



Margaritas or a massage?

I am not exactly sure how ripping three eyelashes out of my head is going to make my husband passionate, but at this point, there doesn't seem to be any turning back. After all, I have just let a fully head-scarved Moslem woman rub ruby oil into my breasts. It's a little late to be tentative.

To be fair, I thought I had merely signed up for a cheap massage. It's not like I had an option of going to the bar. I am in the state of Terengganu on Malaysia's east coast. Known as the fundamentalist state within this Islamic nation, they take the idea of abstaining to serious levels. Coca-Cola is truly as good as it gets. Besides, sixty Malaysian Ringitts amounts to just over thirty bucks Canadian. It seems like a decent alternative to margaritas.

The fact that masseuse Sari Ra Wati doesn't speak any English, has me lying on the once-navy hotel carpet covered only in a soon-to-be-removed sarong, and is digging into my ovaries through my belly wall is rapidly making up for the savings. When she gets to my legs, she pushes aside my muscles and bruises the tibias and fibulas directly. So, when she stops long enough to say, "Solly, Auntie", and begins kneading my breasts, I am merely grateful for the pain's end.

Kneeling behind my back, she thrusts me upright. Her thumbs push through my scalp, bracketing her mouth that is waterfalling a rush of Malay syllables into my head. She breathes and blows into my brain. I feel blessed and weak.

"Finish." Sari Ra Wati leans back on her heels. "Finish, Auntie."

But really, it's only begun.

Dressed now, I nod and smile and wonder why she's not leaving. I read the red oily bottle: Minyak Panas – a combination of citronella, nutmeg, eucalyptus, eugenia aromatica and paraffin oil. I can only hope no one lights a match.

There is a muffled knock. Thank goodness my translator, Sandra Ngoh-Fonseka has arrived. Ngoh-Fonseka begins, "You mentioned that you would be interested in the spiritual world of Malaysia. This woman has a gift that is passed from mother to daughter. She offers it to you."

Masseuse, Sari Ra Wati



The elixir is poured into an empty bottle. Ngoh-Fonseka translates, "Make your husband's coffee using this water. He will have eyes only for you. And now she will bless the rest of the water for a potion to splash on your face. You must do it every day. When either potion depletes, you can top it up with normal water. It will not lose its potency."

Instructions are simple. Go to the lobby and buy a small bottle of water. Pour some in a cup. Scrape left thumbnail and toenail into the water. Pluck three eyelashes and add them to the mix. I opt for scissors, hoping that self-inflicted pain is not required for this particular enchantment.

She takes the cup, sets it on the generic coffee table cum altar, faces east and begins her prayers. Incantations start slow, the la-la, sh-sh sounds of the language soft and melodious, only sounding clunky when she inserts my mispronounced name. The prayers change to pleadings, her body rocking and begging on my behalf in the hot room. The muezzin's plaintive call to prayer floats like a hot misty ghost from the South China Sea to my tenth floor balcony. Many minutes pass. The elixir is poured into an empty bottle. Ngoh-Fonseka translates, "Make your husband's coffee using this water. He will have eyes only for you. And now she will bless the rest of the water for a potion to splash on your face. You must do it every day. When either potion depletes, you can top it up with normal water. It will not lose its potency."

Ngoh-Fonseka smiles. "She wants to know if you want to know a persuasive potion you can make at home?"

In a culture where it is still permissible for a man to have four wives and where women's rights aren't exactly at the forefront of political discussion, it is perfectly logical that such secrets and potions exist. This kind of covert knowledge gives a woman power in her situation, not unlike our North American equivalent of wearing Victoria's Secret red-hot lingerie under our beige clothes.

"Bring it on," I say.

There is a rapid Malaysian discussion. There are smiles and gestures. Finally, I can't stand it any longer. "What? What do I do at home?" Ngoh-Fonseka brings her hand to her mouth, smiling, "Boil your panties and use the water to make your husband a hot drink."

I stroll down to the lobby. I am feeling pretty fine. Three hours have passed since Sari Ra Wati first appeared at my door.

"Wow. You're glowing. You look like you've had a night of great sex." My traveling companion is right.

I look and feel pretty warm and shiny. Mind you, it's 39 C in the shade, the humidity is about 1000% and I'm slippery with red-coloured paraffin oil, but I think it's more than that. I am powerful in my possession of the potions splashed on my face and stored for future use in my purse.

Look out. Here I come.

