2005

Heritage and destiny short stories

Daisy Luu
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Luu, Daisy, "Heritage and destiny short stories" (2005). *Master's Theses*. 2774.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.mzuq-m5n8>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/2774

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

HERITAGE AND DESTINY

Short Stories

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Daisy Luu

August 2005

UMI Number: 1429437

Copyright 2005 by
Luu, Daisy

All rights reserved.

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 1429437

Copyright 2006 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2005

Daisy Luu

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dr. Samuel Maio, Director

Dr. Paul Douglass, 2nd Reader

Dr. Cynthia Baer, 3rd Reader

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

HERITAGE AND DESTINY SHORT STORIES

by Daisy Luu

This thesis presents an exploration of the roots that link people to their past and the voices that call them to a future unknown, to be shaped by their own integrity. It portrays the rich cultures of the characters' homeland, along with the alienation they inevitably feel upon immigration. The stories focus on relationships, especially the strong ties that hold family members together through difficult circumstances that threaten to drive them apart.

Stories in the first half of the collection are set in Asian countries such as Viet Nam, China, and Taiwan, where poverty and societal influences can force the characters to make life-altering decisions for the sake of safety and survival. The latter half concentrates on the cross-cultural and cross-generational rifts that occur between parents and children after their immigration to America, a foreign land that promises opportunities but nevertheless threatens the abandonment of tradition through assimilation.

**Once again to Tung Sen,
who met me at the beginning and saw me through to the end.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe an enormous amount of gratitude to my parents, Hung and Hue, who taught me the magic of stories, the meaning of sacrifice, and the courage to pursue my passion. I would like to extend my thanks to the Duong-Sens who, in sharing their past with me, helped my imagination evoke with such vivid clarity the sights, sounds, and smells of Viet Nam.

Special thanks to my thesis committee—Professors Sam Maio, Paul Douglass, and Cindy Baer—for their dedication in reading my manuscript, and for their kind encouragement throughout. Professors Kristen Iversen and Chris Fink, who were my very first creative writing instructors, have taught me much about the craft of stories; they have been extraordinary mentors and friends.

The students in the MFA Program at San Jose State University have been supportive of my endeavors and extremely helpful in their critiques of my stories. I must thank Kate Evans, my guru through the program, for her generous willingness to send me much-needed materials and guidance on short notice. During times when my energy and inspiration ran low, Kate provided these three blissful words that gave me heart to continue: “You’re *almost* done!” As I was piecing together my project, Stephanie Chan and Andy Coffaro—with kindness and dedication beyond the call of duty—managed to comment on drafts of my stories while juggling a full load of school, work, family, pets, and living accommodations; I could not have kept sane without their good humor and witty emails. Good friends like these provided me with a warm sense of community to which I will always remain grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface / viii
The Face of a Hero / 1
How I Became a Taiwanese Bride / 15
Mushroom Dumplings / 35
Birth-Marked Daughter / 45
Homecoming in the Year of the Snake / 57
Red Sun's Fire / 74
Riding the Dragon's Tear / 92
Inheritance / 121
Courting Her Shadow / 138
Invisible Wings / 157
The Way to Heaven / 177
Works Cited / 199

PREFACE

I wish I can say that I am gifted in mathematics or science or engineering, but I am not. These fields have lucrative payoffs after all, but ever since I learned to read, I have loved languages and words. After immigrating to the U.S. from Viet Nam at age four, I spent a fair amount of time in ESL classes, struggling to learn English and to understand the new culture in which I found myself immersed. On the last day of kindergarten, books were dispersed to each student to take home. This excited me more than a batch of chocolate chip cookies, and since then, books became my obsession. I collected them, got lost in them, read my favorites over and over. So I learned about the power of stories when I was very young, and when I got older, I wrote them. I discovered that words are nothing but black lines across a white page, but the right ones placed in the correct order can elicit an emotional response from readers, even though author and audience are strangers.

Writing about a country I had left such a long time ago has had its challenges. Colors, tastes, scents—bits and pieces of Viet Nam still linger upon the edges of my memory, but many stories in my collection require extensive research for me to be able to convincingly capture the setting and cultural nuances. I had so many questions and few answers. Researching the myths and folktales I have incorporated proved difficult; a lot of the material is written in Vietnamese, which I am only able to read very slowly. Upon encountering Le Ly Hayslip's memoir *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, I was struck by the lush agricultural landscape of Viet Nam and realized how few, well-known works portray a land most associated with a war that many are struggling to forget.

Literature by Vietnamese-Americans most notably details the Viet Nam War, but I hope to represent the voices of the common citizens outside the war context, portraying them in their ordinary, everyday lives, exploring their personal needs and desires. This is how I realized my gift and decided to pursue my passion.

My collection of short stories falls under the category of Asian-American literature, as well as women's literature. In my work, women play a large role; they explore not only the connection with their family members but also struggle to shape their own character as their emotional strength, will, and integrity are put to the test. Several Asian-American authors who have inspired my own writing have explored the theme of family dynamics and feminism. Amy Tan, through the majority of her novels, shows mothers and daughters who struggle to overcome their differences in order to understand how alike they really are, and how deeply they care for each other. I have been especially influenced by her novel *The Joy Luck Club*. Through sixteen interwoven stories about the lives of four Chinese mothers and their four Americanized daughters, Tan deftly portrays the rift between the different generations and details the challenges the characters face in trying to bridge that gap. The mothers struggle to give their daughters their "life's importance" (197) and make them understand their heritage, while their resisting daughters sass back, "I wish you weren't my mother" (142). Tan often employs flashbacks to a traditional, almost mythical China in many of her works, and the latter stories in my collection present characters that cannot help but become nostalgic about a land they love but have left behind. Like her, I start in "the East, where things begin" (41), then follow the characters along their journey to the modernized, and alien,

Western shores. Gail Tsukiyama, in *Women of the Silk*, exploits the consequences of a mother's inability to communicate with her daughters and stand up to her husband, speaking up for their rights. Her main characters, the traditional, submissive mother, Yu-Sung, and the headstrong, inquisitive Pei—a daughter with “too much spirit,”—pose as binary oppositions as the old culture and the new generation. Yu-Sung muses, “a girl with such spirit was not wanted by most families. How often [she] had wished one of [her daughters] was a boy, something Pao could be proud of, something of value” (7). Some of the characters in my stories also must confront their culturally-assigned, stagnant roles in order to change, grow, and defy conventional standards. Anchee Min has often written about young women who feel vehemence for what is expected of them by family and society. Such an example is her novel *Wild Ginger*, in which the female heroine, Maple, defies Mao Zhedong's decree for sexual suppression, shunning appropriate conduct to pursue her carnal desires. Unreserved in her portrayal of sexual encounters, Min has taught me how to write about passion and avoid sentimentality, how to best incorporate emotion in an artistic way.

Some other authors who have influenced my writing deal specifically with the themes of immigration and alienation. In *The Odyssey of a Manchurian*, a novel written and illustrated by Belle Yang, the author chronicles her Manchurian father's escape from China during its civil war. The main character is constantly on the move, running from a violent past, uncertain of what the future will unveil. Yang writes, “To understand my [father] is to make sense of the past, see it linked to my own belly like an umbilical cord, even as I see the future emanate from my own breath” (xii). The title of my work,

Heritage and Destiny, closely mirrors this idea of a past culture that immigrants cannot shed, that remains a part of their inheritance even as they pursue an indefinite future. Fae Myenne Ng portrays some of the problems associated with Asian assimilation in a Western culture. In her novel *Bone*, a single mother strives to connect with a daughter well adjusted to the American lifestyle. In modern-day Chinatown, San Francisco, the main characters in *Bone* must deal with divorce, eloping, abortion, and the mysterious suicide of a family member. Even though Leila, the daughter and central protagonist, has grown up in America, she remains linked to her mother and stepfather through loyalty and love, and a part of her wants to understand her Chinese heritage. “All I have are memories,” Leila admits, “and I want to remember them all” (61). Many of my stories, too, explore this idea of cultural rifts and familial bonds.

Robert Olen Butler’s collection of short stories, *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*, has particularly been influential to the form of my own short stories. Butler’s works thematically portray the lives of Vietnamese immigrants living in exclusive communities in Louisiana. In many stories, he deals with the issue of women’s roles in Vietnamese society. Such an example is “Mr. Green,” a story narrated by a misunderstood heroine whose grandfather is Buddhist. The disheartened grandfather confesses to her that, after his death, the narrator’s Catholic-converted father will not honor his spirit in the traditional ways. Because she dearly loves the old man, the narrator promises to pray for his soul in the Buddhist tradition, though she is also Catholic. “Not possible,” the grandfather tells her, “you are a girl” (19). At the end of the story, long after her grandfather’s death, the narrator reflects, “There were women

around Jesus when He died, the two Marys. They couldn't do anything for Him. But neither could the men, who had all run away" (28). Butler's tightly written stories offer interesting premises that draw the readers into his works, and he conveys powerful emotion in a seemingly subtle and quiet narrative.

The works above deal strongly with the Asian experience, familial relationships, women's roles, immigration, and the artistic conveyance of emotion in a way that reaches out to the audience and touches a familiar cord. These, too, are the themes and techniques employed in my own stories. To know where they are going, people must first find out where they came from and who they are. This is the journey on which the characters in my collection embark as they seek to understand their past; armed with this knowledge, they can then set foot on the path that leads them to their destiny in a new land, hoping that they and theirs will never lose sight of the significance of their heritage.

HERITAGE AND DESTINY

BY DAISY LUU

The Face of a Hero

“When I was pregnant, your father used to buy me *che* to eat every night,” Mother told me as we harvested together in the rice fields. She referred to the desserts with fondness. “*Che dau xanh danh*—thick yellow mung beans ground to a custard; *che dau do*—rich red beans; *che bap*—sweet corn kernels cooked with fatty coconut syrup—those were some of my favorites, and he’d bring home a different *che* every night of the week to satisfy my sweet tooth.”

Mother and I cut down the stalks heavy with rice grains. Our small plot of land did not take long to harvest because we were sharecroppers; sixty percent of our yearly rice crop went to the Truongs, a nearby family with more land and plenty of children to tend it. Like any other farming family, they gave a percentage of the profits to the Communists. These green-uniformed men occupied our village in the city of Quang Ngai. From their quarters at the edge of the village, they kept watch over us, making sure no farmer became too lucrative. Sometimes, they held meetings to drill the same message into us: “Contribute your profits so we can distribute them to those who are less fortunate. Our economy operates on a cycle, and you rich farmers have used the poor to make money. Now you must share with them what you have taken away.”

Following Mother’s lead, I beat a thick bundle of rice against the wooden frames laid out at waist height in the threshing tent. The ripe grains fell from their limp stalks and landed in a big hole in the ground. A mesh tent enclosed the area. Grains flying up would bounce against the tent and land in the hole so we could later collect them.

“You see,” she told me, “this is why you have such a crazy craving for sweets. You demanded it even when in my womb.”

* * *

An only child, Mother lost her parents when she was fifteen. They had passed down to her their life’s worth of earnings: a small plot of land and the thatch-roof shack she and I both grew up in. When I was an infant and all I knew was the comforting sound of her voice, Mother told me stories about my father, a man I knew only by reputation. Brave and romantic, loving and kind, a good provider for our family despite our poverty—playing the part of his devoted widow, Mother fed me these images of him. I wish I had the chance to know this great man. During the Viet Nam War, he fought for the South and earned several medals for hauling his comrades out of the line of fire. These men, whom Mother claimed to have known briefly before they went off to war, were my father’s close friends. He treated them like brothers. Because of his exceptional performance during the war, he evoked hatred from his enemies, the Communists who eventually won over the Southern land.

As if to plant in me a sense of hatred, Mother often told me about the events that led up to Father’s death. One evening, three Communist soldiers invaded our shack after Father had left to collect wood. The men found Mother by herself. At the time, she had already carried me for three months in her belly. The soldiers made leering comments at her. Then they pushed her onto the dirt floor. One man held her arms. Another spread open her legs. The third ripped Mother’s shirt down the middle, popping the delicate buttons.

"Bo nguoi ta, bo nguoi ta! Hiep dam!" Mother screamed, but all the neighbors ducked inside their own houses. Since the Communist occupation in our small village, no one wanted to make trouble, not even to help a close neighbor being raped. They feared having their land and crops taken away.

Like a dog, the man on top of Mother licked up the salty sweat of her flesh. He didn't have a chance for more when he heard his friend's surprised warning. A severed head landed on Mother's stomach with such sickening force that she thought she was going to faint. Blood spewed from the truncated neck. The Communist who held her arms let go. Three shots fired. Eardrums rang. Rapid footsteps ran away.

Father had come home from his wood chopping to find the three green-uniformed men on his wife. With his ax, he lopped one soldier's head clear off the neck. The man who was holding Mother's arms shouted the warning, reached for his pistol, and shot Father three times in the chest. Afterwards, the two remaining soldiers ran away. They never came back to the village, nor were they ever caught after Mother reported her husband's death to the local authorities.

"Chi di ve di," said the Communist to whom Mother presented her case. "Go home, Ma'am, and if anyone asks, tell them your husband died from a heart attack. If you disobey me, if you ever tell anyone differently, I'll have you locked up for the murder of a Communist soldier."

* * *

"I did not want you to be an orphan, My Le, to be ripped from my arms the moment you were born and left on the streets to die," Mother had told me. "I did not

want to rot in Communist prison, hoping that someone would pity you and pick you up. But who would do that? These Quang Ngai farmers, they have enough mouths to feed to be doing charity. And who would want you—you're a girl, not a strong boy who could help with the farming. It's because I love you that your father's spirit descended to the underworld unavenged." Mother felt ashamed for never putting Father's murderer to justice. She told me it was sacrilegious for his name to fall from her unworthy lips. For this reason, I never knew my father's name.

The moment I was born, Mother knew what to name me.

"A beautiful girl," the midwife had announced.

"Yes, beautiful," Mother agreed. "But without a father, her life will be hard and sorrowful. So I will call her 'My' for beauty and 'Le' for sorrow. My Le, my Beautiful Tear."

* * *

After all the rice grains were beaten off the stalks, they dried in the sun for several days. Then, Mother and I beat them in an earthen container with sticks to loosen the husks. To clear the debris from the white rice, we sifted the grains in a sieve, occasionally tossing them into the air to blow away the husks. We caught *tam*, the broken rice grains, in a circular wicker basket that lay underneath our sieves. *Gao*, the whole rice grains, were the best of the crop; those we saved in tall jugs to use throughout the year.

Squatting in my loose cotton trousers and thin, black peasant shirt, I looked over to Mother as I continued husking the rice. She was beautiful at thirty years, with smooth

skin on her round face and brown-black hair that she always wore in a loose ponytail. Slender and girlish, she differed from the neighboring women, whose hips grew wide after bringing forth an army of children to help with the farming. Only Mother's hands betrayed how hard she worked to feed us. They were wrinkled with wear, calloused and scratched from rough farm labor.

I shared none of Mother's features. I had bigger bones and a stronger frame. My round eyes were as light as a fawn's coat, while her almond eyes were dark like a ripe coconut shell. Next to her feminine fingers, mine looked stubby. I had a chiseled face that starkly contrasted her round one. In all my twelve years, no one had told me I looked like my mother. As I watched her at work, I wished I did. The rice husks blew away as a breeze caught them, and for a moment, Mother's delicate face was hidden behind a curtain of gold. By the end of the day, we both had to comb the flecks out of our hair.

* * *

Late August marked the beginning of the rainy season that dominated half the year. At the rooster's crow every morning, Mother and I woke up, washed with the water we stored in earthen jugs, and headed to our garden. There, we grew seasonal crops to sell for a bit of extra money.

In silence, we cut down the ripe vegetables: crisp leaves of lettuce, wet morning glory bunches, and heavy sweet potatoes smelling of fresh earth. We placed these in sets of baskets suspended on thin bamboo poles. Draping the poles across our shoulders, we headed out to sell the products of our labor door-to-door. I followed Mother, focusing on the steady swing of her two baskets. We wore cone-shaped, dried-banana-leaf hats to

shield our heads. The cool dirt road gradually warmed beneath my bare feet as the sun climbed to its peak. I felt its rays seeping through my long black hair.

We did not have any luck selling to our neighbors. “We don’t want any,” they told us if we tried, shutting the door in our faces. Their reactions ranged from polite decline of our vegetables to open hostility at our presence. So we sold to the nearby villagers, walking until noon to receive a warmer welcome.

“*Khoai lan bui, cai xanh ngon ngot, rau muon xanh tuoi,*” we sang to herald our vegetables as we paced the streets. Banana trees with their thick, yellow-green leaves swayed lethargically in the breeze. Tall coconut trees bore heavy fruit high up their branches. Delicate, flexible bamboo stems hung low to the ground, their thin leaves brushing against my trousers as I walked by. Once in a while, a passerby would stop us to select a few choice greens; other times, the lady of the house would wave us over to her doorstep.

A few hours past noon, we headed back to our village with the remaining vegetables. Though the sweet potatoes kept well, the lettuce and morning glory leaves wilted from the long journey. Mother kept our profits safety-pinned in the left pocket of her shirt. Though the morning sun shone hot, it began to rain. Thick drops rapped like falling marbles against my cone-shaped hat and slid off its waterproof surface. The shower ceased shortly. My bare feet stiffened with caked mud.

“Your father went to school for a while, but he quit when he got to be around your age,” Mother told me to break the silence of our trek.

“Did he go to school near here?” I broke in.

“Listen to my story, My Le,” she said. Always eager to finish talking, she never answered my questions when I interrupted her. “He quit because he found out that education is Communist brainwash! It's true—the school employs Communist sympathizers who bring in soldiers as guest speakers. They want these men to ‘enlighten’ our youths with their ‘infinite wisdom.’ One day, a soldier stood in front of your father's class to explain to the ignorant farm children how he recently saved the telephone line when it got cut in half.

“‘I stood between the cut wires,’ he said, ‘holding together the broken parts, one in each hand. I used my body as a transmitter to save the telephone communication system and had to stand in the hot sun until they came to fix the wire. Listen to me, children! Little things you do for your country will make you feel like a big hero. So help Uncle Ho Chi Minh by helping your country!’”

Laughing hard, Mother cradled her stomach. “They think farmers are so stupid and can be so easily tricked! But your father knew better than to believe such rubbish.” I nodded my approval and giggled along with her.

“How can signals go through a human body?” she continued. “Your father quit school because he had had enough nonsense lectures from lying Communists.”

As soon as we got home, Mother started a fire in her cooking area on the side of our house. She boiled a few handfuls of precious rice grains in seeping water, creating a thin porridge for our lunch. We ate in the house on a wicker mat laid across the dirt floor, sitting cross-legged and sipping our rice porridge as it blew hot steam in our faces. On occasion, we seasoned it with a pinch of salt bought with our extra income from

selling vegetables. After lunch, we headed out to the field with our scythes to reap more grains.

* * *

“Remember what I said,” Mother told me as she released me from my chores.

“Stay away from the other kids. They have bad mouths. They’re a terrible influence on you.”

“Yes, Mother,” I said as I went out to play, already knowing I would disobey her.

If the other girls ever allowed me to join them, I might have played dolls and simpered at discussions about future husbands, but I wouldn’t have enjoyed it, anyway. Instead, I loved to fight crickets. The insects lived in what looked like tiny air holes in the dirt around the house. With the stiff straw from a broom, I poked into each of the different tunnels, jabbing and twisting and turning the straw until I annoyed a cricket into meeting me. He hung on to the straw as if riding a horse. In one swift motion, I whisked him into a small box I built using rubber bands and branches. With my newfound fighter, I met the other kids near the fields where a crowd of eight boys hovered around a small wooden box set on the ground.

“Wait for me, wait for me!” I rushed up. “*Con nao thang?* Which one won?” I peered into the arena where a cricket still clung to another smaller one. The loser staggered before falling over. Its legs, pointed skyward, quivered a few times before it died. A boy with bushy hair and legs as skinny as bamboo stilts got up from squatting and walked away. The winner, fourteen-year-old Lam, was a boy who lived a couple houses from me. He fished the carcass from the wooden ring and threw it out.

“Who’s next to take me on?” he asked. His small, squinty eyes looked around at everyone else. Lam’s left nostril was running, but instead of wiping it clean, he sniffed once in a while, causing the stream to be sucked back into his nose before trailing out again.

“I want to fight mine!” I said, pushing aside the other boys to get my cricket into the arena.

“Go away! No girls allowed!” yelled the crowd.

“Oh, let her fight.” Lam sneered. “I want to send her away crying.” Appreciative laughter rang from his admirers.

“*You’ll* be crying when I win, you baby,” I said.

I tilted my box and tapped it so my cricket fell out. Angry and feisty, he launched his small body at Lam’s cricket. The crowd cheered at the excitement of the fight.

“*Da no di!* Beat him, beat him!” Lam prodded his cricket with a straw to urge it on, but mine bit and kicked, pulling at one of the other cricket’s legs until it came loose.

“*Me ba no*, it’s killing my prized cricket!” Lam swore. “Stop it!”

Before I could do anything, it was already dead. Lam let out a scream and stomped on the wooden arena, smashing my cricket with his bare feet. I leapt from my squatting position and shoved him.

“What are you doing, you jerk?” I shouted. “Sore loser!”

“Stupid girl! You killed my cricket—stupid, stupid girl!” He brushed roughly at his tears. He threw his full weight at me to pin me down, but I caught my balance. Grabbing him by the shirtfront, I shook him.

"Danh no di! Danh! Danh!" Fueled by the excitement of this new fight, the throng of boys pressed in closer. Palms pushed and elbows jabbed me from behind, hurling me at Lam.

My father must have had to fight hand-to-hand combat during the war. Thinking of his courage lent me strength. My right fist flew forward and hit Lam in the eye. Just as quickly, my left fist followed and swiped him across the nose.

Lam fell, eye swollen, nose bloodied, crying openly. *"Con roi qui!"* he yelled at me. "Bastard child! Your mother is a whore!"

I stopped breathing. The other boys stopped chanting their encouragement.

"My Le!" Mother's voice cut across the field. "Come home right now!"

I turned and saw her at a distance. A few farmers had looked up from their work at the commotion we caused. Filled with anger and fear of punishment, I ran to Mother, who quickly ushered me home.

"Are you crazy?" she yelled as soon as she closed the front door. "You're a woman now but still acting like a little girl. What trouble you've caused! Why are you still getting into fights?"

"But, Mother, Lam killed my cricket, and he called you a bad name!"

"You just forget what he said. I already told you to stop playing with the village kids. Get ready for dinner."

As I set out the rice bowls, I grit my teeth and stomped hard, slapping the floor with my bare feet. The chopsticks rattled and clinked against the bowls as I gnashed

them together. Mother pretended not to notice my behavior. She kept her eyes down and calmly shoveled rice into her mouth.

When the moon shone yellow in the sky that night, Ba Nam, Lam's mother, pounded at our door, yelling and cursing as she hauled her son along.

"Look what your little brat did to my son!"

Lam's purple left eye shut tightly. A large red spot covered the bridge of his nose, and dried blood crusted at the nostrils.

"*Chi Nam*, I'm sorry for my daughter's disobedience," Mother offered. "I can assure you this won't happen again."

"Oh really?" Ba Nam replied sarcastically. "Well, I guess she truly is your daughter to be making dumb mistakes. You're lucky I'm not making you pay for my son's injury medications. From the looks of your shack, it's not like you can afford it. You take care your daughter doesn't grow up to be a whore like you."

Trembling, Mother watched her go away. After a time, she finally shut the door, securing the latch with shaky hands. Her face lost its blush, and her lips became a thin purple line.

"Mother, why did she say such a horrible thing?"

She walked over to snuff out the candle. "Go to sleep," she whispered. "Don't you mind what others say."

I inhaled the scent of warm wax. The sole shutter in the house was propped open with a dried sugarcane stalk, and in the dimness of the moonlight, I saw how she hunched her thin frame, how her shoulders slouched.

“I want to know,” I said before I could be shamed into silent obedience. “Tell me why the neighbors have always been mean to us.” I yanked at her bony wrist as if to wrench the secret from her, but she pulled away and began pacing the room.

“Why do the village kids make fun of me?” As I intercepted her, she turned away to avoid my stare. Never had I this control over my willful mother. It was scary to wield such power, to see her wall breaking down.

“Mother!” My voice sounded harsh with reprimand. “Why do you tell me to stay away from anyone who could have been my friend?” She was trying to get away from me, but I knew I would soon have her cornered in our small shack.

“Listen to me, My Le. Some things you don’t need to know.”

“I want to! You’re being unfair.” My quavering voice sounded strange. “You don’t let me play with or talk to anyone but you! My life is miserable! If Father were here, he’d know what to do. He’s a hero and won’t take abuse. He’s not afraid of anything in the world!” Crossing my arms across my chest, I glared at her.

“You dumb, thankless child! Is that how you repay me for taking care of you, My Le? Do you really want to know who your father was? Not a hero, that’s for sure.” She snorted. “Never did take care of me while I was pregnant with you. As I threw up in the fields, sick with a new child in my womb, no one paid me the slightest attention. While you hung heavy in my belly during your eighth month, I had to walk those long miles to the nearby village to sell my vegetables.”

As she talked, Mother waved her arms around her as if shooing away mosquitoes. A few strands of her hair had fallen loose from her ponytail. Her silhouette looked like

that of a madwoman. "Provide for us? A good family man? *Pih!* All stupid stories to mask my shame! Your father was a lecherous Communist who grabbed me while I was on the road in the middle of the night!"

"Stop it, Mother, shut up!" I tried to overlap her last few words with my voice. Grinding my toes into the hard dirt, I spat, "You're lying! Don't let your anger make you crazy."

"All this is truth." The way she said it, pronouncing each syllable slowly, without a hint of emotion in her solemn voice, finally made me believe it. "When my stomach showed, these villagers spread ignorant rumors about how I fooled around with some Communist passing through town. Just because my parents died when I was young doesn't mean they did not teach me how to be a good girl. How could I desecrate their memory with whorishness? Our neighbors think I became a traitor to my own people, my own land, for a brief moment of forbidden joy."

I bit the insides of my cheek to keep from sobbing. Twelve years of betrayal hardened me against Mother's pain. Those stories I held in my heart were only lies. In an instant, she had destroyed the image of a man who all my life posed as a hero to me. Mother's laughter rang out, queer and hysterical.

"You're not a child born from love, My Le. You're the daughter of rape!" She dragged the back of her palm across her eyes to swipe away the tears. "I was only eighteen. It took three men to pick on a weak village girl going to the bathroom at night."

Mother turned her back to me. "Which one of them ended up being your father, I don't know. One by one, they thrust their hard instruments into my softness." I could

tell by the way her shoulders shook that she was sobbing. “All this I wanted to carry to my grave so that the father I invented for you gave you pride and hope. I didn’t want you to walk through life shamed like me.”

Slowly, she stepped to the cot we shared and lay down facing the wall. I stared at her curled-up form. If she was awake or crying, she concealed it well. Her body rose and fell evenly. I did not bother wiping my tears away; I waited for their salty path to dry on my face.

A face that did not look like hers.

A face that must highly resemble my rapist father.

I could not imagine what it could have been like for her when she had to look at me every day and be reminded of her shame. After a long while, I closed the shutter, then tiptoed to the cot and lay next to her, back-to-back. We both stiffened to each other in the cold night, denying ourselves the familiar warmth. In an unsteady downpour, the rain outside drummed a broken rhythm against our shack.

How I Became a Taiwanese Bride

April 14, 1998

Baba said that knowing how to read and write set people above the animals, but in a place like this, I can't help but feel like one. We were countryfolks, but some nuns once came from the Roman Catholic Church and taught him letters, and when I grew up some, he taught me even though I'm not a boy. Baba never had no sons—just me and Hanh. Maybe if I'd been a boy and helped him more with plowing the land he wouldn't've gotten sick so young. If I'd been a boy I wouldn't've ended up here, a different man on top of me every hour. These men, they're all the same. They breathe hot wind in my ear, gasping high-pitched and quickening their rhythm near the end, their skin sweating on my skin. (Here I'd just stare at the ceiling above me and grip the creaking bed below me that always smelled like cheap rose-water mixed with sweat. Here I'd try not to think so much—just of washing their dirtiness from my skin and of splashing myself down there with vinegar like the other girls taught me to keep from growing big with baby.)

Tonight it was that club-foot man who climbed on me. He dragged himself ker-klunking up the stairs to the second floor of the brothel to my private room. "Brothel"—that's just another name for a whorehouse. Men come here to relieve their cravings, and women like me have to let them have their way. I can't read and write too good, but Baba said that for a peasant girl it's plenty already. If he can see me now (which I hope he can't), I wonder if he'd still think of me as a person, or as an animal.

April 16, 1998

It all began this way. 2 months ago I was washing the family's laundry in the brook that ran through my village in Long Xuyen. I liked to watch the dirt from our clothes seep into the water until everything got carried downstream and all was clear again. I dawdled in that brook always, the water being so cool up my calves. That's when a man, called himself Lee Min Long, walked up and asked if I wanted to make some extra money. My Ma, she warned me about strange men, told me to be a good girl. She said, it doesn't matter if they pay you, the men these days are up to no good, not like before when they knew how to treat women like ladies.

So I looked at him all nasty, but he followed me a ways up the main dirt road and said, It's not like that, Missy. What I'm asking you to do is perfectly legal.

He said that Taiwanese men are running out of women, with them killing off the girl babies and all, so they're looking for foreign brides and will pay lots of money to a girl's family if she agrees to marry one of them.

Well, it still sounded funny to me, but he kept along behind me, and all his talk of money made me think of Baba, who was at home on his cot for a good couple of months already, the cough bothering him too bad for him to work. Lately it was just me and Ma, her plowing the rice fields all by herself since we never bought an ox, and me doing the house things like washing clothes and cooking meals. Little Hanh, she's at school mostly. She's a sharp one, smarter than me, so all of us decided to let her go to school and make something of herself maybe. Even if it meant harder work for us we'll trudge along. When I got done with the house things I went out to the fields to help Ma some,

but mostly it was just her alone till at least high noon, and working the plow was giving her hand-blisters filled with clear puss, I was afraid they'd pop open in not too long a time.

Mr. Lee, he's a smart one. He saw how I slowed my walking when he said Money and so he added, Just think, Missy—5 hundred U.S. dollars for your family!

That sure was more money than I'd ever seen in my life, enough for us to live off for years, probably enough to get Baba a better doctor than the old Medicine Man of the village. (Here I stalled for time, tucked my hair behind my ears.) I asked Mr. Lee, Well do you have pictures of these men?

He laughed and said, I believe, young lady, they are the ones who should ask for pictures of you.

So I asked what I needed to do, and he said if my parents say yes to the whole thing, I could come with him and he'd go setting me up with the right man. He said, I won't fail you, Missy, and went on about how pretty I was, how my cheeks were a healthy pink color, how strong I looked carrying that wet batch of laundry without teetering off balance. He said plenty of rich Taiwanese men would pay good money to marry me, on and on like that, made me feel like some kind of cow up for sale. I gave him little smiles when he was talking about my looks, just so he thinks I'm still interested. All that time I thought about what that money could do for us and went on smiling like a simple village girl while the sun baked the soil beneath my bare feet. Felt like I was walking on hot coals.

The first thing I heard when I stepped into the shack was Baba's breathing sounding dry and awful. I set down my laundry basket and asked if Ma was home yet. He told me she was still in the fields. He turned to face me, his cheeks all caved inwards, his arms just bones with knots at the elbows. He must've seen how I looked at him because he told me not to worry and to go on and get those clothes on the line before they wet the floor. I went to sit at the edge of his cot and ran my hands over the cotton sheet that he used as a blanket. I could see its criss-crossed thread lines and his light blue pants showing through underneath. This white misty stuff had clouded over his brown eyes. Looked like he had trouble seeing me. I said, Baba I met a man named Mr. Lee and he told me a rich and handsome man in Taiwan wants to marry me.

Baba halfway asked what I was talking about before he started coughing and gripping his blanket, turning his head to spit out the green phlegm. I reached over and stroked his chest and helped him to sit up and drink some water. I said, It's true, Baba. That rich handsome man wants to pay our family good money just for giving me away.

Baba said, Diep what's this nonsense? Why can't you pick out a nice Vietnamese boy from the village so I can drink your wedding toast? What about Ba Loi or Sau Phong?

I said, Baba, those boys don't got anything to offer but what we have already—more earth to farm.

Baba coughed again and motioned for his bedpan, that plastic bowl we put near his cot since he got too weak to make it to the outhouse. He shook his head and said, Diep you shouldn't be too picky. I don't have much time left.

I told him not to say things like that, it's already hard enough with Ma in the fields everyday and just me taking care of the house things.

Ma didn't come home till dinnertime. The rice crop being new, it was hard for her to eat lunch with all that planting to do. I told her about Mr. Lee, and right away she said, I don't like that idea.

Her, me, and Hanh sat down to dinner on the wicker mat. Ba was on his cot after gulping down his thin rice porridge. He wheezed breaths choked with coughs, and we listened to it and didn't say much to each other. Finally I couldn't stand just pushing the matter aside and said, Ma we don't have much choice left.

I picked up some boiled cabbage with my chopsticks, put them in Hanh's bowl, and told her, Eat up, you'll need the strength.

I loved how she flashed her dimples at me, those 2 front baby teeth having fallen out, leaving gaps in her gums. I continued saying to Ma, Baba needs a real doctor, you know that. His lungs are too bad. He can't go on much more.

Stubborn as always, she said, Diep you're not getting married to someone out of the country.

Well, that would have settled it, but that night Baba almost died. Around midnight, his breathing grew wheezier, and I had to run get the village doctor. After examining Baba, he shook his head and said, I told you folks. This man needs treatment in the city.

Ma, her eyes all swollen from crying, said, Doctor, the city hospital is so expensive! We don't have much money left. Please, is there something that you can do?

Hanh was supposed to be in bed but kept clinging to Ma's trousers even after I tried to pull her away. She had that scared look in her big eyes and I didn't want her hearing anymore. Right around then the doctor said, I'm sorry, but there's nothing more I can do. You'd better think of a way to get him to the hospital or you should get ready for his funeral.

So that's the beginning of how I came to be here.

April 20, 1998

The club-footed man came to me again tonight. After he was done I drew myself a bath. The money he tucked into my bra was starting to make me itch, so I pulled out the bills and smoothed them flat on my palm. Club-Foot's ugly but useful to me, and so I keep him coming with my sweet talk. When I ask, How 'bout an extra 5 minutes, love?, he always stays with me. I feed him rice wine and he tells me about his boating business. After a few nights of hearing him talk, I started collecting money from my other men for longer sessions. For a few extra "*qwai's*," most men agreed to let me show them an even better time. But I have to be careful. Matron doesn't let us brothel girls ask for more money than what the men had to pay for a normal private session.

When I stepped into the tub, the warm water coming up calves-deep made me think of laundering in the brook from my village. Memories like this made me miss home, but it wasn't any use thinking of that, so I started scrubbing my skin hard with the sponge. I especially washed the parts where Club-Foot kissed me, my face and breasts and stomach, till my skin went red. Already it's 2 months since I've been here and still I

can't make myself stone-numb like the other girls. They say to wall yourself against what's being done to your body but still I feel. I feel the men's touch like it burns, I hear them panting lust in my ears, I dream of their faces hovering like ghosts over me at night. Sometimes I cry all quiet into my pillow.

Ma said to be a good girl, that no one but my husband should see me clothes-less, and here I go making her ashamed of me. I hope Baba's doing okay. That night when the doctor came and told us to get ready for his funeral, I wanted more than anything to save his life. Well, I got my wish. Mr. Lee did find me a Taiwanese husband who paid my family some money. And once I became his bride, he was quick to claim his husbandly rights.

A cockroach just crawled into a small hole in the corner of the yellow walls. I'll stop writing and hurry on to bed before the mice start coming out for the night.

April 24, 1998

Before I met Mr. Lee I never stepped foot outside Long Xuyen, and here he took me clear out of Viet Nam. Him and me walked for a ways, then rode with a bunch of young women (in the company of men dressed like Mr. Lee) in a bumpy truck that made my stomach sick. Then we caught a boat to Taiwan. The ocean water, it's this beautiful blue, not the muddy brown of most of the streams around Long Xuyen. It was dark and deep and I couldn't see bottom. I was a bit scared riding the waves, it seemed they pushed too rough against the boat, won't let us go far or fast. So I got away from the rails and sat down not saying much till we reached the new land. At the dock, Mr. Lee handed

over my papers, and the guards waved us on. It was crowded and people shoved all around me. Mr. Lee took me by the elbow and led me to a yellow car. I'd never been in a car before. It was all soft and cool inside, not like the rickshaws from home, so I thought I was in for a fancy life. Mr. Lee told the driver where to go. I was all sore and tired from going such a long ways, so I took off those cotton shoes he gave me before the trip and started to massage my feet.

Mr. Lee snapped, Put your shoes back on! We're almost there.

After we left Viet Nam he was either real quiet or real mean to me. He didn't go on praising my prettiness anymore, and I started to wonder if he was getting mad at my village-girl manners. I hurried to do as he told me. Outside the car window, the clean streets and well-dressed people began to disappear, leading to a more run-down place. Homeless cripples sat along the streets, some with thick clouds of flies buzzing around them so that I couldn't tell which of those men were still alive. 2 dogs with matted fur and bleeding cuts showed their teeth and snarled at each other over a dead bird. The buildings looked washed down by rain. They stood there all defeated and made the thatch-roof shacks in my village look cozy and welcoming.

Right then I felt Mr. Lee shaking my arm, nails digging into my skin. He practically screamed, Girl, are you deaf? I've been telling you to get ready—now move! He half-shoved me out of the car and said, You ready to meet your husband?

My stomach did flip-flops, and I reached up to pat my 2 braids. I rubbed my tired cheeks—a trick Ma taught me to bring back some color into them. I followed Mr. Lee to a brown, unpainted door. After he knocked, a short woman with graying hair poked her

head out looking suspicious, but then she opened the door all the way when she saw Mr. Lee. She let us in and disappeared down the hall. When she came back a big-boned man followed her. He was maybe 40-something years old with squinty eyes and a round face red with pimples. His hands were big enough so that just 1 could cover my entire face.

Mr. Lee came up and right away started shaking this man's hand. They talked in Taiwanese, and I could only catch little bits of words here and there, like my name—Diep Pham—and Tan Zihao, which I supposed later was the name of the gentleman. He barely glanced at me before saying something to Mr. Lee, and Mr. Lee told me to follow the maid so as I could wash up.

I did want to stay around to see how everything was going to turn out, but I was too tired and a hot bath sounded good. The old woman led me to a small room with a wooden tub in the middle. A plain pink pajama set in coarse cotton hung next to a white towel. When I undressed and dipped my foot in the tub, I found that the water had turned cold. That made many disappointments that afternoon—common clothing (not even good cotton or satin. I never saw satin before but heard it shines like the sea), a cold bath, and an old husband with such bad skin. Mr. Lee made me believe that my husband would be more handsomer than that.

After I finished my bath, I stepped into the bedroom. I couldn't see the old maid anywhere but right away I noticed Mr. Tan Zihao's big bed. It took up most the room and had a real mattress covered with white sheets and lots of fluffy pillows. It sure was different than the plain cots back at home, just regular wooden slabs that we put wicker

mats over. All the time I would wake up with the red marks of those mats along my arms or on my cheek.

I parted the mosquito netting that veiled the bed. When I sat on the mattress it sank down, made me feel like I was going to fall through. But it was soft, and I thought this must be what it's like to ride a swan. I lay down facing the open window. A breeze made the thin mosquito net flutter apart like wings. I fell asleep before I made up my mind to.

When I woke up the room was dark and the mosquito net stood still. Someone had closed the window. Someone had been in the room since I fell asleep. Someone was sitting on the edge of the bed right next to me. My eyes made out his shadowy form before he put his hand on my chest. I scrambled to get up, and he clasped his huge hand over my mouth. He said in stiff Vietnamese, Shh, no scream, no scream. You new bride.

I said, Wait, we don't have to do this now. Where's Mr. Lee?

Mr. Tan answered, He go do other business.

He reached for the waist of my pants and gave a hard yank. When I felt my bottom bare, I started to panic and kicked and pushed and screamed. I found his chest with my palms and tried to push him off, but his body was crushing me. When after all his sushing I wouldn't quit screaming, Mr. Tan hit me, hard enough so my head snapped to one side. I got scared that he might kill me, so I stopped fighting. In that brief moment, it felt like he suddenly knifed me down there, sharp and painful, withdrawing and then stabbing, withdrawing and then stabbing. I arched up my back, it hurt so bad. Back then I didn't know what a man had that could hurt a girl so much. He filled up

inside me and stretched me so tight I thought I was ripping. By then I was crying but not struggling anymore. Now that what I was fighting for had been taken away, it didn't matter much to me what he did.

When he finished he let go his tight grip on my wrists and lay back panting. I rubbed his finger marks from my skin, turned on my side, and curled up, my body all sore and throbbing. After a while I felt him sit up on his side of the bed. I asked, Where are my papers?

My voice came out all trembly. I took a shaky breath and said, I don't want to be married this way. Give me back my papers, I want to go home.

The shadowy world of the bedroom went black when Mr. Tan suddenly covered my head with a pillowcase. He twisted my arms behind me and tied them in stiff rope. Then he hauled me out of the house, me tripping over things and bumping into walls, trying not to fall. He shoved me into a car. The engine started up, and we started moving. I was all dizzy from the rush of movement and clamped my teeth together tight to keep from throwing up. I turned my head to the hazy white square of window and tried to see through the thread weaving of the pillowcase, but it was like looking at the world through thick mist.

April 27, 1998

This late at night most of the girls are asleep. All across the floor, they lay breathing steady, wedged between their own wicker mats and thin blankets. I can still hear the murmuring voices of the few girls still with their guests. Most girls here, they're

like me—those from out of the country who wanted to find a husband but got sold to Matron instead. Some were orphaned Taiwanese girls, and others had disgraced their families so bad that they had nowhere else to go. Still others did not have enough money to go anywhere else. They'd rather have room and board in a whorehouse than die on the streets.

Here in the brothel, we sleep, bathe, and eat whenever we get the chance. Most times we get interrupted with Matron always storming in and hollering at 1 of the girls because a customer asked for her. We don't see most of our money. Matron keeps it and pays us through food and pretty clothes. Some of the girls say we're lucky to get that much. They know girls from other brothels or used to work in them, and some of the other matrons clothe their girls all shabby and don't feed them too good. But our Matron, she has a reputation to keep, says that's how she attracts high-paying men instead of the common trash off the streets. We can tell she's all about appearance. She's middle-aged, pulls back her hair in a tight bun, wears bright red lipstick that looks like it glows on her white face. Her dresses have glittery sequins all over them. Her voice and her eyes, they're real sharp.

First time I saw her, I wished Mr. Tan kept me as his Taiwanese bride. When Mr. Tan pulled the pillowcase off my head, I blinked at the bright lights. I found myself in a small room with pink walls. A round table stood at the center, and in the middle of it was a vase filled with fake, faded flowers. 3 chairs surrounded the table, but other than that the room was empty.

Mr. Tan was talking to this lady with her hair in a bun, and their voices got louder and louder. I twisted my hands to get the blood flowing through the tight ropes. I couldn't look at Mr. Tan, I was so scared of what'll happen. After a while, Mr. Tan and the woman stopped arguing, and she handed him some money. He walked out of the room without even glancing at me.

The lady walked around me in a small circle, and all the while I felt her sharp eyes on me. I figure this must be how cows feel like when their master sells them. My left cheek throbbed hot and sore from where Mr. Tan hit me, and down there I still hurt. The lady tilted up my chin and stared at me. Just when I thought I couldn't stand it anymore she said, Listen to me, young Miss. You're my property now. Your husband sold you to me because you're not worth anything to him anymore. My name is Chiewhwa—you can call me Matron. This is my brothel, so you'll do as I say.

After all this time I can still remember her first words to me, sharp and clear as crystal. She spoke Vietnamese to me, her tongue not so stiff as Mr. Tan's. She went on grumbling about the price Mr. Tan asked for me and how that bruise on my cheek lowered my worth. She called me spoiled goods and Mr. Tan an idiot. Matron explained that if my husband had kept me pure he could have asked for more money. But of course he's a man, she said, And they can't help but play with their toys before throwing them out.

My eyes were busy darting here and there while she talked. She must have recognized my panicky look because right then she said, Don't even think about running away. This place is closely guarded.

She untied my hands and led me to the eating area. Bread, a hunk of boiled pork meat, and a glass of water awaited on a long wooden table. My stomach started rumbling, and I realized I didn't have any food since I came to Taiwan. The last time was the night before I left. Mama had used up the money she kept sewn in the lining of her peasant shirt to prepare my favorite—shrimp and pork slices sautéed with sweet peas. That money was for Hanh's school uniform next season, and when I found out where my meal had come from I cried. Ma, she scolded me, said of course they'll have more than enough once my husband sends my dowry.

Matron told me to quit my daydreaming and eat. She said for my services I'd get room and board and a little bit of spending money for my once-a-month market days.

After I finished eating, Matron showed me around the brothel. The kitchen, eating area, and reception room (with the pink walls) were on the first floor. There was also a main hall where the girls could entertain the men who were too shy or cheap to rent a private room. Upstairs were several small rooms. Each had a bed covered with mosquito netting, along with a teapot and teacups on a small table. At the far right corner upstairs was a bigger room where all the girls slept. Matron's room sat right next to this. Day and night, big men paced the brothel, especially at the front door, their faces serious and their arms carrying big guns. 1 of the girls once said it doesn't take a big gun to kill a small girl, but Matron makes them carry those things to scare us from running away.

Matron led me past 3 young Vietnamese girls who looked like they didn't enter womanhood yet. Faces pink with cheap rouge and red lipstick, they stared at me and

shied away from Matron. 1 of them had hair cropped short across the nape of her neck and dimples in both cheeks. She reminded me of Little Sister Hanh.

Matron said, Children, don't forget to smile! No man likes a sullen face. First to get picked into the bedroom today is a good girl! You wouldn't want to disappoint Matron.

The girls shook their heads, eyes down.

Matron asked, What happens if you disappoint Matron?

The little one who looked like Hanh piped up and said, We get a beating. She rubbed her back like she was remembering an old wound.

Matron looked at me out of the corner of her eyes to make sure I heard. She said to me, In this place, it's better to learn about mistakes by watching and listening instead of making them yourself. You really don't want to cross me.

Matron clapped her hands twice and said, Run along downstairs, children. The next time I see you up here, you'd better be in the company of a man.

When I couldn't stop staring at the little girls, Matron leaned over to me and whispered all casual, Some of our men like them young and tight.

I told her, Please there's been a mistake, and that I only came to Taiwan so my Baba could afford the big hospital and could I please go home.

Matron laughed, showing her white teeth, and called me a stupid village girl. She asked how much dowry money they gave my family, and when I told her 5 hundred U.S. dollars, she laughed again and said, That means they'll only be getting a hundred, sweetheart. You were sold for even less than you thought.

Well by now my face burned and I looked to the ground to avoid Matron's eyes. The floor started to blur, so I swallowed and then swallowed again to keep from really crying. She was all power and pride and I hated how she made me feel small. I trailed her to the sleeping area and when she threw open the doors, a scream came out wicked enough to make your blood curdle.

I couldn't hardly believe what I saw. A young woman lay on one of those sleeping mats with 2 men holding down her arms and legs. Another man stood above her, beating on her stomach with a stick. I saw a trail of blood from the corner of the woman's lips down to her chin.

Matron said, That's it, boys. Beat that bastard child out of her. I can't have pregnant women lugging their bad-luck bellies all over my brothel.

The other women in the room stood against the wall, watching with big scared eyes. Matron came over to the woman being beaten, grabbed a fistful of hair, and yanked her head back. She said, Mai you know you have to wash with vinegar after every session with a man. How come you're stupid enough to be with child?

Mai replied that she did exactly what Matron told her to do and she didn't know why her monthly blood didn't come. She kept saying, Oh please Matron, please tell them to stop. Please don't let them beat me anymore.

Her face was all wet with tears and nose snot and when the stick came down her body thrashed and twisted and she screamed and screamed.

Matron said, After today your monthly blood will come and wash that bastard child out of your womb.

She headed for the door and without looking at me said, Ladies this is Diep. I trust you all will show her the proper ways to entertain a man.

Every time Mai got beaten it made me flinch, and my ears rang from her screams. I kept staring at her belly and couldn't even tell she was with baby. Soon the men left and the others went back to their sleeping mats. Some came and whispered quietly to Mai. She cried huge hiccupping sobs, and long into the night, after all was quiet again, she still echoed in my mind. Oh please. Please please Matron don't let them beat me anymore.

May 3, 1998

I've been to market 3 times since I came to the brothel. (Last time I bought this diary because I didn't want to forget the letters Baba taught me.) The guards, they'd always follow close behind. I'd go down Snake Alley near the Wanhua District where the brothel is. Outside, the city's busy and crowded. Homeless people sit begging on sidewalks that reek of urine. The bandages covering their open sores show stains of blood and yellow pus. A man cuts ornaments of snakes and dragons from colorful paper. He'd always ask in stiff Vietnamese for me to come check out his goods, and when I ignore him he yells that I'm cold-hearted for letting his family starve for the night.

Dead poisonous snakes hang from metal hooks at many of the stands in the open-air markets. When a customer comes to the stand, the butcher would unhook a stiff snake from the noose and slice its belly open with scissors. He'd pull out the pink mass of entrails, take the gall bladder, and squeeze the juice in a cup. Then he'd squeeze blood

from the snake's body. It gives me goosebumps, I can't see how people could have an appetite for these things.

By noontime shoppers crowd the markets and motor-scooters slide slowly through the heavy-trafficked streets. People sell bolts of fabric, boxes of cookies and dried goods, and fruits like guavas, mangos, and plums stacked high. I've never been to Saigon before but figure the big city must look like this. Sometimes I want to try some dried goods. My mouth waters every time I walk past their sweet-sour scent, they remind me of New Year. I never spend too much of the money I know I'll need, but sometimes I'll buy the cheaper fruits with bruises that no one else wants. The old woman with her teeth dyed black is Vietnamese. I buy her overripe apples, and she likes it when I come because she wouldn't lose money throwing the old fruits away. Sometimes she goes overseas to trade her goods, so I ask her about the boats at the harbor, what time they start to sail and how to buy a ticket. I tell her I came to Taiwan to live with my husband but still have family at home that I'd like to visit. The guards, they hang back and wait for me to finish my shopping. The woman knows they're with me and once or twice she eyes them. She's a smart old woman and I don't know if she's got me figured out yet, but she tells me what I ask of her. Maybe it's because I'm Vietnamese like her. Or maybe it's because she saw the truth in my eyes. Some people can read others that way.

Ever since nights with Club-Foot, I use my market days to memorize the city. If Matron finds out what I'm up to, she'll have me beat for sure. So I hide my money and my thoughts in a secret place. I show her a face she'll never be able to figure out. I'll be

her dog long as I'm able to if it means a chance to get out of this place. I was born human, not meant to be an animal.

The guards never let me near the harbor, but I can tell what direction it is because of the sea breeze blowing into the marketplace. I always breathe in deep to remember the scent when I'm back here at the brothel. The harbor smells of salt and wind and open sea. There's that wide, deep ocean, so dark and blue, and this time, I won't be going against the waves. I'll ride them easy and wait for them to take me back to home shores.

May 6, 1998

These are the things I miss:

- 1.) Baba's laugh (sounds like a horse wheezing, makes me laugh too)
- 2.) Ma's taffy candy (has to be pulled just right, Hanh on 1 end, me on the other)
- 3.) Hanh's gapped teeth and dimpled smile (I wish I was born with dimples)
- 4.) The taste of buffalo hot-pot, Long Xuyen's specialty (so hot I always burn my tongue on it every time. I've eaten it maybe only twice in my life.)
- 5.) Firecrackers on New Year (the earth gets coated red with them on the 1st. Do the Taiwanese celebrate New Year like us?)
- 6.) The sight of open land (at sunset, the crops glow red-gold. Here, you can't see much of the sky for all these tall buildings in the way.)
- 7.) Fish sauce from Phu Quoc (here, they only give us soy sauce with our rice)

- 8.) Our small, cozy shack and my plain wooden cot (no soft pillows like they've got here, but at least I got to share it with Little Hanh and not some man who reaches for me throughout the night)
- 9.) The brook that runs all cool and fresh around my legs as I do laundry, singing its sweet song to let me know where it came from and where it's going (someday soon, I'll soak my feet in it once more. When I come back to where I'm from, I'll toss this diary full of bad memories into the brook to let it know where I've been. I'll sink down to my neck in water so it can wash me pure again.)

Mushroom Dumplings

The smell of sex permeates the air. The saltiness of bodily fluids, the thickness of desire and lust—the stench fills my nostrils and the back of my throat, threatening to gag me. I stand quietly outside the guest room of our two-story home. This mansion, it sits like a cold castle in Canton's wealthiest district. The boat people on floating flats in Pearl River must navigate by it like a star, and land people in their low brick buildings surely envy the power it commands. My satin nightgown sticks uncomfortably to my skin. At two in the morning, the oppressive summer heat still plagues the atmosphere, and the stuffy air caused by the two lovers add to my irritation. My chest rises and falls rapidly; my long hair clings to the sweat of my pale skin; my nails try to dig indentations in the wall that I lean against.

In the midst of her moans of pleasure, she giggles. High-pitched, like a bird's mating call, it gives her away.

* * *

"Yee! Yee! Come down to the living room!" he called to me last week. He had hauled home the wench from that sex-pit of a teahouse where she and the rest of her kind dwelt. "This is Mei." My husband, Fong Tsan, slurred in his drunkenness as he introduced the young woman. She wore an obscenely bright red dress. Red, the color of luck for new brides, as if she had claim to any of their purity! It ran low on her breasts and rode high on her thighs. She pinned up her curled hair, colored her lips crimson, and darkened her eyelids with blue powder in the popular style of the cocktail waitresses. She giggled, high-pitched and bird-like, the cheap wine causing her to tumble off-balance

until she steadied herself by throwing her body into Fong's arms. I shot an accusing glance at my husband. His slick hair hung limp, no doubt tousled by her fingers. He had wrinkles in his cream-colored pants, and the tail of his white shirt stuck out.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled.

"Little Mei wants to see my fine home," Fong slurred. "Mei-ah," he addressed the girl, "This is my wife." He indicated my presence with a jerk of his head.

"*Ni-hao, Tai-tai*," the girl had the nerve to say to me. "Hello, Wife-ey." She hiccupped in her drunkenness. Turning to my husband, she wailed, "I want to go to bed!"

My heart beating, my blood coursing with rage, I slowly walked down the stairs. I pulled Mei from Fong's body and thrust some money into her palms, wrinkling my nose at her sickly-sweet scent. "Take a sedan-chair back to the teahouse," I told the whore before shoving her out the door, slamming it to cut off her protest. I took a deep breath before turning to face Fong.

He moved so quickly that I did not see him raise his right hand—I only felt its stinging impact on my cheek. I staggered, grabbing the door handle for support. Not saying a word or making a sound, I met his eyes, a bilious yellow. Up close, I saw that he was no longer the handsome man I married three years ago. The area around his nostrils flamed red. The veins traced purple branches across his cheeks. His left eye twitched spasmodically, and his clothes gave off the odor of a pungent smoke.

"You scared Mei away, Yee," Fong snarled.

"You're not in your right mind," I told him. "It's the opium talking—"

“You’re crazy.”

“Please, Fong! You’ve got to stop going to those opium dens! They’re poisoning your body. Our marriage was destined for prosperity—why can’t you be satisfied with me?”

“I’m—not—an—opium—addict.” He pronounced the syllables slowly, as if doing this would give him the power to deny his condition. “*I’m not an addict!* I’m the son of wealthy merchants who passed on to me this castle—” he gestured his right arm in a swooping motion around the interior of the house—“and you, rich and beautiful, are my prize.” He had edged closer and closer to me as he spoke. Trapped against the door, I lifted my chin and faced him, still holding the steady gaze of his eyes with my own.

Fong suddenly reached behind my head and grabbed my hair. Pulling it roughly so my chin jerked upwards, he covered my lips with his mouth in a slobbering kiss. I found his chest with my palms and pushed him off me, taking a few steps away from him. We breathed heavily, like predator and prey.

One side of Fong’s mouth lifted in a smile, and he wiped a sleeve across his lips to clean them from the sloppy kiss. “You’re mine, Yee. Your parents rightfully *gave* you to me. You can never go back to them.” Only a disgraced married woman would beg sanctuary under her father’s roof. If something goes wrong with her marriage, she would be considered an inattentive, unworthy wife. Fong knew that I was aware of this. He continued, “So now you are mine. Dutiful. Loving. Forever loyal.” He spat out the words like bland chewing tobacco. “You’ll do as you are told. *Do not* interfere with my business! You are the weaker sex—you’ve no right to tell me what to do, understand? I

want my meals on the table when I come home for them. Don't question me again, or I'll strip you naked and throw you on the streets to shame your family name!"

And so I served him as I should, without questions, without blame. Mei was not Fong's only mistress. He used to fool with our servants before I dismissed them and took on the household duties myself. He then grew fond of the older, much more experienced women at the teahouses. Mei would not last long, considering his attention span with women. When our first year of marriage passed, I could tell he had grown bored with me, despite all that I did for him. His laundry. His meals. His outlet for sexual satisfaction several times throughout the night. During our second year as husband and wife, I grew suspicious of his other women. When he came home in the middle of the night, he would always smell of alcohol, opium smoke, and the slutty stench of heavy perfume. Before Mei, there were others. But after her, there will be none.

* * *

Pih! How can he drag those harlots home to soil and shame my reputation as a wife? I'm not an ignorant village girl, sold to him for a few coins so that he can abuse me! I hold the reputation of being the sole child of a wealthy and respected apothecary of herbal medicines. My dowry is worth his whole house.

I push my body off the wall of the guest room, my gown rustling softly, and head back to my room, driving away from my senses the musky smell of sex, the moans and murmurs of his pleasure. I've had it with his whores. He has insulted me for the last time.

* * *

The next day, I get up early and make him a breakfast of fluffy flour cakes and daikon fried with eggs. After he threw the tea girl out near sunrise, he had the audacity to crawl into my bed, still reeking of her filth.

He comes down from our bedroom.

“Good morning, dear. Did you sleep well?” I greet him.

He grunts, his mouth already stuffed full of food.

“What time did you come in? I slept so soundly I didn’t hear you.”

“Late.” He pauses to take another mouthful, his ivory chopsticks clicking against the bottom of the fine china plate. “I’m going out today.”

“You go out every day, dear,” I remind him, as if I have no idea of his dirty business at the opium dens or the teahouses. “But don’t forget to come home early for dinner tonight. I’m making your favorite: mushroom dumplings.” Assured of good food, he always comes back.

He stiffens on his way out the door. “Mushroom dumplings?” He turns. “Hmm, yes, mushroom dumplings.” Salivating and licking his lips, he says, “Have it ready early! I would like to eat a lot tonight.”

After Fong leaves, I hail a sedan-chair and tell the driver to take me to the main market near Pearl River. As I sit in the buggy, he pedals through the narrow streets, passing clutters of one-story brick houses. We drive across the execution ground where swordsmen, with a few flicks of their sharp weapons, behead the condemned whenever a crime is committed in the city.

When we reach the market, I pay my sedan-chair driver and start walking to the herbal medicine shop. Already, busy fishermen bring their goods to port. They dump the fresh fish, some with their gills still gaping, on ice before wheeling them into the fish market. The morning sun hints the afternoon's harsh heat. The dense smell of fruits hangs in the air. Tangerines, peaches, and persimmons are stacked in neat pyramids in the open-aired kiosks with lean-to's and white tarps to protect them from the sun. Watermelons sit heavy in large boxes. Behind the glass window of a meat market hang links of Chinese sausages and glossy red Peking ducks, their roasted aroma tantalizing. Merchants post red banners vertically on the two sides of their shop's entrance. The characters, written in gold ink with fine penmanship, proclaim fortune and prosperity. Women sit beside their hand-made bamboo looms and watch over their merchandise of finely-woven silk in a spectrum of colors and intricate patterns. Wood carvers display their goods of decorative pieces in the shape of different zodiac animals.

I reach the apothecary and dictate the drugs I needed. Having grown up in my father's apothecary shop, I know about the properties of many herbs.

"Not feeling well, *Tsan fu-ren*?" The apothecary addresses me by my married title, his head slightly lowered to show respect for my status. The merchants look with eyes averted, but I know what they say about me. Everyone's aware of Fong's habits. Some whisper that I tolerate his whores. Others say I like how he brings them home, think that I enjoy them at the same time he does. Then there are those who pity me, stare after and shake their heads when I pass their market stands. *Poor Tsan fu-ren. So beautiful. So wronged. To hell with them all.*

I smile at the apothecary and tell him, "Something for my migraines." He gathers the different herbs and vitamins from the drawers labeled with characters penciled on yellowed paper. He weighs out the ingredients on a tiny metal scale and puts them in piles on brown butcher paper. When he finishes, he ties up the bundle with white string and asks for what I owe him. I pay him, then head for different kiosks and buy the things I need to prepare dinner.

* * *

I chop the celery, minced the shrimp, and cube the pork into small chunks. After soaking the black shitake mushrooms in warm water, I slice them in strips. These ingredients make up the filling of the mushroom dumplings. I retrieve the brown package prepared at the apothecary's shop and mix its contents into the filling. There must be extra cornstarch in the wonton wrappers so the drugs will stick inside his stomach. Stuffing the filling in the wrappers, I fold each dumpling in a neat half-moon shape and seal them with beaten egg. Carefully, I create small pleats on the individual dumplings. I go through these pains to prepare Fong's dinner every night, while all he does to show his appreciation is ruin his body with opium and wreck my heart with his infidelity.

* * *

"Eat well, my love," I tell Fong as he sits down to his dinner of steamed rice and mushroom dumplings. His seat at the table is set with a bowl, a pair of chopsticks, and a delicate, palm-sized dish containing chili-soy sauce. Fong dips his first dumpling in the sauce and pops it in his mouth, chewing and swallowing quickly. Glancing briefly at me,

he notices for the first time that night my mandarin-collared, crimson silk dress. It is sleeveless to reveal my slender arms. I cross my legs and dangle the right high heel on my toes, clasping my hand across the knee to reveal my neatly-manicured nails, painted blood-red. Fong puts down his bowl as he chews, sucking hard on the remnants of the chili-soy sauce on his chopsticks. He appraises me like a work of art he has purchased for his amusement, and I feel his lascivious gaze stroking my cheek, my neck, my bosom.

It comes to his attention that all I have in front of me is a glass of rice wine.

“Why aren’t you eating?” he asks.

“I’m not well,” I tell him with a smile. “I only want to take care of you, and then get some rest.” Without inquiring what ails me, Fong continues to devour dumpling after sticky dumpling.

Slithering behind his chair, I run my perfumed hands up the sides of his arms and start to massage his shoulders. “My lord,” I whisper in his ear, “I’ve missed you so while you went out today. I’m so lonely without you.” A wisp of my curled hair falls out of its barrette and tickles his throbbing temple. I kneel at his side. “Please stop being mad at me for being so rude to your—ah, *friend*, Mei. You are right, my love. I *am* the weaker sex and was wrong to upset you. I hope you’ll forgive me once you’ve finished your meal.” I plant a kiss on each of his knees, parting his legs before gently massaging his inner thigh. Fong begins to get excited over more than just the dumplings.

Perspiring profusely, he loosens the top button of his shirt. “Eat!” I encourage him. “Mushroom dumplings are your favorite. I’d hate to see you waste away.” I pick up my glass of rice wine. “Here, I drink to your health.” He pauses in his attack of the

food and takes heaping gulps of his drink. When Fong finishes his meal, I clear the dishes, then come back to the table and sit with him.

“We haven’t had a good, long talk for quite a while,” I say. “I want to sit up and talk with you, clear through the night.”

Ack! Ack, Ack, Ack!! Fong grips the sides of the table as he coughs.

“What’s the matter, darling?” I continue. “Strenuous day? Whatever is it that you do outside the house? With your inherited fortune, you don’t need to work to support us. I guess you must be draining all your vitality at those whorehouses.”

He shoots me a deadly look. “Run your mouth like that again and I’ll kill you,” he says in-between coughs.

“Oh, but you’re too slow,” I counter. “I thought of it first.”

He starts wheezing. His yellow eyes become bloodshot, and his right hand shakes in spasms, thumping on the smooth cherrywood dining table. “Yee! What have you done?”

“You don’t think the daughter of an apothecary can mix her own drugs? Don’t you just love opium? All I did was give you a dose of a similar mix in your mushroom dumplings. Did you enjoy the meal, dear?”

Fong attempts to get up from his seat and stumbles toward me, but his leg muscles give out and he falls, taking the chair with him. “Yee—please!” He lets out another stream of coughs, gurgling in his throat, drowning. The white, frothy liquid starts to come out of his nose and mouth. His eyes water; I imagine his lungs burning and bleeding. “Help me!” Fong begs. “I’ll give you anything . . . !”

I come closer to stand over him. “I already have everything. You can give me nothing. You have no family left, no heirs. I will own whatever is yours, in the *unhappy* event that a misfortune should befall you—so says the law.”

* * *

“*Tsan fu-ren*,” says the doctor at my front door a week later. “The result of the autopsy revealed an unfortunate thing: your husband had been using opium for quite some time.”

I stare at him, feigning shock and horror.

“The autopsy showed a massive flooding of his lungs with liquid. It seems that his death was brought about by an overdose of opium. I am truly sorry for your loss, *Tsan fu-ren*. If there is anything you need from me, give me a call.” I shut the door and listen to the doctor’s footsteps recede. Moments later, the driver of his sedan-chair pedals away.

The metal doorknob has already warmed under my touch. My forehead still remains pressed against the door. Alone in my house, I slowly smile.

Birth-Marked Daughter

Hakka, China: 1970

“Shengtian got rid of hers. Took the stiff end of a straw from her broom. Squatted in the outhouse and stuck it up her birth canal. Screamed like a madwoman when the baby’s juices ran like soup from her body.”

Xingyi looked down at her stomach, which had already begun to swell. She mused over her neighbor Yufei’s account of Shengtian’s story. Shengtian had already had three children. Her third, fortunately, had been a boy, but last month she had learned of her fourth pregnancy and had taken the baby from her womb in the privacy of her outhouse. People often spoke about the deeds of The Republic of China in subdued voices, careful whispers. What they did to implement the laws of population control was not fit for open discussion. Shengtian was already pushing her limits with the third child. No one in the village dared to take The Republic lightly after what had happened to the Zhou family.

When Lady Zhou was six months pregnant with her fourth child, her husband sent her away with the rest of their children to protect them. That very night, soldiers of The Republic pillaged his thatch-roof house and hauled him out. They hung him upside down on his plum tree, beat his stomach with clubs, stripped him of his clothes, carved obscene characters into his flesh with the tips of their hunting knives.

“Where is your wife?” they demanded, their knives hovering playfully near his crotch. “Tell us, you horny dog, and we may let you live.”

Zhou must have known it was a lie, for if they found out about his wife, they would kill him anyway and then go after her. The small difference was that he would not die quite so torturous a death. His body hung upside-down from the tree for two weeks until the young men of the village felt confident The Republic was satisfied with the duration of this visual warning. They buried Zhou on his land, near his house.

No one found out what happened to Lady Zhou or her children. They could have been captured by The Republic, and if she and her children were killed right away, it would have been merciful. But it was more likely, had they been caught, that the Republic soldiers would describe to Lady Zhou, in precise and painful details, exactly what they did to her husband. They would slaughter her children in front of her—slit their necks—and force Lady Zhou to drink a bowl of their blood by pinning her down and holding her nose until she swallowed the acidic crimson. After binding her arms and legs, the soldiers would rip her fourth child from her womb by carving their way into her stomach so the last thing she saw before she died screaming would be the sight of the blood-and-mucus-covered fetus.

“What will you do, if it’s a girl?” Yufei’s harsh whisper brought Xingyi out of her reverie.

“I suppose we’ll keep it.” There was a hint of irritation in her voice. She did not want to think about such things—not yet.

“Kai is impatient for a son to bear his name, Xingyi. He will not be satisfied until you give him one.”

“And maybe I will. How are you to know?”

“Mamma! Mamma!” cried two young girls as they half-skipped, half-ran into the thatch-roof house.

Xingyi glanced at her daughters, six-year-old Dao and four-year-old Ling, who had been playing outside. Dao ran to her mother’s side, her bare feet pattering across the hard-packed dirt floor. Ling came bounding in after. Handing her mother some yellow wild flowers, Dao skipped around the brown wooden table where the two women talked. Finding nothing of interest, Dao pattered her way outside again, her two black braids bouncing on her back. Ling shrieked out a laugh and trotted along as if she were Dao’s shadow.

* * *

Xingyi felt just as sick during the first few months of this pregnancy as she had been with Dao and Ling. In the evenings, she craved sweet desserts and made Kai bring her some every night on his way home from the rice paddies. An old woman stood near the paddies, selling her goods of sugared black and green beans, milky-white tapioca tarts molded in the shape of roses, deep-fried banana fritters wrapped in dark-green banana leaves, and creamy yellow custard pudding. The sweetness of her home-baked goods welcomed the farmers, coaxing their dry mouths to salivate. Kai paid a few hard-earned coins each evening to satisfy his wife’s cravings. When the old woman was done selling, she strapped thin bamboo poles over her humped back and carried her leftovers home in two baskets suspended by strings from the poles.

Kai came in from the fields, his black-cotton peasant pants rolled up to mid-calf to expose the hairy legs muddied from a long day tending to the rice crop. His hair

matted his forehead with the day's accumulated sweat and grime. Kai hung his banana-leaf hat on the rusty nail near the door, walked over to his wife, and hugged her from behind. "And how's my son today?" he cooed to the unborn child. "One day, little man, you'll grow up big and strong as an ox and help your papa in the paddies!"

Xingyi's stomach, as round as a cantaloupe instead of oval like a watermelon, indicated she would have another girl. A big one, judging from the terrible weight of her stomach during her eighth month. Another girl. But maybe the old wives' tales and superstitions would not be true. Maybe the constant nausea and sweet cravings and round stomach had nothing to do with this baby's sex.

* * *

The room that Xingyi shared with her husband was plain and bare. A gnarled wooden stick propped up the shutters of the single window to let in whatever fresh air possible on the windless, humid afternoon. They kept their clothes in a large, splintered, bamboo box near the cot where Xingyi now reclined. She gently rested her head on the limp, sweat-soaked pillow. With dull eyes, she followed the busy motions of the midwife, a short, pear-shaped woman in her early forties. Her black hair was pulled tight into a bun; the slick strands around her temples stretched the skin, giving her eyes a wide, alert look. The midwife had delivered Xingyi's first two children. She loved babies and had helped bring them into the world since she was fourteen and an apprentice to the former village midwife.

At her birth, the midwife's parents promised her to the son of a family friend; at age twenty-one, the two married. The midwife's husband sold kindling in the main

market. They hardly saw each other—from morning to evening, they worked at different places and came home each day to share a hot meal, a lonely house, and a loveless cot. They did not have any children. Her husband was sterile, a fact she tried to conceal behind the façade of a loveless marriage, wailing complaints about how her disinterested husband had no patience for children. Embarrassed about his handicap, her husband never tried to alter the rumors. All this Xingyi knew, and she remained one of the few who did, for she was present when the midwife, at the prime age of twenty-five, had delivered Yufei's first child. In a fit of depression after cradling the newborn's warm body, the midwife's festering secret burst from her mouth in a gush of bitterness. Afterwards, though, she always appeared calm and composed, and she never again mentioned the incident.

Xingyi tried to recover from the aftermath of her labor and childbirth. She felt numb from weariness and shock. Covered in sweat, her hair sticking to her face like the thin strands of a spider's web, she cradled her third child, her new son, who yawned contently and fell fast asleep after having been introduced to the world.

"Here is the other." The midwife handed Xingyi the newborn's twin. "A girl." Xingyi shifted the first baby to the crook of her right arm and took the second. The red-faced girl belched out wail after wail in spite of her older brother's contentment. A large tear formed in the corner of her eye and rolled down to her ear. She kicked her feet and flailed her arms as if indignant about having been forced to leave the comfortable shelter of her mother's womb. Xingyi gently laid the boy on the cot next to her to better cradle her daughter. Immediately, she noticed a bright red spot on the girl's left arm.

“A birthmark,” the midwife told her calmly. “She is not bleeding.” She bent down and ran her thumb across the girl’s soft arm. “In the shape of a tear. The girl must be destined for a life of sorrow.” The village midwife spared no feelings, made no excuses. Even to mothers who had just given birth to their first child, the midwife preached what she deemed true, though it might not be the news the hopeful mother wanted to hear. “I’m going outside to get some more water,” she announced.

Xingyi’s second newborn had not yet stopped crying. Twins—not just a third child but also a fourth! She blinked unbelievably at her fate. Republic law decreed couples with more than three children could keep their extra baby, provided they pay a significant fine until the child turned sixteen. Xingyi knew she and Kai could not afford the fine. Nor could they risk being assigned to the least productive agricultural lots, another of The Republic’s more merciful policies for farming couples that exceeded their limit of children. Xingyi had seen them starve, the emaciated children in the village whose parents could not afford to feed their families. Her children would not go through the pain of having to die slowly from hunger. Why this third girl, this burden? Kai had hardly been able to forgive Dao and Ling for being girls. It had taken him a long time to learn to love them. And with Xingyi’s third pregnancy, despite their poverty, despite their fear of The Republic’s watchful eyes on their home, there had been so much hope in Kai’s eyes!

Xingyi placed her cupped palm over her crying daughter’s mouth. With her thumb and index finger, she pinched the little nose. Her wails muffled, the baby choked and gasped.

Why did she have to be born, why did she have to be born?

Xingyi slowly shifted her focus to her baby's face. She had been staring into space, contemplating her disappointment, her grief, and the injustice of The Republic's decrees of population control. Now she gazed at her daughter's eyes, watching her die.

The baby stopped flailing her limbs.

Black eyes intent on Xingyi.

The trace of gray eyebrows wrinkling, as if she somehow sensed what was happening.

Tears landed on the baby's bald head. Xingyi blinked and recognized them as her own. She inhaled a sudden, choked sob and removed her hand from the baby's face. The newborn greedily filled her lungs with air and let out a loud wail. Placing her daughter down next to her son, Xingyi reached under the cot until her fingers met the cotton lining of a pouch. She pulled it loose from where it had been sewn and dumped the pouch's contents onto her flattened stomach. Out came a jade bracelet, gilded with thin strips of gold in equal segments around the smooth green surface, and a jade pendant carved in the shape of Quanyin, the goddess of mercy and compassion. Xingyi's mother had given her these wedding presents when she had left her family to start one of her own with Kai Zhang.

The midwife came back, carrying a bucket of warm water. As soon as she reached the side of the cot, Xingyi grabbed her arm and held it tight. Prying open the midwife's hand, she thrust into it the precious jewels. The midwife stared at her, baffled.

Xingyi picked up her birth-marked newborn and shoved the bundle into the midwife's arms.

"Take my daughter, I beg you! Please, she has no future here with me!"

In the midwife's eyes, Xingyi saw confusion give way to an excited panic that mirrored her own. "I—can't," she started to say, "How can I—"

Xingyi's knuckles whitened as she tightened her grip on the midwife's bony wrist. She held the midwife's eyes in a look that implored her favor. The newborn girl had finally stopped crying. And the heavy silence in the room, like the weight of the world, pressed gravely on Xingyi's heart.

* * *

Hakka, China: 1979

"... and will we see your old house, Mamma? The one with the thatch roof that you and Papa used to live in?"

Xingyi nodded absent-mindedly to her son, Huang. It had been six years since she had last returned to her village. The hem of her silk dress brushed against her calves as she hurried Huang along the familiar dirt path to the main market. He scraped his shoes on the ground to create zig-zag tread marks.

"Why couldn't Papa come, too?"

"I already told you, Huang. Papa, Dao, and Ling have to stay back in the city to watch the fabric shop." The shop did well. Life in the city proved to be good, after their rough start selling fried rice and noodles on the side of the street from a rickety old pushcart. After Huang's birth, she and Kai had been blessed with continuous seasons of

good crops. They had saved up and finally moved to the city to live a better life, so the children could get an education that the village's small schoolhouse did not offer.

She had often thought of the midwife, whom she never saw again after the day she gave away her daughter. Rumor had it that the midwife moved to a neighboring village. After relocating to the city, Xingyi had always dreamed of going back to Hakka, but she convinced herself to leave her past behind. Today, she returned under the guise of bringing Huang back to see the village in which he was born.

"Mamma will let you taste the delicious Hakka desserts in the market," Xingyi told her son. "The city people don't make them so good. It's been so long—I used to crave them when I had you in my belly."

At the peak of the day, the main market filled up with traders and peddlers from the nearby villages. Late-coming merchants from faraway villages soon arrived, hauling their pushcarts. The large wheels made dull grating sounds as they crushed the pebbles and gravel that littered the hard-packed dirt road. Merchants who had already set up their stands hollered to shoppers to boast of the goods, their loud voices and energetic tones inviting passersby to stop and look at the merchandise.

"Live chickens, live ducks! Sweet and tender meat, sweeeeeet and tender meat!" yelled a toothless old woman in a voice raspy with age. At her feet were several small cages of woven bamboo, each containing a brown hen or a white duck. Their clucks, quacks, and flapping wings contributed to the noise of the marketplace. Huang pulled on Xingyi's arm in his desire to play with the caged animals, but Xingyi firmly held his hand. "Follow Mamma," she warned him. "Don't get lost in the crowd."

Xingyi browsed through several fruit stands where green mangoes, pink peaches and bright red apples were piled high in pyramids, their tantalizing scent alluring like the nectar of the gods. As they walked past the seafood market where fish were piled on ice and on top of each other, Huang pinched his nose and wrinkled his eyebrows in disgust. Black flies buzzed around the sea smell and skittered thin legs across the fish scales, only to be shooed away by the merchant tirelessly fanning his goods with a piece of cardboard.

For lunch, they stopped by a meat stand where barbecued, red Peking ducks, glossy with fat, hung on display. Sausage links were looped to hang on metal hooks from the top of the pushcart. "Half a pound of Peking duck, chopped up, please," Xingyi told the butcher. He unhooked a duck and hacked into it with effortless strokes from his cleaver. Wrapping it in brown butcher paper, he handed it to Xingyi, who paid him and sat down with Huang to eat at one of the splintered wooden benches of the already-crowded dining area.

Xingyi allowed Huang to browse a toy shop. She bought him a red-and-silver pinwheel and a butterfly-shaped kite. "You won't be able to fly that in the city," she warned, but he cried and wanted it for his room, anyway. They toured the marketplace until evening when the old ladies with desserts came to sell their goods.

"Kindling for sale!" hollered a little girl, her voice a pitch higher than the murmuring crowd.

Xingyi turned to her right to see a peasant girl in the short-sleeved, button-up shirt and matching black cotton pants worn by those of her class. She stood at the corner of a dark alley with a bundle of twigs and branches at her feet. Her disheveled hair was tied

with rubber bands in two pigtails on the sides of her head. Some of the strands that came loose framed her thin face. Dirt smeared across one of her cheeks. The girl's hands and arms, frail as bird wings, showed the trademark scratches of a young collector of kindling. Her bare feet, not yet calloused to roughness, were bleeding through the dirty cotton fabric strips she bound them in.

The girl's eyes caught Xingyi's attention—big and soulful, the mirror image of Huang's. They were intent on Xingyi—the same hurt, solemn look she remembered from the day of her daughter's birth when the baby almost died from being choked by her hand. Xingyi heard her own heart pounding, felt her palms sweating and her breath coming in excited huffs. The girl suffered from poverty, but she would fix that, would give the girl money, or even take her home to the city with the rest of the family. They did not know there was a fourth child, not even Kai, but they would have to understand once they saw this sad, shy, abandoned little girl. Xingyi felt the burden of her nine-year secret lift from her chest, and her throat lodged with the ineffable guilt of how she so easily chose one child over another those many years ago.

Xingyi took a step toward the girl—she had to talk to the child, wanted to let her know that someone in this world loved her immensely and never failed to think about her everyday. A bent old woman suddenly stepped out from the alley. Her hair, pulled in a bun, showed streaks of gray. Wrinkles had formed around her eyes. Xingyi tried to recognize any of the midwife's familiar features, but this woman, besides having her hair in a bun, evoked none. The old woman caught Xingyi's intent gaze on the little girl, bent

down, and whispered something to the child. Xingyi rushed forward in fear of losing them, but Huang suddenly pulled hard on her arm.

“Mammaaaaaa! I’m hot, can we get some dessert now and go home?”

Xingyi tuned out her son’s distraction and looked back to the little girl, who had already gathered the bundle of kindling off the ground. The old woman watched Xingyi suspiciously and motioned for the little girl to hurry. As her pig-tailed form turned the corner of the alley before disappearing into the shadows, Xingyi noticed her exposed left arm. And immediately halted her desperate pursuit.

The little girl bore no red birthmark.

Homecoming in The Year of the Snake

The old woman swept dust and debris out of her house until all that remained was the smooth dirt floor. Few in this town called her by her real name anymore. When she married, everyone started calling her Bai Hai, a title of reverence for the wife of the eldest son. After her husband died of lung disease five years ago, they still called her by this name. Ba Hai's hair showed more streaks of gray than many other sixty-year-old women. Her gnarled hands looked like the roots of an ancient willow tree; liver spots dotted them like freckles. Ba Hai's face had started to wrinkle long ago, but with chore upon chore to do, she never found time to keep track of when they first made their appearance.

By the lunar calendar, the next day would usher in 1977—the Year of the Snake. Yellow *mai* flowers, newly bloomed, graced the roadside, and many of the villagers displayed delicate branches of *mai* in their homes. Ba Hai straightened her back and stopped sweeping to watch a group of children. Waving red firecrackers in their hands, they laughed and shoved each other as they ran past her house.

“*Chao Ba Hai*,” they greeted her.

“*Chao may con*.” It made her smile to see the children's innocent joy during these times of economic hardship.

In the village of Tay Ninh in South Viet Nam, Ba Hai tended to ponds of catfish. She and her husband bred freshwater fish and sold them for a living, mostly to those in the village but sometimes at the central market square. The live fish would swim in

wooden buckets filled with water for passersby to choose. Occasionally, Ba Hai and her husband also went fishing on a rented boat, casting their big nets into the sea and reeling in the silver-speckled fish as they danced in the air. Because Tay Ninh stood so close to the Southeastern Cambodian border, the villagers used to openly trade with the other country. But no one dared to anymore—not after the Communists encouraged hostility by attempting to take over the neighboring land. The Khmer Rouge decapitated any Vietnamese citizens found in Cambodia, sending their bodies to float downstream on the Mekong River. After the loss of its trade partner, Tay Ninh suffered severe financial decline. But who could ask for prosperity during wartime? Ba Hai and her neighbors had to save up bit by bit for *Tet*, the New Year feast. The high government officials could fight among themselves for land—the common folk only cared to keep tradition alive, and to live from day to day.

Ba Hai's burden of bringing in profits to feed her family had lessened since she only had herself to take care of. All five of her sons had been drafted to fight the North Vietnamese Communists, to invade Laos, and to attempt to conquer neighboring lands, as if it did any good. Ba Hai shook her head when she thought about it. What use was it, what joy could the military find in sending women's sons off to war, never to return? The children were the heart of the country, the hope for the future. Her bloodline had all but died out for these military sacrifices. Stepped on a mine. Gunned to death on the battlefield. Lost his own life trying to save a comrade. Malnourished, and then starved to death for lack of rations. Fragments of past letters drifted through her mind, letters that had nonchalantly mentioned how each of her four sons had died. Word came back that

one of her sons called out to her at the moment of his death. How she wanted to have been there to answer his dying wish.

“The general chose his words so carefully,” Ba Hai thought bitterly, “presenting each of my boys’ death like another statistic. And did he not notice that he always ended with the same lines? ‘We truly regret your loss. Please accept our deepest sympathy in your time of mourning.’”

Yes, they were gone . . . the first four that had sprung from her womb in fleeting moments of fertility. And her fifth son, Kiet, had been drafted to the Cambodia border two years earlier when he was twenty years old. So young, and yet he marched out like his older brothers, shoulders squared, head high.

“But I’ll come back, Ma,” he had said. “I’ll be home, unlike them.”

No room for sad thoughts now. Ba Hai could not permit herself to curse the new year by bringing the grief of the old ones into it. Everyone knew that, on the first day of *Tet*, if one were to display grief or regret, these feelings would remain with the person for the rest of the year. However, if people acted happy, much joy would follow. Ba Hai hummed a little spring song to help lift her spirits. Besides, Kiet would be home—he had sounded so sure of this in his last letter.

Ba Hai’s thatch-roof house was bare except for two *cau doi*—red banners with gold letters proclaiming prosperity, which hung on both sides of her front door. In the spirit of tradition, she had also posted painted pictures of different animals on the walls. These colorful creatures, drawn on thin paper, brought good cheer to the otherwise drab house. Ba Hai remembered when Kiet was young and learned how to paint these animals

in school. He had drawn two pictures—one of a man tending to his water buffalo in the rice paddies, and another of white cranes standing on one leg in a lagoon.

* * *

“Ma, I made these for New Year,” Kiet said, smiling. “Can we put them up on the wall?”

“They’re beautiful,” Ba Hai responded. She tried not to laugh at the buffalo that looked more like a dog and the cranes’ disproportionate legs. Eraser crumbs still clung to the paper, and the faint, gray outlines of Kiet’s messed-up marks betrayed how hard he worked to get all the lines and angles to his liking. “Of course we’ll put them up.”

“Do you think I can be a painter when I grow up instead of a fish farmer?”

“Kiet, you can be anything you want to be in the future, but right now you have to wash those paint-stained hands before you come to the table for dinner.”

* * *

Ba Hai looked at the place above Kiet’s cot where the picture he drew had faded long ago. Many spring suns had bleached the paper yellow. He had always enjoyed looking at these pictures.

There remained much to do around the house. Clothes to launder. Food to prepare. It would be nice to be able to afford a watermelon. She hadn’t felt the cool dribble of its red flesh on her chin for a long time. But Ba Hai wanted to make sure she swept the floor. No sweeping or laundering was allowed on the First—no one would want to sweep away her luck or wash away her fortune. Yesterday, she had gathered the ingredients for the round *banh day* and square *banh chung*, the traditional food prepared

for New Year. She had soaked the sweet rice that made up the glutinous shell, and had cooked the yellow mung bean filling to an almost-powdery consistency. Ba Hai stepped out of the house and traced the worn path to the side where a lean-to protected her cooking area from the sun and rain. Big chunks of pork meat boiled in large pots. After checking the fire, Ba Hai lifted the lids and poked the pork with a long pair of chopsticks to see if they had lost their raw toughness. A thick layer of fat lay between the meat and skin. She turned the meat chunks so they would cook evenly. This meat and the mung beans made up the filling for the *banh chung*.

Leaving the meat to cook, Ba Hai went back into the house to stuff *li xi* with money. Married couples and elders handed out these little red envelopes to the young children. It was their only allowance for the whole year. Some kids liked to spend the money all at once on *Tet* festivities such as candies and toys, but most of the poor kids in this village saved their allowance. One time, Kiet had to spend the majority of his *li xi* to buy his father medicine. Though the boy was only eight years old, Ba Hai's husband had started to show signs of ailing health.

* * *

"I know it's your money, Kiet, but Ba is sick again. We didn't make so much from fishing this season. Do you think we can use some of your li xi to buy Ba some medicine?"

Kiet sat cross-legged on his cot, looking down at the dirt floor. He swallowed hard. "I wanted to buy a kite from the market. Ba promised we would go tomorrow."

"I know, and I'm sorry, but Ba doesn't seem like he's in the condition to take you to the market. His lungs have been bothering him again." Ba Hai paused, then said, "How about this—I'll take you to the herbal shop to get Ba's medicine, then tomorrow, I'll show you how to make your own kite with newspapers and bamboo saplings."

* * *

Of course, the shops sold prettier kites, but in the end, Kiet and Ba Hai made one that flew higher than his friends'. She felt sorry she had to take her son's money away. It wasn't right, having to ask her children for their *li xi* money, but in that year, the catfish got sick and died out. The family had eaten *chao*—thin rice porridge—for months instead of their regular meals of fine rice grains. When Ba Hai's husband had taken ill, the family had gone hungry for long months before the next season produced better results.

Ba Hai used to enjoy stuffing the *li xi* pouches and distributing them to each of her five sons. In return, she and her husband received their warm wishes for prosperity, health, and happiness. There was a time when all seven of them spent the three days of *Tet* going door-to-door to wish their friends and family well. At noon, they went to temple to offer their prayers to Buddha and the other gods. Now, she only prepared three *li xi* envelopes—one for each of the kids next door.

At noon, Lan came from the marketplace to Ba Hai's house, followed by her younger brother and sister. Twenty-year-old Lan lived next door to Ba Hai in a smaller thatch-roof house. She was Kiet's betrothed, and they would have married a year ago if he hadn't been drafted to Cambodia. Lan's parents had died a few years back, leaving

her with a ten- and thirteen-year-old to take care of. She wore an *ao ba-ba*, the traditional cotton clothing of the peasant class. That day, she changed her regular black shirt to don a pink one in the spirit of *Tet*. Lan's black hair hung to her waist. She had big eyes and high cheekbones. She was an attractive girl with many suitors, but she took a liking to Kiet, who had been her close neighbor and childhood friend. Lan's face was flushed after having gone through the excited, busy atmosphere of the marketplace that morning.

"*Chao Ba Hai*," she greeted. "I brought you fresh flowers from the market to grace your house during the New Year."

"*Khach sao qua vay*," Ba Hai teased. "You're too polite!" She hurried to take the massive load of flowers off the girl's arms. Lan brought ten stems of red gladiolus, the flowers at the base of the stems barely beginning to bloom. In her wicker shopping bag, she carried two pots of yellow chrysanthemums. Red, the color for luck and fortune, coupled with yellow, the color of royalty and prosperity, had become thematic for New Year's.

"I even brought you some marigolds," Lan said. Marigolds symbolized longevity and were often placed upon altars so that deceased family members could be reunited eternally in spirit.

Lan's siblings also came bearing gifts. Her sister brought *mai* branches, the delicate yellow flowers already shedding petals onto Ba Hai's floor. Though North Vietnamese favored *dao*, the red and pink cherry blossoms that bloom only in the spring,

Southern Vietnamese favored golden *mai*. They displayed these freshly-cut branches in vases and often hung *li xi* pouches on them to keep with the red-and-yellow theme.

Lan's ten-year-old brother carried a huge watermelon in his arms. "*Chuc mung nam moi*, Ba Hai," he greeted, wishing her a Happy New Year.

"*Aye-yah!*" said Ba Hai, "Lan, this is too much! You shouldn't have bought all this!"

Lan responded, "Don't worry, Ba Hai. What's *Tet* without a nice, ripe watermelon to offer to *Ong Dia*? I hope we chose a good one." The Vietnamese valued watermelons with bright red flesh and lots of seeds. Those with pinkish or whitish flesh were thought to be unlucky; fewer seeds meant less fertility for the young women of the house.

Ba Hai polished the watermelon's dark-green surface with the hem of her shirt. "I thought I was all done bearing children after Thach came along. But one particular New Year, my husband brought home a watermelon as big as this one. When I cut it open, *aye-yah!* Black seeds clustered the inside. I knew something special will happen that year, and a few months later, I could feel Kiet growing in my womb." She hefted the fruit to *Ong Dia*'s altar and placed it down as an offering to the earth.

Lan nodded and smiled. Ba Hai had told her this story many times before.

"Lan, why don't you send the children out to play?" the old woman suggested.

"We can start making the *banh day* and *banh chung*."

After wiping clean the banana leaves and placing them in the appropriate molds, Ba Hai and Lan got to work on the New Year foods. *Banh day*—a cake with a hunk of

pork ham wedged between shells of glutinous rice—was relatively easy to make. *Banh chung*, however, demanded rigorous labor. A layer of sweet rice, a cup of mung beans, a few chunks of pork meat and fat, one more cup of mung beans, and another layer of sweet rice to top it off. The women wrapped the cakes with layers of banana leaves, then bound each cube together with colorful strings. They took about ten hours to cook. Ba Hai placed the cakes in a big tin container and started the fire.

* * *

“Ma, why do you always make banh chung and banh day for Tet?” Kiet asked. At fifteen, he spent a lot of time helping Ba Hai with the New Year festivities. Because she had no daughters, Ba Hai always appreciated her youngest son’s help in the kitchen, for not many boys liked to be seen in a woman’s domain.

“Banh day is our symbolic offering to heaven because it is round like the sky. We offer banh chung to the earth, which is square. These are the traditional foods of New Year. My mother once told me the myth behind them. Would you like to hear it?”

Kiet nodded eagerly and took a seat on a wicker-bottom chair—his favorite position for story time.

“Long ago, an old king with many sons decided to pick a candidate worthy of his throne. Because he had many concubines, not all of his heirs were wealthy. The king decided to send each of the boys on a mission to find him the most impressionable gift; whoever succeeded would inherit the throne. Lang Lieu, one of the princes, was a rather poor boy who was completely at loss with such a task; he felt he could not compete with his brothers, so he prayed for the heavens to show him what to do.” Ba Hai bustled

around the lean-to, checking on her pork to make sure it would come out carefully cooked. The best meat was boiled until it had a slightly pink tinge in the center.

She continued, "The heavens heard his prayers, and a high god came to the boy in a dream, instructing him how to make banh day and banh chung. 'Heed my words, and you will win the king's favor,' said the god. 'Now, rice is the chief food of our people and represents the abundance of the earth; both these cakes must have a glutinous rice shell. Make one round and one square; these cakes will stand for the unity of Heaven and Earth and show how Viet Nam is a land blessed with the care of the gods.'

When Lang Lieu awoke, he did exactly as instructed. Soon, it came time for the princes to present their gifts. They laid fine clothes and bolts of silk, gold necklaces and smooth ivory, apple-green jade and fine china dinnerware before the king. Each of his sons vied to win the throne, coaxing the king with impressive words, telling His Majesty how his gift had come from faraway lands of incredible fortune.

The king noticed his least-wealthy son standing back from the crowd. 'Lang Lieu,' he questioned, 'Why do you hang back when all your brothers strive to present me with gifts?'

The poor boy answered, 'Great Father, I have brought you something, but it is not nearly as grand a gift as those of my brothers. I present you with these two cakes in hopes that you will be pleased.' The king sampled the banh chung and, to Lang Lieu's surprise, liked it immensely.

'My son, he said, 'All the wealth of faraway lands do not mean much to the common people. A good king must be sensitive to his subjects' needs. Sometimes, a

simple thing like food becomes the most important gift of all. Clearly the heavens favor you, and I myself feel confident that you will be able to provide for the people of this land, poor though you may be. Distribute these recipes so that all of Viet Nam will be able to enjoy these cakes. ’’

Ba Hai ceased working and looked at Kiet. "So the king gave up his throne to his poorest son. After all, we cook food with great care. The labor we put into its preparation reflects more effort than a costly gift might. This is why on New Year, whether they are rich or poor, people spend days preparing the best foods for feasting. And that's also why we must have banh day and banh chung for Tet. Inspired by the heavens, they remind us to give thanks for prayers answered."

Kiet got off the chair and began to wipe down the banana leaves for the banh chung. "If a poor boy could become king, does that mean that I can, too?"

"Viet Nam has no kings anymore," said Ba Hai, "but if you ever travel to distant lands ruled by monarchy, you can present your gift of banh day and banh chung. Here, let your Ma show you how to prepare them."

* * *

The rhythmic *pat-pat-pat* of Lan's pestle and mortar brought Ba Hai out of her reverie. Lan was grinding meat to a paste to make grilled meatballs called *nem*.

"I made a big jar of *dua mon* at home," Lan said, referring to the papayas, daikon, and carrots pickled in fish sauce cooked with roasted garlic. "Just finished last night. They took four whole days to dry. We've had much rain this season." *Tet* came in spring, which usually marked the dry season when the rain abated and rice and wheat

crops became ready for harvest. This year, however, it had rained long after the wet season should have ended.

“You work so hard, Lan. Don’t forget to take good care of yourself—you’ve been looking skinny. Not good for bearing me fine grandsons,” Ba Hai teased.

“I know you’ll fatten me up with all the New Year food. You’ve really made a lot this time, Ba Hai.”

“My boy’s coming home, and soon I’ll gain a daughter-in-law. I have much cause to celebrate.”

Lan greased the small banana leaf squares with fat before transferring the meatballs into them. She worked squatting on the floor with the sleeves of her pink *ao ba-ba* rolled up. “I’ve heard horrible rumors about troops sent to Cambodia.”

“What rumors?” Ba Hai turned from tending to her *banh chung*, expressing more anxiety than she cared to let on. She saw how Lan’s jaw was set tight, how she quickened up her pace.

“They say the general makes all new recruits write as many undated letters as they can when they’re first drafted. But the general doesn’t send all these letters home right away. He saves them up and sends them sporadically over the course of several years.” Lan stopped in the middle of shaping the meatballs to blot her forehead with her right sleeve. “That’s why the letters always sound so hopeful. In truth, a man can die in battle long before his family members become aware of the news because they keep on receiving letters stating that he is well.” She looked at Ba Hai. “You don’t suppose—I mean, do you think Kiet is okay?”

Ba Hai pressed her lips together so they became a grim line. She had been saving for two years to be able to afford the upcoming days' feast. Her son's letter last month had said, "Ma, cook lots of your delicious food, because I'm coming home for New Year." She knew he wouldn't break his promise.

"Don't believe those stories, Lan. They're just made up by people who don't know any better. And stop speaking of these bad things—I won't hear of them during the New Year." She looked askance at Lan. The girl had her head down as if engrossed in her task. "Besides," Ba Hai continued, "I received a letter from the general every time one of my sons died. Then I knew for sure. But they haven't sent me a letter for Kiet yet, which means he's still alive. And he'll come home to see us."

Lan nodded slowly. "I know." Her voice shook. She took a breath and continued, "Kiet loves my *dua mon*. I made extra this year."

The *banh chung* would be done that night. Before eating any herself, Ba Hai would first offer them to the gods when midnight marked the beginning of the Year of the Snake. Her back and shoulders ached from lack of rest all day, but Kiet would be here soon, and Ba Hai wanted to pray to the gods for his safe and early arrival.

On the first day of *Tet*, Ba Hai tended to the ancestral altars. Tangerines and green baby bananas had been put up as offerings. The altar to *Quang Am Bo Tac*, the Buddhist goddess of mercy and compassion, sat higher on the wall. *Mang cau*—green passion fruits; *dua*—coconuts with brown shells; *du-du*—fragrant papaya; and *xoai*—fat mangoes, heaped on the altar. *Cau-dua-du-sai*—each fruit represented a word in the common prayer to the goddess to grant families just enough profit from their sales to live

comfortably. To ask for too much wealth would be considered prideful, for humans should not dare to attain the position of the gods.

Ba Hai lit three sticks of incense and two red candles, one on each side of the altar. Back when all her boys were still living, she used to take them to temple so the family could offer its prayers to Buddha for New Year.

* * *

Kiet prayed last in front of the Buddha shrine because he was the youngest of the family. After Ba Hai put money in the Donation Box, she went back to check on her son. Eyes squinted tightly shut, three sticks of incense in his hands, Kiet murmured unintelligible prayers. His lips moved devoutly, almost passionately, and the wisps of smoke from his incense drifted up to blend with the hazy-white atmosphere of the temple. Kiet bowed three times at the end of his prayers, then stuck his incense in the pot of sand placed on the altar before hurrying to his mother's side.

"You prayed long, my son," Ba Hai observed. "What did you ask the Buddha for?"

"Tet is so fun," Kiet said, scratching at the stiff collar of his new red shirt. "I prayed for all Tets in the future to be like this one. Ma, can we hurry home and eat the pork meat now?"

* * *

"Goddess of Mercy," chanted Ba Hai under her breath as she brought the incense sticks to her forehead, "Thank you for the blessings last year. The catfish bred

abundantly. I have but one wish for this New Year—please bring my boy home to see me.”

Friends and neighbors came to wish Ba Hai well. On the square dining table in the middle of the house, Ba Hai had placed Lan’s chrysanthemums. Guests snacked on sweets and roasted watermelon seeds dyed red. The women picked a few choice pieces of coconut candy to munch on, while the men helped themselves to the bright watermelon seeds, cracking the shells between their front teeth to expose the thin slivers of edible flesh inside.

“And how is Kiet doing?” they asked.

“He’ll be home soon,” she responded. “Any minute now, he’ll come through that door.”

Lan also came by with her brother and sister. They left their patched-up shirts and pants at home to don new, colorful clothes. Lan had saved up to buy a few yards of yellow and pink cloth to sew them New Year outfits. Ba Hai gave the children their *li xi* pouches and received their wishes for a prosperous year. Lan stayed to chat a while, then excused herself.

“The children are looking forward to a trip to the market,” she explained. “I promised to take them to town today so they can spend their *li xi* money.”

“Come by for dinner later,” Ba Hai said. “I’m making Kiet’s favorite dish—*banh uoc hat dieu*. He will probably arrive today.” When they left, Ba Hai cut boiled pork into thin slices, then cooked them with a drizzle of white sugar to a caramelized consistency. She put this over thin rice rolls and sprinkled on top the sweet, fresh

cashews Tay Ninh was known for. She just finished preparing the fish sauce mixture when Lan came back. Faces red with merriment, the children brought in their new marbles, bouncing balls, and plum candy to show Ba Hai.

The second day of *Tet* came and went with more visitors and much feasting. Often, Ba Hai invited her guests to stay for dinner, but they politely declined, saying they needed to be with their own families. Only Lan and her siblings frequented at Ba Hai's home. The old woman and young girl exchanged stories of Kiet, laughing at his past antics and regretting the many New Years he had missed with them.

On the third and final day of the New Year, Ba Hai rose early and waited at her doorstep. She could not go back to sleep because she dreamt of her son's homecoming. Hoping that it was a sign from the heavens, she posted guard at the front door, staring at the empty dirt road that snaked into the horizon. The sun rose, tingeing the sky a bright red-orange. "*Hom nay con toi se ve,*" she thought over and over, turning the words into a mantra that echoed within the walls of her mind. "My boy will come home today."

By evening, Kiet had not shown up, and Ba Hai began to take down the painted pictures posted around the house. Lan came by, leaving her siblings at home. When she caught the old woman's eyes, Ba Hai saw how she brimmed with hope. Ba Hai shook her head and went back to tidying up the house.

Lan went to the altar of *Ong Dia* to retrieve the watermelon she bought a few days before. "We should cut this open and eat it before it goes bad," she told Ba Hai. The women placed the watermelon on a table. Ba Hai sliced through the center with a long knife, then used her hands to pry it open. With a *crr-rack*, the watermelon split in two

and revealed its interior. Lan and Ba Hai stared at the fruit for a long time without touching it.

The flesh of the watermelon was white, barely tinged with pink. No black seeds dotted the inside; only a few thin white seeds lay sprinkled here and there.

Red Sun's Fire

Nguyen ground his toes into the mucky bottom, leaning into the current to keep from being swept downstream. His little sister stood naked on the shore. Above the water's gurgle, he shouted, "Come on, Hong! Step in."

Hong raised her eyebrows so that they became lost in her thick bangs. "Water's cold," she said, then added, "and the sun's fire eats the sky."

Nguyen waved his bony arms in an encouraging gesture, ignoring her last comment, which Hong tacked on to almost everything she said.

Hong tip-toed to the water's edge, dipped in her right foot, and yanked it out. Nguyen watched as water droplets darkened the hard-packed dirt where she replanted her feet. He dropped his arms to his sides, splashing water in exasperation.

"Hong," he tried again, "don't you want to learn how to swim?" At this, she nodded, shaking her bangs into her eyes. "Well then, come in! We have to get back by noon for lunch. Do you want *Ma* to get mad?"

Without reserve, Hong splashed chest-deep into the water. "No, no—don't tell Mama. I'll be good, *Anh Ba*—I'll be good!" She called him "Third Brother," his position in the family.

Nguyen felt ashamed for tricking his sister. "I won't tell," he quickly added and waded closer to her, reaching out his hands. "Come here. Hang on to me." He led her further into the middle of the stream. "Good, now I want you to kick. Keep your knees straight. Don't splash too much!" When Hong saw how far away the shore was, she

arched her head back in an awkward angle to hold it above the water. “*Anh Ba!* Don’t let it hurt me!”

“Hong, stop! Don’t panic.” She clung to Nguyen’s body, shutting her eyes. Her neck was starting to twitch, and he could feel her body trembling, causing small ripples to form around the two of them. This made him afraid. “Okay, okay—we’re going back to shore. Don’t be scared, all right? No more swimming today.”

When Hong reached land, she let go of Nguyen and crawled onto the warm earth. Dirt clung to her wet flesh in dark smears.

“Stop it, Hong. You’re getting dirty. Are you feeling all right?”

She nodded.

“Good. Now let’s dry off and go.”

Banana and coconut and guava trees lined the road home. For Nguyen, the sweet-and-sour smell of guava conjured up images of the pinkish-white fruit. He thought about rolling the seeds around on his tongue to suck up all the juice, and the sides of his jaws tightened with sour longing. Nguyen wondered what there would be for lunch.

Hong raced ahead several steps, then looked back and waited for Nguyen to catch up. He stopped to pluck two broad banana leaves, snapping off the crisp stems from the trunk. Walking to Hong in two easy strides with his long legs, he handed one to her and folded the other into a sailor’s hat, using the spine of the leaf for the brim. They exchanged finished hat for raw leaf, and Nguyen folded one for himself. They tried on their new hats. The yellow-green brim slipped over Hong’s small head and covered her eyes. Laughing, she used her hands to steady it the rest of the way home.

The fifteen-minute walk back to their two-story house was enough to dry Nguyen's hair. They took off their slippers before entering. The house was cool and quiet. Facing the door was their father's huge ancestral altar, a cherrywood bureau that held white candles and matches. One drawer contained paper money and paper clothes, to be burned on the anniversaries of the ancestors' deaths so they would never be poor in the afterlife. On top of the altar stood red candles encircled by golden dragons, a brass urn filled with rice for incense after prayers, and pictures of the deceased, the grandmothers and great-grandfathers whom Nguyen never met. They stared down at him when he passed by their perch on the cherrywood bureau. Their stiff poses and unsmiling faces always gave Nguyen the impression of having done something wrong.

When he was young, Nguyen had asked his father how to pray. "Light four sticks of incense," his father had instructed, "and hold them close to your forehead for reverence. Ask *Ong* and *Ba*, the ancestors, for their blessings. If you are respectful and have been good, they will hear your prayers and guard you from worldly harm."

Nguyen was intimidated by these stony-faced ancestors. It seemed their eyes followed him around the room. They had so much power over his well-being, which scared him into a silent respect every time he entered the house. The photos of Nguyen's great-grandparents, black-and-whites blurred by time, had already gone yellow around the edges despite the expensive glass frames. Nguyen was worried that they would forget about him once they were gone and wondered who would protect him when they faded away completely.

A sizzling sound came from the kitchen, followed by the smell of garlic in frying oil. Chi, their *Ma Lon*, sautéed shrimp with green beans. The warm smell of steamed rice hovered in the air. *Ma Lon*, “Big Mother,” was their father’s first wife; she did all the cooking, a job revered in the household because her dishes nourished the family. Nguyen’s and Hong’s own mother, Nhung, whom they called *Ma*, cleaned the house and did the dishes after every meal. She used to give their father nightly massages to soothe his aching muscles after a long day’s work until he took on a second concubine—younger and prettier, with soft hands that were more apt for the task.

“Where have you two been?” Nhung’s voice from the stairway stopped them before they reached the kitchen.

Hong jumped, and Nguyen slowly turned around. “We went for a walk,” he said, holding his voice steady. To avoid her eyes, he concentrated on the gray streaks that had begun to show in her hair like zebra stripes. She roughly kneaded her forehead as if trying to get rid of a bad headache.

“Don’t lie to me!” she said, pressing her lips tightly together. She walked over to them, her bare feet slapping the tiles. “You both smell like drowned rats! Hong, why are you all dirty?” Nhung ran a hand through her daughter’s hair, then gripped a good bunch and yanked her head back. The little girl screamed, reaching up to claw her mother’s hands away. “Damp! Smells filthy! It’s not raining outside. Why are you wet, Hong? Why?” Nhung started to drag Hong upstairs, but Nguyen got a hold of his mother’s elbow.

“*Ma*, please don’t! It’s my fault—I wanted to teach her how to swim.”

Nhung threw Hong aside so hard that she ended up sprawled on the floor, weeping openly, frantically rubbing her scalp. She curled up into a ball, rocking her trembling body. Nhung watched her for a while and was about to go to her, but when Hong stopped shaking, she turned away.

Her eyes shifted to Nguyen. “You had no business going out to that stream.” Grabbing hold of Nguyen’s ear, she pulled him upstairs. He had to hop sideways, several times almost tripping on the steps. “You disobedient boy, you couldn’t stay home and study your lessons but decided to get your sister half-drowned instead? Why do I have such troublesome children?”

“*Anh Ba! Anh Ba!*” Nguyen could hear Hong calling up to him at the foot of the stairs. Nhung shoved him into the bedroom, slammed the door shut, and rummaged through her dresser drawer.

“Mr. Ho Quoc Thai, the big businessman,” she mumbled. “Maybe if you behaved yourself, Nguyen, he’d pay more attention to the both of us. Now look, I’m condemned to cleaning, not even good enough to cook for the Master of the House!”

Her voice sounded ugly to Nguyen, so full of bitterness. *She’s crazy*, he thought, *bringing this up every time I displease her.*

Nguyen’s eyes widened when he saw the bamboo switch. He fought every instinct that told him to run. *It’ll just make things worse when she catches me*, he told himself. *Better to let Ma spend herself now, whip that anger out of her, than to let it build.* He felt the tightness start in his stomach, and it spread toward his farthest limbs until he found himself doubled over at the foot of the bed. Nhung came to him and

stripped off his shirt. She threw him on the bed and lifted the thin bamboo switch high above her head. Before he could brace himself, Nguyen heard it slice through the air and felt its stinging impact on his skin. Nguyen flinched against his will and steadied his nerves for the next blow.

“All he cares about is your *Ma Lon* and her son, that fat Trung. He’s already trudging along his Papa’s side to learn about the business. What are you good for, Nguyen? Going down to the stream to wallow in the muck? You’ll be begging for whatever *Ma Lon* and Trung decide to give you in charity!” The blows came harder, faster. Nguyen bit down, clenching his teeth to keep control. Already, his legs twitched and his body writhed; he wanted to turn over, shield himself from the blows. “Your father will never love us. Useless children! You and your retarded sister, always causing me pain!”

Nguyen felt his skin tearing, the angry switch biting into his flesh. Moisture, whether sweat or blood, trickled down his back. He wished he had a crocodile’s hide that no bamboo switch could break through, and sharp teeth to fight back. And never be afraid. He’ll show her, the mean witch. He’ll fight back. Fight back. Bite back. Bite back.

Then he realized that all was quiet except for his ragged gasps. The white bed sheets had become damp with his hot breath; his teeth marks cut through the plush mattress. Nhung’s salty tears landed on his cuts, the droplets seeming to burn little holes into him.

“Look what you made me do, Nguyen,” she said. Her voice sounded calmer now, tinged with confusion. “Why do you always make me do this? Why doesn’t anything go right for us?” After a moment, she reached out and gently touched his head. Nguyen recoiled from the feel of her fingertips on his scalp, shutting his eyes tight. He felt her presence for just a while more, and then she let the switch drop to the floor and quietly left the room.

Nguyen tried not to move. After a while, the door slowly creaked open. “*Anh Ba?*” Hong’s voice came to him, all timid and soft. She crept over and tugged at his arm, but he lay still. Nguyen saw that her eyes were swollen from weeping. “*Anh Ba*, does it hurt? Please get up. The—the—the sun’s fire eats—eats the sky.”

* * *

When Hong was four, she suddenly fell backwards on the floor and started shaking uncontrollably. Then she caught a fever that didn’t leave her for over a week. The doctor said he didn’t have medicine for what Hong had, and ever since, she went into small convulsions every now and then. Usually, they weren’t so bad, and she calmed down quickly. The fever, though, changed her. After she recovered, she became withdrawn and shy, clinging to Nguyen.

“Do you remember the fever?” Nguyen had once asked her, trying to figure out why she repeated words. “What did you see while you were sleeping that whole time? Did you dream?”

“Red,” Hong responded, “and, and the sun’s fire eating, eating the sky.” That was all she would say of it. Nguyen had thought it was because she was so hot from fever that the image of fire and red lingered with her.

* * *

When Hong saw that Nguyen could not move, she began to cry again. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault you got in trouble.”

“*Shhh*,” Nguyen whispered. “Were you sitting outside?”

She nodded slowly, gouging at her eyes with her knuckles. “I—I—I hid when *Ma* came and waited, waited for her to go away.”

The door creaked again, and they glanced up to see Quynh, their *Ma Nho*, “Little Mother.” She was the last concubine in the household.

“Oh, Nguyen.” She made *tsking* sounds with her tongue and shook her head, eyebrows drawn together with worry. With brisk steps, she strode over to the bed. “Why was your mama mad at you?”

“We went down to the stream to swim,” Nguyen said.

“We weren’t supposed to,” Hong added in a whisper.

“Look how badly she cut you up,” said Quynh. She was wearing her blue-and-gold- patterned *ao dai*, an outfit that meant she had been out of the house. Lately, after Nguyen’s father had gone to work, Quynh had gone out more and more often, always wearing her newest dresses. Her long hair curled slightly inwards, framing her narrow face, and her cheeks were flushed.

Nguyen felt a sudden pang of anger. *If you were here, maybe you could have stopped Ma from beating me*, he wanted to say, but he kept quiet when she placed her soft hands on his elbow and eased him off the bed.

Quynh helped Nguyen into the bathroom, looking up and down the hallway for Nhung before leading him out. As she sponged off his back with warm water, Nguyen tried not to flinch. He felt tears smart his eyes and swallowed several times to keep the lump from escaping his throat. The boys at school made fun of those who cried.

"You shouldn't anger your *Ma*," Quynh whispered. Her voice sounded sweet to Nguyen.

"I didn't do anything bad. I just tried to teach Hong to swim. Everybody should know how to swim."

Quynh sighed. "Yes. Everybody should. But you have to try to please your *Ma* until these cuts heal." Then Nguyen heard her say in an even lower voice, "She's unfit to be your mother."

After Quynh helped him put on a loose cotton shirt, she led him and Hong into her room, the one farthest down the hall on the second floor. Sometimes, late at night, Nguyen could hear his father's weighted footsteps when he went to visit Quynh. The sound of the floor creaking would magnify in his mind, causing him to remain wide awake, and Nguyen would strain to hear his father's footsteps coming back from the direction he came before he could fall asleep again.

The walls of Quynh's room were a soft pink, girlish, reminding Nguyen of how much younger his *Ma Nho* was compared to his *Ma Lon* or even his own mother. Hong

was still sniffing. Quynh put her arms around the little girl's shoulders and stroked her hair. "*Ninh di*," she said. "Don't cry anymore, Hong. Everything's okay now." Nguyen lay down on her bed. He could smell Quynh's faint jasmine perfume on the pillow, and he rubbed his cheek against its smooth surface. The afternoon breeze drifted through the open window, making the sheer white curtains dance and billow like sails. His hurt body wanted to rest, and he blinked sleepily, longing to forget his stinging back.

Quynh walked over to her dresser and came back with a wooden box. Two swans were carved on its lid, their necks arched together to form a heart. She wound the switch on the bottom and opened the lid. Soft music tinkled into the air, a sad tune that made Nguyen think of a woman singing a lullaby to her child. Quynh withdrew a lumpy handkerchief from inside the music box and unwrapped two glass swans. She placed them on the mirror base of the box, and the swans started moving around in a slow circle.

"What makes them dance?" Hong asked, wiping the last trickle from her nose.

Magnets, Nguyen thought.

"Magic," Quynh whispered.

"Who gave it to you?" Hong brought her face closer to the swans so that her nose almost touched them.

"My mother, just before I went away to marry your father."

"Your mother didn't hate you like *Ma* hates us?" Hong asked.

Quynh reached over and stroked her back. "No, my mother loved me."

"Then why did you leave her?"

“Because we were poor. And because your father—he said he would give my family a lot of money if I went away with him. So I did.” Her voice trembled.

Nguyen tried to clamp his jaws together, but the wide yawn escaped, and his eyelids forced themselves closed. He vaguely felt Hong shift her weight on the mattress.

“Your box is so pretty.”

“I’ll give it to you, Hong. But you must keep it a secret. You can only play with it in my room—your *Ma* will be angry if I give you things.”

The music slowed, the notes dragging on and suspending in the air. And the lullaby dulled the hurt on Nguyen’s back, coating his mind with sleep.

* * *

The usual silence hung over the dining table that night. The only sounds were the chewing and swallowing of food, the clinking of chopsticks against porcelain bowls. At the head of the table sat Nguyen’s father, Ho Quoc Thai, constantly transferring more meat and fish to his rice bowl. Facing him, Chi sat at the other end of the table, the second-honorary position. She looked pleased at her husband’s appetite. After a while, Chi asked her son Trung about his day, whether he had learned anything new from helping out Thai with his business. “How’s the food?” she added after he finished talking. “I made your favorite soup tonight.”

“Very good, Mother.” Trung had a round face and short neck, and he ate even more than Thai. Nguyen and Hong, throughout their lives, had never talked to him much. If they played with him and he got hurt, he’d go crying to their father or *Ma Lon*, and they would be beaten by one and starved by the other for harming their big brother. After

a while, they decided it was safer to play by themselves. To make things up to Trung, Thai bought him toys and treats while Nguyen and Hong grew content playing with rocks, sticks, banana leaves, and insects.

When Nguyen reached to refill his bowl with soup, his back tightened. He dropped the spoon so that it splashed soup droplets on the table. Thai, who sat closest to the bowl, shot his son a look. "What's wrong with you? Be more careful," he demanded.

"It's not his fault! His back is hurt," Quynh said. Nhung looked hard at her, and she stared back.

"How did this happen?" Thai began to stroke his beard. He could never keep his hands still.

"*Ma* hit him," Hong blurted.

Nhung slammed her chopsticks down on her half-finished rice bowl. "These kids are disobedient! Do you know what Nguyen did today? Took Hong down to the stream to teach her how to swim. With her condition, he could have drowned her! And they came back looking like mud people. He needed to be disciplined."

"You shouldn't have hit him so hard," Quynh interrupted.

"Don't tell me how to raise my children," Nhung shot back.

"Enough," Thai said, rubbing his ballooning stomach. "Nguyen, Hong—next time you don't have anything to do, concentrate on your lessons. Don't cause anymore trouble for your *Ma*. You must learn to obey her wishes."

At the sound of his voice, all grew quiet again. Then Quynh pushed her chair back so that the legs grated hard on the tiles. "Please excuse me," she said, glancing around the room before setting her gaze on Thai. "I'm finished with dinner."

Late that night, when a chill settled in the house, Nguyen eased himself off the bed. He had been lying on his stomach so he wouldn't disturb the cuts on his back. Quietly, he swept aside the mesh netting that protected his bed from mosquitoes. He tiptoed out of the room and down the stairs so as not to disturb his family. Downstairs, the house basked in pale blue moonlight. The furniture looked hulking and lumpy—sofas with red-and-gold floral cushions and high-polished cherrywood backings and armrests. Their father had employed the *Thuong* to make these sofas by hand. This was no small feat, for these mountain people were not sociable and would not work for a small amount of money. But they did beautiful work and used only the best-quality woods. The day Thai hired a group of men to haul the finished sofas back to his house, they had a great party where neighbors came to admire his new home furnishing.

The cherrywood altar looked black in the moonlight. Nguyen drew out four incense sticks and lit them. Holding them close to his forehead, he quietly prayed for the pain to go away, hoping that at least one stony-faced kin would take pity and watch over him.

* * *

School let out at noon. Nguyen met up with his little sister to walk home. He couldn't wait to get lunch. Hong slowed when she saw the lady with her lunch cart on the side of the road. She was selling little French bread loaves stuffed with liver paté and

ham. Hong smacked her lips twice. Nguyen fished in the pockets of his school trousers and pulled out some crumpled bills his father had given him over the last month as an allowance. “Do you want some bread?” he asked after he counted his money.

Without removing her eyes from the lady’s lunch cart, Hong nodded. “Yes! Yes, yes, and the sun’s fire eats the sky.”

Nguyen paid the lady and handed the sandwich to Hong, who unwrapped the crispy wax paper and bit out a chunk. After three bites, she extended her arms to Nguyen. “Want some, *Anh Ba*?”

He bit and chewed zealously. “*Mmm*,” he hummed.

By the time they reached the house, Hong only had the hard nub of sandwich left. Angry voices drifted to them as soon as they opened the front door.

“... don’t appreciate your temper tantrum last night. What right do you have to tell me how to raise my children?” Nhung stood over Quynh, who sat rigid on one of the red-and-gold sofas, her right hand gripping the cherrywood armrests of the chair. Nguyen softly closed the door behind him, stepping further into the room so that he could see the women’s profiles. Hong hid behind his legs.

Quynh’s voice came out cold and calm. “You think you’re so big because you can beat your little boy? Don’t forget your worth in this house—you’re nothing but Thai’s chambermaid, married to clean other people’s messes.”

Nhung snorted, her nostrils flaring. “And you’re so important? Think I don’t know about your little outings? You’re just as bad off as me, stuck in a marriage with

one-way love. I'll tell you this—once your flesh loses its softness, he'll cast you aside and marry another.”

Quynh got up from the sofa. With her willowy frame, she stood several centimeters taller than Nhung. “Maybe so,” she said, “but I’m not half as stupid as you. I can’t believe you could drive away the only two people in the world who might have loved you.” She started for the stairs. “When you die, they’ll forget you.”

Without warning, Nhung’s hand jumped from her side and struck Quynh’s face. Fists suddenly bunched up, she hit Quynh over and over—her temples, her face, her stomach. Quynh covered her head with her arms, curling up to protect herself from the blows.

“*Ma Nho!*” Nguyen ran to help, grabbing his mother’s arms, tugging at her clothes to distract her from her rage. She whirled on Nguyen, both hands flying to his throat.

Sparks exploded in front of his eyes and floated in the air like a drizzle of gold dust. He heard his own wheezy breath, felt the pressure of his mother’s cold fingers against his throbbing pulse. “I am your mother, stupid boy! Not that barren bitch! And you defend her? You defend her?” Nguyen’s fingers clawed at his mother’s hands. The curtain of gold dust expanded and darkened and blotted out bits and pieces of his vision. He vaguely heard footsteps, yelling and crying.

“*Ma oi*, please,” he gasped. A piercing scream hit his ears, slicing through his head like a cold knife. And then the air came back to his lungs so fast that he had to cough some of it back out. There was a rush of motion at the corner of his eye. On

hands and knees, Nguyen glanced over to see Hong on the floor, writhing on her back and kicking at the air. Quynh was kneeling over her, hands held close to the twitching body but also seeming afraid to touch it. Nhung, as if in a trance, slowly headed over. Nguyen was too dizzy to stand; he pawed at the cool tiles, crawling to his sister.

Sweat poured out from the pores on Hong's forehead. Her eyes batted rapidly; her face contorted into expressions of fear and pain. Nguyen lunged on her, holding her jerking body down with the weight of his. "Hong," he kept on calling, "Hong! Stop it! Hong!"

Nhung's strong hands pried him off. "Get away from her! Do you want to kill her?" She bent over Hong, stroking her hair back from her forehead.

Nguyen looked up and realized that his *Ma Lon* had come into the room. "Get help!" Nhung yelled at her. "Call an ambulance!" She directed her attention back to her daughter, cradling the little girl in her arms. "There now, Hong," Nhung said. "Mama's here. Don't be afraid—Mama's here."

Hong had begun to chew on her tongue. Her lips turned a sickly blue. She arched up her back as if she was trying to suck in air. By the time the ambulance arrived, Hong's body had stopped twitching. To Nguyen, she looked to be holding her breath, waiting until it was safe to start breathing again. Chi and Nhung rode with her to the hospital. Nguyen stared at the empty space where Hong once stood. The little nub of bread lay on the floor; crumbs and bits of crust littered the ground next to the door.

* * *

Nguyen sat by the shore of the stream where earlier that week he had tried to teach his sister how to swim. The water murmured a jargon of gurgles, a language that he could not decipher.

Don't let it hurt me, Anh Ba. In his head, he could still hear her voice. When he closed his eyes, he saw Hong's body sprawled across the tiled floor. She looked so helpless, so scared.

He had gone with his family to visit her at the hospital. While the adults went outside to discuss her condition with the doctor, Nguyen stayed in the room and took his sister's hand. He stroked her forehead like the time she was sick with fever. "You have to wake up, okay?" he had whispered. "You promised me you'd learn to swim."

A leaf fell off from a tree whose branches hung above the water. The leaf dipped and swirled, twirling in eddies before the current picked it up again. The flow of water became hypnotic, seeming to travel one way in a direction clearly mapped out. Only when he followed the path of the leaf did Nguyen understand the frantic ways of the stream.

"Nguyen."

He did not have to look to know that it was Quynh. When he did not move, she placed a hand on his shoulder. He vaguely felt the wounds on his back throbbing in protest.

"You should get out of the sun," she said. "Want something to drink?" Nguyen shook his head. After a while, she sat down beside him.

"It's *Ma's* fault." Nguyen scraped the dirt with his big toe, doodling meaningless patterns. When Quynh remained silent, Nguyen added, "She hates me."

"No. She just doesn't know how to love you." Quynh cleared her throat. "I went to visit Hong today."

Nguyen looked up, tried to catch her eyes. "Did she wake up yet?"

She shook her head. Nguyen thought about his ancestors' fading photos on the altar and imagined Hong's young face staring down at him behind a frame of glass. He started to cry, and then he felt Quynh's arms around him, drawing him close. He had three mothers but had never felt a woman's softness like this before. Suddenly, he ached with longing. Nguyen wondered if Quynh would now stay home and take care of him instead of going out so often in her pretty dresses. Impulsively, he threw his arms around her waist. He wanted to make her stay. "Don't leave me, *Ma Nho*," he said. She began to stroke his hair, combing her slender fingers through the tangled strands.

"Don't be sad, Nguyen," she whispered. "It'll be alright."

Nguyen heard the hollowness in her voice, like echoes fading fast down an endless hall. Empty promises. Her skin felt so smooth and she smelled like sweet summer flowers and he couldn't think of anything else to say to her.

The sun shimmered gold over the water's surface, and the sky became a deep red. Nguyen threw out a silent prayer to his ancestors, *Please let Hong be alright, and please don't let Ma think I'm useless anymore, and please don't let Ma Nho ever leave me.* The blue of daylight faded fast, and together they sat at the shore of the stream, watching the sun's fire eat the sky.

Riding the Dragon's Tear

My Mama's name is Nguyen Tam Hue. It's pronounced *Hway*, but the GIs who come to see her say it phonetically and call her *Heew*.

"What does *Heew* mean in English?" I asked Bob, a big-boned man who often visited her. All around us, the streets of Saigon hummed and buzzed with life. Motor scooters zipped by, cars tooted their horns, skeletal men pedaled their pedi-cabs back and forth. In the distance, the occasional wail of an ambulance siren could be heard, and the big hospital stood a few blocks to the left. Cigarette smoke thickly clouded the air and mixed with the smell of alcohol in front of Anh Trang Teahouse where we sat.

"Oh, you know, *Heeeeew*," he said, stretching out the syllable as if that would enlighten me. "Kinda like pigments, or shades—of colors. Yeah, that's it, colors of the rainbow. Pretty poetic for a Joe, eh, kid?" Bob had a habit of tracing his large fingers over the scar that ran from his forehead across the spine of his nose and down his right cheek. "Got this shit in the war," he bellowed to anyone he caught staring at it.

* * *

The first time I saw Bob, I was eight years old. I thought he looked like *Ong Ke*, the monster Mama had threatened would come snatch me in the night if I wasn't a good girl and didn't go to sleep when she told me to. I had come looking for Mama at the teahouse where she worked when I saw her with this huge bear of a man, his arms wrapped around her shoulders. The dark scar ran like an eel down his flesh, and without thinking, I screamed, "*Ong Ke's* caught Mama! Somebody help!" A few people

lounging on the patio turned to see the commotion but lost interest when they realized what I was scared of. A group of men in their green-and-brown army uniforms roared with laughter, slapping their knees and hitting each other on the shoulder, some nearly falling off the delicate wicker-bottom chairs. A short glass of golden fluid got knocked over, its contents running down the table and onto the cement in a dark pool. The sharp scent—like the rubbing alcohol Mama had often put on my wounds—prickled my nostrils.

“Bob, you ugly shithead, you’ve scared the wits out of the poor girl!” said a blonde, light-skinned man. “Go stick your head in the sand and save the world the sight of you! Ain’t that right, Hue? He don’t deserve lovin’ from a pretty lil’ thing like you!”

Mama’s cheeks turned red as she eased scar-faced Bob into a seat next to his friends. He sat with his legs wide open and reached a club hand over to smack the laughing blonde man on the back of the head. “Shuddap, Thomas!” he said.

I ran over to Mama and wrapped my arms around her legs, all the while wary of Bob. She knelt on one knee and scolded in Vietnamese, “Mong, what are you doing here? I told you, go straight home after school!”

“But, Mama, we’re out of rice. You have to buy some when you get out of work or we won’t have dinner!”

One of the uniformed men reached over, picked up a strand of Mama’s straight black hair, and twirled it around his finger. “Bob took long enough. Am I next, Sugar?”

She reached up and slapped his hand away. “I talk with my daughter,” she said, the cadence of her English fluctuating as if she were speaking Vietnamese. Then she

grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me so I would stop staring at Bob's scar. "He's not *Ong Ke*, he's Mama's customer. Don't make him feel bad because he looks different." She pulled up the skirt of her *ao dai* and grabbed some bills she kept tucked between the pants and her stomach. Shoving them into my hands, she said, "Get yourself some lunch from the street-cart vendors. Now go home! Don't let me see you here again."

As I walked off, I heard Mama giggle politely. "I sorry, Billy. I mean to you? I make up to you now, Sugar." That was so like her—stormy one moment and sunny the next. Once, she spent a week crying and pulling at her hair. I thought she had gone crazy, but then she returned to work later, laughing like her usual self. Hearing her softened tone, I felt instant jealousy over how nice she suddenly was to this man whom she had just slapped away so she could treat me like the center of her world.

That night, when she came home later than usual, I cried on my threadbare cot and pounded the pillow with my fists, refusing to eat and yelling that she loved those big men more than me. When other mothers would have slapped their children for disrespect, Mama came over and stroked my hair. For a long time, she sat next to me until my screaming became soft hiccups. Then she drew from her handbag a gold necklace with a jade pendant carved in the likeness of Quan Am, the Goddess of Mercy, sitting cross-legged inside a lotus whose petals were tipped with diamonds. My eyes followed the shiny trinket as Mama put the gold chain around my neck, pressing the S-hook into place. The jade, a fresh green marked with swirls of white, felt cool against my skin.

"I missed your birthday last month," she whispered, her eyes shyly looking away as my intense gaze bore into her. "I was trying to save up for something really nice. Quan Am is Mama's guardian goddess. One day, Mong, I will take you to a good fortune teller to find out yours."

I glanced at the small altar on the high shelf against the wall. Though the contents of the house shifted now and then, one thing had always stayed the same: the framed picture of Quan Am Bo Tat in a glorious white robe, walking with bare feet on the coiling body of a dragon amidst a sea of fog. Mama's eyes followed mine.

"She didn't start out as a goddess on a pedestal, I tell you." Her tone became even and low, a sure sign that she would tell a story. "Quan Am was a common woman, just like us. One day, as she watched her husband sleep, she murmured, 'Why, Husband, how long you've let your beard grow!' So she decided to shave him, and just as she was getting ready, the husband awoke and saw the razor held over his throat. He gave a start, nicking himself with the razor's edge, and screamed so that everyone came running to see what had happened. This man, who had never loved Quan Am in the way a husband should love a wife, blubbered to his family about her attempted murder. Well, there was the razor still in her hands, stained with the blood still oozing from the cut on his neck. Outraged, Quan Am's mother-in-law threw her out of the house. Quan Am wandered like a lost ghost until she found refuge in a monastery."

Soothed by Mama's voice, I kept my eyes on her lips, saw them move to shape the words. I imagined those words to be golden threads flowing from her mouth to weave a comforting blanket over me.

“Quan Am cut off all her beautiful black hair, bound her breasts, and put on the brown robes of a monk. In those days, women weren’t allowed to join monasteries, you know. She found peace in the teachings of the Buddha until a woman named Thi Mau from a nearby village brought with her a scandal that would destroy Quan Am’s life. You see, Thi Mau was pregnant but didn’t have a husband. The villagers threatened to lynch her if she wouldn’t reveal his name, so she brought the mob to the monastery and pointed a finger at a monk whom she fell in love with, but who wouldn’t ever look at her. This monk happened to be the disguised Quang Am. ‘There’s the father of my baby,’ Thi Mau accused. ‘He made me bear this secret alone, and now you all know why.’”

Mama unconsciously reached out to draw circles on my back. Through my thin shirt, my skin tingled as her fingertips brushed across, as light as the caress of butterfly wings. “The villagers were outraged. ‘A monk,’ they whispered among themselves, ‘What a shameful thing to do!’ They asked her, ‘Do you have anything to say for yourself?’ And when she remained silent, they hauled Quan Am outside to beat her. She could do nothing but hold her tongue and bite off her screams. To be falsely accused—that was unfair, but had she revealed her gender, the one thing that would have saved her, that would cause her to be kicked out of the monastery, never again to bask in the ways of the Buddha. And that would be unbearable.”

Mama stopped talking as if the story had ended. I blew an impatient breath out of my nostrils and finally gave in. “So then what happened, Mama?”

As if she was satisfied to see my anger give way to curiosity, the corners of her lips lifted in a smile. “Well, the woman finally had her baby—a son—and they made

Quan Am take care of him. She brought him up as best she could, but one day she fell sick and died. When the mortician came to dress her for the funeral, he finally unmasked the secret Quan Am had kept for all these years. Even Buddha up high recognized her devotion and pitied her sacrifice. So he received her spirit with loving arms and made her the Goddess of Mercy, for the compassion she showed to the child she raised, and for the mercy she granted to the poor, petrified woman who falsely accused her.”

Images danced across my mind as Mama spoke; I saw a beautiful woman with her head shaved bald, sweeping the monastery grounds until another with a large belly came to rob her of this life. I once again looked at the framed picture on the altar. “How come she carries that white bottle in her hand?”

“That’s the cooling water of mercy. See how she holds the sprig of bamboo in her other hand? When we pray to Quan Am Bo Tat to help us through hard times, she dips the bamboo in the bottle and sprinkles us with holy water to grant us mercy.” Mama wrapped her arms around me. “So you see, Mong—Quan Am, she is a special goddess. Only she knows the sorrows that women must bear. She sees deep into your heart, so that even if you do bad things, if your intentions are pure and true, she will be willing to forgive you.” She tilted my chin up and traced her fingers around my face, oval, with high cheekbones, just like hers. “Mong, you must be good and understand why Mama has to be nice to those men. It’s because they give me money so I can feed us both and give you nice things like this necklace. Do you understand?”

I nodded, wiping a hand across my nose. She patted me on the head and tucked the necklace underneath my shirt. “Keep it from your schoolmates’ jealous eyes. They

don't think that such a young girl should wear something so fancy." I got up from the cot, followed her to the kitchen, and helped her wash the rice she had bought for our dinner.

* * *

That was many years ago when the war was coming to an end and a group of Americans who were supposed to fight in it visited the women in the teahouse instead. And even though Mama had told me to stay away, I went to Anh Trang at least four times a week to wait for her during the evenings. Children weren't allowed inside, but at fifteen, I was taller and more developed than most girls my age. Once, I was seized with curiosity and wandered in. No one noticed to kick me out. The environment was drastically different from the casual outdoor-patio-lounging—women in colorful *ao dai* dresses hung onto the arms of men, some of them gangly Vietnamese, but mostly former American GIs and tourists who had established a reputation as “frequents” to Anh Trang Teahouse. I watched the whiny-voiced women with their artificial eyelashes and fake smile. They dragged the men back to the bar to get yet another drink of beer or that sharp-smelling hard liquor, then led them, wobbly-kneed, upstairs to individual bedrooms. Some of the women, hair done up and press-on nails gleaming crimson, straddled their customers right on the bar stool, tongues busy licking these men's lips and chin and chest hair, hips jerking in a rhythm, causing the stool to creak. The thick stench of liquor and sweat, the sight of bright makeup painted on in thick layers, the sound of belching and giggling and guffawing, and the occasional loud moans and guttural screams from upstairs made my stomach toss and flip; I could feel my lunch of rice and

fried fish swimming back up my throat. I clenched my teeth together to avoid gagging, and as I turned to hurry back outside, I thought I caught a glimpse of my mother at the top of the stairs, a dark shadow of a man at her side.

Mama walked home alone that evening, and when she saw me on my cot with my face turned away from the front door, she did not come to sit next to me. She went to the dinner I left for her on the splintered kitchen table, ate in silence, and extinguished the flame from our oil lamp before retiring to her own cot. My tears had been used up along the journey home from the teahouse earlier that afternoon, and all I felt in the darkness was a dull ache somewhere deep within my body. I clasped my fingers tight around my Quan Am pendant, praying to the Goddess of Mercy to forgive Mama for what she had to do to keep us alive, and to forgive me for having to accept it.

* * *

At seventeen, I began to go back to the teahouse to escort Mama home almost every day, though I never went indoors again. In my white school *ao dai*, I would sit at one of the patio tables, sipping an iced tea and studying my notes on English as the men made a commotion around me. Bob lived in America but would often come back to Viet Nam on vacation. His first stop was always Anh Trang Teahouse to see Mama. The day when I asked what Mama's name meant was only his second day back in the country.

"Got jet-lag, is why I didn't drop by yesterday," he said. "Shit, can you believe it, kid? Twenty-three trips in eleven years and now it's beginnin' to wear me down. Guess I'm gettin' old." He downed the rest of the whiskey from his shot glass and flagged the waitress to order another. When he exhaled heavily through his mouth, the alcoholic

fume reached me, and I crinkled my nose. “‘The most common syntax in the English language is subject-verb-object,’” I slowly read from my notes, flexing my tongue to form the big words. I turned my face away from Bob’s mouth and continued, “‘though sometimes the syntax can be varied by a dependent clause, which can preclude the main clause in the form of a subordinator or a prepositional phrase.’ Can you give me an example of each, Bob? The teacher was talking too fast, and I didn’t copy the sentences down in my notes.”

“‘I’m gonna piss in my pants,’” Bob said. “Example of normal syntax. ‘Because I drank too much of this damn whiskey, I’m gonna piss in my pants’: example of subordinator starting off the sentence. ‘Before I piss in my pants, I’d better go to the can’: example of preposition.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him. He had this broad grin on his red face and was chuckling at his own sentences. “Hey, kid, we’re too close now for me to be polite to ya.” I knitted my eyebrows together, substituted “politer” words in his example sentences, and jotted them down so I could study them later.

“Shit, put that away, kid,” Bob said, rubbing his forehead where the scar started. “All this grammar crap’s givin’ me a headache. Let’s go back to your mama. Now, she’s worth talkin’ about. Did you know . . . wait—hell, I’ve already told you her name’s meaning. What about yours, Mong? That’s a strange sorta name. Not like all the Mai’s and Hong’s and Lan’s that I know. What’s it translate to?”

I could hear the slur of drunkenness in his voice. What I told him now he probably wouldn’t remember tomorrow, but I put down my notes anyway; I was tired of

studying. “You only know those flower names because that’s what those women call themselves when you visit them in there.” I gestured to the front door of the teahouse, and already he was shaking his head no.

“Come on, honey! Your Ma, she’s the only one for me.” He rapped his left fist against his heart, and I quickly looked away so he wouldn’t catch my sudden flash of anger. Over the years, I’ve come to know Bob better than any of Mama’s other visitors, but I couldn’t ever feel comfortable with what he did with her upstairs.

I cleared my throat and changed the subject. “Mama named me Nguyen Uoc Mong. *It is* a funny name—more like a noun than a common name.”

“Uhk Mong,” Bob tried, and I couldn’t help laughing.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said, though he slightly mispronounced and leveled out the accents. Say it one way, and my name meant “a dream” or “a wish.” Say it another way and it meant “hope.” I suppose it was a good name, appropriate. I was my mother’s hope that helped her through this teahouse job; she wanted to help me become a doctor—a better life than she could have ever wished for herself.

Mama stepped out of Anh Trang. The waitress had no doubt told her that Bob had come for her. Over the years, she had aged, and fine lines creased around her mouth and eyes. She smiled when she saw Bob and opened her arms to him. At the end of each day, Mama looked tired, but her face often lit up when she was ready to walk home with me. Bob came to her, bent over her petite frame, and planted a kiss on her cheek.

“You have nice trip?” she asked.

“Naw. Jet-lag.”

“You ready come up?” Mama was bypassing the small talk. I think she felt uncomfortable with me there—rarely did she take clients from outside the teahouse where I could see, and often, when I arrived to pick her up, she was all ready to go home. “I almost done for day. Mong waiting for me.”

Bob shook his head and grinned. “I’m not goin’ up today, darlin.’ Just dropped by to see you—it’s been a while. Had a talk with your daughter there. Growin’ up to be a fine gal. Looks like you.” Whether from drunkenness or shyness, he awkwardly fished in his pockets for a long time before pulling out some American bills. One green one was worth so many of our own reds. He thrust these three bills at Mama and said, “Here, go buy yourselves a nice dinner tonight.”

Mama looked at him, surprised and confused. Her eyebrows knitted together, causing Bob to laugh. “You look just like your little girl when you do that!”

She shook her head at his offer. “No, you no come up, I no take money.”

“No, go on, peaches! We know each other better than to be all politesey-cutesey!” Bob forced Mama’s clenched fingers flat and thrust the bills into her palms. Then he briskly walked away before she could give back the money. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow, Hue.” He started toward the direction of his hotel, and as I watched his backside move farther and farther, I began to smile.

I wondered what fine meal Mama would buy for dinner, but instead of turning left where the road forked to get to the row of street vendors and restaurants, she veered right so that I found myself in front of the red-and-gold Buddhist pagoda. She marched straight in, past the big urn at the entrance in which red incense sticks gave off thickly

perfumed wisps, past the monks in gray robes with brown beads around their necks, and stood in front of the big porcelain statue of Quan Am. I arched my neck to see the serene-faced goddess. There were statues of the Buddha and other gods in the pagoda, but Mama always prayed to Quan Am. To the side of her statue sat a large wooden box for pagoda-goers to put in their donations. This money was often used to buy incense and candles, which people could use free of charge. Whatever was left over went to various charities around the country. Mama didn't even light incense; she went to the donations box and, without hesitation, dropped in the bills Bob had shoved into her hand. She turned just in time to catch the look of disappointment on my face. Without a word, Mama led me out of the pagoda and down the shortcut alley to the Central Market where groceries were sold on the streets by local peddlers. Halfway there, she glanced at me again to gauge my reaction.

“Your Mama's job may be considered worthless and dishonorable by many people, but never forget, Mong, that I still have some pride. I work for my money—I never ask for something with nothing in return.” The sun was sinking fast, and she hurried her steps. “Don't you ever think of me that way. We don't need his charity.” At the market, she bought some green cabbage, carrots, and fifty grams of ground pork to prepare the same soup we ate two days ago.

I tried to look like I enjoyed the meal, even though I was tired of cabbage. Afterwards, Mama dug into her tin box of savings that lay underneath her cot and pulled out some money. Wordlessly, she went out of our house, and when she returned, she held two sweet buns still steaming hot. They were my favorite dessert, fluffy white flour

on the outside with a yellow core of sweet-egg filling. We rarely had dessert with our dinner, and so I enjoyed my bun with her at the kitchen table.

“Your father, he was a good man, worth so much more than these others who come lusting to the teahouse,” she suddenly began. For an instant, I stopped chewing. When in my youth the kids at school started teasing me about not having a father, I had asked her where he went, but Mama never did tell me about him. When I grew old enough to understand the making of babies, I had thought that even she did not know which of her “customers” made me. Then came a time when I suspected Bob was my father—he frequented more than any other, but after staring at myself in the mirror, I couldn’t find any trace of him in me. I didn’t look like the mixed kids at school whose eyes were tinted a lighter shade of brown and whose hair shone dark gold.

For a while, I thought I was somehow Mama’s mistake, for she took great care to prevent another child. Every night, she would warm vinegar on the wood stove and douse her private parts with this liquid. Later, when she could afford it, she bought bitter roots from the herbalist to chew on, guaranteed to stop seeds from implanting. While other mothers would have burned with embarrassment if their daughter found out about these womanly methods, Mama discussed them openly with me. “The men who come to see me are ruled by their lust and not their logic,” she said as she made a face at the herbal roots’ bitterness, “which is why I must be careful.”

As we sat at the kitchen table that night, I thought perhaps she finally felt I was old enough to learn about my father. Even so, her sudden openness caught me by surprise. I looked down to see the indentations my fingers had left in the white dough.

The half-eaten, sweet-egg filling oozed onto my hand. I held my breath as if trying to sustain the spell, afraid that if I moved or spoke, she would suddenly say, “Oh, why am I suddenly telling you this? You can’t know yet!”

But instead, Mama continued, “For a long time, I did not speak of him because I was mad at him. He had made it to America on a student visa and promised to send for us once he had his citizenship. The day he left, your eyes had not yet opened. I held your wrinkled, red body in my arms so we could see him off. The big-winged machine bore him into the sky, and I watched until it became a speck, like a silver dragon’s tear in the clouds.”

Mama finished her sweet bun and motioned at my crushed one so I could do the same. She got up, lit the remaining wood in the stove, and put some water on to boil. “I was naïve, thinking I’d hear from him in a week, two at most. But he didn’t write back for a long time, and when his first letter reached me from the foreign shores, it came with a note for me to sign for the money he wired back so I could buy you milk. I almost fainted when I brought the note to the exchange office and the lady behind the counter counted the bills into my hands. Two green American twenties! More money than I’d ever held at one time. Your father said he was washing cars for a living while attending school, and though he missed us, it would be quite a time until he could get his citizenship—years!—and even longer before he could sponsor us over.” She came back to the table to sit with me, and I hurriedly wolfed down my bun so she would not be crossed for telling me twice. “I knew that it was easier to make that kind of money in

America, but I also knew that he must have been living in threadbare shirts to be able to send so much back to us.”

The water made bubbling sounds on the stove, and she went over to pour it into two teacups, bringing them back to the table. “Your father must have been busy because his letters didn’t come often. My heart became jealous, and I started thinking that he was fondling some pretty thing in America. That was the year you caught that stomach illness, vomiting and vomiting until you looked like a skeletal, big-eyed ghost. It took all he sent over to get the doctors to save your life and then for me to nurse you back to health again. Our food ran low, and I sent letters telling him what happened, but he never replied, which doubled my suspicions.”

She stopped talking to take a slurp of tea. “Every day when I walked home from visiting you in that hospital, I passed by Anh Trang and heard the life and laughter streaming from behind those walls. And I don’t think I could have ever done it if I was not so mad at your father.” She laughed, high-pitched with a hysterical edge. “Mong, I cried when his letter finally arrived with a note that would let me withdraw sixty U.S. dollars! He even sent me a picture of himself that a friend took—so skinny and worn that he could not have done anything but work! And it wasn’t until later that an American at the teahouse told me about citizenship and immigration. ‘It’s not so easy, Hue,’ he said, ‘It takes years and years and lots of paperwork.’ Your father was not lying after all, Mong. And when the guilt of my betrayal hit me, I could not go back to that teahouse for weeks, too busy puffing my eyes with tears and pulling my hair out from insanity.” The

memory washed over me like a current and disappeared in a calm wave. I fiddled with my pendant and tried to think of something to say, but I sat in silence.

“In life, Mong, you must know where your loyalties lie. If for one instant you let go of your faith, you’ll be lost.”

“Mama, it wasn’t your fault!” I felt a sudden impulse to defend her. “We had no money—you had to!”

She shook her head and smiled sadly. “It was poverty that kept me going, but it wasn’t poverty that led me there.” She finished her tea, tipping her head back to drain the last drops. “After his letter with the picture, I had to write him back to tell him. And when he learned what I was doing, I never heard from him again.”

I stared at my cup, watching the unfurled tea leaves dance in their pond of gold. When I look back up at Mama, I noticed she was staring at my Quan Am pendant as if seeking solace after her confession. We didn’t say anything more to each other. The oil lamp flickered and cast our dancing shadows against the wall.

* * *

The wet season had come, and it rained the first day I forgot to bring my umbrella to school. With the long sleeve of my shirt held over my head in a pathetic attempt to shield myself, I ran to my bike, struggled with frozen fingers to unlock it from the rack, and started pedaling home. Barely had I left the schoolyard when I noticed the four bikes on my trail, chains whirling madly around the gears as the owners eased off the pedals.

“Whore’s child! Whore’s child!” they taunted. I gritted my teeth and pedaled faster. I knew this group of four boys; they went to my school and were one grade higher than me. The boys gained speed, and soon two flanked me on both sides.

“Go away! Don’t you have anything better to do?” I tried to keep my voice from quavering, but my hands already shook from the adrenaline. Ignoring me, they rode closer and closer and started to shove until I could no longer control my bike. My handlebars swerved, and in a rush of wind and motion, I found myself lying on the muddy ground, pinned down by my bike. They closed in, lunged on me, and started pulling my hair, tugging at the skirt of my *ao dai*. When I felt their touch on my flesh, I screamed like a wild thing; I no longer recognized my voice as human. I tugged my hair out of their grip, the pain shooting through my scalp. A hand came forward to silence me, and I sank my teeth into it. No sooner had its owner cried out than someone slapped my cheek, but I didn’t let go until the rusty taste of blood hit the back of my mouth.

“Bitch!” the boy spat, yanking back his hand and trying to shake out the pain.

“Let’s just go,” someone else said. I looked toward the direction of his voice. He met my wild stare with wide eyes and quickly lowered them to his sandaled feet. Luckily, the throng lost interest in me. The boy I had bitten continued to nurse his hand, muttering curses as he approached his bike.

“Better check that wound for rabies,” his friend said.

“I’d worry more about AIDS,” said another. “Probably got it from her mom by now.”

My *ao dai* was coated in mud. I could see scratches on my hands and felt bruises forming on my left cheek from the fall. My scalp still burned from the lost hairs, but I pushed the bike off me and picked myself up as dignified as possible. As I walked in the direction of home, I could hear my heart beat, feel the rhythm of my blood throbbing painfully in my sore cheek. Dammmy tears, I swung back on the bike and began to pedal.

Mama greeted me at the door. Her lips twitched once when she saw me, but my bruised face and muddy *ao dai* was nothing she hadn't seen before.

"I—those boys—" My throat closed up. Mama wasn't often home from work in the middle of the day, and I felt unprepared to confront her.

She gave me a look that said she didn't need an explanation. "Clean yourself up and come inside," she told me.

We left a tin pail outdoors to catch rainwater, and as I squatted and dipped my muddy hands into it, the dirt particles washed off my skin and spread outwards to the rim of the pail. I watched as the brown of earth mingled with the sky's clear water and suddenly wondered what it's like to be a raindrop, to have a short and predestined life—no guilt, no sins—and to land anywhere else but here. After I finished washing away the dirt and blood from my face, I re-entered the house. When my eyes adjusted to the dark, I found myself focusing on a masculine form sitting at the kitchen table. Mama stood near with her arms crossed, eyes averted from this man. At first, I thought she had taken to bringing her customers from Anh Trang to our house. But on closer look, this man wasn't big-boned or muscular or even American. I sensed a strange tension in the air,

and the prickly-haired feeling on the back of my neck told me I had just walked into the eerie quiet following a big argument.

“Mong,” Mama said softly. “This is your father. He’s come to see you.” With that, she left us alone.

For a long time, we stared at each other, I so shocked that I did not think to ask my mother to remain. Then he called out to me in a voice husky and deep. “Come here. Sit with me.”

The time it took to reach the table felt like a dream. I kept looking at his face and was surprised to recognize my own sharp features in it. He was skinny, with cheeks sunken in, but otherwise looked healthy. Small hands. Slender fingers. Hair combed back on an already-balding head. He wore a long-sleeved, white dress shirt and khakis—thick, smooth fabric that couldn’t be found in Viet Nam. He cleared his throat, his eyes drifting toward the altar. “Surely your mother has told you the story of Quan Am?”

I nodded.

“Did she tell you that I gave her that framed picture, right before I left her to go to America?”

I shook my head. By now, my father might have thought me mute.

He leaned forward and clasped his hands neatly on the table. “The boat people—the ones who escaped Viet Nam secretly by sea—thought up the image of Quan Am riding on a dragon’s back across the mist. It’s said that, once, a shipwrecked bunch of refugees would surely have drowned, had not Quan Am appeared on a dragon and buoyed them safely to the Singaporean shores. Framed pictures like that one on your

altar became popular because of this tale. I thought such a gift would help your mother and me remain linked through our prayers, even though we were a thousand miles apart.”

He shifted his eyes to my *ao dai*, and I grew red with shame upon remembering the mud stains and rust marks my bike left on it. “You fight a lot?” he asked.

I fidgeted. Once again, I found it difficult to speak; I had never seen this man who was my father and couldn’t just tell him, “Actually—the boys at school, they tease me because my mother whores herself out to American GIs.” I opened my mouth and settled on, “No. Not a lot.”

“Mong. I know what your mother does. I can just imagine how it is for you.”

I shrugged. “Mama does what she has to do. She has to keep our rice bowls full.”

He slammed his palm on the table, and as if I felt the impact on my throbbing cheek, I winced. “There are other means than to be a—” He closed his eyes, sighed. “She didn’t trust me.” After a while, he dismissed the thought with a slight shake of his head. “I talked to your mother for a long while before you came home. Now I want to speak with you. How do you feel about America?”

I lifted an eyebrow. “It’s—faraway. Well, what about it?”

“How do you feel about going there? With me?”

I felt anger creep up my neck. “What? We haven’t heard from you for all these years and suddenly you come back and want to take me away? How come you left us? Why’d you stop writing?”

“Your mother has been lying to you.” His words spilled over mine.

I quickly looked to the door as if expecting Mama to barge in and defend herself.

“Mong. Look at me. I’ve been writing to you—specifically you—for the past three years. I regret not having watched you grow up, and I didn’t want to miss anymore of your life. So I wrote you letters. I asked if you wanted to come live with me. But your mother read them first, and she hid them from you. Do you know why?”

Of course I did. She didn’t want me to go with him. When he saw understanding register on my face, he continued, “Look, Mong, I know you have no future in this country. America will give you many more opportunities. I know I couldn’t ask you to fly to a new land and live with a man you’ve never met before. But the American government says I can now use my citizenship to sponsor my daughter over. So just take your time, think about it. Tell me when you want to go.”

I looked straight at him and asked, “Just your daughter? What about your wife?”

He broke eye contact and stood up to go. “She’s not my wife anymore,” he said, and walked to the door.

I ran after him, just in time to catch a glimpse of Mama pacing a distance from the house, as if she was nervous about having granted us privacy. When she saw Father, she hurried toward him. A breeze picked up the skirt of her *ao dai* and whipped it like a squirrel’s tail. She whispered something and reached out, her fingertips resting on the crook of his elbow. He shot her a look and yanked his arm from her touch, then walked away to hail a *siclo*.

She took one look at my face and headed for the house. I lingered behind her.

“He told you about the letters. You must want to see them.” She made her way to the cot and knelt down, back slightly arched as if in prayer. Lifting the thin mattress with her right hand, she groped between the crevices with her left before extracting a thick bundle of long envelopes bound in twine.

“Why’d you lie to me, Mama? You really think I’d choose him over you, just because he wrote me?”

She stayed for a while with her back to me, shoulders sagging. Finally, she turned. “It wasn’t you I was lying to, Mong,” she said, lifting my chin in her cupped hands. Gently, she traced her fingers around my face, a comforting and familiar gesture I’ve known since youth. The wrinkles below her eyes seemed to crease deeper. Looking at her now, I was taken back to simpler times when nothing else mattered except the fact that she was my mother, and I her daughter.

“I don’t know,” she continued. “I thought that if I tucked the problem away into some dark place, I’d forget about it. I never imagined your father would come back looking for you. I wish that I could keep you here. But all these feelings inside me that tell me to be a good mother, also tell me that I should let you go.” She thrust the pack of letters into my hands and left. Alone once again, I stared at the weighty bundle, my father’s identity beckoning from within, heaps of words resurfacing from that forgotten place between my mother’s cot and mattress, dozens of promises left unfulfilled.

* * *

Dear Father,

I am sorry your previous letters have been unanswered, so I am writing today in response to all your questions. My favorite color is pink. I, too, like to eat bun thit nuong and am sorry that the quality of the vermicelli noodles, grilled pork, and fish sauce are not up to your standards in those Vietnamese restaurants you've visited in California. I hate the wet season and favor the sun, so I can't imagine the winters in America being colder than Hanoi; Mama and I went there once, and I couldn't even go for a swim. In my spare time, I like to read health books and press flowers.

No, I don't have a boyfriend yet—in fact, I hate the boys at my school! They're big bullies, not at all ambitious, will probably grow up to inherit their family business or some small rice paddy in the countryside. Anyway, maybe I shouldn't mention these things. In the future, I want to be a doctor. I know I must study very hard, and I am getting mainly good marks in school. I enjoy science and have been learning English since I was young. Right now, we are studying syntax—and grammar, too, of course.

Thank you for making the effort to meet me last month. I have not stopped thinking about you. I appreciate your offer to bring me to America, but please give me some more time to think about it. Mama said there are excellent medical schools in the U.S. and that, if I'm serious about pursuing my dream, I should not pass up such an opportunity. But I also know she feels ashamed that her reputation is affecting the way I am treated at school, and she wants a better life for me.

I know this may seem forward (and Mama has often told me to stay out of adult business), but I just want to let you know that she really regrets having done what she did. Please know that she believed it a necessary action to ensure our survival. I am indebted to you during the early years when you were in America. Mama said the money you sent back helped save my life. Despite the men she's met over the years, I believe she has never stopped loving you. She talks about you now and then, always in the fondest way, and with much praise. I cannot imagine my life without her, so I hope you will consider bringing her to America with me.

*With much love from your daughter,
Nguyen Uoc Mong*

I lifted the two letters up to the light, my newly written one next to my father's most recent letter, dated four months ago. Our slanted and accented Vietnamese writing lapped up the pages. American paper contrasted greatly with the Vietnamese type. Father wrote on thicker paper with blue lines streaked across in even increments. My letter had black fountain ink on plain white paper, so fine that the words leaked through to the other side. It looked like a translucent ghost next to Father's substantial letter. I sealed my thin pages in an envelope labeled "Par Avion" and had just set it down when Mama came home from work. Father's recent presence had again repelled her from the teahouse; for a while, she could not go back and mostly sat on her cot, staring out. Finally, she woke up extra early one morning, lit some incense at Quan Am's altar, and resumed her life at Anh Trang without a word of explanation.

Despite my indecision on whether or not to leave her, she seemed determined that I should accept my father's proposal. Just last night, she pulled out her savings tin, pried open the flat lid with a soup spoon, and handed me a thick wad of bills. "I've been saving this for you, Mong. I knew one day you would need it. If anything happens in America, it will be enough to give you a start."

"I'm not ready to go yet," I had protested. "I mean, I'm not sure."

"Well," she said, shoving the bills back and tucking the tin away. "It'll be here for you when you are."

* * *

Over the next few months, Father's letters came consistently, telling me about America, particularly California where he settled. He mentioned the names of some

reputable colleges emphasizing the medical field, always ending with an urge for me to come join him soon. He wanted me to go to America and become integrated enough into the culture so that I would be comfortable in college. “Now is the right time,” he often wrote.

One day, he surprised me by showing up at the front gate of my school as I was unlocking my bike from the rack.

“Been well?” he asked and proposed that we go to the food stalls at the Central Market for lemonade.

We talked for a long while about his life in the U.S., from the first day he arrived to how he was currently earning his living by teaching Vietnamese at community colleges. He was on summer vacation, he explained, and decided to once again visit me. “I hope you don’t think me so much a stranger anymore, now that we’ve been writing to each other,” he said.

I shook my head. “It’s nice—to finally have a father. By the way, thanks for teaching me that mnemonic device for coordinating conjunctions. I did alright on my last English exam.”

“Helpful, huh?” He smiled. “I remember being mystified when I had to first learn English. I’m glad to hear you’re doing so well.” He hesitated only a moment before reaching into the breast pocket of his long-sleeved shirt and extracting an envelope folded in half. Slowly, he pushed it toward me. “Your ticket. To your future.”

I knew without looking that the envelope only contained one, but Father's face showed so many signs of pain—premature wrinkles and baggy eyes and a bunched brow—that I did not ask about Mama again.

"I hope I've given you enough time to think it over." He brought the lemonade straw to his lips and slurped until the glass ran empty. "If you decide not to go, I understand. I think you'll make a fine doctor, Mong. Wherever you decide to be, never give up on your dream."

The Central Market at that late afternoon hour bustled with the sounds of street hawkers and the soft murmur of people enjoying a cool drink on the sweltering day. Anh Trang loomed in the distance, and I suddenly felt a familiar, dull ache in my gut, like those mornings right after my pet canary died and I woke up realizing again and again that she was gone.

"Thank you, Father. I'll write and let you know." I reached for the envelope and felt, before my fingers even touched the crisp paper, that I had already made my ultimate decision.

* * *

The plane ticket was for a month from now. A month left to say goodbye. This thought must have raced through Mama's head as it did mine. That night, after I had announced Father's visit and told her that I was ready to go, we sat side-by-side on her cot, underneath which lay a tin full of my future security.

Mama scooted close and stroked my hair like the day she gave me my necklace. "Really, he is very generous—he must love you so much to hold back his pride and offer

you this opportunity.” She nodded, trying to convince herself of this. “Your chances to succeed are endless in America,” she continued. “A doctor, that’s a good profession. You’ll be well respected. And no man will ever tell you what you’re worth.”

I put my arms around her soft waist. “I told you, Mama. I have a plan. I’m going to get my citizenship so I can sponsor you over.”

Her body shook like she was trying to suppress a laugh. “I don’t deserve to be with your father. Things between us can never be the same.”

“It’ll work out, Mama. I’ll make Father understand.” I was surprised at the firmness of my voice, but the determination behind it made me feel strong. “He’s mad now, but when I’m with him in America, I’ll make him forgive you. You’ll see . . . you’ll see . . .” I kept murmuring this until at last she nodded, and as she rocked me in her arms, I felt the hot splash of her tears on my forehead.

* * *

“Tomorrow I leave, Bob.” I had stopped going to school last week and started sitting at the teahouse so that I could see Mama when she took little breaks. Bob had joined me every day.

“You’ll like the States, kid. It’ll be grand. Big, beautiful houses, nicely-clipped lawns . . . I’m goin’ back to Washington myself tonight. Here’s my address and phone number, case you need anything. You just call me up—I’ll take care of you. Your Mama made me promise.” He grinned, running a hand along his face scar. “I think you’ll be okay with your Pops in California, though. Your Mama told me about him. Sounds like a good man.”

“Bob?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“You come back to Viet Nam often. You think I can go with you to visit Mama some of the time?”

“Sure, kid, sure. But ya gotta get a passport first. Real easy, that citizenship test. Should be a piece a’ cake for you. All your English studyin’ is gonna come in handy.” He reached over and patted me on the back, stiff and formal. “Look, kid, you’re real lucky, believe it or not. I’ve seen girls desperate enough to give everything they’re worth for half the opportunity you’re getting. Cheer up. Study hard. Don’t worry about your Mama. I’ll keep an eye out for her when I’m back in town.”

That night, Mama and I had a grand feast. Not even on New Year did I see so much food. Shark-fin soup and egg rolls and baked fish and even special cakes and tarts. Determined not to cry, we laughed about funny things in our past: the time she put on her *ao dai* and forgot her pants; the time I held the curling iron too close to my forehead and branded the logo into my skin; those daddy-long-leg spiders that sent me shrieking up my cot, which Mama squashed flat for me and threw away. In the middle of the night when I couldn’t sleep, I crept over to her cot and molded my body into her arms. She responded right away, as if she, too, had been awake. I breathed her scent in deep and snuggled into her warmth. The next morning, when the gray sky turned a tint of rose, we gathered my suitcases and hailed a *siclo* to get to the airport.

I watched her disappear behind the throng of passengers as I was pushed onto the plane. She had hugged me close and hung on to my fingers during the last few moments before pushing me away. "Go now," she said, and I remembered my promises to her.

I'll study and work real hard. I'll write everyday that I can manage. I'll wire my earnings over so you can soon quit the teahouse.

It had been drizzling when I boarded the airplane. I imagined the path of a single drop of rain traveling from the sky downwards and landing with a plop and a splash in the tin pail outside my house. It didn't seem like too long ago when I squatted next to it, washing the hurt from my wounds. Strange, that I should think of the heavens when I stood firm on the ground, and that I should long for the earth's stability as I was about to move through the open sky.

When the plane took off, my stomach sank into my feet. After it leveled, I looked out my window in hopes of catching a glimpse of the people below, but all that was visible through the threads of clouds were the rice fields marked off like a green-and-brown tic-tac-toe board. I knew that down below, Mama was watching this silver dragon's tear disappear. The sun shone through the curtain of rain, and I settled in my seat as the plane pushed toward the West, taking me to foreign shores with all the blessings of the rainbow.

Inheritance

You were supposed to have your father's determination and my compassion. His thick bones. My delicate features. And your feet—not big and flat and angular like a peasant's but small and neat, with a bony ridge on top like a camel's hump. This is how both your father's and my own feet are shaped. According to the midwife that brought me into this world, feet like ours predestined us for a life of comfortable wealth, not one of near starvation like your father and I have had to endure many times in our life together. Perhaps we would have been well off, had we remained in Viet Nam. But our superstitions, which ordain that our future be shaped by our physical endowments, cannot follow us so far over the sea. No, in this land of saints, angels, and the white-bearded God, your future can only be determined by one thing: yourself. Perhaps it's better this way—more fair—to believe that you can carve your own destiny. This was why your father and I decided to come here, so that our children could have the chance to be judged beyond merely what the heavens gave them.

You must know, my son, the pain of leaving our Motherland. We were like trees that had already sunken their roots into the rich and fertile soil of Can Tho. On our land, the cranes could "*bay thang canh*"—fly with wings outstretched. When you stood in the open at sunset, the wide, flat earth rolled out beneath you so you'd be level with that shimmering red orb before the horizon swallowed it whole. From where they flew, I imagined those cranes could see nothing but the vast expanse of land—the square patchwork of rice fields marked off by rows of green and brown—and the waterways that

criss-crossed the earth like snakes embracing. The flowing waters of the *Cuu Long* River brought us the abundance of life from the Mekong Delta. Leaving meant giving up so many familiar things: the sight of lush, golden fields of rice during harvest season; the sound of farmers singing *ho oi* midday songs; the feel of the cool afternoon breeze brushing on your bare skin as the swinging hammock lulled you into naps; the smell of meats cooked on a wood stove; the tangy, fermented fish sauce being mixed as the servants prepared the evening meal. Yes, we had servants. Your father and I grew up in farming country, but we were both the children of wealthy families that allowed sharecroppers to farm on our land.

You should have seen the things I grew up with, so rare that I will never lay eyes upon them again, but what did I know as a little girl but to take advantage of them? My great-grandfather built our house from *go mung*, a strong, rugged wood with a brown-black gloss found only where the mountain-people lived. He commissioned them to chop and send these trees down the snaking river so they could be fetched from the water and hauled to the land on which our house was built. After days of rigorous polishing, our floor, overlaid with hardened beeswax, shone like marble. The doorway stretched many hands taller and wider than me so that, crossing the threshold, I felt like a child breaching the mouth of a dragon. We ate with silver-tipped chopsticks of *cam lai* wood, sleek with a deep red luster, and on holidays or special events, my mother would bring out our fine-china rice bowls. I wish I could show you—so thin they were that when you held them up to the light, you could see the silhouette of the blue floral prints through the china. When you flicked at them ever-so-slightly with your fingernail, they let out a hollow ring.

Once, while playing ghost, I pulled at the table cloth on which these china bowls perched, and all twenty of them came crashing to the floor, cracking like eggshells. As punishment, your grandmother swatted the back of my legs so gently with a bamboo switch that you'd think she was teasing a fly, but you know what your grandfather did? He scolded not me but her! I can still remember his gentle voice saying, "These bowls, they're not worth anything to me. But this child, she is my world, and if anything were to happen to her, I could never forgive myself." While the servants regretfully picked up the jagged shards from the floor, he barely even glanced at those broken bowls, once worth a middle-class girl's dowry. Instead, he scooped me up in his arms and bore me away. He didn't speak to your grandmother for a whole week after that. Nor could he have another child besides me. So I became a spoiled young thing.

When the season came for certain fruits, they reserved the biggest and sweetest for me, picked fresh from the trees by my personal servant; I ate nothing marred by even the slightest scar. To this day, I can still feel the smooth texture of peeled and seeded rambutans against my tongue—tart and sweet. And I can conjure up the aromatic smell of *xa li* guavas that made me salivate as soon as I rolled the fruit in a dip of salt and ground chili peppers. Each week, I drank vitamin mixtures from the best herbalists' shops, so costly that the money spent on just one dose would feed a poor family for half a month. But they tasted so bitter that in my temper fits, much of the medicine would end up on the floor. I didn't learn how to do the simplest chores, like light a wood stove or wash the rice clean, until years after I became your father's bride.

Our marriage was a blessed union: he born in the year of the dragon and I a rooster—a powerful pairing of *long-phung*, of dragon and phoenix. But when the Communists began to occupy Viet Nam, they took our land and distributed it to our own farmers. Daily, they'd come to harass our family, "re-possessing" all our fine things like leeches taking their fill of thick blood. When at last they burned down the house that had held four generations of my family, your father and I found ourselves looking toward this so-called "Land of the Free." You must understand—the decision to leave for America felt to me like cutting my roots from that which had fed me life. But in the end, this was our choice, even though we knew we might suffer, that we had to start from *hai bang tay trang*, from the white palms of our hands. We wanted, more than anything else, to build an environment fit for you to grow up in. We knew it would take a while to make enough money to start a family, but we didn't know how long. We tried so hard to have you, my son—we worked so long to finally welcome you to this world.

* * *

Who knew we'd be working the land like our rag-wearing sharecroppers? We had to coax fertility from the earth, just like them. Your father found us jobs as yard workers. We went to work in a beat-up Datsun pick-up truck that smelled of gas fumes every time he started up the engine. In the truck bed, we loaded our equipment, all older than second-hand: a red lawn mower sun-bleached to orange, mud-crusted and rusted shovels, rakes with the prongs bent crooked, and gardening gloves worn soft. We'd admire the different houses where we worked, some with yards bigger than twice the patch of land we had given to our sharecroppers. I raked leaves and tended to the

flowerbeds while your father pruned branches to make perfectly spherical trees and flat-topped hedges. At the end of the day, sweat-soaked and sun-tanned, we headed home to a small rented room until the first sunlight of the next day summoned us back to the same labor.

And so it went for many years until we could finally afford a house of our own. The previous owners listed it in the Vietnamese newspapers for a reasonable price, so we came for a tour. We found the paint chipped and peeling, the water pipes rusty, the garden overgrown with weeds, and the kitchen infested with cockroaches so big I hadn't seen their like since I left Viet Nam. But your father and I had grown used to hard work. We bought it, moved in, and cleaned up. By then we had enough money so that we could take it easier—we took English classes at night at the Adult Center so we could market ourselves to American clients. We changed our business name from *Long-Phung* to Dragon-Phoenix Landscaping and even added a slogan: *We'll transform your garden into a mythical heaven on earth!*

Your father got back into his hobby: framed wood sculpting, an art form similar to *son mai*, or mother-of-pearl seashells laid on lacquer paintings. I penciled in scenes on a slab of balsawood, and he used a chisel and a fine-edge carving knife to cut thin curlicues from my drawing, then glued the individual particles onto a landscape of red velvet. The pieces fit together like a puzzle but did not quite touch. The result was a large, framed picture with a three-dimensional quality like Chinese paper cut-out animals or Japanese kirigami. When he courted me in Viet Nam, I drew him *mai* flowers, orchids, chrysanthemums, and bamboo. Here in America, I draw things that remind us

both of Viet Nam: little boys riding water buffalos and old men on boats, pulling out fish from the sea with a narrow pole; two women wearing *ao ba-ba*, the traditional clothes of peasants, carrying straw baskets across monkey bridges that looked like spider webs lacing the sky. I could watch him for hours as he sliced through the cream-colored wood, the *rap-tap-tap* of his instruments like muffled knocking. He'd work on a section and then leave it to dry, his deft hands slowly birthing a dragon, two village girls, a buffalo, three fishermen.

When neighbors and friends found out about your father's artistic gift, they began placing orders with him. "Make me this scene," they'd request. "I need it for a housewarming present." And in this way, your father and I achieved a comfortable income from our *hai bang tay trang*. Every evening, I prepared our dinner, stealing glances at him from the kitchen window. He usually had one leg on the work bench, his back arched over the table like the curve of a waning moon, a slight wrinkle on his brow betraying his deep concentration. I'd move from the sink to the four hot coils on the stove—I usually had all four going at once—one to boil water for his chrysanthemum tea, one for a pot of soup, one for a pan of sautéed vegetables, and one for the main course. I could finally afford good meals again, the kind that made passersby salivate when they came near our house.

After I married your father, I had to learn how to cook from my mother. "The Communists are moving in," she told me, "and our lives won't be like before. So you'll have to learn to do this to survive or your family will starve." It's a funny thing in America, all these cookbooks complete with colorful graphics. People measure things

out by cups and teaspoons and, from that exactness, know the outcome of the product before even tasting it. Vietnamese mothers believe in nothing of the sort. As my mother busily added drops of fish sauce and soy sauce, palm-fuls of sugar, and sprinkles of ground black pepper to her dishes, I'd prance around, frustrated, asking her, "How much of that do you put in? What's a dash? What's a pinch? What do you mean, 'add a little'?" And she would tell me, "Taste it to be sure it's right." She could never articulate recipe amounts. You see, cooking is passed down through memory and love, not through written-down recipes, just like how your father and I pass down not only our genes and mannerisms—things written into your character from the moment of conception—but also our hopes and dreams for you, my son. Some things in this world are best learned through instinct and not through schooling. Studying is what makes you smart, but observation is what makes you wise.

Had you older brothers and sisters, I would save the umbilical cord that once linked me to you and wrap it in translucent rice paper—all my children's umbilical cords left to intertwine in a covering as fine as the womb that once held you. We Vietnamese believe that such safekeeping would allow our children to grow up close to each other. My own umbilical cord remains in my homeland, buried under the fertile soil in the backyard of our once-standing house where I was conceived and born. Our people also believe in the strong tie that links us to our homeland. A rural legend says that anyone drifting from his birthplace is in fact wandering away from his own soul. If his body dies outside his country, his soul will wander, lost forever because of the unbearable separation. Maybe this explains why, ten years after having first set foot in America, I

still yearn for lush rice paddies, and for that humid heat that coats me like a second skin. It's always cold here in this land; the winter chill eats through my bones like worms and leaves me feeling all hollow inside.

* * *

Let me tell you, my son—life is no different than the *Cuu Long* River, full of unexpected twists and bends. The day I became unsure of my own heart was the day I met a man named Tuan. No, it's not that I fell in love with him; it's just that he offered me something your father would not even consider. You are too young to understand this. But I will tell you this anyway, because we are mother and son, and I don't want walls of secrets to come between our trust for each other.

Tuan and I first met in ESL night class. He sat in the row next to mine, on my left. Together, we worked through the mysteries of the English language. We discovered that "rye" and "pie" are supposed to rhyme, but "jury" and "bury" aren't. That the "t-w" in "twice" is pronounced, but not in the word "two." And then, a few months after knowing Tuan, I learned something more precious than English. I learned that he could help me start a family—something your father and I had not been able to do no matter how often we tried.

Tuan said he was one of those people born at sea, that there were so few of them that they registered as 0.0% on the U.S. Census. "I guess I can't claim a birthplace," he said. "It's like I don't really belong anywhere."

And for some reason, the loneliness of his birth conditions reminded me of how lonely I'd been. That's what drew me in, so that before I knew it, out tumbled the

confession that I had felt too embarrassed to make. I thought the intimacy of this discussion would cause him discomfort, but instead he said, “My brother—the one who took care of my papers so I could come to the U.S.—he specializes in helping couples have babies.”

My eyes jumped perhaps too eagerly from their shy downcast to his animated face. He laughed when I asked him what sort of *bua phep*—voodoo magic—his brother practiced.

“He’s very westernized and professional, I assure you. They have ways of doing it you wouldn’t believe.”

Now I checked my eagerness, not wanting to get in the middle of whatever twisted operation these two brothers were involved in. He said “in-veet-ro fer-tul-eye-zay-shun” and described the most peculiar procedure for having a baby. “Expensive, though,” he continued. “Most couples try ‘ah-dop-shun.’” Which made me think, why not? In Viet Nam, people pick up stray orphans all the time. If a poor or careless mother has the heart to throw away her baby, then why shouldn’t I bring it into my home and love it forever? Tuan and I got to talking so long that night after class ended that I forgot the time and rushed, late, to the parking lot where your father had been waiting for me with the car engine turned off.

* * *

The following afternoon, your father was assembling a myth, to be lain upon red velvet. When I peered over his shoulder at the unglued wood bits upon the scarlet surface, I saw that he had crafted the billowing hem of Chuc Nu’s royal robes. A

goddess from heaven, Chuc Nu fell in love with a common buffalo tender, Nguu Lang, who played the flute so well that he could have seduced the winds. The two spent many happy days together until the gods became jealous and scorned the beautiful Chuc Nu for choosing a human for her mate; they punished the lovers by pulling her back to the heavens and forbidding her from seeing Nguu Lang again. Seeing their great pain, Ong Troi, the High God, eventually felt sorry for them and decreed that one day out of the year, they may be allowed to reunite. He commanded the crows to serve as a bridge spanning from heaven to earth and declared the day as *Le Nguu Lang*, which became a holiday for lovers. In your father's frame, the feet of the gifted peasant and graceful goddess hovered over the feathery wings of crows, their hands millimeters from touching, the two ready—after having spent a whole year apart—to enjoy the one day in which they could consummate their love. Your father made the wood look as if it flowed like water, creating the illusion of movement on a stationary surface with one piece molding into the next. He stepped back to squint critically at the careful placement of each jigsaw piece.

I laid one hand gently on the small of his back. "Let's have a baby," I whispered, my voice barely audible, skirting his ear like a wisp of wind.

He did not look up from his work but reached for his Elmer's wood glue. "We'll try again tonight," he mumbled.

"We're trying too hard. Maybe we don't have to. Maybe it can be easier." Heat radiated through his shirt, emanating from his clammy skin. I cleared my throat. "I've

invited Tuan over for dinner tomorrow. The man from my ESL class, remember? I think you should listen to what he has to say about adoption. Maybe we should give it a try.”

I felt him stiffen right before he yanked himself from my touch. “No,” he said.

“No, what?”

“He’s not coming for dinner. He won’t need to. Because we’re not adopting.”

The heat rose to my face, but I tried to control the tremble in my voice. “This again? Why won’t you at least listen? There are so many unwanted babies out there. Why can’t you let me love one?”

“No,” he repeated. “It’s not mine.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose where a headache was quickly forming. “You are so narrow-minded! Inconsiderate!” I wanted my words to wound, but they only incensed him.

“*I’m* inconsiderate? You’re the one taking aimless advice from strange men. This ‘arty-fee-shul in-seh-min-a-shun’ thing is the sickest procedure I’ve ever heard. Is that what you want? For some stranger’s seed to be injected into your womb? You want your baby to come out with red hair or blue eyes or freckled skin? What are you going to tell it when it asks why it doesn’t look like you or me?” He paced around the yard as he talked but suddenly made a beeline toward his work table. “You want to so much? Huh? Fine then, go ahead!” He turned the work table on its side, the metal top hitting the cement with a reverberating echo. The carefully laid out pieces of the *Nguu-Lang-Chuc-Nu* scene scattered with a sound like hard rain. I couldn’t suppress my sobs; I couldn’t

even look at him. The tension in my head suddenly sent a surge of nausea through my body, and I hurried to the bathroom.

After rinsing out my mouth, I made my way to our bed. The late afternoon sun made a golden diagonal slice on the sheets. When at last I dared to lift the curtains to catch another glimpse of him in the yard, this was what I saw: a man sitting on the dirty ground, his head in his arms, with broken pieces of the legendary lovers strewn about him like winter's first snow.

* * *

Your father and I never spoke of Tuan again. In fact, I never went back to finish my ESL class. A month after the argument, your father and I still spoke curtly, and minimally, to each other. He found a job working construction—at that time, they needed a lot of people to build houses. In the daytime, after I finished the household chores, I sat alone and watched Divorce Court on TV. In Viet Nam, where the majority of people were Catholics and Buddhists, divorce was unimaginable. Even non-religious couples considered it shameful to their families. I couldn't understand the concept of divorce in America, how people not only considered it as an option but also devoted a television show to the husbands and wives who sometimes yelled at each other with such vehemence that the lady in the black robe would have to bang her little hammer for long minutes to scare them silent. When we first got our television set, I'd flip through the violent channels and watch the cooking and sewing shows, or the channel where they sold jewelry and kitchenware. But remember that confusion swam through my head after

the big fight with your father. We had discussed baby options before, but that was the first time he fought back my proposal with such anger.

One evening, I prepared a *ga ac* for dinner. You'd never see a funnier chicken, my son—with feathers as white and fluffy as clouds, but with skin black like tar. Prepared steamed with a mixture of Chinese medicinal herbs, these costly chickens made for a healthy, nourishing meal, especially for pregnant women. I liked to cook this dish on nights when I wanted to drop another hint for your father to let him know I wanted a baby. The salty scent of steamed chicken, mixed with the earthy smell of the Chinese herbs, invaded all rooms of the house, no matter if I closed the doors.

When your father came home from work, he headed to the kitchen. I had lifted the lid off the pot to check on the water level. The pungent cloud of smoke rose up to meet my face, and I felt the beads of moisture cling to my forehead. When I caught sight of your father, I let the lid down again. He shot me an angry, disapproving look as if he couldn't believe I would go to such lengths to once again remind him of what we had been fighting about. Instead of accepting the meal as my gesture of reconciliation, he thought I wanted to rub in the point of his incompetence. I let him stand there seething for a moment longer as the hot steam caused the lid to dance noisily on the rim of the pot.

"We have got to stop this," I finally said.

"What is it that you want now?" he asked, his arms crossed on his chest. It had been long since I could look into his eyes again, but at that moment I saw his conflicted misery—his anger and love mixed together.

"I only want for things to be like before."

“How? So much has changed. The way we live. The clothes we wear. Nothing’s the same, not you, not me.”

I nodded. “Okay. Maybe things aren’t the same. But we take the changes slowly as they come. We have to.”

“Why?” he almost whined. He raked a hand through his hair, now so long that the bangs kept dipping into his eyes.

I reached over and clicked off the burner on the stove. The steam continued to propel the lid in its mad dance. “Because,” I said, and met his gaze. “I’m pregnant.”

* * *

At first your father cast me strange sidelong glances. He lay in bed with one arm draped across his forehead, a position he reserved for deep thinking. Then one night he reached for me and pulled me in his arms. Falling back into our usual routine, I rested my head on his chest and listened to the steady beating of his heart. Things between your father and I changed after that. We focused our energy on creating and not destroying. On days off work, your father used his woodworking skills to build you an ornate crib, varnishing it with three coats of finish. And when I learned that I was carrying a son, I knitted you blue socks and mitts—common, motherly things that I’d never gotten to do—and quilted you a blanket with sailboats and waves to remind you of your home across the sea. Maybe, I thought, someday I could take you back, plant your feet on native soil—rich red with the scent of fine earth. You could smell the marshy Can Tho air, ride on boats through waterways to the floating market at Phung Hiep, and hold the hairy shell of the rambutan fruit in your cupped hands for the first time.

Your father grew more silent, but he glowed as he worked, always bearing that little crease between his eyebrows as if a thousand images ran through his busy head. He continued his balsawood frames in his spare time, pouring so much of his soul into them. It seemed he marked each piece with a signature of sacred dedication. He crafted for me a scene of a mother nursing her son, her hair long and flowing, she casting a downward glance at the baby boy whose face bore her features. Due to an accidental flick of the wrist, your father had unintentionally carved what looked like a tear in the corner of one eye, a gouged-out fleck that merged into the bridge of her nose. He had wanted to start over but became too busy with his construction job. In the end, he hung the frame on our bedroom wall where I could make out its dark outline by the dim glow of the moon.

I saw you for the first time when I had an ultrasound. The doctor gave us pictures to keep, and I watched you grow from a peanut to a tadpole, then into a more recognizably human shape with eyes and arms, legs, fingers, and toes. I'd stare for hours at your hazy blue image, until the negative imprinted itself against my closed eyelids.

"Clearly he looks just like me—nothing like you," your father teased as I tried to swat him across the leg. At night I slept with my bulge of a belly cradled in my arms, protecting you as you swirled around in your silent sea. I drifted off to sleep with your movements inside me and dreamed of your face, with my eyes and your father's nose, mapped out like a clear design.

When you were ready to greet the world, I kept my focus on the doctor, the wrinkles across his forehead and the sheen of sweat that coated his face. I held on to the image of the Mother-and-Son frame that hung on my wall at home, telling myself that,

soon, I'd get to meet and nurse you. When you finally slipped from my body, I felt a rush of life leave me. I counted the seconds until your first cry, fifteen . . . sixteen The doctor barked at the nurses for tools, his words muffled by the white face mask. His hands tried to suck fluid out of your lungs and pump in air, forty-four . . . forty-five The furrows in the doctor's brow grew deeper, and I watched as they worked on you, frantically, frantically. I saw you go blue, was hardly aware of my own whimpers, of your father's tight grip on my shoulders. One-hundred-and-eight . . . one-hundred-and-nine . . . I felt dizzy from exhaustion, and the hazy feeling in my head gave me the sensation that I was drifting into the land of sleep. I couldn't bring my numb body to feel emotions, as if I were caught in a dark dream, when at last the doctor walked up to me, pulled down his face mask, and said, "I'm sorry, but there have been complications." The wind inside my head howled so loudly that I could scarcely hear him, wailing like a madwoman who had just lost her most cherished thing in the world.

* * *

All human experience consists of swiftly-fading joy and sorrow. In the context of infinite time, misery is but a vestige of the past, like shapeless curlicues of smoke, diffusing as they travel upwards to a vast expanse of sky. I had hoped that these thoughts would comfort me in the pain of your passing. The day of your birth and death, they let me hold you for some minutes before they took you away. Your skin was purple, and your eyes sealed shut, but right away I saw you had your father's shapely nose and my delicate, rosebud lips. I knew your father saw this too, for when the first sight of you proved that you were his, something changed in his face; like me, he had gained and lost

something precious, all in a single moment. Remember how I slipped my index finger in your tight fist to feel your last warmth? Or how your father softly smoothed back your thin hair with his thumb. I forgot, in my sorrow, to lift the swaddling cloths and see the shape of your feet. But wealth and poverty wouldn't have mattered anyway, for destiny called you to another world.

My mother once told me that the spirits of young orphans and stillborn children must wait to be claimed by their loved ones in a limbo before the gates of heaven. Before they can enter, they need to be mourned for properly, and prayed for dutifully, in order to be reunited with their parents. I tell you all this now so that time will not wash away the memories of your past while you linger in limbo in the years to come. So you see? Even though they took your body away so quickly after it had left mine, I knew, in the end, where I'd find you. I knew that you're my *con ngoan*, my good boy, and that you'd watch for your father and me when at last we come to you in the place where spirits wait.

Courting Her Shadow

I could feel the cold weather seep into my bones though it was only autumn. Seemed like I started aching earlier and earlier each year. It made me feel so old and worn. Pressing my lips together, I hurried to sweep the last of the leaves into a pile in front of my house on Magnolia Drive.

“Just a few more,” I murmured before catching myself. Such a quiet neighborhood almost pleaded for human voices, but I felt silly talking to myself. The *swish-swish* of the broom echoed in the tranquil morning.

My son, Cao, had gone to work early as usual. The last time I talked to my niece, Tien, over the phone, she promised to visit. “I have something for you, Auntie. I’ll bring it over this weekend.” But that weekend she had forgotten, and the weekend after that did not bring her to me, either. America bred the world’s busiest citizens.

“*Di Linh?*”

I stopped sweeping when I heard my name. Leaning against my broom, I glanced up at this man who was blocking the sunlight from my face. He removed his baseball cap, revealing a brow glistening with sweat.

“*Cau la . . . ?*” I squinted up at him. My eyesight was leaving me fast, even in the brightness of day. Something about his tall nose and moustache tugged at my memory.

“Ah, I’m sorry, you must not recognize me.” He put his cap back on and rubbed his palms on his pants as if cleaning them of sweat. “I’m Tran Van Truc—do you remember . . . ?”

“Truc?” I almost dropped my broom. “What are you doing here? When did you come to America?”

Excitement flickered in his eyes. “Well, I made it over just three years ago. I deliver furniture now.” He gestured at the way he came, directing my attention to a truck. A group of men struggled to unload a new sofa set at the ranch-style house half a block from mine.

“Is that right?” I murmured. “How are you doing for yourself? You holding up pretty well?”

“It’s a job. It pays enough for me to get by.”

I counted the years in my head. He must be forty-three, but his hands were already gnarled, the veins popping out from the sun-browned skin. His face, though, with the shadow of the familiar moustache, still reflected the good looks from his late twenties. I remember those years well, years when I checked our jug of rice to make sure we had enough to go at least another meal.

Truc eyed my house, a two-story with a large lawn surrounded by the magnolias that grew so common in this neighborhood. A tall, black-iron gate barred the lawn from the sidewalk. I made it a morning chore to sweep the magnolia leaves. The last flowers had long since wilted, and autumnal gusts of wind skittered the crisp, browned leaves across the pavement.

“It’s beautiful here. I’ve delivered furniture to many places, but I’ve never seen such fine, grand homes as these. Who do you live here with?”

“My son, Cao.”

“Ah . . .” Truc trailed off. Then, with sudden determination, he said, “*Di Linh*.” He looked at me, his eyes desperate. “Surely you’re still in contact with Tien? How has she been all these years?”

I looked away, resuming my sweeping to avoid eye contact with him. “Do you have family yet, Truc?”

“No—no family. I immigrated here alone—and, well, I’m still alone now.” He caught my elbow with a firm grip. “Please, do you think—can you give me her address—her phone number!” He raised his voice as I swept my way toward the iron gates. “Anything—at least tell her that I’m in America now.”

I shook my head in pity. Never did I think a man of such good looks and smooth manners could be haunted for so long. The words of comfort caught in my throat, and without knowing what to say, I looked up at the magnolia trees. “How beautiful they were at the peak of the summer,” I mumbled. “So white . . . such beautiful, beautiful blooms. *Dep qua . . . dep qua . . .*”

“*Di Linh*?” Truc loosened his grip on my elbow. I could feel his eyes on me.

I stood there for a moment more, letting the silence settle between us. A loud, low honk bellowed from the furniture truck that had made its way next to my sidewalk. With my back to the street, I could hear the rhythmic rumble of the big engine.

“Truc, *le len*! *Di, may*—you’re taking time off our lunch break!” Vietnamese voices yelled at him from the truck.

Truc whispered, “*Di Linh*. Please. At least tell her.” Then he let go of me and walked away. I stood on the sidewalk, my neck still arched up at the magnolia trees long

after the truck roared down the street and out of the neighborhood. I listened to the chirping of the songbirds and heard the wind rustling through the leaves. If I were convincing enough, Truc would have thought me an old woman with quickly-fading memory. But my memory was anything but fading. I still remembered the last few times I saw Tran Van Truc. I remembered how he looked, how he walked, the sound of his voice. And I remembered how, during those last few months my family and I spent in Viet Nam, he never gave up on Tien. No, he came to see my niece every day at the house, pleading with her to take him back, only to court her shadow until the very end.

* * *

The wind made a racket with the chimes we hung outside our house in Saigon. I was listening to their frantic song when Tien's voice cut sharply through the sound.

"Where have you been today?"

My hands halted in the middle of patching one of the children's torn shirts. The front door had just opened, and I glanced up to see Truc's form silhouetted by the late-afternoon light.

"Pedaling the *siclo*," Truc replied, making a show out of stretching his arms as if exhausted from a full day of taxiing clients.

I tried to catch Tien's eyes and warn her to keep her voice down, but she took no notice of me. Eyes narrowed, she stepped closer to her husband, who tried to evade her gaze. Truc took a step toward the hallway, away from us.

"Liar," Tien said, roughly brushing aside a wisp of hair from her face. "Turn around. Look at me."

Slowly, he obeyed her. “What’s the matter?”

“*Chi Bay* came by today.” Tien’s voice trembled. Truc stood there, waiting for her to continue. “She said—she said she saw you step into the Binh An Hotel with some woman.”

Truc let out a groan and shook his head as if ready to offer an explanation. He reached for Tien, but she stepped back.

“Since when do you follow your clients into their rooms?” Tien crossed her arms on her chest.

I stood up from the kitchen table, leaving my sewing, and made my way over to them. “*Bình tĩnh lại*. Let’s talk about this calmly.”

Tien continued as though she never heard me. “I knew it! These past weeks, you’ve been staying out later than usual—”

“No, Tien, please. Listen to me.”

“I know who it is. I smelled her on you. Ever since she came to Saigon, you’ve reeked of her rose perfume—”

“*Me oi!*” Four-year-old Minh had just wakened from his nap. Wiping one eye, he stumbled into the main room. The beaded curtain, which separated the two bedrooms from the rest of the house, swished as he pushed them roughly aside. Minh started to cry for his mother, who seemed not to hear him. I rushed to his side.

“*Shh, shh*, let’s go back to bed.” I took him by the hand to lead him away. When he refused to move, I picked him up and carried him into his parents’ bedroom, down the hall and next to mine, where his two-year-old sister Phuong still slept. Placing him on

the red hammock strung against two corners, I fanned and rocked him, humming softly to quiet his cries.

In the main room, Truc's soft murmurs were followed by Tien's escalating voice. ". . . just this once! It was just this once, like it matters how many times you've had her!"

Their voices carried through the thin blue walls, and I kept rocking and fanning to keep Minh calm. He did not go back to sleep but lay there with his eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling.

They were standing very near the wall adjacent to the bedroom. Though Truc's voice came through low and husky, I could hear his every word. "Tien, I'm sorry. Everyday she came to my *siclo*, picked me out among the dozen others, and asked me to take her here, take her there. She's a paying customer—we need the money—and, well, she tips much more than normal. I never knew it would lead to this."

"I don't need her charity! I never cared how much money her family had—I never asked her for a *xu*. Don't make that an excuse for going to bed with her."

"I knew it was a mistake before it was even over. I don't love her. I was very stupid for a moment. Tien? Please don't look at me like that. What can I do?"

"*Ba oi*, why is Mama crying?" Minh asked. He had taken my hand and held it firmly.

I reached out to caress his cheek. "Your mother and father are having a little argument, like you have with Phuong sometimes when she takes your toys. It'll be all right. Be good now. Keep quiet."

The sound of Tien's sobs drowned my whispers. "Leave," I heard her say. "Go away, Truc, and never come back to this house. You are no longer my husband."

"Tien, I'm sorry. Don't do this—I can't just leave my house."

"*Anh di di!* I don't want you here anymore. Am I so ugly? Am I, that you have to take my old school friend as a whore?"

"Tien, Tien! Stop it! Don't hurt yourself!" There were sounds of struggling between them, and I almost leapt up and ran to the main room had not Tien's voice again pierced the air. "Don't touch me! Get away from me." She sounded less hysterical; the hint of iron in her voice suggesting her new resolve. "Listen to me, Tran Van Truc—I will never let you see my face again!"

Truc's words grew muffled. The house got so quiet that I suddenly noticed the loud buzzing of the flies. For a long time, there was only silence; then the front door creaked open and slammed shut again with a finality that shook the thin walls.

* * *

Tien's door opened slowly; I could see a thin slice of the left side of her face as she peeked out. After the fight with Truc fifteen years ago, Tien never again flung the door wide open to greet guests. Instead, she peered out tentatively as if judging if her visitors were trustworthy enough to be invited in. When she saw me, she yielded.

"*Di Linh?* What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

It took only ten minutes by bus to reach Tien's house from Magnolia Drive. As I entered, I removed the scarf I wore on my head. "No, nothing's wrong. I wanted to pay you a visit, that's all. You haven't come to see me in a long while."

"I'm sorry, Auntie—I've been busy with work. I've been meaning to drop by before the Mid-Autumn Festival to bring you some moon cakes, but I never found the time. Now that you're here, you can take a box home to Cao. Did he drive you?"

"That son of mine? No. He's as busy as usual—too busy to find himself a wife, even. Gone to the bank early this morning to see if he can take out a loan for that new piece of property. I took the bus here."

"Aye-yah! Why did you do that? I would have driven you if you called me!"

Halfway to the sitting room, I stopped by the curving stairway to catch my breath. The dark, cherrywood banister gleamed and gave off the smell of fresh polish. The coolness of the blue marble tiles seeped into my bare feet. I took a good look at Tien. All these years, and she still had not aged much. She clipped her hair in a ponytail now instead of letting it flow loose like when she was still in Saigon. Just recently, her hair had started to streak with gray in the front, but her skin still remained smooth and creamy. Only if I looked very closely could I see the small pockmarks where she gouged her fingernails into her face the day she told Truc he would never look upon it again.

"What's the matter, Auntie?" she asked, half laughing. "Why are you looking at me for so long?"

I shook my head. "It's nothing. Come, let's sit down. I need to talk to you." We made our way to the kitchen.

"These kids, they misplace everything." Tien rummaged through the cupboards, each overfilled with snacks and dried goods.

“You plan to open a convenience store with all that?” I asked. “That snack pile of yours gets bigger every time I visit.”

“Oh, Auntie, I don’t have time to clean up, and the kids never do.” She had made her way around half of the cupboards that lined the kitchen. “I’m looking for the jasmine tea. I know you don’t drink soda.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m not thirsty. Come have a seat and talk to me.” I sighed. “Look how plentiful food is in America. In Viet Nam, we were lucky to have a good evening meal.”

Tien found the jasmine tea tin and put the kettle on the stove. She came over and sat next to me at the dining table. “That was so long ago,” I said, and she nodded slowly.

The sudden, loud clicking of high heels across the marble tiles brought Tien back to attention. “Phuong, is that you?” she called.

The high heels *click-clacked* their way to the kitchen, and my seventeen-year-old grandniece poked her head around the corner. Streaks of red showed through her hair where only sleek black had been before. “Yeah, Mom?” she asked Tien.

“*Ba Linh* is here. Where are your manners? Say hello.”

“Hello, Great Aunt.” Phuong managed a little wave with her bare arm.

“*Cha oi!* Phuong, you grow bigger every time I see you. Come, let your Great Aunt have a look at you.” I stretched out my hands to her like when she was just learning how to walk. Phuong hesitated, then stepped into the room. My hands dropped to my side, and it was all I could do to keep my jaw from dropping as well. Phuong wore what looked to me like a red band of fabric across her chest. It left her midriff bare, revealing

a little silver ring pierced through her bellybutton. The sharp smell of leather from her black skirt hit my nostrils. Phuong fidgeted under my gaze, her high heels clicking again, drawing my attention to how she laced the black strings of the shoes up and around her calves in a criss-cross pattern.

“Where are you going?” Tien’s voice sounded small, defeated.

“Out with some friends.”

“Dressed like that?” She looked at her daughter sharply, not so much out of shock of having never seen this before, but out of embarrassment for me having to see it.

Phuong snorted and crinkled the tall nose she inherited from Truc. “Ma, come on—we’ve been through this clothing conversation before.” Somewhere outside, a car honked twice. “Well, there they are. Gotta go.”

“Where is your brother?” Tien seemed at a loss for further ways to detain her daughter, who busied herself readjusting the lacing on her right calf. Phuong bent slightly, enough to reveal that she was not wearing anything underneath her half-shirt.

“I don’t know—I’m not Minh’s babysitter. Metallica’s not blaring from his stereo, so I guess the moron went out some time this morning.” I looked away so she would not see my sadness. I remembered back in Viet Nam when Minh noticed how hungry I was because I always saved food for his sister and him. One night, he snuck up on me as I was eating the leftover burnt rice and offered me some meat from his bowl. “I don’t want it,” he had said, eyes averted to conceal his lie. “You eat it, *Ba Linh*. I saved it for you.” And now, even with his new driver’s license, he could not afford to drive ten minutes to visit me.

The car honked again, more insistent this time. “Gotta *go*, Mom!” Phuong said. “See you later, Great Aunt!”

We sat in silence until the kettle whistled. Tien got up and began making my tea. She said, “I’m sorry, Auntie, the kids never speak Vietnamese anymore,” as if this was what shocked me the most.

I took a deep breath. “Tien, are you happy with Phil?”

Tien’s shoulders raised and then dropped in one careless shrug. She did not talk much about her current life with her second husband, whom she met after entering the U.S. “What a strange question, Auntie.” I waited for her answer. “He does what he needs to do—make money to support our family,” she finished.

And so did Truc, I thought, even after Tien kicked him out. I had seen her smile so much more often in that small Saigon house than she ever did in this mansion. I had heard Tien and Truc murmuring to each other through the walls well into the night, and their voices were the first thing I woke up to. But when I watched Tien and Phil converse, I saw that they did not look at each other. She would be staring at the grease pooling on her dirty dishes, and his eyes would never leave the TV with some sports channel on the screen. Strange, the way the heart worked—that she could be so poor and happy and yet so rich and sad.

“You didn’t marry him out of love.” The words came out before I could stop them. I saw her stiffen, and then she shrugged it off and brought my tea to the table, her face already concealing emotion. “You said you’d eventually learn to,” I said.

Tien let out a shrill, unconvincing laugh. "Of course I love him, Auntie!" She cleared her throat. "Maybe not then. But now I do."

"Phil works too hard, Tien, and so do you. Look at your children—they're never home. And you—you're never happy." I took a sip of the hot tea, feeling it burn a fragrant trail down my throat. "But I remember that once you were." I glanced at the place where Phuong had stood. "Your daughter looks like her father." I sighed, remembering how Truc had awakened to her nightly cries. He would cradle her in his arms and sing folksongs until she cooed herself back to sleep. That was long before she learned how to walk, before her bare legs could carry her so swiftly away from home.

A muscle in Tien's jaw jumped. I realized that I had made a bad transition but couldn't fix it now. "I saw him earlier this week," I pressed.

Tien stared at me as if I had gone mad for mentioning it to her. I reached across the table and put my hand on hers. "He asked about you." She snatched her hand away as if I had burned her.

"Why are you telling me this?" Her voice rose. "I couldn't care less!"

"Tien." I closed my eyes so that I would not have to see her anger. For the past fifteen years, it had ruled her. "My intention is not to sabotage your marriage. Don't you think you've carried this on long enough? Truc made a mistake, and for the rest of his life, he will try to make amends, unless you forgive him. Isn't it time?" I knew that I was heightening her anger, so I got up to leave, grabbing my scarf to wrap my head with it once again. "He's made it to the States. Before we left Saigon, he did a lot for our family, after all. I think you should at least grant him one last meeting with you."

Tien remained motionless at the dining table. She looked hard at me. "I will never forgive him," she said.

* * *

The evening was unusually humid, even for Viet Nam. With a thick wooden spoon, I scraped the burnt rice from the bottom of the pot, scooping the crispy grains into my bowl. It covered barely a quarter of the porcelain, but it would have to do. The important thing was that the children ate to their content. I shoveled the rice into my mouth. Chewing on the hard grains hurt my teeth, so I ate slowly.

"*Ba Linh.*" Minh's voice startled me from behind. I turned abruptly, and he glanced at the rice bowl in my hand. "Papa said to give this to you," he whispered. In his outstretched palm, he presented a good amount of money—some *dong* paper bills, the currency amount stamped on with red ink, enough for a month's worth of groceries if carefully budgeted.

I glanced out the kitchen window. "Is he still here?"

Minh nodded. "In the front. He caught me on my way home from school and asked if he could see Mama."

I hurried out. Truc stood a distance from the house, and I waved him over. It had been months since he had come to visit. He looked skinnier, more weathered; I could make out dark bags under his eyes.

"*Aye-yah*, Truc, haven't you been eating lately?"

"*Di Linh.* Have you been well? Did Minh give you—"

“Yes, yes he did. But, Truc, it’s too much. You have to save some for yourself—you can’t afford this!”

“Don’t worry about me. Make sure the kids eat well, and that Tien takes care of herself. How is she?”

I thought of my niece, who these days stayed mostly within the confines of her bedroom, sewing clothes, patching ripped pants, and embroidering designs on pillows as a means of supporting the family. A gifted seamstress, Tien performed these chores for those who knew enough about her talent to place orders with her. Since we could not afford a sewing machine, she did everything by hand. Over the last couple of years, her unfinished work began to pile up in her room: patterns for dresses, fabric for trousers, elastic bands, and pins littered the floor; pillowcases displayed half-born embroideries of green dragons, golden phoenixes, and red cherry blossoms in threads that shimmered underneath the light.

“Her work consumes her,” I said.

“*Di Linh?*” The front door creaked open just a sliver, Tien’s voice coming from inside.

“Truc is here,” I told her. The door opened no further. “He brought us some money.”

She remained quiet. A few years ago, when money was not yet so scarce, she would have thrown the bills back in his face. These last few months, however, she said nothing when I made the announcement, but she would never touch what he contributed. It was up to me to spend the money on food, and it broke my heart every time I picked up

ca thu—Truc’s favorite fish—from the market and remembered that he was not eating it so that we could.

Truc craned his neck in hopes to catch a glimpse of her through the opening, but the sunlight made the house’s interior invisible. “Tien,” he said softly, “have you been well?”

“Yes.” She did not ask about him.

“And the kids?”

“Fine.”

The lady selling desserts pushed her cart across our street, advertising her sweets. Truc used to buy Tien two *banh bo* every week since their marriage. These fluffy rice-flour cakes were her favorites, but since he left the house, she had not eaten one again. The lady slowed near our house, glancing briefly at the sight of Truc and me standing outside, then carted her goods further down the street.

Truc cleared his throat. “I guess I should go.”

“I guess you should,” came the reply from the other side of the door.

“Tien, if you or the kids ever need anything, you know where to find me.” Truc always parked his *siclo* on the corner of the busiest street in Saigon’s central market. Sometimes, I saw him on my market days. The other *siclo* drivers said he made that three-wheeled taxi his home, sleeping under awnings when the rainy season came.

“*Chao Di Linh*,” he said. “Take care of yourself.” Shoulders hunched in a posture that proclaimed defeat, he walked away. I watched until he disappeared, then came back into the house. Tien had already retreated to her room. Moments later,

someone knocked faintly at the front door. By the time I opened it, the person had gone, but on our doorstep lay two white, fluffy *banh bo* wrapped in wax paper.

“Leave them.” Tien had come up behind me when she heard knocking. She turned away to go back to her sewing. All through the night, she let the *banh bo* sit on the doorstep, collecting dew. Only when the next day’s sun had hardened them and the ants started their feast did she pick them up and throw them away.

We never notified Truc when Cao sent word that the necessary forms were completed for us to join him in America. I didn’t know how he discovered that we had gone; perhaps he dropped by one day for his usual visit to find the house deserted. Only fate and chance could explain how he found us again in the new country.

* * *

The sound of my doorbell brought me out of my memories. I hurried across the living room. The opaque oval of my front door showed a feminine silhouette in a beige shirt and white pants. Tien stood on the steps, her hair let down, making her look younger. Two weeks after I paid her a visit, Tien had finally agreed to talk to Truc one last time. “If it means he’ll stop harassing you,” she reasoned. “But make sure he keeps his word to never bother us again or I’ll call the police.” Determined that he should not know where she lived, Tien had decided to come to Magnolia Drive. I seated her on the living room couch, making small talk until three knocks sounded. Tien leapt up, then looked embarrassed for being so fidgety. Together, we made our way toward the door where the opaque window revealed the silhouette of a tall, thin man wearing black pants and a blue long-sleeve shirt.

“Di Linh? It’s me.”

I reached for the knob to let Truc in, but Tien halted my hand. Her clammy palms pressed hard against my skin. After a while, Truc said, “It’s all right. Are you okay, Tien?”

“Yes, of course.” Her shaky voice betrayed her nervousness. I took a step back so that Tien’s silhouette would not be enmeshed with my own, giving Truc the best view of her that I could. She turned toward me, her eyes begging me not to leave her alone.

“Have you been well these long years?” Truc came closer.

“Yes,” she answered. “You?” It was the first time since their argument that she asked about him.

“I’ve been well, thank you. And the children?”

“They’ve grown into teens now.” Tien swung her purse off her shoulders and extracted a photo of Minh and Phuong standing with their stepfather, taken at their recent trip to an amusement park. Tien was not in the picture. She slipped the photo through the mail slot, dropping it before Truc could touch it. He bent down to retrieve the photo from the ground, taking some time to study the people smiling back at him.

“That’s my husband, Phil,” Tien said.

Truc’s head bobbed up and down slowly. “Minh looks like you,” he said, his voice quieter.

“And Phuong like you.”

Truc said, “Do they ever ask about me?”

"They've settled into their lifestyles now. Please, just leave them alone to grow up." The coldness that crept back into her voice disheartened me. I was taken back to when I stood aside to observe this shadow-talk that went on between them. So many times I wanted to swing open the door and push her out, as if making her see her husband would break Tien's spell of resistance.

"Don't worry—I won't bother them," Truc said as he slipped the photo back through the mail slot, but Tien made no move to pick it up. After a time, he asked, "Tien? Do you suppose I can see you? Just once, after all these years?"

She froze, then shook her head emphatically. "No. And I agreed to see you today only to tell you it's over. Please don't attempt to look for me again. I can't have you in my life anymore, Truc. Leave, and don't come back." Head drooping, she covered her mouth, and I was surprised to see teardrops dotting the back of her hand.

Truc placed his right hand flat on the opaque glass, brushing at it softly with his fingers as if trying to wipe Tien's tears away. "*Xin loi, nhe*. I just want you to know I'm sorry. You won't see me again."

He let his hand drop and turned to leave when she called him back. Bending down, Tien snatched up the picture and pushed it through the slot.

"You can keep the picture of our children, if you want."

He stood for a long time with his back to the door, his silhouette like a streak of blended colors. Then, setting his shoulders, he walked away without looking back. Tien waited a while longer and wiped off the last of her tears. She opened the door and retrieved the picture from the ground, then shoved it back into her purse.

“I should get home, Auntie.” Without even looking at me, she hurried down the path and out of the black gates where her car was parked. I watched her drive away and shifted my attention to the magnolia trees. The brown leaves littered the lawn and dried in clumps. The branches stuck out at crooked angles against a background of gray sky. Tomorrow, there would be more leaves to sweep from the sidewalk. I shook my head, then pushed the door closed. The loud bang echoed off the walls of the empty room.

Invisible Wings

On the first night that she saw it, it had gotten stuck in the cream-colored lampshade left on her desk. The old lamp was broken a long while back, but no one bothered to throw the shade away. Suki peered into the open top and saw a black moth fluttering inside, leaving a streak of its wings' powdery residue on the walls of the plastic prison. Though there was enough space, the moth couldn't get past the wire frame strung across the lampshade to hold the light bulb; every time it came near the top, a slight brush of its wings against the wire sent it scampering back down. Again and again it tried a different path, only to lose more of itself on the dingy white walls.

Suki bounced on her tippy-toes. It wasn't a pet dog like she always wanted, but it was hers. "Don't worry," she told the moth, "I'll take care of you. No need to struggle."

She pulled open her bedroom door and headed downstairs. A series of picture frames on the wall to her left showed different people in her family dressed up in formal outfits and sitting in stiff poses. Here was a picture of herself in the frilly pink dress with the itchy collar. The man at Sears Portraits had told her not to look directly at the camera and took so long fiddling with it that Suki had trouble keeping still. She remembered wanting to reach up and scratch her neck, the need growing worse and worse, until the camera's bright flash reflected on the white umbrella.

The next picture down was one of Baby Ty wearing a funny outfit with shorts and a bowtie. It was taken at a different time, but at the same place. The man who took Ty's picture moved around a lot more than the one who set her in that pose for so long; he had

squeaked rubber duckies and waved around balloon animals trying to get Ty to smile. The picture they were left with showed Ty with serious, wrinkled-up eyebrows. There were a few shots of their parents before and after their marriage, which Thao—their mother—paid to get the colors enhanced.

The five pictures sat like torches on the wall, and Suki's eyes skid over to the place where the sixth used to hang. She could see the slight outline of a square in a brighter shade of white paint, and a memory of the picture shot through her head: an older girl in a simple black dress, with pearls across her neck and diamonds in her ears. After her sister Kim left the house, all her pictures started to disappear from the walls, the mantelpiece, the dresser drawers in their parents' room. She had gone away with her boyfriend after a night spent crying and yelling at their parents, who yelled back—palms hitting tabletops, fists pounding walls, voices echoing clear down the hall and up the stairs.

Suki lingered near the pictures for a moment longer, then remembered the moth and ran to tell her parents. She found them in the kitchen, her father at the table, reading the Food & Wine section of the newspaper, her mother doing the dishes at the sink.

"Water bill's due this coming week," her father, Seto, said without looking up.

Thao's posture stiffened. "I don't see you paying it."

The newspaper made a crumbling sound as Seto dropped his arms. "It was just a reminder! Why do you have to be so edgy about everything?"

"Oh, take a hint. You never, never pay the bills, Seto. I'm busy as hell and you don't do a thing to help."

“Jesus Christ, Thao, it’s 10 a.m. on a Sunday! Do we have to start this early?”

“It might do you good to start *anything* early for a change.”

“Mommy?” Suki took a few more timid steps into the kitchen.

Thao whirled around. “What is it?” Her voice shot cold through the space between them.

Suki felt sweat beads on her upper lip. “Um, what do moths eat?”

Thao sighed, yanking the faucet’s lever up so hard that water splashed against the soapy dishes and sprayed outside the sink. “*Me khong biet.*” She shrugged. “Really, honey, I don’t know. Do Mommy a favor, would you, and go check on your brother. He’s in the backyard.”

“Okay.” She hated to see her parents fight.

When Suki slid back the screen door and stepped outside, the sun hit her eyes, sending a flashing headache to her forehead. She squinted, using a hand to shield out the light. Suki found Ty on his tricycle, his splayed legs on the ground, pushing himself slowly back and forth. She came closer and followed his concentrated gaze to the cement where a straight line of smashed ants marked the repeated path of the tricycle’s front wheel. Those left alive ran in frantic spurts, feelers groping to find a safe trail. Panic surged through the colony; some still clung to the breadcrumbs they had managed to salvage, while others tugged at their fallen friends, hefting a writhing body on top of their own and dashing in aimless circles.

“Ty, cut it out!” Suki yelled.

He blinked up at her. “Why?”

Suki stepped toward him so that her shadow fell across his face and blocked out the sun. "It's not nice, that's why. Don't kill things."

"I'm bored," he said, stepping off the tricycle.

"Well then, come here. I'll show you something." Suki thought about taking Ty to her room so he could see the black moth, but a sudden memory changed her mind. She used to catch flies and stuck them inside an empty Korbel champagne bottle, stopping the opening with a wad of toilet paper. She had peeled off the champagne label to watch her flies' erratic zing as they threw themselves against the dark green glass. They had been her pets, but they never lived beyond a day, so she kept having to dump out their silver-green bodies. Once, she managed to catch one of the bigger flies with humongous beady eyes and gray stripes along its body. She showed Ty the bottle and was called in to set the table. When they heard the crash of broken glass, Thao and Suki ran out to find his hands cut and bleeding, his face a livid shade of purple as he shrieked about the fly that got away.

"Suki, hurry up!" Ty tugged at her pants, his chubby legs bouncing as if he needed to go to the bathroom.

She dug into her pants' pockets, gathering lint from the deep corners with her fingernails until she finally pulled out a blue-red lint ball the size of a BB pellet. "See? Here's a lint guy." She did the same to the other pocket and pulled out a smaller ball. "And here's a lint girl."

Ty bunched his brows and stared at the two balls in Suki's cupped hands. "Are they real?" he asked.

“Well, they’re not fake. You *see* them, don’t you?”

“I mean, I mean—are they alive?” he stammered.

“Of course! In fact, they can make lint babies, too.”

“Where? I wanna see!”

“No, you can’t. You’re too young. If you want to see their babies, you have to first turn away.”

Reluctantly, and very slowly, Ty turned his back to Suki.

“Better not look!” she warned and plucked off small chunks of the lint balls, rolling them between her thumb and index fingers.

“Done?”

“Okay, Ty, turn back now.” She purposefully kept her hands higher than he could reach; he grabbed them and tried to pull them down to eye level. A gust sent some of the lint balls flying, and Ty ran after them, shrieking laughter.

“Suki?” Thao poked her head past the screen door. “Phone call.”

* * *

A woman’s nipples become hard when she is cold, and they stand straight up in anticipation. She didn’t know this when the man on the phone told her to run cold water over her hands, then slip them under her shirt and touch them to her breasts.

“Are they getting hard?” he breathed over the line. “Are they getting all round and firm?”

“Yeah,” Suki said, briefly wondering why this was so before turning off the faucet. She felt as if she was in on some dirty secret and glanced at the bathroom door to

make sure it was locked. The shift of her head caused a crackle of static to rip through the cordless phone.

“Good, Suki,” the man said. “Know what that means? It means you’re real good in bed. Real good.” His breathing became more ragged, quickened.

“Who is this?” Suki asked again. She had dragged the phone upstairs because she thought she heard her uncle’s voice. Now, she felt mad at herself. Uncle Tommy, her father’s brother, had a way of carrying on jokes over the phone so that when the strange man asked, “Do you know who I am? How old are you? Are you away from your parents? Alone?”, she had dutifully responded, “You’re my uncle, silly, you can’t trick me. I’m ten, duh, did you forget my birthday? I’m walking away from Mommy and Daddy right now. What do you want?”

He said he wanted her to try something, and she was curious enough to do it, even after she realized it wasn’t Uncle Tommy on the line. And he had known her name. “How did you know my name?”

“Suki. I want to be friends with you. I want you to be my special friend. Okay?”

She kept silent. She didn’t know why she kept him on the line.

“Suki? Do you know where your pussy is?”

That was when she hung up.

Suki slipped the cordless back on its cradle. She couldn’t look at her parents and hoped they didn’t much look at her to notice how red her face got. She felt like she just did something wrong, something bad.

“Suki, *ai vay*?” Thao asked, gesturing to the phone.

“Just Uncle Tommy calling. Forgot which day my birthday was again.”

“Well,” said Thao, reaching into the letter carrier on the wall to pull out a stack of bills. “You know your uncle.”

* * *

A few nights out of the week, Thao prepared Japanese rice because Seto complained that the Vietnamese kind didn't quite match up. Suki admitted that her mother was right, that the stickier, chewier grains of Japanese rice settled too heavily on the stomach. On these nights, she couldn't drown the contents of her bowl in soup—the round grains had a way of sucking up all the liquid—and she found herself too full to go to sleep at her usual time. Ty, on the other hand, relished his father's preference; with his clumsy, chubby hands, he shoveled spoonful after spoonful of food into his mouth.

On the night of the phone call, Suki found it even harder to swallow. She pushed the rice round and round in her bowl and wished she could gulp the whole thing down with soup, but her mother never made any on Japanese Rice Nights. Suki picked up a slim green bean from the big plate at the center of the table and nibbled on it with her front teeth. Tonight, she felt full even before she started eating. Thoughts of the moth and of the phone call clouded her mind and sent a bloat to her stomach.

Suki set down her bowl. Thao glanced at it and said, “Sweetie, you shouldn't waste food. You know what happens to little girls who don't finish their rice?” Seto shot her a warning look, but Thao kept talking, her voice low and serious. “*Ho di xuong Am Phu*. They have to go to the Underworld when they die. Down there, the spirits dangle

full rice bowls in front of you, but you can't touch the food because you wouldn't give it a second thought when you were alive. You'll be forced to stay hungry forever."

"That's enough!" Seto put down his chopsticks and glared. "Chrissakes, Thao, she's ten years old. She doesn't have to think she's going to hell. Stop scaring her with your baloney ghost stories."

"My culture is not baloney! You'd know a few things about yours if you respected it more."

"Don't turn this into something about me again. Look, if she's full, she's full. No point in forcing her."

The room grew quiet except for the clinking of chopsticks against porcelain, of Seto's audible sucking sound as he shoved more rice into his mouth, of Ty smacking his lips and giggling. Suki wanted to hear her parents talk normally to each other so that she could talk to them too, but they didn't even look up anymore. So she stayed quiet, swallowing more rice and adding to the forming lump in her windpipe, until air seemed to pass quite slowly and painfully through a hole too small.

* * *

Mr. Williams's fifth grade class was getting ready for Multicultural Day. Suki had already turned in her signed permission slip, allowing her to be part of the Vietnamese dance group. When the bell rang at the end of the school day, Suki found the four girls who would be in the dance with her. They sat in the far corner of Mr. Williams's class, huddled in a circle and whispering to each other. They were supposed to wait for the arrival of the high school girls from the Vietnamese Student Association

who had volunteered to teach them the dance. When Suki approached, the four looked up without smiling.

“Hey,” said Trinh, lifting her eyebrows so they disappeared underneath her straight bangs. “Suki, right? Are you even Vietnamese?”

“I’m half-Vietnamese. On my mother’s side.”

“She sure has slanty eyes,” Suki heard Ly whisper to her twin sister, Nina.

“So what’s your other half?” Trinh asked, eyes narrowed like a cat stalking prey.

“Japanese. My daddy’s family is from Japan. But he was born here.”

Tranh let out an adult-like sigh that told Suki the above information was irrelevant to the higher cause she had in mind. “Look, Saké, why don’t you ask Mr. Williams if you could join another dance group? We already have four people, so there’ll be two pairs. Thu’s gonna be my partner, so you’ll just be the oddball because you won’t have someone to dance with.”

“It’s *Suki*.” She thought about the two other groups available—the Filipino dancers and the Mexicans. Fernando and Joe were doing a dance with Vicki Montoya; she’d seen it last year and didn’t want some boy to bury his head in the folds of her full skirt. And the Filipinos were going to perform that dance where they had to jump between bamboo poles; she imagined it hurt if she messed up and her feet got caught. “I want to learn a Vietnamese dance,” she told Trinh. “Mr. Williams already said I could.”

Tranh rolled her eyes. “Whatever. But the dance isn’t going to be right if you don’t have a partner, so don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Nina and Ly had stopped looking at her; they played cat's cradle with a string until the two long-legged volunteers from the high school came bounding in the door with a boom-box and the glittery hand-fan props. Only then did the quiet girl, Thu, stop stealing glances at Suki from the corner of her eyes.

* * *

The stump of the cherry blossom tree greeted Suki as she entered her front yard after dance practice. Suki knew that her mother had chopped down the tree because her sister Kim went away. Her father had planted the cherry blossom behind their white picket fence. He said it reminded him of the Sakura Festival he had once attended on a visit to Japan, when a steady breeze had sent the delicate petals from a hundred trees into the air like pink rain. When Thao came home to find the tree already wedged into the ground, she half-gasped, half-screamed.

"Don't plant that there! If you plan a *dao* tree in your front yard, some boy will become enchanted with your daughter's beauty and steal her away."

"Bunch of baloney," Seto said. When a postcard came from Kim two years later to let them know she was married and didn't plan on returning home, Thao took an ax from the tool shed to the front yard, her petite frame hacking away at the cherry blossom until huge woodchips lodged in her hair, until the trunk folded back with a snapping sound.

Suki had felt sorry for the tree. She thought such a thing of beauty shouldn't be cut down. That evening, she secretly plucked a flower from a fallen branch and brought it into her room. She pressed it between the pages of *Gulliver's Travels*, the book Kim

was reading for English class right before she left home. Over the years, the pink petals had dulled to brown, and specks of pollen clung to the book's white pages. Once in a while, Suki took out the book from underneath her bed, turned to the slight bulge that marked the pressed flower, and stared at the cherry blossom, wondering how a thing so small could cause her sister to run away.

Suki turned the doorknob and stepped into the quiet house. Soon, her mother would pick up Ty from babysitting on her way home from work. Her parents owned a Fusion restaurant and, when it got busy, would take turns staying late to close up and check receipts. Suki flung her backpack off her shoulders and ran upstairs, her footsteps reverberating. She peeked into the lampshade and saw the hardened clump of last night's rice sitting untouched on the desktop. The moth didn't fly so frantically around its chamber anymore, but once in a while, it would flutter from wire frame to desktop, its wings flexing open and closed.

"You must be hungry," Suki said. "You didn't eat your rice! I wish you can tell me what you want. I'll get it from the kitchen." She reached a finger into the lampshade and stroked the moth's wing. It recoiled and fluttered away. Suki studied the trace of black powder left on her fingertip and rubbed with her thumb in a circular motion until it smeared. She was thinking of smelling her fingers when the phone rang.

* * *

"Is this Suki?"

She knew the voice. "Who is this?"

"Don't you remember? I'm your special friend."

“What do you want?”

A chuckle. “I want to see how good my little Suki is in bed. I want you to stick your fingers up your pussy and let me know what it smells like.”

She whirled around to look out the window. Did he know she was thinking of smelling her fingers when he called? How did he know? Feeling watched, she ran out of her room and slammed the door. Suki sat on the top steps of the stairs where no window exposed her. Her family members seemed to glare down at her from their post on the wall. The phone grew hot against her ear. Her breath came in pants and gulps, and the breathing on the other end of the line quickened to match her own.

“You ever taste yourself, Suki? Tell me, are you salty or sweet? Sugar or spice?”

“Suki?” The front door shut with a bang, and Thao’s voice drifted upwards.

“Honey, I told you not to leave your backpack lying around!”

The phone clicked, and the dial tone droned in her ear.

* * *

Better not to have a daughter. That was what Seto said when he flung Kim’s postcard into the trash. What she did, he said, was *dirty*. He had sat silent and unmoving at the kitchen table as Thao hacked away at the cherry blossom tree. On that day, they could hardly say a single thing to each other without yelling. They were *tired* all the time. They said the word like a disease, like how their neighbor Margot said, “I’m diabetic” when Thao offered her cookies. Whenever Suki asked a question they didn’t want to deal with, they’d sigh and look away.

Not now, sweetie.

I don't know, honey.

Daddy is tired.

Mommy is tired.

Suki forced her eyes up from her father's brown dress socks with the blue square prints, hoping he wasn't *tired* enough for this.

"Daddy? If I do something wrong, will you still love me?"

Seto put down his paperwork, loosened his tie. "Of course I will. Why?"

The familiar lump rose in her throat again. "Nothing. I mean, I didn't do nothing. I mean, it wasn't me that—"

"Seto." Thao came into the living room, a screaming, red-faced Ty balanced on her right hip. "Can you come help me with Ty? He's burning up, I can't get him to take his Tylenol, and he just threw up on the bed."

Seto kneeled to be eye level with Suki. "Sweetie, is it something important? Your brother's sick."

Once again, she was struck by the shame of her secret; it felt so *dirty*. Looking her father in the eyes, seeing the streak of gray on the hair at his temples, Suki thought of how he chipped off the ice and warmed up the car for Kim in the winter months before she drove it to her high school, and how she had left in the end, made him grow old.

"It can wait, Daddy," she said and watched his shadow slide away from hers, along the wall and up the stairs.

* * *

Tranh acted especially mad when their dance leaders assigned Suki the “center stage” position since she didn’t have a partner. Suki was supposed to be in the foreground—and she could use the gold fans—while the other four had to hold the silver ones and dance behind her. Though the other girls flocked around Tranh and ignored Suki, the quiet one—Thu—had started to make friends with her. Having eaten at Suki’s parents’ restaurant before, Thu would ask Suki what certain foods on the Japanese menu tasted like. During recess, they’d rehearse dance steps together, avoiding Tranh’s crew.

They were going to get measured for the dance costumes. Tranh, Nina, and Ly sucked in their stomachs and juttied out their chests in front of the bathroom mirror. They turned full-circle and giggled, talking about what color they wanted their costumes to be. When they finished, they headed to the bathroom entrance where Suki and Thu were standing. “Hey, did you hear?” Tranh asked the twins. “Vicki kissed Joe Morena behind the oak tree at recess yesterday.”

“Really?” Nina chimed in. “What a slut.”

“I bet they’re going to have babies,” Ly said.

“You don’t even know where babies come from,” her sister shot back.

“Neither do you!”

“I do too!” Nina’s eyes dashed around the room as if she expected to find the answer written on the tiled walls.

“We’re waiting, smarty-pants,” Tranh said, her lips lifted in a smirk.

“Well,” Nina started, then swallowed, “when a man kisses a woman, some of his spit goes down to her stomach to make a baby.”

The girls groaned. Tranh doubled over laughing, and Nina's face went red.

"Well, I bet you guys don't know, either!" she screamed.

"I do." All eyes turned to Thu, and Suki stood close enough to feel the heat of their gaze.

"They come out of a woman's vagina."

Tranh narrowed her eyes in that cat-like way of hers. "That's gross, Thu. Who told you that?"

"This man on the phone."

Suki's breath caught in a sharp inhale. She heard her own blood throbbing in her ears.

"What else did he say?" Ly asked in a small voice.

"That women smell salty down there. That, to make babies, a man's *thing*—you know, what he pees with—it has to get long and hard, as thick as your wrist, and then he sticks it inside the woman and he pumps until it feels good, and that's where babies come from."

Suki tried to imagine Ty's *thing*—which she had seen when Thao changed his diapers—growing and growing from its chili-pepper size. She suddenly wanted to run into one of the stalls and throw up.

"Girls, are you still in there?" They all jumped at the sound of Mr. Williams's voice coming from outside. "Your dance leaders are here; please don't keep them waiting!"

“We’re coming, Mr. Williams,” Tranh shouted back in a sing-song voice. Then she turned back to Thu and hissed, “That guy sounds like a real pervert. You gotta tell me more about it later.” They followed Tranh single-file outside, Suki trailing last, wishing she could tug at Thu’s sleeve, make her stay behind, and ask her the questions that bounced around in her head like a panicked moth seeking escape.

* * *

He breathed as if he had been running, the noise like spurts of static shooting through Suki’s ear. When the phone rang, Suki snatched the cordless and sprinted upstairs; she was aiming to tell this man off today.

“I missed you, baby,” he whispered. “Did you miss me?”

“You called my friend Thu, didn’t you?” Suki practiced narrowing her eyes like Tranh, thinking it made her look and sound mean.

“Your friend Thu? I have her right here, Suki. She’s lying on the floor next to me. I’m taking off her pants and slipping them past her ankles. Now, what I’m going to do is stick my fist up her vagina. You listen good, Suki—I can’t wait to do this to you.” The man grunted in short gasps, quicker and quicker, then let out a long moan. “Oh, yes. She’s so tight. You going to be this tight, Suki?”

He was afraid of daddies. Suki figured this out after talking to Thu when dance practice ended the other day. Thu said that once, while she was on the phone with the man, her dad yelled at her to come down for dinner. At the sound of her dad’s voice, the man hung up the phone.

“You’re a bad man!” Suki yelled. “Stop calling me.”

“Suki. I thought you and I were special friends.”

“I’m not your friend.” Suki heard her voice quaver. She balled up her fist and willed herself to be strong.

“You little girls get angry so easily. It’s just a game. Don’t you want to play with me?”

Suki walked over to her bedroom door, opened it, and slammed it shut. Moving the receiver away from her mouth, she yelled, “Daddy, you’re home! This guy on the phone wants to talk to you.” The room was so quiet that her voice sounded unusually loud. Slowly, Suki brought the phone back to her ear. She held her breath. And then she exhaled and smiled when she heard nothing but the dial tone.

* * *

Downstairs, her parents were arguing. Suki had asked them to come to Multicultural Day to see her dance, and they started to discuss whether or not they could afford to take time off from the restaurant. People from some big company were scheduled for lunch that day, and Thao didn’t want to close up. Seto said at least one of them should go see Suki dance. They couldn’t agree on a solution, and in the end, Suki got sick of their yelling. “Forget it,” she had said, “It’s not important anyway.” Then she ran upstairs and got ready for bed.

Suki’s nightlight cast the moth’s giant shadow against the bumpy ceiling. Remembering it, she walked over to the desk. Suddenly, she became disgusted with herself for keeping it prisoner; just like her flies, the moth would starve and die. It needed fresh air. For the first time, she lifted the lampshade and stuck her hand past the

filmy dust ring on the desktop. The moth lay still, by now too used to her touch or too tired to evade it. Only when she cupped it in her hands did she feel the soft wings beat to brush powder against her palms.

Suki dug her toes into the cushy carpet until her footprints remained; then she made herself move, made her hands fling the moth out the window. It faltered in the night air, and for a few seconds, Suki thought she had killed it, but then the moth lifted itself higher, its body like a dark blemish against the surface of the full moon. Unlike the erratic zigzag of butterflies, a moth in flight, with its wings beating so fast as to appear invisible, seemed graceful, almost magical. She watched until it disappeared into the night, and then she crawled back into bed, feeling relieved but very much alone.

* * *

A month later, a crowd assembled to watch the Multicultural Day dances. People fanned themselves with the neon-yellow programs, making a flurry of warm wind and motion that seemed to melt before Suki's eyes. All the doors of the cafeteria were flung wide open, but the muggy smell of school food still weighed down heavy in the air. On the stage, Suki peeked through the slit between the fans she held in front of her face as she waited for the music to cue. She realized she was trembling and struggled to keep her hands still. *Don't let me mess up. Don't let me trip over these long pants. Don't let anything go wrong.*

"Loosen up, Suki," one of the dance leaders had told her before letting her go on stage. "You were wonderful during practice, but remember—don't be too stiff."

The overhead speakers let out a screech, and then the music began. Suki slowly lowered her fans in the first dance step, got ready to twirl around for the second. She scanned the audience for her parents but couldn't find them. Banishing her disappointment, Suki thought about clumsy butterflies and graceful moths and heard her heart pumping a rhythm and lifted the fans in her hands like wings to the beat of the music and finished her dance.

* * *

Thu tapped Suki on the shoulder after the assembly. "Were you nervous?"

"Of course," Suki said. "Did I look it?"

"No, you were great. I'm glad they got you to dance center stage. Tranh thinks she's so hot, but she kept stepping on my toes, and her palms were all sweaty." Thu arched her head to see above the crowd. "Hey, there are my parents! Want a ride home?"

Suki shook her head. "My mom and dad will probably be here soon," she lied.

After Thu left, Suki waited for a bit longer, but when the crowd began to disperse, she started to walk home. The girls in the dance had all left with their families, and she was too embarrassed to stay around while the teachers chatted with the few remaining parents.

The phone was ringing when she opened the front door. Suki ignored it and headed to her room. A few weeks back, the man had tried to talk to her again. She had hid in the bathroom when Seto yelled from downstairs that she had a call. After a while, she heard her father say, "Suki's not available right now. Who is this, anyway?" She

didn't think the man called again after that, but she stayed away from picking up the phone altogether.

Suki knew her parents would apologize when they came home from the restaurant. She didn't expect them to remember but still felt hurt that they forgot. They were tired and never had time and she was all alone. Suki remembered how Kim and the black moth and even her flies flew away and never came back. Back then, she couldn't figure out why they hated the house so much, but now she was starting to understand. Suki reached underneath her bed, pulled out *Gulliver's Travels*, and turned to the pressed cherry blossom. She ran a fingertip over its translucent petals and wondered—if she had the moth's gift of flight and her sister's gift of courage—how far she would go, and where her wings would take her.

The Way to Heaven

They say that when you think of the dead, the dead can hear you. What they didn't know, Kha thought as he huddled beneath the small awning of Kristie-Lee Johnson's massive mausoleum, was that, if you listened hard enough, you could hear them. But often, people wouldn't think of these things. Only two things the living did for the dead: mourn them or forget them.

Two *lan* lions guarded the entry to the Asian Plaza of the cemetery, fenced off with white gates. The family Kha was watching from a short distance outside was getting ready to bury a young girl. From the picture they propped up near the coffin, she couldn't have been more than eighteen. One-hundred-and-four roses piled high on her polished oak coffin before the tractors pushed piles of dirt upon its surface. Kha counted every bud as relatives and friends walked by—some stone-faced and some with handkerchiefs covering their wailing mouths—to drop them into the girl's resting place. Rain pelted the ground on the appropriately dismal morning, all gray, the clouds so thick you could not pinpoint the sun's position in the sky. Rain splattered the mound of dirt into runny streaks, made the mourners' clothes stick to their skin in a blur of black.

As the Buddhist monks in saffron robes sang her soul on its way to receive Judgment, Kha rubbed his hands together, then brought them to his mouth and blew. When his warm breath drifted back to his nose, he smelled the sourness of a mouth gone dry, of a tongue coated with sickly white residue. He wrapped his arms around his shabby gray coat and breathed deep to catch a whiff of the rich smell of sandalwood incense that the monks waved around to bless the grave.

When the soil was pounded smooth by the giant metal compactors, the girl's mother dragged herself to where the coffin once lay, wailing, "*Con oi, con oi.*" Despite her relatives' soothing voices and firm hold, she crawled toward the girl, her black funeral dress soaking up the brown mud, her fingernails jammed full of dirt and grass.

That was what the living did for the newly dead. Mourning loudly and half-crazed, of course they couldn't hear what the dead had to say. This mother, lamenting on her hands and knees, was deaf to what Kha heard from several yards away: *Mommy, don't cry . . . Mommy, don't cry . . .* And through the bare branches of the trees around them, the wind whispered, *sigh, sigh.*

Some hours later, they were gone. Kha pushed himself off the stone wall of Kristie-Lee's mausoleum and walked into the rain. After a couple of steps, the smell of his moldy rags intensified to a sour stench. Kha entered the lion-guarded gates and made his way to the foot of the buried girl's grave. The rectangular patch of land, marked off at every corner by small posts tied with red ribbons, stood stark and bare on the grassy ground. Her relatives had left a paper plate heaped high with bright oranges—Buddhist offerings for the dead.

It's alright, Kha; go ahead, the spirits murmured. He looked around to make sure the cemetery staff was out of sight, then kneeled next to the plate, picked up an orange, and bit into the peel. Rain-soaked and weak, his stomach churning its own acidic juices, Kha tore at the soft, juicy flesh with his teeth, devouring oranges as he thought up a silent prayer to the new spirit whose food he stole.

* * *

Thursday mornings, the staff of The Way to Heaven Cemetery and Crematorium cleaned up the flowers and other offerings left for the dead. By noon, all the food left in the Asian Plaza would be gone. On these days, Kha walked the three blocks to the light rail that took him to the mall. He boarded the cars in the middle—never the first or last near where the conductors sat—and hunched in a corner seat, looking out the window as the scenery whizzed past in a meaningless pattern of trees, houses, shops; trees, houses, shops. By hopping light rail trains, never sitting on one for too long, Kha often managed to avoid the security personnel who would kick him off for not having a riding pass. He even had a system that seemed to work best: 2:15, board the third car from the left; 2:45, second car from the right; 3:00, middle car. After noon when the lunch-hour rush was over, he could sit unbothered in his corner, only occasionally confronted by the old ladies with their small carts laden with groceries, who pinched their noses and shot him nasty looks before moving to a farther seat.

At 3:15, two stops away from the mall, a group of teenage school boys boarded the train. They entered laughing and yelling, shoving each other and slapping a sign that said WATCH YOUR HEAD, which hung over the automatic doors. The car filled with a garble of voices.

“B-ball at my place, guys. Seven o’clock.”

“Nah, man. Gotta take Tanya to the mall. Been broke lately and crap.”

“Your fault, Romeo.”

“Man, shut the fuck up. At least I’m gettin’ me some.”

“Bullshit, you ain’t gettin’ nothing.”

“What’s that smell? Smells like shit.”

Kha continued staring out the window. Trees, houses, shops. Trees. Houses. Shops. *Kids*, he thought.

I don't have any money.

That's not our problem. You have to own a fighter if you want to play with us.

Voices from Kha’s past drifted back into the present to meet him; he could feel the humid winds of Can Giuoc—his home village in Viet Nam—and see the yellowed rice crop swaying in the wind. In the shade of a tall tree, a group of boys squatted around a soup bowl filled with water. Two male Beta fish, bred to fight, threw their glistening bodies at each other. Kha remembered standing at a distance from that circle after having been shooed away, looking down at his gangly limbs. And, really, it wasn’t about the fish; he just wanted to feel like he belonged. The fish was just his key into the friendship circle.

At Ong Sau’s pet shop, where pythons slithered in large glass aquariums, where a dozen different varieties of birds twittered inside crowded cages, and where male Beta fishes with blue bodies and red fins swam in individual plastic bags strung from one end of the shop to the other, Kha walked slowly around, keeping his eyes on the shop owner. When Ong Sau wasn’t looking, Kha slit one of the bags with a razor until fish and water gushed to the floor. With cupped hands, he caught the Beta and whisked it into his mouth. With every labored breath back to the tree where the group of boys hung out, Kha could feel the Beta squirm in his mouth, thin fins pasted like rice paper to his tongue

and upper palate. Its bulbous body flip-flopped against the walls of his mouth, and Kha could smell its raw-fish stench every time he inhaled through his nose.

The hell are you doing?

Hey, I think he's got something in his mouth!

Kha spit out his Beta into the soup bowl; it floated belly-up. The other two fish swam up to investigate, nipping once or twice at the corpse before completely losing interest.

At first, someone snorted with a *Hah!* of amusement. Then, laughter erupted from the group of finger-pointing boys.

Get out of here!

Beta eater!

What a loser.

Stop it. Stop laughing. The boys trailed him for a distance along the rice paddies, their forced laughter still mocking him long after they were all laughed out. *Just leave me alone.*

Kha heard, ten years later, that one of the boys in that group died serving the South Republic in the Viet Nam War. Another went MIA; his family finally found his bones and buried them right before Kha left for the United States.

The light rail screeched to a stop, and the doors hissed open to flush out the teenagers.

“Man, I thought I was gonna die in there.”

“Holy shit, what a smell.”

“I’d rather get out and walk.”

That’s right, Kha thought, get out of here. Leave me alone.

* * *

There were the men who promised, *Will work for food*, but Kha didn’t think he could manage that. He stood underneath the freeway overpass at the busiest intersection of the mall, holding up a cardboard sign that simply said, *Hungry. Please Help*. An older man stood here once, holding a more elaborate message of how he had a wife and five kids to support, *God bless*. Once, Kha asked where his family was, and the man replied, “Sonny, I don’t really got one . . . but it’s amazing how many bottles of whiskey this here sign helped me get. Whiskey’s better than women, son—keeps you warm at night and doesn’t nag at you all day long.” After the encounter, Kha considered plagiarizing the man’s sign but figured he didn’t look old enough to pull it off.

When the light turned red, Kha made his rounds. He paced slowly up and down the little island that divided traffic going different directions and made a point to look into the eyes of every driver he walked past, tinted car windows and all. Most acted like they couldn’t see him, windows rolled up to block out the rain. Married couples; mothers toting their children in minivans; young men in sports cars with pretty girls in the passenger seats; all seemed to work to evade his gaze. They drummed their fingers on their steering wheels, feigning interest in some bush on the other side of the street; they willed with their eyes for the traffic light to turn green. Once in a while, someone would crack down his window and hold out a crisp dollar bill clamped between two fingers.

Kha shuffled over in his many layers of ripped clothing to retrieve the money and then went back to his ghost-like existence, seen by all, acknowledged by few.

“Excuse me! Young man? God bless you, young man.”

Leaning on the concrete support of the overpass, Kha focused his attention on the middle-aged woman in the sky-blue Pinto, whose window was rolled down all the way despite the rain.

“Here, this is for you.” The woman proffered a croissant, and Kha reached out a shaky hand to take it. She had a head of pepper-colored hair in soft curls and glasses that were too big for her round face. She turned to dig in the large handbag propped on the passenger seat and leaned out partway to give Kha a plain white card with black lettering. On the left-hand side of the card were a few squiggly lines suggesting an angel blowing a trumpet.

BROWN BAG LUNCHES
3850 MONTGOMERY WAY
FREE MEALS TO QUALIFIED CANDIDATES

“We’re only a few miles from here,” she said. “I’m Gloria; I volunteer there regularly. We can help you get back on your feet. We even offer a service that helps you find job connections. Please, come give it a try.”

The light turned green, and when she made no indication of moving, the cars behind her let out a series of honks.

“Hey, Amazing Grace! Move it, already!”

The woman calmly smiled at him and rolled up her window before she went *put-putting* away in her Pinto. The drivers behind her stepped on the gas to make the yellow light, shooting him hate-looks as they drove past.

Kha folded the card in half and stuffed it in his breast pocket. He gulped down the flaky croissant in four bites. He knew many homeless shelters in the area and had even tried a few, but they got to be too much for him. Kha couldn't stand to fill out those long forms, justifying his financial situation, detailing how he got to be that way, estimating how long he intended to utilize their services. Or those pimply-faced teenagers hard-up for the last few hours of community service to complete their quota for so-and-so Honors Society, scooping tasteless and runny mashed potatoes into his plastic tray. He didn't need that cherubic-faced woman with an angel-embossed business card to bless him with God's grace; he belonged to the world of the forsaken. Besides, he wasn't "homeless." He had a home, and as the sky darkened, he walked off to the light rail station to go back to it.

* * *

The black mongrel with white hair on its head and snout had been loping around the cemetery for several days. There was a pound nearby, and Kha wondered if the dog had escaped from it. Tonight, Kha decided to sleep at the foot of the Archangel Michael statue, depicted as a sword-and-shield-bearing man with large wings whose feathers were etched into the marble.

It's cold tonight, Kha. Keep warm, keep warm, came the whisper of voices.

Even though Kristie-Lee's massive monument served as a better shield from the night winds, Kha had to relocate now and then in case someone from the night watch decided to stay later than cemetery closing hours. Kha had seen the black dog earlier in the week; long-legged and emaciated, it ran from tomb to tomb with its head lowered. Like Kha, it had discovered the food offerings in the Asian Plaza, but on its first Thursday night in the cemetery, it wandered around, confused about the sudden lack of food.

It must have smelled Kha before it spotted him, for when it sniffed closer to the Archangel Michael statue and Kha shifted his body, the dog gave a start. Kha made a clucking noise with his tongue and held out a hand palm-up to lure it over. Ears perked and tail lowered in caution, it slowly approached. The dog looked even older up close. In its eyes, he saw the same starved look that he wore. Kha let it smell his hand, then reached out to pet its head. "Atta boy," he coaxed. "Good dog."

Good dog. Come on out, Little Boy. Good dog. He was on his hands and knees and peering underneath his cot in Can Giuoc. A pair of dark brown eyes stared back at him from the cobwebbed darkness. Behind him, his dad and sister, Thi, stood with Old Man Hoa. The three of them had tried for hours to coax the dog from underneath Kha's cot, but Little Boy knew better. He wedged himself into a tight ball against the far wall and, for all their pleas and commands and threats, wouldn't budge. As a last resort, they had to ask Kha to try.

Kha stuck his hands underneath the cot and waved the dog over with half-hearted attempts. Everyone in the village knew Old Man Hoa's family had an appetite for dogs,

but Kha's family wouldn't be around much longer to care for Little Boy. Just the other week, after a few rounds of beer, Father had let it slip to his coffee-shop buddies that they were soon going "away," and Old Man Hoa had asked about the dog. *Give him to me. I'll give him a good home.*

So out of what he felt was an obligation to Hoa, and because they didn't have family left in Can Giuoc to take care of their house—let alone their dog—Father had made the deal.

Kha, hurry up, son. Mr. Hoa is waiting. The floorboard creaked as Father shifted his weight. They had been through this the night before: it wouldn't do any good to turn Little Boy loose, mangy as he was with his ribs showing through his skin, and yes, Father knew Hoa's family ate dogs, but leaving the domesticated Little Boy to roam the already-impoverished streets of Can Giuoc would only prolong his misery. He couldn't hunt for food worth his life, and no one was going to feed him. *Besides, son, Father had said, You know how Mr. Hoa is. If we don't give him what he asked for, he might go rattling off to the Communists that we're planning to go "away," and what will we do then?*

As they waited for the dog to come out, Father's voice was firm, verging-on-pulling-off-his-belt firm. Kha changed his tone with Little Boy. Patting the hardwood floor, he said in a more enthusiastic voice, *Come on, Little Boy! Let's go, let's go!* The dog crept slowly toward him, his hind legs pushing the rest of his body, his forepaws clawing forward and pausing, forward and pausing. Kha kept up his calling. Finally, the dog's white head, and then the rest of his gray-speckled body, emerged from underneath the cot. Little Boy licked Kha's fingers, his stump of a tail wagging even though he still

cowered with his ears folded back. Kha rubbed at the sides of his body where Little Boy liked to be scratched and saw the patches of missing fur that the dog had torn off with his teeth to relieve his itch. A large flea crawled on Little Boy's snout; his tongue shot out to lick his whiskers, but it was too short to reach the flea.

Mr. Hoa swooped down and picked up the dog by the scruff of the neck. Little Boy let out a yelp, and as he was being lifted, his desperate brown eyes sought Kha's for help. *C'mon, dog*, Old Man Hoa said and bore Little Boy away without a word of thanks.

Father left the room to escort him out. Kha felt tears stinging his eyes. He half-wished he could have convinced Father to let the dog loose on the streets—at least that would have given him a slim chance. Big Sister Thi came up behind him and rubbed his shoulders. Up and down her palms slid on his arms, up and down, barely scratching at the surface of the ache he felt inside.

They say that when people die, they have to cross a bridge guarded by dogs, the only animal with the ability to see ghosts. Those who had been good to dogs in their lifetime could pass by unharmed, but those who owed a debt to these animals, like Old Man Hoa who ate them and Kha who once helped him, had to cross the bridge with the spirits of angry dogs nipping at their heels. As if they could smell the same betrayal and sense the same fear, the dogs guarding the bridge would act as one. They knew, and they remembered.

The black dog started licking Kha's fingers, and at the familiar feel of a warm canine tongue flicking on his skin, Kha drew back. Those eyes—the same brown that

had stared into his all those years ago and had begged him to help. A favor for a favor—I came out when you called; why won't you help me?

"No!" Kha shouted. "Shoo, go away! Leave me!" His voice reverberated against the tall tombs. He took off one shoe and raised it above his head. The dog flinched, looked at Kha as if he had been betrayed. Before Kha could bring down the shoe, the dog skittered toward the Asian Plaza and disappeared from sight.

You're better off, Kha thought. Don't rely on other people to feed you; best if you learn how to do it on your own. I just did you a favor, but you're just going to hate me.

That made two demons he had to deal with when his time came.

* * *

The wind *hoo-hoo*'ed through the bare trees. Kha curled into a tight ball underneath Michael, rocking himself to sleep. A few yards away, the branches of a willow tree dipped and swayed, dipped and swayed into a two-tiered water fountain. The droopy leaves hid the trunk from view, like a young girl's long, straight hair flipped forward over her head to mask her face. Thi used to comb back her hair that way; on the balcony of their house in Can Giuoc, she'd walk slowly toward him with arms outstretched, hair all over her face, the thick strands of black sashaying in the wind, once in a while revealing a slit of one eye, a slice of lip.

I'm—coming—for—you—Kha, she'd say in a low, eerie voice.

I'm right here, Thi! You can't catch me! Kha would laugh and stick out his tongue and try to get past her, try to dodge the touch of her cold fingers and dash back into the safety of the house. He never made it before she pulled him down in a tight hug,

the two of them laughing and trying to get the upper hand in tickling each other, Thi's long hair in tangles across Kha's face like seaweed.

The smell of the sea was all around them when Thi got sick on the refugee boat. All night and day, the small boat dipped and rocked on an endless stretch of waves. They had kept her in the lower deck to shield her from the harsh winds, but the dark, moldy smell, the sea water that dripped from the crevices in the planks, and the pervasive stench of vomit from the seasick women only made her worse. So Kha and his father had supported her, one on each side, up the creaky stairs and on to the upper deck. It had been four days since they made it out of Viet Nam, whisked from a simple fishing boat on to the slightly larger refugee boat. There was the black ocean, the quick exchange of gold into the hands of the fisherman, and the dark, fearful eyes of the other refugee family of four looking at them from underneath the hull of the boat.

Slurred voices from a patrol boat made them huddle tighter together: *Where are you going so late at night, Brother? I didn't know the fish jumped at this time.*

And the fisherman's reply, *Just taking my family out for a moonlight stroll, sir. You know my wife, she was born on a boat. Gets landsick! I tell you, sir—women! What trouble! And I'm a poor fool for marrying her!*

The patrolmen, full of beer and good humor, waved them on, and the fishing boat rocked out to sea. Three quick flashes of light from the distant void. They headed toward it, and then the refugee boat materialized out of the fog. A film of white residue coated the paint-chipped wood above the water level, and Kha wondered if the creaking boat would be able to hold his family in addition to the two-dozen-or-so people that

crowded the rails to peer down at them. Strong hands pulled Thi, Kha, and Father on board, and all the while the boat bobbed beneath their feet.

Thi started vomiting right away, so at first they thought she was just seasick like so many other people. Father gave her some ginger to chew on and a few spoonfuls of the medicine they kept tucked in their bundle of belongings, but she didn't get better. Soon, they found specks of blood on the handkerchief she kept coughing into. Father lifted her shirt to expose her back and began the traditional remedy of *cao gio*—"scraping the bad winds" from her body with a coin. The minty eucalyptus he dabbed along her back mingled with the smell of her sour sweat. That was when they saw the rashes along her lower back. It didn't take long for them to spread all over her skin. Thi wouldn't eat anymore, and she could barely hold down the water they gave her in small sips.

Sixth day. Supplies running low. They couldn't seem to find the Indonesian islands; must've been that gale that blew them off-course. Despite how well they hid the rash beneath her bundles of clothing and blankets, it spread up her neck, on her face. One of the women below cried, *She'll spread it to us all!*

Father was in that makeshift bathroom, hunched over the smelly clay pot when they dragged Thi on deck again.

Stop it! Kha yanked at the boat captain's sleeve. You're hurting her!

Your sister's sick, boy. We can't keep her on board or we'll all die before we see land again.

What are you doing to my daughter? Father approached, hastily buckling his belt.

She's half-dead already, Brother. Can't risk infecting the rest of us. She's got the Rash—I've seen it before.

That's right. She'll just end up vomiting all her insides out. Hurts like hell, I hear. Might as well get it over with now, save her from suffering.

You're both crazy! Father lunged toward Thi's hunched figure. The men on board seemed to reach for him at once, pulling him away from her. Before Kha could make up his mind to move, big hands clamped down on his shoulders. Kha looked toward his father, just in time to see a man club him hard on the back of the head. Father slumped forward. The captain and first-mate came for Thi, hauled her up by the armpits, and pitched her overboard.

Sorry, girl, it's for the best.

Kha must have screamed, though at that time it seemed the world was soundless; all he saw was the water stretched in front of him and Thi's flailing form in it. Kha broke free of Big Hands' hold, clutched the rail of the boat, and watched Thi's head bobbing in the water.

Ba-ba! Ba-ba! she was calling.

Kha didn't think of running over to his father and shaking him awake; he stood paralyzed, his hands gripping the rail until his fingers went white. Thi was getting smaller and smaller; several times, she went under and then broke the surface, her hair a curtain of seaweed that draped across her eyes, the ripples from her splashing growing and spreading all around her. When she went under the next time, Kha pleaded for her to come up, but the water's surface remained even, and then they were too far away to see.

Father awoke some minutes later and went to find those in charge of the boat, demanding that they pull back so he could swim down and search for her body. They turned their backs. When he persisted in a cussing streak, they pounded on him with their fists. He swung back but wound up with two black eyes and bruises on his stomach.

It's not just about you, Brother. The captain who had hauled Thi on deck wore a threadbare, long-sleeve shirt with only the last two buttons in their holes; the cotton fabric flapped and ballooned like the sail. *We've got a boat full of other people to keep alive. You knew the risks. You knew the rules.* He reached within the folds of his shirt to causally rub his chest.

Father limped off to a corner of the boat and wouldn't look at anyone else after that. When Kha brought him a plate of dinner, he snatched it from the boy's hands and tossed it into the sea.

The following afternoon, the boat docked onto the shores of one of the Indonesian islands.

The wind *hoo-hooed* through the bare trees. Half asleep, nodding into his raised knees underneath the statue of Michael, Kha thought he heard a young woman's voice threaded in the breeze.

Kha. I'm coming for you, Kha.

I'm right here, Thi. I'm right here.

* * *

Mornings, the cemetery looked sharper. The drops of dew that settled on the leaves at dawn made everything glow with pristine clearness. After two days of rain, the

cemetery land rolled and undulated in waves of soft green grass speckled with stone graves. Passing by Kristie-Lee's mausoleum, Kha entered the Asian Plaza. He wove his way through the graves and wandered among the tall marble headstones etched with Vietnamese accented words and Chinese characters. The ground felt soppy beneath his feet, and the sharp smell of cut grass wafted into his nose. His eyes rested on four wooden post markers tied with red ribbon; he walked over to them and stared down. The grass had already grown to cover the dirt; it would be another good month or so before they erected a tomb for the young girl whose funeral had just passed.

Someone's shadow slid over to mesh with his own, and Kha jumped. "A bit early for visitors," said a feminine voice.

Kha looked to his side where a woman stood. Her graying, shoulder-length hair was clipped neatly in a barrette. She wore a gray suit and black pumps that sank partway into the soft soil. She held a bouquet of pink flowers just below her chest where a black patch of fabric was safety-pinned. "But then Nguyet was always popular," she said.

Kha knew she was in mourning, and it occurred to him that he had seen her somewhere before. *Ah yes, that's it.* Last time, she was on her hands and knees with her fingernails jammed full of dirt.

"So how did you know my daughter?" She didn't look at him when she talked; the way she stared down at the grave made it seem as if she were addressing the dead.

"I didn't know her. I just saw the funeral. I'm sorry for your loss."

She closed her eyes for a minute, and when she opened them, she focused again on the rectangular plot of new grass.

It got so quiet that Kha said, just to break the tension, “Cemeteries—they’re peaceful, don’t you think?”

And then she looked at him straight and replied, “Yes. You know, I come here often. I bring Nguyet fresh flowers at least every other day. Pink chrysanthemums—her favorite. People tell me not to make a consistent habit of it, as if I should just forget, move on to other things, maybe cherish my remaining children more. But she was my little girl. It’s—hard.”

Kha nodded. “I know. I know how you feel.”

“You lost someone, too?”

“Yes. Everyone.”

“I’m sorry.” She set down the flowers and clasped her hands together in front of her. “Does it ever get easier?”

Kha remained silent. He thought of telling her that it will, all in due time, things that she might want to hear. But again he heard the voices in his head, voices following him ever since he came to be alone, and all he could think of to say was, “They say that when you think of the dead, the dead can hear you. Maybe if you talk to her spirit, it will listen. I don’t know—I guess it’s always given me comfort since I lost my loved ones.”

The woman laughed softly, sadly. “I can see why it does. But my family and friends are right. You can only mourn for so long. I mean, you can’t spend your entire life dwelling on the dead. You’re still alive, that’s what matters. I just miss her still, you know?” She reached up, brushed a few tears from her cheeks. Then she turned to Kha

again and smiled, and the way she slightly pressed her lips together suddenly reminded him of his sister; his skin prickled with the memory of her soft hair, her warm arms.

“Anyway, good day, young man,” the woman said. “I’m sorry if I rambled; it’s just so lonely here.”

Kha. She’ll never understand you the way we do.

He tried to tune out the voices and focused on the sound of the woman’s receding footsteps. When she was gone, Kha was suddenly struck by the strangeness of the encounter. Surely the woman must have noticed his shabby appearance, but not once did she mention it or even give him surreptitious once-overs out of the corner of her eyes. He had been afraid she might be offended about him standing smelly and unclean over her daughter’s grave and report him to Security, but instead she made him feel like something he hadn’t felt for a long time: human, and alive.

* * *

The Way to Heaven Cemetery and Crematorium contained a small nature garden fenced off by walls of stone. The path leading to it was marked with molds of footprints stamped into the cement, each containing a name. *Benefactors*, Kha figured. He often followed the prints into the shady garden, which overflowed with purple bougainvilleas climbing on trellises, bushes of red and white geraniums, patches of ivy and nephthytis. He liked to spend the afternoons here. An artificial stream ran through the middle, the water spouting from a black pipe hidden behind a cluster of Queen Anne’s lace. Kha often stared into the shallow stream and thought of the little pebbles underneath the water being smoothed and rounded by time. He also liked to pace very slowly around the inner

perimeter of the garden, reading the small “In Memory” plaques along the stone wall. Names, birth years, and death dates set in formal Roman font swam across his eyes, meaningless to him. Some plaques were so old that the laser-etched pictures of the deceased had faded into washout colors. At the south end of the garden stood a large marble statue of an angel, serene eyes downcast to a big plaque set in a rock:

IF LOVE COULD BUILD A STAIRWAY
AND MEMORIES A LANE,
I'D WALK RIGHT UP TO HEAVEN
AND BRING YOU HOME AGAIN.

Kha had read this plaque over and over, murmuring the message until the individual words lost all meaning to him and became something like a foreign language.

Father. Kha had scattered his ashes into the Pacific Ocean according to the old man's wishes, so that at last his dust could find Thi's. The last few days at the hospital, Father wouldn't even acknowledge him. He never got over it, how Kha wasted his life in America as a butcher in a small grocery store, slicing meat and scaling fish for a living. There were always those unspoken words between them, that maybe Thi, were she alive, would have succeeded where Kha had failed . . . or maybe they both—father and son—might have been more than themselves if she were with them. Those sentiments escalated to an explosive tension when Kha left the house, and though he started coming back a few years later to visit the old man, the tension never went away. But he still honored his father's last two wishes: that Kha cremate him, and—what's more odd—that Kha tie a white band of mourning on the walnut tree in front of his father's house. When they first came to America, Father had planted that walnut in the front yard. They say that trees would die along with their owners if no white band was placed around the trunk

during the mourning period after that owner died. When the funeral was over, the walnut tree lived on, but Kha left the house because he couldn't stand the coldness in it after Father passed away. Even then, he could hear ghosts. Father's voice emanated from the bathroom when the door was left ajar; it called from the dark garage above the rhythm of the dryer tossing Kha's lone batch of laundry round and round; it moaned from the old man's bedroom, jolting Kha awake so that he'd stumble toward it to see what Father needed before remembering he was alone in the house.

Kha had lost a mother to cancer, a father to diabetes, and a sister at sea—and none of them had graves he could visit. They left nothing behind, their deaths as unsubstantial as Father's ashes sifting between Kha's fingers before they were bourn on the wind. He was tired of seeing funerals—a last wail-fest for the living, since apparently the dead had ceased to care. Hated himself for watching afar in hopes that the family would leave behind an offering for the dead so he could later eat. Sick of passing the neat rows of stone graves in the veteran plot, lined like soldiers at attention—so stiff and formal, as if human rules carried any weight in the land of the dead. And he couldn't stand anymore to live with spirits and fight with demons.

—come—us—hear—?

Lately, even though he listened hard, Kha had only been able to make out the voices through a curtain of static. He caught a whiff here, a fragment there, and wondered if they were indeed comprehensible words at all, or if it was just the sound of leaves rustling in the breeze. Kha shook his head to clear his thoughts and looked down

at the card he had been fiddling with. The fold-crease down the middle had erased some of the black letters:

BROWN B G LUNCHES
3850 MONT OMERY WAY
FREE MEALS TO Q LIFIED CANDIDATES

His stomach knotted with hunger; he wanted more than oranges and tea cakes and rain water from filthy flower vases. Kha thought about Nguyet's mother and whether he'd see her again if he waited at the young girl's gravesite a week from now. Pocketing the business card, Kha headed to the Guest Restroom at the Front Lobby and washed his hands and face.

Under the pale fluorescent light, Kha stared at the reflection of his wraith-like image: dingy hair, an unkempt beard, wrinkles on his forehead and bags under his eyes. *Wonder if they'll let me shave*, he thought as he turned away from the apparition in the mirror.

WORKS CITED

- Butler, Robert Olen. *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*. New York: Holt, 1992.
- Hayslip, Le Ly. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- Min, Anchee. *Wild Ginger*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Ng, Fae Myenne. *Bone*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Putnam, 1989.
- Tsukiyama, Gail. *Women of the Silk*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1991.
- Yang, Belle. *The Odyssey of a Manchurian*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996.