

Steps to Footcare

By Josephine Ensign

*Gloves are not necessary unless skin integrity is impaired.

No one touches me like that—gently, as if they cared. You know all that crap about good touch and bad touch, like they teach little kids in school nowadays? They don't teach 'em how sometimes you really can't tell the damn difference—pardon my French. Only touch I get these days is from greasy, greedy, fat-fisted fingers groping my body, like I'm a tissue or something they blow their noses on and toss away. Oh shoot! I can tell you don't want to know this stuff about me. I can tell you're all shocked and like you don't know what to say. Don't worry, you don't have to say nothin'.

Please don't change your mind and feel like you gotta' put gloves on after all. I like you touching me with no gloves on and not looking all scared about it. Thank you for being down here at the women's shelter this morning, doing this footcare stuff. Ya'll bein' down here volunteering to do this is a blessin'. I can tell you'll make a great doctor or nurse or whatever it is you're studyin' to be. Thank you for not wearing gloves, for being willing to touch me like I'm a real person.

1. Soak bare feet in soothing bath treatment with warm water.

Put my feet in this here dishpan on the floor? OK, but that's the same kind a dishpan I used to wash my dishes in back when I had my own apartment. Let's see, how long ago was that? God, I don't even remember now. That apartment sucked! The sink was so nasty and overrun with cockroaches I had to use a dishpan like this one here I could keep halfway clean. Now I miss that apartment. At least it wasn't this crazy-ass shelter full of drama queens and all their fights. You wouldn't believe some of the things that happen down here! The staff—they try to keep the real nut cases outta' here, but there's some nasty cat fights with some of these women hittin' an screamin' an scratchin'. They call each other slut or loser—you know bad names like that—then it'll just start an all-out war. I stay out of it as much I can—keep to myself and don't take no sides in all them fights, 'cause if I do, then I'm likely to get myself hit upside the head when I'm not lookin'. Ain't worth it, I tell ya' that much. I can't wait to get outta' here!

It feels sort of odd seeing my feet in that there dishpan. They look kinda' sad sittin' there in that water, don't they? I guess I don't pay 'nough attention to my feet—they look all gnarly and wore out. I remember my momma had this cheap ole' foot massager thing. She'd sit in a big ole' easy chair in the livin' room in the trailer we lived in. She'd kick off her clunky work shoes, light up a cigarette, and put her feet in that machine and just lay back and sigh real hard. She worked herself to death, that's what I think. I get sad when I think of

momma. She did a lot of waitresin' at the truck stop diner near where we lived. She's mostly the one fed us kids, cause daddie? He worked in this pine mill but he didn't always have no steady work and he really didn't have no steady work when he started drinkin' hard. You can't be drinkin' and operatin' them big 'ole saws. He got to be missin' some of his fingers that way but it didn't stop his drinkin'. He had 'nough fingers to keep a hold that glass of whiskey!

I guess you guys sterilize these pans or something between people, right? Some of these women here don't keep themselves clean and I wouldn't want to catch their cooties. Oooo-eee! No way I want no cooties! Just like in grade school, we used to say Johnnie or whatnot, he's got the cooties and run away? We thought it was real funny but then the cooties got real and it weren't so funny no more.

2. Use soap to wash feet, then remove soap with water.

That soap you're usin' there, that oatmeal stuff? I remember my momma using it on me when I had the chickenpox real bad and was scratchin' myself to death. Them white pockmark scars there on my leg is where they got all infected from me scratchin' 'em raw. I thought them chickenpox sores was the cooties for sure 'cause they said I caught 'em from some kid at school. I was a little bitty thing an didn't like takin' no baths. But momma? She said that stuff the doctor told her was like medicine and it was real expensive so it had better work and I'd sure as hell better get my butt in that bathtub! It did make me feel better while I was in that tub, but once I was out I started scratchin' all over again. I was too little to know that soap wasn't magic like my momma said. It smells real good though, don't it now?

3. Dry feet, especially in between toes.

That blue hospital towel thing you're using to dry my feet—they're the same kinds a ones they use at the clinic where I go get checked out. Lie down on that doctor's table, put my feet up in those nasty metal clamps. They put those same blue towels under my butt. I hate those exams. They ask me all these real personal questions and it don't seem none of their business. They teach you all in school to ask them types a questions? Them clinic doctors and nurses look at me all different like when I tell 'em I don't really have no husband or boyfriend or nothin'. Then they ask me—or they wants to ask me: then how come you got this STD thing or this pregnancy we be checking you for? You sure as hell don't get it from no toilet seat! As if I'm a retard. It's bad out here in Seattle 'cause a my accent. They think I gotta' be stupid 'cause I talk all country-like. They never knew a smart person from the country? I may have a country accent and I may not have finished school, but I ain't dumb. You can't be dumb and survive them streets out there. No book-learnin' helps you on those streets, I tell you that much.

Oh yeah. I was tellin' ya 'bout that pelvic exam thing. Somethin' weird always happens to me during those exams and I've always wondered if it happens to other women or if I got somethin' wrong inside my head. When my feet's up in the air like that and the doctor's got that dang plastic thing up inside me poking around like a jackhammer? I just go some other place, like I leave my body there on the table for them to do whatever they need to, but I myself—I skedaddle right on outta' there. You remember that machine they got on that Star Trek TV show? That one beams you up somewhere, like to a different planet or something? Beam me up Scotty! I remember that. It's just like what happens to me on that there exam table. I beam myself up to some nice Hawaiian beach like them pictures I seen, but sometimes I just go blank like I don't know where I end up but maybe inside some dark closet somewheres. Like that beam-me-up machine gets broke and I'm lost in space

or in that closet or something. Just when I figure I'm lost forever, then I feel the doctor like pattin' me real hard on my knee and tellin' me he's done now so I can sit up careful like so I don't fall off the table. Well, anyway, that's what them blue hospital towels remind me of. You ever heard anything like that? Like I said, I was always scared to tell anyone that story in case it means I'm a nut case.

You really want to do this kind a stuff the rest a your life? Yeab, maybe it pays real well but you can't pay me enough to work at no hospital or clinic or whatnot. Creepy places I think. I can tell though that you'll be nicer to people than a lot of the doctors and nurses I've had up in my face judgin' me, tellin' me what to do with my life, askin' me how come I got this STD. Aint' none of their business tellin' me what to do or how to live my life! They's supposed to just fix me up, like fix what's broken. They wouldn't like it if someone did that to them, so why's it OK for them to do it to me? That's what I wanna know. They teach you all this in school? I hope they teaches you all some manners with patients, like how to treat patients as if they's your own momma or sisters or whatnot—treat 'em with respect. They should remember they's definitely likely to get old and die some day and then how they wants to be treated themselves? With some respect, that's right. People like me might be dirt poor and might a not had much schoolin' and had some bad stuff happen to 'em or maybe even done some bad stuff them own selves, but that don't give no one—'specially not no doctor or nurse—the right to look down on a person and not treat 'em with respect. We's all human with the same heart. Like the Bible says somenheres or 'nother: God made us all. No matter what your religion, or even if you ain't got no religion, I don't care: we's all the same.

4. Inspect feet for cuts, blisters, redness, swelling, calluses, etc.

That there scar? That one's from a dog bite I got back when I was a kid and we was livin' in that trailer park. We was livin' down South, way down right along the Georgia line kinda' near Valdosta—ever heard of it? Don't matter. Little bitty town. One part of our trailer was in Georgia; other part was in Florida. Strangest thing to think there's some line you can't see right down the middle of where you livin'. I used to lie in my bunk bed at night and think of it split in two with me along with it like Houdini or something. Momma told me stop thinkin' such silly thoughts and go on to sleep.

Anyways, that scar. A neighbor had a big 'ole mean-ass dog that got loose off a his chain and took a chomp outta' my foot as I was runnin' past. My daddy, he seen it and come runnin' and kicked that dog real hard fore it could eat me up. Daddy was always wearing them hard cowboy boots with them pointy toes? Dog went a flyin' and a yelpin'! Daddy, he said he wanted to shoot that damn dog he was so mad. But he was too drunk to know where he left his gun. Would a been funny if I weren't bleeding all over the place. I knew where his gun was but I didn't want him shootin' that dog—least not right then. My foot hurt too much. Momma, she borrowed a neighbor's car and took me to the hospital. Those doctors and nurses they held me down and gave me a ton a stitches and I was screamin' the whole time. I don't think they gave me any numbin' stuff but maybe they did and it just didn't took right or somethin'. I remember they was talkin' about having to give me a bunch a shots in my tummy in case that dog had rabies. Not sure what happened but I didn't have to get no stomach shots and I didn't start foamin' at the mouth or nothin'. I'm scared to death a dogs now. I cross the street if I sees one comin'.

5. Assess pedal pulses (dorsalis pedis and posterior tibialis).

Oh Lord! That feels sort a weird there what ya' doin'! 'Cause I can feel my heart beatin' there on the inside a my foot when ya' presses your fingers on it. Makes me nervous, like you's reachin' in an touchin' my heart in some sort'a way.

I remember seein' them nurses do that to my momma's neck when she was dyin'. Cancer got her real young. Like I said, she worked herself to death, that's what she did. And daddy? He let her do it. I ain't never forgive him for that. Now it's too late and he's dead, too. Not sure I'd ever forgive him though no matter how long he lived. I know the Bible says we needs to forgive people but I don't see no way no how to do it sometimes.

I was thirteen when my momma died and that's when my life really went to hell in a handbasket, 'cause my daddy started drinking even worse after momma died. I guess he really loved her. I had to leave school and earn money any ole' way I could. Daddy didn't seem to care. That's when I got in this here mess. I started workin' the truck stop, but not like momma did 'cause I wasn't old enough to work at no diner. I think if my momma had a lived I wouldn't have gone down this here road—ended up in the life and in this shelter. I thank the Lord I don't have no kids to drag into this shelter with me. I love kids and all and there's some sweet ones here, but this ain't no place to try and raise 'em, I don't think. And a lot of women here's had their kids taken away by that CPS and those kids end up all abused in foster care like you hear about. That's sad: kids growin' up without their real mommas. I know what that's like. Ain't no kid should a have that happen to 'em.

The trailer park I grew up in wasn't a whole lot better than this shelter from the looks of it, but at least we had our own privacy and some of our neighbors was like family. Not that guy with the mean-ass dog I told you about. He was a nut case and people stayed away from him. Most a the others were real good folk. Dirt poor but all a us was dirt poor together so we kind a took care of each other and no one looked down on ya'. Different than in the big city like here in Seattle where people mostly keeps to themselves, minds their own business, and don't really help their neighbors like they do in the country. In the South where I'm from people's friendlier. They looks you in the eye and says hello every time. People here don't do that I notice. In this here shelter people come an go so fast you really don't get no time to get to know 'em. And you gotta' keep a watch out all the time 'cause people steals your stuff here. Some a the staff people are real nice and they do try to make it like a home, but no way—it's no home. Better than on the streets though I can tell you that much. For sure. Streets ain't no place for no one but specially not for no woman. Been there and ain't goin' back if I can help it. Got beat up and worse so many times out there on the street, for sure God watchin' over me or I'd long ago be dead—or crazy. I'm on a wait list now to get me an apartment of my own, some sort of transitional place I think they calls it. I seen 'em and they're a whole lot better than this here shelter.

Tryin' to get myself a real job, not what I been doing all these years. Havin' a record with the law don't make it so easy. But I got me a real nice caseworker now—Heidi—you know her? She's sure been a blessin' in my life. She keeps being all positive and makes me feel better about myself and like I can do this, I can have a different life. She even helped me get new clothes for job interviews. New shoes even, 'cause all my shoes were all high-heeled slutty like. Feels weird to walk around now in these flat shoes. They make real cute ones now though—not ole' lady ones. Nothin' against ole' ladies mind 'ya, but I'm not there yet. I want to be an ole' lady with style! An ole' lady who still takes care of herself, you know what I mean? My Nanna now, my momma's momma, she had style! Kind a crazy but not loony-toons crazy. She'd wear these big 'ole hats with fake flowers all over 'em and wear these long white cotton gloves and bright flowered dresses like she was goin' to a church

meetin' all the time. She liked wearing orange, too—said orange was a happy color and she couldn't be sad wearin' that orange.

6. Assess pedal sensation using monofilament.

Damn! Is that a needle? I don't like no needles anywhere near me! I had a boyfriend once, he was a junkie and he tried to get me booked on that crap, but I told him no way, I wasn't messin' with no dope or no needles. He dumped me over that. Got hisself another girlfriend who was a junkie. He ended up getting' hisself AIDS and all—real cooties. He shriveled up and died real fast. Don't know what happened to his girlfriend. She probably got that AIDS disease and died, too. God's been a watchin' out for me that a way, 'cause doctors say I ain't got the AIDS virus an I sure wanna' keep it that way.

Oh, OK, I see it ain't no needle but some plastic bendy thing. Yeab, you can do your tests with it. Close my eyes? What for? I don't like closin' my eyes; I like keepin' a watch on things. Only way to stay safe in this world. Gets in the way a sleepin' sometimes though. I don't want to close my eyes and not know what's happenin' round me. If I don't have my own room I can lock the bedroom door on, I don't sleep real good. Kind a stay up with my eyes open, pinchin' myself to stay awake until after awhile I just sort a pass out I guess. Almost like when I was little and stayed awake worrying I'd be split in two sleepin' right there on that state line. But I got worse things on my mind nowadays. That's why I really wants that apartment soon so I can get me some sleep. Sleep's gotta' be one of the most important things for your health, don't ya' think? Not just beauty sleep but sanity sleep, that's what I call it: sanity sleep. I always feel better about myself and the world when I get me some good sleep. I stay away from sleepin' pills though. Them things is dangerous. I know people almost killed themselves with them pills.

Yeab, I feel that. You pokin' me on the bottom of my foot with that needle-lookin' thing. Tickle. I'm real ticklish. Some guys they use that against me, like a distraction or diversion or whatnot. Kind a paralyzes me so they can do something with me I don't wanna do. Oh, never mind all that stuff. You look like you're a nice clean young lady who don't let no guys do bad things to you. You stay that way now, ya' hear?

7. Cut nails straight across with clippers.

Nah, I'll do that myself. Ain't no one cut my nails the way I like 'em cut. Wish I had me some nail polish, I'd polish 'em now. They look all nasty with the polish chipped off. Some guys, they have themselves some foot fetish for sure! Won't have nothin' do with a woman unless she has nice feet with nail polish and nice shoes and all. Crazy, right? Like who really cares what someone's feet looks like! But I do like keepin' myself clean and lookin' as pretty as I can all over. Makes me feel better 'bout myself. So even if no one looks at my feet 'cept me, I like to keep 'em nice. 'Specially now with nice weather comin' long and I can wear sandals again, I gotta' get me some nail polish. I gotta' girlfriend here I can borrow some from. They gots some real strange nail colors now like green and black and stuff? I leave that to the youngsters; ain't for me. I only use red or pink on my nails. More classic like.

8. Smooth off sharp edges with emery board.

I'll do that myself, too, after I cut 'em. Can't stand it when there's a rough spot gets stuck on my stockings and ruins 'em. Those things get expensive but I don't feel real dressed unless I got me some stockings on. Even when it's hot, I gotta' have them stockings on. Is how my momma raised me, even though she wouldn't let me wear no stockings until I was sixteen and she died afore that anyway. My Nanna—my momma's momma like I said,

the one wore orange? She wore stockings all the time. She died 'fore momma did or I'd a gone and lived with her after momma was gone. She would a raised me right and not turned me loose like my daddy, he did.

9. Gently remove calluses and dead skin with pumice stone.

Oh yeah, I got me some mean ole nasty hard spots on my feet, 'specially those back there on my heels. See 'em right there? Don't know why, but some of my shoes just rubs 'em the wrong way or somethin'. Starts off a hurtin' and after awhile I can't feel nothin' there. Just like some things in life, right? Like a broken heart or something. Haaaa! Starts off a hurtin' like hell and then just goes numb 'til maybe the next one comes along and starts hurtin' all over again. Wish I could rub away the piled up hurt places inside me like I can those callous places on my feet. Wouldn't that be something if they invented a way to do that? Ain't sure no one but Jesus can do that kind a thing though.

I think a heaven sometimes: like the preacher, he says in heaven ain't gonna be no more hurtin' and wailin'? Makes me real sad what I've done in my life and I sure wanna' get to heaven. But you know, Jesus, he even saved bad people like prostitutes and lepers and whatnot, so I guess I can be saved, too. I keep on prayin' on it.

10. Gently remove any debris around nails with wooden stick.

Oooh yuck! That toe gunk stinks! You make sure you wash your hands real well so you don't go outta' here smellin' like no toe gunk. Smells like somethin' died in there and gone all rotten and decomposin'.

Used to have road kill, like dogs or deer got themselves killed along the country road we lived on, and in summer that hot sun would beat on 'em. They'd get all swole up and bust and smell for miles 'round! Oooo-eee! Nasty big ole black flies all over 'em and turkey buzzards, they'd finally come along and pick 'em clean down to the bones. I used to have to walk along that road and hitchbike places and I hated that smell. Sometimes it'd be so bad I'd pick some wild roses and honeysuckle from side the road and just keep 'em up near my nose to get me through 'till the air cleared.

You got yourself a boyfriend? He treat you real nice and buys you flowers and stuff? I love flowers. I buy them for myself whenever I can. Your boyfriend don't never hit you now, does he? I don't stand for none of them hittin' men. They slap me or push me just one time an I'm outta' there, don't never go back for no more. I got girlfriends though—some of 'em here in this shelter with me—they seem smart and all but they can't seem to stay away from them hittin'-type a men. They like 'em for some reason. I don't get it. But then, the stuff I've let guys do to me, I guess it's all the same, or maybe what I do is even worse, I don't know. Makes me all sad to think about it, but it's been creeping back into my head more lately. Maybe 'cause I'm away from that life right now I can see it more? Or maybe 'cause Heidi, she pushes me to think about it and she tells me it's time to be good to myself and not beat myself up over things I couldn't do nothin' about. Things from when I was a real little girl I never told no one 'bout until Heidi come along.

Not sure why I trusts her so much. She's seen me through some real bad times and she's hung in there with me. But she's having a baby now and she just told me she's gotta' leave soon to care for that little baby—that she's not gonna' do this work no more, leastwise not for awhile. That'll be the luckiest baby alive with her as its momma! She trying to get me to start seeing some other caseworker, but I don't want to start all over again spillin' my guts out and all with a stranger. I'd rather not have no caseworker if I can't have Heidi, but she says that's bullshit, if you'll pardon my words there, but that's just what she said. Straight up: that's bullshit! I like that about her—she don't pussyfoot around, she just comes right out and tells me what she's thinking, all

honest like. I 'reckon she's got a point though. I gotta' learn to trust some people if I'm gonna' get out a this mess I'm in. That's another thing I pray about: finding me some trust and knowin' who I can trust, who won't screw me over. Just like that good touch bad touch thing: it's hard to tell the difference, but I guess there's a way to figure it out.

11. Apply lotion to feet, but NOT between toes.

Ooooh! That feels so good! I could sit here all day an let you do that—no really, I could! It's like bein' at a spa or somethin'—feels all pamperin' like. Thanks so much for this whole foot thing. It kind a makes me feel better all over. When your feet feel good you can't help but feel good. Strangest thing now, don't ya' think? They teach you in school some reason why that's so? Somethin' in the nervous system, like maybe nerves in the feet's attached to the feel good center in our heads or something? They outta' study that more like they study everything else under the sun. Study somethin' useful like that 'cause then maybe people wouldn't get so sick all the time or all angry and hurtin' each other. Maybe they wouldn't have to take no feel good drugs no more. I don't know, sounds like a crazy idea maybe but keep it in mind when you's out there treatin' people.

You stay sweet and take care a yourself. I be seein' ya' 'round maybe or—no, I take that back—no offense, but I hope I don't see ya' 'cause like I say, I'm hoping to be outta' here soon, get my own apartment and get myself a real job. Anyways, thanks for doing this whole foot thing today. Makes me have hope we gonna' have us some better doctors and nurses out there practicin' soon. That sure is a good thing. God bless you; you take care now, ya' hear?

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