

YAHOO!
BEAUTY

Good Reflexes

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photo: Getty Images

To be fair I have been warned. Days before I am due to arrive at the oasis that is the Angel Feet spa in New York City, I am given specific instructions: I will need to be very, very quiet to enter the small subterranean space. I should wear loose clothing to maximize comfort and avoid caffeinated beverages in advance. I should remember to breathe. And yet the silence I encounter on a Friday afternoon is still somewhat disarming. Like the thick blankets that pad the floor and chairs and stools inside, it envelops.

The foyer is cozy and sober at once. It makes for an effective aesthetic. No sooner do I orient myself within the hushed chamber than the metropolis outside recedes. This is either a trap and an opium den or the most magical plot of square footage on the island. I keep my fingers crossed for the latter, take off my coat, and hang it on a brass hook. Despite the fact that I'm prone to chatter when I'm nervous, I resist the urge to disrupt the stillness. It is too perfect and sacred and strange to disturb.

Angel Feet opened in the West Village almost two decades ago as the first destination for reflexology in Manhattan. While the landscape has become more crowded in the years since, the salon has managed to maintain a loyal and voluble clientele.

While chatter may be discouraged at the address itself, the clamor beyond it is thunderous. When I ask around for a recommendation, at least five women report that Angel Feet is the best in the business. Even my most austere friend is unequivocal: "You will float home." Given that my neck and shoulders have not unclenched since September, I need no further encouragement. I make the first appointment I can sneak into my schedule and prepare for meditative bliss.

Manager Chantel Lucier promises me exactly that. After I sink into the overstuffed armchair to which I've been directed, she dunks my feet in warm water, swaths them in blankets, and applies pressure in deliberate, even strokes. I brace myself for the brand of agony that my older brother used to call "tickle torture." It never comes. It turns out it is easy to maintain composure when you are unconscious. After twenty minutes, I am happy and comatose. I awake to a short hand massage, a spritz of some kind of cooling elixir on my toes, and the awareness that I have never been more at ease than I am at this moment in this low-lit room. My body feels elastic. My spine and temples tingle. I sit up, electric.

And I might once have declared the experience the best massage I had ever received had Lucier not corrected me. "People often confuse reflexology with massage. It's a big misconception as massage works in a very different way, in technique, application and in what we're targeting," she explains later. "While both practices work with the entire body, massage literally rubs and kneads the fascia, muscles, ligaments and joints to give relief to areas of tension while reflexology is dealing with the reflex points that are located in the hands and feet that correspond to the entire body."

I admit it all sounds like voodoo magic to me. I am a skeptic by nature and believe (really) that conventional massages can be transcendent. But even I can appreciate the difference between the experiences. Reflexology does not feel like indulgence. It feels like medicine. Lucier confirms that the non-invasive practice "works with the entire body through the reflexes located in the hands and feet. By using specific thumb and finger point-pressure techniques, the reflexologist is able to send the message to the corresponding organs, glands and systems of the body to relax."

Even the cynic in me knows this: Mine received it. Loud and clear. My next appointment is on Thursday.

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