

Menaced by Massage

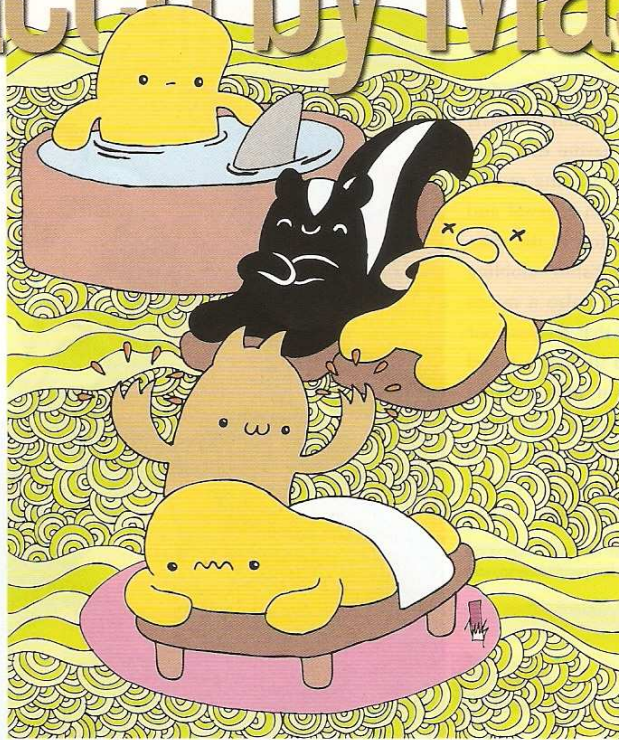
I DON'T LIKE SPAS.

There, I said it. I know that in this world of SNAGs and metrosexuals, it's probably not very *au courant* for a guy to say something like this. It's not like I haven't tried. Whenever my wife and I stay at a hotel with an acclaimed spa or travel overseas I give it a go. I don the silly papery slippers, put on the tiny papery underwear and wrap myself in a waffle-weave robe. I allow myself to be asphyxiated by aromatherapy, marinated in the likely germ-ridden hot tubs, and grudgingly acclimated to the soft sounds of the tinkling new age soundtrack. Yet as my time approaches to be tenderized on the table, I often find myself getting more anxious than relaxed.

Perhaps it's because of that time that I was stalked at the Borgata Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey. I had about an hour before a hot stone massage and was determined to steam and soak away my typical massage-anxiety before the treatment. Not a chance.

I was towel-clad in the gargantuan steam room for about three minutes before a naked man entered and walked to where I was sitting. His conversation was ostensibly harmless enough, but there was just something creepy about the way the guy was standing close to me (did I mention the room was gargantuan?), hips thrust forward, gesticulating with more than just his hands.

I went to get a shower. Towelling off, I found my new "friend" ogling me before making a quick escape around the corner. Perfect. Now I was feeling exactly in the right mood for the massage. Fortunately, the treatment was



fine. I had a down-to-earth Jersey guy as my masseuse who laughed when I told him about my admirer and replied, "You should see what I have to put up with."

Honestly, I find massages more uncomfortable than comfortable. My face never really fits well in the head cradle, my Adam's apple usually hits the table in an uncomfortable position, and the entire time I'm trying to think of something to say to the therapist. Either that or my mind is racing as though I were actually in the company of a different kind of therapist: *calm down; just relax; doesn't that feel good?; just breathe; oww that really hurts; why am I here when I have all that work to get to is etc.* That's while I'm face down.

Face up, I am always a bit nervous that something more than rampant thoughts will pop up. Which is exactly what happened one time in Thailand where the masseur (who a had touch of masseuse in him)

massaged areas that certainly didn't need to be massaged (my inner groin just doesn't hold that much tension.) After, he had gotten my, er, attention, I didn't know how to get off the table without becoming even more embarrassed than I already was so I just stepped up that inner dialogue, focusing mostly on the *calm down* part of the manic mantra.

Then there was the time that absolutely nothing popped up even though I was sitting naked with my wife in a tub full of flower petals in Bali. When we booked, the treatment rooms were occupied but they recommended that we have our massages in a suite. Sounded nice except the suite turned out to be a drab motel room. When the kneading was over, we were told to go into the bathroom and get into the tub together. Normally, this would have been a sweet and romantic ending. But the tub was barely big

enough for one, the water had gone tepid and the bathroom itself was built more for bodily functions than body bliss.

Speaking of soaking, when that hot stone massage was finished back in Atlantic City, I thought immersion in one of the pool-sized hot tubs would extend the effects of the treatment. Seeing that the aquatherapy room was empty, I submerged my limp limbs into the warm bubbling water, closed my eyes, drifted and... *what was that?* My head snapped forward my eyes flew open and – you guessed it – Mr. I-Want-To-Be-Your-Friend had joined me. *Where did he come from?* I sprinted to the locker room, got dressed and got free from the spa stalker.

Considering these massage mishaps, it was like finding water in the desert when my wife invited me to have a massage at Singapore's Wan Yang Health and Foot Reflexology Centre at Parkway Parade Mall. Thinking that things couldn't get too bizarre in a mall, I decided to make this my final attempt to make peace with this peace-inducing body treatment. I'm glad I did.

The place is all business. No requesting a certain therapist, no acrid aromatherapy, no nauseating new age music, no silly slippers or undersized underpants. I didn't even have to take my shirt off. Just get comfortable on the chair and get a powerful no-nonsense massage that drove tension out of my back and shoulders in 20 magical minutes. It was fast, effective, and he never went near my groin. I wasn't even coerced into drinking herbal tea after the treatment. Now that's how *this* guy says spaaah. ■