewood, where clients

use the facilities in the buff with the exception of pink shower caps. She pronounced the experience “empowering” and marveled that there were women of all shapes and sizes and “no one cares what you look like!” Yeah, sure.

As a woman who now checks the “over 40” box, I didn’t have much desire to see svelte, tummy-less 20-somethings cavorting in the mineral pools. So I made a very early appointment midweek to avoid, well, practically anyone. After the grand tour, I donned my shower cap, dropped my robe, sucked in my stomach and walked an interminable 10 yards to one of the unoccupied tubs, where I stayed submerged for 20 minutes. I looked into the other pools, at the walls, at nothing and eventually at the other women.

Finally, when my number was called for the body scrub, I tried to be cool, carefree, even natural as I walked across the room, naked to the world (or about a dozen other bathers, but that’s enough for me). In truth, I wound up scampering to the scrub tables, which were lined up 4 feet apart from one another, affording an unobstructed view of my fellow scrubee’s nakedness. I closed my eyes as one of the “excellent scrubbers” (as the sign professed) took her sponge, which was akin to a Brillo pad, and proceeded to scrub the crap out my exposed skin. She scrubbed behind my ears and the depths of my belly button with an exotic mixture of Dial soap and warm water. Not only did all the dead cells leave the premises, but the live ones were hanging on for dear life.

Has any of this deterred me from visiting spas to get rubbed, kneaded, exfoliated, painted, pampered and beautified? Not on your life. Or mine—should I drown in the hydrotherapy tub anytime soon. **S**