

Donna Mohamed
2009 Jerry B. Jenkins Writer Awards, Third Place

Washed by the Water

War changes people. After America's Longest War, the Vietnamese people brought beauty through nail salons to America's middle class. Salons no longer catered to just the rich and famous but catered to everyone, except me.

In most family businesses, labor laws do not apply. At the age of five, I worked in my family's nail salon in Chicago. My only job was to sit on a chair, on my calves, and remove the polish off the clients' nails. The customers found it adorable. It is not every day that you see a little Vietnamese girl professionally remove nail polish.

Years later, my job description changed. It was not as fun and dainty. I had to clean feet. It was something left to the women of the family because it was beneath the men to do. I worked six days of the week with my mother on one side and my grandmother on the other. It was a repulsive curse.

I have cleaned all kinds of feet. There were feet with toenails an inch thick. There were feet with corns and calluses that could file steel. I also never knew what I would find in between their toes. To add to the slump, my neck and back would be sore by the end of the night. There seemed to be no good coming from this work.

Typically after school, I would go straight to the salon. I never told my friends where I was going or what I was doing. They only knew I was going to work. I was afraid that I would be ridiculed, and was ashamed. I told them nothing.

One summer, at the age of 14, I worked on one of the first pedicures of the day. The lady I worked on was in love. She was talking to her friend about her new husband and how she was proud of how he treated her. As I was finishing off her pedicure, she whispered to her girlfriend, "My husband will never let me touch anyone's feet." Those words pierced me. I lowered my face, hoping that no one would see the tears building up. I could not stop my tears from ridding me out, so I went to the bathroom to drain them with thoughts. "Why is my mother making me do this? One day, *my* husband will not let me clean feet." I went back to finish the pedicure.

Every pedicure from that moment on peeled away at who I was. This led me to experiment with any source that would possibly give me worth. I surrounded myself with the wrong people and the wrong things. All feeble attempts left me feeling worse. It was not until the winter of 2003, when everything in Chicago had wilted, that I found something living and everlasting.

I was invited to a youth service. We were in an old banquet hall room with about 80 students. I was distracted by the mismatching, uncomfortable chairs and dirt-stained walls, so I do not remember much until the very end. The youth pastor shared with us what his God did before He died for him. He washed the feet of His creations who He knew would betray Him.

Suddenly my seat was not as uncomfortable.

A youth leader joined the pastor with a tub of water and a towel on his shoulder. The pastor asked if a student volunteer would be willing to come up for this expression of

love and service. My tears blurred everything that happened afterwards, but I knew I wanted this God to be mine.

With time, effort, and weekly Friday services, I found out more about this God, Jesus Christ. I learned what footwear they wore in Bible times and the main form of transportation they used. I also learned how Jesus' disciples betrayed him. Even foreknowing all of this, Jesus lowered His face and with His bare hands, cleaned the week's worth of traveling off their feet.

I fell in love.

I discovered that my God was my Father, Friend and Husband. A Husband who would sit beside me with a tub of His own and shamelessly wash the feet of His creations. There was no room for shame because He is love.

To this day I will give pedicures, but when I set up, I have the client's comfort in mind. I bring the water to a perfect temperature, take off her week's worth of traveling and give her the gift of service. It is not always fun and dainty, but I have been shown beauty in a way I would have probably never seen. I found beauty within one of the strongest characteristics Christ embodies, beauty within humility.