

## **Million Dollar Red**

*By Jen Ghastin*

The white woman spread her toes admiring and criticizing the job. The fungi one, on the right foot—Could the nail be removed? Maybe a fake nail glued in its place? Probably. But she'd never have the nerve to ask. Not out loud in this crowded toe factory.

To her right, calluses were buffed away on an elderly woman wincing. The Vietnamese woman below her, wincing too. To her left, a Latina beauty queen was choosing the flowered pattern that would decorate her big toe. Children sat in metal folding chairs, swinging limbs, and squirming, and waiting.

She liked how the salon smelled: acetone and tangerine. Fake nails laid out on little plastic fingers, spirals and flowers and heart designs. The walls, tiled and covered with 80ies posters of— not square tip or French tip, but rounded and red fingernails and used- to-be-beautiful women with perms. The nail stations, cubicles, all the same, and crammed, next to strangers, too close, too small. And behind the stations, the masked Vietnamese women laughing, and working, and eating. Tangerine and acetone. Beautiful and toxic.

I'd never do that, thought the white woman, observing, but not too obviously, the Latina and her toothpick painted big toe. Never draw attention to these things. Red is basic, classic, nondescript on the toe.

“What ugly toes,” the other woman complained in Vietnamese to her co-worker.

“Everyone has ugly toes.”

“Your toes are okay.”

“Not me. I have big toes, too long.”

“Long is good, look skinny.”

She squirts lotion into her hands and kneads the chunks like dough. The feet are heavy and loose like dead fish.

The eyes never meet. The white woman never looks down, and code of conduct restricts the other from looking up. It’s better with no talking—too hard to understand, they both think.

She picks at the nail with the sharp tools, scrapping out the dirt, pulling up the almost hang nail, and biting them off with her tweezers.

The white woman scrutinizes, leaning over, but still never making eye contact.

The nails are buffed. They are going to look as good as they are going to look. Not good, but better.

“What color you want?”

“Red. Million Dollar Red.”

The other woman returned from the rainbow cabinet slapping the bottle against the palm of her hand.

“I used to be a translator for the government,” the other woman complaining.

“I know. I know. You tell me everyday. You used to work for the government. You tell me. You are here now. Shut up.”

“I used to have maids as dumb as my customers.”

“We know. We know.”

“Is she complaining again?”

“Complain. Complain. Complain.”

“My mother say, send me money. I tell her no money. She say send money, your father is sick, send money. I tell her I am sick.”

“Sick of ugly toes.” The women roar in laughter.

She holds the large fleshy feet, chaffing away the excess skin.

“So many callus. If I keep going, she will have skinny toe like you.” They laugh again.

The white woman loved her skinny new toes, loved the bright candy coating, the newness, the freshness, the youth, and brilliance.

It was the perfect red. Not a brown, or a soft red, or a berry red, or a slightly maroon red, or a too cherry, or sports car red. It was Marilyn Monroe, it was Betty Page, it was real-woman-red.

It was something she could control, unlike her weight-watcher points, or ex boyfriends, or paychecks, or parking tickets, or her boss’s temper. This was the one thing she did for herself, the big splurge.

The small brush wiped them all away and reclaimed the small part of her that could be reclaimed, that could be feminine, beautiful, Marilyn, and whole.

Unlike the Latina, the white woman didn’t have a date tonight, hadn’t had one in months. My god, had it been a year? Since the ex? In her thirties now, all the honeymoons have come and gone. And, all the past relationships blurred into one long marathon coming to its finale. She was too old for Saturday nights and bars and boys. If ever she was a flower, she was developing the patches of yellow and brown, pre-welt.

She looked down at that broken toe, and it seemed normal enough. Like if you didn’t now it was infected, you never would. She used to worry that the other toes would

catch the fungi too. Like it would spread. But if that was true, everyone in this room would have her condition. They don't sanitize properly.

She would never wear flip flops, or open toe shoes, even with the polish. They'll see it, they'll all see it. And know. That somewhere, some piece of me is wrong, off, and ugly. But here, they are used to it. And with the red coat the nail only looked thick and turned up slightly.

She had told the ex, when he asked, and he did ask, that she had dropt something heavy on her foot once, and since then, the nail grew differently. It was an accident. He sympathized, removed his shirt, and showed her the scars on his shoulder. She regretted the lie.

After the second coat, she was shooed out of the leather chair and into a metal folding chair near the door with a mini fan placed at her feet.

“You sit. You want wax too. Your eyebrows?”

“No thanks.”

“You need was. You have hair. It look better. You wax.”

The other woman pointed in-between her brows, suggested a uni-brow. The white woman craned her neck to see a mirror on the opposite wall. She too, from across the room, saw the uni-brow.

“Okay,” she sighed.

“And lip too. You have hair. It look better.”

She fingered her lips searching for the hair. Not finding any, but nodding, yes to the wax.

The other woman came because it was better here. Better for her husband. Better for her children. Better would make her laugh. Once a customer had asked if she liked her job.

She imagined grabbing her customer's hair, pulling it down to her own foot, and screaming, "You smell feet all day. You touch feet all day! You like feet? You clean your feet. I clean mine! But, she smiled politely and lied, "I like it. It's nice."

She loved the women she worked with, the camaraderie. They were all trapped by circumstance, by family, by war, by politics, lies, language, economy, citizenship. Doing what they could to survive.

"You do school, or you do nail," she would warn her daughter, who did very good at school.

"Easy money, I tell you," boasted a pregnant co-worker.

"Bah. Because you are pregnant," mocked the other woman.

"No, I always make big tips."

"You are always pregnant."

They erupted again. The foreign customers lifted their heads from magazines and cell phone conversations almost wondering what was so funny, but instantly returning to their prior thoughts.

The baby hung sacked between the squatted thighs. The customer's toes almost extending all the way to the protruding belly button.

The pregnant one was younger, sillier. She talked to the customers for her big tips.

"You like red," she would flirt.

“You loose weight, you look skinny,” she would compliment.

“Red is nice. You want manicure too?” Always pushing, tempting, one more thing, one more thing.

With red nails, you’ll be beautiful, red toes will make you beautiful, straight eyebrows, beautiful. Hair on the upper lip is ugly. Bikini wax will make you super-duper beautiful.

And you could whiten your teeth, and bleach your ass hole, and remove your freckles and that growth on your neck, and just a little permanent make-up. And if you wrap yourself in cellophane for hours and go like this, ten pounds, guaranteed, and you will be beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

Beautiful, bah, thought the other woman. Beautiful was the ocean, the stars, on the shores far away, not here. There was nothing beautiful here. Eyebrows stuck like this, are not beautiful. You think stinky toe is beautiful? Twenty dollars. Okay dokey, beautiful.

The white woman stretched her imagination for a moment, side glancing the mirrors, once beautiful, once again, maybe. Maybe under here, somewhere under here, maybe if I try harder, pay more. Maybe somewhere in here. Some small piece.

The pregnant one knew: America is beautiful. Hundred dollar bills are beautiful. Hands are for rings, beautiful.

“Million Dollar Red, bah.”