

The Shadow Waves From Across the Way

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Blood splatters on my arm as I swat at the bodies. Though I've killed one mosquito, more of its compatriots bravely attach themselves to my skin. The buzzing is incessant and everywhere and refuses to blend into the rest of the jungle foliage. I feel like my ears haven't heard any other noise but these tinny cries. I launch one last attack—a swing of my hand—it lands on my arm. I lift my weapon. Nothing.

Mẹ snaps at me to stop. I grumble, but I soon find that she's right. Attacking them tires me out more, and I need the strength right now. Better to spend it on pushing my legs through the tall grass and mountain passes and heavy, hanging leaves than to assassinate bugs.

It has been three days since my family—Mẹ, Bác Bày, my sister, my brothers, and I—left our home in Saigon. We bring little, and most of what we carry will be given away at the end of our journey. It's hardly a greeting gift, and I don't let my mind wander at what will happen after we deliver the food and memories.

As we sway back and forth in the rickety xe lô, I mull over the past few days and only the past few days; remembering is both too expensive and too painful. So I let my mind meander back to the first shadow, crafted from letters and yellowing paper, the first in six months. The shadow stands next to me, as Mẹ ushers us out onto the streets. It follows us as our path turns from cracked and dusty concrete to cracked and dusty mud to cracked and dusty country. It sleeps next to me on the scratchy mat and sits up with me when Mẹ shakes us awake, the room still dark. And it's hanging onto the seat now, as we're biked through the jungle, baking inside the metal container.

I wipe the sweat from my brow, but it's no use. Everything here feels like sweat and mosquitos and an overwhelming heat, and an icy fear. I dare a glance at the shadow, but it just sits there, unbothered. I say nothing.

We ride for another hour or so, until the sun just barely leaves its seat at the peak of the sky, when I see Mẹ and Bác Bảy lean forward. The man who's taking us has just said something, but I can't catch it. But I notice Mẹ tensing, and that's all it takes for my heart to quicken. *We're near*, says the shadow, voice as small and clear as the mosquitos. I turn around, but there's no one there.

The xe lôi slows down just a bit, and we all shift in our seat. The jungle thins out—we're almost there.

The destination is something that tugs at me and repels me. It haunts me and eludes me. And it looms over me now as we hop off the cart one by one. I stumble, my legs jellied after hours of sitting still. The dirt quickly coats my legs and sandals until I'm as orange as the ground.

A stifling quiet meets the humid air as we face the tall fence. The shadow waves at me from behind the fence. I feel so exhausted all of a sudden and dread weighs down on my shoulders, the expectation of a long journey, even though we've already completed it.

Mẹ takes my hand in hers, I link fingers with my sister, and one by one we form a chain. It's a measly link of 6 people, but it lifts my spirits just a little, just enough to look at the fence. I take a breath.

We have reached our destination.

The gate opens.

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"We have reached our destination," a voice crackles from above. I look away from the small window and breathe a sigh of relief. The ever-present nausea had stuck itself in my stomach and throat for most of the seventeen hours in the small, claustrophobic cabin, and I'm glad to escape it. I take another peek from the window, and see hazy, yellow air, and the concrete

field of the airstrip. It looks just like LAX and yet, I see greener mountains in the distance, where I would see skyscrapers in LA, and my heart quickens. The allure of fresh air and new experiences makes me want to run right out of my seat.

I turn to my mom and ask, “Can we go now?” She looks just as travel-weary as I feel, but there’s something more and different from my own excitement. She looks sad, but in a way that reminds me of home. And yet, it’s something unfamiliar to me: Mè is never sad, only happy or angry or calm.

Slowly, slowly, we make our way out of the plane. I clutch my sweater in one grasp, and my mother’s hand in the other. The moment I step off the plane onto the platform, the heat hits me all at once, and for a moment I can’t breath—but then we enter again into an air-conditioned corridor, and I suck in the cool air.

While my parents talk to official-looking people, handing them our passports and other papers I will never see nor care to, I feel a sense of déjà-vu. The sounds are both strange and familiar—the voices speak a language from home, and the accents—the lilt and drawl of vowels, the raucous volume—they’re the same as mine, and even more so my parents, and they are sounds that my ears pick up quickly. It’s all at once a comforting and unnerving experience to hear your language spoken all around, loud and proud instead of among English voices, or through your clumsy Americanized tongue.

We’re ushered along the veins of the airport until I see the giant glass front. My mother pushes us out the automatic door. The oppressive heat greets me once more, and again, I’m robbed of my breath. But then I notice the crowds of people surrounding us, and it confuses me—why are there so many people? I feel both exposed and elated, like they’re all here for us, even though I know that’s not the case.

Then I hear my mother shout out, and her cry is one of happiness, not the wry happiness with her friends or the anger from her lectures, but one that makes her sound younger. I turn in the direction. A man waves at us from the van, short with thinning hair and dark skin and a mischievous smile on his face. He looks like the black and white picture on our altar at home, but I hear Mẹ say his name, and I know that it's my uncle. And besides, the man on the altar looked way more serious.

My mother tells me to cross my arms and greet him, and then we're piled into the van. Before I know it, the van door slams shut and we're driving into Ho Chi Minh City.

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When I see where he eats, where he sleeps, where he exists here—I miss my home. Both the shanty we live in now, but more so our home from before *this*. When I fell asleep with a soft pillow in my arms instead of my constant hunger. When I could smile and laugh freely. When my family was all together. When we were whole.

We sit in the office for what seems like hours, while Mẹ and Bác Bảy talk to men in uniform and sit down and fill forms and then go talk to them some more. Mẹ looks more and more upset with each conversation, but somehow she holds it in, even though I see that she's just as annoyed as we feel.

And then we hear steps from behind the door. Mẹ stands up and I gaze at the sounds of feet. The shadow nudges me and whispers, *We're here*.

Everyone looks as a stranger steps through the threshold. He is haggard, skeletal, wholly unfamiliar. Shock and sorrow broil in my stomach—*where is he?*—but then the man smiles and I see him clearly now.

We clamor around and my mother leads him back to our chairs.

I let myself say the word: BỐ.

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Mẹ loves talking just as much as she loves listening to Bryan Adams, which is to say, it's all she does. And she never misses an opportunity to lecture us on her life back in Vietnam. My friends and classmates all here "Think of the children in Africa" at the dining table, but I only hear "When I was your age..." She tells us this with vigor, like she just barely has the time to form the words before they come jumping out of her mouth, and soon I am bombarded with memories and the past and the constant, constant, lecturing. And with all of those lectures lingers my grandfather, my Ông Ngoại. Although Mẹ commands these lessons with the utmost authority, she always starts and ends with, "That's how your Ông Ngoại taught me, and that's how I'll teach you."

So he's always been around all my life, even though I've never met him. His lessons follow us, his face looks down at us from the altar, and his memory stays with us through my mother. And soon, I grow to know him. But there's that disconnect always, the fact that I'll never be able to have a conversation with him in my broken and stilted Vietnamese, that I'll never be handed lì xì by him. The only time we meet him is in San Jose, through a wall of stone and time.

When I grew older and more curious about the war, I began asking more about my mother's life in Vietnam, and eventually about my grandfather. My mother poured out stories for us, but they weren't presented in the same rigour and fire that she issues out lectures. They're slower, tinged with sorrow, and most of all, fed to me in snippets. Even to this day, I never got the complete story. I ask her now and I still learn new things while I wade in the pool of familiar words.

I learned that he was a lieutenant in the Air Force and that he fixed any and every plane. I learned that he hated gambling and doted on my mother and her siblings in his own quiet and stoic way. I learned that he refused to let my mother learn guitar, so she snuck out and learned it anyway. I learned that he let his last chance of escaping the war go because of a lie and because he loved his family too much to see them separated.

I learned all this, but I will never hear him tell me this directly.

But he lives on in our lessons. I tidy my room with him in mind. I see my mother and I see him, and I guess that's the best thing we have.

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Mẹ shuts the door quietly. The warmth, my siblings, the comforting sounds of home leave with her. They'll arrive in San Jose within the week for the funeral.

For a moment I just stand there, looking at the shut slab of metal. I feel strangely hollowed out, I feel nothing, not even the piercing hunger or... No, don't think about that.

And then my stomach pangs again and I turn and sit back down in front of the pile of rice. I try to pick out the rocks and dirt and rotten grains, but the greys and blacks melt together with the whites and then with everything else around me, and I realize my eyes are wet and full.

I wipe at my face, my hands covering my eyes for a second. When I lower my hand, the shadow sits cross legged across from the pile. He smiles at me and waves, and for a split second I recognize him, and my heart breaks and my eyes can't help drinking up the sight. The vision of him floods with the tears. A name, a word, slips from my lips, but before I can stop myself, I blink. Then all that sits across from me is the concrete wall.

I go back to the rice.

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We get out of the car. The wind whips around us, and it's shockingly cold. Although it's also in California, San Jose is like another world from Long Beach. The grassy hills are visible even on the ever-present highway, and the air seems crisper here.

My father helps Bà Ngoại out of the car. The adults are quiet, and it weighs down on us. I feel all at once afraid and sad. Although I know why we're here, it hadn't hit me until I stepped down. My sister and brother grumble about the cold, hovering close together. They always said I was the warmest. We stand around while my parents dig around the car for things. I feel useless watching them hurry about. So I offer to carry the incense for my father, but he refuses. I offer to carry the flowers for my mother, but she refuses. I offer to help Bà Ngoại walk across the grass. She takes my arm.

We make our way past a dozen tombstones. I read names and dates, but they fall away from memory just as quickly as they entered. We don't walk very far, although Bà Ngoại can only walk so fast. So we take step after step, while my parents are already clearing the grass and lighting the incense and my siblings are standing to the side, bouncing in their shoes. When we finally arrive, my father hands me two sticks of incense. The acrid and earthy smoke hits me as I hold it awkwardly between my fingers. We say, in Vietnamese, the Lord's prayer, Hail Mary, Glory be, and then a prayer I don't know but am familiar with. It's a prayer of mourning, of memorial, and its chanting rhythms lull me into a stupor.

I look around at our group: all adults keep their eyes down, towards the tombstone, while my sister and brother's eyes wander as languidly as mine. Suddenly I catch sight of a shadow from behind my mother's shoulder.

At first the form is murky, dark. Then I blink and the man on the altar, the man on the tombstone stares back at me. I've been scared witless by my father's and uncle's ghost stories and even keep a vow never to touch horror of any kind.

But this doesn't feel like a ghost. I look at him and I feel at ease. I know him but I've never met him.

My mother, father, and grandmother continue their chanting prayers, now faded into the background with the rushing of highway cars.

The shadow smiles at me and waves.

I wave back.