

MOTHER TONGUE

A Play in Two Acts

Cast of Characters

Ánh Trăng:	Immigrant Vietnamese woman; late 20s
Mona Tran:	College-educated Viet-American linguist; late 20s
Thủy Triều:	Ánh's newborn son
Bill Farquarson:	Owner of DaVi Nails Salon; Ánh's boss
Sergeant Siddiqi:	Police man; late 20s
Văn	Ánh's husband
Doctor	Hospital doctor
Socialite:	Wealthy woman
Bride:	Someone's bride
Guard:	Museum security guard
The Boys:	Mona's henchmen

Setting: Los Angeles Suburb

Time: 1996

Act I

Scene 1: DaVi Nails Salon

(Inside the salon, there are a few open salon chairs. FARQUARSON is running the cashier. Enter MONA, who takes her time surveying the surroundings.)

FARQUARSON: Welcome to DaVi Nails Salon, the only salon in East LA that's still run by a white person. How may I help you?

MONA: Hey, I heard about your hair and nail deal. Tell me more.

FARQUARSON: Well, the ad says it all. Get your nails primped to perfection and your hair elevated to the status of goddess, all for the low cost of \$25.

(MONA flips through a book of hair styles. ANH finishes working on SOCIALITE's hair)

ANH: You like?

SOCIALITE: Mmm, it's...alright.

ANH: Tippy?

SOCIALITE: Excuse me?

ANH: Tip?

SOCIALITE: Oh sure, why didn't you just say so.

(SOCIALITE rises from her seat, walks to FARQUARSON)

ANH: (to SOCIALITE) Ah ah ah—

SOCIALITE: Here's some for the poor lady over there.

(SOCIALITE hands him a few bills, looking back at ANH who now stares at the floor.)

FARQUARSON: I hope you have a splendid evening.

SOCIALITE: Oh, I will.

(ANH uncertainly walks toward FARQUARSON)

ANH: Mr. Fakwason—

FARQUARSON: (to MONA) Excuse me for a second. (to ANH) For the last time

Anh, it's Far-quar-son. Farquarson.

ANH: Yes, sorry, I... Sir, I want know if...if I get...maternity leave.

(MONA's attention drifts to their conversation. She stays silent, listening)

FARQUARSON: Oh Anh, you know...you know most of your pay comes from tips...

ANH: Yes, I know, but, but I hear from...TV, the people talk about maternity leave. I get some money after give birth. What I do? What I need—

FARQUARSON: Oh, look at that baby. How many months?

ANH: Sorry?

FARQUARSON: (Indicates toward ANH's stomach. Uses hand gestures) How. Many. Months?

ANH: Oh...6. (smiles) 6 months. But I not ask that, I ask—

FARQUARSON: Oh, it must be fine, you seem to be well off and can take care of yourself. That baby bump is looking very...round! So healthy! I'm sure your husband can take care of you both.

ANH: Ah, but... (defeated) yes.

(ANH dredges back toward her station, hunching over the seat. MONA advances to FARQUARSON)

MONA: Hi, I'd like to get my nails and hair done. By her.

(points to ANH)

FARQUARSON: Well, go ahead. Be careful with her, she's on her lady days.

ANH: But she's pregnant.

FARQUARSON: That too.

(MONA walks over and sits down at ANH's chair)

MONA: Why hello there, my name is Mona.

ANH: (excited) Bạn nói tiếng việt? [Do you speak Vietnamese?]

MONA: Oh sorry, I don't speak Vietnamese. I was born here. But my parents were from Vietnam.

(ANH finds some comfort in this, and proceeds to wash MONA's hair and feet)

MONA: Money is hard to find, isn't it?

(Pause. ANH continues preparing MONA's hair)

MONA: Hard when your boss is stealing all your tips?

(Pause. ANH continues)

MONA: I wonder what your husband would think—

ANH: I no have husband.

MONA: Oh really? Why does the owner think you have one?

ANH: Because I don't say. Men no understand.

MONA: Oh, I see. (softly, gently) This is your first child, isn't it.

(ANH begins to tear up. She nods her head)

MONA: What if I told you...that I could give you enough money for your maternity leave?

(ANH looks straight ahead as she washes MONA's hair)

MONA: In fact, more than that. I could give you enough money to live for a year.

ANH: What you mean?

MONA: I am a professional researcher at UCLA. I study language acquisition in infants. We're doing a highly revolutionary experiment that will take about a year. *(turns around to look ANH straight in the eyes)* And we will pay a lot of money if you help us out.

ANH: What I do? What? What?

MONA: It's simple. You only need to do one small thing, and you'll get paid.

(Pause. In a firm voice) You can't speak to your baby when it's born.

ANH: What? You mean I...

MONA: Don't worry, it's not a big thing. You won't notice, believe me. Is it a boy or girl?

ANH: Boy.

MONA: *(smiles)* You can feel him, play with him, feed him—everything! He's still your baby. You just can't say anything to him. I'll be there at the hospital with you to make sure you qualify to get our money. If things work out, we'll pay for the delivery costs too! How does that sound?

ANH: I don't know, I...I—

MONA: Think about your baby. *(fondly caresses ANH's belly)* Wouldn't it be nice to see it every day? To always have food to eat? To not worry about paying rent for a *year*?

(MONA reaches for ANH's wet hand and places it on ANH's belly, the water seeping through her shirt, leaving wet handprints. Long pause.)

ANH: I do it.

(MONA smiles, sits back and lets ANH finish up her hair.) (After a while)

MONA: What was your name again?

ANH: Ánh Trăng.

MONA: That's pretty, what does it mean?

(ANH looks stumped, and continues pampering MONA)