

## The Sales Pitch

As I join the throngs of pedestrians on Ermou Street, in central Athens, I see young women in jeans and matching T-shirts calling to the passersby and distributing flyers. “Free gift!” I hear.

In my hometown of Toronto, I usually walk past such promotional blitzes without a second glance. But I am not in Toronto. I am a carefree vacationer in a foreign but very familiar city, strolling down a street I have come to know quite well. I wonder what the women are promoting, and what the free gift might be. My cousin is expecting me, but I have a few minutes to spare. I slow down, approach one of the women, and smile. Before I know it, I am following her into a nearby building and up to the offices of a beauty spa. As the crowded elevator creeps upward, I feel a twinge of apprehension.

We step into a large and busy waiting room. The woman walks up to the counter to register our arrival. Then she introduces me to a man, and pleasantries ensue. He asks me how old I am and is amazed by my answer. No! I can’t possibly be that old (28). I look much younger. I could pass for a teenager. Wow!

Of course, I am flattered. And strangely pleased to be holding my own in Greek. As I choose my gift, I do not dwell on the small and, frankly, disappointing selection. Instead, I think of the story I will have to tell my cousin.

The woman disappears out the door and back down to the street. But I am headed for a free consultation with a beauty expert. Now that I have my “free” gift, how can I refuse? The apprehension returns.

I am ushered down a long hallway and into a small office, where a woman with long blond hair and an impossibly smooth complexion asks me what beauty and skin care services I am most interested in. Truthfully? None. But I am not brave enough to say so out loud. Instead, I listen carefully as the woman rhymes off a list of choices, my brain racing to translate the unfamiliar terms into English. I choose facial skin care because it is the only one I am even remotely interested in. And because it is the only term I’m sure I know the meaning of.

A woman in a white lab coat arrives to examine my face under a magnifying glass. Suddenly, my apparently too-large pores are on a computer screen, and the blond

woman is talking about damage and showing me what my pores could and should look like. I nod periodically, with what I hope is a neutral expression. “Oh my God, you look so young” has become “you really need to take better care of your skin.” I should have known.

I hear myself politely refusing the woman’s entreaties to sign up for a series of treatments. To do so would be to admit that I am neither interested in the treatments, not able to accept, seeing as I am leaving the country in three days. The woman is persistent; my answers, strangely truthful: I’m sorry, I live out of town—very far out of town. No, I do not travel to Athens often. No, I cannot come to the city more often. Yes, I live very far away; I only come to Athens once or twice a year. I pause, as though I am actually considering the possibility of arranging my appointments to coincide with my trips to town. No, I’m sorry, I really can’t.

The woman has become a little surly. Surely I have time for a complimentary massage before I leave town! In order to maintain the charade, I have no choice but to accept. I book a time for the next week, give my cousin’s home address and cell phone number, and escape.

I take the elevator down to the second floor, where my cousin has been waiting for me in her office. I am half an hour late and no longer eager to relate my adventure. But I have to—the spa might call her when I don’t show up for my massage.

“Umm...Do you know those women in the street downstairs? From the spa?”

“Oh, they’re always out there, I ignore them.”

I continue, sheepishly, and she laughs. Then I pull out my free gift: a pendant of the evil eye.

“Hey, that’s actually quite nice,” she says.

I let her keep it.