

Kathrin Breitt

Stella Does Feet

Stella does feet. This is how she makes her living: prepares warm, soapy water of the right temperature; gently washes and scrubs skin until pink; pares down unsightly callouses; pats feet dry with thick, white towels; snips and files cuticles and nails; and applies polish to ten various toes. Some client's feet are a twisted torture of skewered nails, thick callouses, and swollen ankles. These women—and they are always women—tend towards oversized dresses and nail polishes with a pink hue. Good feet, solid, workable ones, often come to Stella. Usually they walk in with nurses, waitresses, and salesclerks. The best feet of all are perfection in themselves, and Stella rarely sees these.

She finds them easy to envision. Long straight toes, the second one just a bit longer than the biggest; high arches, without the distraction of ropey veins; and slim, never skinny, ankles, all leading to strong shapely calves. These feet are inevitably well-shoed in Italian leather and are what Stella aspires to.

Preferences, the salon where Stella does feet, isn't often graced with such perfection. Usually she works on odoriferous and skewered toes with dense callouses. Routinely, Stella cares for the feet of mid-aged matrons in polyester slacks who tip poorly. Or night-club girls who squeeze their feet into tightly fitting, high-

heeled shoes and fail to understand why their toes are bent at odd angles. They too tip poorly.

Tips are important to Stella. At home she has a four-year-old with a club foot who must be fitted with orthopedic shoes. This child will never wear Italian leather shoes nor desire her toes to be painted Dashing Red or Catch-Me-If-You-Can Pink. When a perfectly matched pair comes in, their pristine elegance thrills Stella. They make her aspire to great things: running, jumping, dancing, skipping. For a moment she can forget about the bulky shoes and twisted toes that dominate her life.

One Tuesday, a client came in without an appointment and asked to have Stella do her feet.

“Please, I need my toes done,” she said to the receptionist. “I have a date and need them done. Now. Please.” Stella hadn’t ever seen this woman before. She could only imagine the Tuesday date which required perfect toes. She was between feet at the moment, as it were, and was happy to tend to these.

She ran the water until hot but not scalding and added just enough soap; the client removed first her shoes and then her stockings. Stella noted that she wore stockings, not pantyhose and that her shoes were rich red T-straps with shockingly high heels. Stella startled when she saw her client’s feet. They were by far the most beautiful Stella had ever seen. Sure there were such perfect feet in a few of the trade magazines, but they were only pictures. Overcome with anticipation, she was careful not to add too many suds to the water. Too many suds would make a foot oily and too slick to grasp.

The client carefully tested the water with a large, perfect toe and then plunged both feet straight in. “Ahhhh, just perfect.”

Stella went to work rubbing smooth the few rough spots and cleaning the nails with a brush. Before drying, she let the client sit a bit longer in the water to soften the cuticles for easy trimming. Stella tried to think of something to say but was at a loss for words.

She used two towels, one for each foot. Tenderly patting each foot, she was struck by their muted color and lack of prominent veins. The client herself remained obscured by the beauty of her feet. She submitted to Stella’s ministry. Stella envied a woman with so much to offer.

The feel of the foot in her hand reminded Stella of other successes in her life; her client list, her vast collection of polishes, her acceptance at the salon. As she manipulated the foot, small, quiet bones popped and snapped into place. The client made little sounds but didn't speak. When tugging on each toe she released the tension of those high heels. She lingered when she came to rubbing lotion along the arch and around the ankle. The ankle was slender, but not skinny. She squirted more lotion into her palm and warmed it before continuing. Slowly she worked past the ankle to the calf.

Nearing completion, she asked the client her preference of color.

She stated simply, "Red."

Stella was pleased. The skin tone of this foot was well suited to Just Red. A color she had been saving for the perfect foot.

While coloring the toes, Stella wished to confide in this woman about her club-foot child and her own desire to paint only the best toes. The woman, however, did not invite conversation.

Upon leaving, the client noticed the photograph of Stella's child on her cabinet. In this photograph, her foot was well-concealed. She dropped five dollars on the tray and paid cash at the door. Stella didn't learn her name nor was she able to wish her fun that evening on her date.

During the weeks that followed, Stella often thought about the client. One Friday, after having had Thursday free to take her child to the clinic, she learned that the same client had returned and asked for Stella to do her feet. Learning that Stella was out for the day and declining to make an appointment for the next day, she again left five dollars on Stella's tray even though she had done nothing to earn it.

The girls at *Preferences* were dumb-founded, as was Stella.

"What 'ya think she did that for?" asked the hair dresser who preferred working with blonde curly hair.

"Must have been good for her," said another, the one who preferred straight dark hair.

Stella looked carefully at the five dollar bill, turning it over to look at the back as if she would find a clue about this mysterious client.

“Think she’ll be back?” asked Stella.

“Really, she didn’t say,” said the receptionist who made the appointments and sold the special, high-priced shampoos and conditioners.

“Her face is a dream,” said the make-up specialist, “That skin tone.”

At that point, the owner came in from the back room, a heavy-set man with a neatly trimmed grey beard, “Girls,” he said, “Everything okay in here.”

His preference was a quiet and elegant salon. He thought gossip amongst the workers made the clients uneasy; like the girls would talk about them just as soon as they paid their bills and walked out.

For the longest time it was silent except for Stella’s thoughts. Who was this woman? From where had she come? Would she be back? Had someone sent her? Had her child’s doctor, knowing Stella was dependent on her tips, suggested to his wife to frequent the salon whenever she was shopping downtown? Had this woman seen Stella and her child, clumsy in heavy shoes and with an awkward gait, somewhere? Shopping for groceries in the market, in the park but unable to play with the other children?

It was another week until the client returned, again without an appointment and asking for Stella to do her feet. Stella was not free right then. But she could see and over-hear the conversation from her booth near the back of the salon. In another twenty minutes she would be finished painting the thick, yellow toe-nails Touch-Me Pink, a color that contradicted the demeanor of her heavy-set client. Fervently, she hoped the receptionist would persuade the woman to wait.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have time,” she said to the receptionist. “Please, take care of this, will you.” She placed another five-dollar bill on the counter.

And quietly she slipped out the door. Almost, it seemed, without opening it.

The receptionist sauntered back to Stella with the five. “Look,” she said, “Another.”

“Give it to me,” Stella said, with as much anger as she ever felt. “Why didn’t you ask her if she wanted an appointment?”

“Sorry, dear, slipped right out of my mind when she left that five.”

In ten more minutes, much less than it should have taken, Stella completed the crumpled toes she was working on. The polish was sloppily applied and clumps of polish grazed the cuticles and even the skin above the nails at the tips of the toes. This woman, however, found it difficult to see over her belly and wasn’t aware of the inferior job. After paying the receptionist, she came back and left a dollar on Stella’s tray.

“Thanks, dear.” She said, “See you in a couple of weeks.”

She did not reply, it was not this heavy-set woman she wished to see again. Stella jumped up and bolted to the door. On the sidewalk, she looked up and down the block, hoping to see the woman gazing in a store window or coming out of some shop. The streets were full, but empty of the sight Stella wanted.

“Damn,” she said and looked up and down the street again. “Damn.”

Inside the door, the owner stood with his arms akimbo and a stern bent to his mouth. Stella’s actions were not the image he wished his salon to portray.

“Stella.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I forgot.”

She returned to her booth and picked up the latest Ten to Go, the trade magazine of choice amongst pedicurists. She leafed through the pages hoping to console herself with pictures of perfect feet. They left her lacking; she longed for real feet: their texture, their color, their straight, even toes.

Another week passed. Stella’s work had become messy and her manner condescending to her regular clients who returned with their fallen arches, pungent odor, thick callouses and bent toes. The owner watched her carefully, pedicurists were a dime a dozen. Replacing Stella would not be hard.

At home, Stella was quick-tempered when she used to always be even-tempered with her child. She demanded they go on long,

strenuous walks, through parks, around shopping malls, downtown, up-town, wherever Stella thought she might see the client. These walks were hard on her child, the limp became more evident and often near the end of these walks, the child would cry and beg to be carried. Once home, Stella no longer massaged and tended to her child's feet as she formerly had done.

Finally, one Thursday morning, the client returned. Stella was free; she nearly tipped over her stool when the door opened and the woman stepped through.

From a back room, the manager watched Stella and shook his head sadly and silently.

"I've only a few minutes," the client said. "Are you able to do them quickly?"

Stella consented.

The other girls watched Stella do the client's feet. The blonde, curly-hair preferring hairdresser, whispered to the others, "She's back," she said, "Do you see? She's back."

"Shh," said the dark-straight hair preferring one, "Don't you see, he's watching."

Stella fluttered about nervously. From the sink while filling her basin with water, she asked a little too loudly, "Do I know you from somewhere? Have I seen you before, besides here I mean."

"No, I doubt it." She said this quietly, while removing her shoes and stockings.

Quickly Stella turned from the sink with the basin of water. It splashed messily over the rim. From the back, the owner's grey beard wagged.

Without testing the water, the client plunged her feet in and then immediately pulled them out.

"Oh!" She said, "That's much too hot."

"Sorry," Stella said, "I'm sorry, really."

While they waited a moment for the water to cool, Stella gathered three white, fluffy towels from the cupboard. She spread one across her lap and then set to doing the feet. She scrubbed the rough spots, but perhaps a bit too hard. When she brushed the nails, the brush slipped out of her hand and skittered across the tiled floor.

With vigor, she dried the feet, causing them to turn a bright red. With the nail-clippers, she nicked the cuticle and a spot of blood appeared. Quickly, she patted the spot with a white towel. The red blood was in stark contrast with the towel and it was evident what she had done.

When it came to massaging the feet and ankles—Stella hoped she would have time to do the calves too—she used a little too much lotion and the feet were too slick to grasp. Her hands kept slipping and one time she nearly dropped a foot.

When she started sliding up the calf, the client said, “Oh, no, please. I don’t have enough time for that. Just polish now, please.”

Stella picked up the Just Red bottle.

“No, that’s much, much too red. Let’s just use a pink this time.”

Stella had no color called Just Pink, so she chose a shade called Nearly Pink. She could barely tell the difference between the woman’s skin and the color of the polish. Several times she had to neaten up smears with a Q-tip.

Stella’s forehead glistened with the strain of aiming for perfection and failing as she knew she was. She felt the same way when the doctor had told her that her child had a club foot. The client sat still for a few moments. Stella picked up a sleek black pump. The low-cut toe of the shoe would show just a smidgen of toe-cleavage and be very alluring.

“Please, I’ll put that back on now.”

“No!” she said more abruptly than she intended. “I mean, I think you should wait another moment, for the polish to dry.”

“Really, I am in a great hurry.”

Reluctantly, Stella relinquished the shoe to its owner, but not before sniffing the barely perceptible odor. Even that intrigued Stella.

From the back, the owner’s gray-beard grazed back and forth across his chest with vigor. Really, something needed to be done about this.

At the front counter the client paid the receptionist and Stella sat slumped in her stool, feeling very foolish. After a moment, she felt a touch on her shoulder. The client was holding out a ten-dollar bill.

“Thank you,” she said and paused. “I’m sorry, I won’t be able to return.”

Stella started, unable to voice her thoughts in words, but gestured frantically with her arms.

Again, the client slipped through the door, as if without opening it.

In the back room, the owner looked through a stack of applications and resumes he regularly received.

Soon after, a scheduled client came in. Stella methodically and carefully did her feet. She neither noticed nor cared about their imperfections; she administered to them as carefully as any feet she had ever done before.