



TOUCH AND GO

She has been spun in the air by a man in tiny Speedos, trapped between hanging breasts and buried in petals – just some of the reasons why Bella Pollen loves a good massage

I love a good rubdown and will happily take one, anytime, any place, anywhere. Petals and linen are ubiquitous these days, but I have a softer spot for the more dingy walk-ins of Paddington or Soho, where cubicles are divided by plastic curtains and the weary inhalations of London's tired and melancholy are gratefully expelled into the communal air. I'm both a hypochondriac and comically double-jointed, often with a knuckle or vertebra out of whack, and though my local masseur is a dour Chinese man invariably suffering from a nasal drip, there is comfort between his dry, bony hands.

Some of the best treatments are to be found in unexpected places. A hot-oil hair massage in Karachi made its creator, Rosie, an institution long before salons were cool in Pakistan. In Jamaica, a therapist arrived with an in-house service that included an unexpected happy ending, but in life the good is offset by the bad and occasionally the faintly ridiculous. My first facial, for instance. I stepped back out onto the street in New York, feeling good about the world, when a Puerto Rican wheeling a barrow of lamb chops (these were the early days of the meat market) caught sight of my creamy, glowing skin and shouted, 'Yo baby, your pussy as shiny as your face?'

Once, in a grand Marrakesh establishment, the Falstaffian owner greeted me in turban and military frogging before guiding me to the hammam, with the promise that my *mukayyis* – scrubber – would be along shortly. Ten minutes later, he himself reappeared, this time in an elaborate dressing gown that he whipped off to reveal a tiny pair of red Speedos. I can't describe the full *Cirque du Soleil* routine that followed, but know that its soapy, splashy finale involved being hoisted onto his raised legs and spun around in the air at great speed.

The word massage comes from the Arabic word *mass'h*, meaning to press gently. Not what you get in a more traditional hammam, nevertheless being scoured inside out in some architecturally splendid

building remains one of life's joys. Keen that my daughter should experience it, the first thing I did on a family holiday in Syria was sign up for ladies' day at one of Aleppo's many hammams. Mabel was 13 at the time, and shy. 'Trust me,' I told her, painting a picture of an ancient marbled hall crowded with women of all ages, gossiping and drinking sweet tea, 'a communal bathhouse is the heart and soul of any city.'

The bathhouse was near Aleppo's citadel. On entry, we were given a bar of soap, led under a low archway and then on through a series of empty domed rooms from whose echoey recesses there emanated the hiss of steam and odd tubercular shriek. Our attendant called out in Arabic. A great howl of a woman rose, sheathed in sopping, black jersey, her face obscured by dark, wet ringlets. She picked up the bucket next to her and beckoned.

'Mummy, you first,' Mabel whispered and I duly took the full force of scalding water to the face. The next hour was a blur of spine twists, muscle squeezing and stinging slaps. The *mukayyis*'s strength was incalculable, the agony indescribable. At one point I remember my face being pinned between her pendulous breasts. Later, as she vigorously worked at the soles of my feet, I opened my mouth to scream and swallowed a toenail floating by on the crest of a soapy wave.

When it came to her turn, Mabel valiantly staged an escape, crawling away through the grimy shallows. Though our skin felt clean for days after, the sight of that gorgon lunging after my daughter and dragging her back to the corner by the ankle stays with me still. In the tragedy of today, it's hard to think of such comedy in that once-beautiful city.

As with sex and medicine, we put ourselves, naked and vulnerable, into the hands of others at our own risk. So be it. Touch is the most fundamental form of human connection. A salve not just for the aching but also for the anxious, the heartbroken and the lonely. For that I'll take any number of dubious strike-outs.

Meet Me in the In-Between by Bella Pollen is published by Mantle at £18.99.