

It's intimidating for an English girl to arrive on Planet Manhattan, where the girls are more polished and coiffed than their pet chihuahuas and where people decide what they think of you based on your manicure. It didn't take me very long to work out it was a case of beating them or joining them and, after seeing how certain members of the sect wielded hairspray with the same emotional anger as flyspray, I have decided on the latter. So it is to be a complete New York-style makeover, and I mean complete – from my hair to my toenails, no follicle will be left unturned. This is project Eliza Doolittle.

Step one: it's obvious the hair has to go. In my previous life I kept squeaks of mousiness at bay with subtle highlights at Hari's Salon in Chelsea. Subtle, however, is clearly not on the agenda in this town. Blondes here opt for attention-grabbing platinum and, after five phone calls, it becomes clear that there is only one supreme being for the job: Ashley Javier. I had heard he operates from a chic penthouse salon tending to people like Jacquetta Wheeler and Jemma Kidd.

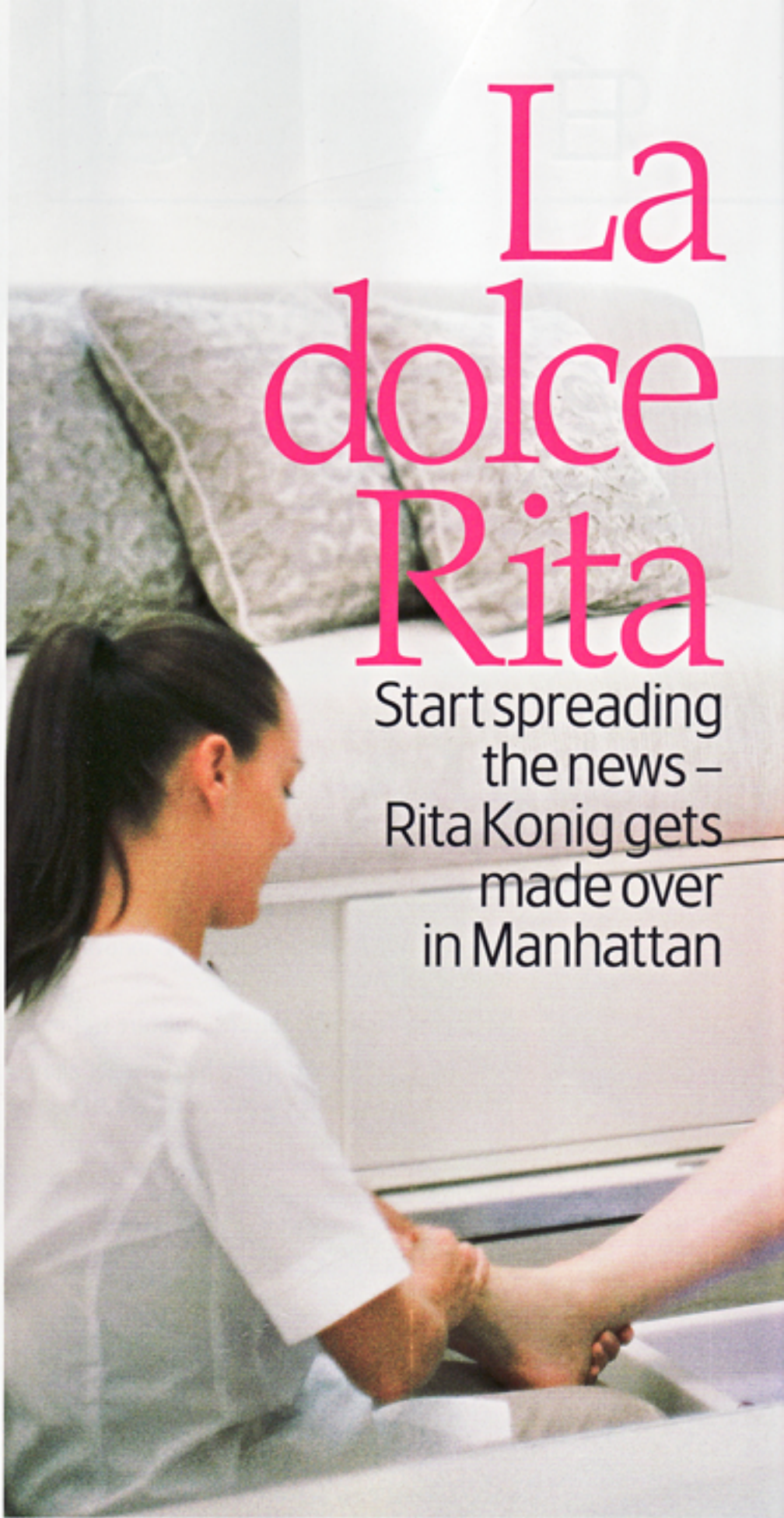
Sessions with Ashley usually start with a look he dreamt of the night before and one thing is for sure – they are always ahead of the curve. For me, he was thinking blonder. 'You want to get noticed – let's go Kirsten Dunst-blond and turn some heads,' he said. Seven hours later (they go long haul in New York rather than do our swift London two-hour sessions) and I have hair the colour of Gwen Stefani's. Later, at dinner, I wear black as the hair has taken on a life of its own. The response is staggering – I have never known so many heads turning.

The next day I fly to California, frantically channelling Marilyn Monroe. This kind of full-on blonde hair is hard to maintain, as it dries out faster than a patient at the Betty Ford Clinic, but the boys go wild for it and so does the camera. I'm learning fast that, rather like a sports car, a high-maintenance hairstyle needs regular oiling and, if I'm to maintain it, I need a follow-up with Philip B, a hair specialist in LA who treats and repairs scalps and hair.

Step two: at the Philip B hair spa I see Ross Poole, Philip's trusty sidekick, for a Four-Step Scalp Treatment, which is basically a facial for your head. Ross picks up a

La dolce Rita

Start spreading the news – Rita König gets made over in Manhattan



tatler beauty

Mason Pearson hairbrush and starts to brush my hair with such love that I feel like I am six again and back in the hands of my nanny. His top tip for dry locks is 100 strokes every other day with a good hairbrush to work the oils through the hair. He is nuts right now about the Widu brush, hand-made out of olive wood and boar bristles in Italy. He starts his Four-Step Treatment with a peppermint shampoo (so minty that one of Philip's neurosurgeon clients washes his hair with it every morning to keep his brain sharp).

An hour and a half later, after a slew of the latest oils and ointments and hot towels, I was blowdried back to earth with a head of healthy, soft hair. Incidentally, New York girls are obsessive about blowdries and are more loyal to their hairstylist than to their husband. Cheating on your hairdresser is considered a cardinal sin and many a girl has ended up falling between two hairdressing stools and getting bumped to

the back of the waiting list when she strays.

Step three: the S word. Cosmetic surgery is a hot topic at Manhattan cocktail parties and the conversation usually falls into two categories – who's had it and who needs it. Being English

and totally anti-cosmetic surgery, I'm out of my depth but gripped. Back in Blighty you'd be hard pressed to get anyone to admit they even know the Botox king Jean-Louis Sebagh, but here cosmetic surgeons are treated like gods and paraded around at parties as a status symbol. Men, women and children (well, teenagers) are all at it – everyone seems to have had 'work'. I'm in my mid-30s and feel worried, which is not good as it's making me frown. I need to catch up and fast, so I call Wendy Lewis, aka the Knife Coach. Wendy offers a service that matches you up to the right surgeon. As I haven't a clue what I need, she books me an appointment with Dr Samieh Rizk for an appraisal of how I'm ageing.

Dr Rizk's Upper East Side office feels friendly and unthreatening – more like a private members' club. Rizk is king of the 'stealth lift', a flawless facelift that keeps the authenticity of people's faces, and he also does pioneering neck-lifts (tiny incisions are made in the ears so there are no scars and his clients are at cocktail parties with their hair up within five days). He tells me I have great skin tone so I won't need to see the knife for another five years, which is a relief as this type of work doesn't come cheap. The starting price for a facelift is £10,000 (no wonder those

society girls are mercenary about marrying before they hit 35 – you need a rich husband to finance this kind of gig). Getting back to my face, Dr Rizk spots a few lines and wrinkles and he tells me in the kindest way I'm in dire need of Botox. I would never normally consider this, but so far nothing in this city seems normal. It's now or never, so I'm in his chair in his zingingly clean operating room quicker than you can say 'nip/tuck'.

On my way home 20 minutes later, with a frown-free forehead and teenage-smooth eyes, I can't help wondering if I have fallen foul of my vanity. My chemical-blond hair and Botox'd head are making me feel slightly toxic. What I apparently need now is a 'spa date' to unwind. Forget ladies-who-lunch – in New York high-maintenance women don't have time to eat. Instead, they prefer to sip green tea and network furiously at the city's top day spas.

The place to be and be seen is the Guerlain Spa at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel on Park Avenue. It's all sparkling white marble and twinkling Swarovski crystal-bead curtains. The hi-tech foot lounge has pedicure bowls that spin out of hidden cubby-holes in the floor and electronic banquettes that plunge your feet into the bubbling water. The 'couples' suites, which in Britain are usually filled with nervous newlyweds, are instead packed with braces of gossiping girlfriends discussing body mass index and Botox.

It was during one of these sessions that the serious issue of facial hair came up. In London I see one lovely lady for all my waxing. But here there are waxing specialists – like specialist doctors who deal with different body parts. The girls proclaim my eyebrows are not as sharp as they could be, so I get referred to Eliza Petrescu, queen of the arch. She can conjure an eyebrow out of nothing, giving a sense of length and shape, and her office is a celebrity beauty spot (as I arrive Tory Burch is leaving). Eliza will also hand you over to her colleague Lana next door, who specialises in nostril waxing if she thinks you need it. Rather than feeling insulted, I adore this directness because these women believe they are on a beauty mission and you are Cinderella. In my pre-NY life, I had either never imagined such treatments existed or been too embarrassed to ask for them.

I'm also introduced to top waxer and skin specialist Arsi Tavitian at the Rita Hazan Salon. Arsi waxes everyone from Rachel Weisz to Naomi Campbell and cares for her clients like Audrey Hepburn did for Unicef. She wears double-lens



I can't help wonder if I've fallen foul of my own vanity



stamp-collector glasses so no hair will escape her fingers. The wax she uses is soft and really does not hurt like a strip wax and, more importantly, it doesn't break the hair, so you have fewer ingrowns. In England, Brazilian waxing is still guaranteed to give your boyfriend a thrill, whereas here it is the conservative option as everyone has moved onto the Hollywood, which involves taking everything off. Ouch. Arsi also does the most amazing facials; I have not had one like it since Jo Malone did them herself. She uses the balls of her hands, which feels amazing, and a microdermabrasion machine to remove dead skin and cells. The best part is she even offers to squeeze spots for you between facials. I kid you not – she tells me to come in for a complimentary squeeze.

Now that I no longer need to pick my face, I decide to put my nails out to pasture and go to see Jin Soon, the queen of the New York nail. She works on shoots for



Clockwise from above, Rita in New York with her friend Julie Janklow. With Nicky Haslam. With Honor Fraser. At home in England



Steven Meisel and Irving Penn and privately for Gwyneth Paltrow and Julianne Moore. New Yorkers are obsessive about nails – a weekly manicure is de rigueur and fashionable nail colours change faster than share prices on the Dow Jones. I have become a hawk for a good shape and Jin Soon files my nails into the perfect soft square. Unlike the rows of Essie polishes you see in most nail shops, here the shelves are filled with the latest colours from Nars and Chanel.

With hardly time to let my nails dry I am duly introduced to dentist Dr Marc Lowenberg, who maintains the smiles of Amanda Peet, Mischa Barton and Christie Brinkley. I've never thought of my dentist as part of my beauty routine but, judging by the rows of flawless pearly-whites on the canapé circuit, the girls here clearly do. After a glance inside my rather English arrangement of teeth, Dr Lowenberg proclaims that I need veneers. I see Esther Rantzen before me. He makes little model veneers and sticks them on my teeth to show me how they would look. Instead of giving me a mouth bulging with white tombstones, he has added bits here and there so my two front teeth are the same length and the crooked one on the side is straight. English methods seem medieval: as he gets the

same results in 15 minutes as a lifetime of boarding-school braces.

So now I am left with the hard part: my not-quite-Park Avenue body. I decide to break myself in gently and ring Pelle Birkelund, the fabulous Swedish masseur who does at-home evening calls to limber up stiff limbs. Rather than being an extravagant luxury, having a private masseur on speed dial is an essential. Masseurs in Manhattan are like nannies in London – once you discover a good one, you don't want to give any details away. I had to get one of my friends slightly tipsy to prise Pelle's number off her. Back at my apartment, Pelle arrives – a tall, broad Viking type in a white pool-attendant-style uniform. Forget snoozeworthy rubdowns – his combination of Thai, Swedish and deep-tissue massages is energising but not painful and wakes up muscles I didn't know I had. When he leaves I put a new lock on my mobile to make sure no one steals the number.

But there is no escaping it – I have to get myself to a gym. As there is a distinct lack of private members' clubs here, and restaurants and nightclubs reinvent themselves as often as Madonna, gym membership is your most defining appendage and the city is divided like a gangland ghetto by gyms that define each district. On the family-friendly Upper West Side there's the swish Reebok gym with its amazing climbing wall; Upper East Side has the wackiest workout classes at Crunch, with anti-gravity yoga in a hammock; and my West Village neighbourhood has the super-cool new 'boutique' gym Aerospace, the most hardcore place I've ever been.

First, there are no treadmills – it is all red and black and metal and there is a boxing ring. Owner Michael Olajide is a former boxing champion, a tall, sculpted warrior of a man with an eye patch. On the day I sign up he's doing boxing training with a Victoria's Secret model who is wearing knee-high gold-leather boxing boots. Pure theatre. I go for a series of Aerojump classes to whip me into shape. The class lasts an hour, during most of which you are (supposed to be) in the air above your jump rope. While others are tossing pretzel shapes with their ropes, I'm struggling to stay airborne. One thing's for sure, it's a great deal tougher than the spinning class at KX Gym in London.

So now the last hurdle and it's probably the most challenging:

nutrition. Brooke Alpert of B Nutritious is used to dealing with neurotic size zeros and I'm a healthy English size 10. She weighs me but won't let me look at the scales, which is a huge relief. We chat about diet and mine is all over the place, as I eat irregularly and badly. Everyone here, no matter how tiny they are, is permanently on a diet. Hostesses have even resorted to having their chefs call guests pre-dinner to go through intolerances – everyone is on a food plan. Brooke gives me my own. I have to eat breakfast every day, all meals must contain protein and fibre and I must snack healthily every three hours, preferably on fruit-and-nut Larabars, the hot health craze in New York. Brooke is crazy about them and says they are great for travel and girls on the go. She gives them to all her brides for their honeymoons. What? You don't even get a break on your honeymoon? Do women in this city ever let up?

If I'm planning to eat out, I can email Brooke the menus from restaurants I am

going to and she will indicate what I can eat. I've been brought up to eat whatever is put on my plate but, whereas in England fussy eaters are usually put on the regrets list, here they are indulged. Brooke's plan works, though, as over the first month – despite a few sticky slips – I'm five pounds lighter.

So how do I feel about the new me? Well, my hair's brighter, my skin's cleaner and my clothes don't feel so tight. I also speak a new language: the words 'dermabrasion', 'endermology', 'ablation' and 'cosmeceutical' are all in my vocabulary and I can tell you what they mean without batting a newly tinted eyelash. My English friends are impressed – even a little bit jealous – and I've never felt better. When I started out on this regime, I thought I would never be able to keep up with the endless appointments and the preening, but the truth is it's all become strangely addictive and I wouldn't dream of leaving my eyebrow wax longer than three weeks. I think Henry Higgins would approve. □

Rita's New York contacts

Ashley Javier

at the Parlor (ashleyjavierparlor.com)

Philip B

at Ava MD Med Spa (avamd.com)

Dr Sam Rizk

(drsamarizk.com)

Wendy Lewis

Cosmetic surgery consultations in London and New York – visit wlbeauty.com

Guerlain Spa

at the Waldorf-Astoria (guerlainspa.com)

Eliza Petrescu

at the Exhale Spa (elizaseyes.com)

Arsi Tavitian

at Rita Hazan Salon (ritahazansalon.com)

Jin Soon

at the Hand and Foot Spa (jinsoon.com)

Dr Lowenberg

(lowenbergandlituchy.com)

Pelle Birkelund

(pellenyc.com)

Aerospace gym

(aerospacenyc.com)

Brooke Alpert

at B Nutritious (b-nutritious.com)