

THE POLISHED MANICURE

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Sara Ljungkull

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SYNOPSIS: Mary, a Vietnamese manicurist, shares her personal experiences with unsuspecting American women. She speaks of the death of her children and her own near-death experience during the fall of Saigon. Her insight into the hearts of the mothers to whom she is speaking helps them reevaluate their priorities as they decide to put their children above their own selfish desires.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(3 WOMEN)

MARYA Vietnamese woman in her forties. She is the manicurist.

ALEXISA woman in her thirties. She is very wealthy.

TIFFANY.....A woman in her early thirties, also very wealthy.

SET

Inside a nail salon. One table and two chairs. On the table is a 3 x 4 photograph.

TIME: Present day.

SETTING:

The interior of a nail salon.

AT RISE:

A manicurist (MARY) is sitting at her station. A woman (ALEXIS) enters stage left. She is carrying many shopping bags: Bloomingdale's, Saks, etc. MARY looks up. She laughs to herself upon seeing ALEXIS entering. It is a knowing laugh, but not condescending.

ALEXIS: Do you have time for a fill?

MARY: *(Gesturing to a rack of polish.)* Yes. *(Laughs.)* Pick color.

ALEXIS: *(Not understanding.)* What did you say?

MARY: *(Taps her nails.)* Pick color.

ALEXIS: *(Pulls polish from purse.)* Oh, I brought my own.

MARY: Okay.

ALEXIS puts down her bags and sits.

ALEXIS: Would you mind hurrying a bit? I'm meeting someone for lunch.

MARY: What time you lunch?

ALEXIS: Twelve-thirty.

MARY: Don't worry, I be done.

ALEXIS: *(Takes off her watch and rings.)* Where are you from?

MARY: Vietnam.

ALEXIS: *(ALEXIS nods.)* I see.

MARY: You have pretty jewelry.

ALEXIS: Thank you.

MARY: I use to have pretty jewelry. But I have to sell. I had pretty necklace, black pearls. You know black pearls?

ALEXIS: Yes, I do, but I don't have any. *(Beat.)* Don't file my nails too much. I like them just the way they are.

MARY: *(Nodding.)* Don't worry.

ALEXIS: And make sure the fill is even. One time, I came in and the girl made my nails too thick and I had to come back.

MARY: I do a good job. Trust me.

ALEXIS: *(ALEXIS rotates her head to loosen up her neck.)* It feels good to take a break.

MARY: You married?

ALEXIS: Yes, I am. He's an investment banker at Golden Slacks.
(*Beat.*) That's a joke. It's really called Goldman Sachs. He does very well for himself. Of course, he'd have to, being married to me.

ALEXIS waits for a nod of recognition from MARY, but doesn't get one.

MARY: I married, once. My husband American soldier. He officer.

ALEXIS: Oh, I don't know anyone in the military.

MARY: Why not?

ALEXIS: Well, I'm not in that circle. I hope he was . . . Not all Americans are like that.

MARY: Like what?

ALEXIS: What?

MARY: Like what?

ALEXIS: Well, it's just that I've heard that soldiers in Vietnam would get girls like yourself pregnant, marry them, and then leave. Not all American men are like that.

MARY: You think he get me pregnant and leave?

ALEXIS doesn't reply.

MARY: He no left me. He died in Vietnam, fighting war. He a war hero. We love each other.

ALEXIS: I'm sorry, I just assumed . . .

MARY: What you know about war?

ALEXIS: Which one?

MARY: (*Annoyed.*) Vietnam!

ALEXIS: Well, I know that . . . it was very ugly.

MARY: (*Calmer.*) Yes, ugly . . . I married when I was sixteen. Then I have two children. They were beautiful. They look like their father. You want to see picture?

ALEXIS: Sure, why not.

MARY shows the old photograph in the frame on the table.

ALEXIS: They look very young here. How old are they now?

MARY: The boy, he was fourteen month and the girl two years old.

ALEXIS: How old are they now?

MARY puts the picture back, slowly, gingerly. It is a treasure to her.

MARY: You have children?

ALEXIS: Yes, two.

MARY massages ALEXIS' hand.

ALEXIS: Oh, I LOVE the massage. It's the best part of a manicure.

MARY: *(Nods.)* You children in school?

ALEXIS: No, they are with their nanny.

MARY: How old?

ALEXIS: One is four months and the other is, no, one is six months and the other is three. One boy and one girl.

MARY: Like me.

ALEXIS: Uh huh.

MARY: You lucky.

ALEXIS: Thank you.

MARY: You husband successful, you have two children, you very lucky. You have nanny to raise children, so you don't have to.

ALEXIS: Nooo, I have a nanny so I get some things done.

MARY: *(MARY looks at the packages.)* You like to shop, you have nanny for children. Where you children now?

ALEXIS: My children?

MARY: Yes, where are children? You know?

ALEXIS: Yes, of course I know. They are with their nanny. Are you almost done?

MARY: You not know where your children are?

ALEXIS: *(Astonished.)* They're with their nanny.

MARY: I was like you. I was very rich. In my country, we had people to care for us. I had woman care for my children. We had money. Before Saigon fall, my family have picnics. My clothes were handmade, very fine silk. We go to Hong Kong and get kimonos. My father, he have suits made of silk. We go to arts. My father was very influential. Did I say right? Influential?

ALEXIS: Yes.

MARY: But that not help in war. That not help my children. The Americans, they all start to leave Saigon. Everyone get scared. We not know what to do. My husband killed by Viet Cong, my father, too . . . No one help us. Everyone just trying to get away. They close embassy. They only take Americans. I try to give them my children, they look like their papa, but they lock gates. We suppose to go because I married, but no one let us in. We saw the helicopter leaving. Pretty soon, there no one left to

protect us. We know we in danger because we help Americans. My children and I, we try to escape, but nowhere to go. Then the soldiers came. They take Saigon. I try to hide my children. I try to keep them safe. Everybody gone. No one help us.

One night, they come to my house. Say they know we help Americans. Say people told them about us, that we traitors. They shot my father. He was old man. Then they take my children from me. They took my babies. I tried to stop them. I was screaming, but one of the soldiers hold me. I tried to get away, but the soldier, he only laughed. They say my children look like American so they shoot them. My baby was crying for me, and I couldn't do anything. Then they shoot me, but they not kill me. They thought I dead too. They left me. I saw them kill my children. I saw them, and I couldn't do anything. Then someone find me and hide me. I no want to live. Now I the only one left, so I come here.

ALEXIS: I'm sorry, I didn't know.

MARY: People say we were traitors. I not traitor, just in love. You understand? You lucky. What you do all day without children?

ALEXIS: Lots of things. I go to the gym, and meet friends, and I do some charity work.

MARY: You children be your charity.

ALEXIS: We don't need charity.

MARY: You no need charity? We all need charity. What you do with children when you away? They need Mama and Papa to teach them things like charity.

ALEXIS: My children are well cared for, and it's really none of your business. I'm sorry you lost your children, but don't take it out on me.

MARY: Yes?

ALEXIS: Yes. Are you finished?

MARY: Yes, I almost finished. *(Beat.)* You children, one day they grow up, or maybe one day they not there. I thought I protected, too. But I not. You Americans too busy for your children. There is nothing more important than them. I know. I know! If you no have money, you have time with children. No choice. I wish I have more time with my children. Now they gone. I miss them. If you children gone forever, you miss them, too.

ALEXIS: *(Finally getting it.)* Yes, I would. I'm sorry. You must miss them very much.

MARY: Yes, I miss them very much. All I want is my family back.
You lucky, you have your family.

ALEXIS: I guess I am.

MARY: (*MARY nods to ALEXIS.*) You children are very precious.

ALEXIS: I know. The oldest one, Garrett, he is so smart. He already knows his ABCs. And the baby, Veronica, is already the apple of her dad's eye. He adores her . . . when he's home. He has to work late a lot, so he doesn't get to see them very much. They're usually asleep when he gets home, and he's always in a hurry in the morning. So it's just me.

MARY: Maybe you children need to have you not so busy like their father. Maybe they need you.

ALEXIS: (*Pondering.*) Maybe they do.

MARY: Good. All finished.

ALEXIS gives her some money.

MARY: (*Looks at the money.*) Thank you.

ALEXIS: (*Gets up to leave.*) You're welcome. And . . . thank you.

MARY: You're welcome.

ALEXIS picks up bags and dials her cell phone while exiting stage.

ALEXIS: Cissy? Hi, it's Alexis. How are you? Good, thanks. Hey, I am sooo sorry, but I can't make it for lunch today. Yes, I'm fine. I don't mean to beg out, but my children need me today. I hope I'm not ruining your day. Oh, good. Thanks for understanding. Maybe you can come over for lunch or we can meet in the park or something. Okay, thanks. I'll call you and we'll figure something out. Bye. (*She dials another number.*) Lupe? Where are you? Well, stay there. I want to take the children for lunch. I'll be there in about twenty minutes. Okay, bye. (*Before she hangs up.*) Wait! LUPE? Can I talk to Garrett? Hi, honey! It's Mommy. I'm going to meet you for lunch today. Would you like that?

ALEXIS exits stage left. MARY laughs. TIFFANY enters stage left.

TIFFANY: Do you have time for a fill?

MARY: Yes, you have color?

TIFFANY: My nail broke and I need it fixed. I'm in a hurry. I'm meeting some friends.

MARY: Okay, don't worry.

TIFFANY: I brought my own polish.

MARY: Okay.

TIFFANY sets her bags down and sits across from MARY, who arranges a clean white towel in front of TIFFANY.

MARY: You married?

TIFFANY: Yes, I am.

MARY: You have children?

TIFFANY: Just one.

MARY: Your child in school?

TIFFANY: No, home with a babysitter.

MARY: You can bring child with you.

TIFFANY: *(She takes off her rings and bracelets.)* Thanks, but it's easier for me to leave her at home.

MARY: I see . . . Pretty jewelry.

TIFFANY: Thank you.

MARY: I have pretty jewelry once . . .

BLACKOUT.

THE END