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## The Other Country: Stories and a novella

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THE OTHER COUNTRY: STORIES AND A NOVELLA

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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**Graduate College**  
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## Dissertation Approval

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ABSTRACT

**The Other Country: Stories and a Novella**

by

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*The Other Country* is a collection of seven short stories and a novella, all of which take place in Saigon and the Saigon area and portray the lives of its citizens in contemporary Vietnam. Given the country's recent history, this setting inevitably evokes the Vietnam War, a connection that casts the book—especially from the American perspective—into the shadow of contemporary American fiction that focuses on the war both as a historical experience and as a cultural idea: important novels like Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*. But although the stories in this collection often show the war's influence on the cultural landscape and personal histories of its characters, the war itself is rarely the dramatic focus. There are characters who embody obvious connections—former soldiers, the children and wives of soldiers, a woman fleeing Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, a man returning two decades after fleeing—but their dilemmas are always more personal and cultural than political or ideological. Most of the

collection does not mention the war or America at all. The focus remains exclusively on Vietnamese characters and how they negotiate themselves in a society shaped by centuries of conflict and occupation—by memory, religion, family ties, and the constant struggle for survival, whether it's physical, economic, spiritual, or even artistic. The most prominent theme, inherent in every story, is the struggle with love and loneliness in a culture where people are rarely alone and rarely without familial and societal obligations.

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## HALONG BAY

Tuan remembered her in the early morning. If he were to awake before dawn, when the new day lingered between light and darkness, he would stroll the riverbank beyond the farm, along a path overgrown with weeds, and now and then be reminded of her. There were times she came to mind shadowed by people he had hurt and lies he had told. Other times, though they were few, he'd see her likeness in a stranger, a passerby, and find himself momentarily perplexed. He once was sure she wore men's sandals and a flower in her hair the morning they met, but in the years since such details felt trite and imagined—if he thought long enough, there might have been no awkwardness between them, no fraught words or shared glances, no reason after all to think these gestures would become, years later, the ghostly remnants of a wish.

“My name is Mi,” she said after Bà Bien, the cook, introduced him that day. “My father named me.” She shaded her eyes from the sun with her hand. “It feels like another country here.”

They were standing in the red-brick courtyard of his family's farm estate, with forty acres of duck ponds and palm trees surrounding them, and at their backs the three-story villa that was his parents' house, embellished then and still with marble, gilded iron, and his father's private admiration for the French. Tuan was twenty-eight-years-old. She was possibly ten years younger. He could not tell if it was the surroundings or his presence that had urged her formal bow, the slow dip of her head, her eyes downcast. In

any case, the elegance of the moment impressed him.

She was the new girl hired to help Bà Bien in the kitchen. “Newly widowed,” Bà Bien had told him. “Poor girl. I don’t know how it happened and shouldn’t yet ask, but she looks well-mannered and pleasant enough. And so young for a widow.”

“She couldn’t possibly be *that* young,” he said, thinking then that the girl’s youth was apparent perhaps from a distance, but not up close where the eyes and bloom of a smile would betray, in his experience with widows, an oldness brought about not by age but by the irrevocable fatigue of grief. He thought of this still when he approached her waiting beneath the two ancient coconut trees in the courtyard. She stood with the air of someone much older than he was, chin lifted, her hair done up in a bun, arms held behind her back as his mother and women her age often did. And then she stepped forward, out of the trees’ tangled shadows, to greet him, and he saw the face and figure of a mere girl. She had the flawless complexion and wide, relenting eyes of someone unacquainted with grief of any kind.

“Mi,” he repeated, struck by the silliness of her introduction and the unwieldy curls in her hair, *that strange curly hair*. He thought of asking her why it was her father who named her. “Have you worked on a farm before?”

“No, sir,” she shook her head. “But I’ve always thought it’d be nice. I’ve heard it’s very beautiful here, your father’s farm.” She threw a complimentary glance up at the coconut trees.

Bà Bien had left them to attend to other business, and it was curiosity, not yet mingled with any other emotion, that made Tuan grateful to be abandoned with her. Although he normally met with new workers to discuss their duties, this meeting felt more like a private welcoming. He began showing her the front half of the estate: the

kitchen house, the guest house, the long row of frangipani trees skirting the path towards the outer garden (he had planted them), the two peacocks caged there beneath a flurry of willows, and the areca tree of legend nearby with a small, stone statue of Miss Thao, arms wrapped around its trunk. She walked by his side, a head shorter than him, her hands still linked behind her back, her slender face upturned and serene, suddenly so comfortably quiet that her comments moments before now seemed gratuitous. Though she listened intently to everything he said, at times her eyes darted away to some unknown purpose, perhaps (in retrospect) towards some distant memory.

She reminded him of a girl in a melodramatic movie he had once seen, not the actress but the character she played, a girl who lived in a mountain temple with Buddhist monks and died in the end, who spoke so little in the movie that her silence portrayed her thoughts. He wanted to tell her this but the idea of actually saying it made him blush inside, and so he found himself explaining the age and growing habits of each tree in the garden. Years later, he would attribute her strange effect on him to that silence she carried, like the weight of some private legend, of something perhaps too profound to put into words.

Back then, as a young man, Tuan believed that the fidelity of memory was absolute, that remembrance in the mind ran the course of a river, and to veer off or swim against the current was to lose all sense of direction, of buoyancy, and essentially to drown. It was with surprise, and some required anguish, that he eventually disproved this notion for himself, for in the years following his last moment with Mi—five, ten, twenty years—he evolved impressions of her that were no more and no less truthful than what he previously thought, so that he finally realized the only way to console himself was to choose a shade of her which seemed best and keep to it until the day he could forget her

altogether, though he also knew that day would never come.

During their walk together that morning, it was not simply her appearance that roused his interest, nor the sincerity of her gaze as he explained to her the nature of sound and shadows on the farm, the fact that much more shade adorned the north side of the land and that the animals were together always loudest in the morning. What startled him silent, made him lower his gaze to the over-sized sandals on her feet, was what she said after he confessed how atrociously the pig stalls smelled after a day of rain:

“My,” she said, squinting. “Your eyes are like the sea at night.”

## I

They did not meet again until a week later, at the annual banquet held in remembrance of his uncle’s death. In a week, she had become a recognizable figure on the estate, always alone, always with a straw basket in hand and a *non là* covering her head. Tuan often spotted her while he was in the company of someone else—a buyer, a farmhand, his mother or father—and had to keep himself from staring. Otherwise, he’d see her in the distance or from the window in his bungalow, which was a minute’s walk from the kitchen house. Her gait, even from afar, had already become familiar to him, brisk but never hurried, marked by a steady and slightly awkward bounce in step that seemed attuned to a song she might have been humming to herself.

At the banquet, as he carried on conversations with relatives and close friends of the family, all there to pay their annual respects, he stole glimpses of her passing his table, her arms weighed down with trays of food and empty dishes. He spoke to everyone of the fluctuating market price of duck eggs, of insincere businessmen and that summer’s lack of rain, but inside he thought only of how small she looked and how heavy those

trays appeared in her arms. When she happened once or twice to look his way, he mused over the thought that had flustered him that morning he bid her his first good-bye and left her standing by the areca tree: *Yes, perhaps she is interested in me.*

The banquet was a large and extended affair, with nearly thirty people gathered under the open verandah of the main house. Only holidays brought more family and friends and more laughter and clatter of expensive China, always reminding Tuan of how tranquil the farm was on normal days. The farm, in fact, had been a particularly quiet place ever since Tuan's maternal grandparents both died six years ago. But as an only child, born and raised in the countryside, far from his cousins who all lived in the city, Tuan preferred this kind of life. He preferred the practical relationships between himself and the farmhands. He preferred the quiet order of things. Though days like this were always enjoyable, he never missed the company when they left. In fact, he always savored the exhalation of silence after the last guest departed.

He sat at the center table with his parents, some close family friends, and his Aunt Loan from Saigon, a widow of two years. This being the second year of the banquet, the mood had become more festive, and everyone talk mostly of trivial things and gossiped about family members who were absent. Now and then Tuan's uncle was mentioned. The third or fourth time it happened, Tuan noticed his aunt blinking and dabbing at her eyes. He grimaced at his father, who stopped in the middle of a story about Uncle Dai's only girlfriend in high school.

"You don't have to do that, Brother," Aunt Loan insisted. She patted Tuan's father on the hand. "Every once in a while it's hard to not get silly when I hear his name. Don't let me bring everyone down."

Tuan's father smiled but did not continue the story. He puffed at his pipe.

“This is all for him anyway, isn’t it?” Aunt Loan looked at everyone and chuckled. “He’d be furious if we didn’t mention him a few times at least.”

“That’s right, that’s right, Chi Loan,” Tuan’s mother declared. “They say keeping quiet about someone who’s gone won’t quiet the pain.”

“That’s just you, Mother,” said Tuan’s father. “Some people are different.”

Everyone at the table was drinking their tea.

Tuan’s mother’s shrugged. “But we’re bound to remember—it can’t be helped. I think of Dai every day.” She turned to Aunt Loan and flicked her wrist. “When my mother died, I decided I would talk about her as much as I could and with as many people as possible. Only then could I make myself get used to the thought of not having her anymore. It was the same case with Father. Familiarity brings peace, Chi Loan. It always does.”

“That and time, I suppose,” Aunt Loan said.

An old friend of the family, a plump man with a cheerful, bulbous nose, spoke up: “That skinny husband of yours—I never could decide what amazed me more, his appetite or his memory.” Everyone at the table laughed. “On my fortieth birthday, we had lunch together in Saigon, and he must have eaten three times what I did. And years later he could still tell me exactly what we had eaten, how salty the fish was, even how much our lunch had cost!”

“Yeah, but that’s because he was cheap.” Tuan’s father rolled his eyes and guffawed.

“He had an appetite for everything,” Aunt Loan said, shaking her head. She hunched her shoulders in a shudder of embarrassed laughter. “If it wasn’t food, it was, of course, his books and his albums. And you all know he had more clothes than me. When we first met, I wondered, what’s a country boy doing all dressed up all the time? He told me

later that he wore nice clothes to cover up the ugliness of being hungry for everything. I never really understood what he meant by that.”

“Who ever did?” muttered Tuan’s mother.

Aunt Loan nodded vehemently. When she smiled, Tuan’s aunt showed off an overbite of perfect white teeth, which was impressive given her sixty years and lifelong habit of eating sweets. In profile, she resembled Khanh-Ly before the singer left for America. Even as a boy, Tuan had thought his aunt embodied what he wanted in a wife; she was pretty, sincere, full of humor, uncomplicated. His uncle used to tell him stories about her as a young woman, about how they had met.

Uncle Dai was the older brother of Tuan’s mother, married incidentally to Tuan’s father’s only sister, and his courtship of Aunt Loan had always been a celebrated story in the family, especially for Tuan. The fact that the two marriages boasted a blood relationship both ways had always kept the greater family closer than most, and what was more, it seemed to balance out the stark differences between the two couples. Tuan’s parents met under the most formal of circumstances, brought together not by mutual attraction but by a mutual acquaintance of both families, the family doctor, and from the beginning they were privately expected to end up together because of how perfect a match they were: both educated and handsome, both refined in taste, and both unreasonably picky. As his aunt and uncle had recounted it, Tuan’s parents seemed perfectly content with this arranged love affair, and being so, the unimpassioned nature of this union carried over to their married life where, as Tuan had witnessed it all the years of his life, there was love and sincerity but none of the spirit he saw in his Uncle Dai’s marriage with Aunt Loan.

As the story of their courtship went, his uncle visited the house of his future brother-

in-law to see how fit the man was for his youngest sister. The visit ended not with a meaningful assessment of Tuan's father but rather with Dai's revelatory love for the only sister, Aunt Loan. Struck silly by the girl, Dai rushed home to his sister and accepted her suitor not so much out of brotherly interest, but so that he could ensure himself the chance to see this girl as many more times as possible, or however long it would take to woo her into his life.

For months, Dai accompanied his sister to her fiancé's house whenever possible and steadily endeared himself to the sudden love of his life, as well as to her unknowing brother. Because he was by nature a reticent and easily embarrassed young man, he told no one of his feelings and managed to conceal them in the letters, candies, and senseless little toys he secretly gave Loan during his visits with his sister: slipped into Loan's hand under the table as they all had dinner together, hidden in the baskets of fruit, cakes, and French paté which he would present to her in the presence of others and claim was a gift from his parents. Tuan's aunt was more than mutually enamored. Each watercolor of a flower she received from him on a napkin, each ludicrously perfumed poem origami'd into the shape of a phoenix she would clasp to her heart with—she later admitted—a ridiculously loud sigh. She also claimed later to Tuan that she discovered the most about his uncle's "heart and soul" during that clandestine time in their relationship, even more so than when they were publicly dating after his proposal.

Dai's crowning moment came at his sister's wedding, during the reception, where he asked the bandleader to sing a famous love ballad and replace the name in the song with Loan's name. A few people might have noticed, but Dai only cared that Loan hear this echo of his feelings for her. He soon proved them further. When it came time for him to toast the newly wed couple, Dai stood up in the most splendid suit anyone had ever



seen him wear, his glass lifted to his new brother-in-law (whose father had died only three years before in a car accident in Saigon), and said: “Anh Liem, now that I can officially call you my brother and say that you are also my friend, I would like to apologize for any deception or wrong I might have done you in falling in love with your sister, for in this most fitting occasion, I humbly ask you for her hand in marriage.” Shocked but deeply impressed by those words (which Dai had recited in his head for two weeks), Tuan’s father smiled widely, grasped Dai’s shoulder, and raised his glass to meet his, all this to the applause and albeit confused laughter of everyone at their tables.

During the banquet, Tuan could not help envisioning that moment as he sat talking to his family, eating the soup that had been served to him, her arm brushing his shoulder, by Mi. She hardly looked at anyone at the banquet except her fellow servers and went about her job as if it satisfied her immensely to do it well. The other maids looked no older than her, but Mi had none of their youthful awkwardness. She carried the trays with great care and control, spilling nothing, bumping into no one, moving about the crowded veranda with the authority of someone who had not only organized the affair but also owned the chairs, the tables, and the food.

“You’re twenty-eight this year, aren’t you, Tuan?” His aunt’s shrill voice returned him to the table. In her usual way, Aunt Loan had spoken to Tuan so loudly that everyone stopped to pay attention. “You know, nearly all your cousins are married. Isn’t it about time you got jealous? A couple of them have kids half your age.”

“I’m picky. And they’re impatient.”

Aunt Loan turned to Tuan’s mother and nudged her playfully with an elbow. “What if he finds a Buddhist girl? Before long, you might even have to accept a Cham girl. A Cham girl can still bear you grandchildren.”

Tuan's mother laughed. "I'll accept no one less than a Senator's daughter: Catholic, fair skin, fluent in French and English, and absolutely no taller than me."

"Mother."

Aunt Loan grinned at Tuan and murmured, "So now we know the *real* reason why it's taken so long." She leaned towards his mother and whispered affectedly, "He gets older and he looks more and more like Dai." And then loudly to Tuan again: "I know what it is—you have his frown."

Tuan nodded, having heard some of this before. He smelled jasmine leaves. Mi's slender arm appeared over his shoulder and slipped away with his empty plate.

"When he was your age, your uncle used to grow a moustache every April and keep it for exactly a month. He did that for three years—just for fun. He'd groom it everyday, wet his hair like you do now, wear those same crisp white shirts. If you had a moustache, you'd be his ghost."

"Dai had a moustache?" Tuan's mother asked.

"Just for that month. I didn't like it when he kissed me on the cheek, but when he smiled, it was very charming. He'd shave it off at the end of the month and look like a new person—not younger, but newer. That's why he chose April. Springtime, of course. And Easter. Some people never noticed."

"I never noticed it," said Tuan's mother. "I'm shocked he could even grow one—but are you kidding?"

"I don't remember ever seeing him with a moustache," Tuan's father piped in.

"You can't remember what you ate this morning," said Aunt Loan.

"Maybe you're the only one he wanted to notice, Aunt Loan," said Tuan.

His mother paused and turned up her eyes as if to conjure an image of her brother, but

then shook her head. "I can't even picture him with a moustache. That's so fitting, too. He was always one to surprise people without calling attention to himself."

"He never stopped surprising me. We had five children after all."

Laughter erupted at the table. Tuan rose from his chair, clapping his hands softly to feign amusement. He was not bored, just restless from sitting for so long, as often happened on these occasions.

"And where are you off to?" his aunt asked.

"To check on the ponds before night falls." He peered around the verandah to avoid the eyes at the table. Daylight was fading and pale shadows had gathered about the guests. Everyone was still chatting gregariously, still eating and drinking what remained.

"Always the businessman," said his mother.

"Always the boss's son," his aunt added and gave Tuan a mock accusatory look. She often teased him for being too serious and hardworking, even when there was no work to be done, which was why, she claimed, he had few friends and little rapport with the farmhands. He squeezed her shoulder and bid good-bye to everyone at the table.

Twilight was approaching. The maids began clearing the tables. He made his way to the other guests and spoke briefly to a few before formally taking his leave through the doorway leading to the kitchen.

"A wonderful meal," he said to Bà Bien as he passed her at the ovens. She only nodded. Two young kitchen maids stood at the sinks washing dishes. They were sisters, in fact, and one of them was crying softly while the other one whispered in her ear, consoling her apparently. That girl glanced at Tuan as he passed and quickly hushed her sister. At the kitchen's far end, where it opened into the back patio, Mi was kneeling amid the small garden of jasmine trees and singing under her breath,

*The moon is a mirror,  
The back garden tree, the back garden tree—  
With morning comes color and a hot cup of tea,  
At night the sun sleeps and hides the different shades—  
And night the sun sleeps—*

When Tuan approached her, he could see her breaking off the dry, withered leaves of a tree. A tray of dirty dishes lay by her side.

He said, “Bà Bien planted those trees here when I was a boy.” His voice startled her and brought her to her feet. She wore her hair held back in a ponytail now, though locks of her hair still curled wildly around the ears, which made her look even younger. She lowered herself again to collect the dishes. “How old are you?” he said, almost whispering.

She peered up at him. She seemed to be pondering the tone of his voice, not his question. “How old are *you*?”

“I suppose that was rude of me—” Tuan tried to look her in the eyes. “I only wanted to say how nice it is to have you here. And that I think you’re the loveliest girl we’ve ever had on the farm.” He thought of all the young women that his father had employed in past years and figured this statement was an honest one.

She rose to her feet. “How shameless of you. I work here for your father.” She glanced at Bà Bien and the girls, all of whom were too busy to notice them. “And besides, I have only just lost my husband. Perhaps you did not know.”

“Oh, but I do—” Tuan said, shaking his head. “I did know, but I didn’t think—”

Abruptly, she walked around him, her eyes averted, and made her way to the sinks. Tuan kept himself from following her with his stare, as if to ignore what had just

happened, as if it did not happen at all, though his embarrassment brought about a sudden urge to run to the toilet. He stood dumbly for a moment, then left the kitchen without looking back. As he walked towards the ponds, almost hurriedly, he felt his face flush in the shadows.

The sky had settled into an even gray by the time he reached the empty ponds. The farmhands had since left for the day. For Tuan, the absence of things was itself a sound here at night—not crickets or running water or the clashing of palm fronds, but the vacuum of remembered sounds, recently here and now no longer. For the first time that day he felt completely at ease. He often went for evening walks alone after dinner. It had become a comforting ritual before going to bed. Just as the land, encumbered by a day of noisy activity, fell into stillness and silence, so too did he feel calmed in its midst, like a traveler shedding his clothes for the night.

The duck farm unfurled over forty acres and consisted of eight rectangular, man-made ponds, all connected by a system of dams (designed by Tuan at age eighteen) that followed from and into a nearby river. During the day a white flurry of ducks, cackling like a thousand dissonant bugles, waded the surface of each pond; and up the sloped, concrete banks, they entered wooden corrals where they fed, and eventually to the long thatch houses beyond where they now slept, caged for the night. Dirt paths bordered the houses, circling the ponds along a palisade of palm and fruit trees, sometimes close enough to the banks for a person to jump the netted fence into the water. Small flood lights in the trees now shone upon the paths and bathed the duck farm in a yellowish phosphorescence aflame with mosquitoes. In the day, the size of the land was clear and impressive, but it was at night, when one could walk down the paths, turn back, and see the passage of intermittent flood lights, that the farm appeared endless.

As always, the knowledge that he and his family owned all he saw offered Tuan a stay from his troubles, real or imaginary. He looked for stray ducks, loose netting in the water, a corral that might have been left open by a farmhand. He regarded his dark form reflected in the ponds.

His aunt was right about him. He knew and cared for nothing but this. Most of his life had been spent at work on the farm, sustaining and improving on his father's work, knowing one day the work would be his alone. More than a decade ago, his father oversaw everything. But after years of studying biology at school and wandering through the local farms, Tuan had developed a new way of duck farming. It was simple: instead of rice and corn, he fed the ducks a grain formula of potent vitamins and imported drugs and raised them on land that offered the essentials: space, clean water, shade, and shelter. This method produced what his father called "prosperity," and he "symmetry": healthier hens producing even healthier egg-laying hens, so that they now produced four hundred and twenty-five eggs in two and a half years instead of five hundred eggs in five years, a hundred of them producing ninety instead of sixty-five eggs a day—10,000 ducks in all, and all of this on concentrated land that housed five hundred ducks per acre rather than the hundred ducks per acre that used to be required. He and his father also sold the grain at fifty percent profit, sold the ducks for meat after their two and half years of high productivity, and reduced the number of farmhands from thirty to twelve. It made for a lonelier but much more profitable farm. The system had operated so smoothly for years now that maintaining it had become easily manageable. With his father handling most of the business affairs, Tuan cared only about keeping the farm functional and beautiful (the landscape groomed, the ponds cleaned, the workers governed), not merely for the politicians and neighbors who came by to admire the family and the farm, but for

himself.

Tuan heard footsteps. Mi's figure was hurrying towards him, momentarily indistinct in the dusky light. She approached where he stood under a lighted coconut tree.

"I need to apologize," she said and glanced at his shoulder. Her face in the light was the color of honey. "I shouldn't have been so harsh with you."

"I should apologize to you."

She shook her head. "It's me—I sometimes forget myself."

"Was something wrong? Is there a problem in the kitchen?"

She smiled and took hold of her left forearm, squeezing it. The youthfulness of her face confused him. He was reminded again of her resemblance to the girl in the movie, whose life in solitude, he always thought, must have kept her young but also somehow given her the nobility of age.

For a moment he thought she would repeat what she had said the morning they met. But after casting a long look at the ponds behind him, she turned and walked away.

Two days later, in the early afternoon, he was helping his father turn eggs in the hatchery when a single scream rang out beyond the open door. For reasons he could never explain to himself, he knew it was her. (Years later, he would hear that scream in his head at night and associate it with other events in her life, events he had no possible knowledge of except in his imagination; yet still he would swear to her recounting such experiences and making him witness to them as though they were his own memories of himself.)

He and his father rushed outside and saw that others had heard as well. Tuan's mother stood bemused on the front porch. A few farmhands had gathered in the

courtyard. Someone pointed to the front of the estate, and Tuan ran in that direction with his father and the farmhands following in haste. As they neared the front gate he caught sight of her and felt at once relief and uneasiness: she was standing over the short wall of bushes just outside the gate, erect with her arms set rigidly at her sides and her hands open like fans, which, with the bushes partially hiding her legs, made her look like a magician levitating from the ground. *She is standing*, he thought, *and so nothing has happened to her.*

When he approached her and saw a man's prone body on the other side of the wall, ten meters from where she stood with her petrified stare, his first thought was that the man had attacked her and that she had used the closed umbrella, now lying at her feet amid the overturned basket of carrots, to defend herself. But the violence of that image did not feel right. Then he looked beyond the gates, on the narrow road that bordered the estate, and saw the two overturned mopeds, one in the middle of the road and the other beached on the roadside gravel, both with mangled front wheels. On the far side of the road sat a man gripping the ankle of a bloody leg and talking excitedly to onlookers who had gathered around the accident.

Tuan's first impulse was to go to Mi and console her, but her stare was impenetrable. He decided to inspect the body which lay motionless nearby under the wary eyes of a few schoolchildren. The man was either dying or already dead, one side of his face dipped in a dark puddle of blood that seemed a shadow of his head. He was about Tuan's age from what could be seen, with longish hair that now clung in whorls to his bloody forehead. One of the schoolboys said he looked like a fish.

An ambulance hummed in the distance. Tuan felt the man's wrist for a pulse and the left leg jerked, a spasm perhaps, or a last gasp of breath, of pain. The schoolchildren



backed away. Mi screamed again, cupped her mouth. Everyone turned in her direction. Tuan's father approached her, but she was already moving toward the gate, clutching the empty basket with both hands as she retreated back inside the farm. In Tuan's head, the echo of her scream merged into the oncoming wail of sirens.

It was learned later that day that the young man—the twenty-five-year-old son of a local tailor—died at the hospital. The surviving driver insisted that he was not to blame, that the young man was certainly driving too fast and that there was a bend in the road and a pot-hole the size of a well. All of this he explained in teary hysterics as they bandaged his knee. No one on the farm was surprised something like this had happened. The farm had a history of curious accidents: fifteen ducks scorched in a fire, the family dog that almost drowned in a pond, the farmhand who lost a finger and his wedding ring feeding a pig, another farmhand who fell out of a tree and broke both his legs, and the kitchen maid who made Bà Bien faint when she nearly cut off her thumb. The accident that afternoon, however, was the first death—the first violent death, in fact, that Tuan had ever witnessed in his life.

Yet what troubled him the rest of the day was not the incident itself or the news of the young man's passing; it was Mi's scream. He heard it on his walk that evening along the duck ponds; it rang again when he stepped out of his shower and turned off the water. He remembered the first one most vividly, a shrill curl of a scream that sounded in the distance and seemed to carry its end to where he had stood by the humming incubators. He was not sure, but she could have been crying out someone's name.

When he reached her at the front gate, he noticed the awkward way she stood and stared at the dying man, the fixed, downcast eyes and upward jut of her chin, her upper body reared back as if recoiling from the flames of a fire. Her second scream could have

been a continuation of the first, for it seemed the time elapsing between the two was merely her waiting to find her voice again.

He sought her out after dinner to ask how she was feeling. It was the proper thing to do, though curiosity, he knew, drove him on.

The kitchen, however, was empty. The adjacent room, where all the workers normally ate, was also empty. Through the open window, he heard the faint sound of someone crying. Stepping into the back patio, he found Mi standing bowed over the two sister maids as they sat on the stone steps. One of the sisters was crying again. There was a possible connection with the accident that afternoon, but Tuan did not let this thought keep him from feeling irritated. The sisters, both in their late teens, had been working under Bà Bien for close to a year. The older one was hard-working and obedient, but the younger one had a habit of being overly emotional, an attribute Tuan found intolerable in a woman. When the girl was happy, she giggled and fooled around excessively, and when she had problems, she pouted and behaved rudely to everyone, sometimes even to Tuan. Lately, she had been forgetting her duties and was routinely scolded by Bà Bien. Tuan had a mind to talk to her himself, though clearly that would have to wait for another day, another moment.

Mi was speaking under her breath with a hand on the girl's shoulder. The girl peered at the ground but was nodding feebly. Both she and her sister appeared childlike under Mi's hand and voice, and it appeared for a moment that Mi might have known them for a long time. All three turned their heads when Tuan stepped forward. Mi murmured a few more words to the younger girl and touched her head, and then she made her way back into the kitchen, smiling faintly at Tuan as she passed him.

The two girls turned their backs as the older one wrapped an arm around her sister.

Tuan returned to the kitchen and approached Mi as she stood washing dishes at the sink. “What’s the matter with her?” he asked softly. “—should I know?”

She shook her head, keeping her eyes on the dishes, and said, “Her fiancée broke off their engagement a few days ago.”

“Ahhh... I guess that explains her recent behavior.” Tuan hesitated, but then said, “Did he have a reason?”

“I don’t know, and neither does she. Seems he either fell out of love or found someone else. Maybe both.”

Tuan crossed his arms, struck by the intimate tone of their conversation. He glanced back at the patio. “I suppose that *is* a difficult thing to take. But the girl is young. She’ll soon forget and find someone else.”

“You’re right,” Mi said and smiled. “She’s young and she’ll eventually find another man. But she will never forget.”

They were quiet for a moment as she carried on nonchalantly with the dishes. Tuan uncrossed his arms, linked them behind his back. “By the way, are you feeling all right—after what happened this afternoon, that is?”

She finally looked at him and nodded absently.

“I wanted to be sure you were all right,” he said. “You seemed very upset.”

She appeared to ponder whether or not this was true. “It was not something I wanted to see,” she said at last, as though referring to a dirty trick someone had played on her. But then she turned off the faucet and leaned into the sink. Her voice fell: “That man could not have known this morning that he would die today.” She submerged her hands slowly into the water as if to sigh. “It would be horrible to have known, though, wouldn’t it?”

Tuan could only nod. They were still alone in the kitchen, with Bà Bien nowhere in sight. The disorderliness of the kitchen suddenly bothered him, the unswept floor, the bits of vegetables strewn over the table, the dim lighting. He took a pile of dirty dishes from the table and stacked them awkwardly into the sink. He then reached for an empty pot, unaware that it was still burning hot, and jerked his hand away, cursing, as the pot fell to the floor.

She grabbed his hand, her own still wet and sudsy, and inspected the burn flowering over his palm and fingers. The sting was intensifying, but he kept himself from grimacing. He watched her take a bottle of fish sauce from the cabinet and pour half of it into a large bowl. She then held his wrist and dipped his hand into the sauce, peering down at it as though waiting for it to heal before her eyes.

“Did you know him, that young man?” he asked her as they both stood over the bowl, waiting. Her grip on his wrist was surprisingly strong.

“No,” she said, her eyes still intent on his hand immersed in the auburn clarity of the sauce.

Tuan struggled that evening with what he thought was very peculiar—not that a woman would react so emotionally to such an incident, but that she would do so for a complete stranger. This question persisted into the night. As he lay in bed, still smelling the fish sauce on his tender hand, he could not decide if it was normal to mourn the death of someone you did not know, and whether he, in fact, could ever feel or act that way. Before falling asleep, a thought occurred to him: *That must be it*, he told himself, *that is how her husband died*.

## II

Tuan knew he was in love with her the morning he awoke, lingering in bed, and began hating her dead husband. He had dreamed of them, she and a faceless man alone on a boat at sea, under the covers of their bed, at a restaurant whispering and drinking from a single glass. Mi always wore the same clothes and expressions in this dream, a white blouse and a smile caught between contentment and fear. Her husband was the tall, long-limbed shadow of men Tuan had seen in movies. He was an outline, the shape of someone strong and bold.

Tuan soon found himself thinking of them during the day as he fed the fishes or packed a shipment of eggs. He wondered how tall her husband had been, whether he had a full head of hair when he died, if he had died by someone else's hand or by his own, if he had been cruel to her or kind, what sort of words he had used to woo her, to make her angry, to comfort her. It crossed his mind that they could have had a child, children even, but the distaste this notion aroused soon made him reject it altogether.

This kind of hatred was unfamiliar to him. He felt it like the burn of alcohol on an open wound. It was necessary, a satisfying pain, a distraction. It also persisted in a vacuum and fell apart at the seams of logic: to hate a man he knew nothing about nor had ever met, a man now dead and lost from the world. Yet knowing nothing brought the inevitable pull of envy—that this man had once owned her devotion and known things Tuan might never know, that he had also loved her in life but abandoned her in death, leaving her astray yet forever bound. So Tuan hated him, not as he would someone unpleasant who'd wronged him, but as he would an ugly scar once the wound had healed and the pain soothed. Hating her husband belittled the very notion of him; but Tuan soon forgot why he needed to feel this way—he knew only that he could not help it.

And his love for Mi, if that was what it was at first, felt entirely new. He had had the

company of numerous women in his life, but only two had aroused what he conceived of as love. When Tuan was twenty, his father's friend, a captain in the Airforce, introduced him to his daughter, a kind and thoughtful twenty-one-year-old who taught elementary school and collected books she never read, who bought him clothes and cut his hair. They spent six months together, hardly ever apart. He later realized that he not so much loved her as he loved being adored by her. When he ended things, the reasons were at first numerous. She preferred the city's energy over the countryside's peacefulness. Her family was too religious, too stuffy. She was also a year older than him, a fact he had never been comfortable with. But the real reason, the reason he did not admit to her, was that he thought himself too young to endear himself to someone so less than perfect. She was, in fact, smart but not intelligent, likable but not charming, pretty but in the way a well-ironed shirt is pretty. The night before her twenty-second birthday, dreading the thought of avowing his love the next day, he gently convinced her that they were wrong for each other, that she was too good for him. She curled into the hammock by his window and wept for an hour. He knew she had treated him well. Memories of her often came with a tinge of regret, though as he saw it, guilt should be neither the brick nor the mortar of love.

Then there was the girl from Saigon whose family sold fabric and jewelry in the city, who when he met her was more beautiful than any girl he'd ever seen, much less known. He spotted her outside her parents' shop and came in to measure fabric for a sister he did not have. The fabric became dresses for his mother and aunt, but for the girl he returned the next day with tickets to see her favorite singer. He soon lavished nearly all his money on her and at one point, despite her family's wealth, offered to pay for her studies at the university. She was only twenty years old, four years his junior. He was her very first

boyfriend. They dated for almost a year, and their families assumed they were destined for marriage. But it ended unexpectedly for him. They had made love five times, the first time after four months of waiting and each successive time in the furtive depth of night, in his bungalow with the doors and shutters locked, the darkness of the room made darker by a time of night when no one, not even God, he imagined, would have assumed they were in sin. One night she refused, the following day growing silent and anxious, and finally she decided her conscience under God and her mother could not allow them to carry on so intimately, so recklessly. She needed time to repent, which soon became time apart and eventually a crevasse between them too deep to fill. Losing her was difficult at first, but forgetting proved easier (at least back then) when one was forgotten.

She and the schoolteacher were the only two women Tuan had ever thought he loved. The other women in between and since, not the ones he took to dinner at his parents' insistence, but the ones he met at a café or dancehall in the city, who wore wet smiles and heady perfume, strangers encountered in a foreign town or a foreign part of his own town: these women he engaged with a vigor both unfettered and casual. Some were accidental, others intentional, and over the years he grew forgetful of their faces, even their names if he had ever known them. He sometimes thought of these women with a fondness he'd have for vague dreams that lingered only because he had awoken happy and untroubled. Which was to say that Tuan, if he had forgotten what it felt like to be in love, had in this newfound sensation with Mì become privy to something unprecedented, an intensity which made him question his own capacity for the anguish that love can bring. And this, above all, was why he hated her husband so unreasonably: in death as in life, he had avoided what Tuan now feared.

He asked Bà Bien one morning if she knew how Mì had become widowed, but the

old woman told him the girl talked more about the dishes than she did about herself.

“And it’s not the kind of question you just ask someone, much less a girl like her,” Bà Bien said. They were standing alone by the pig pens, the least frequented part of the farm. She was holding her nose and trying to select a pig for that evening’s dinner. “She does act oddly now and then. Don’t know how much losing him has to do with it.” The old woman shrugged, but then narrowed her eyes. “She’s nice enough, and smart, a good worker. But she hardly ever says anything outside of those quiet observations, like how your parents’ house looks like a castle at dusk. No one around here seems to know what that girl is about, least of all me. I just tell her what to do and she does it.”

“You have any idea where she lived, who her family is?” At this point, having known Bà Bien since he was a boy, Tuan cared little for disguising his intentions. She had always played ignorant to family affairs and for the most part, he suspected, did not care. “Is she from this area?” he asked.

“Well she did mention going to grade school at a convent in Cát Lát—that’s how I figured she was the good kind of girl.”

The idea of going to Cát Lát aroused Tuan immediately, but then the thought of actually knowing certain things about Mì, things he could only imagine with a grief-like envy, made him abandon the plan. He would wait and find out for himself.

Tuan soon saw her three or four times a day. He could sense her presence now as though it were a sudden breeze, so that her absence from his day soon became a mild distraction, for if he realized by late afternoon that he had not seen her all day, he would then spend the rest of his time looking for her as he gathered eggs or inspected the duck ponds, revisiting certain paths in the hope of spotting her in the distance, if only for a



glimpse of her back rounding the corner.

She slept in a small bungalow by the kitchen house, not far from where Tuan lived, and shared the place with the two sister maids who lived too far away to go home every night. It was sometimes a crowded situation, Bà Bien said, but she insisted that Mi not stay with the male workers nearby, even those who lived on the farm with their families. The old woman herself lived next door to the girls but was admittedly too old to share her place with someone that young.

There were mornings when Mi emerged from her house as Tuan was approaching, her wet hair brushed back and falling in damp curls, like bamboo roots, about her neck, and as they passed one another with a brief greeting, he caught the murmur of a song and the balmy scent of American soap. During his afternoon naps, he sometimes awoke briefly to hear her pass by his closed window—that steady, musical sound of her sandals skipping along the pavement.

Their conversations were brief and friendly. In her free time she took walks across the farm, sometimes stopping to chat with him by the duck ponds where he explained how he managed the water quality, often checking it three times a day, or at the hatchery where he boasted that the farm produced ten thousand eggs a day though they needed only four or five thousand. She surprised him with her questions and how easily she understood the science in his ramblings. She listened to him with the rapt attention of a child, so that there were times he felt the urge to tell her lies, to tell her things about himself and his life that he had heard told of other men, things that might deceive or impress her but were meant only to keep her there.

Now and then he caught her standing alone near the bank of a pond and watching the ducks. She had a habit of holding her hands to her cheeks, not in the posture of someone

afraid or in shock, but as though her hands were her pillows while she stood, a prop to buttress the weight of her head and her thoughts. Sometimes she squatted on the ground and with a stick nearby drew pictures in the dirt until, having finished, she tossed the stick into the pond and would return both hands to her cheeks as she gazed down at what she had drawn. He thought many times of joining her by the bank, but doing so felt intrusive. In fact, he came to find comfort in his distance. After she left he would go to the spot where she had stood and see a drawing of a duck or an elephant or a boat. One time it was a surprisingly elaborate sketch of him kneeling by a banana tree, which was what he had been doing a moment before.

The one place he could watch her unabashedly, whether she knew it or not, was at church. He began going alone on Saturday evenings and would sit in the balcony, which usually gave him an unobstructed view of her in the pews below: her white downcast face half-hidden by the tangle of hair, at times beautiful, at times cold and unappealing, and her thin lips pursed in the perpetual pose of prayer, which was how she often appeared to him, as if out of some dark pensive sadness that he wanted to both understand and alleviate, and, in certain moments, to share. But were he to ask himself what he was truly looking for, his mind would draw a blank; he knew only that it satisfied him to know she was near. He wanted nothing yet. He needed nothing yet. He thought of his reticence more as patience than shyness.

Once every week, on his trips into Saigon for business, she accompanied him to buy certain foods and supplies for Bà Bien that were unavailable near the farm. He had offered to take her. They rode into the city with her sitting behind him on his Vespa, her gloved hands clutching his waist, at times resting on her knees. When she spoke to him over his shoulder, with her chin nudging his collarbone, she spoke always in a normal

tone despite the wind or traffic noise, and he had to listen carefully to understand every word—

*the streets look electric after the rain*

*that man there reminds me of your father*

*people are noisier in the city but I can never*

*hear their voices or their words*

Over her mouth, she wore a silk dust mask that embossed the outline of her lips.

In the city, once she had purchased what she needed and he had taken care of his business, which often consisted of a brief visit with a buyer, he would take her to an outdoor café for lunch—an appropriately casual setting. Although she always finished her meal, she ordered very little, sometimes the smallest portion possible, a habit he attributed to either her unfamiliarity with the city or his own refusal to let her pay for her meal. If the conversation lulled, she would sit perfectly still in her chair and watch the traffic in the street. During these moments especially, Tuan wondered whether people thought they were husband and wife, or perhaps brother and sister.

They talked mostly about trivial things, like what had happened that week on the farm or that afternoon in the city, and now and then they'd share a story from the past that might explain Tuan's fear of heights or her love for foreign music. These stories were usually his. For the most part, she avoided talking about herself, and the one subject she never mentioned was her husband. Her apparent hesitancy made him question again how long people mourned for the dead and the lost. Was it a sadness that inevitably heals, or one that can only be soothed and, at best, concealed in some far nether region of the mind? Tuan missed his Uncle Dai very much but could not say he mourned his death, not like his aunt might have mourned it. At twenty-eight, he was still too young to know

that sorrow, like joy, was as much a choice as an inevitability.

“Are you happy at my father’s farm?” he asked her one afternoon during lunch, surprised by his own bluntness.

She nodded and appeared to pause, as if wanting to elaborate. Tuan had finished his meal and now sat smoking and watching her eat. “There is much to like,” she finally said. “But I think I like it mostly because it feels foreign to me.”

Tuan could have used the same word to describe her manner at the table. She ate slowly and often picked at her food with her chopsticks. She also had a habit of quietly considering everything from the table setting to the customers at the next table, not with confusion or awkwardness as though those things were new and strange to her, but with thoughtful interest, like someone who had traveled and lived in distant lands and now returned home to find that everything she remembered in one way could now be seen in an entirely different light.

“Are *you* happy at your father’s farm?” she asked him. She had stopped eating.

Tuan shrugged. “I know nothing else. And I suppose I’m luckier than most people. It’s a nice place to grow up, better than the city, I think. Everything’s simple and quiet on a farm. The city is only good for things like English cigarettes.” He nodded at the cigarette in his hand and laughed quietly.

“And that is all you need? Peace and quiet?”

He looked at her, somewhat flattered by her inquisitive tone. “I guess it is. I guess I’d much rather be around animals than humans.” He smiled to himself. “My uncle died two years ago—we had that banquet for him a month back if you remember. When I was a young boy, he used to make up stories to amuse me, like why my father’s ducks sometimes mysteriously disappeared. He told me some of them flew away out of sadness

for loved ones that were killed. A duck will see her family slaughtered and then take off at night, sometimes flying all night until she could take it no more and drop to the earth and die.”

“But your father’s ducks do not fly.”

“No, they don’t.”

“That’s very sad, even though it’s only a story.”

“I think of it as funny now,” Tuan said and chuckled. “I believed all my uncle’s stories back then, of course.” Tuan tapped his water glass with a chopstick. “My aunt always tells me that I remind her of him. I suppose it pleases her to think so.” He tapped the glass again. “She and my uncle were married for almost thirty years. When he died, she hardly spoke for a month.”

Tuan looked at Mi. Her face had not changed. She was stirring her soup lazily with a spoon. She said, “Is it more how you look or how you act that reminds her of your uncle?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Tuan said. “Probably how I look.” He was actually not sure.

Mi crinkled her brow thoughtfully and ran a hand over her ponytail. “People can be reminded of others in the strangest and littlest ways.” She spoke as if to herself and held an empty spoon above the bowl of soup.

She often lapsed into these pensive moments, the lingering hesitation, the small, murmurous voice. Tuan soon realized how difficult it was to learn things about her that he wanted to know. During their next lunch together, he tried a different approach.

“There will be a wedding in my family in a few months,” he said. “A big wedding by the ocean up in Nha Trang.”

“Who’s getting married?”

“My cousin. He’s marrying a girl he met there.”

“In Nha Trang? How nice. Will they live there or here?”

“I don’t know, but my parents are not going.”

“Because the wedding is so far away?”

“No, it’s not that. My cousin has already been married before and they’ve been separated for a year—divorced now actually. He’s going on with the new marriage anyway. My parents are not happy with him and are refusing to go to the wedding. They don’t want me to go either.”

Mi shook her head with disapproval, but Tuan could not tell if it was for his parents or for this cousin he did not have. She lay down her chopsticks and wiped her mouth with a napkin, apparently full from the meal.

“Some things the Church will never accept,” he said with gravity. “But marrying again without an annulment is simply out of the question—that is, of course, unless your wife or husband has died.”

Mi did not even blink. Her reticence confused him, but it could have been stubbornness as well. He felt like kicking her foot under the table to get the reaction he wanted—any reaction. It annoyed him suddenly that she had not finished her noodles. Her eyes were now traveling up the twelve stories of the Saigon Prince Hotel across the street, its pink walls as distinctive as its name. From where they sat under the awning of an outdoor café, the very top of the hotel, with its crown of arches and antennas, was out of view.

A bus blared its horns, and Tuan gathered himself. “How long ago did you lose your husband?”

She continued to eye the hotel. Its color and the red, ornate emblem of royalty on the

façade, like a scepter, appeared to fascinate her. The sky had since become cloudy, and the pink of the hotel, bright and cheerful in the sun only an hour ago, had grown drab-looking, the color of flesh.

Finally, she said, “A year ago.”

Tuan took yet another leap. “How did he die?”

She turned to him with a rare expressive look, as if his question both saddened and confused her. “Badly,” she replied.

Tuan wanted to pursue the course of the conversation, but realized then that it was not sadness he saw but rather a gathering impatience—disappointment, in fact. The harshness of her stare did not weaken.

“I don’t mean to pry.”

“You do, I think.”

He felt his stomach tighten. It was beginning to rain; he heard the dull infant drops beating on the canvas awning above them and suddenly imagined her coming in from a storm completely drenched.

“You are a coward,” she said, almost kindly.

“A coward?”

“You are.”

“What do you mean—how can you call me a coward?”

“Because you could have asked about my husband outright, but you did not.”

“I didn’t mean—or want—to seem intrusive.”

“But you are.”

Her severity was real. He felt like laughing, but the shock of her response and his own anger hurt too much for him to conceal. He had sounded like a child, replying the

way he did, which made him even angrier.

The rain was coming down hard. Motorists on the street were now draped in plastic rain ponchos, pink and blue and green, a cavalcade of colorful ghosts gliding by on their sputtering engines. The steady sounds of traffic and rain made the silence between them bearable, and as he watched her slip her hand out from under the awning, far enough to feel the rain on her fingertips, Tuan realized that she was right—that his dumbstruck silence now was proof of his cowardice all along. He had not even once considered how painful the subject would be for her. He felt then like running out into the rain and laughing—feign the whimsies of a child and excuse himself of what had been said. The sound of cars slashing through the wet streets reminded him of waves crashing in the sea.

He finally spoke up in a soft, even voice: “You must think I’m a horrible person. I’ve known you for about six weeks now and I’ve already offended you twice.”

She was watching the rain, though he knew she heard him. It seemed her expression had never been angry, for now a certain calm appeared to drown over her face any emotion she might have had.

“Only you should know that I am not that kind of person,” he went on. “You should know that I could never possibly make you unhappy on purpose.”

He thought of this as a sudden confession, but again she did not appear to notice any intention in it.

Later that afternoon they went to the grand shopping mall in Saigon. His mother had asked him to buy a new statuette of Saint Joseph and child; the old one was recently broken by the house maid. Mì showed no sign of being upset after their conversation, and once they left the café they were speaking normally again, though Tuan would have



preferred foregoing the trip to the mall altogether. Had he a moment to himself, he would have gone back through their conversation and imagined himself talking differently, reacting differently. As it was, his mother had been specific about the errand—the statuette would have to be blessed by the priest that coming Sunday, and it needed to be of good quality porcelain.

Although the rain had stopped, the streets were still glistening in the new afternoon sun when they arrived at the mall. The weather had apparently done nothing to keep the crowds away. The mall, a bustling city in itself, was an enormous oblong building that gaped open at the bottom like the mouth of a cave, so that when one stood at the front entrance and looked up, one could see its staircases rising toward the three upper floors of shops and vending stands. Outside in the parking lot, amid the swell of pedestrians and vagrants, an array of vehicles—bicycles, motorbikes, cars and vans—stood in haphazardly arranged rows, guarded by men in green shirts and caps. Some of the vans remained idling, their motors fueling the constant drone of traffic, their drivers asleep either humped over the wheel or with their feet reclined on the dash, caps covering their faces.

Inside the mall, a labyrinth of open shops stood wedged next to one another, laid out in exuberant displays of food and clothes and jewelry, of cheap plastic toys, expensive china, paintings made of egg shells, and all kinds of lacquered souvenirs. People congested the galleries and the stairs. Traveling through each floor, the pungent smell of dried fish and pickled vegetables mingled with the smell of wood varnish, of perfume and flowers, of fabric and leather.

Tuan never stayed long at the mall. The noise and crowds annoyed him, along with the stifling heat and rudeness of certain shopkeepers; but today he noticed the gleam of

curiosity in Mi's eyes as she stayed a step or two behind him and peered at everything she passed. They walked through the crowds with little to say to one another.

On the second floor, Tuan stopped at an arts shop and quickly picked out a statuette according to his mother's specifications. It was made of all white porcelain and showed a bearded Saint Joseph tilting his head toward the infant Jesus in his arms. The statuette was in fact as tall as a small child, though fairly light for its size. Tuan haggled with the skinny salesgirl but eventually gave her the sale, only to find moments later the same statuette at another shop nearby, its price much lower. His mother was always adamant about sensible buys, but returning it would have been a waste of time.

Tuan walked away, annoyed, cradling the statuette in both arms, feeling in one hand the small, hard, life-like features of Saint Joseph's face. When he had descended the staircase halfway to the first floor, he realized Mi was no longer behind him nor anywhere nearby that he could see. She had been walking next to him just a moment before; at the shop she had helped him bargain with the salesgirl. Tuan reached the bottom of the stairs, looked around briefly, then mounted the ascending staircase.

He returned to the shops they had passed together. The skinny salesgirl shook her head indifferently when he asked her about Mi. The same response met him at every shop thereafter, and despite wandering through the entire floor, turning different corners and attempting new paths, he soon found himself revisiting the same shops and talking to the same useless shopkeepers.

His patience was dwindling, but before anger could set in, he recalled again what Mi had said to him at the café. The thought that she might still be upset made him wince, and as he roamed every corridor of the mall, he grew morbid in thought, startled finally by a feeling of terrific loneliness. A glance over the balcony, at the sprawl of

indistinguishable faces and bodies far below, stopped him, and it was then that the notion of losing her brought him panic.

A passerby bumped him in the shoulder, and the statuette slipped from his arms, shattering on the ground. He heard a few cries of shock nearby—he heard a man apologizing and offering to pay for his clumsiness. The baby Jesus and St. Joseph's head lay strewn in pieces at Tuan's feet, and he bent down to touch them, unsure if he hadn't, in fact, let the statuette drop on its own. His arms felt so light and indifferent—the man could have knocked a real baby from them.

Tuan walked away from the mess, ignoring everyone, and hurried to the stairs. On his way down, he bumped shoulders with two women and an elderly man who cursed after him.

He wandered through each floor of the mall, weaving through the overbearing crowds, still outwardly calm though in his mind he was frantic with the image of her last moment with him at the shop and the possibility—*so outlandish, so sentimental*, he thought—that he might never see her again. He tried to recall what she was wearing that day. He culled her dress and face from the hundreds of people that he passed: a woman spanking her child, a security guard dozing in a chair, an old beggar singing to himself, two kids kissing behind a jewelry stand, a young girl outside crying for her mother, and back in the parking lot two cab drivers arguing as above them the rain returned, warm and pelting, sending people running for cover while leaving others wet but unperturbed, as though rain changed nothing but the smell in the air. Tuan peered down the length of the street before him, his hair already matted to his forehead. It occurred to him then that he had never in his life lost anyone outside his family who was important to him.

He ran to the side of the mall, which was skirted by another belt of outdoor markets.

He nearly gasped with relief when he saw her. In the distance she stood under the large umbrella of a gift stand. She was handing some money to the vendor.

He wiped the wetness from his face and approached the stand.

“This is where you’ve been.” He could hear the anger in his voice as she turned to face him. “I thought you got lost and had to search all over for you. I was afraid you were lost.”

She glanced at him with a small, pitying smile. “You were afraid I had lost you on purpose, didn’t you?”

He shook his head and laughed a little, unsure if she was joking or being serious. He saw her reach out and hand him a pack of English cigarettes. “I hope this is the brand you like,” she said. Then she looked at his hands. “Where is your mother’s statuette?”

It was inevitable. The following week, Tuan went alone to Saigon for business. On his way home, the impulse came like an anxiety, like a draught of hot whisky. Cát Lát was only half an hour outside of Saigon, and his detour would be quick and superficial, a brief indulgence with no goals, no expectations.

He ended up exploring the town for nearly two hours, mostly coasting along the bumpy roads, through the corrugated farmland and green, palmy fields—a town similar to his own. Passing by the whitewashed cottages, their roofs dull and brown with rust, through the marketplace, the churches, the alleyways strewn with debris and barefoot children, he would search random faces for a familiar feature, a sign of a brother or a sister, a mother or a father. A small graveyard by the church stopped him. He had no name to look for but still wandered the tombs, hoping for a young man and a recent date of death, a headstone portrait that might show a face similar to the one engraved in his

imagination. He lingered by certain houses where children played out front and their mothers watched on with indifference, and he was tempted to ask the mothers *do they know of... do they remember a...?* An empty schoolyard brought him visions of Mi as a young girl walking to school in her white *aó dài*, holding her book satchel to her chest and ignoring boys who teased her only to be near her. As the day grew hot and weary, he sensed the ridiculousness of what he was doing. In the late afternoon he turned around and headed home, thinking *no one here knows her any better than I do*.

### III

The rains of August were near. Tuan's parents decided to take a month-long trip to Da Lat before the weather could impede their traveling. Old friends, one of which was very sick, awaited them. While they were gone, Tuan would manage the farm on his own, a task he'd done before and enjoyed.

But his days were now busier than normal. Along with the oversight of daily operations, there were also buyers to meet with and orders to negotiate and fulfill. In addition, because his father farmed out part of their duckling operation, Tuan had to meet weekly with smaller, neighboring farmers and familiarize them with the family's methods. It was part of his father's goal of building the family business while strengthening the community. Tuan saw it more as a tedious welcoming of strangers to the farm, an entire afternoon spent explaining their hatching system to a shy, barefoot farmer from across town. Under such entanglements, his days were now often emptied of opportunities to talk with Mi, if only to chat briefly about the weather. Some days she hardly appeared at all.

So when he did see her, usually standing by the ponds, he no longer hesitated in

joining her, as he did one afternoon during the second week of his parents' absence. A farmhand, submerged up to his shoulders, was struggling to mend a net far out in the water, but Mi was paying more attention to the armada of ducks circling him in a blur of white feathers.

She turned and smiled and showed no surprise at Tuan's appearance by her side. They said nothing for a long time. Ever since the trips to Saigon, a sense of familiarity had grown between them. There were no more formal greetings when they passed one another on the farm; they would either speak briefly or gesture with a nod, a knowing smile. And though the farmhand, still struggling with the net, was now glancing at them, Tuan had long lost his wariness of being seen alone with her. He felt only the comfortable silence.

She cocked her head and spoke up: "One day I'd like to visit Halong Bay and travel on a ferry along the fjords. The limestone islets there are taller than they are wide—they're like giant green cliffs frozen on the water, like tall rocks jutting out of the water, one after the other. People say a dragon has been asleep in the bay for thousands of years, and the islets are what we see of its back."

She giggled, then looked hard at the water. The details must have been from photographs she'd seen, but she described them as if from a memory of being there. She went on, "The water, they say, is so salty that you can stay afloat for hours without tiring—maybe even fall asleep floating on your back. And if you're adventurous, there are cavernous grottoes on the islets that are miles deep. A person could go exploring inside them forever."

"Perhaps when everything in the country is calm again, you can go," Tuan said, thinking *I will go with you, I will pay your way, it will make you forget everything and*

*anything*. He watched the ducks skittering across the water, moving in beautiful tangles, converging momentarily, then chasing and passing one another, while behind them the trails of their progress bloomed and rippled and disintegrated into themselves over the water's surface. He imagined the dragon beneath churning awake.

She looked at him and said, "You have guests for lunch tomorrow. I'll be serving your father's favorite."

He had completely forgotten. Three restaurateurs from Saigon were coming with possible orders for the ending months of the year, including a significant commission for Tet. It was customary for his father to treat such clients to lunch when they visited, a role Tuan would have to fill tomorrow despite not knowing these men. The prospect of them drinking and staying too long, a common occurrence with the more important business guests, slightly irritated him, but he also remembered that meals lately were lonely for him. Ever since his parents' departure, Mi had begun cooking according to his tastes, using less salt in the soup, frying the fish longer, things Bà Bien had always refused to do; but even so, the food never tasted quite as good alone on the veranda or in the silence of his bungalow. And he was not one to eat with the workers.

He thanked her, despite being unsure of what she meant by his *father's favorite*. He would have eaten a soup of stones had she prepared it for him.

At noon the next day, he walked by the kitchen house and saw Bà Bien squatting on the floor. When he stepped inside, he saw that Mi was squatting across from her and helping her hold a live duck over a bowl. They were preparing what was indeed one of his father's favorite dishes. Oddly enough, Tuan had never watched the task up close. He had been born on this farm and lived around these animals all his life, seen them slaughtered, injured, and diseased in all sorts of ways, and had handled them himself,

breaking necks and slicing throats, from the time he was seven years old. And yet the sight of this dish being prepared had always bothered him. It was too slow, Tuan once claimed to his father, who promptly scolded him for such a *silly and unmanly* reaction. Still, he would always look away. Mi's presence was what stopped him today, made him fold his arms and stand by the door.

The duck squirmed in their hands, its wings flapping halfheartedly. It cackled a few times before Bà Bien clutched its neck right at the base of the head, stifling its vocal cords. She grabbed both wings and clasped them together with the neck in one hand. Mi sat there gripping the duck's feet, a whorl of hair sticking to her forehead, her eyes intent on the bird's vacant face. She looked up at Tuan with no acknowledgement, then returned her attention to the task.

With her free hand, Bà Bien began plucking feathers from a spot on the duck's breast. The duck was now limp in their hands. "You picked one that was a bit too old," she said to Mi as she continued plucking the feathers. "The meat won't be as tender." And then her voice was loud, almost harsh, as she glanced over her shoulder at Tuan: "You're in our light, boy."

He moved away from the doorway and grabbed an apple from a bowl on the kitchen table, holding it absently at his side.

Bà Bien reached for the large knife at her feet and nodded at Mi who backed up a step, still holding the duck's feet. The old woman then ran the knife across the bare flesh of the duck's breast and made a deep gash. Blood spilled from the wound in thin streams, running bright red into the white bowl. She said, "Always have some fish sauce in the bowl to keep the blood from jelling too quickly—and hold the duck firmly or you'll make a mess."



The duck writhed a bit and jerked its neck several times, its mouth slowly opening and closing. “It’s dying,” remarked the old woman without looking up. “See, if you make a quick and clean cut, especially right at its main artery, it will die quickly and its meat will not be dark.” Just then, the duck’s body shivered vigorously. The last of the blood trickled out of the gash. Mi let go of its limp legs, and Bà Bien tossed the body into a pan nearby.

Tuan blinked hard. The apple felt warm in his hand. It had been many years since he’d seen someone do this. With a tinge of repulsion, he admired how easily, almost gracefully, the old woman had performed the task. The duck lay there with the deep red gash vivid across its pale breast, its head cast upward in the pan. Tuan gazed at the lifeless body with a wistful kind of hope, as if willing its wings to start flapping again. All his life around this animal and yet he had never thought to pity it—the pain it could not show, the impotence of a life so effortless and fleeting. He noticed that Mi was looking at it with a grave expression. She wiped her forehead with her apron, then brought the fingers of one hand to her nose as if to smell wisps of the duck’s warm death.

The blood had already darkened in the bowl. “And so now we dilute it with some water,” said the old woman in a loud casual voice, “add some chopped mint leaves, cilantro, basil, some minced liver and gizzards. Then we wait for it to congeal. And of course, before serving, a twist of lime—” She smiled widely at no one, her teeth brown and crooked in the light. The blood-licked knife lay on the ground by her feet. Tuan turned, faintly touching his breast, and left the kitchen.

At lunch, he did not touch the dish, though his three guests each ate three or four bowls, constantly shaking their heads with delight. Two of the men were his father’s age and the younger man looked a few years older than Tuan. After a few glasses of wine, all

three began telling stories and jokes and complimenting him on the farm's success. "Your father is a brilliant man!" they cried. "He raises the best ducks in the country here and has by far the largest farm! We wouldn't be surprised if the Ministry of Agriculture called for advice!"

At the end of the meal, with the table cleared of everything but the wine and ash trays, Mi came from the kitchen, and as the men laughed to themselves, she bent over and whispered in Tuan's ear: "If you no longer need me, I'd like to go to bed for a bit."

He turned his head slightly, his ear away from her warm breath. "Are you ill?" he whispered back.

"Just a little tired." She put a hand to her mouth and faked a yawn, but then held the hand to her chest. He was reminded of her grave face a few hours ago in the kitchen. Had they been alone, he would have told her that he knew what she had been thinking—he wanted, in fact, to leave the men and tell her immediately. He nodded and watched her walk gingerly down the steps of the veranda.

The younger man, who had actually drunk very little, leaned over and said to Tuan, "She is a pretty one. And such curly hair."

"She has a husband," Tuan replied and reached for a cigarette. He noticed the older men had toned down their laughing and were looking askance at their partner, and it was then he realized how stern his voice had been. He smiled at the men and added, "He died recently."

The two older men hummed their sympathies, one of them asking, "Was it an accident? She looks so young."

"I haven't a clue."

The younger man held his cigarette in the corner of his mouth and loosened his tie.

He was still watching the path that led to Mi's bungalow. He said to himself, "What a shame."

On his way to feed the fishes the next morning, Tuan stopped in the kitchen house for a glass of water. It was four o'clock, a full hour before anyone else would be awake, but he realized he was not alone in the unlit kitchen. Upon the pile of rice bags heaped against the far wall, a body lay curled on its side, draped in shadow and silhouetted by the dusky, gray light from an adjacent window. Tuan stared from across the kitchen, at the dark face, the dark thicket of hair. He moved along the wall and came within arm's length. Only then was he sure, and his heart jumped.

But quickly he saw that she was merely asleep, lying upon a wool blanket spread over the bags. Her shoulder rose faintly with each silent breath. A folded arm cradled her head. He watched her patiently. He was puzzled, a little amused. The instant he finally nudged her shoulder, she awoke and calmly peered up at him. He could see recognition in her eyes.

"Why are you sleeping here?" he whispered.

She lifted herself from the bed of rice with one arm and, leaving her legs immobile across the bags, leaned on the arm. She looked small in her white pajamas.

"Is there a problem with your bed—has something happened at the house?"

"No," she murmured and yawned.

"Then why did you sleep here?"

"I thought it would be nice to sleep in the kitchen."

"But what if someone else found you here?"

"What would they do?" She yawned again.

“Well, aren’t you afraid they’d think it was strange for you to sleep in a kitchen for no reason?”

“I told you the reason.”

Tuan nearly smiled. She resembled a child waking from a long afternoon nap. And yet it was also the first time that he’d ever seen her up close with her hair down, so much of it too, down to her shoulders and about her face in disheveled curls—she looked older, on the brink of wildness. It shocked him to see her this way, slightly angered him that it was the very first time.

“I like to sleep in different places,” she said and glanced around the kitchen. She squinted even though dawn had hardly broken. Her voice roused to a normal tone: “I wake up in a place that’s not mine, it’s new and strange, and I forget for a second where I am. I like that. The thought of it makes it easier somehow to fall asleep.”

She gave him a drowsy smile, as if to sympathize with his confusion. “Have a good morning.” She slid down the pile of rice bags, clutching the wool blanket, and slipped out the kitchen.

Every morning for the rest of that week, he found her asleep in a new place. He had always been the first to awake on the farm, but he now found himself rising even earlier to find where she was. She spent one night in the doorless shanty by the fish ponds, just outside the ring of chestnut trees that circled his parent’s house, curled up in the green hammock where Tuan’s father often took afternoon naps. She spent another night atop the porch bench of the empty guest house with a thin blanket across her legs. One rainy morning he found her sleeping in the backseat of his father’s Toyota. He peered through the fogged, water-beaded window and fancied her a mermaid asleep on the ocean floor, her hair sprawled like seaweed across the car seat.

As far as he knew, no one else on the farm had come upon her in these strange beds. At least no one had mentioned it to him. Each morning he felt like waking her before someone came along, but then the sight of her always moved him and he would watch her sleep for minutes on end, hoping his presence alone would rouse her, his face the first thing she'd see. But she always slept soundly. He would return an hour later and find her gone.

Late one night, he awoke in bed at the sound of gravel scattering outside his bungalow. A shadow faded across the window. He heard the door in the outer room open, and soft footsteps on the tile floor—rubber sandals, then bare feet. Her dark figure appeared in his doorway, the slight form, the small shoulders and voluminous hair; her shadow cast upon the wall seemed another human body.

Although the room was dark, he could tell she was looking at him. She stood there a long time, like a petrified apparition, a hand at rest on the door knob and her face pensive though entirely obscured, perhaps unaware that he was awake, perhaps waiting for him to speak or hoping he would fall back asleep without ever having seen her, because in her stillness he momentarily believed she was a joke of his dreams, a cruel phantasm that had followed him into wakefulness.

She moved towards the bed, and as she passed the open window he caught sight of her pale, tranquil face. She lifted his bedcover and climbed in beside him. He moved over slightly to make room.

She wriggled under the covers for a moment, then was still. He could not tell if her eyes were open for his own were staring blankly at the ceiling, at the phantom blur of a million blades spinning in shadow with the whirling fan. Two gecko lizards clung to the ceiling like small splatters of paint. Beneath his bed, sandalwood incense was still

burning to ward off mosquitoes, and the smell of it clouded the room.

When she finally spoke, the clarity of her voice startled him: “I hope you do not mind.”

“No,” he murmured, though what he did not mind, he was still unsure.

Their elbows touched, barely, as she pulled the blanket over her chest. He realized he was holding his breath. The thought of her undressed, naked beside him, seemed suddenly strange, outlandish in a deeply desirable but frightening way. He imagined the weight of her body atop his, the smell of her breath, her soft belly exposed in the light. He imagined himself breathless and pining like a swimmer in the folds of violent water. A shock of warmth rushed over his face, over his hands. He grew stiff beneath the sheets. Women from the past invaded his mind, young and older and recent and long past, all of them blurred in memory but for the private softness of their skin, the ache in their voice, their odor (like almonds, like soy milk, like the smoke from grilled cuttlefish), and the buzzing ends of his toes, the weightlessness of a dark room. And yet these memories were not conjured in the swarm of expectation or eagerness; they were in fact the details his mind held up for contrast, so that he could imagine the experience at hand with a desire free not from lust, but from the conviction that things never last, never linger but with vagueness and doubt.

And hence his fright—hence why, just as quickly, just as intensely, his thoughts sobered, became practical. She lay so still and silent next to him that if not for her irregular breathing he would have thought her asleep. It occurred to him that he should touch her first, that she was merely waiting—a hand on her wrist or a finger into her palm might be all it would take. But when he glanced at her, she looked perfectly calm; there was no unease, no expectancy, in her silence. He remembered her face in church. He

remembered the graveyard in Cát Lát. As aroused to impulse as he was, the thought of her recoiling from his touch made him pause, made him question whether her presence in his bed was an invitation at all, and if it was not, the risk of sullyng her intentions and losing her and this moment forever felt all too significant to ignore. With each passing moment he grew more anxious, more frustrated, so that her stillness soon became palpable, and slowly his body grew limp and left him clawing inside for a drink of water.

He coughed.

Her knee rose from under the blanket. She said: "I woke up tonight and forgot that I knew you. Sometimes I feel as though I forget people, and so I have to remind myself." He heard a sigh of withheld laughter in her voice. He felt her eyes turn to him, then away. "I am twenty-five."

"What?"

"You asked me my age once." Her bare arms now lay atop the blanket, her hands at rest upon her chest. "My father died when I was ten. An ice truck hit him in the street. I saw it happen. My mother followed him six months later. They said it was pneumonia, but I am convinced she died of a broken heart. You know, I have my mother's face—her voice, too, people used to say. She talks to me all the time. Sometimes I feel like she follows me everywhere and helps me remember things."

Tuan wanted to reply, to say something intelligent and wise, but he knew she needed no response. This was the most personal thing she had ever told him, so uncharacteristic of her that it could have been a secret murmured during sleep.

"I walked through the farm tonight," she said, "along the banks of the duck ponds. And I thought of diving into the water."

*Why?* he thought.

“But only to swim for a while.”

*The waters are dark and muddy.*

“I imagined then how it would be to swim with you, in better waters.” She laughed quietly and said, “I think of you as a good swimmer.”

He wondered, stunned, if this was finally her confession to him. It had to be. He would have thought her cruel, even foolish, to believe he might think otherwise. But he was also eased by a sudden thought, at last a certainty: *I am important to her.*

She went on in the same timid voice, but whatever else she said after that he did not quite understand or hear, because all the while he felt himself falling away into the din of his heart, and it took all his will to keep from hushing her mouth with his hand and whispering that he loved her, and more importantly, that he wanted her to love him. He felt comforted, lulled by the thrum of her voice as though he were lying in a tomb made warm and peaceful by the finality of death; for with death, he thought, there is no more need for protection, from anyone or anything. The last thing he remembered hearing her say was that “the geckoes are moving,” because he did not know when but after some time they both fell asleep at once, together, having never touched but with elbows.

She came to his bed for ten nights straight. She arrived quietly, never as someone slipping or stealing into his room, but always with the ease and familiarity of someone returning. Each night he inevitably nursed the hope, if only for a second, that they would do something more. But when they did not, he was never disappointed, only patient. He decided, whether out of fear or out of caution, that waiting was the only way of ever being certain, that to wait for her first touch was to facilitate his own. On the first few nights, he pleased himself hours before he knew she would come, but soon he found more pleasure from the anticipation and the eventual sound of her arrival. Out of the still



vacant night: to hear her soft footsteps outside his window, to hear his front door creep open—such satisfaction was never fleeting.

They would lie together (at first never touching but gradually, with each night, her elbow began resting atop his, then her head against his shoulder, then the crook of his arm her pillow), and she would often tell him things that he had never noticed about himself. *You are afraid of fire*, she'd say. *You stutter quietly*. *You sometimes walk like there is gravel in your shoes*. *Your cheekbones are like stone*. *You sing when you are troubled*. *You look at yourself in the ponds*. *You laugh like a child*—and she would laugh at him with the fingers of her hand fanned across her face like the bars of a cage. *You do not sweat enough*. *You smell like duck feathers at night*. *You are quiet when it rains*.

It moved him to think she had paid him so much attention all this time. He could never quite manage the same honesty with her. He could only tell her those things he knew with certainty: that it was easier to raise chickens than ducks since chickens need only feed and a cage, that the hatching rate can fall two percent if the ducks are fed even ten minutes late, or if the pond water becomes salty, or if their feed is altered in any way. He admitted that he was no different, that the boy in him would always be resistant to the slightest change in things around him. She chuckled when he said this, and smiled again when he looked at her blankly.

Each night, she told him stories that she had heard of other people. She was uncertain whether they were true or fabricated, though she also claimed there was no difference once someone told the story, once the story became their own.

“I heard about a man who lost his wife and was left with three teenage daughters,” she said one night. She often spoke in whispers and stifled tones. “He loved those girls

dearly and took good care of them after the death. But he missed his wife terribly, of course, and soon became lonely. And being a man he started having strange feelings for his daughters. The more he thought about it, the stronger his desire became. At times he couldn't go to sleep with all those thoughts in his head. It got to the point where finally the urges were unbearable. And so one day he took a knife and cut *it* off—" Mi paused as if to hear his reaction. "What do you think of that?"

"What a strange story. What do I think of *him*?"

"Was he a good man for doing it?"

"I can't really say. I suppose it was admirable what he did, extreme as it was."

"But wasn't he also weak-minded for doing that?"

It was raining the night she told him this story, and after a moment of silence, she stood from the bed and opened the window shutters. Tuan watched her reach outside the window with an open palm and hold it there in the rain. She stood like that for a time, her arm outstretched as if beckoning someone outside in the wet night. With her back to him, her arm fell and she said, "Let's say you were that man. Not that you would ever have those kinds of urges. But if you were in his situation and had done what he did—would it have been for your daughters' sake, or for the sake of your wife's memory?"

"That's an odd question," Tuan replied and laughed. "Why are we asking what I would be thinking and not what *he* might have been thinking?"

She wiped her hand on the shoulder of her blouse and was silent for a moment. "Because I think you would have needed the memory of your wife too much to hurt her daughters. You wouldn't have wanted to hurt them, but *she*—she would have been the reason."

“And why is that?”

“Because sullyng her memory would have ruined your idea of what love was.”

“Well, don’t you think I would have despised the thought enough to kill myself before touching them in any unseemly way, despite how much I loved my wife? I would kill any man who did such a thing.”

“Yes, of course. But don’t you see, you’re even romantic in how you hate.”

He laughed again. “Is that always so wrong?”

She turned to face him and shook her head. She returned to sit on the bed. Outside, a peal of thunder erupted in the night, and she shivered.

“My father was a taxi driver,” she said, covering her legs with the sheets. “I remember one day he took me along in his cab. I was seven at the time. We stopped somewhere in the city and he told me to wait in the car for a few minutes while he took care of some business. As soon as he left, it began raining heavily and I started singing to myself because I had never liked being left alone anywhere, especially with it raining like it was. As the time passed, I grew nervous and eventually began feeling as though I had been abandoned. I also thought that maybe he had gotten lost somehow and that I would never see him again. I stayed in the car because I didn’t want to get wet in the rain, but after what felt like an hour, I couldn’t stand it any longer and I left the car to go find him. I ran down the street, going corner to corner, store to store, and he was nowhere in sight, and before long I was drenched and sobbing because I believed he had left me altogether.

“He finally found me standing by myself outside a café. I remember jumping when he grabbed my shoulder. His face was hysterical and he grabbed me and held me and apologized about twenty times. He told me he had gone to buy my mother a new silk *áo dài* for their wedding anniversary but didn’t want to risk ruining the dress in the rain. He

had no idea the wait would distress me so much. He brought me back to the car, dried me off, bought me a warm baguette, and promised in the car that he would never leave me like that ever again. Within three years, both he and my mother were gone.”

Mi stopped. “It wasn’t their fault, of course,” she concluded and slowly fell back on the bed.

They did not speak again after that. Eventually she went to sleep. Tuan lay awake, imagining what she looked like sobbing in the rain that day. Her sleeping gave him the chance, as it always did, to look at her extendedly. Surely her face as a child could not be that much different. Perhaps the lines beneath the eyes were now more defined, the jaws and cheekbones as well, and it could be her hair was shorter back then and made her face look rounder and more vivacious. But then it seemed to Tuan that she had not changed at all. Whatever spirit breathed its stubborn melancholy into her as a child still lived in her now and, in its lingering occupation, had kept her from changing much on the outside as well. Was he any different?

Tuan lay there and thought of his own stories to tell her. All the previous nights seemed now to be one long conversation between them, interrupted by sleep and daytime and sustained by some inexplicable and unspoken need that they shared. But to what end, he thought? How long would it last? Would she ever come to divulge everything about her life, and could he, beyond that, bear to know those things? He recalled all their nights together.

Once she cried in her sleep.

Once she said she felt old.

Once she grabbed his hand under the covers and whispered to him that she had never in her life been afraid of dying.

He thought of her husband and wondered if *this* was how they had lain together, if *this* was the sound of her voice at his side, if *these* were the things she had told him in their bed. He knew that in the morning, when as always he found himself alone in bed thinking momentarily that it must have all been a dream, he would sing songs to himself and wonder how dead a man can be if his death was known only to one person.

The next morning he awoke with her still by his side, her face at his neck and her arm draped across his chest, and he knew he could no longer bear it. He went to Cát Lát on the following Sunday afternoon, the day after his parents' return from Da Lat. He went directly after morning Mass and skipped lunch with his family.

#### IV

The convent in Cát Lát was old and pink and towered over a courtyard of breadfruit trees, its façade boasting a gigantic cross-shaped window and its red clay roof and walls overgrown with ivy. Tuan arrived at the front gate after an hour of questioning strangers and following misguided directions. A young nun approached him from the courtyard and told him, No, she had never heard of anyone named Mì. He should go talk to the Mother Superior.

Five minutes later, Tuan found himself in a large dark office that smelled of hot oil and incense. The Mother Superior, an octogenarian who sat behind a desk that nearly swallowed her entire body, also had no memory of such a girl. Tuan described her again: small shoulders, curly hair, porcelain skin—

“Curly hair?” The old nun sighed pensively for a few moments. “Ah, yes, I do remember that one. She attended school here when she was a young girl. An average student.”

“Can you tell me where I might find her?” he asked, his voice loud.

“Oh, I can’t say exactly. I haven’t seen her in so long.”

“But her family—does anyone in her family live near here?”

“She really had no family. No parents, that is. She did have a great-aunt who I think might still live a few kilometers from here, if she’s still alive. I believe her name was—no, I forget. But she owned a restaurant by the river. *The Garden* something.”

As Tuan left the old woman, too abruptly he remembered, she muttered something about how Mi should have stayed and become a nun.

It took him another hour to find the restaurant, which was flanked by a bottling factory and, on the other side, a throng of trees that led to the riverbank. A sign out front read *The Garden House Restaurant*. Inside, two open-air dining areas—with bamboo chairs, red table cloths, and folk music drifting through the air—lay beneath canopies of thatch and were surrounded by banana trees. Behind the kitchen, Tuan could see the owner’s house, a two-story building with yellow stucco walls and spiraling pillars out front. The windows had iron bars. Despite the restaurant’s impressive space, the only customers at the moment were a party of ten people laughing and drinking in the far corner. Near the entrance a small monkey was kept leashed on the branch of a tree, and two giggling children stood feeding it small pieces of fruit with their chopsticks.

The host at the front counter was a tall man, probably in his early forties, who had small, quiet eyes and a thin voice. When Tuan asked to speak to the owner, the man nodded.

“I was wondering—do you know a young woman named Mi?”

The man appeared surprised by the question, as though he didn’t understand it. A plump woman behind him spoke up: “Yes, we know her.”

She had just appeared at the counter to use the phone and had apparently heard the question. She was about the man's age, possibly his wife, and looked fastidious with her wire glasses and her hair done up in a perfect bun. She now held the receiver in one hand and looked hard at Tuan as she went on in a gruff, northern accent, "She hasn't lived here for almost a year now. I rarely speak to her anymore. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Are you her great-aunt?"

She furrowed her brow, apparently offended. "No, of course not. Her great-aunt is my mother's cousin and lives with us. This is actually her restaurant; but I—" she glanced at the man— "*we* run everything for her now."

The man was busying himself with some papers, but it was obvious that he was still listening.

"Is it possible for me to see her?" Tuan asked carefully.

"Why?"

"I would just like to speak to her for a few minutes."

"Is it about Mi?"

Tuan was aggravated, but nodded. The man wandered away from the counter.

"She is very old, you know," continued the woman. "She might be taking her afternoon nap now."

"Well if she is awake, may I go see her? Just for a few minutes. Please."

She hesitated and looked over at the house behind her. She said, "We are not too busy now, so I suppose I can go see if she is awake."

She left Tuan standing there and took her time walking to the house. She spoke sharply to one of the waitresses she passed. A few minutes later she reappeared on the porch and waved Tuan over.

He was led through a very modern house, with colorful landscape paintings on the walls and flood lights peering down from the ceiling, even an aquarium by the front door. They went up a narrow flight of stairs and entered a small bedroom with its shades drawn. An old woman was sitting on the bed next to a pile of clothes and praying to a wooden crucifix on the wall. The room was bare with only a bed, a mahogany dresser, and a bamboo table that stood in the corner. Tuan could hear the old woman murmuring her prayers. The back of her head resembled a ball of gray yarn.

He and the plump woman stood in the doorway until the old woman finished. Then the plump woman approached her, whispered in her ear, and pointed to Tuan. The old woman nodded. She shuffled over to the table and sat down, then looked up at Tuan as he approached her and waited for him to speak.

Tuan assumed the plump woman would leave, but she walked over to open the shades and then sat down on the bed where she began slowly folding the pile of clothes with her back to them both.

Tuan finally said, "I know a girl named Mi who works on my father's farm in Long Bien. I was told that you are her great-aunt."

"I am," the old woman replied in loud, scraggy voice. Her thick glasses enlarged a pair of gray, milky eyes. She might have had cataracts—Tuan could not tell if she was staring at him or the wall behind him. With her mouth agape and her expression blank, she appeared senile, as though she hadn't spoken to anyone in ages.

A young girl, no older than six or seven, ran laughing into the room and stared at Tuan. "Who are you?" she cried. The plump woman told her to shut her mouth and leave the room. She shot Tuan a glance and returned to the clothes.

Tuan continued with the old woman: "I wanted to ask you some questions about her.



She hasn't done anything wrong—nothing at all. She is actually a fine worker; our cook is very pleased with her. I only wanted to know a few things so that I can understand—”

The old woman remained silent, waiting, and Tuan wondered if she was in fact too senile to answer his questions. He didn't quite know how to begin, or what exactly to ask her. He had spent the day hoping to find someone—anyone—who could give him even the smallest piece of information, and now it seemed strange that he was speaking to the very person who would know everything. The simplicity of this effort felt ludicrous all of a sudden, a little overwhelming.

“I know I am a stranger to you,” he said, “but could you tell me how her husband died?”

The old woman looked at him as though he had asked to kiss her. On the bed, the plump woman's arms fell. Tuan sensed that he was overstepping their courtesy. He was about to lie and say that it was his father who had sent him when the old woman coughed up a cackle: “Husband? That girl has no husband. I don't think she even knows what it feels like to have a man in her.” She smiled, a wide flagrant smile, exposing her black, betel nut-stained teeth.

Her sudden crudeness irked Tuan. There was no doubt now that she was staring straight at him. “Are you sure?” he asked. “Has she ever been married?”

“Absolutely not. I've been raising her since she was ten years old, since she lost her parents. The girl has never even had a boy for a friend.” She squinted behind the thick glasses. “Is that what you wanted to know, or was there another question?”

Tuan peered at the plump woman's back. A tide of questions surged through his head, but they all felt useless at the moment. Could asking them make it easier to disbelieve her? What he really wanted was for the old woman to close her mouth. Her demeanor

had made the claim incredible—a lie a child would tell a stranger.

“The girl is strange, isn’t she?” said the old woman, her smile vanishing. And when he did not respond, she added, “She should have become a nun.”

He thanked her, and without bowing or explaining himself, he turned and left the room. He could feel the plump woman watch his back, follow him out.

Downstairs, as he approached the front door, it opened into the hallway. The restaurant host took a step inside and stopped, his hand gripping the doorknob, his small eyes agape, startled, searching, at once fearful and sad, staring at Tuan as though it were Tuan blocking the way. And then instantly (though it would always seem gradual in memory) his taut face gave way to a slackening of the brow, the shoulders, the arms—a sinking toward and into knowledge. It was here that he stepped aside, slowly, and leaned back on the door as though it were a pillow.

It was no more than a moment, but therein, in that instant of recognition between them, as if a mirror had been placed before them each, five words struck Tuan with the sharpness of a pinprick, like the first voice one hears upon waking: *you were her lover*, he thought, *you*.

Tuan hesitated but then walked out the door. Had he stayed, he would have gone on holding the man’s stare for hours.

Outside in the restaurant, the party in the corner had become loud. A few men were noticeably drunk and waved playfully at Tuan, raising their glasses as he passed. Tuan stopped by the entrance. He was moments away from running back to the house. But then he was seized by laughter: *Both things cannot be true—and so that means both things are untrue—she knows nothing and he is no one—he is no one and she knows nothing*. He suddenly felt an unshakable anger towards both the old and the plump

woman.

The small monkey by the entrance yelped at him, and he dug in his pocket for a piece of candy. It accepted his gift but then promptly spit it on the ground. When Tuan saw that no one was looking, he untied the leash.

The sun began setting as he left the restaurant. His head began to ache. The roads here were quiet in the evening, traveled only by a bicycle here and there, the solitary car or moped driven by a motorist like himself, speeding off for home, the only destination at this time of day. Tuan spent half an hour on a dirt road that ran alongside sea-like stretches of rice paddy, golden now at dusk, before he realized he had driven in the wrong direction. It was then, alone on that deserted road, that he accepted everything. The old woman's wide ugly smile, chimeric but real in his mind, made everything, anything, an irrevocable possibility.

Tuan ate very little at dinner that evening and took a sleeping pill later in the night to fall asleep. He awoke in the morning feeling tired and heavy, still anchored to the night's troubling dream. By noon, the dream had escaped him completely but also left him wandering the farm in a state of mild paranoia. When evening arrived, he found himself one hundred and fifty miles from home, strolling the beaches of Vung Tau, a ten-mile stretch of sand and mountain overlooking the South China Sea.

As he walked on the warm sand, Tuan held his shoes to his chest and felt twilight descend like the immense shadow of a mountain. A few families had lingered into the evening, their children splashing in the gray waters of the sea. Giddy laughter broke upon the air, diffused by the intermittent roar of waves. At the far end of the beach, the figure of a man staggered against the oncoming swell, but Tuan could not tell if he was

drunk or simply having fun. The sea seemed dangerous at this time of day, its tenebrous waters drowning shades of people, of their forms reappearing then disappearing, and beyond them, afloat on the waves, lanterns from indistinct sampans burned like small, wishful fires on the sea, dancing against the lambent horizon and the dark islands brooding in the reach.

Far down the shore, the lights of a small coastal village glowed in the dull womb of the sky. The village was perhaps fifteen minutes away by foot. Tuan could have easily driven there in his Vespa, but he had been driving for four hours, and he preferred now a walk on the beach and a view of the sea at night.

That afternoon, he had told his father that he was going to Vung Tau to take care of some business. A family friend lived there, an engineer named Phong who used to work on the farm years ago before moving to the coast. He was nearly ten years older than Tuan but had been a friend, one of the few people whose intelligence Tuan trusted. They had built the dams together, and Phong was now designing a new incubator for him, though it was not scheduled to be completed for another two weeks. Tuan's father had asked him why he was going so early, but Tuan would only say that he needed to check on the project's status, and that going in person was the best way to do so. He would be gone for two days.

He had seen her the previous night at dinner, after his return from Cát Lát. He tried his best to act cheerfully around his parents and went so far as to tell a few jokes, giggling to himself as he approached each punch-line. He was formal with her, as he always was when his family was present, and once or twice they exchanged brief, expressionless looks. But during the meal, she came to his side and asked him if he wanted more soup, and for a moment he could not reply, could neither shake nor nod his

head, and it was not until she repeated herself with a laugh that he blinked and said *no thank-you*. When she walked back into the kitchen, he quickly confessed to his parents how tired he was from his trip that afternoon.

They passed one another in the courtyard after dinner, and he remembered her saying to him, “The soup was too bland tonight, wasn’t it?” He must have nodded because she apologized to him in a near whisper. He could have confronted her there in the courtyard, but the weight of all he had to say left him inarticulate. Looking back on that moment years later, he could not decide if she was apologizing for the soup or for the things he had just discovered about her. He only knew that the moment was awkward, and that as they went their separate ways, he peered over his shoulder, regretting his silence with her, and saw that she was hugging herself, hands gripping her shoulders, as she walked away.

She did not come to his bed that night, or the night before. He figured his parents’ return two days ago had kept her away, but also had a notion of her suspecting his knowledge of everything. He wanted at first to see her, even kept himself awake in bed to await her arrival. At one point he wrote the first three sentences of a letter he would slip under her door, revealing everything, all that he knew, all that he felt. His head spawned scenes of their confrontation, the words he would use, his questions and her reaction: an inscrutable silence, a look of grief, a denial, another story, another revelation. But these scenes could never quite sustain her presence, could never quite fulfill themselves in his mind: he could only see her now as a phantom, himself as a phantom beside her, beside her husband (who never was), beside that man at the restaurant (who might never have been, might still never be), beside all the people and places and myriad sorrows he had imagined for her—all phantoms now, obscured, protean, forever out of

reach, unbearable to ponder not because they (and that version of himself) had become illusions or figments of an impossible world, but because they (*and that version*) had once been so real. What had he and she shared but a bed in a dark room where they had hardly touched each other, seen each other but for the shadows on the wall, the silhouette of two people when there had always been only one? Tuan could conjure up the reasons why she had lied to him, why she had kept her secrets to herself; but to what end when it was not so much the lie but what the lie extinguished—the dream of loving her despite who she had loved, of being loved despite who had loved her, of saving her as she had wanted to be saved—that kept him awake into the night? He felt no anger, no hatred, only exhaustion at the thought of another dream, with other phantoms, destined to fail. She never came to his bed, and he was grateful.

The next morning he found a note under his door, unsigned, her handwriting thin, elegant, unhurried: *I will come late tonight. Your parents will surely be asleep by then.*

Tuan tried his best not to think of her as he walked the beach at Vung Tau.

When he arrived at the village, the air felt unusually warm for the seaside, which made the odor of fish sauce even stronger. Some of the villages near Vung Tau produced fish sauce commercially, and the smell could travel miles outside of town, startling unwary strangers. Inside the village it was overwhelming. Tuan had always associated the smell with the sea, which was unfortunate—it amazed him how, for the people living here, this smell had become familiar to the point of being forgotten altogether.

At the curb outside his friend's restaurant, he passed an old couple sitting on plastic stools behind their vending stand. The old man was grilling squid over coals, fanning the fire with a banana leaf. His wife looked at Tuan and nodded at the squid. Tuan shook his head politely. *They will be standing there until midnight*, he thought, *and then they will*

*go home to bed, smelling of squid.*

Through the front window of the restaurant, he could see his friend's wife, Thanh, sitting alone at a table. When he tapped on the glass, she startled and greeted him at the door with a surprised smile. The restaurant had closed an hour ago and she was the only remaining person.

"He has gone to Long Hai for the night," she said.

"Yes, of course."

"He won't be back until tomorrow afternoon."

"Of course. How have you both been?"

"Are you hungry? I can fix you dinner."

He nodded.

She sat him by the window and opened the glass shutters. A weak breeze drifted in from the sea, but even with the ceiling fans lazily stirring the air, Tuan still felt as though he were balled up inside the belly of an animal. The restaurant's only light came from the fish aquarium by the wall and the lamp above his head. On the table, three empty beer bottles stood amid a mess of newspapers with elaborate drawings all over them in blue pen, one of which was a detailed self-portrait.

Thanh returned from the kitchen with a bowl of noodles and a plate of grilled beef topped with cilantro, lettuce, and cucumber. She cleared the table of the newspapers and empty bottles, throwing everything into the trash, and went to the refrigerator to grab two beers. Opening a bottle for him and then one for herself, she sat down across the table and watched him eat.

"You've lost weight," she said. "Your cheekbones—"

"Well, you don't cook for us anymore."

She laughed. “Phong has actually gained a lot of weight since we opened this place. He’ll grow old as a fat man, I’m sure.” She laughed again and covered her mouth.

She and Phong had been married for only a month when they arrived at the farm fifteen years ago. For over a decade, they lived in the bungalow that now housed Mi and the two kitchen maids. Phong was the farm’s electrician and utility man, fixing whatever needed to be fixed, maintaining all the feeders, incubators, and water purifiers. He moved to the coast with Thanh two years ago to be closer to family, but he and Tuan still wrote each other every now and then, especially when Tuan needed help with a project. The project at hand was a favor actually, since most of Phong’s energy nowadays was devoted to the restaurant. Thanh had worked in the kitchen with Bà Bien all those years on the farm, and it seemed her expertise was much more profitable here by the coast.

“My cooking is even better now, you know,” she said. “It’s a shame you and your parents are not around to appreciate it. Though I’m sure Bà Bien wouldn’t care.” She rolled her eyes and made a face. She drank her beer from the bottle like a man.

“Now when are you and Phong finally going to have children?” Tuan asked. “All this wonderful cooking, and only for strangers. You’re seven years older than me and you’ve been married twice as long, and not one child yet.”

She shrugged, nearly blushing. “One of these days, I suppose.” She stared out the window, caressing her cheek with the beer bottle. Thanh was the daughter of a church deacon and had never worn make-up in her life, or so far as Tuan remembered. Phong once told him that her plainness was what made her the ideal wife for him.

Tuan went on to ask about the restaurant and how life had been recently in Vung Tau. She told him about the typhoon the previous month that drowned three fishermen at sea. As he finished his meal, their conversation veered back to her and Phong’s many years on



the farm. They recalled the time Thanh cut her thumb so deeply that the blood made Bà Bien faint in the kitchen, and when Phong once fell off a ladder and broke his arm trying to wire ceiling lights in the guest house.

“Of course, I’ve never believed that the place itself is cursed,” Thanh said. “Not like Bà Bien. I’m surprised she’s still there after all these years, superstitious as she is.”

“Twenty years this May, to be exact.”

“Is that so? But as I was saying, I don’t believe a place can be cursed. Only people are cursed.” Thanh sat up, and her voice grew quiet. “Now, here, for instance, I have this customer who comes in every Sunday, an old man, always alone—he’s tall like you are, probably older than your father. He comes in at noon every single Sunday—ever since we’ve been open. People say they usually see him in town after Sunday Mass, strolling the sidewalks with his black walking stick. Sometimes they see him walking on the beach in the afternoon by himself. But what’s strange is that no one has ever seen him on any other day of the week.” Thanh shrugged. “It’s like he falls off the face of the earth on Monday and stays away until the Lord’s Day brings him back.”

“Ah... a weekly Lazarus. But does he live in town?”

“No one knows for sure where he lives. But here’s the stranger thing: the two outer fingers on each of his hands are missing, not by birth because you can tell by the awkward scarring, but cut off some time ago. And if you look hard enough when he’s wearing sandals, you’ll see that he only has four toes on his right foot—the small one is gone.”

Thanh finished her beer and wiped her lips with two fingers. Her face did not flush from the beer.

She went to the cooler and brought back two more beers. She continued, “Phong and

I talk to him all the time. He tells us he was never in the war, tells us he had two wives, the first one left him and the second one died of cancer years ago. And he tells us all these other things about his life, horrible things like when his brother was attacked by a shark and nearly killed, or how his third child was born two months premature and lived for only a week. All these stories about his life, the books he's read, the people he's met, the things he's seen—but he has never once mentioned why he has only six fingers and nine toes.”

“Have you tried asking?”

“We don't dare ask. He might get offended and then never come back.” She smiles and wipes her sweaty brow with a hand. “I could follow him, I guess, though it's kind of fun just to wonder. And he's such a kind man, and a good customer. He uses his chopsticks like this—” and Thanh demonstrated with two fingers folded into her palm.

“Could be it was nothing at all—he could have lost his fingers in an illness perhaps.”

“Oh, but he could have also been kidnapped by robbers who held him hostage and mutilated his hands! A better story is so possible once you think about it.” Thanh's eyebrows jumped as she brought the bottle of beer to her lips.

“I suppose so,” Tuan replied and finished the one beer he had been drinking the entire time; it had since become warm in his hand. “But then that's why we all like to lie.”

“You're so cynical.”

“No, not me. The opposite actually.”

“Cynical, cynical. I suppose everyone is a liar to you.”

“In a way, yes. But let me ask you this—”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“What?”

“No. It has nothing to do with anything.”

“What is it?” She laughed, her eyes suddenly luminous. She laughed again and her head swayed.

“Alright,” Tuan said. “You don’t think Phong has ever lied to you?”

“What would he lie to me about?”

“I don’t know. But that’s not the question.” He looked at her, then leaned back in his chair. “How about this instead: if he were to tell you a terrible lie, would you get back at him with one of your own?”

“And what would be a terrible lie?”

“One that would keep you awake at night.”

She was caressing the lobe of an ear. Her hand then went to her cheek, where it rested: *her unmade nails, her unblemished, unmade face*. “It all depends, I guess,” she said quietly. “But yes, I guess I would. I would lie to him. Ha! And I’d hate him horribly for making me.”

The sudden loudness of her voice reminded Tuan of how empty and silent the restaurant was, indeed how empty and silent the entire town seemed at night. A waft of cool air came finally through the open window. It cooled his neck and back.

Thanh was sitting still now. In an even voice, she said, “He has never lied to me.”

“Yes, of course.”

She rose from the table, steadying herself, and he finished the rest of her beer. He followed her to the doorway leading to the rooms upstairs. He switched off the dining room lights, remembering that there were two switches, one by the door and one hidden behind the aquarium. Up the staircase, she lingered with each step, and eventually he had

to lead her by the hand. He felt her soft fingers and the deep groove of a scar around her left thumb.

In her room the smell of alcohol on her breath deepened. Her eyes were iridescent in the dim light. Like an oil slick, he had always thought. She was laughing quietly, as though at herself, and perhaps it was the laughing and the way she fell onto him that made him feel intoxicated along with her.

Not until later in the night, when her breathing had subsided, did he remember how sober he was. Thanh's eyes were closed as she lay beside him, her breasts barely shadows on her chest. She momentarily resembled a fish, cast in silver slivers of light from the open window, though this image seemed more a trick of the night than anything. Languidly, she rolled away from him. The sheets had fallen to the floor, and Tuan now felt his nakedness like a hollowness in the air. He wanted to be sleepy and wished that he had drunk more. *Clarity can be a horrible thing*, he thought and the dark held him close.

It seemed to Tuan that for as long as he could remember he had not so much lived his life as watched it unfold from a distance, like a reader following the hero of a novel, skipping pages and reading ahead, promptly closing the book if the story seemed destined to turn sour or tragic. Were he to relive his childhood in a photograph, he'd see a thin, fine-haired boy counting his toes on the edge of a pool. He'd see the boy in mid-air, diving feet-first with his eyes squeezed shut. He'd see a mother's short figure walking away on her son's first day of school; the slit of light beneath a bedroom door on insomniac nights; a cage of drowned pet ducklings after a monsoon storm. And then that fine-haired boy would grow into a tall, sturdy young man who worked harder than his father, who spent his teenage life planting trees and building and rebuilding incubators, never crying at sad movies or funerals, willfully nonchalant around strangers but

demanding with himself and people he knew, and whose one recurrent dream was of his family's farm consumed in the flames of a beautiful, raging fire. So the father would scold the son for his carefulness, his stubborn perfectionism, *dreaming of oceans in the desert and of mountains where only hills abound*, not realizing that the son saw the world all too clearly and soberly and expected no more perfection than could be asked from a single drop of rain or a man dying in his sleep, and this was precisely why he eased and steeled himself with his phantom fires, his mountains in the sky.

Tuan turned onto his side and with a finger followed the soft furrow along Thanh's pale back. "Have you ever been to Halong Bay?"

"What did you say?" she murmured, half asleep.

"Nothing," he said. "It is nothing."

## V

When Tuan returned to the farm, he saw his father arguing in the courtyard with a man in a green cap. Clouds had been gathering in the sky as he drove home from Vung Tau, but the morning air here still felt thick with humidity. Three wooden-bed trucks stood parked in the driveway to receive a shipment of ducks. Several farmhands, their shirts soaked with sweat, were loading the birds onboard, clanging the cages against each other, while Tuan's father both argued with the man and barked orders at them. The ducks cackled and fluttered about in their cages, and the clamor made it difficult to hear anyone.

On the other side of the courtyard, two men were installing an iron fence around the front of the guest house. His parents had planned this a while back; "Give our guests some privacy," his father said, "and keep that dog from shitting on the front steps." Atop

the roof of the guest house was yet another stranger, a dark and stocky man who went about shirtless replacing clay tiles that had been damaged in a storm the previous month.

As Tuan mounted the porch, his father hurried over to him. "He says we owe him six hundred ducklings," his father muttered, nodding at the man in the cap, "but the order here says only five hundred. Do you remember taking the order?"

Tuan replied, "Yes. I remember it was five." He could see the man carefully inspecting the cages and eyeing the farmhands as they loaded his goods. He recognized him now from an afternoon meeting a few weeks ago. "I'm positive."

His father sighed heavily. Before Tuan could walk further up the porch steps, his father put a hand on his arm and said, "I thought you'd be gone two days?"

"Phong and I missed each other by a few hours. He went out of town and won't be back for a couple of days. I'll try to go see him next week."

His father's face did not change.

"I thought I'd spend a night by the sea," Tuan added, "since I was already there."

"Might as well." His father's eyes fell. "You should plan better. It's not like you." As he walked back to the courtyard, he said over his shoulder, "Your mother wants to speak to you."

In the formal room his mother was standing, arms akimbo, by the window. She responded to his greeting with a wave of her hand. Tuan did not see his aunt until he crossed the large aquarium in the center of the room. She sat on the sofa with her legs crossed, a glass of ice tea in her hand. She patted the seat next to her.

"Two sisters who are not sisters," he said as he walked to his aunt, who smiled and smelled of perfume, and told him he was too skinny nowadays.

"He works like his father," his mother said, still facing the window. "If that man falls

off the roof, it won't be our fault. He's just walking about like it's nothing at all." She turned to Tuan and his aunt and shook her head. "I think he's Cambodian." The cackling of the ducks was still audible inside the house.

Tuan's mother continued with a story she had been telling Aunt Loan about an incident in Da Lat—something concerning a man who was searching for a young girl. "He didn't know her name or who her parents were. He claimed he'd never even said more than a few words to her." His mother clucked her tongue with amusement. "Anyway, he said he was from Saigon and that he traveled all the way up to Da Lat to look for her. But he never explained why. This man, as old as I am, looking for some nineteen-year-old girl whose face he could hardly remember. Then he smiled and paid for our lunch, and then walked out the restaurant. The strangest man. I can't stop thinking about him."

She crossed the room, past the sofa, and approached the aquarium. She watched an Oscar fish with interest. In a dull and loud voice, as if to no one, she said, "You've become close to one of the kitchen girls."

Tuan sat down beside his aunt, who was now circling the rim of her glass with a finger. The soft, ambrosial smell of her perfume gave him comfort.

His mother continued, "I guess I shouldn't be too surprised that things about the farm have been a bit... *unkempt* since your father and I left. Your father says the egg count is down and one of the dams is leaking. And I see that we've made a few mistakes with orders. That man out front is still arguing with your father." She crossed her arms and continued staring at the fish. "I also shouldn't have to tell you that the workers are talking. They might pretend to be dumb, but they notice everything. You are older now and you can do as you like, but don't forget, Son, that you are the future owner of this

farm—and that she is a girl who works in the kitchen.”

Tuan wondered who had told her. He silenced the impulse to explain himself, which never did much good with his mother. She spoke without facing him, always a sign of gravity. He was ready to tell her that he hardly cared what anyone was saying or thinking; that he and Mi had done nothing wrong; they were good friends and it shouldn't matter that she was a kitchen maid. He insisted to himself that these thoughts were not entirely lies.

“Do you believe everything you hear from the workers, Mother?” He made himself say it, tried his best to avoid a sarcastic tone.

His mother finally looked at him from across the room.

Aunt Loan spoke up: “Your mother asked me about it yesterday, and I told her what I knew.”

Tuan could not remember the last time he turned a bad thought on his aunt, but the sudden sense of betrayal he felt was real. Her presence in contentious family affairs had always been a comfort to him, a reminder to hold his tongue and humor his parents. Boldly, he said to her, “What you knew? What exactly do you know, Aunt Loan?”

“God, your uncle always spoke in that same tone.” She gave him an accusatory smile. “You could never tell if he was being sincere or sarcastic.”

Tuan's mother took a step towards them both but then held back, prepared apparently to let someone else do the talking for her. They had both planned this conversation together. *Sisters who are not sisters.*

“To be honest with you,” his aunt went on, “as much as I always say how similar you and your uncle are, you two are actually different in many ways. And that's neither a good nor a bad thing. Only I know that your uncle was rarely ever uncertain of what he



was doing.”

“I’m not sure I see why Uncle Dai is important to this conversation.”

His aunt nodded and patted the air with her hand. “Remember the walks we used to have together when you were a young boy?” she said. “I would come and get you, and you had this adorable habit of asking me where we were going before you said yes. And you always had to think about it for a little bit. I still see that pause in you now.”

“I don’t think that’s unusual for many people,” Tuan said, shaking his head. “Businessmen, especially, have to think things through. I only want to make the right decisions—that doesn’t mean I’m not in control.”

“Don’t get upset, Tuan, I’m not criticizing you. I’m only trying to make a point.” She gave him a reassuring smile and drank her tea.

Tuan heard his father’s voice calling from the courtyard. His mother turned and grimaced. He was calling for her, and after a moment of feigned ignorance, she reluctantly walked out the room and left Tuan alone with his aunt.

He sat contemplating the tile floor, aware of Aunt Loan regarding his face, his profile, her eyes swollen with that mute and amused tenderness she had always given him since he was a boy, as though she were outside his bedroom window watching him play with his toys. But those eyes now felt intrusive to him, all-knowing, presumptuous.

She set her glass of tea on the coffee table and calmly looked over her shoulder. She leaned towards him and her voice fell: “I spoke to this girl yesterday. I was here to visit your mother for the afternoon, and as I was leaving in the evening, the girl approached me at the front gate and asked me if I knew where you had gone. I still don’t know why she chose me to ask, but after I answered her she said nothing, only whispered a thank-you, and then before she walked away she told me not to tell you that she had asked. I

knew for certain then what I had been suspecting for months now, especially when your parents were away. I've noticed how distracted you get when you're around me and other people, how slowly you chew your food when she's standing by the dinner table. I don't see you much, but I still notice these things. Only it's taken this long for me to be sure. I wonder if you are yourself sure how you feel about her, or even how she feels about you. Your mother and I have come to you with this, and you've yet to say anything for her. Is she someone worth defending, or no one at all?"

Tuan's aunt sat back on the sofa and touched him on the arm. "Don't be angry, Tuan. Your mother might care, but I don't mind that this girl is who she is. My point is only this: there are certain things that we should just know in our gut. Sometimes the heart and the head have nothing to do with it. You're an adult, Tuan—a man, I know. But forget the girl. I don't say this because I don't believe you love her, but because I know you do. Forget her."

She fell silent. She looked satisfied, betrayed no unease—only her mouth remained slightly ajar, the tip of her tongue caressing her teeth, as if she were holding her breath for a response.

The trucks started up in the courtyard, the jarring sound of departure. Tuan jumped when he heard his mother's footsteps. She stopped in the doorway, momentarily suspicious of the silence in the room. But then she approached the sofa. She glanced at her sister-in-law and then at Tuan, and in a voice both prepared and tempered, she said, "Your aunt and I are not ignorant of how it is when people cannot help what they feel. Your father was not the first man I had feelings for. But please consider, at least for a good moment, just consider who you are and what you *really* want. Our—*your*—standing in this town is only part of the situation here. I'm your mother. I

know you too well to let you get carried away and have your feelings get the best of you.”

Tuan allowed himself a moment to think, to keep his mother in suspense, to clothe his sudden nakedness. Her argument meant nothing to him; it was the essence of her judgment, the choice she was now imposing and which he'd been avoiding for so long, that he instinctively resisted at first but then saw, in an instant, as undeniably fortuitous. He would never know for sure if they were directed to his aunt or to his mother, but all at once the words escaped him—

“Don't worry, there is nothing between me and the girl. I would never consider her anything more than an acquaintance.”

His mother looked at him. Whatever strategies she held ready behind her back were suddenly, to her apparent surprise, needless. He did not know, nor care, whether she felt better or worse, or if she even believed him; the moment he told the lie, a sense of renewal flushed over him, as though merely uttering the words had made them true, had given him the power to abrogate the past so that the recent months became a stretch of time he no longer recognized, lived by a version of himself whose spirit was a body stumbling through a dark room. He swallowed and felt a heavy, lingering sensation, as though an anchor had paused in its descent down his chest. He had no name for it, not relief, not uncertainty, not quite acceptance either, so probably it was already regret. A single thought followed: *I will never see Halong Bay.*

He turned to both women and said, “Let's not talk about this anymore.”

His aunt looked momentarily startled. Tuan thought he saw a pale shadow of disappointment flee across her face. She crossed her legs and drank her tea in silence. His mother nodded. She said to him, as though to end the conversation for good, “Your

father just told me we lost some ducks last night. They seem to have disappeared.”

“How many?”

“Your father couldn’t tell.”

It rained that afternoon, a violent storm that flooded the guest house, swept across the courtyard in gusts like the arm of a windmill, and for the rest of the day kept everyone indoors. The ducks, of course, did not mind the heavy rain, and Tuan and the farmhands were soaked every time they went to feed them. There was little else to do during the storm. Toward evening, Tuan emerged from his bungalow and decided to take a walk in the rain. He passed the kitchen house but saw only Bà Bien and another kitchen maid at work.

For the very first time, he knocked on the door of her bungalow. Someone else could have answered but he did not care. He saw himself standing mute and freezing before her in the doorway. There was no answer.

*She could be sick, he thought. Or looking for me. Or avoiding me.* He barred his mind, as he had all day, from a vision of her standing at his door last night and knocking as he now did (*but for how long?*). Tuan followed the path out of the courtyard, his clothes clinging to his body, and he walked hurriedly so that someone seeing him would think he had a purpose and destination for being outside in such torrential rain.

He fell sick that evening, a sudden but welcomed fever, and slept through dinner and into the night. In the morning, his head ached and a vague queasiness kept him in bed for the rest of the day. His mother brought soup. His father brought the paper. No one else bothered him.

The next day found him fully recovered and again in the formal room with his mother

and aunt, joined this time by his father and the parish priest. Father Do was speaking of the decline in contributions every Sunday and how the church needed new wall fans and a new statue of the Virgin Mary to decorate the entryway. Tuan took no interest or part in the conversation; his presence was merely a formality.

Through the open windows, he could see the two men back at work finishing the fence for the guest house, and above them, the same dark and shirtless Cambodian from two days ago, walking about fearlessly on the roof and swinging his hammer around like a baton. The sun had finally come out again and now glared on the window pane.

Tuan's mother was telling Father Do about the churches in Da Lat, how much older and more elegant they were there and how differently the priests performed Mass. Father replied that he was unaware of the differences, to which Aunt Loan remarked that the main difference will always be found in the weekly contributions. At which point a farmhand hurried into the room and, to Tuan's father, said, "Sir, one of the kitchen girls has drowned, I think."

A flurry of questions and replies were exchanged, though Tuan was too stunned to listen or join in. His mother cried out in disbelief, almost angrily. His father rushed from the room with the farmhand, and it took a moment of indecision before his aunt and mother followed them. Father Do glanced at Tuan, as if perplexed by his abandonment, and though there was no intent in it, his face gripped Tuan with guilt. They made their way to the courtyard where Tuan stopped and watched the priest skip ahead with the folds of his cassock bunched in his hands. A moment later, another farmhand scampered past him, throwing back a quick glance as if to question Tuan's standing there in the courtyard.

The heat of the afternoon sun was dazzling. Tuan wandered to the front garden, half

intent on mounting his moped and driving as far away from the farm as the day would let him. As he stood amid the oleander trees, the sweet fragrance of the flowers struck him as obscene. He was reminded of Thanh's breath three nights ago, the smell of his aunt's perfume two days ago, and again everything he had done and said, and he pulled hard at his hair and cried out loud, "My God!"

He returned to the courtyard and saw the two men standing at a halt by the fence and muttering to each other, tools still in hand, peering over the fence they were installing as though it were the only thing keeping them from what was happening in the distance. Tuan looked up at the roof of the guest house. A narrow wooden ladder descended to the ground, and he did not realize how unsteady it was until he had climbed half the rungs.

Once he reached the top, he willed himself to stand upright on the clay shingles. At the far end of the roof, perched a meter from the edge, the Cambodian man stood gazing at the duck ponds with the head of his hammer clinging to a finger. The roof rose on an incline, steep enough to be dangerous, but Tuan found himself careless in his progress over the clay shingles. The Cambodian man was a statue. His tanned back, broad and muscled, gleamed in the sunlight. When Tuan reached him and stood with him shoulder to shoulder, the man kept his gaze and pointed a finger into the distance.

Tuan looked hard over the roofs of the kitchen house and the employee bungalows, along the endless carpet of treetops, the clusters of green foliage that stretched like walls around the ponds. He could see a few of the ponds from this distance, their waters shimmering in the sun's glare, trembling with white clouds of ducks. He was struck by how deserted the land appeared from this height, how beautiful and lifeless.

At last, in a clearing by the bank of a pond, he saw where the Cambodian was pointing. Father Do's black cassock stood before a gathering of people at the edge of the

bank: his mother and aunt's short figures off to the side, three or four other figures in a huddle over the obscured body, and a single farmhand still wading shoulder-deep in the water. Father Do stood erect and appeared to be praying.

"What on earth?" the Cambodian said in a profound voice. "Was it an accident, or did she fall in on purpose? It's a girl was what I heard."

"I don't know. Yes, a girl, but I don't know—"

"Horrible. How deep are those ponds?"

"Too deep."

Someone was running away from the scene. The body was still hidden from view, though Tuan thought he could see a pair of feet jutting from the huddle. He imagined them pulling her from the water, her skin wan and glistening, and he saw then the lurid ghostly face, asleep before them, content in slumber, and he was aggrieved to find himself incapable of picturing her in any other way. He tried to imagine her knocking on his door in the night, waiting and knocking, and again he remembered his words to his mother two days ago. Had it been some kind of revenge for him? Was it wanting her to love as he did and then to feel pain as he did? It occurred to him that he should go to Father Do tomorrow and confess himself, though what words he would use were as unknowable and unsayable as the reasons why she had done this.

He felt a hand seize his forearm and yank him backwards, and he looked down in time to see his left foot scrape the outermost shingle of the roof. He was standing bowed a meter from the edge, the Cambodian still clinging to his forearm, before he realized how close he had come to stepping into the empty air.

"Jesus! You all right?" asked the Cambodian. They retreated further back. "Maybe it's better you get down from here. You'll fall off and we'll have another accident on our

hands.”

He tried to lead Tuan back to the ladder, but Tuan waved him off and made it slowly to the ground.

His absence from the scene would have been a question by now, but he felt capable only of escaping into his bedroom, closing the shades, and sitting in darkness for the rest of the day.

When he passed the kitchen, he saw Bà Bien rearranging the pile of rice bags against the wall. He could hear her sniffing. She whirled around at the sound of his footsteps and stepped forward as if to run to him, but then stopped and regarded him with a quizzical frown. Her eyes were red and swollen.

She returned to the rice bags and murmured: “I can’t believe it. What a thing to happen. So young.” Her head swung from side to side. “So young.” And then to Tuan, as though he had asked her a question, she declared angrily, “I tell all my children to watch after their kids and teach them how to swim before something like this happens.” She straightened herself, smoothed down her apron, and looked around blankly. “And now that’s two I’ve lost this week.”

Tuan was too flustered to be annoyed by the old woman’s distraught mumbling, let alone pity her. She had no idea the depth of his anguish; hers was a sorrow to last no more than a month, for by then another girl would have replaced the lost one and the drowning would be remembered merely as a most unfortunate incident. *An incident. Most unfortunate.* It was then that Bà Bien’s last comment registered in his head.

“Two?” he asked her, nearly crying out.

“Well, yes.”

“But what happened? Who else is gone?”



“Mi. She quit. She’s been gone for two days now—didn’t you know?”

“She left?”

“She didn’t explain—she just up and told me that morning and apologized three or four times. I thought you knew—” Bà Bien sounded annoyed. She turned away and appeared momentarily disoriented as though his question had interrupted her train of thought. She put her hands on her hips and sighed. “The parents of that poor girl—to have her drown away from home like that. And her older sister, all alone now. I can’t bear to go out there. And to think I just saw her this morning—”

Tuan could not decide whether to laugh or cry or ask her again the question. He was prepared to console her if she were to begin weeping, but the old woman went back to work and quietly told him to leave her to her business.

He went directly to his bungalow and sank into bed. His legs and arms, the tips of his fingers, were numb with relief—and yet his mind resisted: the grief he felt only minutes ago had become somehow more complete, for having stolen her back from death, he was now left solely with the recognition of his part in losing her yet again. The drowned kitchen maid’s face invaded his mind, and as he remembered her broken engagement with a pang of guilt, he saw himself as that young man who had loved her, then rejected her, and now lost her forever. Struck by the cruelty of this, but wearied also by the tangled coils of his happiness and his regret, Tuan closed his eyes and, with complete disregard for the sirens wailing outside in the courtyard, fell asleep.

For the next few days, a hush pervaded the farm. Whether out of shock, sorrow, or merely respect for what had happened, everyone on the farm went about their business with little to smile about and even less to say. The drowning was avoided in all

conversation, especially within the family, and though it appeared to Tuan that his parents were upset, an air of glassy civility marked their behavior with him and the workers. The farm had not been this quiet since his uncle's death two years before.

Some light rain would have been fitting and welcomed, but the days dragged under an unrelenting sun, heavy and humid with the vestigial flush of summer. Tuan took advantage of the farm's sullen mood and hardly spoke to anyone. He ate very little and kept himself busy with work. In the evenings he curtailed his walks by the ponds. After three days of taking extended naps in the afternoon and lying awake at night, he decided finally to return to Cát Lát.

The restaurant was closed for the afternoon, but the plump woman was out front sweeping the entrance. She stopped when she saw his Vespa approach and stood there holding the broom like a staff. She had been expecting him; there was the hint of exasperation in her face once she recognized him, which confirmed to Tuan that Mi had come and gone. She turned and walked into the restaurant with a weary air, fully expecting him to follow her inside.

The restaurant was empty but for two or three workers wiping tables and sweeping the floor. The husband was nowhere to be seen. Ceiling fans spun in silence. An old folk song played in the background, the plucked notes of a stick fiddle flung into the restaurant's emptiness where they lingered.

Tuan walked up to the plump woman as she stood behind the counter, wearing glasses now, and waited for her to look up from the mess of receipts in her hand. She did not have a single strand on her head out of place. Her bun was a clenched fist clutching at her hair, tightening what would have been a fleshly face, making it even rounder and

more intractable than it already was.

She spoke before he could open his mouth: “She is not here.”

“May I speak to your aunt?”

She finally looked up. “There is no need for you to speak to her. What more could you possibly want from the old woman?”

Her glasses frightened him. They seemed to magnify her stark, unblinking eyes. Still, he held her glare. “Why do you dislike me?”

“I do not dislike you.”

“You know nothing about me.”

The plump woman took off her glasses and cast the receipts aside. “Mi didn’t have to tell me anything. I know her well enough to understand.” She slowly walked around the counter to stand before him. “And trust me that I am familiar with men like you.” There was a sudden cold affection in her voice. It could have been uncertainty.

“You are familiar with hollow men. I am not a hollow man.”

“Hollow?” She squinted and the corner of her mouth curled as though she were about to laugh.

Quietly, he said, “I have more fire in me than you could ever imagine.” When he said it, he felt himself at the center of great cold space, and expected her to laugh aloud this time. But her face seemed to soften.

“Do you know where she is?” he persisted. “I believe you do—you must know.”

Her mouth grew small. She sighed and crossed her arms. “You know, I raised her myself. The old woman was always too old to pay attention to the girl. I was the one who taught her how to cook, and how to swim, how to ride a bike. She was a good girl, you know. She was a good girl.” She stopped as if to measure her words. “We are no

longer close. I have my reasons—it's no business of yours. But I'm also not one to turn my back on people. I may seem a hard person to you, but I am neither blind nor dull-hearted."

Tuan waited for her to continue but she only stood there and gazed at the sunlit threshold of her restaurant.

"Wait here," she said and walked away toward her house as she had done the first time he met her. She reappeared at the door after no more than a minute. Tuan stepped forward to meet her. He was ready for a confession, a refusal, another evasion, ready to resist and persuade if he had to. But then the plump woman came to him and revealed from her pant pocket a small envelope.

"Here," she said. "She asked me to give this to you if you were to come. And you have. I did not read it."

She remained standing there patiently.

Tuan opened the envelope and then the folded letter inside:

*Tuan,*

*When I last spoke to you in the courtyard, I had a feeling that you knew. And then you left, and I was sure. My guess was right how you had found out. You believe now that I have deceived you. I cannot explain it to you, I cannot, and I would not expect you to understand. Only you mustn't ever think me crazy. You mustn't. Please know that from the very beginning I knew I would finally have to go away. Leave you, I suppose. I have always been alone, and wanted to be. For a while there I forgot.*

Tuan reread the last line twice and looked at the plump woman.

“She’s no longer here,” she concluded quietly. “And I don’t know where she has gone.”

For an instant she appeared to pity him, and so he believed her and, in turn, wanted to tell her how sorry he was for the way things had ended. He wanted to explain everything, the entire story, or at least the very beginning. She stood there with her face coloring like someone who just come in from the cold, and he believed for a moment that she already understood, that there was no need to explain.

“If she is ever in need...” he began, but then he remembered her words to him a few minutes ago and knew that she understood nothing, that she and all the people he could tell it to would never truly understand.

He folded the letter into the envelope and licked and sealed it shut. The plump woman watched him slip it into his shirt pocket. Tuan took one last look around the restaurant. Perhaps her husband will appear from the kitchen. Perhaps he had been listening around the corner the entire time. Tuan did not even try to imagine another meeting with him. The effort felt insignificant. He bowed to the plump woman and walked out of the restaurant.

He did not lose his way leaving Cát Lát this time. He decided to take a farther route home, on a road that skirted a forest of rubber trees planted in perfectly aligned rows. As he passed them, the rows appeared to move in his line of sight like the shadow of a closing door; they resembled narrow, adjoining hallways, stretched into the far vague distance, and he imagined her wandering through them, passing from one hallway into another, through imaginary doorless rooms, never finding the roadside, never wanting to. As the forest receded from view, a sudden fear arose in him. It took a moment, but he soon understood that the fear, as certain as anything he had ever felt, was his knowledge

that he had indeed been loved.

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A life of happiness is a life of diversions and distractions. His uncle once told him this, and as the years passed Tuan believed, at least most of the time, that it was true. He grew older, and certain memories became more vivid, more varied, enduring their evolution in his mind in details rremembered and reimagined over the course of random moments throughout the years. It no longer mattered to him that they might be imperfect. So long as they kept their luster.

He never looked for Mi. In his mind he traveled the length of the country in search of her, rode on a ferry along Halong Bay, into the caves and grottoes, to find her. In reality he did not step beyond the gates of the farm. It was cowardice, he thought at first, in part a way to keep the good memories of her intact; but eventually he saw it as his one selfless deed for her. Her home was not here; it was somewhere far away and unseen, somewhere by the sea perhaps, in the sea, at the depths beneath all light and human breath where one can think a little and be at peace.

He married a woman from Bien Hoa who was three years younger than him, not too pretty he thought but beautiful in many ways. He loved her, they had two children, and never once did he consider being unfaithful. There was one moment a month after their wedding, while they were eating lunch together at a restaurant in Saigon, when she asked him jokingly if he had ever regretted anything in his youth, and he told her that he had once loved another woman deeply before her. But he added that those were the feelings of a young man, and that the older man in him felt the regret as someone who'd already found what he wanted. She understood and smiled and confessed her two lovers before

him. And he felt no jealousy. He said nothing more and never spoke of it again to her or anyone else.

His father eventually passed and left him the order of the entire farm, which continued to prosper, which continued to see infrequent accidents among the workers and the frequent disappearance of ducks, inexplicably. His mother and aunt lived out their widowhoods with him and his family, and they would all often remind themselves of how, long ago, the farm had once been such a quiet place.

Tuan came home one day and found a folded note amid the mail that had arrived on his desk. His name was written on the outside and inside were the words, *i have not forgotten*, which at first he thought was a message from his wife, who might have been referring to their son's upcoming birthday or a guest who was coming that day. But on a second closer inspection, he could not quite recognize the handwriting and thought momentarily that it might be a note from his mother; but then this did not seem right either. Actually, it could have been left for anyone, written by anyone—most likely it was his wife after all who probably scrawled it out in a hurry. But just to be sure, he folded the note and placed it in his drawer where all the other notes lay in an envelope beneath an illustrated book of fairy tales, a bible, and a stack of unsent love letters written long ago and addressed to his wife, who was then not his wife.

Tuan made it a point to tell his children stories whenever the occasion allowed it, otherwise they might never know certain things in life. Sometimes it helped them fall asleep, especially the boy who suffered at a young age from insomnia as his father had when he was young. Other times it seemed to entertain them and fill a void in his relationship with them that he felt was frequently obvious, especially with the girl. But when sometimes he could not think of any story to tell them, or to anyone, he resolved

himself to certain truths he'd learned in life: when he was a younger man, he used to believe that everyone had a secret story to tell, but in the years since he realized that the only stories worth telling were the ones never told.



## MONSOON

Father Linh woke that morning from a dream of drowning water buffalo. He sat up in bed, his throat parched, and remembered fragments of the dream: hooves thrashing, a rainy darkness, the hulking forms of countless buffalo tumbling, floundering, in and out of water, and amid the thunder and rain, the bizarre sound of their drowning, like cats screaming. Father Linh tugged at an ear lobe, blinked his eyes. It felt like evening in the room, though the wall clock read half past six. He poured himself a glass of water from the nightstand and chuckled at the thought of water buffalo wailing like cats. He passed gas beneath the sheets, smiling again as he imagined an exhalation of evil spirits from the night. Above him rain galloped on the rooftop. How appropriate, he thought, finally noticing the morning storm at his window sill.

Unbeknownst to the Father, the first rains of monsoon season had drenched the countryside overnight. Swirling currents overran the roads, engulfed rice paddies, flooded private gardens, seeped into houses beneath the front door. Had Father Linh only looked outside his window, he would have seen the willows and banana trees sagging in the courtyard and, beyond the iron gates, ropes of muddy water snaking their way downhill to the stream that skirted the neighborhood. It had only begun raining last night, and already the stream was overflowing its banks, capable at this point of drowning any number of unlucky animals, water buffalo included.

But Father Linh did not mind the rain. For him, morning showers had the quality of a

soothing song, and on this day, in particular, the musical play of water—of life as it were—inspired him. Next week would mark his ten-year anniversary as pastor of this church, and for days now he had been working on a special homily for Sunday's Mass. Being the lone priest in a mostly Buddhist town, Father Linh felt great pride in the congregation's growth since his arrival. It was crucial, therefore, that his homily be a celebration, a stirring testimony, an affirmation. He had been known to move people to tears with the beauty of his sermons, and the thought now of doing so on Sunday gave him goosebumps. As he mumbled his morning prayers, two decades of the rosary, he wondered if last night's strange dream could offer any possible ideas.

A knock came at his door. Before he could respond, the house boy stuck his bushy head into the room: "Mrs. Phong just called, Father, and says you must come to the house immediately. It's an emergency."

"Someone die?"

"I don't know, but from the sound of her voice, I think it's something much worse."

"What's worse than dying?" said Father Linh with a grin.

When he stepped outside, a thunderous downpour greeted the Father. The church stood on an eminence of land that overlooked much of the surrounding neighborhood, and as he peered down at the houses lining the road, at the clusters of palm and banana trees, at the stretches of farmland in the distance, it seemed everything was sinking and fading under the haze of rain.

He descended the hill toward the Phong house, hunched under his umbrella as a steady stream of water lapped at his heels. This five-minute walk was going to drench him, and the thought of being wet so early in the morning made him sigh dramatically.

He loved a rainy day, but preferred loving it indoors and in bed.

Someone was probably ill at the Phong house. Father Linh knew the family well, had baptized the twin girls, confirmed the oldest daughter, and long known how old and fragile the grandparents were, how apt they were to call on him even when nothing was wrong. Mr. and Mrs. Phong were especially fond of him, and as they were the richest rice farmers in town—and one of the few families with a phone—it was difficult for the Father to turn down their frequent invitations to dinner. Their generous contributions to the church were, if anything, an excuse to indulge them. But then Father Linh was an uncommonly obliging priest. He had no siblings, and his own parents had passed on years ago, and so even though the townspeople sometimes exhausted him with their personal and domestic problems, he relished their trust and attention.

At the bottom of the hill, a large pool of water had flooded a dip in the road. Father Linh lifted the folds of his cassock and waded across the pool. For a moment, he saw himself as a stylish woman from some French painting, one hand holding an umbrella and the other lifting the hem of her dress. His feet and ankles were numb, but for a moment the chill felt pleasant. Looking back up the hill, at the church's towering steeple and cascading walls, at the small rectory where he lived, Father Linh reminded himself of how good it was to have people to help at all.

A few bicycles glided past him on the road, their riders draped in plastic ponchos. Many of the houses in the neighborhood still stood quietly with their doors and shutters closed. The Phong house, as he approached it, looked just as quiet, though its four stories and many windows gave it a deserted appearance.

Mrs. Phong met him at the door with a startled expression, her voice muffled by the hand across her mouth: "The boy, Father. It's the boy."

Father Linh stepped inside the dim and silent house, calmly wiped his brow and balding head. “What is it?”

“My only boy,” she murmured and closed the front doors hastily. “I always knew his strange ways would bring about misfortune. All that time he spends locked up in his room, scribbling away, talking to no one but himself—” She was mounting the winding staircase rather quickly, much too quickly for the Father at this time in the morning. “No wonder something like this has happened. Twenty years old and no interest in girls or playing soccer or anything else but those books, books, books. They’re the fruit of all—” She spoke in intense whispers, as if to herself, and hurried the Father down the long hallway upstairs. She appeared to be the only one awake in the household.

They reached the boy’s room, a cove-like place on the topmost floor, and before entering, Mrs. Phong turned to the Father uncertainly. “It is bad enough he was born with a weak heart.” She opened the door and stepped aside.

Inside the room, the rainstorm sounded louder, more violent, though it felt to the Father that he had stepped into a cube of silence. The first thing he noticed was the large puddle beneath the open window, then the empty bed, a tangle of sheets. He walked to the window and closed the glass shutters, and it was in turning around that he saw Bao Ninh on the wall.

The boy was awake but looked unaware of anyone’s presence, perhaps even his own. His body was fixed upon the far wall, two meters from the ground, at ease as though he were sitting on the edge of an invisible chair, knees out but his feet and back clinging to the bricks, with one arm outstretched like a wing and the other arched over his head as if in the act of scratching it. Frozen in this pose, the boy wore blue and white striped pajamas and the weary expression of a deep sea diver.

Father Linh shuddered, fell back a few steps. He crossed himself and stuttered at the boy, "Mary, mother of God! What have you done?" He did not expect a response, and indeed Bao Ninh made no sign of having heard a thing.

Mrs. Phong was standing nearby. Father Linh could feel her eyes on him, could feel the rising bubble of a question in her silence. He wanted her to say something, anything, so that by sound she might lessen the severity of what they were seeing. Anyone's voice, in fact, would have been welcomed for his own was presently lost.

Footsteps approached from the hallway. He fell further back.

The oldest daughter was the first to come. She wandered into the room, saw her mother standing wide-eyed, saw her priest backed up against the wall, his palms flat on the bricks, and muttered sleepily, "Is the house flooded?" When she turned and saw her brother, her scream was as loud as the crack of thunder that followed.

One by one, the rest of the family rushed into the room: Mr. Phong, the grandmother, the grandfather, the impish twin sisters. Flustered by the sudden excitement, their faces demanded answers: *Who screamed?—What's wrong?—Why is the floor so wet?* But then a gesture towards the wall directed their eyes, and a string of gasps filled the room, a look of terror, a look of grief, a look of shock and disbelief; and once everyone was present and awake enough to see it was no dream, each face turned to the other for something to say.

Finally, Mr. Phong spoke: "Someone come help me find my ax and a pair of scissors." He ran from the room.

"Is he in pain?" said the sister.

"We should go fetch Father Linh," cried the grandmother.

"We should go fetch the Pope," cried the grandfather.

“The Father is here,” Mrs. Phong said.

“Who glued Bao Ninh to the wall?” asked one of the twins.

“Did he get up there by himself?” asked the other twin, who then added, “Is he evil now?”

“We need Father Linh, I say,” the grandmother cried. “He’ll explain all this.”

“The Father is right here, Mother.”

“Oh, well good morning to you, Father. I didn’t see you standing there.”

Mr. Phong came rushing into the room with an ax and a pair of scissors.

“What are you doing?” demanded his wife. “Let the Father handle this.”

“Woman, this isn’t Fátima. Why bring God into this when I can just as easily get the boy down myself—” With that, he leapt onto a chair and started pulling at his son’s feet, which did not budge. He then went for the arms, but they too were immovable. When he started cutting into Bao Ninh’s pajamas, he quickly discovered that both the boy’s shirt and his skin were stuck to the wall. So as the women averted their eyes, he lifted the ax and swung at the bricks. A small crack appeared. He bit his lip and growled, “If I can’t pull him off the wall, I’ll pull the wall off him.” He swung the ax again.

Bao Ninh paid him no attention, hardly even flinched. Though his hair clung to the wall, his head was free, and he now peered down at his body and for the first time appeared to consider his dilemma. The window had crept open again, and the world outside erupted in thunderclap as his father knocked down a small chunk of the wall.

Father Linh, as if awakened by the thunder and the chaos of voices in the room, finally roared: “Do you expect to carve him off the wall? Tearing down this house will not help anything!”

Mr. Phong stopped in mid-swing and looked over his shoulder. It was always rather

startling when Father Linh raised his voice, especially since such intensity seemed unbefitting a face so apt to smile, so round and calm—the wide, porcine nose, the thin eyebrows, a pair of eyes as quiet as the voice he almost always used. Mr. Phong's ax fell to his side, and with reluctance and some embarrassment, he stepped down from the chair.

The room fell silent again as everyone waited for either the Father or Bao Ninh to speak. The boy coughed awkwardly, then murmured, "Someone please hurry and get me a bucket to piss in."

Father Linh waved everyone out of the room. Mrs. Phong returned with a metal bucket and helped her son relieve himself, and then, with a backward glance at the Father, she closed the door behind her.

Alone at last with the boy, Father Linh felt a chill invade the room. His voice, he hoped, was calm: "What happened here?"

Bao Ninh pondered the question beneath the tangle of hair that draped his brow. The boy had profound cheekbones, which seemed to narrow his already squinty eyes, and together they gave his face a puffy, almost stubborn, appearance. Father Linh rarely saw or spoke to the boy, whether at church, around town, or here at the house when he visited, but he had long known the boy to be obsessively studious—"the pouting poet," as he was called by a few neighbors. At his first communion nine years ago, the boy, he remembered, brought along a book and fell asleep during the ceremony.

The Father was about to repeat himself when Bao Ninh spoke up: "Seems I woke up this morning and heard bells, Father. Tiny bells. And then I found myself up here." His voice was barely audible amid the clatter of rain. He was staring blankly at the floor, as though regarding a reflection of himself on the clay tiles, and for a moment Father Linh

thought he was under some slumberous trance.

“Are you in pain?” the Father asked.

Bao Ninh shook his head, wiggled his fingers. “It almost feels like I’m lying down and you’re the one on a wall.”

Father Linh edged closer to the boy and reached for his hand, then thought second of it. He brought his own hands together and said, “Close your eyes, child, and we shall pray together.”

But Bao Ninh continued staring, and after a moment finally turned to him, his eyes wide and luminous, as though he had just awakened and recognized who the Father was. His voice was unexpectedly loud: “I have not taken communion these last few Sundays, Father.”

“I didn’t mean to hear your confession just yet, child.”

“I’m not confessing anything. I’m simply telling you that I no longer care.”

“About what?”

“As of last night, I’ve decided to stop praying altogether.”

“Stop praying? But why?”

“It’s an empty obligation, Father. Merely wishful thinking, I say—” The boy stopped and his brow furrowed slightly. He looked wide awake now. “I’ve memorized these words and repeated them in my head since I was a boy. I could recite them now in a boxing match if I had to. There’s no integrity in that, is there? And I’m usually thinking of other things, anyway, like the book I’m reading or what I’ll be doing tomorrow. Before bed, I sometimes say my prayers while I go to the toilet, just to get them out of the way.”

“And you use the same hand to cross yourself?”



“On many occasions, Father.”

“Well that’s just.... you should be ashamed.”

“I’ve also decided guilt is not a good reason to pray either.”

“Now don’t be foolish, that’s hardly the attitude. Be wary of where this will lead you.” Father Linh heard his own voice quiver. He had a notion of making the boy blink somehow, though his harshest glare at the moment seemed rather ridiculous and futile. Their conversation suddenly felt absurd to him, the boy’s indifference as bizarre as his exile on the wall. “Have you no fear?” he asked Bao Ninh.

“Fear of what?”

“Well, don’t you realize prayers are for the grace of your *soul*?”

“I don’t know what that is, and I’m afraid I’ve never felt it, or ever will. And you, Father, I doubt you’ve ever felt it either.”

Father Linh considered this accusation and realized he had no personal proof to challenge it. He coughed loudly and reminded himself of the boy’s present predicament. “So if not the grace of God,” he said, “what *is* important to you now?”

Bao Ninh glanced at the mess of papers that cluttered his desk, at the bookshelves lining the walls of his room. “I have all I need in this room,” he said.

“But that’s it. Don’t you see?” Father Linh looked around the room and crossed himself. “This is a sign. Look what has happened to you—”

“Yes. This.” Again, the boy regarded himself. “I must say, this is quite strange. Perhaps it’s a mere coincidence, Father. A cosmic blunder.” He gave a luxurious sigh. “Or perhaps it is my fate, unexplainable but worth bearing.”

Father Linh stared at him. “A vainglorious suggestion, child,” he said quietly. The draft was making him shiver, and he went again to close the window. “So why have you

told me all this? What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, Father. Perhaps it *is* my one last confession to you."

The boy lifted his eyes to the ceiling and took a deep breath, as if breathing in the scent of the room, a scent (it appeared to the Father) of some naïve and preposterous triumph.

"Father," Bao Ninh said. "Please don't speak of this to my family, especially my mother. I'm certain she wouldn't take this well."

"And what do you suggest I tell her?" the Father replied. He felt like scolding the boy, but then something cold in the boy's demeanor, a coldness in the air, in fact, made him inarticulate, made him want to flee the room. "I'll return tomorrow," he said, "and we shall talk then. Tonight, I *will* pray for you." And he walked out the door.

Downstairs, in the formal room where the windows were still closed and the front doors still locked, the Phong family stood about arguing quietly.

"I don't want people coming in here and thinking my son's the devil," Mr. Phong said.

"Oh, but this could very well be a miracle," insisted the grandmother.

"Hanging on a wall doesn't sound like a miracle to me. I'm sure it's quite uncomfortable up there."

"Will he be able to sleep on the wall?" asked one of the twins.

The other twin said, "Maybe if we feed him a lot of food, he'll get heavy and slide off."

"Or maybe tomorrow morning we'll find him back in bed," suggested the sister.

"You're all being silly now," Mrs. Phong said. "This is a sign from God. I am sure of it. What it means we don't know. But the boy has his faith and so do we. All we can do is pray and leave it to Father Linh." She turned to the Father and nodded her head.

“What did he say, Father? What happened? What should we do now?”

“I don’t know,” he said, avoiding her eyes. Everyone in the family looked at him in silence, as if disappointed by his reply. Their quiet sincerity, their solemnity, was something he was unused to on his previous visits to the house. He led them in a quick prayer and promised he would return as soon as he could.

The rain was stilling raging outside, and on the way home Father Linh gave up on his umbrella and his sandals. Before long, his cassock was soaked and his feet caked with mud. He passed a rice paddy, now a pale green sea where children were swimming and screaming playfully. The Father felt too exhausted to warn them out of the waters. All at once, he was seized with bewilderment and pity, for the family, for the boy, but also an inexplicable outrage. It seemed to him that Bao Ninh had been speaking from the depths of some ludicrous dream, and had the Father not possessed a moral reserve of sympathy and hope, he would have believed the boy deserving of this strange affliction.

At the evening service that night, only half the normal parishioners attended. The Father’s homily about familial honor and loyalty was one he had used five years ago, and tonight he recited it indifferently. The rain, he knew, was drowning out his voice. Later in the night, after the church was emptied, after the cook, the housekeeper, and her two sons had left for their own homes, the father sat alone in his room and tried to write his special sermon for next Sunday.

Words usually came easily to the Father; he fancied them the sword and scepter in his execution of the Lord’s truth. Tonight, however, words eluded him. He managed to write one line—“The might and gift of the Lord lies in the Mystery of our devotion to Him”—but what else to include remained another mystery. For hours, he tried to incorporate anecdotes about his ten years here in town, the weddings he had performed,

the funerals he had overseen, the illnesses and recoveries and triumphs he had witnessed. But in light of the events that morning, all these stories seemed insignificant to what now felt like the beginnings of a failure.

Outside, the rain fell about the house as though upon an ocean, and for a moment, perhaps the first time in his life, a tide of loneliness washed over the Father. He murmured his evening prayers, laid his head upon his desk, and forgetting to pray for Bao Ninh, let the rain lull him to sleep.

When he returned to Bao Ninh's room the next morning, he found Mrs. Phong feeding the boy chicken porridge and his twin sisters painting his toenails with nail polish. Bao Ninh ate his porridge quietly and looked satisfied by their company, nodding and shaking his head when his mother spoke to him. The room was alive with music and voices. A record player sat on the desk playing old folk songs, the volume turned high enough to be heard over the ongoing storm. One twin was telling Bao Ninh ghost stories while the other sang along with the songs on the record player. Spirals of burning incense hung from the ceiling to keep the mosquitoes away.

"I'm glad you've come to spend time with us, Father," Mrs. Phong said. "Your presence, at least, is comforting." She hushed the twins. "The girls were frightened at first, but now they can't stay away from this room. We were all uncertain at first, too, but now the entire family wants to keep Bao company. We've actually seen more of him today and yesterday than we have all year. I suppose coming in here makes things feel less terrible."

Father Linh nodded and sat on the bed.

Bao Ninh's sister soon came with needle and thread and sewed the tear in her

brother's pajamas, offering also to sew the small hole in the chest of Father Linh's cassock, which had been there for years. He kindly thanked her and said no. As he sat there on the bed, he watched the women at Bao Ninh's feet, singing instead of weeping, seeing to his every need like four maids before their king.

When Mrs. Phong and her daughter left, Mr. Phong entered and greeted the Father with a bow. He then stood there eyeing his son and the cracked wall beside him, back and forth as if contemplating another strategy, all the while his right foot tapping in rhythm with the music. He left the room and soon returned with a cleaver and a plate of mixed cement. Standing on a chair, he patched the crack in the wall. He looked again at the Father and said, "His mother is always right."

Before long, the grandmother and the grandfather joined them in the room. They brought the Father coffee and cigarettes, and began telling their grandson stories about their life, happy to have the Father and the twins there to listen on. The grandmother talked about her days in the convent as a little girl, how horribly mean the nuns were ("No offense to you, Father.") and how much she missed her family when she was away. The grandfather spoke of his time in the war and, pulling down his pants, showed everyone the scar on his left buttock in the shape of a diamond—"Sat on a dead man's knife, I did."

They talked on into the afternoon, invigorated by their own voices, by the strains of music and rain, until Father Linh was overcome by the opulence of his surroundings and the softness of Bao Ninh's bed and remembered his own chambers back at the church. The thought of returning home saddened him, struck him as a distance too far to travel, through so much rain, so much mud and silt, all the way home to a church and rectory pervaded by the echoes of prayer, where his housekeeper dusted the pews in silence,

where her two sons whispered playfully as they hunted for mice, where the cook prepared his dinner in a kitchen lit by fireflies and a lamp older than she. Father Linh watched Bao Ninh on the wall, watched him staring at the window that had crept open again somehow, and realized at once the envy in his heart. For an instant, he wanted to linger in this house, in this room, and with this family for the rest of his life.

As the day progressed, the Father forgot about his duties at the church, forgot even his plans to call the bishop for assistance, the pope perhaps if it would come to that. Bao Ninh's family continued frequenting the room, even had lunch and dinner together on the floor. There was no work to be done in this weather, and so it seemed the family brought their lives to the room: the sister her dresses to sew, the twins their toys, the grandparents their photographs from years and years past. Every few hours, the Father was asked to lead everyone in prayer, and it was during these times that he remembered the dilemma at hand and his voice and will grew more fervent. He noticed that Bao Ninh, who told his mother that he would follow along in his head, had his eyes open during the prayers.

When evening approached and everyone gradually went off to bed, their departure, one by one, left the Father with a sense of impending solitude. When Mrs. Phong finally stood up to go, she beckoned the Father to her and whispered, "I have faith that this will be over soon. You must believe it, too." She smiled and left the room.

The Father was alone again with Bao Ninh, who was staring sadly at his bookshelves. He turned off the record player, and stood quietly by the bed.

Finally, he said, "I can tell from your eyes that you are not happy up there."

"Only because I must bear the boredom, Father."

"But can you bear the loss of your spirit?"

"My spirits have not yet left me."

“Oh, but the spirit of God—where is *that*?”

Bao Ninh peered at the floor.

“This is what I fear.” Father Linh sighed loudly and let a moment pass, waiting for the boy to meet his eyes. He pointed at the open window. “Take a look outside.”

Bao Ninh was looking at Father Linh’s finger. The priest dropped his arm. “Can’t you see what has happened? Look through the window, and behold the coming flood. Don’t you see you are the cause of this?”

“Me?”

“But of course. The Lord works in mysterious ways. The rain, all of this—” he swept an arm across the room, “—all that has happened is His message to you. Pray with me, and things shall be rectified. Here. Now. We’ll pray together.”

“I can’t do that, Father. Not in good conscience.”

“Good conscience? You’re stuck on a wall—don’t you want to get off?”

“But I would only be pretending, Father. It would mean nothing. Besides, being up here on the wall has allowed me time to think.”

Father Linh waited.

Bao Ninh finally looked out the window and said, “There is too much cloudiness in the world. And what you offer, Father, are absolutes that simply do not exist.” He nodded at his desk. “Look there, Father, at that pile of papers. They are my poems. Hundreds of poems that I’ve struggled to write for years now, even in my sleep. They mean more to me than anything I know. And yet a week ago I was in despair, ready to throw them away, burn them all, until I realized that my struggle all these years has been God’s cold and grieving hand on my shoulder. But now I feel nothing there. Now, everything is possible.” And again he lifted his eyes to the ceiling. “One day I’ll be the

greatest poet this country has ever known.”

“Not up there, you won’t.”

“But don’t you understand, Father? What motivates life but our own selfish needs: desire, ambition, jealousy? Could it be my choice is the least selfish, the least sinful, of the three?”

“Ah, so that is it. The poet in you will save you as well? You’ll break your mother’s heart, you know. And your family who loves you so.”

“I believe I love them, too, Father. But in the end, an artist’s only responsibility is to his art.”

Father Linh grimaced. He remembered how sick the boy was years ago. It was his heart, they said, and at one point the family ordered his coffin and his grandmother prepared his clothes for the grave. Mrs. Phong came to the church every day for three months and prayed for an hour in the morning and for an hour in the evening. Father Linh wanted to remind Bao Ninh of all this, and was about to, but visions of death flickered in his mind—

“And what of oblivion?” he declared soberly. “If there is no faith, there is only oblivion. Your art may outlive you, but will it help you bear the anguish of being outlived?”

Bao Ninh leaned his head against the arched arm and looked down at Father Linh. “I’m sorry, Father,” he said. “But there is nothing I can do. Please, if you could, turn on the music before you leave.”

“But listen, child—”

“The music, Father. Please.”



As Father Linh departed, the music from Bao Ninh's room drifted in the air. It followed him down the winding staircase, caressing his back and curling over his shoulders, though it seemed also to dull the light from the chandelier, lifting shadows onto the high walls so that when the peals of thunder sounded, the darkness trembled, for the house now felt alive and deep in slumber.

Father Linh found himself descending an endless flight of stairs. He remembered his unwritten sermon at home, and the thought of having to finish it, of having failed here, and now of leaving this house, this family, made him ache inside. It was not fair, he thought, that someone like Bao Ninh possessed what he, a man of boundless faith and devotion, could never have. With a candle in hand, he wandered from room to room and peered at each family member asleep in bed, wrapped in the furious comfort of rain and thunder: the sister under her pink covers, the grandparents side by side, Mrs. Phong, her hand on her husband's chest, and the twins lying on the tile floor, arms draped around each other. Despite the torrential rain outside, he could hear the sound of their breaths rising and falling. Eventually, the Father came upon an empty room with an empty cot in the corner, and without thinking, without even the slightest hesitation, he curled himself under the warm covers and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, the Father was awakened by the thunder. The darkness and emptiness of the room brought him to his feet, disorienting him momentarily, and he found himself walking blindly again through the corridors of the house, up, up the staircase, and back to Bao Ninh's room where music still played softly.

He stepped into the room and into a standing pool of water that rose past his ankles. He would never know, later on, if it was a trick of the night, a vision encumbered by

sleepfulness, but Father Linh now saw Bao Ninh fixed upon the opposite wall, next to his bookshelves and above the hill of poetry on his desk, still in the same pose like a toy ballerina asleep in her glass globe. Instead of panic, the sight only brought the Father a more intense drowsiness, as though the weight of all he had seen were a swiftly sinking anchor in his chest. He waded, splashing, through the pool of water, toward Bao Ninh's bed, but did not hear the sound of his progress for all the thunder roaring outside. As he lay his head down upon the pillow, he heard a deep voice speaking to him, coming not from the boy asleep on the wall, but from the record player it seemed, but his eyes closed before he could piece any of the words together.

Father Linh woke in the morning with a faint ringing in his ears. He sat up in bed and looked around the dark room, stricken by a feeling that he had been abandoned in the house. The rain had ceased, its sound on the metal roof fading into a hollow kind of silence, sudden and heavy, so that now a forgotten stillness overcame the room. To the Father's left, Bao Ninh had returned to the far wall and was snoring quietly. Perhaps it was not a flood, after all, he thought.

The Father felt as though he had been asleep for months, then realized he had forgotten, for the first time in his life, to say his prayers before going to bed. The guilt made him cringe. It seemed the awareness of himself in someone else's bed brought about a weakening of his moral will, so that now he wanted nothing else but to escape from this house and return to the church. And yet, as he stared up at Bao Ninh still on the wall, an intense affection burgeoned in his heart, not for the boy, he realized, but for that sense of himself as a creature reborn, rousing not only from sleep but from a body no longer his own.

Father Linh rose to his feet—the floor, he noticed, was dry—and approached the boy's desk. Bao Ninh's poems lay in a mess of papers, some pristine, some formerly crumpled, his handwriting ornate and frantic across the pages. He lifted them to the light of the window and began reading, one after the other, and soon found himself intoxicated by the power of the boy's poetry. His own unwritten sermon came to mind, and Father Linh could read no more. Bao Ninh's words were more beautiful than anything he had ever written or could ever conceive of in his mind, a beauty so wrought and terrible and truthful that he would have believed God, himself, had hidden in the ink of the boy's pen. But then this could not be, the Father said to himself. The boy still needed to be saved, had to be saved, and for an instant the deep voice to which he fell asleep last night echoed in his head. He saw the moment had come for drastic action.

Slowly, as quietly as he could, the Father gathered up the papers on the desk and held them to his chest. Cowering from the ceiling, from the closed eyes of the boy on the wall, he hurried out of the room, descended the staircase, and without once looking back walked out the front door.

Outside, dawn was approaching. Tree branches leaned over the road, dripping water onto the Father's head as he walked. A cool breeze caressed his face, wafted through the hole in the breast of his cassock. In the far distance, he heard bells, and for a moment, he believed he was the first person to wake in town, in the world, as it were. The countryside had never been this green, this clear, this quiet.

Again, he passed the flooded rice paddy, whose waters by now had climbed the roadside as though lying in wait for someone to pass. Father Linh stopped and regarded the paddy with something approaching peace. He felt then that the agony of the world was nothing more than a test, a trial, and if one were to awake from a night of fitful sleep,

it was best to say a prayer and go on with things as normal, because at the end of the day the mystery would be all too overwhelming to bear. Two days of rain had now ended, and eventually it will rain again. And so there it was.

With the papers thrust to his chest, he stepped into the paddy and waded into the depths. After some distance, he flung the papers up in the air, watched them flutter and swirl around him, then come to rest on the surface of the water, where they floated.

Father Linh waded in deeper and deeper (not too deep, he thought), until the water reached his waist, his stomach, his chest, the entire time his voice growing louder: “The Lord is my Savior, the Lord is my Savior, The Lord is my Savior...”

## THE GIFT

When his daughter was twelve years old, Nguyen Van Lam began noticing in her a strange taste for violence. Until then she had given him little reason to worry or to think her any less traditional a daughter than her three older sisters. He often figured she was normal for what she was not: not dumb, not mopish, not devious or rebellious, not even tomboyish for that matter. She would become, many years later, both a wife and a widow before he understood how feeble this logic was, for at the time he could only say that fatherhood had its limitations. A decade in the war had separated him from the family, and upon returning home for good, he realized how little he knew about his five children, particularly this daughter, named Nguyen Trâm-Mai—the youngest, the prettiest, and for him the most beloved.

She was twelve when her only brother was beaten one day by two neighborhood boys. The row began on the way home from school, in the deserted square outside the church. She alone stayed behind while her sisters rushed home to call their father. When Lam arrived, he found her seated on an old tree stump with her hands in her lap, drawing blind circles in the dirt with a toe and watching the two boys land blow after blow to her brother's body, his cries muffled and the kicked-up dust clinging to his bloodied face, as he lay pinned and writhing on the ground. Lam chased and cursed the boys away and in his bewilderment forgot about Mai's presence in the faint shadow of the church, forgot even later on, as a neighbor drove them to the hospital, that he had left her by herself in

the square. Not until after his son was taken home and lying in bed, with his arm in a cast and thirteen stitches on his face, did Lam finally remember that his daughter had been there and had witnessed everything. He noticed that while everyone was gathered around the son's bed, Mai was alone at the other end of the house, curled upon the couch with her hands between her thighs, fast asleep.

Months later, this image of her on the couch would invade his mind at moments when he loved her most. Those tranquil cheekbones, the mouth slightly ajar, a forehead as smooth as porcelain: that expression of blissful childish indifference would return to him and make her acts of kindness seem more complicated than they should be; so that when she bought him cigarettes without being asked, or fanned her mother to sleep during the hot afternoon, or hushed the neighbor's colicky baby in her arms, Lam—who once spent three days on the jungle floor calmly waiting for enemy footsteps—found himself distracted by vague feelings of doubt.

Over the years, there were other moments of odd behavior: a look, a gesture, an incident made severe in memory. And although they were rare enough for him to believe he was overreacting, although he had faith in the notion that men need not show their fears unnecessarily, his love for the girl kept him privately wary.

More so than anyone he knew, Nguyen Van Lam was paranoid about forgetting the important things. When he was young, his father had said that “what was easily forgettable was worth remembering the most,” and though Lam did not believe this was true of everything, his father's solemn voice lingered in his mind. Once he became a husband, a father, the protector of his own family, he decided that everything had its ounce of importance. He made a point of remembering the weather on the days his children were born, the exact date of their baptisms, the fact that his wife prayed with her

eyes open, that his son had a fear of dogs, that his oldest daughter never went to bed without using the bathroom at least twice. Remembering details helped him heed his father's words, helped him suffer the doubts and uncertainties of fatherhood.

But with Mai, it was different. At her uncle's funeral, when she was two years old, she cried during the ceremony and did not stop until he placed his army beret on her head. Then, as if struck by some strange giddiness, she began laughing and dancing at his feet with the oversized cap balanced on her head, tipped over her eyes, giddy still when it came Lam's turn to cast his handful of dirt upon her uncle's coffin. Ever since then, he bought her hats on special occasions—on his visits home from the war, when she graduated from school, when she became engaged. But attached as he was to this memory of her, it would not come to help him forget the day she sat on an old tree stump and watched two boys nearly beat her brother unconscious. If anything, the two memories merged, one an amorphous shadow of the other.

So when, decades later, Mai's husband of ten years was found drowned in the river one summer morning, Lam was horrified but not shocked. Inside, perhaps without knowing it, he had been awaiting this moment for years.

\* \* \*

They found him floating on his stomach. At dawn his body appeared along the far banks of the east river, undulating against the early morning swells near a block of bungalows and shacks, one sandal still clinging to his toes and his legs entwined in rotten banana leaves. It was hard to spot him at first with all the trash and broken water coconuts strewn along the bank, some in the water, some in the mud. They said there was a half-empty bottle of rice wine bobbing in the water twenty feet away from him with the cap still firmly attached. It could have been anyone's.

When they told her the news, she did not cry. When the body was brought to the house, she crossed her arms, stared at it momentarily, then withdrew to her room. At the funeral, flanked in the pew by her eight and nine-year-old daughters, she sat stiff-backed and expressionless, like some unhappy queen too dignified to accept consolation. Friends and relatives attended out of respect for her and the family, but had they been complete strangers, they'd have had no way of knowing who the widow was or whether she was there at all.

As he sat beside her and the children, Lam watched the solemn faces in the congregation and tried his best to share their sympathy. He saw what they saw: the wife of a man taken in morbid death, a young widow perhaps too grief-stricken to show emotion. He even believed, as they did, the possible deeper truth, that she had fallen out of love with a husband who, sooner or later, would have drunk himself into another grave. Indeed, this was the same man who pissed on their front porch after a night of drinking, the same man who sometimes forgot his children's names when asked, a man not seen on Sunday morning in years, whom they knew would surely have done her no good alive.

But Lam could not help his suspicions. *Drowned in a dark river of mud and feces*, he imagined, and his prayers buoyed up his son-in-law's bloated, floating carcass. Was this wrong, Mai's husband lying pale and unrecognizable in a casket before her while others wept and she sat quietly with a face of grim content?

Lam closed his eyes for the rest of the funeral. His lips moved but his prayers were feigned, for in his mind he was conjuring up memories of his youngest daughter that no one else had. There was another reason why he never forgot her odd behavior as a child. Mai only acted that way in his presence, and it seemed to Lam she would awaken this



dormant personality for him and him alone.

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From the day she was born, she had always clung to him. As a baby, she would only stop crying in his arms and at night slept by his side. Growing up, she never disobeyed him, followed him everywhere he went, and often hummed songs she heard him sing. He left for the war the year she turned two and for the next decade he saw her only two or three times a year. But during those visits home, his wife would tell him how differently Mai behaved with him around. “She argues less with her brothers and sisters and sleeps better at night,” his wife would say, “and with you here, it’s like she forgets to talk back to me.”

Lam usually came home in those days to find his children quiet and timid, as though a stranger had arrived to stay at their house. It would take a day or two for them to talk and laugh with more abandon, to argue with each other again, to eat with ease at the dinner table. With the exception of his wife, Mai was the only person who seemed comforted by his return to the household. She asked him about his life away from the city, from home—why, for instance, he fought in the country, to which he could only say that the city was too busy and crowded for the business of fighting. She often sat by his side in the afternoons and recounted stories he had missed while he was away: the new family across the street, the girl her brother was in love with at school, the time it rained for three days straight and flooded the front room. The other children spoke to Lam and sometimes even joked with him, but it was Mai who kept him company without being asked. Once, when she was eight years old, Lam came home after a four-month absence to find that she had preserved a game of checkers left unfinished between them from his

last visit. She had made a drawing of their positions on paper, and before he left that same week, they resumed the game, and he tried his best to let her win.

When Mai turned fifteen (a few years after a mine explosion shattered Lam's ankle and sent him home for good), her name had become well known in the neighborhood. She won many honors and awards at school, which was no surprise considering her talent at home of winning card games, arguments, and the wary respect of her mother, from whom she had inherited her dislike for losing. Her sisters loved her, of course, but Lam figured they nested a little envy inside. Her oldest sister was married that year, and at the wedding Mai sang songs for everyone and even charmed the priest into dancing with her at the reception. "Whoever ends up marrying her," the priest would say afterward, "if he's a jealous man, he'll never stop worrying, and if he's a lazy man, he'll regret it." The other guests agreed, and so did Lam. He noticed that Mai received more attention that day than her sister. By the end of the night, he realized he had not only lost his oldest daughter to marriage, but would probably lose his youngest one sooner than he thought.

But in Lam's mind, his daughters were all sculpted from the same stone, the older teaching the younger what their mother taught them, what all women should know. His oldest was a seamstress and married now at twenty, to a math teacher oddly enough, though she'd always hated math in school; the one below her, at eighteen, worked as a clerk at the hospital where she pined for a new doctor every month; and his middle child, a meek and plain seventeen-year-old, whiled her days away writing poetry and helping her mother with household duties her older sisters could no longer do. Lam insisted to himself that the only difference between these three girls and their youngest sister was that Mai was the brightest and, incidentally, the prettiest ("Like my very own Japanese daughter," his wife used to say), and that anything beyond that was a mere difference in

personality. But now and then Mai made him change his mind.

She came home from school one afternoon and calmly marched into the kitchen without greeting or looking at him. He saw her face from the corner of his eye and wondered, as he continued reading the newspaper, if what he saw had actually been blood. It was common in those days to see his son this way, but never his daughters. As soon as he heard his wife's cry from the kitchen, his first thought was who had done it.

"Phuc did," she replied, averting her eyes.

"Why?" he asked her. There was a half-inch cut on her upper lip, a flower of red across her cheek.

"Ông Binh's daughter?" cried his wife. "What did that girl do to you?"

"We were arguing outside her house, and she got mad and cursed at me and said I was stupid and weak. So I pushed her and she tripped and fell. Then Ông Binh came out and slapped me."

"Slapped you?" Lam said. "Enough to make you bleed?" Already he felt his fists clenching, his fingernails digging into his palms. Mai was about to say something else, but he did not stay to hear it.

When he arrived at the house a few blocks away, Binh's wife dropped her broom on the porch and began shaking her head and hands at him. "No, Ành Lam," she said, "Please—there is no fight for you here!" She spoke as if out of breath. "My husband has no fight with you!"

But Lam was not looking at her. The front doors were open, and from where he stood below the porch steps, he could make out a figure cowering in the darkness of the house. Directed at the wife, his words came out in a growl: "Tell that boy to come out here." The figure shifted in the shadows.

“Please go home, Ành Lam—” Binh’s wife said. She had noticed the brass knuckles on his right hand. “Please, Ành Lam.”

Lam raised his voice: “Tell him, if he doesn’t come out now, I’ll go in and get him myself.”

Binh appeared then at the doorway and stepped gingerly out onto the porch. He stood hunched as though there were weights on his back.

Lam moved as if to mount the porch steps, sending Binh and his wife retreating toward the wall, but then he stopped, was silent for a moment. He pointed a finger up at Binh and spoke in the calmest voice he could muster: “If you ever touch my daughter again, I’ll come and beat you like a child.”

Binh was about to speak, but his wife waved her hands in his face to shut him up.

A small crowd of people, mostly young boys, had gathered nearby to watch. Lam paid them no attention. As he walked away (his limp by then hardly noticeable to most people), he flung his brass knuckles on the street and heard the boys scramble behind him to snatch it. His mind wandered momentarily before he realized that he had taken the wrong way back home. His rage returned and made him regret abandoning a worthy fight. He could have easily leapt onto that porch and struck Binh where he stood, floored him with a single blow. But what stopped him was the slight figure of Binh’s daughter behind him in the doorway, her face visible enough in the afternoon light for Lam to see the gash on her brow and her dark, bruised eye, swollen shut.

That night, when everyone had gone to bed and Lam sat smoking on his front porch, Mai wandered out of the house and knelt by his side. She leaned in closer, and in the arc of pale light that flooded half the porch, her face looked like a pearl.

“Father,” she whispered. “After she fell, I kicked her. That’s why Ông Binh slapped

me. Please don't tell anyone."

\* \* \*

(There was another time, much earlier, and perhaps he thought nothing of it then. Mai was eight or nine years old and had accidentally broken her mother's statuette of Saint Joseph, given as a gift by her deceased grandmother and blessed by the priest at church. They were alone in the front room, her sweeping the floor and him smoking on the sofa, when he heard the statuette shatter on the floor. She yelped and he turned to see her eyes well up with tears, her face ashen and strained. He called her name three or four times, but she did not hear him. She remained frozen on her knees until he approached her and squeezed her elbow. He thought she was crying out of fear—the certain whipping she would get from her mother. But as she knelt on the floor and held the shards of china in both hands, some inexplicable grief seemed to seize her, as though she had just destroyed something precious beyond mere material or sentimental worth, destroyed St. Joseph, himself, in porcelain flesh, his once smooth and lustrous body now in pieces, that destruction irrevocable. Lam swept up the mess and quietly scolded her for crying. And then he promised to tell her mother that he had broken the figurine.)

\* \* \*

The police said Mai's husband was indeed intoxicated when he died, that most likely he must have stumbled drunk into the river and lost himself in the deep waters of the night. For the family and the neighborhood, this news only confirmed what had been assumed all along. Two young men reported seeing him at a café drinking with friends the night before. The woman who owned the late-night *banh bao* stand near the café said

he lumbered by and pestered some of her customers. There were also two children who swore to their parents that they had heard him singing outside their window. Lam had no reason to doubt what people were saying, and in the months following the funeral, when he was reminded of what he used to tell his children, what his own father had told him, that “everything has its ordered place,” he felt inclined to believe the death was both accidental and inevitable.

He had never liked his son-in-law. He gave his blessing back then because Mai was in love and, with the stubborn romanticism of all young women, could not imagine herself with any other man. The boy was handsome and mild, some said charming, but over the years he became skinny and shiftless from his vices. He reminded Lam of those soldiers in the war who were neither cowardly nor brave, whom the war had only made lazy, because once they returned home, no one, not even their loved ones, saw any value or threat in them. They were not smart enough to be endearing, not strong enough to be bullies. Their mediocrity doomed them to indifference, and like them, Lam’s son-in-law was a failure—a harmless fool who failed at being a father and a husband, who once forgot his five-year-old daughter at the market, who once gave his wife stolen flowers to apologize for losing three months’ salary in a card game, who once went to his daughter’s first communion drunk and fell asleep on the pew in a suit he borrowed from a friend. His death did not sadden Lam; once the shock of it faded, his only concern was what had led up to it.

Months before the drowning, Lam came to visit his grandchildren one afternoon, and as he turned into the small alley that bordered their house, he saw Mai and her husband arguing loudly outside. He stopped where he was and veered out of sight, watching the scene behind a grove of chestnut trees.

Her husband appeared sober, his voice sharp and animated, as were his hand gestures, stabbing the air in front of Mai's face. But angry as he looked, Mai spoke to him without flinching or giving ground. Their voices grew louder still, but Lam was too far away to hear what they were saying. A few neighbors walked by, glanced at them, and went on their way, apparently familiar with these spats. Mai began interrupting and shouting at her husband when he abruptly reached out and slapped her across the face. Lam lurched forward, scratching his cheek against a tree branch, on the verge of barking out their names. But then he saw Mai swing her arm and strike her husband's face with the back of her hand, and whether from the force or the shock stagger him back a few steps. Regaining himself, he could only stare at her with what from a distance looked like dumfounded grief, as though it had been a child and not his wife who had just struck him. Mai walked into the house and left him standing there holding his jaw. A minute later, he wandered away down the alley.

Lam tried following him but soon decided it was best to leave things alone. The family had long known about Mai's marital problems, and he was not one to interfere. "If he hurts her, I'll kill him," he once told his wife, "but beyond that, their business is their business." And to himself, he'd also say that to know as little as possible about their business was the best and only way to avert his eyes. Lam was of the mind that fathers not only give away their daughters to marriage, they relinquish them, and that the husband's job thereafter was to protect and provide—the job of the father only to love and keep his distance.

Lam returned home and kept silent about what had happened. His wife already knew too well about Mai's marriage, and the news would only worry her more. And as for Mai, there was no use in confronting her, for as it was, Lam could still not decide on the

importance of what he had seen, whether he could even help her if she needed it.

He invited himself to dinner at her house that night. Mai's husband was not at home, and though Lam waited for her to bring up his name, to recount the argument that afternoon, she remained silent during most of the meal. He lingered at the house, watching television with the children until their father finally sauntered home, greeted him with a nod and a weary smile, and went immediately to bed. Mai sat there with her arms crossed and ignored the box of sugared prunes he had left on the table beside her. Only then did Lam say goodnight.

A few days later, as he was fixing the wooden balustrade on his front porch, Mai wandered up from the dusty road and slowly mounted the porch. Without a word, she kneeled next to him and held up one of the balusters.

Minutes of silence passed between them, punctuated by his brief directions. The metal roof overhanging the porch sheltered them from the hot sun. He could tell by her flushed forehead that she had been walking outside all day.

She finally spoke, in a voice she would have used to remark on the weather: "I don't know what to do about him, Father."

Lam began hammering a baluster to the frame of the balustrade, but the large nail buckled and refused to drive in cleanly. He pulled it out, bent and useless, tried again with two other nails, and failed both times. He spat away from his daughter as the third ruined nail fell to the ground, bouncing metallic against the concrete. He motioned for her to let go of the baluster. She now knelt there with her hands wedged between her thighs, watching people and traffic pass by on the narrow road that bordered the house.

"He does nothing for the children, ever," she continued, as though talking to herself, that casual sawdust voice unchanged. "Doesn't even make an effort to scold them when



they misbehave. And he drinks everyday, wanders home for an hour to eat or nap, then spends all his evenings at the bars and billiard halls.” She picked up the bent nails and held them in her palm. “At night, when he does come home, I can hardly stand the smell of him, and I have to push him out of bed to go take a bath. If he even hears me, he’ll go and pass out on the couch, in clothes he’s worn sometimes for days.”

“Is he still working?” Lam finally asked, calmly, still facing his work.

“Yes, at his brother’s garage, but I see hardly any of the money. And I don’t want to imagine some of the things he wastes it on.”

Lam set down the hammer to do more measurements. The baluster did not quite reach the handrail. Mai took up his hammer, laid the bent nails on the ground, and began hammering them straight.

“A few weeks ago,” she said, “he came home late one night and said he was hungry. I ignored him, so he sat at the dining table and began scraping the dried bottom of the rice pan. He scraped and scraped with that damned spoon—it so infuriated me and the children.” Her voice swelled now with each hard blow of the hammer. “And when I still refused to go see to him, he went over to the girls’ bed and poured water over their feet. They were probably more annoyed than scared. If he’s at home during the day, I go to Lien’s house to get away from him.”

She paused. In the distance, children were laughing and yelling in the street.

“He humiliates the children, Father,” she said. “They just humor him. He humiliates himself. And me.”

Lam ran his fingers across the handrail and realized it was warped. A loud curse escaped him. He peered at Mai’s downcast face as he held the baluster dumbly in his hands. It was rare nowadays for her to wear make-up. She used to share her sisters’ love

for clothes and had a habit of wearing blue blouses, but for the last year or so, she hardly dressed up for church on Sundays, and usually went alone.

He noticed she had hammered the nails perfectly back into shape. Even with his strong hands he'd never been able or patient enough to do that. He coughed gruffly and said, "When I was his age, I had three children I never saw and a wife who gave birth to two of them without me. I was hundreds of miles away, yet none of you ever went without food or clothes or behaved like these kids around here. I made sure of that when I came home, and your mother kept it that way while I was gone." He grabbed the handrail and tried bending it straight. "Your sisters—I thank God their husbands are doing what they're supposed to. Even Lien's husband, given to gambling as he is."

"He's not nearly as bad—"

"Please, no more about that husband of yours."

Mai bowed her head as she had done as a child when scolded. Lam let go of the rail, regretted his sharp tone of voice. He waved a fly away from her hair, and wished then that easing her problems was as easy as taking her husband aside and scolding him—slap him a few times to give him sense.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he said. "There's nothing I can say to help you. Go talk to your mother or your sisters—I know nothing of this business."

"But Mother will only tell me how she didn't want me marrying him in the first place. And Lien and Huong have their own problems—they already know mine well enough. I just wanted to tell you—"

He looked at her.

"Yesterday afternoon, I saw him pissing in the street, in full view of everyone in the neighborhood—" She gasped as if to catch her breath. "Some days I wish he were dead,

Father,” she said, staring at her hands. “I wish I could just make him disappear.”

She placed the three straightened nails by his feet and descended the porch. Lam watched her hesitate in the street and look up at the sky, as if to gauge the heat of the sun, as if to decide whether defiance was enough to bear her burdens, then watched the quiet weariness of her gait as she meandered through the crowd of noon pedestrians and weaving bicycles that soon engulfed her.

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During Lam’s years as a soldier, Mai was the one child who asked outright about his killing others in the war. It was a question she directed at him with the quiet vigilance of a priest, coming out the first time as, “Have you ever killed anyone in the war, Father?”, progressing to, “How many people have you killed, Father?”, and culminating in, “How did you kill them, Father?” And in some form or the other, the brief inquiry usually ended in the same way:

“Silly child—we’re forced to kill in war. And what does a young girl want with knowing how I killed people?”

“You won’t tell me?”

“None of you children need to know. Not from me or anyone.”

He expected this response to silence her from further questions, but suspected, too, that her interest would return on his next visit. She was a curious girl, though it seemed her curiosity was not inherent of some need for understanding, but was simply impulsive, as spontaneous as a nervous tic or a ludicrous dream. They might be walking together in a crowded marketplace or sitting alone on the porch, and abruptly she would ask him such questions as though they were part of a game she and Lam were playing, an

exchange of secrets that would make up for their time apart.

Perhaps it was his absence that inspired her curiosity, but Lam felt it odd that he, in turn, hardly ever thought of her or anyone in his family while he was away. Out in the jungle, consumed by the fear of death and the vacuous passage of time, his mind did not wander to his wife, his children, or his home. He thought of less complicated things, like smoking on a cool rainy Saigon night, that tingle in his breath. Or eating a bowl of phở, steaming hot with fresh basil leaves and lime, the raw beef submerged in the broth, curling pink then grey. And inevitably his thoughts veered not to his family but to where he actually was: a mass of crumpled, hot earth overlain by trees and brush and vines and human bones, a verdurous place that could not bury the violence and the terror but only mute them. It seemed this precarious world had no place or patience for thoughts of home—it was a world entirely separate from the one inhabited by his family, and in some irrational way, he was never able to believe in both at the same time.

Which was what bemused Lam when the war followed him home. There were times when he returned from being gone six months and found her sitting on the front porch with an expression that saw him unchanged since last they met, an expression no different had he been her father three hundred and sixty-five days out of the year and just returned then from a brief walk. But after a day or two of him being home, in a moment of sudden curiosity, or perhaps unease, she would ask him one of those questions.

In his mind, it was the same recurring moment: she and he walking through the neighborhood, the city, her hand latched to his, passing the palisade of buildings that flanked the streets, passing houses thrown open for anyone to come eat at or shop at or perhaps drop by for some tea and conversation, passing through the bustle of traffic and pedestrians and vendors and vagrants, passing the church and from there the cemetery

where the colorful graves of his family and friends resided—when out of nowhere she would ask the question, and a memory like this one would return to him—

—where one day he and his troops came upon a village burning within a clearing of jungle, smoke billowing into the napalm-tinged air like ribbons and they all creeping among the abandoned interior of the village, stepping over bodies—some with charred flesh, some cowed thick with dried blood, and still others peacefully dead as though asleep. There was one young soldier who, at the sudden sound of voices or cries, lunged at a hut that had just caught fire. This same soldier only days before had wept for his mother. Lam remembered his slight build, his neck from behind resembling a woman's, his voice timid as he refused his meals, and those dull eyes as he quietly cried to himself and clenched his fists to his chest. Those same eyes glared at the entrance to the thatched hut now engulfed in a spiraling welter of flames. His shoulders hunched, his rifle punching the air in front of him, the boy soldier leaned away from the leaping flames and kept his eyes on the doorway of the hut. As if falling from the sky into sound, a feral cry rang out, and then out of the dark column of smoke fuming from the doorway, the fiery body of some animal materialized. The boy floundered a few steps back as the animal contorted its body and flailed its legs, giving a series of ferocious yelps. It was a dog, nearly as tall as the boy's waist, its color now obscured by the serpentine wave of fire jumping along its back and legs. The boy appeared momentarily awestruck by the sight, not so much scared as delighted. But the dog suddenly leaped awkwardly at him and he kicked it in the head, staggering it back into the doorway as it still writhed maniacally and barked out the squeals of a pig. The boy kicked it again, even harder this time as if also to put out the flames scorching its flesh, but it only sent the dog reeling into the hut. Instantly the dog reappeared and again the boy kicked it in the chest, and it reared like a

horse and fell back into the smoke. Each time the dog stumbled out of the hut, the boy would kick it back with more force, covering his mouth to keep from choking on the smoke, bowing his head to avoid the flames. It yelped each time he kicked at its ribs or its head, loudly at first and gradually weaker, until eventually it made no sound at all, tiring with each charge from the doorway before finally disappearing one last time into the black innards of the hut with a long, ululating bellow. The boy backed away from the hut as one wall caved in and sent a rush of black smoke and tangled fire towards the sky, stuttering sparks of ignited thatch into the air. Lam had been watching with equanimity, unsure if the pain lodged in his chest was caused by hunger, the pungent heat, or what he had just seen. He felt an urge to say something to the boy, console him, slap him. But before he could step forward, he saw the boy walk up again to the failing hut, and for reasons perhaps elusive even to himself, the boy began firing his rifle directly into the hut, firing into the smoke and flames of the falling doorway until he was empty and no one, not even Lam, could look at him—

—“No,” Lam would always say to her, his daughter, as this memory faded, “I will not tell you how men kill and die in the war.”

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And he never did. Once he exited the war, Mai’s curiosity faded and so he figured it must have been a childish whim, a young girl making fanciful leaps into the world of her elders as he had done when he was a boy. Nothing to bring about a clamor. It was not until her husband drowned those decades later that he again remembered her questions and realized how difficult it would be to ask her what she had once asked him.

He tried. In his mind he asked the question many times, in many ways, saving it

perhaps for the finale to a long conversation they would have in a dark corner of his imagination—but when he finally approached her, the words did not seem right, could never seem right, and so he again acted as if nothing was wrong, as if those doubts in his mind were as normal for a father as moments of pride and adoration.

A year passed after the drowning. The family saw one another everyday, shared meals together, continued doing those things they had done as a family before the death, though Mai's husband was rarely mentioned. At times it appeared to Lam that his daughter's silence was the repression of whatever grief she might have had; other times it seemed forgetting was a way of keeping the dead respectfully dead, of not revisiting the misery her husband had once caused. Mai moved back into Lam's house with her children since they no longer had enough money to live alone. With the sale of her house, it seemed all traces of her husband were left behind as well. Only the hushed knowledge of what had happened persisted.

But now and then, when suspicion drifted through his head, Lam would look for a sign of something withheld, a breach in the indifference Mai showed. He asked his wife and children if they ever saw her cry or heard her talk at all about her husband, but they had not and declared that they did not care to. "Cry for whom," his wife would say, "that worthless fool?" Lam even asked his granddaughters whether they felt their mother seemed the same to them, if she for any moment in the last year appeared extraordinarily happy or angry or sad. But they only shook their young heads vaguely, for it seemed they, too, had already accepted the convenient death of their father. Lam searched their faces and remembered the time when Mai spanked one girl badly for some petty reason and afterwards held her and cried: mother and child in an awkward embrace, one crying because of the pain, the other for the pain that was given. "Your daughter will not cry for

that man,” Lam’s wife would say, “and don’t expect her to. If you were the same man, I wouldn’t cry for you either.”

Lam sometimes mentioned Mai’s husband to see if a reaction would follow. “That husband of yours never ate enough meat,” he might say during dinner; “Doesn’t this shirt look like the one your husband used to wear?” he might ask when she was ironing his shirts. But each time Mai would only say yes or no and continue, unmoved, with what she was doing.

He decided at one point that if what he thought was, in fact, true, he would forgive her—it would remain *their* secret. He made up his mind that relieving himself of the curiosity was all that mattered and kept this firmly in mind when he approached her to ask the question outright.

But then always a certain laziness would set in, for by now he had conceived of the right words, only his mouth could not utter them; at once anxious and weary, he realized it was not curiosity that wanted relief, it was the uncertainty of his disappointment. The laziness was just one symptom of the fear, for though he would remind himself to try, the threat of an answer, of a finality terrific in its inevitability, made the uncertainty and self-denial already there a pain he preferred to bear, only so the alternative could never hurt him more—which was why the question could not come, and would not come. And then he would remember all those moments in her life when she revealed her strange nature to him and him alone, those aberrations of the person she normally was and, he wanted to believe, had always been: the fifteen-year-old waltzing with her priest, the eight-year-old buying him cigarettes, the two-year-old at a funeral wearing a beret too big for her head, laughing and dancing at his feet. He would reremember these images, hold them fast to his chest, then convince himself that meaning and connections conceived in memory



were flimsy bridges and that to corrupt a good memory would be to corrupt them all. And so, selfishly, not because his suspicion might have been wrong but because it could have yielded the truth, he never asked her.

\* \* \*

The next ten years went by in calm succession. Not counting his time away from home, it seemed Lam had lived three lives with his family—the life of his children’s childhood, the life of his children’s marriages, and now the life of his children’s children—and that this last life so far was the least remarkable, and the easiest. He had eleven grandchildren who were all mostly healthy and happy, and in them, in the unfurling of their young lives, he was prepared to face the inevitable closing of his own. His wife often accused him of idleness, of “sitting on the boat and watching others swim,” but he would only say that he was too old to get wet and that the view from the boat was a beautiful one. At times, he even fancied himself a fish underwater, heedless of what lay above surface and what loomed in the depths; and though in reality he would never be able to ignore the past or what lay ahead, he had learned to be satisfied with the present so long as others around him were safe and, themselves, content. It was with this attitude that he helped himself suffer things one summer when he fell ill.

He lay in bed during much of the day with a thin blanket over his legs and an electric fan nearby. His wife glanced at him each time he coughed, and his children stopped by every other hour with feigned reasons for being there. It was true he’d never been this sick, but he knew and insisted to everyone that he’d be better in a week, at the most two. More than probably anything else, he had always been certain of his own health, had risked it too many times in his life to doubt it now, even in old age.

Mai came to visit him everyday. She now lived with her second oldest sister and that sister's family. In the foyer of their house, extending out onto the porch, the two sisters sold clothes they had bought cheaply at the shopping malls in Saigon. Mai went to Saigon twice a week and would purchase as much fabric and clothing as could be strapped to her moped. She spent the rest of the week, every day except Sunday, selling shoes, toothpaste, soap, and whatever else the two sisters could display in their limited space. She also helped with household chores and watched after her young niece and nephews. Her own children had recently married and left her for their new family, the youngest girl only days ago. Mai, herself, had never remarried, despite offers from various men over the years. Lam would have been happy had she taken another husband, but inside he found a certain sense of peace knowing she never did. Perhaps that was the one sign of her private mourning.

On his tenth day of illness, she came by with pictures from her daughter's wedding. Lam was half-asleep in bed, but he could hear Mai talking to her mother in the next room. He was the only family member who did not attend the wedding, and he felt sharply reminded of this as he listened to their conversation.

"The pictures turned out wonderfully," Mai exclaimed, "but that photographer charges more than double now what he charged for Huong's wedding pictures! And he only does this as a hobby."

"That reminds me," Lam's wife said. Footsteps approached the room. Lam saw his wife enter the room and reach into the top drawer of the dresser, where she kept her purse. Mother and daughter stood in the doorway, whispering, unaware that Lam lay there watching them. "Take this," Lam's wife said, handing Mai some money.

"I didn't mean for you to pay for the pictures, Mother."

“Well, I intended to give you the money anyway. You’ve put enough into the wedding already.” As his wife walked back to the front room, Lam saw Mai return the money to the top drawer. She followed her mother, and their voices became shrill again in the next room, mother and daughter sounding more alike with every year.

“I haven’t told you what happened yesterday,” Mai said, giggling. “This crazy little woman, she comes by and picks over our shoes like fruit for about ten minutes, then asks me if I have more in the house. I leave her there to go look, and when I come back out, I see her running down the street with a pair of our shoes clutched to her chest.”

“She stole them?”

“Chi Loan saw her run off with them and even yelled at her son to chase after the woman, but the boy said he lost her a block away. No one in the neighborhood knows who she is. But the funny thing is that I went to the market in the afternoon, and there she was, walking towards me and wearing those shoes.”

Lam’s wife chuckled. “Was it really her?”

“The nerve of the woman! And they were definitely our shoes. I stepped in front of her, and when she recognized me, she froze. I thought she was going to run away again, but she only stood there—completely terrified. I told her I knew what she did and demanded that she pay me immediately. She asked me how much and when I told her, she said she didn’t have enough. So I took what she had, plus the bundle of baguettes under her arm, and walked away.” Mai guffawed. “I’d never seen anyone so afraid of me—the woman could barely speak.”

“Be careful now,” Lam’s wife said. “They won’t always be that weak and stupid.” Lam heard his wife’s sandals slapping the tile floor. “I’m stepping out to buy some coffee while you’re here. Go show the pictures to your father.”

“Is he asleep?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Is he feeling any better?”

Lam did not hear his wife reply. Her footsteps drifted out of the house.

Mai’s head appeared in his doorway, and when she saw that he was awake, she smiled and approached the bed.

“I have the wedding pictures, Father,” she said, almost in a whisper. She dragged a chair to his bedside and sat down level with him. He noticed that her head had more grey now than he had remembered. Her face, however, had aged very little, her ivory complexion still flawless. She slowly placed one picture after the other on his chest.

The first was of his granddaughter and her new husband standing outside a car with some wedding guests. She was dressed in a red *aó dài* and stood with her head tilted—a picture of her mother in youth. The next photograph showed them sitting in the car with palm fronds fanned across the back window. The groom was grinning awkwardly, and Lam’s granddaughter, her red *aó dài* vivid against the white leather seats, was looking sadly into the camera as though she had been crying.

Lam studied each photograph and imagined the smells and sounds that day, what the sun must have felt like on the people’s shoulders, the thoughts behind their smiles. When he reached the one where the bride and groom stood with their parents and grandparents, his hands fell.

“Did you get a good photographer like I told you?”

“Ba Lu’s son took the pictures. A professional would have charged too much, you know that.”

“But these pictures—some are too bright, and this one here is out of focus.”

“They’re just fine, Father.”

“But I told you—” he said but then stopped when he realized how irritable he sounded. She noticed and did not say anything more.

He went through the pictures a second time but could feel her peering at him, as if looking for blemishes on his face. Her moments of silence and scrutiny lately had become noticeable and discomfiting. This was the third time this week that she had come alone to his bedside in this solemn manner, annoyingly akin at times to someone prepared to offer last rites.

He coughed and felt it burn in his chest. Another cough followed, and as they always seemed to do, each cough spurred on another more vigorous one. He held the stack of photographs to his throbbing chest.

“Father,” Mai said. He swallowed to soothe his throat and expected her to fake an apology to him. “I must tell you something. I confessed it at confession years ago, but I feel now that I should confess it to you as well.”

In her face, Lam suddenly saw the extent of his illness. Many years had passed since her voice last carried this serious tone, and the instant, inexplicable recognition of what she was about to say made him hold his breath. How long had it been since these thoughts had crossed his own mind? He could not decide then if he should refuse to listen, or resign himself to words he had long banished from his mind.

“It’s been so many years,” she said, her voice as dull as spoken prayer. “I’d like to tell you how Bao died. I want to tell you this,” and she looked at him as if to ask for his approval to go on. He nodded with his silence.

“I came out to the cafés that night looking for him,” she began but then stopped. She was staring at the stack of pictures on his chest. Her hesitation seemed a need for

articulation, a need to say what she was about to say in a way that had perhaps been conceived differently in her mind. She continued slowly: “There was no particular reason that night for me to do so, except that I felt angrier than most nights. One of the café owners told me he saw Bao head toward the boat docks, and so I made my way over there. When I finally found him, he was standing on an empty pier at the end of the quay with a bottle in one hand, staring out at the water. My God, at that moment, I wanted to run over there and push him over the edge, show him how awful a man he was.” Mai’s face was calm though her hands now lay on Lam’s bed in tight fists. “As I approached him, he turned and looked at me dumbly, like he didn’t recognize me, and he began backing up awkwardly, and then he stumbled and fell into the water. I ran over to the edge and looked down at him holding onto a dock pile, and he was spitting water and flailing about like he didn’t know where he was. He didn’t say anything, scream anything, and I couldn’t tell if he was able to or not. I looked around frantically for some way to get him out. I knew I couldn’t jump in to save him and I thought about yelling for someone, anyone, to come help. But then he lost his grip on the dock leg and began drifting away. He went under and then came back up choking on water. For a moment it looked like he suddenly remembered how to swim and he began making awkward strokes in the water, but again he went under and as he came up, he let out a gurgled cry, and I yelled out his name. But then I just stood there and watched him, and I couldn’t bring myself to call for help. He was moving about more slowly now, and I could hear him coughing and choking, and his short moans—”

Mai lowered her head to her knees, then sat up again. She was not crying, her face still composed. She breathed in deeply, and her voice fell to a whisper: “But I did not budge. I remember holding my breath, listening to him struggle in the water, then

backing away from the edge so I could no longer see him. But then I looked again, and he was drifting further away from the dock, and for an instant I thought he looked directly up at me. He disappeared into the darkness, so I turned around and ran home. I couldn't sleep that night. I couldn't talk at all the next day, and it was lucky that they found his body in the morning because then I had a reason to stay silent without people asking why."

She ceased. She was looking at Lam as though pleading with him. What she was pleading he did not quite know, but he found himself stricken by a cold and peaceful silence. All at once, the past ten years of his life felt illusory to him—artificial. He questioned how the truth would have changed things, whether ignorance had done his family or him any good. He could have doubted Mai's story, but the will to do so was no longer there. A lone image flowered in his mind: of himself long ago forcing his ten-year-old son to dive into a pool so that he would learn to swim. *I'll save you if you...* and he ended up jumping in to do just that, the boy so wearied afterward that his eyes did all the cursing—so that years later Lam imagined, as he did now, the cold water engulfing the boy, all his fears compressed into an instant and then bursting forth with not in anger for his father—though that was there—but in silence.

"Father."

"Yes?"

"What do you think of this?"

"What do I think?" he murmured.

"I've told no one. I know it was horrible what I did. Unforgivable. But I also believe... I also believe that night was like something God gave me. As a gift." She spoke slowly, as if waiting for him to interrupt her. "Is that wrong?" she said. "Am I

wrong to think that?”

“No,” he replied vaguely.

He heard his wife’s voice from out front calling back to her neighbor, laughing.

He looked again at the wedding pictures and murmured, “You really should have gotten a good photographer like I told you.”

Mai bowed her head. A few of the pictures slid off his chest, and she slowly picked them up, one by one, and set them neatly on the bed.

Lam’s wife entered the room. “I spoke to Chi Loan,” she said to Mai, “and she told me about everything yesterday.”

“Yes,” Mai replied without looking up.

“Said her boy ran as fast as he could but that the woman outran him.” Lam’s wife laughed heartily. “I guess it’s fitting that thieves have quicker legs.” She walked into the kitchen, still laughing.

Mai leaned closer to Lam and said, “I’m sorry, but I would have regretted never telling you.” He shook his head faintly, then coughed twice before Mai spoke again, as if entreating him for a better response, “Father?”

“Do you know,” he began, and in the same instant another image flashed in his mind, perfectly distinct after years of being forgotten: his old army beret, dark brown and a perfect fit, emblazoned with a menacing tiger head and its exaggerated fangs. What had become of it, he thought? Was it lost? Did his wife burn it when Saigon fell? Buried it perhaps?

“Do you know,” he said again, “that at your Uncle Phong’s funeral years and years ago, when you were only two, you wore my beret on your head and laughed and did this silly little dance during the ceremony? You refused to take it off the rest of the day. You



know that's the reason I bought you all those hats when you were younger."

Mai laughed suddenly, somewhat mournfully, then stopped. "But Father," she said, as though she wasn't sure it needed explanation, as though it were mere forgetfulness on his part. "Uncle Phong died before I was born. It must have been Lien or Huong you remember, not me."

## WOMAN AT SEA

September 17, 1978

Dear Sister,

Whoever told you of my death either lied or was lied to. I am very much alive. We made it to Malaysia on the third, and I'm writing you now from the camp at Pulau Bidong. There are as many people here as mosquitoes. Though some food is shipped in, I've heard stories of people eating frogs and monkeys on the island, an unseemly thought given my memories of us playing at Uncle Vinh's farm. I've lost almost fifteen pounds and shed a layer of skin, and I'll punch the next man here who tries to proposition me, but other than that I am fine. I only wish I could talk to you face to face. The Red Cross promised me this letter will find you.

I'm told the wait for sponsorship might take months, perhaps years, and for now there are things to do, applications and interviews, English classes. Waiting, it seems, is what everyone does here—the school, the clinic, the shops, even the church and cemetery have all been built to make us forget about waiting. I could tell you more, but now I'm sure you'd first like to know what happened on those seven days in the boat.

We had 192 people onboard and over half of us got sick. With everyone crammed together elbow to elbow, you can imagine how miserable it was once the diarrhea and vomiting began. Most of our food spoiled by the second day. On the third our drinking water ran out. On the fourth day we were stopped and looted by pirates. Two days later

we were stopped and looted again. In between we ran into a typhoon that nearly drowned three people and got us lost for a day and half.

I sound casual, I know, but it should be no surprise to you. It's why I was chosen to go, isn't it? I'm the strong one, the tough one? I feel impatient telling you these things. One day, when I see you again, I promise I'll tell you everything in detail and we can both shake our heads and sigh. For now, the story simply feels lost in my fingers.

What happened was that a little girl onboard disappeared. This was on our second night at sea, the darkest night of the month. The girl's mother woke up without her and began shrieking. Lanterns were lit and the entire boat searched, but most people were already looking overboard. A few men stood ready to jump into the water, but we all knew there was no sense in it. There was nothing out there, and even with the lanterns, you couldn't see more than two meters into that dead, inky blackness. The best swimmer among us would have been lost within a minute.

I remembered the girl. She was five or six years old, with cropped hair, and I remembered thinking at first that she was boy. She and her mother had a spot next to the water barrel, a few meters from me at the boat's stern, and I had already seen her twice sit on the gunwale and urinate overboard despite being yelled at.

Her mother wept for hours. That dull moaning went long into the night—you could hear it over the boat's sputtering engine. No one could console her. By morning, she had turned to periodic fits of hysterical wailing. Were it not for the stench of vomit and urine in the lower decks, I would have moved below. At one point I and a few others were close to quieting her by force, but by the afternoon she stopped all of sudden, and some of us at last were able to fall asleep.

Remember that only people fore and aft of the boat could stand up completely, and if

you stood there was no room to walk a straight line—so when I lazily opened my eyes that afternoon and saw the figure of someone walking swiftly along the gunwale, the sight was bizarre enough to jolt me awake. Everyone else must have either been asleep or, if awake, as stunned as I was, because before anyone could yell out or stop her, the mother had already thrown herself overboard.

She disappeared underwater immediately. Two men jumped in after her, but they came back up without having seen or laid a finger on anything. She must have sunk like an anchor.

The entire boat was quiet for hours, save the sound of the engine and the old women reciting their rosaries. You'll think me horrible, but even though I felt badly for the mother, I was annoyed by what she did. She had no right giving up. I remember watching her leap and hearing the splash and thinking *how melodramatic, how silly*. And really, all I wanted at that point was sleep—only then do you forget hunger and thirst and whatever else troubles you. And with everything that happened in the next few days, there was soon little room left in me for that one incident. When we finally caught glimpse of the Malaysian shore, my one and only thought, aside from joy and relief, was of myself lying down somewhere, anywhere, my entire body stretched out, and sleeping for days.

Before we were brought to Pulau Bidong, they had to process us on the mainland and let the doctors look us over and treat us if necessary. Our boat was emptied at the Malaysian dock, and as everyone stood on land, collapsing, weeping, laughing, thanking God, an official stepped out of the boat with a child in his arms. Many people did not recognize the little girl, but those of us who did nearly fainted. Where was she all that time? How did no one notice her? Had she been hiding? Was this really her? The

official asked who she belonged to, and our captain had to explain what we were all slowly trying to believe. And then this happened: the girl climbed out of the official's arms and walked over to me and grabbed a hold of my pant leg. And then she just stood there. She did not look sad or happy or anything.

I had never spoken to her before she disappeared on the boat. We had not exchanged a single glance. Perhaps I was the closest person she could walk to on the dock, the first person she saw who could look her straight in the face. A few of the mothers told me I was the only young woman alone on the boat. That's why the girl chose me. She could sense my aloneness.

I guess I could have refused, but I agreed to temporarily look after the girl. I showered with her, fed her, and let her sleep beside me in that cold, gigantic building that housed all of us that night. The next day, when we arrived on the island camp, she and I joined the hut of a Chinese family from Saigon and have stayed together ever since.

I don't know what I'll do with her. She is a cheerful girl and talks all the time, but has yet to utter a word about her mother. I suppose I'll tell her the truth when she finally does ask. Or should I? Maybe she already knows.

She has acquired the habit of clutching my shirt before falling asleep. Last night it was warm and rainy and I awoke and found her sitting on her haunches outside our hut, beneath a breadfruit tree. She was drenched, quietly and happily watching the rain fall around her. I pulled her inside, and then scolded her, which I feel badly now for doing.

I have grown protective of her. Is it just pity? Could it be I feel guilt for my indifference when her mother died? Or is it this, the look she had as we lay face to face that first night in Malaysia, the same look of sleeplessness I had seen in the faces of the Thai pirates, a look I had felt myself on the boat, on those waves, after days of fearing we

would capsize at any moment. Somehow, her face has become more tragic to me than anything that happened on the boat.

I realize now that you should have gone instead of me. It doesn't matter that I am younger or unmarried, or that Mother and Father think you're too sensitive to endure these kinds of things. If you were here, this would be easier for you. You would have no questions, no doubt or uncertainty.

All I can say is that for now it is good to have someone to look after. I will write you more as things progress. Do not tell Mother and Father about her. Do say that I love them and that I am well. You are constantly in my thoughts.

Your Sister,

Hoang

## THE OTHER COUNTRY

On the night of his sixtieth birthday, our neighbor Ông Vinh had a dream that foretold his brother's death. What happened in the dream, his wife was uncertain. She knew only that he awoke that morning murmuring his brother's name. For the next few days, he took long naps and spoke in hushed tones, and when asked he said simply that it was a pleasant dream, though one he preferred never to have again. A week later, he received word from a cousin in Saigon that his brother, just a year older than him, had died of a heart attack. They had not seen each other in over twenty years.

People sleep, my mother once told me, to dream their lives all over again, so perhaps Vinh's dream was one of imminence, his brother's death merely the finality to a loss he had accepted long ago. When the news arrived, his wife said he blinked a few times, gave the phone back to her, and returned quietly to his newspaper. Two months later, he poisoned himself in the night. His wife did not realize he was dead until late morning when she came to wake him for the second time and found his face cold and ashen and an empty teacup on the floor beneath the bed. Though his eyes and mouth were closed, his brow remained furrowed as though he were still wrestling with slumber. His wife couldn't bear to see so much life in the face of someone dead, so she combed his hair, covered his face with a green silk handkerchief, and called the priest. Only then did she weep.

I was twelve the year this happened, the same year my father walked out the door

after Mass one Sunday afternoon and never came back. I know now that he had another woman, and perhaps his five years away in the war made it easier to fall out of love with my mother when he returned, made it easier eventually to forget us both. In any case, Mother called it abandonment and refuses to this day to mention his name, which was why, at the time, she felt no pity for a neighbor who had killed himself and left his wife all alone. Vinh must have been wronged by his brother long ago, she said, and maybe the guilt of being angry for so many years did him in. Such frailty and selfishness—and now he'll pay for eternity, she reminded me. *No sin greater than taking one's own life.*

I did not argue. Everyone in town was shocked by what Vinh did. They probably still think of him with ambivalence, if they think of him at all. His was the first suicide I had ever known, and I could not stop imagining him, ten doors down, drinking his tea in the dark calm of night with his wife beside him in bed. No one knew his true reasons. Even the older women of the neighborhood—those convinced that by their age they knew and had seen everything—were perplexed; even they pursed their lips and crossed themselves when people began experiencing strange things in and around the house.

When he was still alive, Ông Vinh rarely entered my thoughts. If he wasn't at church, then he was sitting atop his porch bench with a pipe in hand, always alone, always reading a book or newspaper as I passed his house. He was a stranger I had always known, his grave face as familiar as the posters of American soft drinks on café walls. My mother once told me he bore a passing resemblance to her uncle, who stabbed a man for insulting him but was not big or strong enough to keep from being stabbed back and killed. I never knew him, but apparently he had Vinh's thin moustache and also wore wire glasses. Maybe the ignominy of both their deaths was the other reason my mother



held fast to the comparison.

Vinh and his wife lived alone and had few if any friends. People saw them mostly on Sunday when they would come to church wearing the same clothes they had worn for years: he, a gray suit that was too small for him, and she, a trio of *aó dài*'s—pink, red, and green—that looked bigger on her with every year. It seemed no one ever visited their house, even on Christmas or the New Year. Some people said their children died long ago and they were still mourning the loss; some said they never had any children at all. Whatever their reasons for solitude, though, the old couple were quiet and respectable, and outside of passing comments, people paid little attention to them.

Bà Vinh used to stop by our house now and then to get clothes mended or a dress made. She'd sometimes stay and chat with my mother who was the local seamstress and half her age. She said little to me, though she always smiled when we spoke. Like her husband, I often sat reading on the porch, and she would appear by the railing and ask for Mother, whispering to apologize for making me lose my place. It was odd how many dresses she made since no one ever saw her in anything but her three church *aó dài*'s and the white blouses she wore to the market. As far as I knew, my mother was the only person she befriended in the neighborhood, and from their chats, Mother found out that she and Vinh had only returned to the church for about ten years, that they had been married for twenty-five, had moved here when the country divided, and did indeed have two sons who lived in Saigon and sent them money every month. Aside from those details, however, there was not much more to know. And the strange thing was that Bà Vinh never mentioned anything to my mother about her husband, which was why I sometimes forgot he even existed.

So when he died, it was his killing himself, not his dying, that aroused my curiosity

and, for a while, the curiosity of everyone in town. Mother, of course, forbade me from saying his name. It wasn't appropriate to talk about people who had left this world in ugly ways. If anything, it was bad luck. She often cringed at the mere mention of my father, and for all we knew, he was only spiritually dead.

After the death, Bà Vinh stopped visiting the house and was no longer seen on Sunday morning. People said they saw her at the market only once or twice a month, and the rest of the time her front doors were closed, her window curtains drawn. Mother assumed she was hiding herself out of shame, and for this she pitied the old woman. She considered checking on her but stayed away out of respect. Two months later, Bà Vinh appeared at our house, looking perfectly healthy. The period of mourning had not aged or weakened her at all. And during their chat that day, when Mother felt it was proper, she asked about Vinh, and the old woman told her about the dream and everything.

Then those strange things began happening. Bà Vinh said she came home one day and found a burglar standing dumbfounded in the kitchen and holding her husband's old hammer before her like a cross. He had broken in through the kitchen window and taken the hammer and some fruit, but when he tried to climb back out, his feet would not let him, and so he roamed the house in circles, inexplicably clutching the hammer, not sure of where to go until all he could do was stand in the kitchen and wait for someone to come home and relieve him of the old rusty tool, which was what Bà Vinh did. The burglar then confessed himself in one long breath, like someone staring at himself in a mirror, and wandered quietly out the front door. There was also the story of the schoolteacher walking her students home one day, and when they entered the alley behind Vinh's house, they heard a rough breathing sound, like an ox snorting. They couldn't tell where it was coming from or see anything around them. Then the sound

grew louder as though an ox was actually there and galloping towards them—so they started running, faster and faster, then frantically, out of breath, all of them, teacher and students, scrambling through the empty alleyways with an invisible ox roaring demonically at their backs. And the schoolteacher, she was so terrified that she outran her students, lost her shoes, and staggered into her house barefoot and gasping for breath, her face paler than the bed sheets into which she fell and wrapped herself. No one in her family could speak to her. They all thought she had gone mad. She was sick for over three months—the usual hundred days, as they say.

*Such stories!* my mother would exclaim, shaking her head. The only thing worth fearing in life was God's judgment, she'd say, not ghost stories. She was right in her own way, but I suspect even she would never spend a night alone at church. I knew then what she would not admit, that there was no difference between fearing God and fearing his phantoms, that the unknown—and unknowable—is what really haunts you, and beyond that, inevitably, the specter of death. Vinh had actually *wanted* to leave this world—that was what fascinated and terrified me. At night I envisioned pale faces lurking behind the windows of his house, holding their expired breaths as they waited for the right person to enter and take their place.

"If those stories scare you that much," my mother said one day, "then go over there and find out for yourself. Face your fears. You won't die, I promise you."

Her logic stunned me.

"And why are you smiling?" she said. "I'm being serious."

I told her my going would do me no good and that I was not as scared as she thought I was, which was a lie. I had begun avoiding the Vinh house altogether, taking longer routes home from school and breaking into quick strides whenever I had to pass it. Some

of the boys at school dared each other to run onto the front porch and see what would happen, but none of them ever tried it, and none of them dared me.

“Bà Vinh told me she has something for you. She always saw you reading and thought it fitting that you take a book from her husband’s library.” My mother noticed my silence. “You should go and receive it from her.”

I insisted that her bringing a book to our house would be just as easy, but Mother lowered her eyes at me. “It wouldn’t be polite,” she said. “You’d be doing this for her.”

But this was her lie. My going was partly vicarious for her. My mother felt safe with God on her side, but she was superstitious enough to believe that inexplicable things happen in the world. I couldn’t decide if she wanted me to go to disprove my notion of ghosts or confirm her own private belief that the Lord worked in mysterious ways. In any case, she placed her pink praying cross in my hand and encouraged me to join Bà Vinh in afternoon prayers if the opportunity arose.

It took me nearly half an hour to make the five-minute walk to Vinh’s house. I stopped at the ice cream stand, loitered in the church courtyard, and even considered lying to my mother. When I finally arrived at the house, I found Bà Vinh waiting for me at the front door, smiling. She was a small, thin woman who, even with her good posture, stood only to my shoulder. I always thought she had a peaceful face, youthful for her age and, with her hair in a bun, undistracted; but when she took my hand, I realized that all her sixty or so years were in those veined, weathered hands.

“I have something for you,” she said and led me inside.

Their house smelled of sandalwood, of cleanliness and order. The walls were unadorned, the tile floors polished and gleaming, everything a clean shade of yellow

which brightened the house despite the faint lighting. What furniture they had looked old but taken care of: a yellow sofa with its patched cushions, an oak cabinet stacked neatly with books and magazines, an old-model television set atop the dresser, unplugged and in mint condition. In the front room, a lone photograph of Vinh hung on the wall beside a wooden crucifix. My neck went stiff when I saw his face, a face I'd never seen up close before but which looked so real and alive now that it seemed he had not yet died. An image of him, old and lonely, burning in God's inferno, jumped to my mind. I was a moment away from apologizing to his wife and walking out the door.

But then she took me by the wrist, her child's fragile grip like a bracelet too small to pull over my hand. As she guided me through the house, the back of her head looked distant and small. I tried to pity her for her loss and remind myself that I was there in part to make an old widow happy.

She led me to the back room, a small, dark study that was *his* room apparently, with two big shelves congested with books, framed photographs, and Buddha figurines. On the glass table between a short leather sofa and a mahogany chair, three wooden pipes were neatly set beside an ashtray, and nearby his old wire glasses lay entangled in a wooden rosary. The thick window curtain was drawn, and the only light came from a lamp by the sofa which enshrouded the study in a dull reddish glow.

Bà Vinh stood silent in the doorway for some time like someone savoring a last glimpse. She leaned her face into the room as though indulging in its sharp, clean corners, breathing in the smell of her husband's old possessions left intact and untouched—only polished and dusted and sheltered from light so that they, and he, could linger in her mind in that clean, inviolable darkness.

Finally she turned to me and said, "I'm sure you'll find something here you like. Stay

as long as you want. And come back tomorrow if you care for another book. I'll let you read by yourself." And before I could thank her and ask her not to abandon me, she disappeared, and I was left by myself in the old man's study.

Gripping my mother's praying cross in my pocket, I took a step forward, prepared again to run if something, anything, were to happen. I considered opening the window curtain to ease the terrible somberness, but felt hesitant about disturbing the room in any way. It also occurred to me that light was not the only thing the curtain kept out—that there were many curious people in the neighborhood and not all of them were too afraid to peek inside a haunted house.

I walked up to the bookcase and began running my fingers across the spines of novels, history books, and biographies of men and women I had never heard of. Old black and white photographs of people, their brows dark and unsmiling, stood nestled among the Buddha figurines. I assumed they were pictures of Vinh's family, though neither he nor his wife appeared in any of them.

On the bottom shelf, to my surprise, I discovered a book of folk tales and ancient legends, bound in brown leather that was dull and coarse with age. Inside, on nearly every page, meticulous ink drawings illustrated some of my favorite stories: the shadow in the moon, the birth of the One Hundred Princes, the story of Emperor Lac Long Quan, King of the Dragons. I sat on the sofa and, to ease my mind, began reading each story out loud to myself. When I paused, it was to admire the elaborate drawings, some of which filled entire pages: a labyrinthine world beneath the ocean, an emperor's palace on a mountain surrounded by guards and towering trees, the eyes of a tiger glistening in a dark lush forest.

When I was younger, when Father was away in the war and I couldn't get to sleep at

night, my mother used to tell me these stories on our front porch. I'd be kept awake by silly thoughts, and annoyed as she was (*No, there are no volcanoes or earthquakes here—The world has no end—Your father will return*), Mother would give me warm milk and whisper tales to me in the darkness until I dozed off. Sometimes she'd fall asleep first, and I would be left by myself to gaze at the silhouettes of dark houses.

Sitting in Vinh's room, reading these stories again, I could hear her voice. Before I knew it, I had spent over an hour in the room and apparently forgotten that I was sitting on a dead man's couch and reading a dead man's book. I returned the book to the shelf.

In the front room, I found Bà Vinh lying asleep on the floor, an oscillating fan nearby blowing strands of hair across her face. A small pillow lay beneath her head, and beside her on the linoleum floor a glass of tea stood half empty. In the silence of the house, her breathing sounded like someone whispering. I wanted to thank her, but she looked too peaceful to disturb. As I passed her and made my way to the front door, I thought I saw her smile in her sleep.

I returned the next day. For what reason, I was not quite sure—perhaps to thank Bà Vinh in person for inviting me. I did not tell Mother. I did not bring her praying cross. Beneath a drizzling rain, I took the long way home from school, around the cemetery behind the church, through the empty soccer field furrowed with mud, past the riverbank shanties where the Cambodians lived, and finally through the alleyways that led to the Vinh house. A glimpse of it in the distance still gave me nerves, but they subsided once I thought of the old woman.

Through the open doorway of the house, I found her kneeling in the front room and praying beneath the crucifix and her husband's portrait. Kicking off my mud-caked

shoes, I took a step inside and waited, thinking how odd it was, that sense that the house, so wanting of sound and human presence, still felt occupied by more than one person, as though others had been there only minutes before I arrived and had left their scent behind: an indentation in a sofa cushion, the ring of water from beneath a tumbler. Vinh was on my mind, of course, but thoughts of him now felt more wistful than frightening.

I saw Bà Vinh cross herself and wrap a jade rosary around one hand, and without turning, she patted the floor by her feet. I came and kneeled beside her. Quietly, she said, “I saw your shadow approach and knew it was you. Everyone has their own unique shadow. Even on stormy days.” She tapped my knee. “You’re wet. Are you hungry?”

I replied that I was, and she led me into the kitchen where the table was already spread with mincemeat sandwiches and ice tea. I set my book-bag on the floor and sat at the table with her, drying myself with a towel she gave me. It appeared she had awaited my arrival all day. She peppered and sauced the sandwiches and nodded for me to eat.

“I see you enjoyed that book of tales yesterday,” she said.

I wondered how she knew. To avoid being rude, I stuffed all the food to one side of my mouth and gave her a muffled ‘yes’.

“You would have liked my husband’s stories.” She glanced over my shoulder to the front of the house. “He enjoyed telling stories to our children when they were young. He told them so well, so convincingly. That voice of his—like a violin, I always thought, a cello. Had he outlived me—” and here she paused momentarily. “Had he outlived me, he would have told someone like you about me and made me a queen. And you would have believed him.” She watched me chew my food with the easy silence of someone who had known me all my life. I felt her familiarity was due not to facts and details, like stories about me my mother might have told her, but rather to impressions she had



gathered by silent means over the years—which I know now can be a habit of solitude. She sipped her ice tea and found the words she wanted: “Listening and telling makes intimates of us all. He always said that.”

She prepared another sandwich for me and refilled my glass of tea. “You are a quiet boy,” she said.

When I had finished eating, she again offered Vinh’s library to me, and promptly left me there to read. I caught the faint scent of tobacco in the air as I entered. Despite the dreary weather outside and the patter of rain on the roof, which deepened the quiet, the room itself looked and felt no gloomier than the day before.

There was a book on the glass table, another volume of folk tales which I assumed Bà Vinh had left for me. I did not read it out loud this time. The room felt comforting that day, a shelter from rain and light, and the stories I read kept me rapt enough to fight back the apparitions of headless men and demonic oxen. Now and then, I imagined Vinh’s voice reading the stories out loud to me—what I thought it might have sounded like had I known him. His children must have had these same stories read to them long ago; Vinh might have read them when he was himself a child.

When I left the house that afternoon, I again saw Bà Vinh lying asleep on the floor and could not thank her. I managed to slip the pillow back beneath her head without waking her.

On the way home, something curious happened. I passed the old town doctor’s house by the riverbank and saw him lying on his front room floor, smoking opium as he often did. I pictured him dying there with a grim smile on his face, strands of smoke still rising from his lips like a last exhalation of his spirit—like how Vinh’s soul might have escaped him the moment he took his life. As I was thinking this, I glimpsed a man standing

beneath a chestnut tree by the river's edge, smoking and talking with a circle of cyclo drivers. There was a haze of rain between us, but I thought I was staring at my father. His hair was drenched, his face somehow different, and it had been six months since he disappeared, so I wasn't sure how much he'd changed. I considered approaching him but quickly realized that I'd have nothing to say, that in fact I hardly talked to him during those few years he was home after the war. Then it seemed the reason I didn't want to approach him, the reason I couldn't fully recognize him, was because he appeared ghostly to me: the wet-haired, skinny shade of the father I briefly knew. It could very well have been someone else entirely, but I left the riverbank without looking back.

That evening, as I was helping Mother sew satin flowers for a wedding, I asked her about my father. She looked up from her work. "What did you say?" she said.

"Do you still love Father?" I repeated.

"Why would you suddenly ask me this?"

"I'm just curious."

"You're always curious. Like some dumb little monkey." She reached over and wiped the crust from my eye. "No, I no longer love your father. I'd rather love a monkey."

"Do you think the war had something to do with him leaving?"

"It's not for me to say, I wasn't there with him. Look at how clumsy your flowers are—" She picked up a flower I had just finished. "Hold them firmly and pull the thread tight, but don't crush the ribbon." She went on with her work, and for a moment I thought our conversation had ended. Then she said, "The only thing I understand about war is what I've lost. Whether it made your father leave is beyond me, but I have a feeling he left us long before he ever shot at anyone in a jungle."

I stared at my needle and thread. “But a person can do a bad thing and still be a good person, right?”

“It depends on what that bad thing is. But yes, of course.”

“I suppose you’d feel better if he had died fighting.”

My mother’s hands fell and she looked at me, sucking in her cheeks as she often did when something upset her.

“I meant that—”

“I know what you meant,” she said calmly and returned again to her satin flowers.

Visions of my father killing and dying flashed through my mind. I pricked my thumb with the needle to see myself bleed. After dinner I walked to the riverbank, back to the spot where I saw the man that afternoon. There was only a group of young boys playing hide and seek by the chestnut tree. By then, the rain had finally stopped.

The following afternoon, I found Bà Vinh sitting on her porch and, to my surprise, stitching. It appeared to be her husband’s old shirt. “You should take a book for yourself this time,” she said when I approached her. In her hands, the needle and thread seemed to be unraveling the shirt. “Any book that you like,” she insisted and went back to her work.

I entered the house and walked through it alone, aware for the first time of how big it was, how emptied and old and permanent. In Vinh’s study, it seemed nothing, not even the temperature, ever changed in the room, as if it was a painting I could step into and out of at will, the same web of shadow and reddish light forever cast over the room like a blanket of dull paint. It was not difficult then to notice Bà Vinh’s jade rosary on the glass table, ensnared as it was in the wooden rosary, a garish green in the dim light. I wondered if it ever frightened her to pray in this room.

I browsed the bookshelves and flipped through a few illustrated novels. Then I noticed a thin book jutting out from the top shelf. It was a book of poetry by someone I'd never heard of. Wedged in the center of the book was an old, brittle slip of paper with four hand-written lines of what appeared to be a poem. I still remember it easily:

*Gifts from the other country—*

*I have come for you, worthless man,*

*Why do you smile?*

*Why do you look at me so?*

I reread the lines several times, admiring the flourishes in the handwriting, the way the last question mark curled largely over the word it followed, as if ready to swallow it, a serpent of ink.

And it was then that the smell of tobacco smoke crept into my nostrils, a fragrant but bitter smell which made me think of flowers burning. I waved my hand before my face and sniffed the air to make sure I was really smelling it, but by then it had overtaken the room like the cloud of incense at Mass. Soft footsteps approached.

"I'd forgotten how dark this room is," Ba Vinh said behind me. I watched her walk to the window and draw back the curtain. A narrow column of white light cascaded down the middle of the room. "You'll go blind reading here and your mother will never talk to me again. Would you like a glass of lemonade?" Her voice was casual.

"Yes," I told her, waiting for her to sniff the air.

She looked at me with sudden kindness. "I'll be back," she said, and walked out quietly.

The room was brighter now though much if it remained in shadow, errant sunlight flecking the furniture and the wood floor, dust motes set adrift. I returned to my book,

but looked up again and saw a dark figure standing in the corner, a man embedded in the shadow of the bookshelf. He simply stood there, motionless, and appeared to look at me though his face was hidden.

I remained surprisingly calm, struck by the sense of him having been there the entire time and me just missing him in the darkness. It felt natural that he be there—the room needed him as much as it needed the sofa and table and books, and now the invisible fog of tobacco smoke, sweet and heady like melted sugar, drifting about the air. He began walking slowly towards me with his arms held behind his back, the clack of his shoes across the wood floor the only sound in the room. His wan skin glowed as he passed through the column of light.

He was a skinny man with a neatly combed head of hoary hair, a thin shadow of a moustache above his lip, and prominent cheekbones that made his eyes fervid in the light. He withdrew his arms, and I noticed he was not smoking anything, that his gray suit was too small for him. As he sat down in the chair across from me, like some tired wedding guest, I heard his suit crush against itself and thought of my mother's dry hands caressing silk.

Strangely enough, I felt no urge to call Bà Vinh and tell her that her husband had returned to haunt his old room. I wanted, in fact, to touch Ông Vinh and make the believing complete, touch his gray hair or the grayness of his suit, feel if he was cold or warm or something in between. His aspect was serene, his hands upturned in his lap as if holding something precious. I wondered if this was how Jesus had appeared to his disciples after rising from the dead; if they, like me, felt the emanation of his presence, his thereness like the hereness of clouds and distant mountains. But I curbed the thought immediately. This was, after all, a man my mother had stopped praying for, and I had to

be wary of why he had come.

Vinh frowned as though he had tasted something sour. “Thirsty,” he said at last, eyes closed, his voice slight and raspy. “All I ever feel is thirsty.” He started caressing his neck, running the hand slowly under his chin, then over his mouth and moustache, like a blind man exploring a stranger’s face. When his eyes opened, he looked surprised to see me, as if it was I who had just appeared. “You’re a skinny boy, you know. You’ve always been skinny.”

“Why have you come?” I said. My voice was loud in the silent room.

“Reasons—” he muttered bitterly. Then he tilted his head. “Why have *you* come?” It occurred to me why I had returned these last two days. “You’ve been waiting for me,” he said. He was glaring at me steadily.

I was not scared, though his visage had grown grim and perturbed in the half light. His voice, too, like an enduring yawn, made his body seem decrepit, more alive in fact in its lack of vitality. But I was not scared. I was too distracted by the buzz of questions in my head. Had my father appeared to me now, I would not have run away. I said to Vinh, “You killed yourself.”

“Yes,” he murmured. “I suppose I did.” He reached for his glasses. As he picked them up, the jade and wooden rosaries slipped free and rattled onto the table. With his glasses on now, he peered at the window, which offered a view of breadfruit trees, and again caressed his face and throat. I imagined someone sitting in the trees watching us. Vinh looked at his hands. “When I was six, a stray dog limped into my arms. Someone had stabbed it. When I let it go, my palms were coated with blood. I don’t know why, but as I watched it die beside me, I found myself lathering the blood all over my hands. It was warm and sticky, the first time I had touched the blood of another living thing. I

wish I could feel that blood on my hands again. Everything is numb and dry for me now. No sense of touch but that of memory.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I said. He did not look up. After some silence, I went on: “Why did you go?”

Vinh stirred in his chair. My question was a pebble dropped in the pool of his memory. “Ah, the question I thought you might ask,” he said, and an uncertain smile appeared on his face. His voice grew loud and sharp. “I was eight years old,” he began. “My older brother and I were fighting one day, for what reason I’ve now forgotten, but I remember he struck my face as hard he could with his fist,” Vinh raised two fingers to his temple, “and knocked me unconscious. When I came to, he was kneeling over me and crying lavishly. He apologized over and over again. Not even my forgiveness could console him. For the next few weeks, he did my chores for me and secretly abstained from eating sweets. He never hit me again after that, not even playfully. I think he’d sometimes let me win at games out of regret for what he did. As he dried his eyes that afternoon, I remember him whispering to me that one day I’ll do something bad to him, and then we’ll be even.”

Vinh coughed weakly, absently, as though remembering how to do so. He licked his lips. “I never imagined it would happen. That years later I would introduce him to his wife, help him woo her, become best man at his wedding. That after a difficult first year of marriage, I would counsel them both and urge them to stay together, for each other, for the vows they made under God, and then finally that I would come to take her away from him. Is it enough to say that she loved me deeply and always had, more than him? I could convince you with all my regrets (for I can see the judgment in your eyes), but I have none. Only that there was no other way.

“My brother found out and refused to see us ever again. Our family and friends shunned us. No one attended our wedding. No one has ever seen our children. We left the church for many years, and our guilt followed us wherever we went. But after years of writing unanswered letters, of visiting home and having no one talk to us, we finally gave up. My brother’s stubbornness was especially hurtful. I suppose it fueled my own anger. Eventually it kept me away from him for good. I did not see him again for ten years, not until our father’s funeral, and even there we did not speak. The years had left us with nothing to say. So we never spoke again.”

The sunlight appeared now to awaken the furrows of age on Vinh’s face. He swallowed and again licked his lips. “But I had a dream,” he went on. “I was walking with my brother on a road that bordered a great, black forest. To our left was a bright vista of green hills; in the forest, only darkness. As we went further down the path, we found ourselves young handsome men again. We spoke about football and music, about our old schoolboy dreams of swimming in Halong Bay. He told me he wished the road was long enough so that we might reach a cliff that overlooked the entire forest because at twilight the top of the forest resembled a dark green ocean. But if the road were to end suddenly, he said, I should know only that he had never stopped thinking of me. He began humming a song from our grade-school days, and as we watched the hills we shared a cigarette. After some time, a second path appeared before us. I looked at my hands and found myself old again. My brother, I saw, remained a young man. As I kept walking toward the hills, he turned and took the path into the forest. Looking back at me, he waved a hand over his shoulder and said, *farewell, young brother Vinh*. His voice reminded me of our childhood when we would whisper to each other before falling asleep. I watched his back as he vanished into the trees, and I continued walking alone on the



road until I awoke.”

Vinh’s voice filled the dusky air. I could not tell if these memories brought him sadness or peace. I knew only my own mixture of both, as though it soothed me to hear his anguish, as though I were again on my front porch at night, listening to my mother’s stories until this same feeling, this strange satisfied cousin of grief, embraced me in the darkness and quickened me to sleep.

Vinh continued: “I dreamt another dream after hearing the news of my brother’s death. This time he and I were children, naked in our bath, and at one point he laughs and dunks my head underwater. Then I found we were sitting on the bed we once shared and he was whispering to me. He told me that the other country is a very beautiful country. A country all our own. It is this bed, Vinh. It is this house. It is the forest where we last met and bears no darkness save that in the shade of trees and mountains. And there we’ll talk as long as you like. He would return often to remind me of this place until the day I, too, passed onward and joined him there. We heard Mother’s voice call for us to go to sleep, and so we lay down on the bed. I felt warm, soft linen on my cheek, and the sound of the sea surrounded me until I awoke.”

Vinh stopped and appeared to be pondering something. Raising a hand to his face, he regarded it momentarily, then smoothed the folds of his suit. “On my last night—” and here he hesitated again and turned to face the window. Its white reflection on his glasses concealed his eyes. “I knew I could never explain it to her. It was cruel, I know, to leave her in this way. I felt she would understand, that after forty years she would understand this one and final thing. When she fell asleep that night, I gazed at her face in the lamplight and imagined the passage of time without her. Would I be conscious of her absence? Would it be more bearable in the beyond? I unfastened my gold necklace and

crucifix and gently slipped it around her neck. She never stirred. I took some thread from her knitting basket—green it was like the waters of Halong Bay—and I bound the clasp of the necklace so that it would not come loose in the night or during the rest of her life without me. Only then was I ready. I drank the tea. It was hot and bitter. I lay down beside her and listened to her breathing for a short time. She never stirred. I closed my eyes and said a prayer, and waited for sleep to overcome me before my last breath.”

Vinh’s voice trailed off. He sat there, massaging his hands as if washing them in water.

I waited a moment before asking the question. “So you are there now? Is it what your brother said it would be?”

Vinh leaned forward into the column of light. He was absolutely still now. “There is no forest, boy. There are no mountains. There is only this room. I never left, in fact, and yet I am alone here without my brother, and *she*—she is alone here without me. I pass, like night, from corner to corner, a shadow of a shadow. I watch her. I talk to her. Some days I think she sees and hears me, believes in me; other days I fear I’m only a figment of her imagination and nothing more. I want to see her live a long life, and yet I know I will never be at peace until she leaves this world. But even then, where will she go? I long for her now as I imagine my brother had all those years. Perhaps it is, at last, what I deserve. But my brother—could he be this diabolical? Is God this diabolical?”

Outside, a cry of laughter echoed from somewhere in the distance. We both turned our heads toward the window. All these days in the room and this was the first sound, aside from rain, that I had heard from the world outside. Suddenly, finally, I felt frightened. I looked at Vinh and wondered then if his brother had actually been the one to visit him. I wondered if what visited him was visiting me now, and I held my breath

before saying, “Perhaps He has punished you for taking your life—and so now you come back to haunt people.”

Vinh roused in his seat, and for a moment I was afraid my words had hurt him. “Haunt them?” he said, chuckling drily. “No. I don’t haunt people. They haunt themselves. Were it to rain in this room, the only thing we need fear, you and I, is getting wet.” He tilted his head as if to see me better, as if to balance the weight of his thoughts. “I have no wisdom for you, boy. I have only this room and these hands,” and he looked once again at his palms. “Now go and leave this place.”

The instant his voice broke off, I felt a pang of sorrow—not for him, I realized, but for myself. I remembered the book of poetry in my hands and now closed it. I sat silent for a moment, caressing the book’s cracked spine. Finally, I said to Vinh, “Would you rather God forgive you, or your brother forgive you?”

Perhaps I had asked him too many questions. Perhaps he had no answer for me. He rose and began making his way across the room. The smell of tobacco smoke sharpened, bloomed, as though he were stirring its phantom cloud with his progress. The last thing I remember was watching him traverse the room, passing into shadows, through arcs of sunlight and spiraling dust motes, moving over the room as if to encompass it, to take in every step of it, the clean room.

When I awoke, I was alone, my arm warmed in a pillar of light that severed the sofa. It felt like late afternoon. I walked to the window and drew the curtain, casting the room into darkness once again. The room smelled of old leather and sandalwood—a peaceful smell in the hushed air.

The book of poetry lay on the sofa, and I returned it to the shelf. What compelled me to enter this room now kept me from taking anything from it. Before I left, I noticed the

wire glasses on the table, still entangled in the rosaries, and beside them a glass of lemonade

Bà Vinh was not asleep in the front room. I found her standing on the porch, her arms folded by the rail. She was watching people pedal their bikes slowly past the house. I imagined them throwing her furtive glances and speeding up, wary of her husband chasing them down the road one day.

She heard me approach and turned around. I nodded at her awkwardly. We stood facing each other for a few moments before I said to her, in a clumsy murmur, “Was your husband’s brother a good man?” My mind was not yet clear. The question felt born of a dream I’d awakened from, even though all I’d dreamt had the clarity of bells.

Bà Vinh was taken aback momentarily, but then smiled to herself as if struck by some pleasant memory. “I did not know him that well,” she replied easily. She must have figured from my silence that her answer satisfied me. She glanced at my hands, my empty hands, and said, “Such a quiet boy.” Taking my shoulders, she drew me down to her height and brushed her fingers slowly through my hair. Then she kissed me on the forehead. I left her on the porch and felt her watch me as I followed the alleyways home.

A week after my last visit to the house, my mother and I heard from the neighbors that Bà Vinh had moved away. Apparently we had missed it entirely. A young man and woman had arrived at the house early in the morning with a truck, and by the afternoon they had emptied the house and left. A month later my mother received a letter from Bà Vinh in which she wrote that she had moved to Saigon to live with her son—“to be with him and his family, at his request,” she said. She apologized for not saying goodbye in person and promised to come visit the first chance she got. The letter accompanied a

package that contained, wrapped in newspaper, the two books of folk tales I had read in Vinh's study.

A year passed and Mother received another letter, this time from Bà Vinh's son, who informed her that his mother had died in a car accident. "She would have wanted you to know this," was the letter's last line. No other details were included. Strangely, my mother did not cry as she often did at the news of a familiar's death, and after she and I read the letter together, she reminded me of the two books I had been given and told me to keep them stored safely somewhere so that they never got lost or ruined.

The violence of Bà Vinh's passing shocked me, and yet I also felt a vague satisfaction—a murmur of hope. I still remember the day I left her on the porch. I glanced back and saw her lean her head on the post, hugging it with one arm, eyes closed and a hand to her chest.

I never told my mother about that afternoon, and not because she would have doubted everything I said. What mattered was that she go on believing in the goodness of all she believed. In the end, she would have wanted a happier story. For me, a story was all it needed to be. When I think of Bà Vinh nowadays, I imagine her husband hovering behind her in the shadows of that porch; then I think of the moment she leaned over to kiss my forehead—for upon lowering my head to meet her lips, peering down, I saw a gold crucifix hanging from her neck, the clasp of the necklace bound by green thread, bound tightly enough to withstand the rest of her life.

## A PAINTED FACE

My sister tells me Lieu's taxi ride will be free of charge today. Three years I've been a driver for her and this is the first time anyone has ridden for free. I am to take him to Bien Hoa and wherever else he wants to go, all day if necessary, and if he insists on paying, I am still to refuse. Even a tip will be forbidden.

"He's your cousin," she is saying to me. "And this is his first time back. He's brought his wife and kids a long way to visit us, so it's the least we can do."

"But it's customary to tip in America," I say, "he probably tips his mailman over there. It'd be rude of me not to accept."

My sister frowns at me. She is standing by the open window of my taxicab (or her taxicab) with one hand on the roof of the car and the other on her hip, resembling our mother with that expression of calm disapproval on her face. She owes Lieu a favor, for loaning her money to start her taxi company, and she reminds me again of this fact as if to tell me I have favors of my own to repay.

"Remember that woman's luggage you forgot at the airport last month?" she says, tapping me lightly on the shoulder. "Consider today a down payment on your amends." When I don't laugh, she sighs and says, "I'm sorry your plans are ruined, Diem, but Lieu's the reason you and I can even talk about things like this."

That's always been a philosophy in our family: never leave your debts unpaid, no matter how long it takes or how much is owed. This refers to everything in life, of course,

not just money, and if my father were talking to me, he'd say it's simply the balance of things. Only question here is knowing when the debt's been repaid in full. But I'm hardly feeling sentimental about my sister's gesture. It's me who's giving up an afternoon at the park with my girlfriend. It's me who'll be working all day on short notice and for practically nothing. And what's more, I have no idea where in Bien Hoa I'm taking Lieu or why, and neither does my sister because he told her nothing. Bien Hoa, which is almost an hour away, has Saigon's crowds but none of its energy, and I imagine a hot and muggy afternoon idling in my cab, watching hustlers gamble in some narrow, deserted alley. My older sister, for all her great skills at running the business, has never spent an entire day driving someone around, or worse, waiting for them.

"If anything, spending the day with Lieu will do you some good," she insists. "It'll give you both a chance to talk."

"Talk about what?" I mutter to myself, though I know she means for me to soak up Lieu's secrets to success in life, a life I should aspire to despite the differences that separate our worlds. *All he's gone through*, she often says, *and look where he is now*. My sister likes to chide me for not being motivated or ambitious, for not taking things seriously enough, like the job she's given me or the girlfriend I should either marry soon or drop altogether. Since she's been supporting me and the family for years, two things I'm admittedly bad at, keeping quiet is usually my only option.

I drive away without saying goodbye. In the rearview mirror, I see her watching me with her arms at her sides. Before I turn onto the main road, I stick my hand out the window and give her a quick wave.

At a quarter to noon, I arrive at the Rex Hotel in downtown Saigon, and Lieu is

already waiting for me by the front square, smoking a cigarette and ignoring a little girl who pulls endlessly at his pantleg, trying to sell him postcards and smokes. This morning, my sister showed me a photo of Lieu and his two young sons on some island beach—a vacation he took last year. I assumed his wife took the picture. Lieu looks taller in person, and his aspect at the moment bears little resemblance to the man laughing in the photo. I approach him and shoo away the girl, and he turns to me with surprise, taking off his sunglasses to shake my hand.

“Diem? Is that you?” He regards my face thoughtfully as I shake his hand with my firmest grip. I think he is about to comment on how much I’ve grown up, but instead he says, “I thought you were coming at eleven o’clock.” He squints, acting confused as if to hide the fact that he’s angry. I notice he’s nearly a head taller than me.

“My sister told me noon,” I say, ready to tell him how she even posted a note on my steering wheel this morning to make sure I was on time. But he turns away from me and shouts “hey” to the little girl who comes running back with a pack of cigarettes. He pays her with a five-dollar American bill, four times what the pack is worth, and waves off her effort to make change, then pats me on the shoulder with a quick nod towards my cab.

He sits in the back seat, which only strangers do when they ride alone—and I remember his wife and children. I want to ask him where they are, since my sister told me his wife is half-American and very pretty, but his brusque manner keeps me silent. He puts on his sunglasses as we drive off.

Lieu and I are first cousins, but he is a good ten years older than me and was eighteen when he fled the country almost two decades ago. I hardly remember him at all, only that he used to visit our house every so often and play cards with my sister, who is his age,



and would curse when he lost. I was too young back then to understand or pay much attention to family affairs, but I've learned over the years that he suffered a lot after the war. His father, an Air Force captain, spent two years in the reeducation camps after *giai-phong*, returned home with heart and drinking problems, and died a year later from a stroke. Shortly after this, Lieu's older brother escaped the country by boat and drowned in a storm at sea. Lieu's escape a year later was more successful, though he ended up toiling in the refugee camp at Pulau Bidong for almost three years with no one to sponsor him. My sister tells me he nearly died twice in the camp, but I've never taken the time to ask her how.

I glimpse him now in the rearview mirror, smoking out the open window in his crisp, white shirt and expensive sunglasses, his hair neatly combed and gleaming, and, though it's foolish to think so, he doesn't look like a man who has suffered much. Even as a child, I thought Lieu was handsome, and now I see he has the healthy white skin and ample body weight of *Việt-kiều* who have lived a long time in America. I hear he owns a chain of Vietnamese restaurants in California and that he and his family live in a six-bedroom house with three cars. None of this impresses me except for the cars. One of these days, when I no longer have to rely on my sister for everything, I'd like to drive a car that's actually mine, take it on a trip all the way to Hanoi or Halong Bay and for once, like my cousin, know what it's like to travel a far distance.

We are entering the highway that leads out of downtown Saigon, and traffic is particularly bad today. An old, rusty bus fuming black smoke passes into my lane and nearly sideswipes the cab, and I hear Lieu grunt in the back, apparently unused to this kind of driving. He rolls up his window, and taking that as a sign I close mine. The car's weak air conditioner embarrasses me, but I haven't had a chance to refill the freon yet,

not with my sister running me ragged for a week straight.

Lieu is facing the window, rapt in solemn silence with his sunglasses off, staring out at a Saigon that must be both familiar and utterly foreign to him—its shopping centers, its high-rise hotels and office buildings, its colorful new houses all jumbled into the old, unruly city he remembers. His face, bronzed by the sunlight and levitating above the jade crucifix that dangles from the rearview mirror, a gift from my girlfriend, appears strangely deific. I turn off the radio and slip in a cassette of American pop music, but he doesn't seem to notice.

Traffic slows, and the car horns erupt. I honk a few times myself as motorbikes continue worming their way around me and through the congested traffic ahead. In the distance, I see the problem: a truck full of ducks or chickens has stalled in the middle of the highway, smoke billowing from its hood. For a minute or two, we hardly move at all.

To the right of the highway, in a crowded church courtyard, a wedding party is taking place. I can see people hugging and laughing, children chasing each other across the square. The bride and groom are standing beneath two towering palm trees, flanked by a number of wedding guests dressed in suits and colorful *áo dài*'s. From where I am, I can make out the bride in her white gown, and for a moment it looks like she is pregnant.

"You married yet?" Lieu's loud voice startles me. I look up and his eyes are staring at me in the rearview mirror. He nods in the direction of the wedding party.

"No, not yet," I say with a small laugh. I see an opening in traffic and dart in front of the bus that passed me a few minutes ago.

"A girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"And what's her name?"

“Tuyet.” I can tell he’s asking these questions more out of boredom than out of sincere curiosity, and so, though I want to, I refrain from telling him that Tuyet is a medical student at the University, an intelligent and in my opinion very beautiful girl from a good, Catholic family. She also cuts hair and is helping me save money for a new Honda moped so that I don’t have to drive her around in my sister’s stranger-worn cab.

Lieu is quiet for a moment. “You love her, don’t you?” He says this, his voice deep and thoughtful, as though I’d been hiding it from him all along. “I can tell by the way you don’t want to say anything about her.”

I shrug my shoulders and avoid his eyes in the mirror.

“How long have you known her?”

“Two years,” I say hesitantly, though I do feel compelled to lay out the facts. I turn down the music. “We’ve been dating for a year now.

“You’re what, twenty-four, twenty-five? Here’s some advice. If she’s the right one, marry her as soon as you can. Impress her parents, buy her a nice little ring, forget all the other girls who’re no good anyway.”

“I’m really in no hurry,” I say, “and I don’t think she is either.” Actually, I want to ask him how he should presume to know my intentions, my feelings for anyone. I look in the mirror and his head has fallen back on the headrest, his eyes nearly closed.

“You know, my wife and I met in the States,” he continues, “but I nearly married someone else here. I doubt if you knew that back then, young as you were.”

“I didn’t.”

“Yeah, we were together not long before I left. She was a pretty one. Flawless white skin. Small, beautiful breasts.” He chuckles. “I wanted us to get married and planned on proposing, but then I thought I’d wait until things in the family were better—you know,

with Father and Linh recently gone. We were both young anyway.” Lieu takes off his seatbelt and settles deeper into his seat, sinking a bit from view in the mirror. “Then she went and fell in love with a friend of mine, someone I’d known throughout school—I actually saved his neck once in a fight. They went on for months behind my back, and sometimes right in my face. I was blind. When I finally found out, I broke things off like that—” and he snaps his fingers. He speaks casually, flippantly, and I’m not sure if he even cares whether I’m listening. But then his tone changes: “You know, that’s the reason I left. Not because of the country the way it was. Or because Father and Linh died.” Again he laughs. “I left without telling her. Once I got to Pulau Bidong, I heard she was devastated and dropped him, asked my family if I had written, whether or not I made it there alright. I told them to ignore her, shut her out of anything concerning me. To hell with her and everything—” He stops abruptly, almost angrily, and says nothing more.

I feel like I’ve just eavesdropped on a private conversation and am not quite sure what to say. I imagine him telling his wife this story; I imagine her wondering if she was the next best thing. After a long silence, I remember and turn up the music.

Traffic slows again. Up ahead an army of large trucks is creeping onto the highway, their cargo covered with tarpaulin. They’re headed, as they have been for a month now, toward the construction of the new highway that will lead straight to Vung Tau. Soon, it’ll take two rather than four hours to drive to Vung Tau, and I decide at that moment to take Tuyet to the beaches there next week, to make up for our lost afternoon today. I will even buy her a new bathing suit, a nice foreign brand.

“Traffic here hasn’t changed at all,” Lieu mutters. He leans forward, puts his hands on the shoulders of the front seats. “We’re still downtown, aren’t we? Let’s stop

somewhere for a bit. All the fumes, all this stopping and going has given me a headache.”

“We still have almost an hour before we get to Bien Hoa,” I remind him.

“That’s fine, we have enough time. There’s actually a place on Le Duan Street that I’d like to visit, if it’s still there. A small restaurant where we can get a quick drink.”

I sigh in my head, disappointed that he’s apparently no longer in a hurry. Through a throng of Vespas, I maneuver the cab across the highway toward an exit.

We are near the Trade Centre, where traffic on a Friday is bad enough to confuse any driver, and finding this restaurant Lieu mentioned is as difficult as I thought it’d be. I don’t recognize the name of the place, nor does he remember exactly where it’s located. I offer to take him to a number of decent cafés, but he’s insistent on this one despite everything that has changed in the city, despite the likelihood that it might now be the first floor of a karaoke bar. But finally, to my surprise, after nearly half an hour of driving in circles, we spot the restaurant—a small café wedged between a computer store and an Italian ice cream shop, with a neon sign overhead that reads *Café 33*. There is an empty parking spot by the front curb which I slip into, thankful for my first stroke of luck today.

As soon as Lieu steps out of the cab, three children and an elderly man hurry up to him, holding up lottery cards and packets of chewing gum. He walks through their outstretched hands. They follow us to the entrance of the restaurant where the attendant waves them off with an impatient flick of his wrist.

Lieu stops and takes a long look at the place. “This is it,” he says to me and points at the front patio. “That girl I told you about—she and I came here all the time and used to sit right there. Everything’s changed, of course, and it was called something else back

then—but it's still the same place.”

The attendant leads us into the patio, and as I walk behind Lieu, I ask myself why he'd bother revisiting a place where bad memories might follow him.

“Two Tiger beers,” he tells the waitress as soon as we are seated.

“I can't drink—”

He waves a hand in my face and nods at the waitress to go ahead. Lighting a cigarette, he offers me one, which I take. The beers arrive and he drinks half of his in one gulp before sitting back in his chair and facing the inside of the restaurant. His survey of the place is slow and complete, roving over the bamboo tables and chairs, the lavender walls adorned with neon beer signs and posters of singers and movie stars. I can't tell if he recognizes anything, but I hear him sigh as he settles his gaze on traffic.

“It's amazing that we managed to find this place,” I say.

He doesn't appear to hear me. Across the street, there is a homeless woman standing on the grassy median, swathed in a black, tattered *áo dài* with her face done up in garish makeup. As cars rush past her on both sides, she stands there and performs exaggerated tai-chi chuan movements, pushing invisible walls, drawing invisible arcs in the air with a closed paper fan, her head tilted all the while like a Thai dancer's. Lieu turns to me with an uncertain grin, both amused and a little unsettled by the sight of this woman. His beer nearly finished, he holds up two fingers to the waitress, who promptly brings over two more bottles.

“So where is it that I'm taking you in Bien Hoa?” I ask him.

Lieu pulls a pen from his pocket and thinks for a long moment, then carefully writes something on a napkin. He hands the napkin to me with an address on it. I don't recognize it as anyone's I know, nor am I familiar with that area of the town. I tuck the

napkin in my shirt pocket.

Lieu's attention wanders from the table again. There is no awkwardness in his silence. Taking long drags from his cigarette with his beer constantly in hand, he seems perfectly satisfied as though he has forgotten me. I look at my watch and take another cigarette from his pack.

We sit smoking quietly for a long while until two young women, probably Australian or European tourists, walk past the café wearing shorts and halter tops. Lieu eyes them and says to me under his breath, as though it is a mystery to him, "You know, American women aren't as dark down there. And some are completely shaven."

I blush, and drink my beer to hide it. For some reason it feels like my father has just said this to me and if I were to add anything it would only make things more uncomfortable. There's something patronizing in what Lieu's said, and it makes me think of the one other girl I slept with before Tuyet, possibly the only girl I'll ever be with aside from her. I find myself startled by a jolt of envy. I say the first thing that comes to mind, "Where's your wife today? And your kids?"

He glances at me sideways with a flash of amusement in his eyes. "I think she took them to that new waterpark. A waterpark—in Saigon! Who owns it, the French?"

"Malaysians, I believe. I'd like to take my girlfriend, but it's pretty expensive."

"Malaysians are probably the only ones who can afford to go there."

"Shouldn't we get going soon?"

Lieu pats the air in front of me. "Don't be in such a hurry now. We have plenty of time. All day, in fact." He nudges another beer toward me and gestures again at the waitress. "One thing I learned from my time on Pulau Bidong is that there's always plenty of time for everything."

“Didn’t you tell me just half an hour ago that I should rush out and marry my girlfriend?”

Smiling, he points a finger at me. “Ah, so you’re not as timid as I thought you were.”

I glance at the street, trying my best not to grin. I consider what he just said. “So what *was* Pulau Bidong like? I heard it was hard for you there.”

“It was,” he says and shrugs nonchalantly. “I was sick for a while. Hepatitis. I lay in bed for six months and lost more weight than any grown man should. And then a year after getting better, I went and got myself stabbed in a fight.” He leans back and pats the right side of his abdomen as if he’s full from a good meal. I’m expecting him to unbutton his shirt and show off a scar, but he only peers at the spot his hand is covering. “Both times I thought it was the end,” he declares.

“Which was worse?”

Lieu shakes his head. “There was no worse. Thing is, I remember very little about those months in bed, aside from the sheer misery of being ill and helpless. And the stabbing—well, I’m not even sure now how I got into the fight. Some fool decided he disliked me one night, and we got into it. I’ve completely forgotten his face.”

“If some guy stabbed me, I’d never forget what he looked like.”

Lieu is shaking his head again. “Yes, but you’ve never had anything happen to you.”

I look at him and laugh a little. I think of when I failed at school, of the two times I crashed the cab and nearly missed killing myself and my passengers, of the night I lost all my savings in a billiards game. “What do you mean?” I say.

Chuckling to himself, he coolly drinks his beer, which at once irritates me. A second time he’s done it now, and I’ve a mind to tell him he has no right, coming where he’s come from, with his house and cars and pretty wife, to assume anything about me. I



never left like he did. Has he been gone that long that he's forgotten where he is?

Lieu puts out his cigarette. His smile fades, replaced by an air of restlessness as he takes out his wallet and tosses two bills on a napkin. With his elbows on the table, his face flushing faintly from the beer, he stares at the ashtray and says to me, "Those three years on the island were about as long as the twenty I've lived since. And yet with everything that happened, with all I went through back then, the thing I think about most nowadays is my old girlfriend cheating on me. Funny, isn't it?" He gives me a questioning look, surprised apparently by his own statement, as if he only just now realized how profound it is. He continues in a subdued voice, "You know, she sent me a letter two years ago. Told me she still thinks of me, that she still loves me. She apologized. I don't know how she found my address. I had to hide the letter from my wife."

He takes a long, slow swig from his beer, finishing it, then stands abruptly to leave. As I follow him out of the restaurant, it occurs to me that I might be taking him to this woman's house.

As we approach the cab, he stops and looks at his watch. Hesitating a moment, he walks back to the attendant. "You sell wine?" The attendant nods. "I'd like a bottle of red wine. Whatever brand you have is fine." Lieu hands him a few bills, and when the attendant turns to leave, he adds, "And is the owner here? Could I speak to him?"

The attendant looks at me, then back at Lieu, apparently taking him for an important person.

"I'm an old customer," says Lieu, as though it should be obvious.

Without a word, the attendant disappears into the café. I go and stand by my cab as Lieu waits at the entrance. I soon notice the homeless woman from across the street

making her way toward us, and though I ignore her, she approaches me directly, stopping a meter from where I stand.

“What a handsome boy,” she purrs at me in an unexpectedly rich voice, her smile toothy and brilliant. She’s older than I thought, her face heavily powdered, a kabuki mask of crudely drawn eyebrows, rouged cheeks, and smeared, bright red lipstick. I want to look away but cannot help feeling a little flattered. At least she’s not asking for money.

She soon turns and sees Lieu, and now begins slowly approaching him. I know I should get rid of her, or at least warn him, but his comments a few minutes ago are still gnawing at me. Sure enough, when Lieu sees her, he nearly jumps a step away.

“Look how handsome he is,” she proclaims, turning to me for agreement. She can’t be any taller than Lieu’s chest. Leaning forward, she clasps the closed fan to her breast and stares unabashedly at him as if at some beautiful statue. “So handsome...”

Lieu turns his back to her, putting his hands in his pockets. When she edges closer, he takes another step toward the entrance of the café. Just then the owner, a man about Lieu’s age, appears at the door with a dark bottle of wine in one hand. He hands it to Lieu who, perhaps to drown out the woman’s voice, thanks him rather loudly. As they shake hands, he says, “This was once Ong Thu’s restaurant, right?”

The owner laughs cheerfully, glad that someone remembers. “Yes, yes it was! Thu was a friend of my father’s and sold it to him about ten years ago. I took things over not too long ago.” Then he adds proudly, “I’ve since redone the place.”

“Yes, I noticed.”

“You live in America, don’t you? Did you know Ong Thu?”

“I knew his son—a friend of mine from school.”

“Yes, the son. I didn’t know him very well, but apparently he ran things for a few

years and didn't do that good a job. That's when his father sold to my father."

"How tall and handsome," the old woman is still saying, turning happily from me to the owner. "Look at him."

The owner glances at her, but continues smiling at Lieu.

Lieu says, "You don't know what Thu and his son are doing nowadays, do you?"

"Well, I haven't spoken to the family in years, not since they all moved away. But last I heard, Thu lost his wife to cancer, and I believe his son, your friend, served some time in jail for burglary. Very tough for Thu, I imagine."

"It must be," Lieu mutters to himself, cradling the wine bottle in one arm. He appears distracted for a moment and doesn't seem to notice that the old woman is now standing right beside him, mumbling at his elbow. He turns to her and says irritably, "Yes, yes, woman. Leave me alone."

She is still smiling lavishly at him and now takes a hold of his wrist. Lieu pulls his arm back at once, glaring at her. As soon as she reaches for it again, he shoves her away with a sweep of his arm. She stumbles backward a few steps, loses her footing, and before I can move to catch her, she hits the concrete hard. With her legs splayed on the sidewalk, she looks around blindly as though waking from a nap.

I rush over to help her up, and when Lieu does the same, I turn to him and whisper angrily, "What's wrong with you?"

A few customers from the patio are staring. The owner, who appears both shocked and a little embarrassed, snaps at the attendant to come fix the situation. The old woman is unhurt apparently, and as the attendant leads her away gently by the arm, she starts mumbling something to him, already oblivious to what just happened, her face alive again with a mad happiness.

I see Lieu standing beside the owner, gripping the neck of the wine bottle in one hand. He notices the old woman's fan on the ground, picks it up, and after a moment of indecision hands it sheepishly to the owner, who receives it with an awkward smile. I walk to the cab. For once Lieu walks behind me.

We are on the highway again. It's not yet two o'clock, but I feel like this trip began three or four hours ago. As Lieu sits in the backseat with the bottle of wine in his lap, my first thought is that he's taking this wine to his old girlfriend's house; but we're only driving about ten minutes before I hear the cork pop and see him in the rearview mirror bringing the bottle to his lips.

He still hasn't spoken to me, which is fine—my job is to stay silent and drive. If he were to apologize or try excusing his actions, I wouldn't know what to say. And what's more, I'm beginning to feel complicit in some treacherous scheme. Is it a secret rendezvous I'm taking him to? I imagine my girlfriend's reaction tonight when I tell her the story: *Returning to your long lost love is no good reason for betraying your wife*, she'd say. *Lost love is simply that—lost.*

But perhaps Lieu is running from something. A loveless wife, for instance. Visions of a failing marriage jump to my mind: their arguments at dinner, their silence in cars, an unspoken affair between them. I'm reminded of Lieu's advice to me earlier, and though it feels silly, the thought of Tuyet as my wife makes me imagine, for a moment at least, my own unhappy marriage.

I glance again at Lieu in the back and feel the urge to both sympathize and roll my eyes. Why, after so many years, after so much contemplation, is he revisiting the woman he once loved drowned in booze? Every minute or so, even though music is playing in

the cab, I can hear him kiss the lip of the bottle. He stares out the window like someone gazing at both the past and the future.

At half past two, we approach Bien Hoa. I exit the highway and find that we are going to a less populated area of the city, beyond the tall buildings and city tenements. Patches of farmland and green pasture break up the dense neighborhoods, and there are often children playing in the streets, as well as a water buffalo or two grazing near the roadside. There are also many trees, and with the sun glaring as it is now, I'm hoping to find a spot soon beneath a crowd of palms where both the car and I can cool off.

Lieu tells me to stop somewhere with a toilet, his first words to me in over half an hour. I pull over at another café, and he jumps out holding the wine bottle. Five minutes later, he returns empty-handed, his face now fully flushed.

Once we get going again, he asks me what time it is; when I tell him, he says to me in a slow, dull voice, "Will you be able to find it?"

"We don't have much further to go," I reply, and he returns to his silence.

Within ten minutes, we reach the entrance of the neighborhood I'm looking for, and I turn into a narrow, gravel road shaded by a wall of breadfruit trees. It is quiet here, hardly anyone outside. Small houses with dingy, stuccoed walls line the roadside, and my cab's side mirror nearly scrapes their front gates as we pass by. The road soon opens a little, into a half circle of houses built so close together that they look conjoined. I check the address on the napkin and stop the car in front of the pale blue house.

I turn to the back seat. Lieu has yet to move. He is peering at the house as if to make sure it's really there, his face an inch from the window.

"Is this it?" I ask him.

"That's the address," he replies quietly. It appears he, too, has never been here.

Opening the door, he turns to me and says, not unkindly, "Thank-you, Diem."

He walks toward the porch, his gait no longer quick and assured but more like that of someone who just awoke. No sooner does he reach the porch than he stops and returns to the cab, dipping his head into the passenger window. My hand is resting on the shifter, and into it he awkwardly crumples a fifty-dollar bill and gazes at me with wide, bloodshot eyes. "Your sister probably told you not to, but take this and buy something for your girlfriend. And Diem, please don't talk about this to anyone, especially anyone in the family. Just tell them you brought me to visit an old friend." His words are soft and measured, his face momentarily lucid. My gut tells me I should feel insulted, but instead, for the first time today, I feel like we are actually cousins.

I lean toward him and say, "Is this *her* house?"

He grins at me suddenly, a little sloppily, and says, "Wait for me. I won't be too long." He mounts the porch this time and disappears under the shade of a large plum tree that has grown into an appendage of the house. I can hear a metal door sliding open, a few dull voices, and after some silence the door sliding shut.

I feel uneasy sitting in the cab and decide to wait outside. A neighboring house has a small shop in its front room, and I wander over there to keep myself busy. The shop sells everything from toothpaste to shoes. I notice a couple of leather handbags in the corner. A pretty girl about my age sits on a stool by the counter, reading a magazine while a small radio plays European dance music. She looks up when I approach and nods shyly, smiling. She turns down the music and puts her magazine aside, glancing at me as she shuffles some paper on the counter.

I walk over to the handbags. They're well-made, the leather sturdy and soft, but I'm taken aback by the price tags. "Those bags are made in Italy," the shopgirl volunteers

from her counter. Her voice is small and apologetic. She nods eagerly when I ask permission to use the phone on the wall. I turn away from her as I dial Tuyet's house number. She is not at home, but her sister is quick to mention that Tuyet was disappointed about our cancelled trip to the park. Before I hang up, I remind her to tell Tuyet that I called.

I look over at the house. Awash in the shadows of the plum tree, it appears deserted. I remember the night two years ago when I first met Tuyet at a friend's house and she asked me if I had ever been to Hanoi. I lied and told her I had gone there as a child. I now regret the fact that she still believes this.

The shopgirl is standing on a stool and quietly rearranging the wall of videos behind the counter. Her hair, unlike Tuyet's which is bobbed, falls past her shoulders.

I pick up the phone again and dial my sister's number, mindful of what Lieu asked of me. When I reach her, I tell her that I won't know when I'll be back in town, but that everything is fine. Without hesitating, my sister says a client called and said I was late picking up his family at the airport yesterday, and that I drove too fast on the way home. She sounds exasperated with me, but there's a tinge of humor in her voice, as if she's no longer mad enough to scold me. Lowering my voice, I tell her traffic was bad yesterday and that I was making up for lost time on the way home. I can feel her shaking her head at me. When I tell her that Tuyet is upset with me, she seems to soften and is pleasant when she says goodbye.

As soon as I hang up, I decide to buy one of the leather handbags—a black one big enough to carry all of Tuyet's things, even her books. She's not a showy girl, but the bag will make her stand out nicely at the University. I pay the shopgirl with the money Lieu gave me, foregoing the usual bargaining, and the girl's eyes light up when she sees the

American bill. She carefully wraps the handbag in newspaper. “For your girlfriend?” she asks. I nod and return her smile, feeling both impressive and somewhat awkward.

Before she can count out my change, a woman’s high-pitched scream startles us both. I take a step toward the house Lieu entered, and another scream rings out. There are crashing sounds, then the shatter of glass. As I hurry across the street, I hear shouting, a man’s voice this time.

My hurry turns into an all-out sprint when I see Lieu’s form stumbling onto the porch. A stocky man comes rushing out after him and throws a fist in his face. Lieu staggers to the edge of the porch where he turns in time to lift his feet and goes tripping down the four steps, nearly crashing into the branches of the plum tree at the bottom. By the time I reach them, Lieu is already on his feet, floundering a little but glaring steadily at the man on the porch.

I step in front of Lieu, glancing from him to the man above us, who is standing astride with his fists clenched. The last time I hit someone was in high school, and I lost that fight, but my glimpse of Lieu’s bloody teeth makes me stand my ground. Then I see that the man on the porch is bleeding badly from the nose, and as furious as he was a second ago, he looks haggard now in his flimsy t-shirt, wiping at his nose repeatedly with a finger. I notice a tattoo of a dragon running down his arm and the deep, leathery tan of too many days in the sun. Faint voices come from within the house.

I feel invisible. The man continues staring at Lieu, his posture and hands relaxed now, as if the thought of throwing another punch bores him. There is sadness in his face, a glint of pity in the downcast gaze, and hearing Lieu’s soft wheezing at my back, I can understand why. “Lieu...” he finally says, uttering the name like some disappointed father. Without another word, he turns and walks back into the house, and the metal door



grinds shut.

Behind me, Lieu has already opened the door of the cab.

It is not until I turn the car around that I see the neighbors standing by their doorsteps and windows, staring at us as we slowly drive away. I look at Lieu, sitting in the front seat now with a busted lip, his hair hanging over his eyes, his shirt spotted with blood, and my first reaction is to feel ashamed for him in the eyes of the neighbors.

“What did you do?” I demand, a little too loudly.

Lieu doesn’t say anything. I’m already annoyed by the thought of driving him home in silence. But he begins laughing quietly to himself, then a little louder, until his shoulders start shaking and he has to cover his mouth to keep from spitting blood on my dashboard.

“What’s the matter with you?” I say, not quite sure if he’s sobered yet. I take the café napkin from my pocket and hand it to him. “Who was that back there?”

“I got him good in the face—” Lieu gasps. “I must have broken his nose! He thought I would forget—he thought after all this time I’d let it go—” He stops laughing long enough to wipe the blood from his mouth with the napkin. For a second, I feel he’s laughing at me.

He soon grows quiet but watches the road ahead of us with a sliver of a grin on his face. I steer the cab through traffic a little recklessly, recalling our trip this afternoon and everything Lieu said to me. I want to ask him why, with everything he *did* tell me, did he not tell me about this, but it seems asking about anything that led up to today would be like asking him why he bleeds.

As we stop in traffic, he holds the door ajar and spits blood several times onto the

street. A cyclo driver in a dingy shirt and cap is idling by our cab and staring lazily at Lieu. Lieu notices him and shuts the door. He takes out his wallet, empties it of cash and credit cards, and tosses it out the window at the cyclo driver, who fumbles it like a hot coal against his chest and gives us a stupefied look. As I drive on, Lieu turns to me, blood still oozing from the cut on his lip: "If anyone asks, just say someone robbed me—but tell them I put up a good fight."

We are half an hour away from Saigon, and Lieu is snoring softly, slumped in his seat. His left eye is noticeably swollen, dried blood curled over his lower lip. I offered twice to take him to a doctor, but he refused both times.

Traffic is backed up as we approach the Saigon River Bridge. A parade of pedestrians crowd the roadside, walking to and from the bridge's boardwalk up ahead. There are vendors prowling among them, and those who approach me, I shoot my meanest glare. A gaggle of eager ones assault the red touring van next to me, holding up maps, books, and woven hammocks. The van is full of *Việt-kieu* who, despite the weather, are adorned in sport jackets and silk scarves. It must be a family of twelve or so people, and one of them is telling a story up front and gesturing wildly as the others laugh. Their windows are closed, but I can still hear the laughter. A young man takes pictures of the vendors with a small camera as they walk alongside the van, waving their wares stubbornly at his window.

The van moves ahead of me a few paces. Two young boys in the back are staring at my cab. One looks about five, the other a couple of years older, both wearing identical baseball caps that are too big for them. I crawl forward in traffic until they're nearly adjacent to my door, a few meters away, and I see now that they're staring at Lieu.

The younger boy opens his window and shouts something at me in English, which I don't entirely understand. The older boy nudges him impatiently and interprets for me, nodding his head at Lieu, "Is he dead?"

I'm tempted to say yes. I tell them, "He was robbed."

Their eyes widen. The younger boy leans over the seat in front of him and says something to a woman. She is laughing with the other adults, but at the boy's insistence, she looks over at me, then at Lieu, her smile vanishing. She reaches back casually and closes the boys' window. Before I know it, she's roaring with laughter again. The van pulls away from me, but the two boys continue staring at Lieu with blank, patient faces. They are buried in youth, I think, they know nothing of what may come.

I roll up my window. Traffic finally speeds up, and when I shift gears, Lieu's head falls onto his shoulder. He doesn't stir. His snoring sounds childlike and weak.

I want to laugh at how absurd the day has been, at what he ended up doing. It's because of love, he'd probably say, though I suspect the truth of the matter is bigger and inexplicable. There must be a pain in the world that will follow people like their shadow, despite the other sorrows they've experienced in life, despite reason and proportion. I've apparently envied Lieu all this time, for only now do I see how different I want us to be.

I cross the Saigon River, its calm waters burnished white by the sun, and remember the handbag I had bought for Tuyet. A loud curse escapes me. I failed at my one good thing today, and this somehow makes it easier to admit I love her, as much as Lieu believed and my sister has hoped. But the river's glare is momentarily blinding, the rumbling of traffic outside like distant thunder, and I feel strangely disheartened.

Up ahead I see the red van again. Suddenly it swerves and darts around a stalled cyclo driver, weaving drunkenly before it regains control—my heart leaps, and in that

instant I imagine myself that driver, the van crashing into me, my body pinned beneath the wheels as I hear above me the sound of laughter.

## VAGARIES

The girl, when Chau first sees her, looks restless. She sits in the restaurant's crowded patio under a table umbrella that shades her from the noon sun. One arm remains in an intrusive spot of sunlight and looks severed from the rest of her. Her parents, well-dressed and solemn, sit eating across the table, but the girl ignores her food, only plays with her necklace and stares inside the restaurant. The mother, her left arm in a cast, says something to her and the girl shakes her head. She takes a drink of water and chews on the ice cubes.

With four tables of noisy diners between them, Chau feels he is far enough away to watch her without notice. No one would blame an old man for staring. The girl is pretty, about eighteen or nineteen years old, with fair skin and large, dark eyes that when they blink or wander seem to bloom from her placid face. Her pensiveness reminds Chau momentarily of his wife, who used to wear the same expression early in the morning when she stood by the window and watched morning traffic.

Chau turns away. An electric fan nearby buzzes faintly in his ears, stirs the muggy air. From where he sits in the white light of the patio, the restaurant's dim interior appears inhabited not by people but by their moving shadows. He spots an empty table inside behind the fish aquarium. The aquarium, about a meter wide, rests on its pedestal near the opening of the dining room, just beyond the reach of the patio sunlight. Chau grabs his ice tea, his cigarettes, and saunters over to the table. Once seated he discovers a

better view of the girl through the waters of the aquarium, not as clear as before, but now his view of her is his alone, framed and isolated as though he were looking at her through binoculars from far away.

The restaurant owner, a stout little man who never seems to perspire, approaches his table. "More tea, Bac?" he says. He begins filling the glass but then stops when he sees Chau's old seat in the patio.

"The heat is too much today," Chau explains. "But lunch was very good."

The owner shrugs, smiling, and says, "Maybe the fish will be better company for you." He finishes filling the glass and walks away. Ever since Chau's wife died a year ago, the owner has not charged him the iced tea with his meal—he must have guessed somehow. Chau has been coming here for lunch twice a week for six years, and even when his wife was still alive, the owner had never once asked for their names. This one complimentary act has been his only acknowledgement of their long patronage, the only indication that he knows anything about Chau's life. Which is fine, Chau thinks. Someone once told him that anonymity is a safe loneliness.

A child's handprint splotches the aquarium glass—Chau's reflection appears momentarily to him: the large forehead, the round wire glasses, a neck too skinny for his head. The six oscar fish meander around themselves, around his reflection in the glass, each fish bigger than his hand. A red one is drifting at an angle in the water as though one fin no longer works, its mouth pinning the impenetrable surface, opening and closing as fish-mouths do, only faster. The other fish bump into it indifferently. The restaurant is well-known in Saigon for having these expensive fish, and Chau once considered buying a couple to liven up their bookstore, only his wife thought it ridiculous to spend so much money on fish one did not eat. Two oscars are doing their mating dance,

thundering their fins in the water and facing each other with their mouths gawked open as if on the verge of a violent kiss. A young boy at a table nearby says it looks like they are about to eat each other. His parents are not listening.

Chau returns his attention to the girl. He knows he has to return to the bookstore soon, but this private view of her makes his responsibilities feel less important, the afternoon less urgent.

She sits slouched now, her legs curled under the chair and crossed at the ankles. She is staring over her shoulder at the cars and mopeds congesting the city streets, the pedestrians squinting in the sun, the white quivering heat. Her parents exchange a few words, and it appears for a moment that the mother is confused by what the father is saying. The next second her hand, the one not in a cast, swipes at the father's glass as one would a fly, and knocks it into his lap, darkening his gray suit. They face each other sullenly. A few customers nearby notice but do not stare. The mother stands from the table and calmly walks away out of the patio. The father glares at his daughter, as if for an explanation, and then he too abandons the table and leaves her to sit by herself.

The girl stares at her soup, stirs it lazily with a spoon, with no hint of shock or embarrassment—only fatigue. When she looks up, she meets Chau's gaze through the aquarium.

He is emboldened momentarily by the safeguard the aquarium provides. She blinks nonchalantly, and in that instant appears to recognize him as though both his presence and his gaze were expected. An oscar fish passes within their line of sight, and he averts his eyes.

He lights a cigarette but lets it burn in one hand as the other fingers the scars scattering the wood surface of the table. He wonders why she did not look away

immediately. Did she see him through the water as clearly as he saw her? Did he appear to her as a nosy old man?

From his wallet he pulls out one of his business cards. He thinks for a moment and writes on the back, *I did not mean to stare. It is rare that I see...* but then scribbles over the words, embarrassed now by his own embarrassment. He glances at the girl and sees her lift a finger to a waiter. The waiter ambles past her without noticing, and she follows him across the restaurant with her gaze. Under her table, one hand cradles the other as though it is wounded.

Perhaps he is imagining things. On another business card he writes as legibly as he can: *Smile... the stars stay bright on cloudy nights.* It is a short saying he once read in a novel, a saying he'd tell his children had his wife borne him any. It has always sounded nice to him, but only now does the meaning carry weight.

He finishes off his ice tea, pauses for a moment, and then approaches the girl's table. Not until he stands right before her does she look up, momentarily confused, unsure if he is standing there for her or for someone else—this skinny, nervous old man. And so he grins and hands her the business card, the written side up. She reads it and with her hand still holding the card in the air regards him blankly. He gives her a small, awkward nod and walks out of the restaurant. He thinks he might have caught a nascent smile on her face before he turned away.

Outside, her parents are arguing though their voices cannot be heard. They stand by a small touring van, and the father reaches over his wife's shoulder and pounds the side of the van. She does not flinch. They are rich, Chau thinks. It is the only thing that comes to mind.

\* \* \*



When a week later Chau sees the strange letter in his stack of mail, he thinks at first that it is an anonymous customer complaint; though rare he has received a few in the past: unfriendly service, high prices, poor book selection. There is no return address and the handwriting on the envelope is unfamiliar. He puts it aside.

There is another letter, sent by his wife's older sister who lives an hour away in Bien Hao. He has not seen her in nearly half a year. She is informing him of her visit to Saigon in a week to call on a friend. She wants to stop by the bookstore and see how he is doing, and also to reclaim, if possible, his wife's old Hue cookbook. Something about an old soup recipe from her childhood. Chau's wife and her family were originally from Hue, and apparently this cookbook contains many of the best recipes from that area. *Certainly, you no longer have any need for it*, the letter says. She looks forward to seeing him soon.

Chau folds the letter and tosses it onto the stack of papers littering his desk. He does not dislike his sister-in-law but often finds women her age presumptuous with people younger than them, especially family members. In her case, she is two years older than Chau and has rarely hesitated in imparting her wisdom. It was probably this same wisdom that once made her disapprove of him as a husband. A bad first impression, Chau's wife explained at the time, though he believes that impression never did improve. He chuckles, crumples the letter, and throws all ten lines of it into the trashcan.

It is then that he opens the anonymous letter and realizes it is from the girl at the restaurant. He has all but forgotten her in the week since their encounter, and the abrupt memory of her brings his mind to a flutter. There are three neatly handwritten pages—the longest letter he's received in years. Surely, she did not misread his intentions.

A customer walks into the empty store as he begins reading and startles him. He tries reading on but cannot until the woman leaves, which she does twenty minutes later having purchased nothing.

*To Le Nhat Chau, 27 May 1996, Da Lat*

*I don't quite know why I'm writing you, but perhaps it's the same kind of feeling you had when you gave me your note at the restaurant. Do you remember me now? I still have your card with me. I like reading books myself, especially historical and romantic novels, but I'm the only one in my family who is fond of reading. My parents own three clothing stores in Saigon, clothes imported from Europe and America. You don't strike me as someone who would care much about this.*

*My father wanted us to visit Da Lat for a week so that the cool weather can help my mother with her recovery. I told him it was just a broken arm but he insisted; he was surprised that I would even think twice about a trip to Da Lat—most people would jump at the chance to go and could work a year and still not afford it. I think it's odd, us leaving so suddenly. And Mother hates to travel by car—she throws up every time. I offered to stay behind and watch Mother if he wanted to go away for a while, but he wouldn't have any of it. He told me I am hardly a woman yet at seventeen. When Father wants to do something, he wastes little time and normally gets his way.*

*We just arrived in Da Lat an hour ago and I am writing to you in my hotel room. Have you ever been to Da Lat? I don't know you, of course, but everything here is quite new to me and I just need to tell someone.*

*The ride up here was a bit strange. It took nearly eight hours and the roads were very bumpy. On the last part of the trip, we drove through the rainforest, up these steep*

*mountain roads, and it rained heavily the entire time. Mother and Father were asleep, and our driver never speaks much, so all I could do was sit and listen to the rain beating down on the van. It was like the sound of a hundred galloping horses, a strangely soothing sound.*

*When the storm passed, we stopped at a rest area by the wall of a mountain. All around us was jungle. A small café with a blue tarpaulin roof stood against the mountain wall. Nearby a stream ran below a tall stone embankment and fell off into the mountainside.*

*There were three other cars at the rest area. Everyone, it seemed, was inside the café, and as soon as we walked in for some coffee and cokes, we saw that something was astir. At the back table sat a young man holding his wife in his arms. She had apparently fainted and he had just brought her in and was cradling her against his chest, whispering in her ear and fanning her with a newspaper. An old woman, the owner I think, came rushing out of the back with a fold-out recliner, and they gently lay the young woman down. It appeared she was a few months pregnant.*

*My mother stepped in and offered the young man her bottle of hot oil and asked what had happened. He said he and his wife had been driving a few miles up the road and had stopped by the roadside to wait out the heavy rain. They were sitting in their car when what looked like an enormous tiger appeared from behind the thicket and approached their window and began clawing the glass. The young man was so frightened that he pounced on the gas pedal and sped away and, with the roads wet as they were, nearly hit a tree. By then his wife had passed out in her seat.*

*Everyone at the café gasped. The young man added that he was sure it was a tiger, but then it had also happened so quickly and the rain had been torrential. My father*

*spoke up and said that there were no tigers in these forests, but the old woman laughed and said that supposedly there were no elephants either but she had once heard one roar in the night. It would not surprise me, she said seriously, if dragons slept somewhere deep in these trees. I glanced at her tiny stone house behind the café, it looked like a small cave, and imagined how lonely it must be to live out here in the middle of the jungle, especially at night. Or maybe it's wonderful, being away from everything.*

*The young woman finally revived and managed a smile and the young man thanked everyone. My mother told him to keep the bottle of hot oil.*

*We had cokes by the stream. From there we could look down at where we came from and see fog rising from the forest canopy like steam. On a precipice further up the mountain wall, there was a white, life-size statue of the Virgin Mary. It stood above some fifty stone steps and was surrounded at the bottom by a small garden of flowers. Mother said this rest area was famous because people stopped here to pray to the statue. There was a story about a woodsman, many years ago, who had wandered to the statue in search of his brother, a missing soldier in the war. At the foot of the Virgin Mary he prayed to find him again and then miraculously stumbled upon his brother's grave about a hundred feet away. It was marked by a wooden cross and his brother's army tags. This was a very sad story, but I couldn't help thinking how more tragic it would be had it been a man in search of his wife—or the other way around.*

*My father went to the van to smoke with the driver, but my mother decided she and I should say a prayer under the statue, for the young man and his wife in the café, and for our own safe journey. I relented but prayed for no one. I stood there and pretended.*

The letter is unsigned. No name or address appears anywhere on the three pages, or

on the envelope. For a moment Chau thinks he might have dropped a page on the floor and goes on his knees to search under the desk. It soon occurs to him that the girl might not want him to write back or even know who she is—that this letter might have been a way to indulge herself on a particularly strange day. Her story gives him a pleasant chill, but the intimacy of her voice is startling and somehow saddens him. He still remembers her face vividly from that afternoon a week ago, though it did not cross his mind at the time that she needed anything more than temporary pity. *You're never right about people*, his wife once told him in passing, *and people are never right about you*.

After sitting there for some time, Chau retrieves his sister-in-law's crumpled letter from the trash and smooths it out on the desk. Perhaps it was hasty of him to judge her this way—in any case, an unusual bout of sensitivity on his part. His sister-in-law has always been civil and generous with him. She once scolded him over the phone for not visiting her on the New Year and then called him the next day to make peace with him. When his wife died, she took care of all the funeral arrangements and sent one of her sons to help him at the bookstore until he was settled enough to continue alone. Her absolute readiness to speak her mind has never made her an amiable person, but even Chau knows there is something admirable in an honesty so vigorous and moral. *Certainly you no longer have any need for it*, he reads again from her letter, uncertain now if it is worth any of his ire.

Chau's wife would have probably read nothing into her sister's words. Unlike her sister, hers was strategy of avoidance—avoid conflict and it will avoid you. Soon, he will have to go rummaging through the closets upstairs and find that cookbook among the many other books she left behind, stacked amid her old clothes, the dusty shoes, her collection of stuffed animals, her paints and paintbrushes, those small baskets full of

perfume bottles and jewelry she hardly ever wore. After her death, he was in no mood for organization and so threw out and gave away very little, choosing instead to pile all her possessions into the two closets by the bedroom. It took him a day to empty their room of her things, and though he planned eventually to organize the closets, he had only opened them twice since her death: once to find her old yellow umbrella (whose color kept him from using it when she was alive), and the second time to pursue a mouse that had scurried under the door. He knows his avoidance of the closets is mostly out of laziness.

It is strange, but memories of his wife have become increasingly vague and distant. When forced to explain to someone unaware of her death, he often finds himself using the most casual of terms, as if referring to someone else's wife, or to the death of a character in a novel. He can never tell if the silent reaction he receives is a result of the news or of the way he told it.

Chau folds the two letters and slips them back into their envelopes. He places both between the pages of a book he is reading. How many months with hardly any personal letters? And yet two today.

But then another question arises. Could the girl be lying to him—writing a fanciful letter to an impressionable old widower? Chau nearly blushes. The idea that he has become naïve in some way strikes him as grotesque. Approaching her that day was bold of him, even silly, and thinking of it in this way makes him question how much he has changed since his wife died, whether he could have written such a note to such a girl a year ago. Alone but not a widower, would he have even noticed her? Later that afternoon, after rereading the girl's letter twice and deciding that it is indeed genuine (sincere, in any case), the same question still lingers in his mind.

It was thirteen months ago that Chau's wife fell sick one morning. At first, it seemed like nothing too serious, just a mild fever and some muscle pain; and since she had always been afraid of doctors, they called on no one, only purchased some medicine from the store. By the time a doctor finally came two days later, she could hardly breathe and her lips and nails were bluish. It was a severe case of pneumonia. Two hours after arriving at the hospital, she died suddenly. At her bedside, toward the very end, he told her that it had been a busy week at the store, to which she responded with her last, quiet breath, *Don't forget to dust the books*. Nearly two decades of marriage, and he would remember that exchange as the culmination of their life together.

They were both in their late thirties when they married, old enough by then to understand the limitations of a gaudy love, of love based on ideals and dreams—too old to be alone any longer and, for him at least, too tired. He had spent fifteen years working as a construction worker, building many of the new homes and hotels that now gilded Saigon, always busy with work, always in the company of men, never lucky or brave enough to find a satisfactory woman for himself. So when he was introduced to her at a cousin's wedding one year, he did not mind her plain face or sober demeanor, or the fact that she was still grieving the loss of a sick mother she had been nursing for nearly ten years. If anything, her grief reminded him of his own, and she would later say that his kindness in listening to her all night moved her deeply. Their mutual love for art and books—a virtue that had been impossible to find in those around them—carried their very first conversation and eventually sealed their union. A new profession blossomed for him, a new life for them both, albeit one initiated by chance and convenience.

They spent most of that life in the bookstore—eating, sleeping, reading, working

together, their days quiet and amiable, their best conversations usually shared with a customer. They hardly ever left the store, let alone Saigon, and their social life was limited to the familiar few who frequented the store. She painted in her spare time, mostly landscapes of Vietnam that she found in their books. She fashioned a spot in the corner of the store and, there, cultivated her skills over the years, often selling or giving away her small paintings to customers. He would have encouraged and complimented her more, but she rarely asked for his opinion of her work. He always suspected that she lived vicariously through her sister's family, whom she visited from time to time at their prosperous restaurant and home in Bien Hao. There, she was surrounded by her sister's children and friends and an atmosphere of energy and prosperity, and yet on returning, she never expressed a preference for that life, her silence an indicator to him that she was content with what they had. Perhaps for her, as it was for him, there came peace to a life of habit.

She did not want children because giving birth terrified her. They had few friends because she thought gossip was a nuisance, betrayal always possible. They argued very little, conversed mostly about books and customers, and made love only when the mood struck them, which was normally twice a month.

He cried for hours the day she died, both anguished by the loss and guilt-ridden that he had failed to call a doctor immediately. But after a month of her absence, he discovered how little he missed her, or at least how little missing her hurt. Nowadays, he seems to think of her only when he comes upon a book she enjoyed, or when a customer offers their condolences, or when at dinner he finds the soup too salty. On most days he'd say there is little regret in him, no anger, only a tinge of shame that he does not think of her as much as he should. One fact does remain: he truly did love her and was



dependent on her for everything, for work, for intimacy, for order and familiarity. There have only been a few occasions, like today, when he has asked himself how she might have loved or depended on him, and if her memory of their beginning, their life, was the same as his.

Two days later, Chau finds his wife's old cookbook at the bottom of the closet. He has hesitated out of necessity, choosing first to clean the bookstore before his sister-in-law's arrival in the coming week. The store has steadily fallen into disorder without his wife's maintenance: papers scattering his desk and jutting out from books, books stacked about and unshelved, shelves undusted, the dust gathering in places Chau has thought impervious to air and dirt—like his memory of how this place appeared a year ago. Although he has always fancied a bookstore should look somewhat disheveled to maintain its intellectual character, his sister-in-law would not agree, and far be it for him to disappoint her, or have her believe him inept in his solitude.

Which was why he also tidies the rooms upstairs: the always vacant guest room, the office used for book storage, and his own bedroom sequestered from outside eyes for almost a year. His wife was obsessively neat and organized, and her sister is no different; and knowing his sister-in-law as he does, Chau wants to avoid her pity—that silent, downcast look she reserves for people she insists are unduly bereft.

So it is not until the store is cleaned and tidied that Chau finally opens the closets to search for the Hue cookbook. It lies wedged between two photo albums, dust-laden with its worn spine and a cover photo of a red sampan on the Perfume River. The corners of certain pages are folded, and he turns to them to find dishes his wife used to make, dishes he can now taste on his tongue. All those different ingredients absent now from his

kitchen: lemongrass, shrimp paste, hot peppers, curry, five-spice. Strange that he ate her cooking for so many years and is only now aware of how she prepared them. After a trip to the market, he spends the rest of the day cooking those old dishes the way he remembers them, filling the store again with the smell of what now feels like another life.

\* \* \*

The girl's second letter arrives the next morning. This time, even though a few customers stand about the bookstore, Chau reads it without any hesitation. For the past two days, he has been studiously checking the mail. Since her first letter ended abruptly, he assumed a second letter was possible, telling himself that if she never wrote again it would be fine, a mystery short-lived and forgettable, though deep down he hoped and expected a second letter to arrive, knowing also that when and if it came he'd still be amazed. When he saw the envelope with her handwriting this morning, he cut his finger opening it.

*To Le Nhat Chau, 30 May 1996, Da Lat*

*Sometimes it is nice to have someone to write to. I hope you don't mind. You probably think it's strange that a person you don't know is writing you, but I assume you read enough books to know how strange we can all be.*

*I read a novel yesterday about a woman who had two lovers and spent years hiding one from the other, only to lose them both in a fire. I'll admit I cried after finishing the book. I have never been in love, but I believe never experiencing certain things can sometimes make you understand and feel them more. Mother says it's not proper for young women to reveal their intimate emotions to people they don't know (especially to men), but I don't think it's wrong or rude to tell you any of this. I sometimes feel more*

*comfortable with strangers anyway. And besides, you strike me as a good listener.*

*Last night my father woke me up at midnight and asked me to go on a drive with him through the city. He told me Da Lat is completely different at night and worth seeing, though I could tell he was having problems sleeping. I asked him what about Mother but he said she was asleep and would not be interested.*

*We sat together in the back seat of the van and were driven around the entire city. Da Lat is beautiful in strange ways, you know. It's crowded and busy in some places, almost like Saigon, and then elsewhere is heavily forested. Everyone is right about the weather here. It's so cool, the people wear coats and some have rosy cheeks. Sometime it feels like another country, what Sweden or Germany might be like. There are tourists everywhere during the day, and a lot of honeymooners, and they all visit the parks and gardens, the hiking trails, and especially the Lake of Lament at the bottom of the city, which you've probably heard of. At night the city is cold and feels deserted, especially up through the forested hills, where all those towering pine trees look taller and their trunks thinner and longer, and the houses alongside the road look older than they probably are. The city below is visible but seems so far away. It always rains at about five o'clock in the evening, and so that time of the day looks and feels like midnight.*

*It was drizzling and chilly when my father and I went for a drive. Back home we often went around the city together, to the markets and shopping malls, just he and I, sometimes for no reason really but to spend some time together. I should be married in a year or two, and so he says we won't be able to do this much longer.*

*The driver drove us up the hills and we passed many of the old French villas with their white stucco walls and red clay roofs, those massive arches and wide, open balconies. Father told me they had been renovated a while back but no one lived there*

*now. They were now government offices—what a waste, he said. He said one day he will build a house like them in the city if the government ever let him—if they or my mother ever let him.*

*After a while I asked him if Mother knew we had gone and if she would be worried about us being out so late. He told me not to worry myself.*

*When we reached the high-point of Da Lat and began descending into the other side of the city, I saw an unusual sight. A barebacked horse was galloping ahead of our van, this beautiful dark brown horse, and I told the driver to catch up to it so we could have a closer look. We drove up alongside the horse and came close enough that I could almost stick my hand out the window and touch its mane. Its one visible eye was large and shiny black.*

*The horse gathered speed, and my father and I watched it pass us. Even the driver seemed curious. I peered at the empty road behind us, almost hoping to see someone running after the horse, maybe an unsaddled rider. But the van braked all of a sudden and jerked forward violently, thrusting me out of my seat, though my father's arm restrained me—at the same time I heard a thud against the front of the van and I yelped thinking we had hit the horse. The van had stopped, and my father and the driver jumped out. When I looked out the front windshield, I saw the horse's haunches bobbing in the distance and was momentarily relieved before I saw my father and the driver standing over a body in the road. It looked like a man. I could see a leg move. The van's lights were beaming on them, but my father looked back and saw me and stepped into my line of sight. He and the driver kneeled over the body.*

*They returned to the van and the driver slowly drove around the body and stopped us a little farther ahead in the road. Then we all sat there, waiting it seemed. I wanted to*

*say something but my father's silence made me hesitate. I turned to look at the body but he told me not to. After a few minutes lights appeared behind us and my father jumped. Our van edged forward. I could see the car behind us slowing down as it approached the body. As we moved further away, the driver turned around in his seat and glanced at my father. Are you sure? he said. Leave him, my father said, he isn't all that hurt and they'll surely see to him. The driver gripped the steering wheel and we continued moving slowly. My father said, we agreed on it, so keep on driving. You have my word, he added. The driver finally sped up and we drove away.*

*We sat in silence for a long time. After a while I said to my father, I won't tell Mother about this. He looked at me briefly and nodded and then continued gazing out the window. I didn't know if he wanted to say nothing or if he had nothing to say.*

*To be honest with you, I was not certain about telling you any of this until just now.*

The sound of whispering. Chau looks up from the letter. There are five customers roaming the small confines of his store in the normal, hushed manner, their feet tracking mud and silt from the morning rain. A well-dressed, elderly man browses the island tables stacked with used books; a woman in a red silk blouse thumbs through the wall of novels; two young girls whisper to each other in front of the magazines; and there is finally a young woman sitting on the floor by the biographies, a book in her lap. Chau considers showing the letter to one of them, but then thinks better of it.

*To be honest with you, I was not certain about telling you any of this.*

It has been a long time since anyone told him something in confidence. Months. Years? It's flattering to think the girl trusts him, though Chau is annoyed that he cannot write her back and ask questions—or at least tell her how puzzling her stories have

become. To a degree, he feels insulted by the distance she affords herself and forces upon him.

The woman in red approaches his desk with two books in hand. She lingers for a moment, flipping through the pages, then looks at him thoughtfully. “Have you read these two novels?” She shows him the books.

Chau sets the girl’s letter aside and nods. In fact he read them just last week, among the four books he averages every week. These two, he remembers, were both flawed by unrealistic happy endings. “Very good writer,” he tells the woman with a smile. “He’ll make you cry.”

She seems satisfied by this and pays him for the books.

Chau takes his time with the transaction. He glances at her red silk blouse, notices her pearl necklace, the rings on her fingers, her leather wallet. “Have you ever been to Da Lat?” he asks her.

“Yes.” She looks at him with a quizzical air. “Three times, actually.”

“Is it really as cold as everyone says it is?”

“It can sometimes be a bit cold. But there’s no place more beautiful in Vietnam.” She smiles, as if very proud of this opinion, and opens her mouth as if to tell him why, then pauses. “You’ve never been?”

“No. Not yet at least.” Then he adds, “But someone I know just went. Told me it was lovely.” He pauses. “And is it easy to drive around the city—not too dangerous?”

“Of course not. Not at all.” She gives him another smile, another look of incredulity.

“I’m just curious,” he says.

She nods and looks down at her new books. She nods again to thank him and then walks out of the bookstore.

Through the store window, Chau watches her cross the street. He wanted to ask her if she had ever seen anyone killed on the roads in Da Lat. And did she think it a crime to leave the scene of an accident? Did her family go with her to Da Lat those three times? Did she have a daughter?

Chau goes to the bookshelves and retrieves the four books on Da Lat that his store carries. Flipping through the many color photographs of the city, he finds many outdoor scenes like the ones described in the girl's letters—the crowds of people in town, the hills that crest the landscape, the trees, the towering trees. He always wanted to visit Da Lat but never had the opportunity or the money. His wife once told him that they should go some day when they were old and too close to death to worry about the money. For their honeymoon, since it was closer and more affordable, they had gone to the beaches at Vung Tau, but that brief trip was unremarkable and disappointing. They did visit her family in Hue one time and were able to enjoy some of the sights there, but a few family tiffs had soured the trip for them both, and now Chau only remembers the price of the car ride. He has often regretted never proposing other trips, though he wonders if his wife would have even cared.

The customers in the store have not moved from their spot. Chau thinks again about showing the letter to one of them. Perhaps the young woman by the novels will find it interesting, even share in this little drama. And those young girls—but what can they be whispering about? They will all remain oblivious of him until the moment he becomes useful. He cannot blame them, for in their place he, too, would walk the store in selfish silence, track mud and silt on floors he cannot know are newly scrubbed, shuffle books he cannot know have been rearranged, ignore the owner at his desk lost in a piece of paper.

*To Le Nhat Chau, 1 June 1996, Da Lat*

*I feel like I should apologize to you in some way. You might not even be reading these letters, I don't know. But if you are, I imagine what I wrote last time was rather shocking to you. I don't know how to explain my father, or if defending what he did is even possible. I haven't stopped thinking about it. I've told my mother nothing. I don't think she even knows that my father and I left the hotel that night. The last two days have actually been very quiet between the three of us. Visiting all the sights in the city has been nice, but I'm beginning to feel like it's a way to avoid things.*

*Yesterday, we went to the most peaceful place I've ever been to—a Buddhist temple that stands at the very top of a mountain and overlooks an enormous lake. My parents had been telling me about this place for years. Since it was Sunday, there were only a few tourists. A twenty-minute climb up the winding stone staircase took us to the top, where a large red pagoda stood surrounded by tall, swaying trees and a silence that made me whisper when I spoke. The view off the side was breathtaking. Below lay a field of recently planted pine trees and around them much older trees, perhaps hundreds of years old. The lake circled other mountains in the distance, even a small forested island, and far out on the water I saw two small boats drifting side by side. I could almost see the people on the boats and wondered if they could see me. As I think of the mountain now, I can't help feeling as though I will never be at a place so nice and quiet again in my life.*

*My mother stayed behind with the driver while my father and I walked up the mountain. The climb would have been too much for her. She tires easily, and I suspect the cast on her arm still bothers her terribly. My father and I talked very little during our*



*climb, and I was hoping he would say nothing about what happened two nights ago. At the top we walked around in silence and took pictures. After a while we wandered behind the temple and found a cliff that fell off into a circular valley far below. It was difficult to tell where the bottom was with all the trees and foliage. A short wooden fence was built along the edge to protect visitors, but my father still held my arm as we stood there peering down.*

*After some moments, he suddenly said to me, I am sorry about what happened the other night. I told him it was fine, that I did not blame him. But he said, No, it was his fault and he was sorry. He said nothing else and walked away. I called to him that I was descending the mountain first and he waved his hand. I saw him enter the Buddha temple after leaving his shoes at the entrance.*

*At the bottom my mother sat by herself on a bench, reading a book, and when she saw me she smiled and showed the ivory Buddha she had just bought me. I sat beside her and she asked me what I thought of the temple. I told her how beautiful it was and how sorry I was that she could not go see it herself. But I didn't know that she had seen it a long time ago when she was my age—she had also gone with her parents. I asked her if she remembered the cliff behind the temple and if the valley below had looked as deep and grim then as it did now. She nodded but said there was no fence when she saw it as a child. It was known back then that a number of people had fallen off the cliff, some by accident, some on purpose. I thought of my father up there alone on the mountain.*

*We were silent for a while. My mother finally took my hand and squeezed it. She said, you will marry soon and one day you will bring your son or daughter up here and show them what we've shown you. Your husband will love it, too. My mother and I waited for my father on that bench for an hour.*

*I imagine we will probably visit all the other tourist sites before we leave Da Lat. We'll be home again in Saigon soon, but I feel like things will never be the same.*

*To Le Nhat Chau, 1 June 1996, Da Lat*

*I sent off my first letter to you earlier this morning and wish now that I had waited a bit. Perhaps I should have told you from the start, but I don't see how I could have done that. It's only now, after telling so much already, that I feel I can. You might be asking yourself why I'm writing you and why I would share any of these thoughts with a total stranger.*

*I believe my father wants to kill my mother. I mean this seriously. Perhaps I am young and naïve—impressionable even—but you should know that I am not foolish or crazy when I say this. I see how he looks at her sometimes, the violence in his voice when they argue. They haven't been happy with each other for years—longer than I can remember. There are times when they don't talk for days, and though my mother can be hot-tempered and impossible in her ways, my father has a bitterness for her that he has never shown for other people. A month ago they had a terrible argument and he left and was gone for hours. When he came home that night, he came to my bedside, drunk and quiet, and he told me that sometimes he wished my mother was dead. He kept on nodding his head as he sat there by my bed.*

*I know they can separate, leave each other—but something tells me this is not enough. He will do it soon, I think—I can see it in his silence and the way he bows his head when he is walking by himself. He'll send me away one afternoon and then tell me afterwards that she accidentally fell from a cliff. But I will jump off that cliff first and kill them both.*

\* \* \*

It is a week exactly. Chau's sister-in-law walks in from the afternoon sun and greets him with a sharp wave of her hand. She is wearing a straw hat, and when she takes it off, her loose hair looks shorter than he remembers. She wears no make-up and does not need any. He has always thought her the prettier sister.

Chau meets her at the door and they shake hands. "Anh Chau! Very good to see you," she says, smiling widely. "You got my letter, of course?"

"Of course. It is good to see you, Chi Khanh."

"I'm sorry I didn't call, but our phone at home is broken and we've yet to buy a new one." She glances around the empty bookstore.

"That's no problem. Please come sit down and I'll get us some tea. Did you come to Saigon alone?"

"Yes, by taxi. No one wanted to go with me in this heat." She hands him a box of French butter cookies—probably bought in Saigon earlier in the day. He takes it with a bow of his head and thanks her generously.

He sits her down by his desk and goes to the kitchen to get tea. When he returns, she is perusing one of the books on his desk. He sets the tea tray close to her and quickly folds the two letters on his desk, returning them to their envelopes.

"Letters?" she says.

"Yes. I've just finished reading them." This is, in fact, his third time reading through the two new letters. He received them both earlier in the morning and has yet to do anything else all day but mull over them.

"So my nieces and nephews are doing well?" he asks and pours them both some hot tea.

Khanh nods and tells him about the family: who is with child, who has what job, who is still in school. She has six children, four boys and two girls, and Chau realizes that the only one he has seen in almost a year is the nephew who came to help him after his wife's death. It appears the oldest boy, who is thirty, will soon be ordained a priest. "His first Mass is in a few months," Khanh says proudly. "You must come and help us celebrate."

"Absolutely—that's wonderful." Chau cannot remember the boy's face. "So what brings you to Saigon?"

"A friend's daughter just had her first child. Are you closed down for the afternoon?"

There is a hint of feigned ignorance in her question, in the way she awkwardly regards the store and does not look at him. "No, we're open," he says quietly. "Just a little slow today." He remembers the Hue cookbook in his desk drawer and decides to wait until she asks for it. "The heat probably."

"It *is* excruciating out there." Khanh blows on her tea, sips it, then crosses her legs. "Are you not feeling well today, Anh Chau?"

"I'm fine," he says.

She peers at him as if reading a sign. "I don't believe that."

He is surprised by the sincerity in her voice—the insistence. Her bluntness has never surprised him, but he cannot remember her ever showing such unreserved concern for him.

He taps his finger on the letters. "There is this girl," he begins slowly, almost shyly. He feels a vague embarrassment. "There's this young girl who's been writing me, four letters now. No return address. I don't even know her name. We met briefly at a restaurant nearby—and it's all very innocent, you know. She just seems a very sad girl

who needs someone to write to.”

Khanh waits patiently as he gathers his thoughts. She holds the forgotten cup of tea in her lap.

“The letters are quite long. She writes about herself and her parents, this trip they’re taking right now to Da Lat. They might still be there. Interesting letters. She’s a smart girl, I think, about seventeen years old. But so unhappy.” Chau takes the two letters in hand, regarding again the girl’s handwriting on the envelopes—so much like an older woman’s. He has an impulse to read parts of the letters out loud to Khanh, but some feeble notion of honor keeps him. “And then I just got these last two letters this morning, both written in the same day but sent off separately; and she tells me all of a sudden that her father wants to kill her mother. They have a very bad relationship apparently. The girl might be overreacting, but I don’t believe she is. I think she might even want to hurt herself.”

“How strange—” Khanh says.

“Bewildering, really. I don’t know what to think. I’m not sure how I should respond. Or if I should do something.”

“What can you do?”

Chau shrugs helplessly. “It really troubles me to think about it.”

Khanh’s eyebrows rise as though she is suppressing a curious grin. Chau is prepared to explain the entire situation to her, but her casual reaction irritates him. She looks surprised that he cares so much, almost as though it perturbs her that they both cannot shake their heads and laugh off this odd little story, sad as it is.

“Do you believe her?” she asks him. “About her father?”

“Yes, I suppose. Though I’m not sure how serious she is about hurting herself—I

can't really say."

"But she hardly knows you, right?" Khanh peers down at her cup of tea as if to study it. She sets the cup on the desk. "I haven't read these letters, of course, but I must be honest with you, Anh Chau, I don't see why you should take this so seriously. You don't even know these people, do you? What could you possibly do to help them? It's indeed a pity for the girl, but you should worry about your own problems. I don't think I'm being callous when I say this."

Chau nods, though he knows she is wrong. Honesty is always callous. Harden the heart, the old people say, so the truth be told, so the soul can be saved; otherwise risk shouldering the blame, risk getting carried away. Chau understands the risk, has spent a lifetime being wary of it, but he is not about to apologize now for his concern and affection—however excessive, however silly—for the girl. He feels impatient to the point of being amused. His *own problems*? What are they anyway? And why should he expect Khanh to understand?

Chau places the letters in the drawer of his desk and chuckles to himself. "Perhaps you're right."

"Well..." Khanh shrugs as if unimpressed by the truth of her judgment. Again, she glances around the bookstore. A man has just walked into the store and is quietly roaming the bookshelves. Looking at the man indifferently, she says to Chau, "It's funny, but I've never seen you care about anyone like this—and a stranger no less."

Chau looks directly at her, unsure if he should act insulted or pretend he didn't catch the accusation. She turns to find him staring at her, and it is then that she seems to realize what she has just said. She looks momentarily disarmed and peers at a spot on the wall above his head, then again at the man in the store. He believes this is the most speechless

she has ever been, and to punish her he remains silent. Before long, however, she appears to rebound from her slip, as if it had gone undetected, and looks only slightly embarrassed now, smiling as she drinks the rest of her tea.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you from your customers,” she says. “I should probably get Tuyet’s cookbook and be on my way. The taxi is waiting outside for me.”

Chau hesitates for a moment. It has been a while since he heard his wife’s name. They always called each other *Mother* and *Father*, though they were childless. He furrows his brow and says, “I’m afraid I couldn’t find it.”

Khanh studies his face for a moment. “The cookbook?”

“I looked through all her things, but it’s nowhere to be found. I can’t imagine what could have happened to it.” Chau shakes his head a few times and is on the verge of offering to let her search the closet herself. “I have other cookbooks here that you can take.”

“Is it possible you sold it to a customer?”

“That’s possible, but I don’t think so. Tuyet could have misplaced it a long time ago.”

Khanh sighs dramatically and taps the desk with her nails. “I don’t see how I’ll ever find another copy nowadays.”

“I’m sorry you had to make the trip here. I would have called—”

“Oh, but that’s all right.” She manages a smile but still appears disappointed. She stands from her chair and for a moment looks down at him in awkward silence. But again she smiles, perhaps thinking her disappointment is retribution enough for what she had said. “It was good to see you, though, Anh Chau. I’d better be off now.”

He stands to see her to the door.

“You should come up to Bien Hoa sometime to visit us,” she says quietly. “You will come to Tieu’s first Mass, won’t you? We’ll know when soon.”

Chau nods. “I look forward to it.”

They shake hands again and she walks out. He notices for the first time that she walks differently than her sister, not with small measured steps and her shoulders stooped, but with long, brisk strides and her face upturned, as if balancing a book on her head.

Chau sits there in his sister-in-law’s absence and eats the entire box of cookies. When the one customer leaves, he closes down the bookstore for the rest of the day. Upstairs, he goes through his wife’s old possessions, intent on discarding the unnecessary keepsakes. Here, the never-used picture frames she bought for cheap at the market. Here, the unworn shoes she kept despite their being the wrong size. Here, the old calendars she saved for their beautiful photographs of Vietnam landscapes: Halong Bay, the Red River Delta, Marble Mountain, Da Lat.

The effort exhausts him, and he finally throws out only a few torn dresses and a pair of tattered sandals. The rest of her things are now somewhat organized, though their sheer number still gives the closets the appearance of disarray. He is too tired to care, too tired to even cook dinner for himself, and on the tile floor wreathed now in a lattice of afternoon shadows, he soon falls asleep.

When he awakes in the early evening, his mouth is thick with bitterness, his body heavy from the long nap in the heat. He had a dream of the girl—she stood at the edge of the cliff she had described, arms at her sides, glaring down into the circular valley with no fence to protect her from the darkness below. Pine trees swayed around her.



Chau lies supine on the floor, still thinking of his conversation with Khanh. Her visit has left him besieged by memories of his wife. He cannot remember the last time he has thought of her this intensely, or if he has ever felt for her this coil of emotion, somewhere between sadness, guilt, and denial. One particular memory is vivid: their honeymoon in Vung Tau, an experience that was altogether unpleasant enough that his wife rarely mentioned it during their marriage. He wonders now if things would have been any better had they gone elsewhere. Might their marriage have been different as well? They had waited a month after the wedding to go, and the traffic that day was terrible. It took them four hours by taxi, and when they arrived the beaches were too crowded and the day cloudy, windy, and cold. They spent the afternoon walking quietly through town and holding hands, as they should have done, and that evening they went to an expensive restaurant by the beach. Some time that night she became angry with him. He had forgotten to bring their camera, a point she had already made earlier in the trip. Chau tried to defend himself but it only exacerbated the situation. He left her in the hotel room and went walking by himself through town. When he returned that night he heard her crying in the bedroom—a stifled but sustained weeping. He remembers turning the doorknob to enter, thinking he might console her in some way, ask her what was really troubling her. But then a sense of laziness, of anger in fact, washed over him. He briefly left the hotel again, and on his return she acted as if nothing had happened, and so they made love. Except for the time when her father died, that night was his only memory of her crying during all their marriage.

Chau rises from the floor and takes off his shirt. For a while he wanders bare-chested through the rooms of his house, then through the bookstore downstairs, feeling neither presence nor absence, for in his weary mind still fettered to the sleepfulness of dreams, he

thinks he hears the sound of the ocean, but finds only the drifting silence of dusk in an empty house. Eventually, he goes to his desk and takes out the Hue cookbook. Upstairs, he places it back in the closet, between the two photo albums where he found it, and then locks the door.

\* \* \*

It feels like trickery of the mind, a disappearing (or appearing) act, but when Chau finds himself sitting at a café, in a small town halfway to the city of Da Lat, it is as though he has been transported from Saigon in the blink of his eye. Though people and traffic pass by in the streets, the town here feels stark and calm. Beyond the rooftops, against the overcast skies, he can see the dark virescent mountains which he will soon approach, and it is perhaps their proximity that makes the air so pure and crisp. Chau believes that if he takes a deep breath and holds it for a moment, he might forget altogether the warm, sooty smell of the city.

For two days, he had been restless at the bookstore. He kept rereading the girl's letters, searching for details he might have missed, envisioning the scenes she had described. In fact, were he not so worried for her, he would have believed he was reading the letters for pleasure. Dreadful visions recurred in his mind: another car accident, a commotion amid a crowd of tourists, the girl vanishing during an afternoon walk around the lake. The father would be despondent, though Chau questioned how much he would blame himself. And what of the mother—why would the girl hurt her in this way?

No more letters arrived, and so he figured she might have returned to Saigon. When the bookstore closed on Sunday, he wandered through the many imported clothing shops in the city and found himself asking about three people he neither knew nor could describe in full. It occurred to him that the girl and her parents could have once been

customers of his; it was even possible he sold the girl a book some time ago and spoke to her without knowing how much he would eventually want to know, and how much she was willing to share. They could have encountered each other in his store last month, last year, or maybe when his wife was still alive. Chau walked around Saigon carrying this imagined memory like salt on his tongue.

He continued to have lunch at the restaurant. He sat at the same table behind the aquarium and lingered for an extra half hour after finishing his meal, hoping to see the girl appear, with or without her parents, and this time walk in from the sun, perhaps sit next to him and initiate a quiet conversation...

She would greet him with a smile, her appearance slightly changed—the skin perhaps a bit darker from the Da Lat sun, the eyes more sunken. When asked about what happened, she would only shake her head and tell him how ugly Saigon is after such an eventful trip. And if he were to go on and ask her why she had written those letters to him, she would laugh a little and say, I guess I was rather sad at the time.

*But can one die of that?*

Chau eventually realized that waiting for the girl was as silly as imagining her there, and both had made him forget what he wanted in the first place. On Monday morning, he gathered up his savings, which he kept locked in a tin box in the kitchen, packed a small suitcase of clothes, hung a sign on the front door of the store, and called a taxi.

As he sits now in the patio of this unfamiliar café, Chau no longer imagines anything. The driver told him they had nearly four hours left and that this café was a good place to rest and eat lunch. Chau was hoping to stop somewhere in the rainforest and drink coffee under a canopy of trees, but that would again be asking for too much. Empty your head, he tells himself, and let things come as they may. He invited the driver to join him for

lunch, but the driver declined the offer graciously, choosing instead to take a nap in the cab.

On the patio, Chau feels a storm approaching, and when the drizzle begins, he moves to a table inside. Soon a torrent of rain sweeps the patio like a fierce exhalation of breath from the sky. All the customers flee into the café except for a young man and woman who remain at their table, laughing as the rain buffets the umbrella above them, ruins their food, soaks their clothing and mats the hair upon their wild, fervent brows.

It stormed violently the afternoon he and his wife left the beaches of Vung Tau, and in the taxi the rain pummeling the roof resonated like the sound of galloping horses. They talked very little during the drive home, and as she sat by the window staring at the receding countryside, she softly hummed the song playing on the taxi's radio. She was thirty-five years old then, but still looked young.

Traffic again was bad, and at one point the taxi stalled on a bridge overlooking a river, and she began laughing.

"What is it?"

"This rain!" she exclaimed. "It's like the sound of the ocean." She looked off to the side and then pointed to a young boy sitting on the bridge's concrete railing with his back to the river. His face was downcast, his shirt clinging to a diminutive chest. "Look at that boy. Does he even know it's raining?" She shook her head in amazement, still smiling. "Good Lord, he could fall off that railing at any moment—"

"He'll sooner die of pneumonia," Chau replied.

She ignored the comment. "See how miserable he looks? It's like he's dying of sadness."

The taxi crawled further down the bridge, and her face presently grew morose. He saw her gazing at the river and said to her, “Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll visit the ocean many times again.”

She shook her head absently and said, “No. I was just thinking—” she seemed on the verge of asking a question.

At the time, he figured she was merely tired and so did not pursue the rest of what she had wanted to say.

As the taxi cleared the bridge and again stopped in traffic, she opened the door and ran out into the rain. He jumped from his seat to pursue her but saw her stop at the roadside and turn round to face him with a radiant smile. From that distance, with her arms outstretched in the rain, she resembled a young mischievous girl. He apologized to the bewildered driver and waved her into the car. She waved back at him playfully, gesturing him out of the taxi, her hair and dress completely drenched by then, her face awash in a white glow of splendid joy.

## VESPERTINE

Mrs. Doan, on the morning of the engagement visit, sat alone in the formal room drinking tea. She could hear her three daughters singing in the kitchen as they prepared lunch for the afternoon's guests, their song an old ballad about a fisherman who fell in love with a dolphin and drowned pursuing it into the sea. Lan's voice was loud and playful, lilting above those of her sisters, extravagant as always. Mrs. Doan tried humming along, but soon lost the melody. She was remembering herself at twenty, not long before her own marriage to the Colonel, and it occurred to her that she used to sing every morning, no matter the weather, no matter her mood. Any song would do, and indeed she had carried this habit throughout her girlhood and into the first years of her marriage. It shocked her now to have forgotten.

She dipped a finger into her tea. She felt its tepidness like a clammy handshake. Mrs. Long, her sister, was coming any minute now to help with preparations, and Colonel Doan and Mr. Long were sure to return soon from their morning walk. That would leave only an hour before Lan's fiancé and his family arrived, and that much less time for her to sit here alone and prepare herself for today's reunion with Xuan.

She peered again at her wedding photo on the coffee table, housed in its silver frame alongside the two portraits of her long-departed parents. The Colonel, stately in his impeccable black suit, was holding her hand aloft as if offering it to the photographer, while she smiled widely in her scarlet *aó dài* and headdress, a radiant figure against the

white walls of the church. People often remarked on how little they had changed from that day twenty years ago, how gracefully they both had aged; but while Mrs. Doan had by no means lost her beauty, she always felt the compliment was intended really for the Colonel. Outside of thinning hair and a few creases under his eyes, the Colonel was still the elegant and handsome soldier, with all the health of a wife eighteen years his junior. She, on the other hand, had grown more angular in the face, her skin harder and darker, as though someone had taken her younger self and chiseled a likeness out of a block of granite. She ran a finger along the dusty silver frame. It was not envy or nostalgia she felt, but something more akin to abandonment. If she could whisper it into her own ear, she'd say this: that the photograph, like all photographs, held images of the dead, entombed in the freeze of time, the fixture of an expired moment, and that the girl in the scarlet *aó dài* and headdress especially was a girl who looked like Mrs. Doan but would not, if pulled awake here into the present, recognize her.

“Shouldn’t you be busy doing something?”

Mrs. Doan startled at the voice of her older sister. Mrs. Long had arrived with a tin of French biscuits which she set loudly on the coffee table.

“Come now, Phuong,” Mrs. Long said, “you could have at least bought some flowers for the room.” She was wearing the red silk blouse they picked out together in Saigon last month. On any other day, Mrs. Doan would have borrowed it herself, but it annoyed her now that her sister, who rarely wore clothes this expensive or formal, had chosen today’s occasion to do so.

“You act like they’re royalty,” Mrs. Doan said dryly. She did not yet feel like moving from the couch. She watched her sister adjust the family portraits on the cabinet.

“The boy’s parents know who the Colonel is. That should impress them enough.”

“Well that shouldn’t keep you from making them feel at home. You said you liked the parents when they came last week, didn’t you?”

“It was just the father and an older brother, and they were fine, I guess. The father seemed overly formal when he asked the Colonel for his blessing. It was like he was reading something. No sincerity at all.”

“Don’t be so judgmental, Phuong. Give them a chance. They were probably just nervous about speaking to the Colonel.” Mrs. Long came and sat on the arm of the couch, next to Mrs. Doan. “So the rest of the family is coming today?”

“Yes. Six of them at least. Hopefully the mother isn’t as shy as the father. You might be right about them being nervous, but can you imagine how awkward the engagement party would be?” Mrs. Doan shook her head at the thought.

Her sister glanced at the kitchen and her voice softened. “So Xuan *is* coming?”

Mrs. Doan nodded at her teacup. “The boy insisted. Apparently Xuan is his favorite uncle. That’s what Lan told me. Today will be his only appearance since he’ll be out of town for the engagement party and the wedding. Lan barely knows him and yet she says she’s very disappointed.”

“She still has no idea?”

“Of course not. The Colonel would never tell her. And I imagine Xuan, for his own sake, would not have mentioned it either.”

Lan appeared from the kitchen, still humming, and hurried over to her aunt. “Your blouse, Aunt Lien—it’s beautiful!” She caressed the fabric as though she were petting a puppy.

“Yes, yes—and look at you!” Mrs. Long beamed.



Lan had had her hair frizzéd yesterday and could not stop twirling her finger through the new curls.

“Lan, stop playing with your hair—” Mrs. Doan exclaimed. “And put it up if you’re fixing the food. I found a strand of curly hair in the chicken just last night. What would his family think?”

Lan’s smile wandered away, her hand dropping to her side. She looked confused but replied softly, “I will, Mother. I’ll put it up right now.”

Touching her niece on the elbow, Mrs. Long said, “Here, take these biscuits and set them out on a nice dish.”

Lan picked up the tin obediently and left the formal room. Mrs. Doan felt badly for snapping at her, but was soon eased by the sound of her singing anew in the kitchen. “That girl sings like she’s in an opera,” she muttered, chuckling to herself.

Her sister joined her now on the couch and took a sip from her teacup. They sat in silence for a moment before Mrs. Long, in a near whisper, said, “You won’t be bothered by it, will you?”

“I don’t know.”

Mrs. Long sighed heavily. Her voice went dull. “We should have discussed this. Good Lord, when I heard he was the boy’s uncle... Of *all* the boys Lan could’ve fallen for in this town. But I figured his coming would just be awkward. I didn’t think that after all these years it could still upset you. You can’t tell me you still have feelings for him—?”

Mrs. Doan shook her head impatiently. “No, no, stop being so suspicious. That’s not it at all.” She could not look at her sister.

“Then what’s got you so upset?”

Mrs. Doan shook her head again. She set her teacup carefully on the table. "I'm just remembering myself back then. How I felt. And what I did."

"Stop it. We all fall in love when we're young. You were only twenty. You were someone else entirely."

"I know. That's what's bothering me."

Mrs. Long frowned. "I don't understand."

For the first time that morning, Mrs. Doan smiled, to herself. She could see it the way her sister might have: it was a smile borne not of amusement or any measure of joy; it was, rather, a smile of dark amazement. Then it vanished, and she offered her sister a blank face. "He wrote me a letter."

"A letter? When?"

"Two days ago. Come into the bedroom."

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*Phuong,*

*Perhaps you already know why I'm writing you. If you have no idea, then I hope you'll understand for me once you've read everything. In any case, I won't pretend that this letter is appropriate. Enough time has passed that writing these words—your name alone—is as strange for me as it must be for you to read them. But since we are soon meeting again, I feel I must be honest, as I had failed, long ago, to be with you. I only hope your sister told you everything back then.*

*During these past twenty years, from time to time, I've been made aware of you and your family. Long before my nephew ever met Lan, a friend had told me of your three girls and how smart and beautiful they were. I also know of the Colonel's success. He deserves it after his time in the camps. Even in my envy, I never once wished a man like*

*him any misfortune. In fact, I passed the farm a few years ago and was very impressed by what you'd both accomplished.*

*But I want to explain something. The truth is that I did successfully forget you. Don't misunderstand, I was miserable for the first few years. Once you married, I knew it was too late, and I'd look at my wife and regret everything I had stupidly lost with you. But then, as time went by (and let me confess this), I began imagining that you were dead, that you no longer existed in the world, and that helped me. Eventually my regrets turned elsewhere. As you may or may not know, my marriage has lasted, but only out of habit and convenience. My wife and I love our children, that is all. I admit I married her in part for her family's wealth, but all it has provided me is the means of occasionally escaping her. Working for her father often requires that I travel to other cities, sometimes for weeks, and it's during these times that I am most content. My flaws are known to you and many others, so I don't hesitate in admitting that I've had the company of various women over the years, even now and then a professional girl. If anything, I've sought these women out.*

*Which was my situation nearly five years ago on one particular trip to Dalat. My wife and I had hardly spoken to each other in over a week, which was common for us. Some silly argument about the children. Whatever it was, I was more than happy to go away for a few days.*

*When I arrived in Dalat, I handled my business affairs quickly and left myself two days to enjoy the city freely. It was very strange, traveling alone in a city full of tourists. The sight of newlyweds on their honeymoon was especially significant, though I was not, as you might think, saddened by it. Oddly enough, it made me feel outside myself, as though I was at liberty to do anything. I decided then to visit the Prenn waterfall and*

*take a hike in the forests. In my experience, the prettiest women are often found at these tourist sites, foreign women especially, and the peaceful environment lends itself to sudden intimate conversations with strangers. I say all this at the risk of offending you, but I must be honest since this story requires it.*

*Before starting out, I had a light meal at the foot of the mountains, in a café filled with tourists, mostly old couples and families with children. My table was in the back. Eventually I must have fell into some daydreaming (as I often do nowadays) because I felt awakened and sat up straight in my chair. I never believe people when they say they can feel someone watching them, but that was the sensation that had seized me, and, sure enough, when I peered around the crowded café, I spotted the person: a woman, sitting alone in the far corner, leaning on an elbow and staring at me. It took me a moment to realize it, but I swear that woman was you. It had been fifteen years since I'd laid eyes on you, or honestly even thought about you, but the woman had your every likeness. She even sat with her shoulders a little hunched like you used to. I figured it was one of two things: a woman who looked a lot like you and was interested in me, or it was you, yourself, recognizing me after all these years. Either way, my curiosity was strong.*

*So I decided to find out and was ready to make an approach. But then you (or the woman) stood up and walked out of the café and disappeared into the crowds before I could follow. I remember feeling disappointed, to a surprising degree, the fact that I'd never be sure who the woman was. I could have gone looking through the park, but then it also felt like I had just escaped something, so I tried to think nothing more of it and set out on my hike.*

*About two hours into the hike, I stopped for a rest by a stream. I've always liked the forests in Prenn for their giant pines, and it was nice to sit down and look up at their*

*towering trunks. A few other hikers passed now and then in the distance, but I was mostly alone on the forest trail. I had been sitting there on a rock for about five minutes, a bit drowsy from the hike and all that peacefulness, when a figure appeared further down the stream on the opposite bank. It began crossing the shallow waters, moving closer and closer to where I was, until I realized that it was the woman from the café. She had not noticed me yet, and so I stood up and peered directly at her, willing her to look my way. And then she did and I saw no change on her face. She was walking with purpose but no hurry and finally stopped three meters from me in the shadow of a pine tree that swallowed us both. Her shoes and the bottoms of her pants were soaked.*

*She was closer to me now than she had been at the café, but I was still uncertain if she was, in fact, you. She looked about your age. She had your round face and high cheekbones, your puckish lips and the same wide and eager eyes I remembered from long ago. And yet she also looked taller, darker and more hardened, with hair too thick and curly to be yours, and a face too inexpressive. How many changes, after all, can fifteen years account for? I could not rule out that this was simply some strange woman who had been following me for her own private reasons.*

*I was about to say something like Who are you? or Is something wrong? But then she walked right up to me, put a hand on my chest, and then kissed me full on the lips for what seemed like an entire minute. I must have kissed her back, but I was too stunned at the time to even close my eyes.*

*When she pulled back, she immediately turned and hurried away. I could only watch. There are certain things that even selfish men like me do not forget, and so it had struck me all of sudden that she did not kiss like you did. Something about it felt cold and angry. I suppose I was convincing myself that she was not you and at the same time fearing (or*

*was it hoping?) that she was, and this kept me dumbfounded. She was almost fifty meters away before I finally yelled out, "Wait!" But she did not look back. I followed her into a thicker part of the forest, away from the stream, but just as I was gaining some ground, she disappeared behind a tree, and by the time I reached it, there was no trace of her anywhere.*

*I'm not sure how to end this story or even how to end this letter. I can't imagine us beginning to discuss this at the engagement visit. I figured we would hardly talk anyway. But here it is. I have no reason to lie about such a story, and I'm prepared to believe it was simply one of many ridiculous encounters in my life. But in case it was not, I felt I had to tell you, if only to ask, since I'd probably never have the chance in person: was it you?*

Mrs. Long looked up from the letter. Mrs. Doan was sitting on the bed with a calm, reckless gaze on her face. Loud voices had erupted in the formal room. Mrs. Long carefully folded the six handwritten pages and said, "Well? Was it you?"

But before she could get a reply, Lan appeared in the doorway. "Father and Uncle Long are back. I think Father hurt his foot, Mother."

Mrs. Doan looked at her sister and stood from the bed. Mrs. Long reached for her wrist and whispered, "Tell me, Phuong, was it you?"

"Later. I'll tell you later."

"Why not now? A yes or a no—that's all I want."

"That wouldn't be enough. Doan is calling me." And she walked out of the room.

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Mrs. Long remained on the bed, unsure of how she should feel and what, if anything,

she should do. She felt a ghostly giddiness taking over, a visitation of old guilt, old fears. She hoped for a moment that the Colonel, whatever happened to him, had hurt his foot badly, enough only to warrant a trip to the hospital so that they could cancel today's visit.

She slipped the letter back into Phuong's makeup drawer. Usually, in a situation like this, she would spring to action and take care of the problem as best as she could, or at least try first to understand it. But how to understand this—the devouring anarchy of someone else's passion?

She fell back on Phuong's bed and closed her eyes. It was clear she had been unprepared all along for this reunion. How foolish of her to think that time was all it took to turn anguish into sorrow, sorrow into mere nostalgic folly. With or without this outlandish letter, the specter of the past would have emerged as soon as he walked into the door: Xuan, that once handsome and admirable young man, the first to ever keep her young sister awake at night, to make her ignore all her friends in the neighborhood, to make her jump at the very sound of his shoes on the front step. Phuong had met him as though in a movie. She was only nineteen at the time and had been walking home alone from school, from her first day as a teacher, and in the rain she had slipped and twisted her ankle. Somehow he had come upon her, seen her weeping and limping through the mud, and so he lifted her onto his back and carried her three blocks home. She must have fallen in love the moment she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pressed her cheek into the back of his head. He left her in the care of her family, but only after offering to get a doctor and being warmly turned down. He came back the very next morning with an ankle wrap and a crutch he bought in Saigon, and ended up staying the afternoon. It turned out he was a medical student at the university, the son of a restaurant owner in the city. Not only was he tall and handsome and slightly reminiscent of a

popular actor at the time, he was also unusually well-spoken and well-educated, with enough charm and sincerity to forgive the overwrought affection he showed so openly for Phuong. Their mother was pleased. Their father, had he been alive, would have been pleased. And Lien was pleased.

She was only *Lien* then, Lien the Big Sister, three years older than Phuong and constantly wary of Phuong's weakness for getting carried away. Give Phuong a puppy and she could love it to death. Watch a movie with her and she would either laugh too loudly and cry too long. When they played games as children, she was always the first to lose and run crying to their parents. Once they lost their father, Lien embraced her role, her obligation, as the stronger one, the one in control and who saw things clearly. Her sister often accused her of being made of stone, but Lien was wiser, after all, and sometimes one must sacrifice feeling for the benefits of wisdom. She saw to it that Phuong never hurt herself with her own unwieldy passions, even if it meant withholding from her things she need never know.

But at the time, Lien reasoned that it was best for once to believe in things as they appeared. Everyday for weeks, she watched Xuan arrive early in the morning with the newspaper for her, tea and fruit for their mother, and a new book to read to Phuong as they sat together on the couch or on the porch. And she approved. Perhaps she was happily envious as well (it would be two years yet before she became Mrs. Long). He began bringing his books from school to study with Phuong. He began joining the family for lunch and sometimes dinner, often buying the food himself, always careful not to overdo his generosity lest they be offended. He knew they were poor. He knew their father had died five years before in the war. He offered to fix their stove and an old radio that had not worked in years. One day he spent four hours building a small desk for



Phuong where she could write and do her schoolwork. Once her ankle healed, they went on walks across the countryside, often spending the day by the river reading to each other. He even attended Sunday Mass three times with the family and on one occasion wore a brand new suit. Repeatedly he apologized for not bringing his parents to meet them, explaining how busy they were these days with the restaurant in Saigon; but the apology, it seemed, was confirmation that he would soon propose, and silently, along with their mother, Lien approved.

Then, two months into the courtship, he stopped coming. A phone call one afternoon cancelled an outing to the river. A call the next day explained that he would be detained at school for at least a week. Three weeks passed without a single word from him. Lien watched with no surprise as Phuong began skipping meals and crying herself to sleep at night.

At the time, the family had a neighbor, Mr. Tran Van Doan, a former colonel in the Army who had recently returned from three years in the Phú-Quốc camps. Their father had been his comrade and mentor in the war, and ever since his death, Mr. Doan (no one publicly called him *Colonel* in those days) had made it his duty to watch over the family. He had not yet fully recovered his health, but he was a strong and enterprising man and in two years had begun a small fruit farm in town. He frequently visited the house: a shy but polite man, handsome in his own right, always well-dressed and meticulously groomed, always sincere once one could engage him in conversation. It was he who found Phuong her teaching job at the local school, he who installed a telephone in their house so they could call him if they needed anything. And after a few weeks of Xuan's absence, it was he who took Lien aside and shared his misgivings all along about the younger man's character. He had been at the house to see how things began with Xuan

and Phuong. It was inappropriate, he said, to woo a girl so vigorously, so unabashedly. And who was this boy really? Where was this family he spoke of? No one in the neighborhood had ever seen or heard of him. And what, of all things, brought him to this small country town that rainy day—a medical student from a wealthy family so far away in Saigon? Lien listened politely but had no real cause yet for concern. Mr. Doan, she knew, nursed feelings for her younger sister. His visits were out of genuine kindness to the family, but their regularity was out of love for Phuong. His hesitation, his embarrassment, was due in part to the eighteen years that separated them, but those long, pensive stares said more than any confession ever could. Phuong, of course, would have nothing to do with him, citing his reserve as a lack of passion, his age as proof that he would never change. Still, Mr. Doan came and offered his quiet generosity. Only when Xuan became a fixture at the house did he begin staying away.

Then the letter came, a full month after Xuan disappeared. A mere five sentences stating that he could no longer visit Phuong, that school now took up all his time, and that despite her wonderful friendship, he must now, with deep regret and apologies, stay away indefinitely. He explained nothing more. Lien could hardly bear the sight of her sister eagerly reading the letter and then sinking at once into tears. Lien read the letter herself and felt the instant pang of guilt. How stupid she had been—how blind! She should have known better than to trust a man without knowing his family or anything about him beyond what he himself claimed. And then to allow her younger, more impressionable sister to be seduced so wholeheartedly, so irreversibly.

For days, Phuong hardly ate a thing or spoke a word to anyone. As soon as she came home from teaching, she would crawl into bed and remain there into the night. Every hour or so, Lien would check on her and find her weeping quietly into a pillow. Lien

planned to go to Saigon and hunt down Xuan, but her mother forbade her: “Nothing more futile in the world,” she said, “than to force a man to love you.” And so there was nothing Lien could do but comfort Phuong with empty words, feed her what she would barely eat, and hope for the healing passage of time.

Late one night, a week after the letter, Lien awoke alone—Phuong’s side of the bed was empty, her blanket tossed onto the floor. Lien looked all through the house. The kitchen was empty, the front room couch was unoccupied, the television turned off, the windows closed. Without waking her mother, she ran outside and searched up and down the neighborhood, nearly bursting into tears (for the first time in her life) at every turn. She finally found herself at Mr. Doan’s doorstep, and without pause he suggested they go to the river where Phuong and Xuan had spent so much time.

They found her thirty meters from the riverbank, standing motionless in water that reached her hips. She was staring into the darkness, her back to them, her hands submerged at her sides, her nightgown blooming over the surface of the water and undulating away from her, like billowing smoke, along the crest of the night current. Before Lien could call out twice to her sister, Mr. Doan was already in the water, wading toward Phuong until he reached her from behind and wrapped an arm around her waist. She collapsed onto his shoulder and so he lifted her entirely into his arms, bearing her drenched, lifeless body onto land. He then carried her all the way home as she wept wearily into his chest. The entire time, she was saying, “All I want is an explanation, it is all I need from him, it is the only thing I will ever want.” Lien followed them both from behind, too numb to say or explain anything.

Phuong spent an entire week in bed, paralyzed by an intense fever and on the verge several times of slipping into unconsciousness. At one point they called the priest to the

house in case last rites were necessary. But then, just as dramatically, she recovered. Mr. Doan had been there everyday, bringing food, sitting quietly in the front room with his cane and his newspaper, entertaining Lien or her mother with conversation when they were too tired to sit with Phuong. He had called the doctor himself, a well-known physician from the city, and insisted on paying for everything. He often stayed until the evening. On the morning that Phuong was able at last to sit up in bed and speak clearly, she called him into her room to thank him. They were left alone for over half an hour, and Lien could hear nothing of what they said.

Two weeks passed and Lien was called one afternoon to Mr. Doan's house. She arrived and found him standing by the window and Xuan sitting on the couch with his hands in his lap. Mr. Doan had tracked him down in Saigon at the university and forced him (he would never say how) to come back and explain himself to Lien. It would then be her decision to do what she wanted with the revelations, which were this: that Xuan had been engaged for two years to another girl, that their marriage was planned for the coming month, that the wealth and status of both their families required that he go through with it, and that, in fact, this girl was already two months pregnant and this made it impossible for him to break the engagement. It was the news of the pregnancy, he insisted, that had caught him by surprise and prompted his disappearance a month ago. He didn't know what else to do. He had been too ashamed and cowardly to confront the family, especially Phuong, with the truth. His actions were unforgivable, but deceiving them had never been his intention. He had come to town to visit a friend, and for some time away from school. (The friend, he confessed, after a look from Mr. Doan, was an old girlfriend.) Then, without ever expecting to, he got carried away by his own rescue of Phuong, by the friendship that ensued, by the kindness and love the family showed

him and which he had never known with his own family. Was he so wrong to indulge in this, to pursue it, however foolishly? Phuong, after all, was unlike any girl he'd ever known, so honest and passionate in her feelings that it actually made him believe in the purity of his own. He had no idea that his fondness for her would turn so quickly, so drastically, into what he now claimed to Lien, with sheepish regret, was love. His excuse was ego. Youthful folly of the worst kind. Perhaps he had never known his own intentions, but Xuan understood now the weight of his mistake and expressed his regret and shame with that same fervent sincerity that Lien still remembered from his time with the family.

She listened without saying a word, without giving him the satisfaction of her anger. In truth, she had to fight the stirring of sympathy for him—that quiet eagerness in his voice, his apparent thinness since she last saw him. But this also clarified her own naïve faith in him those months ago. When he finished, she remained silent, and so he stood from his chair and approached her. Bowing his head and admitting that he had no right to ask for anything, he asked her to relate all he had said to Phuong, and to promise to tell her two final things: that his fondness and admiration for her had been genuine from the very beginning, and that he would truly be sorry for the rest of his life for what he had done and what he had lost. After a long moment, she nodded, but only for the sake of her sister. Phuong would have wanted to know. Xuan thanked her with a dramatic bow. Then he walked out the door and would not be seen again by her or Mr. Doan for the next twenty years.

Mrs. Long opened her eyes and stood heavily from the bed. Twenty years and she still felt the fatigue of responsibility. It occurred to her that Xuan's last words had made

her his messenger and the vehicle for his cowardice. The Colonel had probably told him about that night at the river, of what Phuong almost did because of him. Most likely it was the strategy for bringing him back to town. Would he have returned otherwise? Would his confession have been so impassioned? Only four people were left in the world who knew of what happened that night, and all four of them would soon be sitting together in the room outside this bedroom door. What would happen if no one, after all these years, had changed?

She and Phuong had never spoken about it afterwards, though Lien had kept her promise and told her everything Xuan had said. The only thing she left out was his claim—his declaration—of lifelong regret. At the time, she simply could not believe it.

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But Mrs. Doan believed it without ever being told. He could never possibly forgive himself, she thought, and would always regret losing the one woman who could love him so completely and foolishly. The promise of his pain helped ease her own, helped her embrace the impossibility of his return, helped her finally to vanquish him from her thoughts. And so she made herself believe in his regret, like a child believing in good ghosts—only she had no idea then that she would one day confront him again and that this faith in herself would dissolve, not merely from his return, but from the return of that twenty-year-old girl who had loved him so. *How must I feel?* she asked herself. *What is this wonderful dread in my chest, this terrible ache of rediscovery?* For two days, such questions had lingered in her, like pangs of hunger, and they seized her even now as she entered the formal room and saw the Colonel lying across the couch, his leg elevated upon a pillow.

The girls were standing by his head with Mr. Long kneeling at the other end of the

couch. Only when Mrs. Doan came closer did she see the Colonel's bloody knee, his mud-caked pants, his face pale and taut with perspiration.

"My God—what happened?"

"The path through the apple orchards," replied her brother-in-law, who was cleaning the Colonel's knee with alcohol. "He slipped and fell into the ditch. All that rain last night, of course. We should have been more careful. I think his foot is broken."

"Does it hurt badly?" she asked. Instinctively, without knowing what for, she felt his forehead with her hand. "And how about your knee?"

The Colonel shook his head, but she could see the pain in his face. His foot had swollen and turned purplish. When Mr. Long adjusted the pillow beneath his leg, he winced violently.

"How did you get him back here?"

"Some of the farmhands carried him. Calm down now, Phuong. He'll be just fine."

"It's nothing, Mother," the Colonel spoke up with a quiet laugh. "I broke my foot daily when I was a soldier."

Mrs. Doan glanced quickly around the room and turned to Lan. "Your aunt, go get your aunt for me."

"Why don't you go fetch the car, Lan," Mr. Long said. "I'll take him to the hospital."

"But how about the engagement visit?" the Colonel said. He tried to sit up on the couch.

Mrs. Doan put a hand to his chest and scolded him, "Lie back down, Doan, you'll make it worse!"

Mr. Long laughed. "Stop being valiant, Doan." He turned to his two other nieces who were standing about and looking from their mother to their father. "It's fine now,

girls. Go back to the kitchen with you. Your father's become a clumsy man, but he'll be okay."

Mrs. Doan sat down on the coffee table, across from her husband, and tried not to look at his foot or the gash on his knee. The sight of blood had always made her lightheaded. Her brother-in-law had gone to the front door to wait for the car. She tried to pick up the bloody towel on the table with the tips of her fingers.

"Is it very painful?" she asked him.

The Colonel nodded now. "Sorry about this. I know today is important." He winced again. He turned to her with a feeble grin. "I'm an old man, Mother."

She felt a sudden surge of love for him. She was reminded of the first time she saw him when he returned from the camps long ago, an old man at thirty-eight, only a kind neighbor then, his gaunt face and dry, self-conscious eyes. It did not take him long to regain his health and reclaim his youth. He had always been a strong, stubborn man.

But there was something else in this moment: what he had said a few days ago, when they were alone in the kitchen and finally acknowledged to each other the fact of Xuan's coming. "I'm sure he's ugly now," she had said, joking as she always did when he fell silent. He laughed and stood from the table, patting her playfully on the shoulder. "Just don't go falling in love with him all over again." He continued smiling as he walked out of the kitchen, but she had noticed the unintended severity in his voice. Although she had no memory of him ever acting jealous, her mother had told her long ago, from the very beginning, that a husband so much older than her would always silently question her love.

Mrs. Doan peered at the front door, impatient for Mr. Long's return. She wanted to weep—to sob into her arm, or into a pillow as had been her habit in youth. But who would she be crying for? The Colonel? Herself—her younger self? An imagined self?



A phantom?

“What happened?” a voice cried beside her.

Mrs. Doan jumped and saw her sister standing by the couch. The Colonel patted the air with his hand and quickly explained everything. Mrs. Doan thought she saw a look of satisfaction pass over her sister’s face.

The front door opened and Mr. Long entered with two farmhands in tow. Carefully, the farmhands lifted the Colonel from the couch and carried him outside.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Mr. Long said over his shoulder. “I’m sure Lan’s boyfriend and his family will understand.”

“Wait!” Mrs. Doan followed him to the door. “You stay here. I’ll go.”

“No, no. You, at least, should be here. Lan can’t be without both her parents on an engagement visit.”

“I want to go,” Mrs. Doan insisted and looked at her sister.

Mrs. Long immediately nodded. “Yes, she should go. All she’ll do here is worry. You and I can stand in for them both. It’ll be fine.”

Mr. Long hesitated for a moment, turning from one sister to the other, and then shrugged. He handed over the keys.

Mrs. Doan turned to go but then stopped. Her sister had not moved. Concern hardened her brow, and Mrs. Doan knew it had little to do with the Colonel’s injury. Mr. Long had disappeared outside. She took her by the arm and leaned towards her ear. “It wasn’t me. Don’t worry.”

“Why didn’t you just say that in the bedroom?”

“He must have imagined it, lied, I don’t know. But don’t let on that you know anything. After today, we won’t have to worry about this. Let him think what he wants.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?”

“I’ve been nervous and confused today. You know that. Perhaps for a moment there I wasn’t sure what I believed. I just didn’t know how to explain that to you.” Mrs. Doan pressed her sister’s hand. She turned quickly and walked out the house.

When she opened the door to the car, Colonel Doan looked up with surprise and shook his head. He sat with his back against the door and his leg set stiffly across the backseat, his foot iced now in a giant wrap. She jumped into the driver’s seat and turned on the ignition.

“Lan will be upset with us both.”

“She’ll understand.”

He said nothing more, but she could see in the rearview mirror that he was smiling at the back of her head.

She maneuvered the car slowly over their bumpy driveway, through the path lined densely with breadfruit trees that they had planted ages ago. The tree branches brushed the side of the car, the only sound between them, like that of pelting hailstones in a storm. In the mirror, the Colonel’s calm, tanned face peered out the rear window. She knew what he was thinking. Their silence meant more to her than anything they had said to each other in the last twenty years. But if he were to say anything, anything at all, she would not be able this time to hold back her tears.

What she had told her sister was a lie, at least partly a lie. It *was* her. The woman Xuan saw at the café. She and the Colonel were in Dalat five years ago to visit friends, a trip they made every few years. She had been left alone at the café to rest. The heat had made her sick. Then she saw Xuan and could not stop staring. Then he saw her and she

got up and left. All of that was true. An unexpected encounter years ago. A story worth telling no one. But now there is a woman in a forest. By a stream. With soaked shoes and a dark face and thick, curly hair. That was *not* her, could not have been her. Had he imagined it? Dreamed it? Made it up? It was impossible to say. But for two days she had avoided looking in the mirror, avoided touching her own face, as though terrified of what she would find, or what she wanted to find, and this same fear, the shadow of every private desire she had ever felt in her life, had kept her from telling her sister the entire truth: after first reading Xuan's letter, for a single rhapsodic moment, a moment that might one day seize her again like the sensation of falling in one's sleep, she had wanted his story, every part of it, to be true.

"Why are you crying?" the Colonel said. "It's only a broken foot."

"I know."

They drove on in silence. Above them, ashen clouds had blotted out the morning sun. A brisk wind made the trees sway around them.

"It's going to rain again," the Colonel said quietly. "It looks like evening."

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