

**PLEASE BE AWARE THAT  
THIS PLAY IS FULLY PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT**

All plays, books, music and other materials published by Heartland Plays, Inc. are fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America and all countries which the United States has reciprocal relations including, but not limited to all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, The Universal Copyright Convention and the Berne Convention. All rights to the plays and materials on our website are strictly reserved including, and without limitation, professional and amateur performance rights; motion pictures; public reading; radio and television broadcasting; audio and video recording and reproduction of any type known or yet to be invented; information storage and retrieval systems of any type known or yet to be invented; and the rights of translation into any and all languages. No individual or organization whether amateur or stock may perform this or any play published by Heartland Plays, Inc. without first obtaining advance permission from Heartland Plays, Inc. and paying the appropriate fees including Royalties and Single-Use Copyright fees. Heartland Plays, Inc. collects royalties on behalf of the Playwrights whose plays it publishes. Unauthorized copying, transcribing or reproduction of this or any play or excerpt, or storage or transmittal in any form and by any means whether known or yet to be invented, is strictly forbidden except as provided by Agreement with Heartland Plays, Inc. Any unauthorized use is a violation of copyright laws and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

**FIVE SIMPLE RULES TO REMEMBER**

1. DO take advantage of the free online perusal of our plays to help you make the best choice for your particular needs or production.
2. DO enjoy the convenience of our online purchase application for performance rights and single-use copyright.
3. DO understand that this play and all plays and materials on our website are controlled by Heartland Plays, Inc. and fully protected by copyright.
4. DO NOT attempt in any way to copy, transcribe or reproduce this play by any means or perform this play or use any play or material from our website without first receiving permission from Heartland Plays, Inc. Any attempt to use this or any other work without first obtaining permission is a violation of copyright and punishable by law.
5. DO NOT rob this Author or any of the Authors we represent of their right to be paid for the use of their property. It is a crime and it is wrong!

Product Code A0080-F

# NAILS

A full-length play about  
assumptions and attitudes toward immigrant citizens

by  
Robert L. Kinast

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**  
**REPRODUCTION WITHOUT SPECIFIC WRITTEN PERMISSION PROHIBITED**

**Performance Rights Available Exclusively through**  
**Heartland Plays, Inc. at [heartlandplays.com](http://heartlandplays.com)**  
**[playsnow@heartlandplays.com](mailto:playsnow@heartlandplays.com)**  
**customer service: 406-431-7680**

**Copyright © 2011 by Robert L. Kinast**

# Nails

by Robert L. Kinast

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

- ANGELA**     *early twenties, stand-up comedian whose routine caricatures the Vietnamese technicians who work in nail salons, insensitive to the implications of her “humor” and always looking for new material*
- KIM**         *early to mid-fifties, Vietnamese immigrant, was a teacher in Vietnam, operates a nail salon with her husband in the U.S., hard-working, intent on making a good life (=financial success) for her husband and daughter while holding on to the memories, culture, and religion of her homeland, speaks excellent English albeit with a Vietnamese accent*
- TRAN**         *early to mid-fifties, Kim’s husband, was an engineer in Vietnam and soldier in the South Vietnamese army, escaped Vietnam and emigrated to the U.S. ahead of Kim, quiet, thoughtful, conciliatory when conflict or confrontation arises, also speaks and understands English very well*
- LAURA**       *eighteen, senior in high school, only child of Kim and Tran, born in America, very Americanized, neither interested in nor desirous of learning about Vietnam, its history or the war, speaks like any other American teenager and without an accent*
- CELIA**         *any age between forty and sixty, Hispanic, recently became a U.S. citizen, injects Spanish words in her conversation, ordinarily cheerful and talkative but hesitant and awkward relating to Kim on her first visit to a nail salon*
- BARBARA**     *late-thirties/early-forties, regular customer of Kim and Tran’s, very much a me-generation woman, self-centered if not self-absorbed, assumes an air of superiority in the nail salon, house-sits people’s pets for her income*
- MOVIE  
STAR**           *wants to help Vietnamese immigrants get started in the nail business, appears in one short segment of a scene (can be played by the same actor who portrays Barbara)*
- MANICURIST**     *middle-aged male, speaks and acts with a “fashion professional” flair though not necessarily gay, accompanies Movie Star*
- IMMIGRATION  
OFFICER**       *middle-aged, speaks and acts with an official if not officious demeanor (can be played by the same actor who portrays the manicurist)*

## SETTING

The play takes place in the “Just Your Nails” salon operated by Kim and Tran. There is a door SL; chairs, coat rack, and credenza for waiting customers next to the door; a counter with telephone, computer for making appointments, and credit card machine toward rear wall; two tables with heat lamps and chairs for customers having their nails done DSC; large bamboo plant and one or two lounges for customers getting a pedicure SR; a small Buddhist shrine USC. Time is the present.

# Nails

by Robert L. Kinast

## PRELUDE

*(Theater is dark. After a moment, a male voice is heard offstage.)*

### Male Voice (OS)

Welcome to this segment of the Comedy Club's "Who's Laughing Now?" Our headliner tonight is a fresh, young comic who's been taking the comedy scene by storm. Please welcome the lady with a heavenly name and a devilish wit—Miss Angela Hayden.

*(Taped applause as ANGELA enters, stands in front of the curtain or, if there is no curtain, stands in a spot light at the front of the stage with the background dark.)*

### Angela

Oh, thank you. Thank you for that warm welcome. I really appreciate it. Especially after the day I've had. Have any of you ever gone to one of those nail salons run by Vietnamese?

*(Taped audience reactions, and possibly "live" as well)*

Yeah, well I hadn't—until today. I thought, hey I'm on the Comedy Club tonight, maybe I should have my nails done. So I went to this place called [*pronounced with an exaggerated Vietnamese accent*] "Perfect Nail." Now right away I should have been suspicious. I mean, do they only do one perfect nail? I've got ten, and ten more if I count my toes. Which "one" do they do?

*(Audience laughter, which increases during the skit)*

OK, so I go in and right away this tiny Vietnamese lady appears out of nowhere and says:

*(With exaggerated emphasis, mocking a Vietnamese pronunciation, especially by holding the "i" sound in the words nice and like as well as the "ou" sound in you)*

"What you need today, honey? You want nail?" Actually, I already **have** my nails. I just want them prettied up.

*(Audience laughter).*

But before I could make this obvious statement, the little lady says, "You want manicure and pedicure? Only fifteen dollar more. Very sexy." No, I thought, "very expensive."

*(Audience laughter)*

**Angela, Continued**

“Come wi’ me, honey. I take good care o’ you.” That’s what I was beginning to be afraid of.

*(Black out; ANGELA exits.)*

**ACT I  
SCENE 1**

*(Lights come up slowly on the nail salon. After a few moments there is a noise at the door as KIM finds the right key and unlocks the door. She enters, flips on the lights, slips off her windbreaker, hangs it on the coat rack, and heads for the Buddhist shrine USC.)*

*While KIM places fresh flowers and fruit pieces before the Buddha and lights an incense stick, TRAN enters carrying a money bag and the morning newspaper. He heads straight for the counter, turns on the computer, opens the cash drawer and begins placing bills of varying currency in their proper slots. KIM and TRAN may exchange a few comments in Vietnamese and then speak in English, to suggest their conversation is being “translated” into English for the audience, somewhat as subtitles accompany a foreign language film.)*

**Kim**

*(Turns from the shrine, looks toward Tran)* What’s keeping Laura, Tran?

**Tran**

*(Leans over the counter to look out the door)* She’s still on her cell phone talking to Amy.

**Kim**

We should never have let her get that cell phone.

**Tran**

Everybody her age has a cell phone.

**Kim**

But Amy will be here in a few minutes to pick her up for school. Why can’t they talk then?

**Tran**

Because they’re teenagers. They talk to each other all the time.

**Kim**

Not when there are chores to be done.

**Tran**

Did you always do your chores when you were her age, Kim?

**Kim**

Are you kidding? My father would have caned me if I didn't do my chores. Or have you forgotten what it was like in Vietnam when we were growing up?

**Tran**

I haven't forgotten, but have you forgotten that Laura is not growing up in Vietnam?

**Kim**

That doesn't matter. All she has to do is put out the nail polish, straighten the magazines, and be sure the towels are stacked neatly. It isn't much to ask.

**Tran**

Maybe we should ask her to do something more important.

**Kim**

Like what?

**Tran**

I don't know, maybe let her order the supplies next time, or design a new coupon for our mailer.

**Kim**

Oh no, those are **too** important for someone who cares as little about this salon as Laura does.

**Tran**

She might care more if she felt more involved, like she's making a real contribution.

**Kim**

Doing her chores is her real contribution.

**Tran**

I know, but I think she'd like something more challenging.

**Kim**

Then she'll have to earn it. First you prove yourself in small things; then you move on to bigger things.

**Tran**

Not in America. Everybody in her generation wants to start at the top.

**Kim**

Well, that isn't how it's done in this corner of America.

*(LAURA enters, concluding her conversation with Amy, running the words together without a break.)*

**Laura**

Okay see you then bye.

*(LAURA drops her school backpack on the floor next to the counter where TRAN studies the schedule for the day on the computer monitor. He hands her a few magazines which came in the mail yesterday and gestures to her to “get going.” LAURA saunters to the credenza, studying the new magazines, then stops and opens one to an article that catches her interest. KIM sees LAURA reading the article.)*

**Kim**

The magazines are for the customers, Laura.

**Laura**

I was just looking at this one article.

**Kim**

You can look at it when you’ve finished your chores—if you finish them on time. *(Beat)* And be sure to replace the old magazines with the new ones.

*(LAURA sighs, slumps into a chair next to the credenza and replaces the old magazines with new ones, then takes the old ones to her backpack and shoves them inside, which KIM observes.)*

I hope you’re not going to be reading those magazines when you should be doing your school work.

**Laura**

I’ve already read them, the ones I like anyway.

**Tran**

Then why don’t you throw them out?

**Laura**

I’d like to donate them to our school’s A-L-F project.

**Tran**

What’s that?

**Laura**

Students collect things the residents of local Assisted Living Facilities might use, and our social science teacher distributes them.

**Kim**

You haven’t told us about this program before.

**Laura**

It just started.

**Tran**

It sounds like a good use for old magazines.

**Laura**

So it's okay if I donate these?

*(TRAN looks at LAURA, who shrugs matter-of-factly.)*

**Tran**

Of course. *(Pause)* Is there anything else they can use?

**Laura**

*(Hesitates for a moment, then speaks excitedly)* Well, I was thinking, we have several bottles of nail polish that have never been opened. Maybe the women at the Assisted Living Facilities would like them.

**Tran**

What do you think, Kim?

**Kim**

I suppose there's no point having nail polish sitting around that nobody likes. But before you get carried away with any more ideas, Laura, be sure you put out the nail polish our customers **do** like—before they start arriving.

*(LAURA smiles with satisfaction and exits with a little more spring in her step to a back room stage right. A moment passes as KIM and TRAN continue preparing for the workday. Then a Hispanic woman, CELIA, enters through the door stage left and looks around hesitantly.)*

**Tran**

*(Notices the woman)* May I help you?

**Celia**

*Si . . .* eh, yes.

*(CELIA removes a gift certificate from her purse and holds it out for TRAN who takes it.)*

**Tran**

Ah, a gift certificate.

**Celia**

My daughter, she gave it to me.

**Kim**

Is your daughter named Maria? (*CELIA nods.*) I remember her. She came by the other day and said she wanted to give you something special for becoming an American citizen.

**Celia**

*Si...yes. Pero*, I have never been to a nail salon.

**Kim**

(*Smiles and bows slightly*) Well then, a special welcome to Just Your Nails. Do you have an appointment?

**Celia**

Oh, no. I did not know I need one.

**Kim**

You don't. Walk-ins are always welcome. Tran, when is our first appointment today?

**Tran**

At eight-fifteen. Barbara Whitaker.

**Kim**

She is always late. I can take you now. (*As she leads CELIA to the manicure table*) My name is Kim. This is Tran, my husband.

(*LAURA enters with a tray of nail polish bottles.*)

And our daughter, Laura.

**Laura**

(*Recognizes that Celia is Hispanic*)¿*Como estado?*

(*CELIA is surprised but excited that LAURA addresses her in Spanish*)

**Celia**

Ahh, *muy bien, muy bien. ¿Y Usted?*

**Laura**

(*Looks at the tray of bottles, sighs, speaks with a half-hearted tone*) *Bien.*

(*A horn sounds offstage; LAURA's mood perks up.*)

**Laura**

That's Amy. Time to go. I've straightened all the towels and put the used ones from yesterday in the hamper. Is there anything else?

**Kim**

Yes. Don't forget we are having dinner with Aunt Hoa tonight.

**Laura**

I hope she won't make her claypot catfish again. I hate fish.

**Kim**

I don't know what she will make, but it will be a traditional Vietnamese meal, and you will eat it.

**Laura**

I wish we could invite her to our house sometime and just have pizza.

**Tran**

Laura, you know how much we owe Aunt Hoa. She sponsored me to come to America and was one of the first Vietnamese immigrants to start our nail business. It is a small thank-you to let her cook for us once a month. It gives her pleasure.

**Laura**

I know, I know.

**Tran**

You know, but do you appreciate? Do you understand that what we have today is because of her?

*(Horn sounds offstage again. LAURA looks around the nail salon with an air of condescension, signaling that she doesn't think the salon is much to be proud of, and exits. TRAN tells KIM in Vietnamese that he is going into the back room and exits. KIM is sitting at the table and puts on her surgical mask.)*

**Celia**

Why are you wearing that?

**Kim**

So I won't inhale the fumes from the nail polish and other chemicals we use. They could be harmful.

**Celia**

Oh. *(Pause)* Should I wear one too?

**Kim**

No, you don't need a mask. You won't be here very long, but I am here all day, every day. *(Reads the gift certificate)* Your daughter has paid for a full set of nails for you.

**Celia**

*(Looks at her fingers)* Pero, I have my nails. I don't *compre . . .* eh, understand what you mean.

*(KIM Shows CELIA a set of acrylic nails and demonstrates.)*

**Kim**

These are acrylic nails. I put them on your nails, then shape them and color them the way you like.

**Celia**

Ohh.

**Kim**

And when your nails grow, the acrylic nails move with them. Then you come in for a "fill."

**Celia**

Does it hurt?

**Kim**

No, no.

**Celia**

What if I don't like these nails?

**Kim**

Then I will remove them and you can go back to your natural nails. But I hope you will like your new nails

**Celia**

*Si, si.*

*(KIM shows CELIA the collection of nail polish bottles.)*

**Kim**

Do you want to go ahead and pick out a color you like?

**Celia**

*(Puzzled)* Oh, I don't know what to pick. What do you think?

**Kim**

Hmm, your daughter gave you this gift certificate because you are now an American citizen. How about this bright red, like the color in the flag?

**Celia**

*Si, si.* I had to know the colors of the flag for my citizen interview.

**Kim**

I had to know the meaning of the stripes on the flag.

**Celia**

*Yo tambien.*

*(KIM and CELIA giggle at their shared experience, then lapse into silence as KIM begins working on Celia's nails. A few moments pass. CELIA looks around the salon, trying to hide her awkwardness/discomfort when she notices a bamboo tree behind KIM downstage right.)*

Is that bamboo tree real?

**Kim**

*(Without looking up from her work)* Oh yes.

**Celia**

It looks very healthy. *(Pause)* I keep a cactus garden at my *casa*. To remind me of Mexico. *(Pause)* Does your bamboo remind you of Vietnam?

**Kim**

*(Pause)* Yes.

*(Lights go down on the salon. TRAN enters stage right wearing Vietnamese clothing and holding a walking stick. KIM crosses stage and slips on a tunic. Both wear the traditional Vietnamese hat, "non la." VOICES of the Police are heard shouting offstage; light from flashlights cuts through the darkness. A spot comes up on KIM and TRAN.)*

**Kim**

What if the police find us? They'll know we are trying to escape again.

**Tran**

Do you remember what your sister, Sophie, told us? "If the police sweep the village before you get to the boat, hide in bamboo. They do not cut into large bamboo with their machetes."

*(KIM and TRAN simulate hiding in the salon's bamboo bush. VOICES of the police grow louder.)*

**Kim**

I'm so frightened. What's going to happen?

**Tran**

Shhh. We must be as still and quiet as the root of this bamboo.

---

*(VOICES and SOUNDS OF MACHETES SLASHING; KIM and TRAN hold each other tightly. The VOICES and SOUNDS peak then begin to fade slowly away until there is silence.)*

**Kim**

Are they gone?

*(TRAN looks out cautiously, slowly emerges from the bamboo, extends his hand to KIM who moves out warily.)*

**Tran**

I think we are safe now.

**Kim**

How much farther to the boat?

**Tran**

Only a few more kilometers.

**Kim**

What if the boatman has left? We're really late now.

**Tran**

He will be there. *(Beat)* He hasn't been paid yet.

*(KIM and TRAN walk, almost in slow motion, from stage right to stage left, looking around anxiously for any signs of police or informants. When they reach stage left, KIM stands back while TRAN steps to the front and, facing the audience, begins miming a conversation with an "invisible" boatman. As he holds out the money, he begins speaking aloud in Vietnamese about the agreement to take KIM and TRAN on the boat and becomes increasingly animated. Finally, he returns to KIM.)*

**Kim**

What is the matter?

**Tran**

He says he does not take women on the sea. It is bad luck.

**Kim**

But it was all arranged. We have the money he asked for.

**Tran**

It was not arranged with this boatman. He says the risk is too great for him.

**Kim**

What about us? We cannot return to our village now. Even if we sneak past the curfew police, others will know that we tried to escape.

**Tran**

I will not leave without you.

**Kim**

But now you cannot leave with me.

*(TRAN turns to the “boatman” and tells him angrily in Vietnamese to wait.)*

**Tran**

We will find another way to escape.

**Kim**

*(Looks in alarm toward the “boatman”)* He is going to leave!

*(TRAN shouts again at the boatman. KIM grasps Tran’s arms as he turns back to her.)*

You must go.

*(TRAN resists; begins to argue but KIM shakes her head insistently.)*

It is our only chance.

**Tran**

What will **you** do?

**Kim**

I will return to the village. I know the authorities will question me, but I will make up a story. *(Beat)* I’ll tell them we had a fight and you ran off and I went to find you.

**Tran**

Then what will you do?

**Kim**

I will wait...until I learn that you are safe.

**Tran**

How will you know I am safe?

**Kim**

Aunt Hoa. She is allowed to send letters to my mother. When you reach her, tell her to let me know in one of her letters. She will disguise the message so the police won't be suspicious.

**Tran**

But that might be months from now.

**Kim**

I will need the time to plan **my** escape.

**Tran**

I cannot do this.

**Kim**

You must. For both of us. *(Beat)* The boat is leaving!

*(TRAN kneels in front of KIM, places his hands on her feet, and speaks as if quoting a poem.)*

**Tran**

I leave the imprint of my hands on your feet, so wherever you walk, you will feel me with you.

*(KIM embraces Tran's head and raises him to his feet. They look at each other for a moment, and then he turns and exits abruptly stage left. Spot goes off as Kim slips out of her "escape costume" and returns to the table with CELIA in the nail salon. Lights come up on the salon.)*

**Kim**

*(Looks at the bamboo tree behind her, turns back to Celia)* Yes, the bamboo reminds me of many things about Vietnam.

*(BARBARA, fashionably dressed, enters stage left, slips off her jacket, hangs it on the coat rack, and removes her cell phone and a bottle of nail polish as she speaks.)*

**Barbara**

Sorry I'm late, but I had to stop at the pet store to pick up some food pellets for a client's rabbit and... *(Finally notices KIM is working on Celia's nails)* ...oh, Kim, I... I'm not that late, am I?

*(KIM slightly shakes her head "no.")*

I mean, I did have an appointment. It's not as if I were a walk-in.

**Kim**

*(Lowers her mask)* I should only be about fifteen more minutes, Barbara. Then I can do your nails.

**Barbara**

*(Checks her wristwatch)* Fifteen. Oh my, I'm not sure I can wait that long, but I do need to have my nails done today. All I need is a fill.

**Kim**

Tran can do that for you, right now.

**Barbara**

Tran? He's never done my nails before. Does he know how...? I like them?

**Kim**

I will tell him how you like your nails. Don't worry. Tran obtained his nail certificate before I did. He taught me most of what I know. And he's very fast. Do you want to go ahead and sign in?

**Barbara**

Well, I suppose I have no real choice, do I? *(Mutters to herself as she goes to the counter to sign in)* Just because I'm a few minutes late.

*(KIM calls to TRAN who enters and listens as she explains in Vietnamese what he should do. BARBARA has a look of suspicion, as if she thinks they're criticizing her. TRAN nods, approaches BARBARA, bows slightly.)*

**Tran**

Good morning, Barbara. Would you like to sit here?

*(TRAN shows her to a table center stage. As she passes CELIA, BARBARA looks down at her with an artificial smile and says, insincerely, "Good morning." CELIA nods in acknowledgment of Barbara's greeting.)*

**Celia**

*(To KIM)* I hope I do not cause you a problem.

**Kim**

We never want to turn away a customer, so this sometimes happens. You are not a problem.

**Celia**

*Bueno.*

---

*(Lights go down on KIM and CELIA, up on TRAN and BARBARA, and vice versa when the focus of conversation shifts during this scene.)*

**Tran**

So, Barbara, have you been house-sitting any interesting pets since the last time you were here?

**Barbara**

*(Places her car keys and cell phone on the table)* Why, Tran, I'm surprised you remember that's what I do.

**Tran**

*(As he begins working on Barbara's nails)* We try to remember everything about our customers, especially when it is something unique.

**Barbara**

Well, now that you've asked, I did have one crazy episode last week. This doctor and his wife were going to Europe for two weeks, and they asked me if I could house-sit their Siamese cats, which I'd done before, so I said sure. Then he tells me they had recently gotten a mixed breed Lab—you know, a Labrador retriever?

**Tran**

Yes, I know.

**Barbara**

Well, I just love Labs; they're so, I don't know, kind of forlorn-looking and really affectionate for big dogs. Of course, this one was still a pup but big enough, believe me. Anyway the doctor said, when you let him out of the house, be sure to keep him on a leash because he'll take a running leap for the pool cover and if he lands on it, he'll rip it right in half and it would cost like five hundred dollars to replace it.

**Tran**

*(Looks up from his work)* Five hundred dollars? For a pool cover?

**Barbara**

That's what he said. I guess it was custom-made or something, and the doctor said there are a lot of other things he'd rather spend that much money on. So the first time I took the Lab outside, I put several Hound's Tooth dog biscuits—you know, the gourmet kind?—in my pocket and sure enough that dog started straining and pulling on the leash and I knew I couldn't hold him back so I took out one of the biscuits and started waving it in front of him and you should have seen him settle down. Those dog biscuits are expensive but worth every penny at a time like that.

**Tran**

Gourmet dog biscuits?

*(BARBARA's cell phone rings; she looks to see who's calling.)*

**Barbara**

Oh my, it's Mrs. O'Connell. I'm supposed to house-sit her parrots this weekend. I hope she's not canceling. Would you mind handing me my cell phone, Tran?

**Tran**

Actually, Barbara, we prefer that customers not use cell phones while in the salon. It can disturb the other customers.

**Barbara**

*(Looks around the salon)* I know what you prefer, Tran, but there's only that one other customer at the moment, and pet-sitting for people like Mrs. O'Connell is how I'm able to pay you.

*(TRAN reluctantly nods and hands the phone to BARBARA who takes it with her fingertips. She begins the conversation in a light, cheery voice.)*

Hello Mrs. O'Connell. This is Barbara Whitaker . . . .

*(Light focus is back on KIM and CELIA. Silence for a few moments which makes Celia, who is very talkative, uncomfortable. Then she brightens up at the prospect of a new topic.)*

**Celia**

My teacher, the woman who helped me prepare for the citizen interview, her name also was Kim. *O*, I should say, her nickname was Kim, for Kimberly.

**Kim**

My name in Vietnamese is just Kim. It means gold or golden.

**Celia**

Ahh, *oro*, I see. *(Beat)* My name, Celia, means heaven.

**Kim**

I was named for my grandmother, Kim-Li, golden lion.

**Celia**

But you did not name your daughter Kim?

**Kim**

No. She was born in America, so we named her for the midwife who delivered her.

**Celia**

*Y*, your husband's name?

**Kim**

Tran? It means honored or decorated. But Tran is the family name, not a first name.

**Celia**

*Por qué...* eh, why do you call him this way?

**Kim**

When he came to America, he gave his name to the immigration officer as it is in Vietnamese: Tran duc Anh. The officer thought Tran was his first name. He wrote it that way, and that's how it appeared on official documents, so we never bothered to change it.

**Celia**

*Pero*, it is not right . . . eh, correct.

**Kim**

Our Vietnamese family and friends know the difference, and it doesn't matter to Americans.

*(Light focus shifts to TRAN and BARBARA, who hands her phone to TRAN. He closes it, places it on the table and resumes working on Barbara's nails, trying to avoid conversation as much as possible.)*

**Barbara**

That Mrs. O'Connell and her parrots. *(Beat)* She's a very religious woman. She teaches her parrots little spiritual sayings like "God bless you" and "sweet Jesus." *(Beat)* She taught them a new phrase since the last time I house-sat for her and she didn't want me to be surprised if they say it. *(Beat)* "Are you saved?"

**Tran**

*(Looks up at her)* Pardon me?

**Barbara**

"Are you saved?" That's the new phrase she's taught her parrots. Lord knows why, unless she's inviting heathens into her home to convert them. *(Beat)* Not that she invites me into her home because she thinks I'm a heathen. I mean, I don't go to church as often as I should, but I read my Bible and I do pray.

*(Beat as BARBARA glances toward the Buddha shrine.)*

Is that what you do at your little shrine over there?

**Tran**

Not exactly. As Buddhists we do not pray to a God; we honor the spirit of the Buddha and of our ancestors.

**Barbara**

I suppose that's a bit like Mrs. O'Connell. She has statues and religious pictures all over her house. She's very Catholic. (*Looks more intently at the shrine*) I don't think she burns incense though; at least, I've never smelled it in her house.

**Tran**

We burn incense for its fragrant aroma, but also to remind us that all things, even the most pleasant, are fleeting.

**Barbara**

That must be true of your flowers too. Mrs. O'Connell has a lot of flowers around her house, but most of them are artificial. I don't suppose your flowers are artificial.

**Tran**

No, Barbara. They are not.

**Barbara**

How often do you change them?

**Tran**

Every day. It is a sign of respect to have fresh flowers.

**Barbara**

That must get expensive.

**Tran**

The worth of things is not always their dollar value.

*(Lights go down on the salon; a spot comes up on KIM who, facing the audience, speaks to an unseen person.)*

**Kim**

I don't have any more money! You agreed to this price and I have paid you. Now get me into Cambodia. (*Pause*) I know there are more border guards now, but more money won't make it less dangerous. (*Pause, then a shocked reaction*) No! This is my wedding ring. I will not give it to you. (*Pause*) It is only a silver band. It is not worth much—in money. (*Pause*) No, no. I must get into Cambodia today. I have already tried to escape Vietnam three times; the communists are watching for me. (*Looks skyward, frustrated, distressed*) Oh, what should I do? I must leave today. Everything is arranged. (*Takes a deep breath, removes her ring and looks at it in her hand*) If I give it to you, how will you get me into Cambodia? (*Pause*) In that wagon? With those chickens and goats and the sacks of feed? I myself have not eaten for two days and now I must hide among food for animals! (*Pause*) What if there are new guards who don't know you make this trip to the mission three times a week? What if they search your wagon? (*Pause*) A bribe? What can you give them for a bribe? (*Pause. KIM nods, opens her hand, takes the ring, and holds it in front of her.*) Here. Now take me to Cambodia.

*(Lights come up on the salon. CELIA and BARBARA are sitting next to each other as their nails dry. KIM and TRAN are at the counter, speaking in Vietnamese.)*

**Barbara**

*(Speaks in a confidential tone to CELIA.)* I hate it when they speak in Vietnamese. It makes me feel they're talking about us.

**Celia**

*Si.*

**Barbara**

I just think when there are customers in the salon, they should speak our language.

**Celia**

*Si.*

*(TRAN begins speaking in Vietnamese, then switches to English so the audience can understand what he is saying.)*

**Tran**

If we could get just a few more customers each day, we won't have to raise our prices.

**Kim**

But if our costs keep going up, we'll have to raise our prices even with more customers.

**Tran**

In hard economic times, people cut back. They think of a service like ours as a luxury they can't afford.

**Kim**

*(Holds out her hands as if examining her nails)* I have never had a manicure.

**Tran**

And I have never had a pedicure!

*(KIM and TRAN laugh at the irony of their comment which prompts BARBARA to get up and begin to leave.)*

**Barbara**

I wish I could wait until my nails are completely dry, but I simply can't be late for Mrs. O'Connell. Is it still fifteen for a fill?

**Tran**

Yes.

**Barbara**

*As she removes her wallet from the jacket on the coat rack*) Oh, and I have a coupon for three dollars off, so that makes it twelve. You can take it out of this.

*(BARBARA gingerly removes a ten and a five and hands them to TRAN who goes to the cash drawer.)*

*(As she puts on her jacket)* I'm so glad you haven't raised your prices, Kim. You're still the cheapest salon I know of, especially with those coupons.

**Kim**

We hope to keep it...inexpensive.

*(TRAN hands BARBARA her change. She hands him back a dollar bill.)*

**Barbara**

Here's a little something for you, Tran. Don't spend it all in one place, heh, heh.

**Tran**

I won't.

*(BARBARA exits.)*

**Celia**

Do I go now?

*(Lights fade out as a spot light comes up on ANGELA who enters and crosses to center stage.)*

**Angela**

Now I'd heard how the Vietnamese had pretty much taken over the nail business—another foreign monopoly in our own country—and I thought, they're not so dumb, these Vietnamese. I mean, how hard can this be? Minimum skill, low overhead, steady customers, and you don't even have to speak English. Just another job Americans let get away from them, I guess. I was pondering this when I heard, "You ha' boy friend?"

"Ah, no," I said, hoping she wouldn't ask why. "Why a ni', pretty girl like you not ha' boy friend?"

*(Audience laughter)*

"Because I'm..." I started to say, but she went right on. "I gi' you long nail. Boy like girl wi' long nail. Only five dollar more."

*(Blackout; End Scene 1)*

---

**ACT I**  
**SCENE 2**

*(Same day, early evening. Lights come up on the salon. TRAN is at the counter, beginning to sort through the mail. KIM enters stage right, untying the mask under her chin, walks wearily to one of the tables near TRAN, and slumps into a chair.)*

**Kim**

Do me a favor, Tran. Do not wish for more walk-in customers for awhile. I can't remember a day when we were so busy.

**Tran**

I know. I haven't even had a chance to go through our mail.

**Kim**

If this keeps up, we may have to hire another technician.

**Tran**

Or maybe take a vacation—finally.

**Kim**

It would be nice not to work so hard just to pay bills.

**Tran**

**And** to save for Laura's future, whatever she wants it to be.

**Kim**

She doesn't want it to be in the nail business, that's for sure.

**Tran**

Can you blame her? She has so many other opportunities before her. We had little choice when we came to this country. We were fortunate that Aunt Hoa was already established in nails and could help us get started.

**Kim**

I know, Tran, but you were an engineer in Vietnam; I was a school teacher. Who would have thought that we'd end up working in a nail salon?

**Tran**

It is honest work, Kim. I am not ashamed of it.

**Kim**

Neither am I. But sometimes I wonder if we could have done better.

**Tran**

We also could have done worse. No one knows the outcome of decisions not taken.

**Kim**

You were an engineer, Tran, not a philosopher. Open the mail . . . while I close my eyes.

*(TRAN tosses away a few ads, opens one or two apparent bills, examines one envelope for a moment, then opens it. As he reads the enclosed letter, he shows growing concern.)*

**Tran**

*(Approaches Kim with the letter)* Kim, you better open your eyes and read this.

**Kim**

What is it?

**Tran**

A letter from the manager of our strip mall.

**Kim**

*(Takes the letter, reads aloud)* “Dear Tenant.” *(Looks at TRAN)* We have been here five years. Does he not know our names?

**Tran**

I think it’s a form letter. Down below they have typed in the name of our salon.

**Kim**

“I write to inform you of a change in your lease. As you know, with the new mega-mall being built across the street and other developments being planned, the value of property in this area is increasing.” *(To TRAN)* That sounds good.

**Tran**

Keep reading.

**Kim**

“This has resulted in higher taxes, new zoning impact fees, and utility and property upgrades.” *(Beat)* I don’t understand what all that means.

**Tran**

What it means **to us** is in the next part.

**Kim**

*(Reads with growing shock and alarm)* “As the management company of the strip mall where your business is located, we are faced with increased expenses related to these charges. We have considered all our options and our only realistic choice is to make a one-time assessment on all occupants and to raise your monthly rent, something we have not done for two years.

**Kim, Continued**

“The assessment for each tenant is five hundred dollars, payable within sixty days. The monthly rent for “Just Your Nails” will increase by four hundred dollars beginning next month.”

*(KIM stands and begins pacing nervously, growing more disturbed as the impact of this news sinks in.)*

Tran, where will we get this money? We barely clear four hundred dollars a month now.

**Tran**

When we have a good month.

**Kim**

This is not fair. They can't just impose this...this assessment, and raise our rent at the same time.

**Tran**

Yes, they can. We signed an at-will lease. They can change the terms anytime they want.

**Kim**

With no discussion, no notice?

**Tran**

This **is** our notice.

**Kim**

Maybe we should meet with this manager, make him understand our situation.

**Tran**

I don't think it would do much good. It sounds like the decision has already been made. Besides, we are not very good at confronting people.

**Kim**

Then perhaps we should meet with the other tenants, see if we can do something together.

**Tran**

Like what?

**Kim**

I don't know...maybe offer our services for free to the employees of this company instead of paying more rent.

**Tran**

Kim, we share this mall with a dry cleaner, a donut shop, and a used bookstore. How many of those “free services” would it take to meet this increase? Besides, I’m sure they want the money.

**Kim**

But we’ve been good, reliable tenants. We always pay our rent on time, keep the salon clean and up-to-date, bring in customers for the other businesses.

**Tran**

I don’t think any of that matters to them.

**Kim**

Then what does?

**Tran**

*(Takes the letter and reads)* “These changes will meet our obligations and insure the success we all seek.”

**Kim**

Success? What does he mean by that?

**Tran**

I remember Aunt Hoa telling me when I first arrived here: In Vietnam success means surviving; in America it means “making more.”

**Kim**

Then we will make more.

**Tran**

How? We don’t want to raise our prices and lose customers.

**Kim**

We can work longer hours, open the salon on Sundays.

**Tran**

We cannot work all the time, Kim, and even if we did, I don’t think we can make enough to meet this increase.

**Kim**

If that is so, we should begin looking for another location that we can afford.

**Tran**

That means we will have to start building up our business all over again. I don’t think I have the energy for that. *(Beat)* Maybe we should apply for a small loan, to carry us over.

**Kim**

It is not our way to borrow.

**Tran**

But this is America.

**Kim**

And we are Vietnamese. A loan is the doorway to debt.

**Tran**

Then what are we to do?

*(CELIA appears at the door and hesitantly enters.)*

**Celia**

Hello, good evening.

**Kim**

*(Sees CELIA)* Celia, you're back. *(Beat)* Do you not like your nails?

**Celia**

Oh, *si*, I like them very much. I come now because this morning I left without giving you a tip.

**Kim**

A tip is not necessary.

**Celia**

*Pero* my daughter told me it is, eh, customary.

*(Offers KIM a folded bill. KIM takes it and looks at it.)*

**Kim**

Oh, Celia, this is too much.

**Celia**

No, no. It is from me **and** my daughter. She also likes my nails very much.

**Kim**

Then tell her to come to our salon, and I will do her nails too.

**Celia**

Oh, *si, si*.

*(Awkward silence for a moment as CELIA smiles and looks around, not sure what to say or do.)*

*Bueno.* Good evening.

*(As CELIA turns to exit, she holds out her hand, wiggles her fingers, showing off her nails, and smiles.)*

*Y gracias.* *(Exits)*

**Kim**

*(Waves the money in the air)* Here's a start, Tran...

*(Lights go down as KIM crosses to stage right where TRAN has already moved. Spot on them both as she continues speaking.)*

...our first U.S. dollars to pay the boatman.

**Tran**

Shh. You must not say that out loud, Kim. Someone may hear you and report it to the police. I learned in the re-education camp the police think anyone with U.S. money is a spy for the CIA. We must hide this money.

**Kim**

Where?

**Tran**

*(Thinks for a moment)* At the well by my father's house. There are two loose stones on one side where my brother and I used to hide candy and toys as children.

**Kim**

Will it be safe there?

**Tran**

Safer than in our house.

*(KIM nods in agreement and hands the money to TRAN who counts it.)*

Where did you get this much money?

**Kim**

At the flea market.

**Tran**

The flea market! It is run by peasants. You are a professional teacher.

*(KIM gestures over her head indicating the shape of a "koolie" hat)*

**Kim**

I wore the “non la” hat and the oldest clothes I could find. No one recognized me. *(Pause)* But I was ashamed to be there.

**Tran**

I don't want you going to the flea market again.

**Kim**

The flea market is the only place I could think of to sell the miniature paintings Aunt Hoa gave me before she left Vietnam.

**Tran**

Her paintings are works of art! They have been displayed in museums and galleries.

**Kim**

I know, but we must have money for our escape. The communists pay you almost nothing for your work, and I don't know how else to get it.

**Tran**

*(Frustrated, discouraged at their situation)* Who bought the paintings?

**Kim**

Three businessmen from Singapore. They insisted on using American money to show how successful they are.

**Tran**

Maybe their money will lead to **our** success.

*(Lights back up on the salon. TRAN is pacing, holding the letter.  
LAURA enters, drops her backpack by the counter.)*

**Laura**

Where's mother?

**Tran**

She took today's deposit to the bank. She will be back soon.

**Laura**

*(Looks around, sighs, sits down)* I wish we had a TV in this place.

**Tran**

A TV can be annoying to customers, especially if it's too loud or there is a program on that some people don't like.

**Laura**

But it's so boring when nobody's here. And I'm going to miss the re-run of last night's Comedy Club show.

*(LAURA flips open her cell phone to begin text-messaging.)*

**Tran**

Laura, there is something I want to talk to you about.

**Laura**

*(Sighs again, closes her cell phone)* I'll have a good attitude at Aunt Hoa's tonight.

**Tran**

I know you will, but it isn't about that. *(Holds out the letter)* We received this letter today from the manager of the mall. He is increasing our rent, and adding a special assessment to be paid in two months.

**Laura**

*(Matter-of-factly)* Everything gets more expensive.

**Tran**

Your mother and I do not know how we can pay this increase and the assessment at the same time.

**Laura**

Why don't you borrow it from the relatives and pay them back?

**Tran**

We would have to tell them our problem, and we do not share such personal matters, even with relatives.

**Laura**

Well, how about a loan from the bank?

**Tran**

Your mother will not hear of it. You know her feeling...

**Laura**

"A loan is the doorway to debt." *(Beat)* You could expand. Instead of doing just nails, add new services—massages, tanning—things that bring in more money.

**Tran**

We don't know anything about these services.

**Laura**

You didn't know anything about nails until you came to America.

**Tran**

That was twenty-five years ago. It is not so easy to learn new things at our age.

*(LAURA shrugs and gives a “what can I say?” look.)*

Laura, I am telling you about this because your mother is very worried that we may not be able to hold on to our nail business.

**Laura**

Maybe it's time to quit the nail business and do something else.

**Tran**

What else would we do?

**Laura**

Whatever you want. This is America.

**Tran**

That's your America, Laura. You're young and free and able to choose your future. We're Viet-Kieu, sojourners from Vietnam in another land.

**Laura**

But you've lived in America almost as long as you lived in Vietnam. And you're American citizens!

**Tran**

But we are not American...the way you are.

**Laura**

And I am not Vietnamese...the way you and mother are.

**Tran**

I know. But if we lose our business, we will also lose face, and that will be the worst of all. *(Beat)* So, I wanted you to know why your mother might be a little tense this evening.

**Laura**

More than usual?

**Tran**

Yes, more than usual. Try to understand her feelings.

**Laura**

More than usual?

*(KIM enters and sees TRAN with the letter.)*

**Kim**

I assume your father has told you about the news we received today.

**Laura**

Yes, mother.

**Tran**

Laura had a few suggestions right away about what we might do.

**Laura**

Father didn't think any of them would work.

**Tran**

But I appreciate that you made them. After all, this is a family matter.

**Kim**

*(To TRAN as she takes the letter)* Which **we** will decide.

**Laura**

I have one other suggestion.

**Kim**

We can talk about it later. We don't want to be late for Aunt Hoa's dinner.

**Tran**

We still have time. I'd like to hear Laura's next idea.

*(KIM looks sharply at TRAN, stands in a reluctant/resigned pose, forced to listen.)*

**Laura**

You can use the money you've been saving for my college expenses...until you figure out something more permanent.

**Kim**

*(Shows disbelief at the apparent absurdity of the idea)* Absolutely not!

**Tran**

That money is untouchable, Laura. It is only for you.

**Laura**

But I won't need it.

**Kim**

Of course you will. You know how expensive college is.

**Laura**

*(Pause)* I'm not going to college, not right away. *(Beat)* I'm going to join the Marines.

**Tran**

*(Uncharacteristically firm, even harsh)* No! We will not allow it.

**Laura**

I'll be eighteen by the time I graduate, Father. There's nothing you can do to stop me.

**Tran**

We talked about this, Laura, when you first mentioned it weeks ago. We decided you should go to college.

**Laura**

**You** decided. I said I would think about it. I have, and this is what I've decided to do.

**Kim**

And when were you going to tell us about this decision of yours?

**Laura**

I hadn't decided **that**, knowing you'd react the way you just did.

**Kim**

So why tell us now?

**Laura**

Because I thought it would help . . . help you deal with this news about an assessment, and increased rent, and not making enough money.

**Kim**

It doesn't help.

**Laura**

Obviously.

**Kim**

It hurts. It hurts to think you want to enter the military after all we have told you about the war and what we had to go through.

**Laura**

I know; you've told me a hundred times, but I don't see what that has to do with me wanting to join the Marines.

**Tran**

It has to do with what happens to you when you enter that life.

**Laura**

I learn new skills; I take on new responsibility; I make a real contribution.

**Tran**

You learn to stop thinking for yourself and do as you are told.

**Laura**

Follow orders, yes. That's how the military works.

**Tran**

It is more than following orders. It's becoming a certain kind of person, someone who will do things "under orders" you would never do on your own.

**Laura**

But you joined the South Vietnamese Army, Father.

**Tran**

I was forced to. I had no choice. And the only reason I survived the reeducation camp was because I never stopped thinking for myself.

**Laura**

Reeducation camp? You never told me about that.

**Tran**

We told you enough horrible things about those years. We did not think you needed to hear about the camps also.

**Kim**

But maybe now is the time.

*(TRAN hesitates, then nods, and crosses to stage right as KIM begins to speak.)*

After the Americans left Vietnam, the communists swarmed into the South, arresting everyone they considered rebels or traitors: soldiers, of course, but also religious leaders, teachers, government officials, anyone whose job might have aided the South.

**Laura**

What did they do with the people they arrested?

**Kim**

They sent them to "reeducation camps," prisons actually, where they indoctrinated them about the evils of democracy and the glories of communism.

**Laura**

It sounds like brainwashing.

**Kim**

It was. And along with that, each prisoner had to make frequent, humiliating confessions of their faults and errors in opposing communism.

**Tran**

*(Stands "at attention" holding a piece of paper)* My name is Tran duc Anh. This is my confession.

I was duped by the imperialist Americans into believing that their puppet government in South Vietnam would protect me and my family. The inevitable victory of the National Liberation Front, led by the Communist Party, has proven me wrong. I am ashamed of my error.

I now study the writings of the great revolutionary leaders of Communism. In my comrade group and under the direction of our enlightened instructor, I am learning and will continue to learn the true path. I acknowledge my mistake of believing western propaganda and I admit I must be reeducated.

I am an engineer. I betrayed the honor of my country by assisting the war machine of imperialist America with my knowledge and skill. I believe in the glory of productive labor and I am grateful for the opportunity to correct my past faults and assist in the rebuilding of a united Vietnam, if you, my superiors, graciously give me this chance.

**Kim**

The reeducation camps were not just about repeating communist propaganda and humiliating yourself with shameful confessions. There was also labor, hard labor, sometimes dangerous like clearing mine fields. The least productive groups were called lazy, and were punished.

**Tran**

*(As if talking to other workers, hoeing the ground)* I know you are tired, Lanh, but we must keep hoeing so the rest of our labor group can plant more corn. We have never been judged the laziest, even when we had to dig those latrines with bamboo poles. We must beat the other labor groups or they will cut our food rations and we'll be out here on Sunday too.

*(For the benefit of an invisible, passing guard first in English, then in Vietnamese)*

"Productive labor is the honor of the people. Productive labor is the honor of the people."

**Kim**

But the worst was at night when the names were called out.

**Voice OS**

The following comrades report to the camp entrance at once for evening exercise. Trung Danh. Phan Hung. Ngo Thu.

*(VOICE fades out with the calling of the last name.)*

**Kim**

And do you know what the “exercise” was?

**Tran**

*(Returns to Kim and Laura)* A brisk, long walk—almost a trot—into the jungle. Those chosen prisoners never came back. And every night when they started announcing the names, you almost died of fear that your name would be called.

*(There is a long, silent pause.)*

**Laura**

How long were you in this camp?

**Tran**

One year, nine months, two weeks, and four days.

**Laura**

How did you get out?

**Tran**

I convinced the authorities that I had completely renounced my liberal, democratic faults and had become a true communist. *(Beat)*

**Laura**

But you hadn't.

**Tran**

I was a good liar.

**Kim**

And an even better engineer. The government needed engineers to help rebuild the country.

**Laura**

So you cooperated with the communists?

**Tran**

I also wanted to rebuild the country, for the sake of the innocent people whose lives had been uprooted by the war.

**Laura**

But you still wanted to escape from Vietnam.

**Tran**

I wanted my freedom more. That's why I don't want you to lose your freedom by becoming the person the Marines want you to be.

**Laura**

I won't, Father. The Marine Corps is not a reeducation camp. I won't lose my ability to think for myself—any more than you did.

**Tran**

I wish I could believe that.

**Laura**

I wish you could also.

*(There follows a long, awkward silence.)*

**Kim**

It is time to go to Aunt Hoa's for dinner. We will talk about all this later.

*(Lights go to black; a spot light comes up on ANGELA.)*

**Angela**

Another thing I noticed while I was having my "puh-fect nail" done was the men. There were two of them in this salon and as far as I could figure, all they did was take the money, watch TV, and go outside for smokes. Talk about the easy life! Those guys have it all figured out.

*(Black out; End of Act I)*

## **ACT II**

### **SCENE 1**

*(The next morning, Saturday. As the curtain opens/lights come up, TRAN is at the counter; KIM enters stage right, goes to the counter, opens the cash drawer, and removes several coins. She goes to the Buddha shrine and places the coins before the Buddha. TRAN observes her action.)*

**Tran**

Do you think your coin offering will help us find a solution to our financial problems?

**Kim**

I place these few coins before the Buddha to remind me that financial prosperity is not the most important thing in life.

**Tran**

Be sure to remind me of that when the increased rent is due next month.

**Kim**

We must remain open and confident, Tran, so the solution will find its way into our hearts.

**Tran**

I would prefer it find its way into our salon. We have only six appointments today, none until eleven o'clock. And you were talking about opening on Sundays too!

**Kim**

And you were talking yesterday about giving Laura more responsibility for our salon. Maybe we **should** let her design a new ad for us, one that would attract customers her age.

**Tran**

If she liked that, she might become interested in doing even more. I would never want her to work here permanently, but if it would interest her enough not to join the Marines, I would encourage it.

**Kim**

I'm afraid it will take more than that.

**Tran**

I only wish I knew how to change her mind. Telling her our experiences has not worked.

**Kim**

They were **our** experiences, Tran, not hers. Besides, things are different now. The Marines are not the South Vietnamese army.

**Tran**

Are you in favor of Laura joining the Marines?

**Kim**

No, but it is not our decision. As she reminded us, she will be free to do what she wants when she graduates. We cannot stop her.

**Tran**

But we must not stop trying to enlighten her.

**Kim**

About what, Tran? Conditions in Vietnam thirty years ago? Traditional customs and rituals that have no meaning for her?

**Tran**

No, about all the opportunities she has in America.

**Kim**

What do we really know about those opportunities? All we have done for the past twenty-five years is work in nail salons.

**Tran**

And save, so we could buy our own house.

**Kim**

With no furniture for the first year, remember?

**Tran**

I remember how we sacrificed, and saved, so we could send Laura to good schools, and prepare her for her future—a better future than in the Marines.

**Kim**

Maybe joining the Marines **is** better for her. Maybe we have made it too easy for her. Maybe she is looking for the kind of challenge the Marines can offer.

**Tran**

What kind of challenge is that? Learning to fight? College offers a challenge too—learn a profession, contribute to society.

**Kim**

That may not be the challenge Laura is looking for. I think she wants to prove she **is** American.

**Tran**

Why would she have to prove that? She was born and raised here.

**Kim**

What do you think people see when they look at her? A native-born American? They see an Asian, someone different from them.

**Tran**

But she speaks perfect English. We have seen to that.

**Kim**

Which will make her seem only like an exception to what people expect. It will make no difference in the way they view her.

**Tran**

And you think being a Marine will make this difference?

**Kim**

I think Laura does. Being a Marine gives her credibility as an American—all at once.

**Tran**

Then you do agree with her about joining the Marines.

**Kim**

I don't know if I agree or not, but I remember what Aunt Hoa said to me when Laura was born. "A person cannot breathe through another one's nose."

**Tran**

I know that Vietnamese proverb. Why did Aunt Hoa quote it when Laura was born?

**Kim**

"Remember, Kim," she said, "just as a newborn must breathe on its own if it is to live, so must a person do the same as an adult." Laura wants to breathe on her own.

**Tran**

But some air is better to breathe than other air.

**Kim**

We know we do not want her breathing the air in this salon—or any other. She must find her own air to breathe, and we must let her.

**Tran**

Well, there is still time before she graduates. Maybe she will change her mind.

**Kim**

Or maybe we will change ours.

**Tran**

It seems to me you already have. I have not heard you speak on Laura's behalf like this since she became a teenager.

**Kim**

I am only trying to understand, and do what is right.

**Tran**

For her or for us?

**Kim**

What do you mean?

**Tran**

If Laura joins the Marines, she would not need her college fund for several years, if ever. It is very tempting in view of our present situation to use it ourselves, especially because the money in that fund came from us.

**Kim**

Tempting, yes; but that is not why I speak on Laura's behalf—if that is what I am doing.

**Tran**

Why then?

**Kim**

I heard a different Laura yesterday, more determined, more mature than I expected. I think maybe for the first time I actually listened to her.

**Tran**

And you liked what you heard?

**Kim**

I liked that she spoke as a young woman, not as a child.

**Tran**

I did not hear her like this.

**Kim**

Perhaps you were only listening to yourself. Listen to Laura. You may be surprised at what you hear. *(Beat)* Now, go pick her up at Amy's while I get things ready here.

*(TRAN exits stage left; KIM goes into the back room stage right. After a moment, the door opens and ANGELA enters. She looks around, goes to the counter, comes to center stage and speaks aloud to herself.)*

**Angela**

Jeez, did I pick the wrong place. Nobody's here. How am I going to get new material for my routine?

*(KIM enters from the back room and acknowledges Angela's presence)*

**Kim**

Hello. I thought I heard someone speaking.

**Angela**

Oh, just me. Talking away. It's a habit I have.

**Kim**

May I help you?

**Angela**

Ah, yeah, maybe. Do you do toenails?

**Kim**

Yes.

**Angela**

Is that like a pedicure?

**Kim**

If that's what you want.

*(ANGELA is taken slightly aback, expecting a "hard sell." She also makes up "her story" as she goes along.)*

**Angela**

Oh, well, what I want...what I need really is to have my toenails clipped. See, ah, I hurt my back last week and can't bend over, and my nails are getting a little long and starting to hurt when I wear shoes.

**Kim**

Then you may only need to have them trimmed.

**Angela**

So, you wouldn't recommend a pedicure?

**Kim**

We only do what the customer wants.

**Angela**

Good ol' American spirit, eh? The customer is always right.

*(KIM smiles, nods.)*

What goes into a pedicure anyway?

**Kim**

With a pedicure, I trim your nails, clean the skin around them, scrub your feet, massage your legs, and paint your nails a color you like.

**Angela**

How much does all that cost?

**Kim**

A pedicure is twenty dollars, unless you have any calluses you want me to scrape. Then it will be twenty-five.

**Angela**

And what if you just cut my toenails?

**Kim**

Ten dollars.

**Angela**

*(Baits KIM with a line from her comedy skit)* Oh, what the heck? Let's go for the pedicure. Who knows, it might even attract that **boyfriend** I've never had.

**Kim**

*(Shows no reaction to Angela's comment)* I'm sure you will be pleased. Would you like to go ahead and sign in?

*(KIM motions toward the counter, then goes to the foot-soaking lounge and turns on the water.)*

**Angela**

I didn't expect you'd take me right away. I thought you'd be busier.

**Kim**

Our regular customers will begin coming at eleven.

**Angela**

*(Almost to herself)* Lucky me. *(Pause)* Do you run this shop by yourself?

**Kim**

My husband and I operate it.

**Angela**

What does he do here?

**Kim**

*(Looks at Angela quizzically)* Nails. *(Beat; gestures toward the lounge)* Would you like to have a seat?

*(ANGELA crosses over and settles uneasily into the lounge.)*

**Angela**

How'd you get into this business?

**Kim**

When my husband...and then I...came from Vietnam, my aunt was already working in a nail salon. She helped us get started.

**Angela**

Kind of a family thing, huh? You know, I've been told that most of these nail salons are run by you people. Do you know how all that got started?

**Kim**

*(Begins working on Angela's feet)* Yes.

*(Waits for KIM to continue, but she doesn't.)*

**Angela**

Would you mind telling me? *(Removes a small notebook and pen from her shirt)* You see, I'm a...I'm a...a free lance writer, and I think this might make an interesting story.

*(A long pause follows, then KIM begins the story while continuing to work on Angela's feet.)*

**Kim**

When the first Vietnamese immigrants began coming to this country in the 1970s, they stayed in refugee camps that were set up in southern California. Some of the movie stars began to visit the camps and took an interest in the women there.

*(Lights fade to black on KIM and ANGELA; a spot comes up stage right on the MOVIE STAR and her manicurist.)*

**Movie Star**

Do you see what I mean? Look how these women work with their fingers. They're so attentive to detail, so accurate, and quick.

**Manicurist**

I'm sure I could train them, darling, but do you think they want to be manicurists, much less pedicurists?

**Movie Star**

I don't know, but I want to give them that chance. Our country has done so much harm to their country in this war.

**Manicurist**

You're not acting out of guilt, are you?

**Movie Star**

What if I am? These women have already suffered enough, and given up so much just to get to this country. I want to help them make it here.

**Manicurist**

All well and good, but you're talking about something that's never been done before—Vietnamese refugees working in beauty salons?

**Movie Star**

Why not?

**Manicurist**

For one reason, the women who frequent beauty salons aren't likely to be comfortable with them working on their nails.

**Movie Star**

They'd get used to it.

**Manicurist**

I wouldn't count on that. But for a second reason, we're still at war with Vietnam. Have you thought of how that might affect your own career?

**Movie Star**

What do you mean?

**Manicurist**

You're a movie star, darling, a celebrity. That's why you hired **me** to do your nails. Fans may misunderstand your motives about helping these people and put you in the same foxhole with Jane Fonda.

**Movie Star**

Nonsense!

**Manicurist**

I'm just saying...

**Movie Star**

I'm just asking: will you train them?

**Manicurist**

You know I'd do anything for you, dear, but...how would I communicate with them?

**Movie Star**

There are interpreters. And the women are studying English.

**Manicurist**

I wonder how you say "acrylic" in Vietnamese? What about getting their license to practice?

**Movie Star**

I've already talked with the head of the cosmetology commission. He's open to conducting the tests in Vietnamese. (*Beat*) Being a celebrity helps.

**Manicurist**

All right, suppose everything goes perfectly: they take the training, pass the test, get their license. Who hires them?

**Movie Star**

No one. I've been thinking, what if they open their own salons?

**Manicurist**

And compete with established beauty parlors?

**Movie Star**

They'd do only nails—manicures and fills and pedicures—a niche market.

**Manicurist**

Who would be their customers?

**Movie Star**

Middle-class women who can't afford, or don't want, a full service beauty treatment but would like to have nice nails.

**Manicurist**

How would these "prospective" customers find out about these Vietnamese nail salons?

**Movie Star**

My publicist is working on it.

**Manicurist**

Is there anything you haven't already taken care of?

**Movie Star**

How to be sure this will really work.

**Manicurist**

Well, I suppose we won't know that until we try, will we?

**Movie Star**

You'll do it then?

**Manicurist**

You pay me too much to refuse. Where shall I start?

**Movie Star**

With this woman I met last week. Her name is Hoa, which I'm told means some type of flower. She strikes me as very determined, willing to work hard, do whatever it takes to be a success.

**Manicurist**

Then by all means, take me to your flower woman.

---

*(The MOVIE STAR and MANICURIST exit. Lights come back up on KIM and ANGELA in the nail salon.)*

**Angela**

Who was the movie star?

**Kim**

I don't remember her name. I don't go to many movies.

**Angela**

Me neither, not with the price of tickets these days. *(Beat, then with curiosity)* Do you watch television?

**Kim**

Not much.

**Angela**

Too hard for you to understand, huh?

**Kim**

No, I understand. *(Pause)* Our salon is open until seven, sometimes later if we have last minute walk-ins. By the time we get home and have dinner, it's just about time for bed.

**Angela**

How far away do you live?

**Kim**

About fifteen miles.

**Angela**

Wow, you could live a lot closer to your shop. I'm at the Kensington apartments, just a few blocks away. I walked here in about ten minutes. *(Kim shows no reaction)* I guess there are a lot of other Vietnamese where you live.

**Kim**

No.

**Angela**

Oh. I was wondering, you know, with so many of you running these nail places, I thought maybe you all lived together, like in one neighborhood.

**Kim**

No.

**Angela**

I mean I don't see a lot of you in stores or restaurants or...other places.

*(KIM gives no reaction. After a brief, awkward pause:)*

How long have you been doing nails?

**Kim**

Ever since I came to America, twenty-five years ago.

**Angela**

Do you like it?

**Kim**

*(Pause, deep sigh)* It is hard work.

**Angela**

Really? *(Beat)* I mean, I would think you'd say it's...unpleasant, or something.

**Kim**

Not really.

**Angela**

Cleaning people's toenails? Rubbing their feet? Maybe scraping their calluses like you said? I don't think I could do that.

**Kim**

In our culture we do not have the same feeling about people's feet as you do in America.

**Angela**

I guess not. *(Beat)* Have you ever **wanted** to do something different?

**Kim**

It's not so easy, coming from another country, to do whatever you want.

**Angela**

But immigrants in America have always done what they wanted. That's how our country was built. *(Beat)* But maybe you don't know that much about American history.

**Kim**

I have studied it.

*(Lights go down; KIM crosses to a table stage right and sits quietly. After a few moments an immigration office enters, greets her with a matter-of-fact "hello," sits down opposite her, opens her file and shuffles through the papers.)*

**Officer**

It appears your papers are in order...application form, registration card, filing fee, fingerprinting fee...Do you know why you were fingerprinted?

**Kim**

To prove I am of good moral character.

**Officer**

Yeah, well, at least to prove you haven't been convicted of a crime. (*Beat*) What do the stripes in the American flag represent?

**Kim**

The thirteen original colonies.

**Officer**

Hmm. Who were the Pilgrims?

**Kim**

(*Taken slightly off-guard by the shift in questioning*) Ah, they were early settlers in America... from England.

**Officer**

Why did they come to America?

**Kim**

To escape religious persecution.

**Officer**

Is that why you came to America?

**Kim**

I came to be with my husband...and to escape communist persecution.

**Officer**

When did the Vietnam War begin?

**Kim**

For us it began right after World War II with the civil war between the North and the South.

**Officer**

When did it begin...for us?

**Kim**

It never officially began as a war, at least not with a declaration of war by Congress, which the Constitution requires, Article One, Section Eight.

**Officer**

Are you sure about that reference?

**Kim**

Yes, sir. I was a school teacher in Vietnam. I know how to study, and learn.

**Officer**

When was **our** civil war?

**Kim**

From 1861 to 1865.

**Officer**

What caused it?

**Kim**

Slavery. The southern states wanted to expand slavery to the new territories; the northern states wanted to confine it where it already existed; and some wanted to abolish it altogether.

**Officer**

What was the last state admitted to the union?

**Kim**

Hawaii.

**Officer**

You ever been there?

**Kim**

No sir.

**Officer**

Me neither. I just thought on your way here from Vietnam, you might have stopped there.

**Kim**

I escaped to Cambodia, then went to refugee camps in Singapore and the Philippines. (*Beat*) There were no camps in Hawaii.

**Officer**

Too close to home, I guess.

**Kim**

Perhaps.

**Officer**

If you become a citizen, what gives you the right to vote?

**Kim**

The nineteenth amendment to the Constitution.

**Officer**

Not the Constitution itself?

**Kim**

The Constitution gave the right to vote to men. Women did not have that right until the nineteenth amendment, passed in 1920.

**Officer**

Well, that was my only trick question, and you nailed it.

*(The IMMIGRATION OFFICER makes a few check marks on the paper and signs a form)*

You'll be getting a notice in about two weeks telling you when and where to take your oath of allegiance. *(Looks up from the papers)* Congratulations.

**Kim**

Isn't there supposed to be a language test?

**Officer**

Only if I think the applicant doesn't understand or speak English well enough. You're good to go.

*(Lights go down; KIM picks up a towel and returns to the lounge where ANGELA sits)*

**Angela**

You know, I'm really surprised how well you speak English. Some of the Vietnamese nail people I've met are pretty hard to understand.

**Kim**

English is a hard language for us to pronounce. Sometimes we hold a sound the way we would in Vietnamese and...

**Angela**

...it sounds funny to us.

**Kim**

...it is embarrassing to us.

**Angela**

At least you don't **have** to talk to do nails.

**Kim**

Sometimes silence can also make a customer uncomfortable.

**Angela**

Not as much as when you talk to each other in Vietnamese.

**Kim**

We try not to do this in front of our customers.

**Angela**

Yeah, but I get the feeling if you have to talk in Vietnamese, you're probably saying something about us you don't want us to understand.

**Kim**

Why do you think that?

**Angela**

Oh, eh, I don't know, maybe it's from an old Seinfeld skit I saw years ago.

**Kim**

Seinfeld?

**Angela**

Yeah, you know, the TV show. Oh, that's right, you don't watch much TV. Well, in this episode, Elaine, one of the main characters, is late for her manicure appointment because she didn't have correct change for the bus and had to walk and now she's really in a hurry and the women start talking to one another in Vietnamese, calling her "the princess" and mocking how important she thinks she is, and at first Elaine laughs along until she begins to realize they're making fun of her. It was really hilarious.

*(Kim gives no reaction.)*

You know, hilarious...like humorous, funny.

**Kim**

I know the word, but I don't know why it is funny to make fun of someone.

**Angela**

Well, it's the irony, the false assumptions. See, she thought they were saying nice things about her when they were really saying the opposite.

**Kim**

They ridiculed her and this made people laugh?

**Angela**

Maybe you had to see it, or maybe it's just an American kind of humor.

*(TRAN and LAURA enter. LAURA sees ANGELA and slowly slips out of her backpack and places it carefully on the floor, watching ANGELA the whole time as if stalking her. She approaches the lounge where KIM is finishing Angela's feet.)*

**Laura**

You're Angela Hayden, aren't you?

**Angela**

*(Looks at Laura, taken slightly by surprise)* Why yes, yes I am.

**Laura**

Mother, do you know who this is?

*(KIM shakes her head.)*

Angela is a TV personality, a stand-up comedian.

**Tran**

*(Approaches the three women)* What is this "stand-up comedian"?

**Laura**

It's a one-woman show. It's just Angela talking to the audience, making them laugh.

**Kim**

*(To ANGELA)* Laugh about what?

**Angela**

Anything really. Situations people get into that strike me as funny.

**Laura**

Angela has one routine about going to a nail salon for the first time.

**Kim**

How do you know about this, Laura?

**Laura**

When you dropped me off at Amy's after dinner with Aunt Hoa last night, a couple of the other girls came over and we started watching TV, and guess what came on? The Comedy Club with Angela Hayden. And she did her nail salon bit.

**Tran**

Was it funny?

**Laura**

I'll let you be the judge. Why don't you do a little of your skit for my parents, Angela?

Oh, no, I...I couldn't just do it...here.

**Angela**

Why not? Nobody else is here.

**Laura**

Well, this isn't the proper setting.

**Angela**

But a joke is a joke, no matter where you tell it.

**Laura**

Laura, this is really not necessary.

**Kim**

But I want to see if you'll laugh.

**Laura**

**This is Not the End of the Play**  
**Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes**