The Departure Lounge

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MY NEPHEW Xuan, now forty and too old for such talk, used an American expression I had never heard before, and after his wife explained it to me in laborious detail I briefly fell deaf. This was at our annual family picnic in Fresno, under a shade tree. When my hearing disappeared I pretended nothing had happened: for months now, whenever I am spoken to insensibly, in a rush of American street slang or media references, I have experienced total silence, lasting up to a minute.

I have not yet told Xuan of my affliction. He sometimes seems to me no longer Vietnamese. His American wife, Janet, and their two mixed-blood sons, and even Janet’s parents, whose house we are driving to after the picnic, have transformed him. His family extends me courtesy, but nothing more, and I sense that Xuan, too, no longer holds me dear to his heart. I am the last of my own family’s Saigon generation, a dried-out stalk, and one day soon, I know, my nephew will place my portrait on the small altar in his garage and light funeral incense. Until then I have no desire to suffer empty and dismal lamentations from Xuan or his family. Time no longer welcomes my presence. I accept that, even as I accept the
betrayal of my adopted language, one I have loved and cultivated for decades. It has now begun to turn its back to me, leaving me bereft, as if standing outside a door, until the door opens again of its own accord. There is nothing that can be done.

We had been at the park, eating picnic food, for perhaps half an hour. Xuan’s sons, Peter and Jackson, played nearby in the meadow, throwing a football back and forth. Last week, Xuan told me, a despondent man had been shot dead by the police in their neighborhood. They live in a respectable area, one with many professionals, so of course I was curious. “Suicide by cop,” Xuan then said, stuffing potato salad into his mouth. He wore a backwards baseball cap, in imitation of his sons, and he spoke the words so fluently—he still has an accent—I asked him how he came to know such an arcane expression. Then Janet leaned across the picnic table and informed me it was a common phrase. She explained its meaning to me. She must have been worried I’d start to ask for word derivations and such because she then leaned back and tried to expand the conversation. Imagine, she said to us both: imagine making a poor policeman carry around that guilt. What an act of spite, she said. Imagine pulling a stranger into your own darkness. It was like killing two people, yourself and the cop.

That is when my hearing briefly vanished. I nodded politely, and I passed Xuan a hotdog bun when I saw where his eyes were looking. Janet turned toward Peter and Jackson and yelled something, telling them, I think, to hurry up and eat. Soon, before traffic picked up, we would all drive to Janet’s parents’ house to exclaim over their newly installed hot tub. Peter shouted something back to his mother, but Xuan and Janet simply ignored him. If I had been the parent of either of those two boys, my response would have been much stronger. They had been speaking nonsense all morning, and they both laughed in my face when rude noises came from a mustard container I had squeezed.

I found myself wishing my deafness would continue all day, sparing me from the conversation that would ensue at Janet’s parents’ house. The last time we had all spent the evening together—it was Christmas dinner, with turkey and pineapple ham—I felt only insult. Xuan, of course, had fitted in quite nicely, raising his glass several times to toast ridiculous things—badminton, the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, the benign colon polyp his mother-in-law said doctors had just removed. I was seated at the head of the table, as befits my age, but the evening progressed as though I had been placed under glass. I was faced with disagreeable foods and youth music on the stereo. The conversation was first something about television, then the boys’ sports camps, then some
funding controversy about widening the freeway. I made an observation to Rick and Donna, Janet’s parents, about Vietnamese refugees writing Cali on their mailing envelopes instead of CA. Why not? I said: in Vietnam that’s what people had learned. When I was met with stares, I offered my opinion to Donna about the delicacy of southern Chinese cuisine.

Later, as I was about to return from the hall washroom, I heard Peter talking with Janet outside the door. They must have assumed I was in the main bathroom, off the kitchen, or outside with Xuan and Rick. Mother and son were conversing in low tones, and I placed my ear to the door. I pictured them, conspiratorial and intimate, standing in the narrow hallway leading to what everyone referred to as the Great Room—a dark, carpeted square with a hissing fireplace and dirty sliding glass doors that opened onto a neighbor’s fence. Janet, I imagined, was stroking her son’s hair, staring with great intensity. What I heard was Peter complaining about me. He told his mother I thought my shit didn’t stink. I knew the expression; I recall frowning from surprise. There was silence, then Janet’s voice: “You can say presumptuous, honey,” I heard. “Or you might like snooty better. But you have to forgive people, OK? Now let it rest.”

I said nothing, of course, and since that time I have even taken up the habit of returning the hugs Xuan’s family gives me upon greeting. But as we sat at the picnic table—Peter and Jackson came bounding over, grabbing cookies—I found myself once again trying to comprehend the distance that existed between Xuan’s family and me. When my hearing returned after, perhaps, a full minute, the first thing I heard was Xuan apologizing for saying “suicide by cop.” He laid his hand on my arm. “It’s just an expression on TV, Uncle,” he said. “It doesn’t mean anything more.” He exchanged a glance with Janet, an anxious one, I thought, and though I am not naturally of a suspicious mind I wondered then if he had told his family about my daughter in Vietnam. I wondered how much he recalled from so many years ago, if he told stories that grew out of the air.

“That’s fine,” I said, and I drew my arm away. Peter and Jackson had returned to throwing their baseball, and the ball made a loud pop when it landed in their big gloves. In the distance, a teenage couple held hands; they stopped to kiss, and the boy put his hand on the girl’s hip. Some youth band on a radio nearby played screeching music. Peter shouted out some joking American insult to his brother.

“Xuan,” I said. “Nephew.” I had no idea how to finish the sentence. I wanted only to say a familiar name and hear it answer.
During the American war I raised my only child, my daughter Lai, but I never knew her heart. Vietnamese fathers rarely do, which has always been another way of saying our ignorance makes us blameless. But I no longer accept this formulation. I now see in such ignorance an evasion: we Vietnamese of the Saigon generation choose to behave selfishly, then we make ourselves believe that no other behavior is possible. This is how we lost our country to the communists. This is why our own cruelty continues to surprise us. I will say in all truth that Lai does not reside in my memory as one’s daughter should, like an ocean forever breaking upon the shore. She exists for me as a smaller thing, like a midnight candle ceremony: a string of bright, hissing illuminations in the night, wisps of flame surrounded by I know not what—striped lemurs asleep on palms, a man with the face of a pelican, giant starving carabao, all the richness and perfume of her life that was held at arm’s length from me.

But what is one to do with a stone? She hardly spoke. She spent her days laboring like a dray animal, washing clothes and sewing, over and over. Though I am now familiar with the concepts of autism and neurological disorders, for years I had secretly thought her silence a conscious choice, an act of atonement for her birth: her mother, to whom I had been married only a year, died on the birthing table. Near the end of the American war, I would sometimes in the evening jangle coins in my pocket and stand by the back door to watch my daughter wash clothes by the small well in our washing room. She could not have been more than twelve. The smell that rose from the well was of ammonia, and when Lai paused to rest her elbows on the edge of the well, her skin glistening with water, she breathed deep and long, and she closed her eyes, and at such moments the look on her face seemed to me so distant, so pinched for such a young girl, that her skin in the moonlight turned pale and cold, like the washing floor itself, and I imagined her washing away the smell of her birth.

At the time, such fanciful notions seemed to me the very essence of poetic vision. We lived in the small city of Vinh Loi, northwest of Saigon, where I was a teacher of literature and language at an elite preparatory school for boys. I kept a row of small stones on my table in front of the classroom, and when some dull boy talked stupidly, I threw a stone at him. I was strict but fair, and my shirts were always crisp. In my study was an iron barrel filled with books that Lai would lay out in the sun to kill the earwigs that nibbled the glue. Every evening, after dinner, I put on Moroccan slippers, still trailing the sales tag from a Saigon
department store, and walked into my study. I sat in my cane chair and corrected compositions. On weekends I lent my voice to the choir director's demonstrations of musical scales. I was, perhaps, something of a peacock. When the Ministry of Education proposed on blue letterhead that I, a respected man of scholarship and accomplishment, assume the position of headmaster, I exchanged my plastic-rimmed glasses for gold-rimmed glasses to symbolize the richness of my vision. I bought a soft flax cleaning cloth with which to clean my lenses, and at night I sometimes stared up into the sky and whispered poems to the stars about the nocturnal nature of the Vietnamese spirit.

When Lai was very young, I ran an extended household of Saigon relatives who had moved in to eat at my table and raise my daughter. First came Binh, now long dead, my rheumy-eyed aunt from my mother's side. In her wake followed nephew Xuan, who, before arriving in Fresno as an adult, spent a decade in a refugee camp in Malaysia; joining him was his brother Nhu, always plump and scabby. In those days, Xuan was a scrawny and shave-headed tadpole, entirely unremarkable. I had little to do with him or his brother; the boys lived with us only a few weeks out of every year. For reasons unknown to me they arrived by pirate taxi in the middle of the night, squabbled with Aunt Binh, then disappeared back to Saigon for months on end. From my father's side came ancient Uncle Duong, whose mouth snapped like a turtle's when anyone mentioned the Viet Cong. He had been a machinist, and the tips of his fingers were stained black with the oil of his trade.

We all lived, I thought, in harmony, even when Uncle Duong announced one night that diagrams of the Tao implied three, not two, natural forces: yin, yang, and the traitorous smaller opposite within each—like infections, he said, like the VC. Mornings, I rose early and threw open the window of my study to smell the canal that flowed, unseen, just past a grove of orange trees across the road in front of our house. I never talked to the vegetable sellers setting up for the day along the canal banks, though I took pleasure in imagining their labors. I pictured them carrying bundles of watercress and radishes and potatoes, then laying them across strips of mottled cardboard that had been soaked in the brown canal water; I imagined the smell of fish and rotting cabbage, and I imagined with much satisfaction their young sons unwinding the knotted twine around their parents' produce. I saw these boys, in my imagination, squatting on the cool cement, then leaping up to whip cockroaches over the canal bank with the twine, pausing long enough to wrap the string in circles and place the loops around their eyes, in imitation of eyeglasses. I was sure, in those days, how peasants thought.
In my mind’s eye, in the cool and silence of early morning, I knew, I was absolutely sure, that the boys along the canal believed their string glasses would one day, as if by magic, become real plastic frames and lenses that would let them see the full breasts of American movie starlets painted on the marquees of the downtown streets, high above their heads. Their thoughts, I believed, were crass and even base, and because of that I did not believe our country could fall to an army of peasants.

There was, as well, no fighting in the town, and because of these factors I doubted the government’s dire warnings. Our house was built of thick white stone. It seemed a fortress, and the rich appointments of its interior gave an impression of permanence. The corners were filled with vases from Laos and dried lavender, and the tile on the floor of our front room had been constructed of expensive stone from the Choong Tan quarry, in the Delta. We had a Belgian cookstove and two ceramic wash basins; in my study, workmen had installed dark mahogany wainscoting. In back, we looked out a handsome bay window overlooking a small garden, and our tile roof had been streaked by the elements into the color of mangos.

Most impressively, most reassuringly, our front door was of thick, burnished teakwood, engraved with swirling dragons and fronted with a wrought-iron accordion guard door with metal guides running along the frame. Its only flaw was also a strength: a cable for the door buzzer had fallen from the metal clasps in the stone, so when you pressed the button, the cable moved as if alive with electricity. I kept the urchin boys from stealing our shoes—we kept them outside, by the door—by telling them a pit viper lived inside the cable. And stories, I knew, reached far, even across the river. Peasants with rifles, with murder on their minds, might race across the road under cover of darkness and sneak to our front steps. But who would raise a hand where a pit viper roamed? Who was to say others did not slither inside the buzzer cable and seek their prey on starless nights?

Yet despite my assurances, despite the confidence with which we undertook our daily tasks, all Lai seemed to do was sit alone, hidden, by the washing room well. Sometimes she hummed baffling little songs to herself; she rocked constantly. I knew, however, I wanted no part of Aunt Binh’s explanations about earth essence and water essence. Lai, said Aunt Binh, had a bad wind. “Country talk,” I said, and then I walked over to the bookcase to put on my reading glasses. “Great scholar,” Aunt Binh said, mocking: “I’m ignorant. You explain it to me.” She craned her neck forward like a child, folding her hands in anticipation.
“Lai’s a schoolgirl,” I said. “We have a saying at school: ‘A schoolgirl jumps when chopsticks break.’”

Aunt Binh parted her lips like a fish. “Even the countryside knows that saying.” She shook her head at me. “She’s not just delicate. It’s more.”

Later, I poked my head into the kitchen, where my aunt pounded dog meat against the cement. “What’s wrong with her is this,” I said, and then I recited for her an English phrase I had read in a textbook: “clinical depression.” The English words seemed to echo against the sheet metal of the enclosure, and my aunt looked at me as though I had pronounced myself a Viet Cong. When I translated the phrase for her, the Vietnamese words came out “a doctor knows she’s sick and sad.” Aunt Binh laughed. She lifted the meat high in the air and said it was the brain of an American doctor, and when last it spoke it said woof-woof.

So I withdrew my explanation. I went back into the front room, leafing through back issues of my Phong-hoa weeklies, which I sometimes read aloud in English to the family to let them hear the sound of the language. Now even the name of the weeklies didn’t sound right in English. “Manners and Morals,” I said aloud. It sounded funny. It sounded a bit like country magic. But after dinner that night, Aunt Binh and Uncle Duong told me not to worry about Lai because meekness was, after all, an attractive lure for a husband. I was glad to hear them say this, for at the back of my mind I had begun to wonder if I had rejected the simple interpretations of my family just to demonstrate my sophistication. I accepted their optimism. Lai would grow into whatever flower she was, and I could sleep easily in the knowledge that I raised her with Confucian respect and discipline. So I agreed not to worry. I told them a father’s love is absolute. I told them the Americans always talked about their love because they were afraid it would go away. I told them I would show patience. I remember coughing as I spoke; I remember taking my glasses off and rubbing them with my flax cloth and delighting in the knowledge that simply by removing my glasses I could turn my aunt and uncle blurry. Spectral. That is perhaps a more accurate word, despite its appeal to magic.

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On those occasions my daughter spoke to me, her words were alarming. Three times a week, at one o’clock, I drove my Citröen to her school to drive her home. There she would be in her white blouse and blue shirt, with a brown satchel lying atop her shoes. The air would be alive with
hummingbirds and dragonflies, and the sugar-cane vendors squatted behind their carts, chewing betel nut and spitting.

“Lai,” I said one day, honking the horn. “Why the worry face? You look like an old woman.”

“It’s not a worry face,” she said.

I looked at her in surprise. I had trouble recalling her voice. “It’s a worry face,” I said. “Don’t you think it is?” I nodded, encouraging her to talk.

She played with the strap of her satchel and stared long and hard out the window.

“What are you looking at?” I asked. “What’s so fascinating?”

“Our roof,” she said, and she pointed.

I looked for our house. In the bright sunlight I could hardly see, and when I leaned over to look for it from her angle, I saw only the dull tiles at the end of the road. “What about our roof?” I asked. But the conversation was over. She frowned and rocked a bit, and kept her eyes focused on the same point.

I thought very hard, and I decided upon a meaning. I think for her our roof was a beacon: she always got dizzy in the center of town; it overwhelmed her, made her lose her bearings. Vinh Loi must have been a puzzle to her. I imagined her standing along the road, in the middle of the city, looking past the thatched homes of the lorry drivers and bricklayers. Her eyes would focus on the sooty huge marquee of the Oil and Gas Building, then on the tiny shops filled with mesh bags of raffia string and squirt guns and batteries. She would then look into the middle of the cobblestone street, then past the noodle sellers, the white French tables, the small eruptions of bougainvillea, the mechanics emerging from grease pits. She would be confused and alarmed until at the far end of the road she caught a glimpse of our tile roof, streaked the color of mangos.

For she was just a little girl, and perhaps she was too frail to plug her heart with strength. I’d watch her walk on the long padi dikes near the house, stooping occasionally to pat down dirt on rocks perched close to the water. To me, the rows of padi shined like mirrors, and in the early morning, before the sun burnt through the mist, the blue hills in the distance seemed to ring the town like braided velvet borders. I doubt whether Lai viewed the landscape with such serenity. When she arrived home from school during the rainy season, I was always saddened by her expression, which seemed to me small and fearful. In July when the monsoons came down in thick gray curtains, I pictured her waiting for me to drive up in my Citröen. I pictured her squatting under the eaves
of the copra shops, watching men in black shorts heave the matted sheets from one pile to another and snort in the sweet acrid particles that rose from the mats like smoke. The pedicab drivers would cluck rudely to her, nodding to their small carriages, sometimes pointing up the road with bony fingers that popped up from their plastic slickers at impossible angles; and when the sewers began to race, the sweaty cafe waiters, all tattoos and Vo Cam cigarettes, would stand under the eaves with her, hacking onto the sidewalk, grabbing her arm in glee when the sewer water brought forth the small pink bodies of baby rats and plastic wristbands inscribed with Chinese characters.

In the rainy season, she told Aunt Binh, there were only sheets of rain pounding the buildings, only the sound of falling rocks, and when the rain flooded from the gutters it felt warm to the touch, as if it were alive. At night when she looked out the bay window, I saw her stare at the giant black clouds swelling overhead and close her eyes in prayer to the Jade Emperor, who she had heard was the source of beauty and terror.

“I want to learn to swim,” she said one day.

I put down my newspaper. “What’s so nice about swimming?” I asked.

“What if there’s a flood?” she said.

“Then you’ll drink so much you’ll be too full for dinner.”

Aunt Binh put down a pot and grabbed Lai around the waist. “This one won’t drink,” she said. “She’d be too scared to open her mouth.”

Everyone said not to worry about Lai, yet everyone, all of us, tried to help her. In her school pinafore, Lai was called Moonflower because she was thin and brought her arms close to her side, like petals folding, when she was afraid. When Aunt Binh heard the nickname, she passed bracelets over Lai’s arms, laughing that it was easier to thread a wooden needle. Then she pinched the bridge of Lai’s nose to fatten her up.

“That just works for babies,” said nephew Xuan, dressed in green school shorts. He and nephew Nhu had arrived the night before; neither had yet changed clothes. Nhu, dressed in a dirty turtleneck, agreed with his brother. Aunt Binh hushed them both by bending her fingers into the shape of a claw and swiping at the air near his face.

“Lai, don’t worry so much,” said Uncle Duong. He looked down at his niece. “Or I’ll throw you to the Viet Cong. You’ll be VC stew.” He smiled, then snapped his mouth open and shut.

Aunt Binh said the lines on her forehead looked like hair. Lai seemed embarrassed, but even in her sleep the creases stayed, thick as rings on a tree. Mornings, before Lai left for school, Aunt Binh would look up
from mincing mulberry leaves and laugh: “Lai! Someone’s pasted a leaf across your forehead!” Lai would nod, stopping in her tracks, and draw her hands up to her face to ease the skin back toward her skull; yet minutes later, as she did the morning sweeping, she would be met by cries of exasperation from her uncle. “I could walk to Saigon on roads like that,” he’d say, and he’d point to her forehead.

One day Aunt Binh shook her by the shoulder when Lai let out tiny yelps over spilling tea from a metal cup. She wouldn’t stop, and the very next day she began yelping again when a rat raced across the dirt patch in front of the house. From the storeroom her uncle’s voice rose in irritation: “Lai! Stop that. Right now. Stop.”

But she only got worse and worse. Nephews Xuan and Nhu said Lai was afraid of her own shadow, and in the evenings when the kerosene lamp reflected giant images of moths along the wall, they’d giggle to themselves and say Lai was a moth. In the afternoons when Lai bent over the water basin to rinse rice, they sometimes knocked on the corrugated-tin back wall with wooden blocks. She jumped every time. “Lai the hummingbird,” they’d say, then they’d laugh very hard and very long. But even they worried for her, though they never said so. On Sundays, after attending Mass with their aunt, the boys would run to the bamboo fence surrounding a neighbor’s house, trailing behind them dragonflies tied to strings. They’d set their faces, assuming stern expressions, then twirl around as fast as they could, pretending the dragonflies at the end of their strings were warplanes. “VC,” they’d yell. “VC die.” They’d twirl faster and faster, and then they’d send their warplanes smashing into the fence to explode on the invisible Viet Cong threatening their cousin. All would die: pilots, planes, enemy. But it made no difference. Day after day, they had to save her all over again.

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When army convoys began to rumble along the cobblestone road in front of our house, Lai made known her distress. In our garden in back she planted tiny nubs of sorghum, sweet potato, and cassava. She planted them, she revealed, for the future.

“Is it as bad as that?” I asked.

In answer she made the sound of an explosion.

Her turn of mind was exasperating. Occasionally I saw silent white bursts from howitzers far away in the mountains to the north, but back in those days the bursts were like shiny carp under a bridge: they opened their wide mouths and said nothing, then they were gone. I revealed to
Aunt Binh one night my discomfort with the implications of disaster suggested by the garden. Uncle Duong raised his beer in agreement. Aunt Binh took a more practical view, arguing that subtle thoughts were never as filling as sweet potatoes and manioc pudding. Still, I took action. “We aren’t peasants,” I told Lai the following day. “If pork goes to ten dong, we’ll pay ten dong. You see the charcoal in the storeroom? You see the basket of pine resin? We’re well stocked.”

Lai crinkled her brow at my rebuke, and when I saw the look on her face I felt so tender toward her I dropped to one knee. “An old woman,” I said, smiling. “Is that what I see?”

I teased her that night just before the evening meal. I was freshly bathed, dressed in a white shirt, and I stood at the doorway and looked at my watch, then pressed my finger to the door buzzer, calling everyone into the house. It was six o’clock, precisely. Our door buzzer was loud, and because I pressed it at exactly the same time every evening, our neighbors viewed it as a kind of communal clock: parents yelled to their children; old men rose from their chairs to clack down domino tiles. I walked then to my study, and my relatives entered, one by one, kicking off their sandals at the doorway. I had grown so familiar with the different sounds made by their rubber flip-flops I had no need of looking to see who was coming in. Instead, I played a game with myself.

I heard two thumps at the front wall. Thwack-thwack. “There’s Uncle Duong,” I said, aloud.

Tik-tik. “There’s Aunt Binh.”

Then came the other sounds. Nephew Nhu, fresh from playing, kicked off his sandals and made sounds like spring rain. Xuan ran in after him; he aimed high, hitting the decorative design on the cinders. The sound was of small books falling.

Then I went into the front room and turned my back to the door. I addressed my relatives with a joke. “Where’s Lai?” I said. “She hasn’t come in yet.”

Everyone laughed because Lai had already entered. She was in the kitchen, boiling water.

“Lai the ghost,” said Uncle Duong.

“Lai,” Aunt Binh called out. “Did you float in?”

But in fact I had heard her sandals. That was my joke: I pretended not to hear her, for the sound of her sandals was so slight, like palm leaves dragging in the dirt. Shush-shush.

“So you don’t hear her when she comes in and out?” I asked. “You truly don’t?”

Aunt Binh didn’t know what I was talking about.
I asked Uncle Duong and the nephews if they heard. No, they said: Lai walked on mouse paws. So the following night I had Uncle Duong stand at my side, with his back to the door. I told him to listen closely. I told him everyone’s sandals made a different sound. Tik-tik. “There’s Binh,” I said. Uncle Duong agreed. There was more noise. “There’s Xuan,” I said, and he agreed again. Nhu entered next, and Uncle Duong, frowning, shouted out the boy’s name. Then I heard Lai’s noise: shush-shush. “There she is,” I said. “Lai’s here.” Uncle Duong looked at me. He couldn’t hear a thing, he said, then he looked over his shoulder and saw her, and yelled in delight.

“Elephant ears,” said Uncle Duong, and he waggled his own ears at me in mock tribute. Aunt Binh swore I was hearing air.

And so I began to view the small shuffling sound of Lai’s sandals in a different light. I stopped making jokes about it. I was, I decided, privileged: I heard what no one else could. It was as though my daughter were playing music meant only for my ears, though, I had to acknowledge, my ears were not trained to follow with appreciation.

One evening I heard her sandals and turned around and told her that her feet were the noisiest thing about her. I told her she was so small and quiet that she might vanish. She listened solemnly, and at dinner she made a great show of eating two helpings of rice. After eating she threshed rice shoots for hours. Then she washed laundry, pumping the handle of the tiny well over and over, stopping only to slap the shirts and pants against the sides of the giant plastic tub, jiggling the water out in great splashes onto the cement, as if, I thought, she wished me to hear.

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I was at the time intrigued by European ideas, filling the iron barrel in my study with English and French periodicals. I taught Shakespeare to my classes, assigning the highest marks to a student who noted that in disguising themselves as trees, Macbeth’s soldiers acted with Taoist virtue. At school, my daughter was an absolute failure. Her exercise booklets were sloppy and she seemed unable to retain details from literature of any sort. Her ineptness embarrassed me, so despite my heavy workload I read aloud to her at night from sentimental Vietnamese classics in order to improve her scores. *The Story of Lady Khieu*, which every schoolgirl was expected to know, was my favorite.

The story told of a maiden, Khieu, promised to a mandarin’s son, her first love. The fiancé was called away to war, and during his absence
Khieu was tricked and bullied several times over into a life of prostitution and horror. When she could no longer stand her existence, she threw herself into a river but was lucky to have a priestess pluck her to safety at the last minute. The priestess sent her to a temple, where she was reunited, with much rejoicing, with the mandarin's son, who in her long absence had married her younger sister. So great was the love still between Khieu and the mandarin's son that they agreed to stay together always. With the blessings of Khieu's sister, the two married, and Khieu was established as Wife Number One; yet so pure were their hearts that they restrained their passion and remained forever chaste with each other, lovers only in spirit.

When I read the final scenes my voice quavered with emotion. Lai looked at me curiously, her head tilted to the side. Her eyes scanned my face. She put her fingers to her throat and, sticking out her chin, she began to hum, imitating the quaver of my voice, adjusting the placement of her fingers until she located its source.

"Don't practice it," I yelled. I grabbed her hand and thrust it down onto her lap. "You feel it. You don't practice it." I had to restrain myself from slapping her.

That night, as always, Lai positioned a ceramic Buddha at the head of her sleeping mat and touched the photos of dead relatives, lined up like New Year's cards in the corner, just under a painting of Jesus. She drew a crinoline curtain around her mat, and as she sat upright to extinguish her small kerosene lamp, I could see her outline against the cloth. She looked like a small, padded chair.

I had grown comfortable having her in the house, but I had begun to worry over what I now saw as a shadow play of domestic harmony. I knew my daughter as I would know an amah. When Lai swept, she teetered forward, on the balls of her feet. She wore her hair in a bun, with stray hairs forever in her face; she sneezed with her eyes shut tight, as though making a wish. In the mornings she woke before dawn, while the air was still sweet from the charcoal fires burning in the neighborhood, and bustled around, shoving the small kerosene stove across the tile to the kitchen. Then I would hear her at the well, filling a pot for my tea and bowl of bananas and rice pudding. Lai kept the house spotless. She swept with a broom of bundled straw, and each week she removed the contents of my bookcase, wiping each book cover with duck feathers. During sunny periods in the rainy season, she laid the books out in the garden on a plastic tarp to drive away insects that might have nested in the bindings. She cooked without error, though with little variation, taking care to remove the stray small pebbles that sometimes accompa-
nied the hard grain. I accepted her work as I would a basket of pine resin for the cookstove, or a table: it was simply part of the house.

But one morning I was lying on a straw mat, resting on one elbow, underlining passages from the class texts with my free hand. I wasn’t thinking about Lai at all. Outside, scattering chickens as they went, army convoys began their daily forays out into the countryside. The gears of the trucks growled and whined, and I heard faint strains of laughter as each truck roared by. Then there was pounding at the door. “VC,” a voice said harshly. “VC.” I sat upright on the mat. The voice set my heart racing, though I recall thinking that surely the Viet Cong would not announce themselves in such a fashion. “VC,” I heard again, then what sounded like the stock of a rifle thudded against the door.

I jumped to my feet. Lai came running in from the kitchen. Her face was stricken and pinched, as though she had been shot. Seeing her face so contorted made me think of a photograph I had seen of a Frenchman hugging a young girl, presumably his daughter. I stood to comfort her, sticking out my arms as if measuring for a mat, and walked with my arms outstretched to where she stood. I felt foreign and clumsy, unsure if my heart was pounding so fast from the thumps on the door or the awkward gesture I wished to copy from the Frenchman in the photo. Lai let out a tiny yelp and put one hand to her throat. With the other she flapped like a bird, making my embrace impossible. I returned one of my arms to my side and held her shoulder with the other, stroking her calm, while she looked at me with eyes that seemed not to register the difficulty of my attempt. “Look,” I said. “Look.” I pointed to the window. Two government soldiers trotted past the window, peering in, grinning hugely. They looked drunk. It was a joke.

When my heart stopped thumping, I reacted not with anger or fear, but by nodding my head where the soldiers had been. This time had been a joke. Yet it was now clear that the war was closing in on us, and the next time the thumps at the door might not be a joke. I thought about dying, and then I thought about Lai. I pictured her as a deep, dry well: death for her would take the shape of workmen coming along and simply boarding her up. I could not get the image out of my head. I walked over to the door and opened it, watching the trucks grow smaller and smaller. The chickens were pecking at the dirt by the road; a pedicab driver sat high in his seat, straining under a load of bricks; mist hung over the padi fields, blowsy and white as steam over a bath.

I realized what I had to do. A husband, I thought: a husband would send her sluggish blood rushing upward, as if from the depths of an underground spring. A husband would peer down, holding a bucket, and
she would rise to the surface to meet him, reflecting moonlight, rippling, murmuring water language. I walked outside, barefoot, glad to feel the chill of the patio cement under my feet.

My idea, however, was obviously not without difficulty. I pushed the idea to the back of my mind, and there it stayed until one day shellfire shook the outskirts of the city and brought a soldier trotting down the street in the opposite direction. The man was pushing a wheelbarrow piled with camouflage boots. From the window I saw they were all caked with blood. I then forced myself to act on my idea. I would do it for Lai. I would make sure Lai had a husband. I would do it because I was her father, and I had given her life. I would do it because Lai was my flesh and blood, my moonflower. The next day I sent Lai out to buy a chicken. I then had her dunk it, still squawking, into a scalding pot of water. I called it dinner, but it was a sacrifice, too, an appeasement to the great natural forces. I told no one. I ate in silence, then ordered Lai to gather the plucked feathers and put them in her pillow when they dried.

Days later, not long after the ground had stopped rumbling from the shelling, Le Van Dien, a neighbor’s son, came calling. Dien was a sergeant with a Ranger unit, on leave from his base up north in Tuyen Duc province, near the city of Dalat. He was homely, skinny and square-jawed, and though his family was often in dire financial straits, Dien was known to be honest and hardworking. He walked past our stone house, dressed in uniform, sucking sugarcane cubes on a stick. I was inside, reading. Lai, dwarfed by a giant conical hat, was out back, hoeing in the dry soil of the garden.

“Ong,” I heard. “Sir. Are you here?” Dien stood on the other side of the metal accordion door, which Lai had left half open on her way out. I looked up from my book, and as I did I was conscious of the silence from the back garden. Lai had suddenly stopped hoeing.

I remained silent. It seemed a delicious moment: I, sitting on a straight-back chair; Dien, awkward and stiff on the other side of the door; Lai, her hoe resting on the soil, perhaps arching her back tensely, looking vaguely in the direction of Dien’s voice. I pictured us as the three sides of a triangle, connected in blindness.

I heard Lai’s hoe clank against the house. She was walking to the front. There was a long silence, then I heard Dien’s voice: “Lai, you look like a mushroom.” The voice was light and happy. I imagined Dien smiling, pointing to her giant hat.

Lai spoke: “I’m a farmer today. Isn’t father inside?” I detected quavering in her voice. I imagined her smiling faintly, blushing like a country girl to hide her nervousness.
“Lai,” I heard Dien say, softly.
I heard nothing more. I waited, trying to still my breathing, listening for their voices.
I pictured my triangle again, forcing myself to stay and imagine more. I felt powerful. I wanted Lai to tremble. I wanted her body to ripple with pleasure, with stolen kisses. I imagined Dien’s inexperienced hand tracing my daughter’s arms. I imagined Dien excited, breathing hard. I imagined the blood rushing through Dien’s veins.
I shouldn’t think this, I told myself.
Still, I moved my tongue in small circles along my teeth. *Fill the well with water,* I told myself. I opened my mouth slightly, willing Dien to open his own, to let sweet words flow from his lips. I imagined Lai’s face, willing her to look him straight in the eye.
Minutes later, I heard Lai’s hoe again. *Chop-chop. Chop-chop.* The rhythm was irregular, as if she were distracted. I hoped Dien had touched her. I hoped they had done what I had willed them to do. Later that day I saw Lai smile to herself, and the sight was so beautiful I began to hum a folk song.

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I arranged things between Lai and Dien by driving my Citröen a mile to where Dien’s parents lived. His parents’ one-room house was made of unpainted wood. Muslin sheets stretched over the window frames where glass should have been, held in place by bricks of dung and straw. Dien and Lai, I said, seemed quite interested in each other, did they not? Would they not make a fine match? His parents smiled with enthusiasm. They told me their son was lonely. They said Dien had described Lai in glowing terms. They offered me tea and betel quid, fussing over my health and drawing attention to their son’s military certificates hung on plastic frames by the door.

On the way out I saw Dien squatting by my rear tire. He stood, smiling. We talked awhile, then I drove off; and when I arrived home, I happened to look at the trunk of my Citröen. There, scrawled on the dirty spare tire hub, were the words *Darling Lai.* I could hardly restrain my excitement.

“You should look at my car,” I said, when I walked in.
“Were you in an accident?” said Lai.
“No, but you should look. Dien left you a message.”
So she went out and looked. When she returned, she said, “Bó, I haven’t sneaked out at night.”
“You’re a good daughter!” I said. “Of course you haven’t. But what
do you think?”
She looked at the floor.
“What a good daughter,” I said. “You’re such a perfect daughter. His parents think well of you. I talked to them myself.”
She was smiling. She hesitated, then she said these words: “If he likes me, then he has to tell me. He has to say it out loud.”
We hadn’t talked so much to each other in years.
Later she went out to squat by the Citröen. From the window I saw her trace her fingers along the trunk, writing messages in the dirty metal. She stood up, admiring what she had written, then saw me looking out the window. The next thing I knew, she walked to the washing floor and filled a large tub with water, then she walked back to the Citröen and threw the water onto the trunk.
“What are you doing?” I said, as she walked into the house, tapping the tub against her hip.
“Bó,” she said. “What if he just points to the car? He has to tell me.”
“What a sweet daughter!” I said. The next day I drove back to Dien’s parents. They told me their son was going to speak to Lai; they told me he had something to discuss with her.

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Some months before Lai’s marriage to Dien, I joined The Association of Fathers of the Republic. Publicly, the Association was a political group. Its members were old men who had sons fighting the communists in the Highlands, or the Chinese Ho-Hoa gangsters in Cholon, or, locally, marauding gangs of young thugs suspected to be orphans. In reality the Association was mostly social. Its monthly meetings were highlighted by drinking warm Bami-Bami beer and playing dominoes on a magnificent porcelain table belonging to one of our members, a Mr. Seng, who, because he was of Chinese descent, was viewed as the logical choice for supplying beer and tiny sweetmeats of glutinous rice in syrup.

Through the Association, I arranged to have my daughter married at the Mary Thu Catholic Church, 40 kilometers from Vinh Loi and untouched by the fighting breaking out all over the district.

The wedding was beautiful. Lai looked so pretty in her lace dress and misty veil and gold tear-shaped jewelry that I dared not speak for fear of crying in joy; and when she placed her hand on mine to guide my fingers over the smooth red plastic fork and knelt at my feet to help me slice a huge square of the gaily colored cake, she told me she was grateful for my happiness because I was her father and had never before eaten
a Western cake with icing. When she placed it on my tongue, I chewed with appreciation, delighted that the huge square had shaped itself so quickly to the contours of my mouth while my new son-in-law and his American friends applauded and Aunt Binh wiped at my shirt. The rich paste slid down my throat, and I moaned with pleasure and weepy astonishment that I should be sitting in a white metal chair with my plate on a tablecloth in a room at the best restaurant in the district, where Americans in shiny blue uniforms applauded and Aunt Binh clucked her tongue and fuzzed with my shirt and columns of light laced through the window and onto the small golden hand of my daughter, who fed me cake with a red plastic fork.

“Friends,” I said to the Association members, “we truly live between sky and earth. Our hearts burst like pumpkins with the joy of our land of The republic of South Vietnam. Yet our spirits soar like orioles when we see the world’s bounty. The bounty that is so often invisible . . . the bounty . . . oh, I don’t know what.” I turned away, overcome with emotion. The Association members applauded, slurping hot tea and throwing rice balls into the air and gulping them down when they descended, demonstrating the link between sky and earth. I continued, but could not find the words to express what I felt: I had led my daughter to happiness, into the world, and she had followed. “When Confucius was asked what he would do if he were given a small kingdom,” I concluded, “he replied, ‘Correct language.’ I feel at this moment the same.”

When a month later the body of Lai’s husband was brought to Vinh Loi on the back of a Lambretta scooter, the Association was present in force at the funeral and carried Republican banners and patriotic slogans. Lai was inconsolable, one moment flailing her body on the ground, the other heaving herself onto the unpainted coffin. She clawed at her hair and bit her lips and beat her ears until veins as blue as rice shoots appeared on her neck. The Association members gathered around me with concerned looks, and I cleared my throat and threw out my arms, calling to my daughter, but Lai continued to wail, collapsing to the ground. I trotted to her side and leaned down by her ear to whisper comfort, but Lai slapped at me with both hands, contorting her face in such a way as to remind me of the time the soldiers had knocked on the door and she had come running into the room looking as if she had been shot.

I dropped to my knees and closed my eyes, allowing her hands to sting my face, and with each slap I grew more and more surprised at the strength of her blows, for I had not felt her palm to my face since she had stroked it as a child. I heard her grunt with the exertion of striking
me, and when I fell on one arm from the force of the blows, I found myself thinking that I should never have given her a husband, for we lived at a time when sky and earth were unstable. “Lai,” I said, opening one eye, but then I closed my eye again because her face was a mask that looked like rage. In blindness I held out my hand for her to grasp. I imagined her swollen fingers and wriggled my hand for her to take hold of, feeling in the back of my throat the words that would make her see that I was her father and our hearts were together. I began to paw at the ground, feeling for her fingers, and though I felt nothing, I heard her breath grow fainter and the stiff silk of her dress crinkle along the grass and dirt. I opened my eyes and saw her rolling on the ground like a log, away from me, my flesh and blood, and all I could think to do was to stare at her turning over and over. Two Association members ran to her with confused looks, holding Republican banners to the side, but they let her roll past when they saw me struggle to my feet and walk in silence in her direction.

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For weeks after the funeral Lai did not speak to me. Aunt Binh and Uncle Duong were of little help; they had taken a bus to a nearby town and upon returning related to me the nervousness they felt when passing the burned-out hulks of overturned vehicles along the route, between the government roadblocks. The Americans had almost completely withdrawn, but according to the newspapers our Army of the Republic had killed 70,000 Viet Cong in major battles around An Loc. Uncle Duong’s eyes lit up at the figure.

“You look like a Buddhist who just converted a butcher,” I said. “I heard 50,000 on the shortwave. Is either one possible? Can you believe anything you hear these days?”

“Hush,” said Aunt Binh. “You don’t want to upset Lai with your conversation.” Aunt Binh looked out toward the half-open door to the washing floor, where Lai was scrubbing clothes.

“She’ll just hear it somewhere else,” said Uncle Duong. “You can’t escape the killing.”

“Give her time,” said Aunt Binh. “She’s still washing her funeral clothes.”

“She’s been washing all week.” I said. I lowered my voice to a whisper. “She’s been making funeral clothes all week, too. Wash and sew. That’s all she does.” I pointed to the foot-pedal Singer sticking out from the curtain around her sleeping area.

“Yes, maybe tuong tu,” I said. We all sat silent for a moment, wrapping our fingers around cups of chicory tea and sweetened milk. I started to talk about the stoicism of Dien’s parents. They had built a small shrine for him, exhibiting his military certificates and placing oranges and bowls of water under his picture. Still, they had carried on; they went about their work. I did not want to tell Aunt Binh and Uncle Duong that I felt tuong tu as well. I knew they would think I could not claim to deserve it. But they had not been shunned by Lai day after day. When I saw her come out from behind her dressing curtain every morning in funeral white, I asked myself if she weren’t telling me something about the two of us, as well.

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Aunt Binh and Uncle Duong stayed on, alarmed at the increasing number of travel warnings on the shortwave. Uncle Duong spent hours with his ear pressed to the tiny speaker, listening with great concentration to reports of sudden reversals for the army in the Highlands. Aunt Binh attended to Lai, walking with her arm in arm to the open market for fresh fish. One day she brought back with much gaiety a sparrow in a small bamboo cage. I looked with approval at Lai’s response to the bird: she giggled when the bird hopped from bar to bar, and several times she stuck a skewer between the bars of the cage, coaxing the bird onto the stick and bouncing it up and down until the sparrow fluttered its wings.

“It’s a beautiful bird, isn’t it?” I said to Lai.

“Yes, bó,” she replied. “Do you want it for dinner?”

“No!” I said. I drew back. Uncle Duong looked up from the shortwave at the bird, snapping his mouth open and shut.

“No,” I said again. I smiled at my daughter. “This is not for dinner. It’s so beautiful. I love its song.”

“It’s just a sparrow,” said Lai. She didn’t look at me. She left the skewer in the cage, then walked back to her foot-pedal Singer.

“A sparrow has a lovely song,” I said to her. I lifted the cage up by the tiny bamboo loop at the top and placed it on top of my bookcase, by my reading glasses, as if to emphasize the bird’s permanent place in the household.

“Lai, look,” I said, pointing to the bird. My smile was so broad that Uncle Duong whispered under his breath that I should be a politician.

Lai looked and nodded. My action seemed to please her. I was happy
with how our exchange had played itself out, and I made hand signals to Aunt Binh that her time with Lai had been well spent. In truth, I found the bird’s trilling annoying; in any other circumstances I would have skewered the bird myself. But through the bird I saw an opportunity to influence Lai.

I had lost much sleep over her since the funeral. I had already received solicitous offers of assistance from members of the Association; two, in fact, including vice-president Ly, had come to see me at school, going on and on about the smell from the paper mill, but their real conversation, the one I had anticipated, came as they were leaving. “If you ever have need of this spoon,” said Ly, withdrawing the object from his pocket, “it’s yours.”

He offered it as a medical instrument for use on Lai, a cure for the poisonous wind country people said was the source of most ailments. It was silver, blackened from heating, and bent from much hard scraping along the torsos of those who had undergone its treatments. I was at first embarrassed, then touched by the gesture. I declined the instrument with thanks, then went back to marking essays. I worked for hours until I found myself thinking how my scribbling sounded like the scraping of the heated spoon treatment. I put my pen down on the pile of essays, and my mind wandered to my lectures for the week. I taught my students that the Americans, and before them the French, could not understand the fluid passage between the heavenly and earthly realms. I wondered, looking out onto the dirt campus square, if the limitations of the foreigners were not their appeal, for Lai seemed to me to belong no more to one realm than to the other. It was as though she were not truly alive; and I, in my role as father, could not claim earthly life, either.

I had allowed Lai to ignore me completely for too long. I behaved with restraint even when I had stood outside the crinoline curtain surrounding her sleeping alcove, expressing my admiration of her dead husband, only to be answered by the clanking of her kerosene lamp against the floor. Her pile of newly sewn white funeral clothes continued to grow. Every day when I returned from classes I frowned: she would be hunched over her Singer, surrounded by discarded bobbins and coils of string, too engrossed to even look up.

That night, after dinner, I put on my reading glasses and said to her, “You’re making a lot of clothes.”

“Yes,” she answered. She looked me in the eye. “I’m Widow Lai.”

The challenge in her answer so surprised me that I felt she had begun to slap me again, as she had at the funeral. She was by tradition expected to grieve for her dead husband. But the strewn bolts of white
silk and cotton by her table spoke of a compliance with tradition that in its excess seemed a mockery of it. She was adamant about her sewing, furrowing her brow in a way I hadn’t seen since she was a child. I knew even without asking Aunt Binh that my daughter labored all the hours I was away; I knew because Lai’s fingers constantly trembled from fatigue and strain.

“Sew, wash; sew, wash,” Aunt Binh told me, later that same night. “That’s what she does all day.” Then Aunt Binh opened the lacquered red box where Lai kept her glass earrings and jade necklace. Inside were uncut betel leaves and a compact case full of crushed limestone. I at first did not understand the significance of the items, but when Aunt Binh bared her own blackened teeth to me, I shut the box in disgust: Lai was now chewing betel, staining her teeth black, making herself as dead to youth as a crone.

“She’s got VC inside,” said Uncle Duong, pointing to his heart. I frowned. “Don’t say that.”

Uncle Duong pressed his finger into his chest. “In here is where she lives. They live there too. Their spirit.” He made a giant arc with his arm, and as he did I understood that Uncle Duong was referring to the diseased ideas that drove the VC on.

“She has VC eating her heart,” he said, emphatically. “Do you understand? They want to change everything. They want to kill everything.”


Uncle Duong apologized, then he and I settled on a plan. We walked to the bookcase, and together we loudly cooed over the sparrow with much enthusiasm. We made trilling sounds to each other, and the bird responded in kind. Aunt Binh laughed theatrically, slapping her hands against her thighs.

Lai entered the room. “Father,” she said quietly. She walked over to the cage with a newly sewn white cloth in her hand and quickly slipped the covering over the cage, all the way to the base, and the bird fell silent.

“Why did you do that?” I asked. She mumbled something so quiet that I could not hear, but I was sure I knew the answer anyway.

“Lai, why did you shroud the cage?” I asked again.

“No. You know I won’t eat it. Why did you shroud the cage?”

She sat down again by her sewing table. Her expression was calm. She brought her hands up and cupped them like a mask over her face.

“Lai,” I said sharply. She did not move.
“Say one thing, do another,” Uncle Duong whispered, pointing to his niece. He glanced at me. “Just like VC.”

I began to question the sincerity of Lai’s obedience to me, but since I could not make her heart transparent I began to view our relationship as a kind of stalemate. One step forward, one step back. For this reason, perhaps, when I drove my Citröen to campus, I delighted in hurtling myself ahead of the bicyclists and passing the lorries and the ox-driven carts with honks of my horn and daredevil aplomb. It was the hot season, and in early 1975 that meant my students rolled up their long white sleeves, dangling Marlboros from their lips, and dissected news of the latest communist offensive. They huddled in tight circles, taking out their wallets and passing around green military registration cards. Some of the students wore buttons showing the yellow and red flag of the Republic; others wore sandals made of tire rubber, like the Northerners. They swore. They made noises like machine guns when they laughed. They told of relatives in Saigon who had seen American CIA prowl Tu Do Street in pickups, loading the flatbeds with schoolgirls to sell in Thailand. They reported that helicopters flew over the jungle at night, broadcasting ghost noises because the Army of the Republic was running out of bullets. They said the VC had lost so many men that they forded rivers on rafts built from the bodies of their dead. They dog-eared pages from Paris Match that showed communist trucks clogging a long jungle road, snaking so far back they appeared to come out of a small hole on the horizon.

On the bulletin board in the dirt campus square they hammered broadsides denouncing the Saigon government over broadsides calling for its support. The next day I heard them sing the national anthem, clapping so hard that passing motorists looked out their windows to check for gunfire. In the late afternoon, sluggish after a plate of rice and pickled eggs, I heard them from my office charging across the dirt with Republican banners, raising huzzahs, waving small branches menacingly over their heads, until the chain-link fence separating the campus from the thoroughfare forced them to stop. Stepping outside, I saw them lower their branches, catching their breath, then regroup into loose ranks and go charging in the opposite direction, yelling at the top of their lungs until the long white wall of the Sciences building stopped their advance; then they charged the other way, then the other, again and again, staining their white shirts with dust and sweat.
“Stop this,” I said.

“Don’t you love your country?” snapped a student.

I lunged for the boy, but he was elusive, escaping into a large circle of companions.

When I turned on my heels to walk back to my office, I heard a voice shout derisively at my back: “His daughter’s a worm wife.” I spun around, angry, but I saw only the students’ impassive faces. Worm wife. Someone married to the dead.

That night Aunt Binh and Uncle Duong squatted on the cool patio cement with me. “You should tell her to stop,” said Uncle Duong. “She’s obedient.” He inhaled deeply on a Galoise cigarette.

“No,” I said. “That won’t do any good.” I looked out at the road, hearing the distant whine of truck gears.

I knew Uncle Duong would think that I was worried Lai would say no. But what I could not admit to him—what I did not want to admit to myself—was that I was even more worried she would say yes, then smile behind my back, then cook my dinner, then disobey me and disobey me and disobey me. Say one thing, do another. Perhaps Uncle Duong was right.

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Nephews Xuan and Ngu stopped visiting, and when Aunt Binh and Uncle Duong braved the journey back to Saigon, back to what they thought would be safety, I was left alone with my daughter. There was no one to witness what then occurred between us. I mention this because if nephew Xuan has been telling unflattering remembrances about me to his American family, then his stories would be dishonest: his child’s mind back then knew but a thread of the whole cloth; his stories now would paint his memory, not the other way around. Of tadpole Xuan, I recall little. Some months before he and his brother simply disappeared, I cuffed his head roughly; I believe he had entered my study without permission.

My daughter cooked for me, she cleaned, she went to the market, but she began to express herself in ways that seemed not so much distant as dishonest. When she spoke to me at all, her words seemed vile things, floating snakes burrowing into my ears. So I turned to other ways to understand. I listened now to the washroom’s rusty pump handle going up and down. Evenings, as I sat with a book in my lap, the sound of the pumping gave me information. When she was content, the pumping was continuous; she would flex the handle up and down until her
red plastic washtub was full. When tired, she would pump three times, then sit waiting the length of three more pumps; then she would pump again. I asked her in irritation one night if just for once, just for me, she could pump with a different rhythm. “I know when you’re well,” I said, “and I know when you’re not. Tell me something else.” I imagined her pumping erratically, in passion; or slowly, as with a violin, in contemplation. But she looked at me quizzically: “What do you mean, bó?” I sighed loudly, swinging the washroom door back and forth, and wondered if she truly did not understand.

When my Association friends dropped by, she made herself scarce. Sometimes she drew the curtain of her sleeping area around her and remained quiet; at other times, she grabbed huge piles of white funeral clothes—clothes I knew were clean—and disappeared into the washing room.

One evening I called to her, wishing to introduce her to an Association colleague. I had thought she was behind her curtain, resting on her sleeping mat. But then I heard water gurgling into the washing room drain. She walked out to front room, sopping wet, the fabric of her blouse sticking to her woman’s body, clutching her giant red tub with one hand. Her brassiere was visible. I tried to make light of the situation. “This is my daughter Lai,” I said, pointing. “And that’s her sister, Red Tub.”

Lai set her mouth and gave me a look that in its hardness startled me for a moment. My associate laughed uneasily, and Lai then turned on her heels and returned to the washing room. Afterwards, I walked to the back and opened the washing room door. “Why did you come in like that?” I said.

“I don’t understand,” she said, looking up. “You told me to come in.”

I stared at her face closely. Her expression was wide-eyed and theatrical, and she nodded her head from side to side in what appeared to be exaggerated innocence. I wondered if she were acting. She had meant, I knew now, to mock my authority. It occurred to me that this was her vengeance on the world. I knew that world. I was that world, its knowledge and money and power. She would, I feared, lope like a dog if I told her to get something; she would blurt whatever thought was running through her mind if I asked her to speak; she would enter the front room, dripping wet, displaying her body like a bar girl, if I interrupted her washing. She wished to humiliate the world—to humiliate me—and she would do so by obeying.
When I saw a boy bicycle drunkenly toward me in the morning—was it months later? Weeks? I do not know—when this boy in his white shirt weaved slowly in my direction, the sun had not yet burned off the river mist. Yet I knew even before I saw his stained and mealy face that he had been shot. With one hand he steered his bicycle; with the other he cupped the flap of his cheek. For days, I had heard a chorus of dull gunfire rising from the forest, like axes striking teakwood; silence always followed. Flares lit up the hills at night, and in my dreams enemy soldiers emerged from the river, smelling of lichen and sea slugs; each night they ran into my study, enraged, holding the thick cord of the door buzzer to use as garroting wire. “Where is he?” they’d shout. I knew they meant me.

One morning the ground shook for hours, and the pages of the book on my desk blackened with small tufts of plaster and dust. I began to lose track of time. Through these terrible weeks, I faltered. I moved my chair to the doorway and spent hours watching the military traffic. If we lost, would I be sacked? Considered an undesirable? What would happen to our house? What would become of Lai? I pondered removing my certificates of appreciation from the wall. Every night, my daughter left my dinner on the table and retreated to the washing room. She had become a creature I conjured into being. Without me, I recall thinking, would she have existence? I pictured with such clarity her actions out back, washing and washing, that she became for me a kind of mental furniture, forever stationary and mute, aligned with other furniture in a formal pattern: Lai stretching across her red tub, her face inert, her plain face in counterpoint to the red of a shirt in her hands; Lai lying stiff on her mat, her fingers tracing the straw weave.

We heard a siren one night, and the sound brought her into my study. She smelled, I thought, of eucalyptus and fish; her eyes were wild.

“Are you nervous?” I asked. “Don’t be. We’re safe.”

“It’s more of the same,” Lai answered, but I could see her hand shaking. Then she walked to the back, opening the sheet-metal door to the washing room, and began pumping the well handle, splashing water into a tub of white clothes.

I followed her. “You’re nervous,” I said.

“My husband doesn’t want me nervous,” she said.

I turned around quickly, then walked back to my study and sat down on the wicker chair. I put on my glasses and picked up a book, flipping slowly through the pages. I read, but without meaning. It was one thing to not accept Dien’s death at his funeral. It was quite another to invoke
him now.

I stood up and yelled toward the washing room. “He’s a ghost now,” I shouted. “Do you understand?”

I heard only the sound of her scrubbing. Then she stopped. The door to the washing floor was half-open, and I saw her head leaning into the hallway. “Have you heard him, too?” she yelled.

I cursed at her. “Listen,” I hissed, making my voice cold. I walked to the front door and with my thumb pressed the button for the buzzer. The buzzer rang out in the night like a claxon, and though I expected to see the police come bicycling down the road to investigate, I pressed with my thumb for so long that I began to feel pain in my elbow. The house across the road suddenly glowed with light, and between its illuminated window slats I could see faces pressed against the panes. “Huy!” I heard, from across the road. Somewhere in the distance there was shouting.

I stopped, then walked quickly to the washing room and stood by the half-open door. Lai was squatting behind her tub of laundry, perfectly still.

“Did you hear that buzzer?” My voice was full of accusation. “Did you? If he can still hear anything, he’ll hear that,” I said. I could not keep the anger from my voice. “If he answers it, he can eat my fish sauce. If he doesn’t, then no more of your stupidity.” I shook my head in demonstration. “If he comes tonight, then fine. If not, then stop. No more. He’s dead.” I then slapped my chest. “I am not dead. I am your father, and I am alive, and you are alive. Do you understand?” She looked down at her tub. She did not move.

I avoided her the rest of the night, retiring early, but I could not sleep. Well into the morning I heard her leave the washing room. The door squeaked a little, and when she walked to her sleeping alcove, in the dark, I heard only the tile squishing from the moisture on her feet. From behind her curtain, she called out: “I’m sorry, father.” And then I turned on my side. I felt warm with satisfaction.

In the morning, before the roosters started up, the loudspeakers set up by the army crackled to life. They called the Youth Teams to exercises: 4–3–2–1, 4–3–2–2, 4–3–2–3, again and again, to the accompaniment of martial music. The loudspeakers fell silent, and a dog began barking. There was a loud pop, followed by a motor scooter revving its engine. Then the speakers sputtered to life once more and another strain of martial music filled the air. Then they simply stopped.

I heard all the sounds. I listened very closely. My outburst had been successful. I pictured Lai behind her curtain, cupping her hand to her ear
during the night. For hours she would have prayed for her dead husband to answer the buzzer, but as dawn approached, she would have stopped. She would have accepted. She would have heard only the crows of roosters break the silence.

Later, she sat out on the cement patio, staring at the convoys lumbering by. I kept an eye on her, first rooting around our storage room for a straw bonnet for her to wear, then weaving a bamboo strip of her basket back into place, then looking out the door to make sure she was still there. I left for coffee with my Association colleagues, and when I arrived back at the house, I could not help smiling when I saw that she hadn’t moved from her position on the patio. I called out to her, and she waved. “You’re a good daughter,” I shouted. “Very good!” I began to walk quickly toward her; the air smelled sweet as figs. If I had owned a victory flag, I would have planted it.

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I assumed then that this chapter of my life had finished. I thought Lai would simply begin to linger at the table after serving my breakfast rice, that she would once again offer to brew my tea; I assumed she would clutch my hand if gunfire filled the forest. And she did. She did all these things, and she even smiled at me one morning, then pointed to a maw-caw perched in a neighbor’s tamarind tree.

But it was April of 1975, and the war ended so suddenly we were jolted into chaos once again. When I first heard news of Saigon’s collapse, I was sitting perfectly still in a barber chair, receiving ministrations from Mr. Xiep, who was dressed in the oversized white smock of the Heavenly River Barbershop. Mr. Xiep groaned when the news came over the radio and stopped twirling the medicinal cotton-headed toothpick he had inserted into my ear. The shop was filled with the smell of mercurychrom and hair tonics from America, and under the huge screw-in wall mirror in my line of sight were two men covered in dragon tattoos, sleeping on a long bench with steaming towels over their faces, as if on display in a mausoleum. Big Minh, installed as president after Thieu flew off to France, spoke with much dignity and emotion over the radio about communist forces entering the city, and when he did, I found myself wondering what would become of men covered in dragon tattoos, lying as in death on a barbershop bench. My thoughts were not of Lai. She was at home, cleaning; she had just bought a boar-bone comb, and the last I had seen of her that morning she was dragging the comb through her hair; I recall that she rubbed her index finger over her front teeth.
That is the last clear image I have of my daughter. The Northerners marched openly through our city later that afternoon. There was a plume of smoke rising from the forest. Everyone was walking quickly; an old woman selling litchi nuts overturned her cart and began weeping. Newspaper was everywhere, floating down from the clouds. The ground kept shaking; the world seemed about to split. When the loudspeakers called for us all to welcome the liberators, Lai and I stood behind other Association members. There must have been thousands of people by the city hall, and overhead a flock of noisy birds soared over the avenue.

No one spoke, but then we all began to shout. I raised my voice with my Association colleagues. We shouted peace—Hoa binh! Hoa binh!—at the file of green-shirted boys in pith helmets marching briskly on the cobblestones. Lai stood at my side, clutching lilacs I had thrust into her hands to give to a soldier in case of trouble. I saw her hand wave, but as I waved my own, I noticed her fingers curl into a claw. I continued to chant peace, but I was looking out of the corner of my eye to watch her. Her mouth opened in time with the chants, but her lips were saying something different. She was speaking in a whisper, and at first I could not puzzle out her words, but then I knew: she was chanting the name of her dead husband. Le Van Dien. Le Van Dien. I did nothing; I had no strength in my body. I remember being amazed at how young the soldiers looked. I turned to face my daughter. She looked back at me, without shame, then opened her mouth wide and screamed out Dien’s name. I continued to pump my fist in the air, shouting for peace with my Association friends, then I laid my hand upon her shoulder and squeezed it hard to silence her.

She jerked away. She did not look at me, but she threw the lilacs down and they scattered as if a strong wind had blown them to the ground. Then she pushed my colleagues out of the way. She grabbed people by their shoulders and moved them aside, and as I looked on, shouting for her to return, she burst from the crowd and ran onto the cobblestones. She may have tripped. I could not see her momentarily, and then I could. She ran straight at the Northerners and attacked one of the soldiers, hitting him with her fists. The man seemed bewildered; he held his rifle away from his body and shoved back at her with his free hand. Other soldiers fell out of line. They grabbed at Lai’s arms. I could see the shock on their faces, their childish confusion. There was a moment of hesitation, then a small circle of men closed in around my daughter and began to stretch, accordion-like, first one way, then another. Through the crowd I caught glimpses of Lai. She was lunging for the rifles on the men’s shoulders. One of them raised his weapon high in the air and
brought it down swiftly, with force, like a farmer killing a chicken. The blow drove her down hard. Some people in the crowd were screaming, and the soldiers looked back, not unkindly, before jogging to catch up with their marching comrades. When I arrived at my daughter’s side, the stones by her head had turned slick and dark. She lifted her hand once, and her eyes opened and shut without reason. She was already beginning to die. And then I couldn’t hear anything: not the wails of the crowd, not the prayers of my colleagues. Nothing. Not the loudspeaker, not the screeching birds overhead.

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We drove in the Fresno traffic for nearly an hour. Janet gave up her front seat for me and sat with the boys in back. They were mock arguing, speaking harshly to each other, but also laughing. Peter, apparently, had stolen test answers for his history class; Jackson stored dirty magazines in his gym locker. “Xuan,” said Janet, giggling. “They’re your sons. I don’t know these two.” Xuan smiled tightly at her in return, but said nothing. He turned to me then. “Uncle,” he said, “Rick and Donna said they’re looking forward to seeing you again.” He leaned forward and searched my face.

My nephew’s tenderness, I knew, was a continuation of his apology at the picnic. Suicide by cop: the expression still hung in the air. I recognized his contrite look. He had always hated to upset me by mentioning the American war. He must have thought the expression reminded me of Lai’s death at the hands of the communists. I had told him of that day myself. But he was only half right: I felt again the grief I have carried for years, and I was avoiding Xuan’s anxious glances because of that. Yet I had years ago forgiven the communists for what they had done. I had years ago accepted the incompleteness of my life. Riding in the car with my nephew, in the bright sunlight, I felt something within me begin to loosen, somewhere along my spine. The expression Xuan had used had been so casual, so accepting, so crass that it had sailed far from its intended meaning. Even before we began our long drive, Xuan’s words, which had seemed so insensible at first, had begun to speak to me, first in a whisper and now powerfully, in a clear voice. It was as though Xuan’s American expression had somehow escaped from the well of my deafness. It was as though the strangeness of my adopted language, its perpetual foreignness, kept Xuan’s words separate from the world that was deserting me.

So I listened. What I heard were questions I had not asked myself
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for years, but in different form. Was it not possible that I had been the
cop? That I was wrong to deny my daughter her illusion? Was it not
possible that her actions that day had been aimed at me, and not at the
Northerners? I do not know. Such questions are impossible to answer.
They have always been impossible to answer, but in English they seemed
once again to beckon. Years ago, when my questions were in Vietnamese,
their pattern, their weight, was always the same. Their words always
to the same familiar pathway, and they led always to where I
had started.

By the time we arrived at Janet’s parents’ house, I was feeling more
kindly disposed toward Xuan. I called him a good driver. I turned to
Janet and the boys and said I could hardly wait to see the new hot
tub. As I spoke, I saw Rick and Donna open the front door. They were
smiling and waving. They both have silver hair coiffed to look full and
youthful. They play tennis, and I heard the boys once remark that their
mom’s side of the family could still fast-dance like people on TV. Rick,
I had been told, had always wanted to be a rock star. He now worked
a checkout counter at a department store, where he harbored a raging
grudge against the requirement of wearing a red vest. Donna was wear-
ing shorts that revealed purple veins in her legs; every other day she
carried padded weights in each hand and jogged to the cul-de-sac a mile
away. She liked to tell stories about flirting with repairmen. The boys, I
know, admire their American grandparents greatly, and Xuan, who has
never expressed any interest in owning a pet, recently bought a spaniel
after Donna told him a funny story about a spaniel they had owned
when they lived in Bakersfield. The dog, she said, growled whenever she
kissed Rick. Made out, she had said, laughing, but I think my consterna-
tion had been such that she quickly apologized.

As we walked up the driveway, Peter spoke to me. “Do you want to
take my hand?” he said, and then he looked away. I doubt if the offer
was sincere, but nonetheless I appreciated his politeness. I saw Janet nod
to him.

I had never liked Rick and Donna’s house. It is small and dark, and
its stucco siding is chipped and discolored. The sliding glass doors of the
Great Room constantly stick, and the washroom smells of mold; their
appliances rumble and squeak, and the walls of their dining room are
lined with framed posters of rock bands. Down the hallway are auxiliary
rooms I have not entered, but I suspect they are similarly flawed and
tasteless.

We walked in a ragged line to the door, and Peter and Jackson both
leapt up the front steps and hugged their grandparents. I lingered behind,
combing my hair with my hand and taking small, old-man steps. Janet hugged her mother a long time, and Xuan gave Rick a hearty slap on the back. “How are you?” said Rick, addressing me over Xuan’s shoulder. I nodded. The others, all of them, stepped into the hallway. “Need some help, partner?” Rick said to me. I waved him off. He stepped back inside, watching me. They were all, I realized, watching. Xuan was whispering something to the boys, and Janet held her mother by the arm. When I reached the door, I smiled my greeting, and Rick beckoned me forward. “Hot tub’s out back,” he said. I was standing in the archway, swaying a bit, when I saw something to the left of the door that I had never noticed before. There was a large, ornate doorbell buzzer, painted white. I stared briefly at the object; I felt a bit dizzy.

“Well, come on in,” said Donna, looking straight at me. “I’ll get you some water.” I saw her walk to the kitchen sink; I heard water pouring from the spout. I stood there a moment, then stuck out the finger of my right hand and pressed it to the buzzer. I did not wish to take my finger away. It seemed proper to ask for permission to enter. It seemed right that I should put my hand to the bell and stand at the door.

“Uncle,” said Xuan. Rick took a step forward, but Janet whispered something to him, and Rick stepped back. Peter and Jackson came out from the kitchen, chewing on something; they stood behind their parents. I cannot say precisely what I wished to accomplish by leaning my finger against the buzzer and not releasing it. I kept my finger on the buzzer and listened to its rich noise, and I felt the expanse of the house reverberate in the sound. I kept my finger there a long time, and Xuan and his family stayed a respectful distance away. No one rushed to grab my hand. No one put their arm around my shoulders. The buzzing seemed never to stop, and I heard in its sharp and loamy bray different modulations. I heard the kitchen faucet running, and the clacking of ice cubes into a glass. I heard the buzzer echo, as in a cavern; I heard an echo and return, over and over, and as I heard these things I grew conscious of the sharp crease in my pants, of the spotless finery of my shirt. I stood straight as I could, pressing hard on the buzzer, my face a question: May I enter? May I enter now, please? For an instant, then, sunlight laced in a column through the sliding glass doors and bathed everyone in brightness, and all the rooms of the house, all its private chambers, the places where secret things lived and rose in the night, seemed to open to me, glowing, and I stepped through the doorway and entered.