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**Connecting**Cathryn Ramin

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**Nailing down a future**

**O**NCE A WEEK, I relinquish my compulsion to be busy every minute. I drop in on Lisa, who goes to work on my fingernails. It's a luxury, I know — it costs me 10 bucks — but for one hour, I sit as still as Whistler's Mother. We talk. She asks me about my life. To her, it seems exotic.

A week ago, I convinced her to tell me the story of her escape from Vietnam. At the age of 21 — the same age as the crazy college kids on the streets of Westwood — Lisa is already a hard-working entrepreneur. She employs a half-dozen women, all of them refugees, all of them relatives. They sit together on big gray sofas during the slow times reading the gossip from Vietnamese newspapers.

Lisa was born in Saigon at the height of the war. Her father worked as an attache to the American government. When Lisa was 4, he went to prison, where he stayed for seven years, until he became very ill. Finally, the North Vietnamese let him go. They expected him to die.

Instead, he decided to leave the country, and to take 11-year-old Lisa with him. A son-in-law arranged for them to travel to Malaysia in a small boat, on the open sea. Lisa had heard tales of drownings, of cannibalism, of suffering. She worried about leaving her mother. Still, she was ready to go.

If she'd stayed in Saigon, she'd be married at 16, and the mother of four children by 20. She'd be poor for the rest of her life.

**LISA AND HER FATHER** made the crossing. They spent six months in a refugee camp in Malaysia, then three months in another camp in the Philippines. They were ready to leave for America when Lisa's father became ill again. He was hospitalized and their plane left without them. Lisa was sent to live with strangers whose language she did not speak.

Her father recovered in a few weeks. They flew to New York, and traveled to Philadelphia, where a Vietnamese family awaited them, with money and an apartment. Lisa was lonely and scared. But there wasn't time to weep.

Before the winter came, they left for Los Angeles, to live with some young cousins. In the fall, Lisa started school. Math was easy for her. Her teachers took note of her talent. They talked of a future in science. But Lisa knew that it was just talk. There wasn't much time to study. In the late afternoons and on weekends, she worked in her cousin's manicure shop in Hollywood. Whatever money she earned was sent to Vietnam, to help support the rest of the family. With that money, two of her older sisters, one of them pregnant, attempted to reach America. Neither of them survived the voyage.

At 16, she left high school to work full-time in her cousin's manicure shop. She got her green card. She started to save money. In four years, she accumulated \$10,000. A sister who had immigrated to Italy arrived in L.A. with her Chinese husband and a \$10,000 nest egg. The two women hunted for a location for a manicure shop of their own. A year ago, they found it. Lisa negotiated the lease. For the first five minutes, the landlord treated her like a little girl. Then he got the picture.

**WHEN THE LEASE** was signed at \$2,000 a month, Lisa got nervous. She kept it to herself. They opened in July. Lisa put in 11-hour days.

By December, the business was in the black. In six months, they established a loyal clientele, based solely on word-of-mouth. Under the Christmas tree were boxes of cookies, candies, clothes, books and games — all the trappings of America. All of them were gifts from happy customers.

Lisa's mother and sister came to Los Angeles nine months ago. It had been 11 years — half her life — since she'd seen them. It has been hard, Lisa says, for her traditional, Vietnamese mother to adjust to the fact that she has a grown-up, modern daughter with a business and a life of her own.

Mine, too, I told Lisa.

She looked up and smiled. Then she told me to get out of the chair. My nails were nearly dry, and the next customer was waiting. ■

*Connecting appears on Mondays and Thursdays.*