



Photograph by Doug McCulloh.



SUSAN STRAIGHT

## From the Green of Vietnam to Toes Painted with Nirvana

They came here because of war, though people might not think of it that way when sitting down in the massage chair to have Anna Nguyen or Ly Ngo bend gracefully over their fingertips and sit with curved back over their feet. But from the years of brutal conflict in Vietnam, the farmlands and jungles and colonial-era streets of Saigon, men who fought alongside Americans were sent to reeducation camps, tortured and starved, and their wives and children had to fend for themselves in the ruined land.

Now nail salons anchor nearly every strip mall and upscale shopping plaza. Excellent Nails, Star Nails, Hot Nails—thousands of doors out of which float the sharp smells of acetone and the lilting voices of women who paint delicate flower petals onto toenails, with a flick of the fingers and concentration.

At Nail Spa Boutique in Riverside, Kim Ngo sits on a low stool where she spends her eight-to-ten-hour days, tonight trimming excess cuticle from Charlie Freeman's toenails, then rubbing off dead skin with a pumice tool, then rinsing the feet, and then massaging lotion into Freeman's calves. Freeman, a realtor, comes here once a month, and so do her husband, daughter, son, and her seven-year-old granddaughter. She considers pedicures a necessary part of life, saying with laughter, "Red makes my toes look better." Ngo finally strokes on the color. Twenty toes—Too Red.

Kim Ngo came to Riverside twenty-two years ago from Saigon. She murmurs in Vietnamese that she doesn't miss Saigon so much because she makes a lot more money here, but there is wistfulness in her voice. Her husband was in a reeducation camp after the war. I saw Ngo last week in Target, and she gave me a hug. We stood in

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line together, her cart holding only bottled water and French-style baguettes for lunch at the salon; she glanced at other full shopping carts and said softly to me, “Americans all so tall—they have so much food. Look how short—I never had food in Vietnam.”

“Mani-pedi” is now a part of American lexicon because of women like Ngo, who left home. Minh Pham is here at Nail Spa today, translating. His sister-in-law Nga Pham is working on a manicure at the table near the door. Minh’s mother, age sixty-one, worked for twenty years at Nail Tyme in Corona and now works at Nail Soleil there.

**Minh Pham:** *My father was in reeducation camp for ten years for fighting alongside the Americans during the Vietnam War and for trying to flee the country by boat. He saw many of his comrades die from starvation, illness, and being overworked. My father was forced to go into a land-mine-filled forest and clear trees and till the land to grow fruits and vegetables. Once a day, he was fed a small bowl of rice and a tablespoon of saltwater. While working, he would pick wild mushrooms and vegetation from the forest to eat. To keep him alive, my mother quit college to sell cigarettes and used clothes in the streets of Saigon to buy my father medicine and dried fish to eat.*

*My mother had to find work less than a month after coming to America in order to keep our family from becoming homeless. Working in the nail shop was the best fit because she was not required to know English and she knew family friends who owned Nail Tyme. She liked working in the nail shop because the tips helped her pay for food and she could learn English from talking to her customers. But over time, she developed asthma from breathing in the fumes. Her only dreams were for her two sons to graduate from college and to visit her seven siblings still living in Vietnam.*

The chairs are all filled on a Friday night just before Memorial Day. Ten women work at Nail Spa in a Target shopping plaza, opened fifteen years ago. My daughters came here for prom manicures, once or twice a year, and then for their brows. No one does my daughter Rosette’s brows like Kim Dang, who was always so kind, so patient, and when she asked about my family, I realized I knew little about hers. Her husband was also in a reeducation camp, and she came here twenty-two years ago from the Vietnamese city of Cuu Long.

The culture of Vietnamese-owned nail salons began in 1975, when twenty women refugees arrived at a tent city

called Hope Village near Sacramento. The actress Tippi Hedren, famous for Hitchcock films, visited the refugee camp, and the women were fascinated with her painted nails. She arranged for them to attend beauty school, and an industry was born. Now, more than 80 percent of California nail salons are owned by Vietnamese-born or Vietnamese Americans, an estimated 50 percent of all American nail technicians are Vietnamese, and Orange County is the capital of the technology. From Florida to New York to Los Angeles, Vietnamese women dominate the business in salons that also offer eyebrow waxing, facials, and hair services. But sometimes customers forget how physically hard the technicians work, or that they’ve spent their own savings on technician training and licensing and the equipment of a salon, where specialized chairs cost \$5,000 to \$10,000. Now and then, customers berate technicians for a smudge, complain about a fill, make fun of their language, or accuse them of talking about customers in Vietnamese. Nail technicians say sadly that their work isn’t always appreciated, but men seem to love the pampering. Minh’s cousin’s favorite customer in Corona is an African American construction worker who comes for a mani-pedi twice a month, leaves big tips, and smiles.

Tonight, fifty to sixty women will relax in the big chairs, and ten women will pull up stools and sit and bend and stand and stretch, with the tiny bottles of vivid paint beside them like totems, like the big Buddha who graces the altar. Every salon has a Buddha surrounded by flowers and incense and fruit—offerings for a good day.

Ming Ming finishes Devan Benter’s toes with a hot pink called New York Summer. Ming came here in 2000 from Saigon, because her husband’s family was already in Riverside. Nearby, Sylvia Villa’s toenails are painted in the milky brown shade of Nirvana (reminding me of the color of the Mekong River), with an overcoat of Big Money, and she smiles.

Ly Ngo came here twenty-two years ago from Saigon, and now is the manager of Nail Spa. She works at the opaque Lucite table near the front, doing French tip manicures, keeping an eye on the sign-in sheet and the money, helping a customer into the ubiquitous flat-plastic sandals to wear while the polish dries. She listens patiently to a regular customer speak about her family, her work. Ngo and the others overhear cell phone arguments with boyfriends, sad stories of love lost. Do they whisper to each other about the past,



Photographs from the Pham wedding.

about the foods or cousins they miss in Vietnam? Their customers will likely never know.

In a 1970s television commercial for detergent, Madge the manicurist would listen sympathetically to a story about a woman with dishpan hands, and Madge would say, “Try Palmolive; you’re soaking in it!” Back then, my girlfriends and I painted our own fingernails, inexpertly, with polish we bought from Kmart. I had never met a manicurist in my life. Manicures cost \$70 or more and were the province of the wealthy.

But during that same time, on that same television, images of America’s war in Vietnam terrified those watching as napalm fires raged to the sky and children ran away, as soldiers were airlifted in helicopters and fleeing Vietnamese civilians were huddled in those same helicopters, leaving their country behind.

**Minh Pham:** *The boat people left during the late 1970s. A lot of the people who escaped had to stay in the refugee camps until a country allowed them to enter. If they were not allowed to enter, then they were shipped back to Vietnam. Boat people landed everywhere: Southeast Asian countries (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines). They waited to enter European countries and the U.S.*

*In the late 1980s to early 1990s, under Humanitarian Operation, families of Southern Vietnamese soldiers who suffered persecution from the Communists were allowed to come to America. Our family came under HO in 1994. My mother was studying literature and law in Vietnam before the Viet Cong invaded Saigon. My parents chose to come to America so my brother and I could go to college. My mother told me that if I stayed in Vietnam, I would be selling lottery tickets on the streets or making carpenter nails in a factory. My eighth aunt and her daughter, my female cousin, actually worked in a factory hammering nails until about two years ago. My other aunts helped their sister get a job selling clothes in the outdoor market.*

Minh Pham graduated in 2013 with a Master of Fine Arts degree from University of California, Riverside, where he worked for three years on a book of essays and poetry about his parents. For him, his mother has bent over thousands of feet every year, and his father has worked hundreds of hours in a Chinese buffet restaurant. After twenty-two years, his mother has asthma, joint pain, and some trouble breathing. But she still works six days a week, brushing onto nails, ten at a time, the small strokes of color that will dry under her breath. **B**

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