

Cool Nails

By Alice Stevenson

I am sitting at the far end of a narrow room on the eighth seat of a long table. I am in Cool Nails. The woman opposite, who really can't be any older than one of my first year undergraduate students, thrusts a small box made from semi-translucent plastic towards me. It is divided into equal sized compartments and each section contains tiny curved discs, sorted according to shape; some have rounded edges whilst others taper into sharp points. They are cloudy, a poor relation of sea glass. I think of the highly organised box of shells and beach flotsam I'd had as a child that had been collected by mother during her 1950's childhood holidays and passed onto me. Had the collection been of my own gathering, it would have consisted of a mix of broken shells interspersed with pebbles, perhaps a sweet wrapper or half a chip fork. In fact, it wouldn't have been a collection at all but a box of rubbish that my mother would have found and binned and I wouldn't have even noticed. But as a girl I had honoured the order of my mother's collection of beach finds because it had not always been mine and it was old and apparently precious. It existed in my childhood as a cube of order, lurking amongst pieces of playmobil, the barbies with matted hair and the half-finished drawings and stories. Had I managed to hang onto this box through the multiple moves from house share to house share that have characterised my adult life, it would now assume a new significance; become a keepsake, a relic. It would also have been the sole piece of my mother's efficiency I inherited, in the form of a wooden cigar box of carefully categorised shells.

On this side of the table, women sit placing their hands upon the white surface in front of them. Some of these hands are being massaged, rubbed efficiently yet gently, some are being painted with tiny brushes and others are being administered to by an array of tools attached to

wires that disappear into holes on the table's surface. Doing the administering are a row of women, who I assume all to be Vietnamese. They are intent on their work, on the sanding, painting and rubbing, their mouths hidden by paper masks. Behind them, against the grubby white walls are shelves of plastic storage boxes, bottles of varying shades of pastel coloured liquids and hundreds of nail varnish bottles in any colour you could want. I half close my eyes it all blurs into an abstract canvas, the baby pink and blues of the bottles complimenting the kaleidoscopic colour of the varnish bottles. The air smells sickly-sweet and toxic and the room is full of murmurs and electrical whirring which blend together into a textured layer of sound and as I look into the compartments that the manicurist has placed beneath my nose, I find something about the order contained inside this plastic box amidst such a busy environment both soothing and painful.

A hand appears out of nowhere and shoves the box back towards the manicurist. I look up. The hand belongs to the woman with a yellow apron over a green t-shirt, who looks least ten years older than my manicurist. Her hair is bleached a dirty copper and pulled into two tight plaits. Her cheeks are pockmarked. She has sprung up from her previous pose, standing over the other workers chewing gum, hands on hips. Whilst I do not understand the words she is now barking at the manicurist, I sense her impatience.

'Ah ok, ok. Gel Powder' my manicurist says, nodding, a fixed smile on her face (she has yet to put her mask on) as the pock-marked woman marches off to resume her surveillance.

Gel Powder. If I am being honest at this point, I can't say that I am entirely sure that this is what I agreed to in the exchange that took place between me the pock-marked woman a few moments previously, as the manicurist sat mutely, looking down at the table. 'Acrylic' was

mentioned and something else I hadn't quite caught and had cost £30 which sounded a lot, so I had chosen another thing, the thing that cost £20: a number that seemed reasonable, something to snatch hold of in the confusing exchange of unfamiliar terms and numbers floating around between us. This thing had turned out to be Gel Powder. I had said OK and the woman seemed content that things were now settled but I was left feeling dubious.

And now the unease I feel as the young manicurist busies herself organising bottles of pastel liquid, is compounded by a persistent strain of embarrassment that I don't really understand the differences between all the services that Cool Nails offers, I could not explain to you the difference between Acrylic and Gel Powder or even begin to guess what most of the bottles or contraptions in this narrow windowless room are here for. It is odd, I reflect as the manicurist takes my hand in hers, the things in life that cause a person to feel out of their depth.

I have been thinking about getting this manicure a lot since that Monday, two and a half weeks ago. In fact, it is something I focus on with a surprising frequency, when I wake up at 3am, my chest tight, as the quiet horror of realization descends. I calm myself with an out-of-focus montage of myself reclining in adjustable chairs in light rooms, the whiteness interrupted by cheerful wheels of colour samples; disembodied nails, glowing like polished jelly beans. I have only had two manicures in my entire life. Mum always despaired of my irredeemable scruffiness. I am someone who has never owned shoe polishing equipment or thought twice about entering a meeting with a not-quite-washed-off to-do list on their hand.

The prominence manicures have taken in my imagination lately is inconsistent with the daughter I have been for 36 years. I have been many things; a teenager who made a large black ink stain on her white bedroom carpet, an author who has written two published books whilst

her old school friends were having their first and second children. But up until now, I have never belonged to the category of Women-Who-Have-Regular-Manicures and yet today I have decided (when it's too late) to try and become that person.

Earlier this year I went on my cousin's Hen Weekend in the Algarve. I find Hen Weekends are an excellent opportunity for getting up to speed with what normal women of my age are up to and this one was no exception. Most of these ladies were married, homeowners, working their ways up various professional sectors. The majority of them were mothers of young children, and like the flawless manicures they all sported and their extensive beachwear wardrobes (lots of white floaty things with coloured tassels), the tendrils they expertly curled their hair into, seemed to be the marker of a lifestyle or a set of priorities, a sign of being a grown-up, a proper grown-up as opposed to the one you play at being in your twenties, when you share a flat and are still blessed with enough youthful effervescence to get away with split-ends.

I imagine that for many of these women manicures are a fun Saturday bonding activity, perhaps followed by shopping and early evening Aperol Spritzes or posh afternoon tea. Personally, I'd always been game for the booze and the cake but rejected the rest. But now here I am, in this sickly hot room, surrounded by people and entirely alone. I find I am glancing longingly at the rectangle of light at the far end of the long table, within which I can see the pavement lit up by the late afternoon sun, as the woman in front of me places the white mask over her mouth and reaches for the sanding tool.

The sander is touching the surface of my fingernails. It's grainy, cylindrical surface spins into a blur and it makes a sound somewhere between a growl and a whine. Not for the

first time that day I wonder why it is that we seem so happy to pay someone to hold such a tool close to the vulnerable areas of skin that surround our fingernails. The young manicurist's hair is tied back in a girlish ponytail and she is wearing a striped overall apron which features a cartoon bear and thick horizontal brown stripes which cover the bear as if it is imprisoned behind bars. I recall news reports I'd skim read earlier in the year, of modern slavery gangs running Nail Bars in affluent West Country towns and I wonder if this woman roughening the surface of my fingernails is living in acceptable conditions, if she is homesick and how much of this £20 for Gel Powder she will actually receive. A wave of anxiety passes across my stomach as the filing tool drones on. Its vibrations against my fingernails makes the back of my neck tingle, and it occurs to me that should she wish too she could hurt me, she could gouge into my finger, splitting my nail down to my knuckle, she could thrust the sander into my eyeball causing blood to splatter onto the imprisoned bear on her overall. She is handling a dangerous weapon, surrounded by bottles of toxic liquid. I feel an overwhelming desire to be anywhere else, doing anything but this.

Getting nails done or indeed any form of 'pampering' is such dead time. I begin to feel a sort of low frequency anger which is mainly directed at myself, it is the heat of the room, it is the sheer tedium I am paying to experience. Earlier that day, I had seen an Instagram story, that the shimmery script had informed me, depicted the moment prior to a facial treatment in a department store. The phone's camera had panned around an interior which featured odd white contraptions, at face height, like space age sewing machines with an incline presumably in which the receiver of the treatment was meant to place their face. Having no experience of such things myself I was at a loss as to what would happen once you put yourself in said contraption, but I imagined lasers, shooting at my skin and into my eyes for half an hour: painless but tingly,

both alarming and dull, then emerging into the tasteful room; peach-coloured, airbrushed and dazed.

Mum always looked forward to her regular cut and colour sessions as one of the high points of her month. A chat with Paul, the senior stylist, catching up on recent issues of Hello! Magazine. Prior to Cool Nails, I had had my first haircut in a year. Lying on the reclining seat, my neck resting on a folded towel, I focused on my outward breaths and the tightness that had been in my stomach for the past two and a half weeks began to relax, just a little. But then the touch of the hairdressing assistant's fingers became slower, more intimate, more considered in their variations of pressure. I had forgotten that The Head Massage has been a key feature of the hairdressing experience since the late 1990's. This stranger's fingers caressing my scalp in a sensual fashion made my stomach contract with revulsion and I just managed to fight the urge to sit bolt upright and ask her to stop. I felt a sudden sympathy for this young woman having to touch strangers' heads in this way. Blissed-out, Relaxed, Dreamy, were all things I was definitely not feeling at that moment. I wondered if she was equally uncomfortable.

The demonic whir of the tools in Cool Nails, drowns out the murmured exchanges between the clients and the staff. My eyes wander down to the sample sheets of nail art that lie on the narrow white table: turquoise tips, a gold and a black squiggle, a dot on long pointed ovals. What would my Aunts think if I appeared at Mortlake Crematorium the following Tuesday with decorated talons like that, clashing with my appropriately somber charcoal-grey velvet dress. Such tiny little areas of unexpected detail on a person can symbolise so much, like the tattoos on my ex's fingers which placed him into a category of person that Mum had never previously encountered. She could never quite warm to him. Suddenly there is a sharp pain on my right forefinger, and I grab it back with a squeak, the manicurist has miscalculated

with her sanding tool. ‘Sorry’ she murmurs through the mask and she reaches behind her to the shelf for one of the anonymous pastel bottles and grabs a small white one containing a clear liquid which she pours onto cotton wool and dabs onto the slit she has made on my cuticle. Pain burns through me like a laser. I hear my mother’s voice: ‘Stop making such a fuss!’ and I push my lips together and internalize until it subsides.

The last time I’d had a manicure was at a salon on a small parade of shops out at the end of the Tube Line, amidst the never-ending sea of semis. It was my mum’s local and an altogether less edgy affair to Cool Nails. I think she had briefed them beforehand and they took charge of decision making, there was no talk of Gel Powder. I had chosen dark blue, to go with the cover of my latest book, whose launch party the nails had been in aid of. The person who had manicured my fingernails was also Vietnamese: a man in his forties, he had been pleasant but slightly too reserved to be described as chatty. He had that indistinct, smudged look about him that suggests a deep sadness. As he deftly added the colour he told me that he had emigrated to England from Vietnam as a child fleeing in a refugee boat from the Civil War in the early ‘80s. I asked him if he’d ever been back to Vietnam and he’d said no. Afterwards, in her spotless, white living room, I recounted the story of this sea voyage to my mother as she pretended to admire my new dark blue nails. As I spoke, I imagined his adult face on a child’s body amongst hundreds of other faces being tossed around in the waves. I think I told Mum about this, in the hope of inspiring her to reassess her opinions on immigration, but my story was met with the usual polite-but-not-really-interested catch all “oh” followed by a bland smile.

The manicurist is piling this strange substance onto my nails that I’ve never seen before, it looked a bit like the colourless paste that is formed when paper is soaked in water for papier-mâché. What is her name? Does she live upstairs beyond the pink curtain? does she hate

Peckham as much as I do? Does she miss her mother? Asking her these things is as unthinkable as leaning over and kissing her cheek. Something amorphous but as immovable as bulletproof glass stands between us, that only my hands can pass through.

After another stint in the drying machine she begins to apply the varnish to my nails, I've chosen a dirty yellow. I had decided on an orangey-red shade when I had initially inspected the wheel of options for 'Gel Powder', a round palette of white plastic, incrustated with raised convex multi-coloured ovals. I'd had a fancy to go conventional, with Mum in mind, who's personal style had never been able to see much beyond a Laura Ashley mood-board. But much like in a restaurant when you have a last-minute mind change as the waiter takes your order, I find myself pointing at the yellow oval: a curious mixture of custard and mustard, almost buttercup but dirtier. Mum would have hated this colour, 'Oh darling, how horrid, it looks like snot.' I hear her say. But somehow this choice seems more authentic. I am honouring the complex dynamic of our relationship.

But I am regretting this now, as it is the sort of nail colour that requires a skilled application, which sadly my poor manicurist isn't quite up too. It clearly wasn't a popular choice and she had initially spent a painfully long time searching the for the right bottle in various drawers, picking up varnishes and putting them down again, eventually giving in and asking her savvier colleague who proceeded to locate it in the drawer she had originally looked in. I have been in Cool Nails for over an hour now. She asks me if I would like another coat of varnish, as whilst thick, the colour has come out rather translucent, creating darker mustard shadows within the yellow. It is sitting globule-like on my nails, yet still lacking a strong consistency. The varnish on the nails of my little fingers is beginning to look as thick as it does wide like a blob of melted cheese.

It is so hot now, my head is aching from inhaling so many chemicals, a wave of hopelessness overcomes me at the thought of being stuck here for all eternity, day in day out. Tears prick my eyes.

‘It looks horrible.’ I say. I am too lightheaded to formulate the right words required to address the situation more tactfully, she moves her head to the side slightly, but I cannot tell if this is a response.

‘It looks horrible.’ I try it louder, emboldened, desperate. The pock-marked matriarch who has been leaning against the wall filing her own nails, marches her way into the situation. Hen-like, she bustles my manicurist out of the way, who now sits nearby huddled with another workmate, observing this clean-up operation as if it were a spectator sport. I have been here too long, the multitude of colours, shapes, smells and sounds has become a putrid cacophony.

‘I need to leave,’ I say. But my new manicurist cannot or chooses not to hear me. I say it louder, my voice comes out strangled, mad-sounding. Asserting myself has never been my strong point. I am not acknowledged. I sink back into my chair powerless as she starts up the electric filer again and proceeds to scrape the polish off the my fingers, shaving away the solidified blobs revealing the roughened surface below. I look up at the clock, it is 6.45 now. If I dared, I’d snatch my hand away and run, but time ticks on and I’ve already had a taster of what pain a sloppy move of the sanding tool can do.

‘I need to go.’ I say, with a lack of commitment now. ‘Five minutes!’ she barks, this is not up for discussion.

The yellow gunk goes back onto my nails now with even less skill than the previous application. I gaze down at my hands as the globules return with an nightmarish inevitability I am destined to always have ugly, melted-processed-cheese hands. What was I thinking; selecting such a colour in such an insalubrious establishment? I hear my mother sigh and see her head shake slowly; eyebrows raised, her mouth a thin line of resigned disapproval.

The matriarch roughly puts my hand back under the drying apparatus for the globules to solidify into little puss-coloured beads.

‘Finished.’ She says a little too loudly, not looking me in the eye.

‘This is horrible.’ I say. I stand up. I’m suddenly furious, in an unhinged and tearful sort of way. ‘I’m not paying for this. You said you were going to fix it.’

She is poker faced.

‘No no, you have to pay.’

Her employees’ eyes are all on me now and not on the hands of their clients. Her mouth is grim.

‘You can’t walk out of here without paying. Pay Something. Pay Something.’

I hold out my hands, ‘No I’m not paying for this. You’ve ruined my nails.’

‘No, you pay something, you pay something.’ A couple of other customers glanced up briefly and then stared very pointedly at their own nails. Her eyes narrow and she shouts in sharp little barks:

‘You Pay! you can’t walk out. If you don’t pay, we take it off.’

I look over at the door. The light and the bustle of Rye Lane flashes across in a narrow strip. I am meters away from freedom. And I look down at the various sanders and scrapers and metal implements on the table. I realise that I’m leaning against the wall. I am very tired.

I sit down, back in the plastic seat, defeated. And once again I hold out my hands. She grabs them and applies the sanding tool to it with a notable lack of care for my safety or well-being. My hands are stinging now, they are raw, but I don’t react. Another twenty minutes has passed since I checked the clock and part of me resigns itself to being in this chair forever, breathing chemicals stuck in a continuous cycle of the application and removal of yellow globules of gel nail varnish to my fingernails. It was beginning to feel as if I was living in a cautionary tale and this was my punishment for depriving my mother of the photographs of grandchildren that she wanted to show her friends in response to their own. Here I was in Cool Nails, trying to atone for being 36 and still living in a rented house-share with damp, for being perpetually in my overdraft and never passing my driving test. But it was too little, and it was too late.

Now, the pain from the sanding tool makes the first manicurist’s slip of the hand feel like a light pin-prick, my hands are smarting, and the surfaces of my nails are a mess: ragged and interspersed with yellow fragments that have been missed and I really, really don’t care.

‘There’ she says. I nod stand up and walk out into Rye Lane, into the light followed by 18 sets of eyes, my step unsteady.

For the next couple of days my fingers throb with pain and the skin around the nails stings, a constant reminder of Cool Nails. I consider making another appointment with a more reputable salon who could sort them out, but the thought of sitting down on one of those chairs and placing my hands out, to be taken by a stranger in possession of buzzing tools is too horrific. So, on the following Tuesday morning, when I wake up at 4am, I sit down on the sofa, with a file and a cheap, two-year old bottle of nail varnish from Boots and begin to paint over the cracks in a pale lilac that I know my mum would have approved of.