

Manon Carrié

At The Korean Spa

I had just undressed down to nothing, wrapping all of my everything in only a battered, green robe with no pockets, when I made my way down a brick and wood hallway to the restaurant where my friends waited. They too had wrapped away their nakedness in the same robe, the one we were all wearing, the robe of every woman and no woman in particular. Some women did not wear the robe, but we did, out of habit of being ashamed and afraid—something we would only grow out of when it was too late.

I never liked my birthday, but that fact has never stopped me from trying to canonize the day with an event of some sort, just so all of the anniversaries didn't get muddled into one. Just to give the timeline of my existence some chapters. Categorizing helps us remember things that are hard to remember, like years of life, or where our socks are, or lovers. This year was category twenty-six, and I was marking it with several events instead of one, just to be safe. I have a poor memory.

The first of these events was a few hours of getting slapped around by a mid-sixties Korean woman, to better my health. I asked my friends to join me in this endeavor, and told them we would heal together in the salt room amongst a sea of women, the women of Los Angeles, all here to reverse the effects of having lived. A bit of steam to soften sun-beaten skin, salt crystals and charcoal to relieve oneself of toxins and radical ideas, a boiling tub to tranquilize the nerves, and essential oils to smooth the residuals of laughter around the lips, and erase the cavities of regret between the eyebrows. I chose the Milk and Honey Smoothie ritual. I wanted to be dessert for my birthday. I wanted to forget, and simply be creamy, vacillating nectar.

Manon Carrié

“Number five!!” echoed across the cafeteria, where I waited while eating dumplings. I knew “Number five” meant me, because that was the number they had assigned me upon entry. It was marked on the bracelet they gave me that I wore around my wrist, and it was the only way they could distinguish me from the other nude and vulnerable customers. Number Five, my spa-given identity. My Korean name. “That’s me”! I shouted back. That’s me.

A stout Korean woman in a black bikini uniform extended her hand out to me. I rushed over—she did not seem the waiting type. I latched my palm to hers and she trotted away, myself in tow.

We entered a wider room spotted with three hot tubs. In them sat women of various sizes, and they all gazed back at me with a gentle expression that forced upon me a violent sensation of nothingness. They were looking at me, but the truth is that they were looking back into themselves, into their own conscience, where they found nothing. So they sat down there in their empty minds and looked back at me.

The Korean woman, called Noh, beckoned me past the Jacuzzi dwellers into the back area of the room. It was divided into nine parts, each a rectangle of modest size with a small divide separating them. The divide was at about belly-button height at the top edge, and extended down to just above knee level. At the center of each stall was a metal bed, much like an operating table, padded and upholstered in a dense plastic with flecks of glitter, or mineral, or magic.

On each operating table lay a woman slathered in oil, towered over by a Korean woman in an identical black bikini, the same as Noh’s. The tiled ground was

Manon Carrié

flooded in a layer of used water, radioactive fallout brimming with feminine bacteria and the debris of an L.A. lifestyle. Such an atmosphere had the effect of a slaughterhouse, and Noh patted the operating table with a welcoming smile. I hopped on without hesitation.

There's not much I can do to accurately describe what happened to me, but in that infinite hour, I was something I have never been before, and may never be again:

I sat on the edge of the table, hands between my knees, shivering from the stale air, distracted by bare, unfamiliar buttocks and backs and hind-knees. Noh dunked a semi-transparent bucket into a larger, less transparent bucket filled with water, and from that she launched the liquid onto my body. With great skill she avoided my face, the warm water striking just under my chin and pouring down my torso, to my toes, and onto the wet, teeming floor. She motioned for me to maneuver myself flat.

I laid face down on the magic plastic, and Noh began to work through each body part with brisk movements, pressing out the tension in each limb, forcing out the anxiety that routinely caused me to clench, ache and second-guess my youth. With little compassion, she beat away at my doubts and aggravations, and out of my pores flowed my anguish. She was exorcising that which made me adult. I was in the abyss of the womb, not yet born, not yet new, even. I was not yet. I was just before, an infinite possibility, full of potential. Me, the breath before a monologue, the silence before a symphony begins.

Manon Carrié

When I came-to, I was sucking on a wonton in the cafeteria, sitting cross-legged, soaked in honey. My friends had left, and I continued to sit without much contemplation. I was dessert, finally. My brain no longer thought. I was now just nectar, and humanity would never trouble me again. Until tomorrow, that is. Luckily, Korean spas are open 24/7.