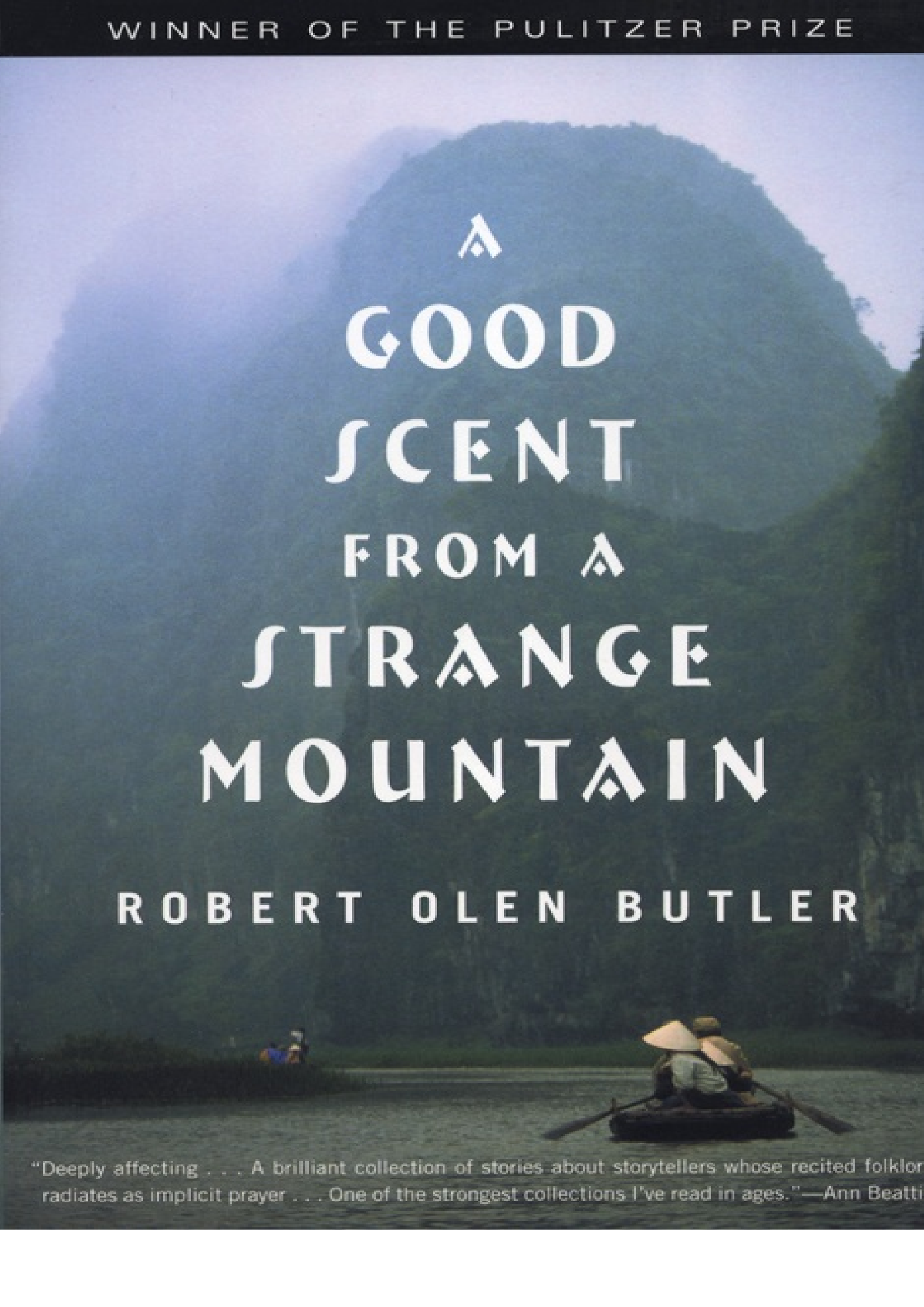


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From Where You Dream

A GOOD
SCENT
FROM A
STRANGE
MOUNTAIN

STORIES BY

ROBERT
OLEN
BUTLER



GROVE PRESS
New York

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OPEN ARMS

I have no hatred in me. I'm almost certain of that. I fought for my country long enough to lose my wife to another man, a cripple. This was because even though I was alive, I was dead to her, being far away. Perhaps it bothers me a little that his deformity was something he was born with and not earned in the war. But even that doesn't matter. In the end, my country itself was lost and I am no longer there and the two of them are surely suffering, from what I read in the papers about life in a unified Vietnam. They mean nothing to me, really. It seems strange even to mention them like this, and it is stranger still to speak of them before I speak of the man who suffered the most complicated feelings I could imagine. It is he who makes me feel sometimes that I am sitting with my legs crossed in an attitude of peace and with an acceptance of all that I've been taught about the suffering that comes from desire.

There are others I could hate. But I feel sorry for my enemies and the enemies of my country. I live on South Mary Poppins Drive in Gretna, Louisiana, and since I speak perfect English, I am influential with the others who live here, the West bank Vietnamese. We are all of us from South Vietnam. If you go across the bridge and into New Orleans and you take the interstate north and then turn on a highway named after a chef, you will come to the place called Versailles. There you will find the Vietnamese who are originally from the North. They are Catholics in Versailles. I am a Buddhist. But what I know now about things, I learned from a communist one dark evening in the province of Phú Thọ in the Republic of South Vietnam.

I was working as an interpreter for the Australians in their base camp near Núi Đất. The Australians were different from the Americans when they made a camp. The Americans cleared the land, cut it down and plowed it and leveled it and strung their barbed wire and put up their tin hootches. The Australians put up tents. They lived under canvas with wooden floors and they didn't cut down the trees. They raised their tents under the trees and you could hear the birds above you when you woke in the morning, and I could think of home that way. My village was far away, up-country, near Pleiku, but my wife was still my wife at that time. I could lie in a tent under the trees and think of her and the night would last until I was in the mess hall and I was faced with eggs and curried sausages and beans for breakfast.

The Australians made a good camp, but I could not understand their food, especially at the start of the day. The morning I met Đặng Văn Thập, I first saw him across the mess hall staring at a tray full of this food. He had the commanding officer at one elbow and the executive officer at his other, so I knew he was important, and I looked at Thập closely. His skin was dark, basic peasant blood like mine and he wore a sport shirt of green and blue plaid. He could be anybody on a motor scooter in Saigon hustling for xích-lô fares in Vũng Tàu. But I knew there was something special about him right away.

His hair was wildly fanned on his head, the product of VC field-barbering, but there was something else about him that gave him away. He sat between these two Australian officers who were nearly head taller, and he was hunched forward a little bit. But he seemed enormous, somehow. The people in our village believe in ghosts. Many people in Vietnam have this belief. And sometimes a ghost will appear in human form and then vanish. When that happens and you think back on the encounter, you realize that all along you felt like you were near something enormous, like if you came upon a mountain in the dark and could not see it but knew it was there. I had something of that feeling as

looked at Thập for the first time. Not that I believed he was a ghost. But I knew he was much bigger than the body he was in as he stared at the curried sausages.

Then there was a stir to my left, someone sitting down, but I didn't look right away because Thập held me. "You'll have your chance with him, mate," a voice said in a loud whisper, very near my ear. I turned and it was Captain Townsend, the intelligence officer. His mustache, waxed and twirled to two sharp points, twitched as it usually did when he and I were in the midst of an interrogation and he was getting especially interested in what he heard. But it was Thập now causing the twitch. Townsend's eyes had slid away from me and back across the mess hall, and I followed his gaze. Another Vietnamese was arriving with a tray, an ARVN major, and the C.O. slid over and let the new man sit next to Thập. The major said a few words to Thập and Thập made some sort of answer and the major spoke to the C.O.

"He's our new bushman scout," Townsend said. "The major there is heading back to division after breakfast and then we can talk to him."

I'd heard that a new scout was coming in, but he would be working mostly with the units of interdicting the infiltration routes and so I hadn't given him much thought. Townsend was fumbling around for something and I glanced over. He was pulling a slip of paper out of his pocket. He read the name off the paper, but he butchered the tones and I had no idea what he was saying. I took the paper from him and read Thập's name. Townsend said, "They tell me he's a real smart little bastard. Political cadre. Before that he was a sapper. Brains and a killer, too. Hope this conversion of his is for real."

I looked up and it was the ARVN major who was doing all the talking. He was in fatigues that were so starched and crisp they could sit there all by themselves, and his hair was slicked into careful shape and rose over his forehead in a pompadour the shape of the front fender on the elegant old Citroën sedans you saw around Saigon. Thập had sat back in his chair now and he was watching the major talk and if I was the major I'd feel very nervous, because the man beside him had the mountain shadow and the steady look of the ghost of somebody his grandfather had cheated or cuckolded or murdered fifty years ago and he was back to take him.

It wasn't until the next day that Captain Townsend dropped Thập's file into the center of my desk. The desk was spread with a dozen photographs, different angles on two dead woodcutters that an Australian patrol had shot yesterday. The woodcutters had been in a restricted area, and when they ran they were killed. The photos were taken after the two had been laid out in their cart, their arms sprawled, their legs angled like they were leaping up and clicking their heels. The fall of Thập's file scattered the photos, fluttered them away. Townsend said, "Look this over right away, mate. We'll have him here in an hour."

The government program that allowed a longtime, hard-core Viet Cong like Thập to switch sides so easily had a stiff name in Vietnamese but it came to be known as "Open Arms." An hour later, when Thập came through the door with Townsend, he filled the room and looked at me once, knowing everything about me that he wished, and the idea of our opening our arms to him, exposing our chests, our hearts, truly frightened me. In my village you ran from a ghost because if he wants you, he can reach into that chest of yours and pull out not only your heart but your soul as well.

I knew the facts about Thập from the file, but I wondered what he would say about some of the things I'd just read. The things about his life, about the terrible act that turned him away from the cause he'd been fighting for. But Townsend grilled him, through me, for an hour first. He asked him all the things an intelligence captain would be expected to ask, even though the file already had the

answers to these questions as well. The division interrogation had already learned all that Thập knew about the locations and strengths of the VC units in our area, the names of shadow government cadres in the villages, things like that. But Thập patiently repeated his answers, smoking one Chesterfield cigarette after another, careful about keeping his ash from falling on the floor, never really looking at either of us, not in the eye, only occasionally at our hands, a quick glance, like he expected us to suddenly be holding a weapon, and he seemed very small now, no less smart and skilled in killing, but a man, at last, in my eyes.

So when Captain Townsend was through, he gave me a nod and, as we'd arranged, he stepped out for me to chat with Thập informally. Townsend figured that Thập might feel more comfortable talking with his countryman one on one. I had my doubts about that. Still, I was interested in this man, though not for the reasons Townsend was. At that moment I didn't care about the tactical intelligence my boss wanted, and so even before he was out of the room I intended to ignore it. But I felt no guilt. He had all he needed already.

As soon as the Australian was gone, Thập lifted his face high for the first time and blew a puff of smoke toward the ceiling. This stopped me cold, like he'd just sprung an ambush from the undergrowth where he'd been crouching very low. He did not look at me. He watched the smoke rise and he waited, his face placid. Finally I felt my voice would come out steady and I said, "We are from the same region. I am from Pleiku Province." The file said that Thập was from Kontum, the neighboring province north, bordering both Cambodia and Laos. He said nothing, though he lowered his face a little. He looked straight ahead and took another drag on his cigarette, a long one, the ash lengthening visibly, doubling in size, as he drew the smoke in.

I knew from the file the sadness he was bearing, but I wanted to make him show it to me, speak it. I knew I should talk with him indirectly, at least for a time. But I could only think of the crucial approach, and to my shame, I took it. I said, "Do you have family there?"

His face turned to me now, and I could not draw a breath. I thought for a moment that my first impression of him had been correct. He was a ghost and this was the moment he would carry me away with him. My breath was gone, never to return. But he did not dissolve into the air. His eyes fixed on me and then they went down to the file on the desk, as if to say that I asked what I already knew. He had been sent to Phu'óc Tuy Province to indoctrinate the Villagers. He was a master, our other sources said, of explaining the communist vision of the world to the woodcutters and fishermen and rice farmers. And meanwhile, in Kontum, the tactics had changed, as they always do, and three months ago the VC made a lesson out of a little village that had a chief with a taste for American consumer goods and information to trade for them. This time the lesson was severe and the ones who did not run were all killed. Thập's wife and two children expected to be safe because someone was supposed to know whose family they were. They stayed and they were murdered by the VC and Thập made a choice.

His eyes were still on the file and my breath had come back to me and I said, "Yes, I know."

He turned away again and he stared at the cigarette, watched the curl of smoke without drawing it into him. I said, "But isn't that just the war? I thought you were a believer."

"I still am," he said and then he looked at me and smiled faintly, but the smile was only for himself like he knew what I was thinking. And he did. "This is nothing new," he said. "I confessed to the same thing at your division headquarters. I believe in the government caring for all the people, the poor before the rich. I believe in the state of personal purity that makes this possible. But I finally came to believe that the government these men from the north want to set up can't be controlled by the very people it's supposed to serve."

“And what do you think of these people you’ve joined to fight with now?” I said.

He took a last drag on his cigarette and then leaned forward to stub it out in an ashtray at the corner of my desk. He sat back and folded his hands in his lap and his face grew still, his mouth drew down in a placid seriousness. “I understand them,” he said. “The Americans, too. I learned about their history. What they believe is good.”

I admit that my first impulse at this was to challenge him. He didn’t know anything about the history of Western democracy until after he’d left the communists. They killed his wife and his children and he wanted to get them. But I knew that what he said was also true. He was a believer. I could see his Buddhist upbringing in him. The communists could appeal to that. They couldn’t touch the Catholics, but the Buddhists who didn’t believe in all the mysticism were well prepared for communism. The communists were full of right views, right intentions, right speech, and all that. And Buddha’s second Truth, about the thirst of the passions being the big trap, the communists were really strict about that, real prudes. If a VC got caught by his superiors with a pinup, just a girl in a bathing suit even, he’d be in very deep trouble.

That thing Thập said about personal purity. After it sank in a little bit, it pissed me off. But this is a weakness of my own, I guess, though at times I can’t quite see it as a weakness. I’m not that good a Buddhist. I live in America and things just don’t look the way my mother and my grandmother explained them to me. But Thập suddenly seemed a little too smug. And I wasn’t frightened by him anymore. He was a communist prude and I even had trouble figuring out how he’d brought himself to make a couple of kids. Then, to my shame, I said, “You miss being with your wife, do you?” What I almost said was, “Do you miss sleeping with your wife?” but I wasn’t quite that heartless, even with this smug true believer who until very recently had been a bitter enemy of my country.

Changing my question as I did, even as I spoke it, I thought I would never get the answer to what I really wanted to know. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I felt a flush spread from under my chin and up my face. It was only a minor attack of shame until I saw what was happening before me. I suppose it was the suddenness of this question, its unexpectedness, that caught him off guard. It’s an old interrogation trick. But Thập’s hands rose gently from his lap and I knew they were remembering her. It all happened in a few seconds and the hands simply lifted up briefly, but I knew without any doubt that his palms, his fingertips, were stunned by the memory of touching her. Then the hands returned to his lap and he said in a low voice, “Of course I miss her.”

I asked him no more questions, and after he was gone, my own hands, lying on the desktop, grew restless, rose and then hid in my lap and burned with their own soft memories. I still had a wife and she had not been my wife for long before I’d had to leave her. I knew that Thập was no ghost but a man and he loved his wife and desired her as I loved and desired mine and that was within the bounds of his purity. He was a man, but I wished from then on only to stay far away from him. The infant boys had their own interpreter and I wouldn’t have to deal with Thập and I was very glad for that.

Less than a week later, however, I saw him again. It was on a Sunday. Early that morning there’d been some contact out in the Long Khánh Mountains just to the east of us. First there was the popping of small arms for a few minutes and then a long roar, the mini-guns on the Cobras as they swooped in and then there was silence.

In the afternoon the enlisted men played cricket and I sat beneath a tree with my eyes on them but not really following this strange game, just feeling the press of the tree’s shade and listening to the thump of the ball on the bat and the smatterings of applause, and I let the breeze bring me a vision of my wife wearing her áo dài, the long silk panels fluttering, as if lifted by this very breeze, as if she

was nearby, waiting for me. And a few times as I sat there, I thought of Thâp. Maybe it was my wife who brought him to me, the link of our yearning hands. But it wasn't until the evening that I actually saw him.

It was in the officers' club. Sometimes they had a film to show and this was one of the nights. Captain Townsend got me there early to help him move the wicker chairs around to face the big black sheet they'd put up at one end for a screen. Townsend wouldn't tell me what the film was. When I asked him, he just winked and said, "You'll like it, mate," and I figured it was another of the Norman Wisdom films. This little man, Wisdom, was forever being knocked down and tormented by a world of people bigger than him. Townsend knew I didn't like these films, and so I decided that was what the wink was all about.

Thâp came in with a couple of the infantry officers and I was sorry to see that their interpretation wasn't with them. I couldn't understand why they had him here. I guess they were trying to make him feel welcome, a part of their world. I still think that. They just didn't understand what sort of man he was. They clapped him on the back and pointed to the screen and the projector, and they tried their own few words of Vietnamese with him and some of that baby talk, the pidgin English that sounded so ridiculous to me, even with English being my second language. I didn't think Thâp would like Norman Wisdom either. Thâp and I were both little men.

But when he came in, the thing I was most concerned about was that since I was the only other Vietnamese in the club, Thâp would seek me out for help. But he didn't. He glanced at me once and that was it. The two infantry officers took him up to the front row and sat him between them, and when Thâp was settled, my attention shifted enough that I finally realized that something was going on here out of the ordinary. The Aussies were unusually boisterous, poking at one another and laughing, and one of them yelled to Townsend, "You intelligence boys have to smuggle this stuff in?"

Townsend laughed and said, "It was too bloody hot even for us, mate."

I didn't know what he was talking about and I was evidently staring at Captain Townsend with my confusion clear on my face. He looked at me and then put his arm around my shoulders. "You'll see," he said. "It's for all us boys who are missing our little ladies." He nodded me toward the chairs and I went and sat a couple of rows behind Thâp and a little to his left. I could see only the back of his head, the spray of his hair, his deep brown neck, the collar of his plaid shirt. He raised his face to the screen and the lights went out and the films began.

There were nine of them, each lasting about twenty minutes. The first began without any credits. A man was walking along a country path. He was a large, blond-haired man, Swedish I later learned though at the time it simply struck me that this wasn't the sort of man who would be in a Norman Wisdom movie. He was dressed in tight blue jeans and a flannel shirt that was unbuttoned, exposing his bare chest. I had never seen an Englishman dressed like that. Or an Australian either. And Norman Wisdom's movies were all in black and white. This one was in grainy color and the camera was quaking just a little bit and then I realized that all I was hearing were the sounds of the projector clicking away and the men beginning to laugh. There was no soundtrack on this film. Someone shouted something that I didn't catch, then someone else. I thought at first that there'd been a mistake. This was the wrong film and the men were telling Townsend to stop the show, put on little Norman Wisdom. But then the camera turned to a young woman standing by a fence with cows in the background and she was wearing shorts that were cut high up into her crotch and she shook her long hair and the Australians whooped. The camera returned to the man and he was clearly agitated and the club filled with cries that I could understand now: Go for her, mate; put it to her, mate; get on with it.

I glanced at Thập and his face was lifted to the screen, but of course he did not know what was about to happen. I looked up, too, and the man and woman were talking with each other and then they kissed. Not for long. The woman pulled back and knelt down before the man and she unsnapped and unzipped his blue jeans and she pulled them down and he still had his underpants on. I discovered, little to my surprise, that I could not breathe very well and I felt weak in my arms. I had never seen a film like this, though I'd heard things about them. But there was a moment, when the man remained clad in his underpants, that I thought there was still some boundary here, that this was not a true example of the films I'd heard about.

But the woman squeezed at him there, playfully, smiling, like this was wonderful fun for her, and then she stripped off his underpants. His body was ready for her and that was very clear there, right on the screen, and she seemed truly happy about this and she brought her face near to this part of him and I drew in a sudden breath as she did a thing that I had never even asked my wife to do, though seeing her now made me weak with desire for her.

And then I looked at Thập. It was simply a reflex. I still had not put together what was happening at this club and what Thập was and what had happened to him in his life and what he believed. I looked to him and his face was still lifted; he was watching, and I glanced up and the woman's eyes lifted too; she looked at the man even as she did this for him, and I returned to Thập and now his face was coming down, very slowly. His head bowed low and it remained bowed and I watched him for as long as I could.

I must admit, to my shame, that it was not very long. I was distracted. I said before, speaking of Thập's "personal purity," that an indifference to this notion is a weakness of mine. I have never remarried and I must admit that it pleases me to look at the pictures in some of the magazines easily available in America. The women are so naked I feel I know them very well and the looks on their faces are usually so pleasant that they seem somehow willing for me to know them this way—me personally. It's a childish fantasy, I realize, hardly the right intentions, and I suppose someday this little desire will lead to unhappiness. But I am susceptible to that. And on that dark night, in that Australian tent in the province of Phú ó'c Tuy, I was filled with desire, and I watched all nine films, desiring my wife—mostly her, I think—but at times, too, briefly desiring one of these long-haired women who took such pleasure in the passing farmer, the sailor on the town, the delivery man, even the elderly and rather small doctor.

Three more times I looked at Thập. The first time, his head was still bowed. The second time, I was, to my surprise, looking at the screen. He was watching as the camera settled on the face of a dark-haired woman who was being made love to in the only way I had ever known to do it, and for some time all we could see was her face, turned a little to the side, jarred again and again, her eyes closed. But on her face was a smile, quiet, full of love, but a little sad, like she knew her man would soon have to leave her. I know I was reading this into her from my own life. She was a Swedish prostitute making a pornographic movie, and the smile was nothing of this sort. It was fake. And I know that it was the same with all the smiles in the magazines. The smiles of these naked women are the smiles of money, of fame, of a hope to break into movies or buy some cocaine or whatever. But on that night in the Australian tent, Thập and I looked at this woman's face and I know what I felt and something told me that Thập was feeling that, too. He watched for a long time, his face lifted, his hands, I know, yearning.

He was still watching as I turned my own face back to the screen. There were two more films after that, and I viewed them carefully. But my mind was now on Thập. I knew that a few rows in front

me he was suffering. This man had been my sworn enemy till a week ago. The others in this room had been my friends. But Thập was my countryman in some deeper way. And it had nothing to do with his being Vietnamese, either. I knew what was happening inside him. He was desiring his wife, just as I was desiring mine. Except on that night I thought I would one day be with my wife again, and his was newly dead.

But if that was all of it, I don't think he would have made this impression on me that does not leave. These films he saw sucked at his desire, brought the feel of his wife to him, made his hands rise before him. He was a man, after all. I watched the films till there were no more and I felt bad for Thập, his wanting a woman, wanting his wife, his being drawn by that very yearning to a vision of her body in ashes now and bits of bone. The third time I looked at him, his head was bowed again and it probably remained bowed. It was bowed still when the lights went on and Captain Townsend was called to the front of the room and was hailed for his show with wild applause and cheers.

And as we all shuffled out of the tent I saw Thập's face briefly, between his two Australian mates and the two infantry officers who had made him feel like he was really part of the gang. Thập's face told me how it would all end. His eyes were wildly restless, like he'd been on a sapper mission and a flare had just gone off and he suddenly found himself here in the midst of his enemy.

That night he went to a tent and killed one of the two infantry officers, the one, no doubt, who had insisted on his coming to the club. Then Thập killed himself, a bullet in his brain. It was lucky for Captain Townsend that Thập didn't understand the cheers at the end or the captain might have been chosen instead of the infantry officer. Thập's desire for his wife had made him very unhappy. But it alone did not drive him to his final act. That was a result of a history lesson. Thập was a true believer, and that night he felt that he had suddenly understood the democracies he was trying to believe in. He felt that the communists whom he had rightly broken with, who had killed his wife and shown him their own fatal flaw, nevertheless had been right about all the rest of us. The fact that the impurity of the West had touched Thập directly, had made him feel something strongly for his dead wife, had only made things worse. He'd had no choice.

And as for myself, I live my life in the United States of America. I work in a bank. I have my own apartment with my own furniture and I have saved more money than I expect ever to need, if I can keep my job. And there's no worry about that. It's a big bank and they like me there. I can talk to the Vietnamese customers, and they think I'm a good worker beyond that. I read the newspapers. I subscribe to several magazines, and in one of them beautiful women smile at me each month. I no longer think of my wife. I go to the movies. I own a VCR and at last I saw the movie "Mary Poppins". The street I live on is one of four named after Mary Poppins in our neighborhood. This is true. You can look it up on any street map.

The Vietnamese on the Westbank do not like the Vietnamese in Versailles. The ones on the Westbank point out that for the ones in Versailles, freedom only means the freedom to make money. They are cold people, driving people, Northerners. The Southerners say that for them, freedom means the freedom to think, to enjoy life. The Vietnamese in Versailles do not like the Southerners. We are lazy people, to them. Unfocused. Greedy but not capable of working hard together for what we want. They say that they are the ones who understand America and how to succeed here. There are many of the Westbank and in Versailles who are full of hatred.

I say that desire can lead to unhappiness, and so can a strong belief. I can sit for long hours from the late afternoon and into the darkness of night and I do not feel compelled to watch anything or hear anything or do anything. I can think about Thập and I can fold my hands together and at those times

there is no hatred at all within me.

MR. GREEN

I am a Catholic, the daughter of a Catholic mother and father, and I do not believe in the worship of my ancestors, especially in the form of a parrot. My father's parents died when he was very young and he became a Catholic in an orphanage run by nuns in Hanoi. My mother's mother was a Catholic but her father was not and, like many Vietnamese, he was a believer in what Confucius taught about ancestors. I remember him taking me by the hand while my parents and my grandmother were sitting under a banana tree in the yard and he said, "Let's go talk with Mr. Green." He led me into the house and he touched his lips with his forefinger to tell me that this was a secret. Mr. Green was my grandfather's parrot and I loved talking to him, but we passed Mr. Green's roost in the front room. Mr. Green said, "Hello, kind sir," but we didn't even answer him.

My grandfather took me to the back of his house, to a room that my mother had said was private that she had yanked me away from when I once had tried to look. It had a bead curtain at the door and we passed through it and the beads rustled like tall grass. The room was dim, lit by candles, and smelled of incense, and my grandfather stood me before a little shrine with flowers and a smoking incense bowl and two brass candlesticks and between them a photo of a man in a Chinese mandarin hat. "That's my father," he said, nodding toward the photo. "He lives here." Then he let go of my hand and touched my shoulder. "Say a prayer for my father." The face in the photo was tilted a little to the side and was smiling faintly, like he'd asked me a question and he was waiting for an answer that he expected to like. I knelt before the shrine as I did at Mass and I said the only prayer I knew by heart. The Lord's Prayer.

But as I prayed, I was conscious of my grandfather. I even peeked at him as he stepped to the door and parted the beads and looked toward the front of the house. Then he returned and stood beside me and I finished my prayer as I listened to the beads rustling into silence behind us. When I said "Amen" aloud, my grandfather knelt beside me and leaned near and whispered, "Your father is doing a terrible thing. If he must be a Catholic, that's one thing. But he has left the spirits of his ancestors to wander for eternity in loneliness." It was hard for me to believe that my father was doing something as terrible as this, but it was harder for me to believe that my grandfather, who was even older than my father, could be wrong.

My grandfather explained about the spirit world, how the souls of our ancestors continue to need love and attention and devotion. Given these things, they will share in our lives and they will bless us and even warn us about disasters in our dreams. But if we neglect the souls of our ancestors, they will become lost and lonely and will wander around in the kingdom of the dead no better off than a warrior killed by his enemy and left unburied in a rice paddy to be eaten by black birds of prey.

When my grandfather told me about the birds plucking out the eyes of the dead and about the possibility of our own ancestors, our own family, suffering just like that if we ignore them, I said "Don't worry, Grandfather, I will always say prayers for you and make offerings for you, even if I'm not Catholic."

I thought this would please my grandfather, but he just shook his head sharply, like he was mad at me, and he said, "Not possible."

"I can," I said.

Then he looked at me and I guess he realized that he'd spoken harshly. He tilted his head slightly and ~~smiled a little smile—just like his father in the picture—but what he said wasn't something~~ smile about. "You are a girl," he said. "So it's not possible for you to do it alone. Only a son can oversee the worship of his ancestors."

I felt a strange thing inside me, a recoiling, like I'd stepped barefoot on a slug, but how can you recoil from your own body? And so I began to cry. My grandfather patted me and kissed me and said it was all right, but it wasn't all right for me. I wanted to protect my grandfather's soul, but it wasn't in my power. I was a girl. We waited together before the shrine and when I'd stopped crying, we went back to the front room and my grandfather bowed to his parrot and said, "Hello, kind sir," and Mr. Green said, "Hello, kind sir," and even though I loved the parrot, I would not speak to him that day because he was a boy and I wasn't.

This was in our town, which was on the bank of the Red River just south of Hanoi. We left that town not long after. I was seven years old and I remember hearing my grandfather arguing with my parents. I was sleeping on a mat at the back of our house and I woke up and I heard voices and my grandfather said, "Not possible." The words chilled me, but then I listened more closely and I knew they were discussing the trip we were about to go on. Everyone was very frightened and excited. There were many families in our little town who were planning to leave. They had even taken the bell out of the church tower to carry with them. We were all Catholics. But Grandfather did not have the concerns of the Catholics. He was concerned about the spirits of his ancestors. This was the place where they were born and died and were buried. He was afraid that they would not make the trip. "What then?" he cried. And later he spoke of the people of the South and how they would hate us, being from the North. "What then?" he said.

Mr. Green says that, too. "What then?" he has cried to me a thousand times, ten thousand times, in the past sixteen years. Parrots can live for a hundred years. And though I could not protect my dear grandfather's soul, I could take care of his parrot. When my grandfather died in Saigon in 1972, I made sure that Mr. Green came to me. I was twenty-four then and newly married and I still loved Mr. Green. He would sit on my shoulder and take the top of my ear in his beak, a beak that could crush the hardest shell, and he would hold my ear with the greatest gentleness and touch me with his tongue.

I have brought Mr. Green with me to the United States of America, and in the long summers here in New Orleans and in the warm springs and falls and even in many days of our mild winters, he sits on my screened-in back porch, near the door, and he speaks in the voice of my grandfather. When he wants to get onto my shoulder and go with me into the community garden, he says, "What then?" And when I first come to him in the morning, he says, "Hello, kind sir."

He loves me. That is, I am the only person who can go near him without his attempting to draw blood. But he loved my grandfather before me, and there are times when he seems to hold the spirit of my grandfather and all his knowledge. Mr. Green sits on my shoulder and presses close to my head and he repeats the words that he has heard from my husband and my children. My children even teach him English words. He says all these things, but without any feeling. The Vietnamese words of my grandfather, however, come out powerfully, like someone very strong is inside him. And whenever he speaks with my grandfather's voice, Mr. Green's eyes dilate and contract over and over, which is the parrot's display of happiness. Yesterday I tried to give him some drops that the veterinarian had prescribed for him and Mr. Green said, "Not possible," and even though he is sick, his eyes showed how pleased he was to defy me.

When we all lived in Saigon at last, my grandfather discovered the bird market on Ham Nghi Street

and he would take me there. Actually, in the street market of Ham Nghi there were animals of all kinds—~~dogs and monkeys and rabbits and turtles and even wildcats~~. But when my grandfather took my hand and said to me, “Come, little one,” and we walked down Trần Hưng Đạo, where our house was, and we came to Hâm Nghi, he always took me to the place with the birds.

The canaries were the most loved by everyone who came to the market, and my grandfather sang with them. They all hopped to the side of their cages that was closest to my grandfather and he whistled and hummed and even sang words, songs from the North that he sang quite low, so that only the birds could hear. He did not want the people of Saigon to realize he was from the North. And the canaries all opened their mouths and the air filled with their sounds, their throats ruffling and puffing and I looked at my grandfather’s throat to see if it moved the way the throats of these birds moved. It did not move at all. His skin was slack there, and in all the times I saw him charm the birds, I never saw his throat move, like he didn’t really mean the sounds he made. The people all laughed when they saw what he could do and they said that my grandfather was a wizard, but he would just ignore them.

The canaries seemed to be his favorite birds on Hâm Nghi, though he spent time with them all. The dark-plumed ones—the magpies and the blackbirds—were always singing on their own, especially the blackbirds with their orange beaks. My grandfather came near the blackbirds and they were gabbling among themselves and he frowned at them, like they were fools to be content only with their own company. They did not need him to prompt their songs. He growled at them, “You’re just a bunch of old women,” and we moved on to the doves that were big-eyed and quiet and he cooed at them and he told them how pretty they were and we looked at the moorhens, pecking at the bottoms of their cages like chickens, and the cranes with their wonderful necks curling and stretching.

We visited all the birds and my grandfather loved them, and the first time we went to Hâm Nghi, we ended up at the cages crowded with sparrows. He bent near their chattering and I liked these birds very much. They were small and their eyes were bright, and even though the birds were crowded, they were always in motion, hopping and fluffing up and shaking themselves like my vain friends. I was a quiet little girl, but I, too, would sometimes look at myself in a mirror and primp and puff myself up, even as in public I tried to hold myself apart a little bit from the other girls.

I was surprised and delighted that first day when my grandfather motioned to the birdseller and he began to point at sparrows and the merchant reached into the cage and caught one bird after another and he put them all into a cardboard box. My grandfather bought twelve birds and they did not fly because they sat in the box. “Why aren’t they flying?” I asked.

“Their wings are clipped,” my grandfather said.

This was all right with me. They clearly weren’t in any pain and they could still hop and they would never flyaway from me. I wouldn’t even need a cage for my vain little friends.

I’m sure that my grandfather knew what I was thinking. But he said nothing. When we got home, he gave me the box and told me to take the birds to show my mother. I found her on the back stoop slicing vegetables. I showed her the box and she said that Grandfather was wonderful. She set the box down and told me to stay with her, I could help her. I crouched beside her and waited and I could hear the chattering of the sparrows from the box.

We had always kept chickens and ducks and geese. Some of them were pecking around near us even as I crouched there with my mother. I knew that we ate those animals, but for some reason Hâm Nghi seemed like a different place altogether and the sparrows could only be for song and friendship. But finally my mother finished cutting the vegetables and she reached into the box and drew out a sparrow, its feet dangling from the bottom of her fist and its head poking out of the top. I looked at it

face and I knew it was a girl and my mother said, "This is the way it's done," and she fisted her other hand around the sparrow's head and she twisted.

I don't remember how long it took me to get used to this. But I would always drift away when my grandfather went to the sparrow cages on Hâm Nghi. I did not like his face when he bought them. It seemed the same as when he cooed at the doves or sang with the canaries. But I must have decided that it was all part of growing up, of becoming a woman like my mother, for it was she who killed them, after all. And she taught me to do this thing and I wanted to be just like her and I twisted the necks of the sparrows and I plucked their feathers and we roasted them and ate them and my grandfather would take a deep breath after the meal and his eyes would close in pleasure.

There were parrots, too, on Hâm Nghi. They all looked very much like Mr. Green. They were the color of breadfruit leaves with a little yellow on the throat. My grandfather chose one bird each time and cocked his head at it, copying the angle of the bird's head, and my grandfather said, "Hello," or "What's your name?"—things he never said to Mr. Green. The parrots on Hâm Nghi did not talk to my grandfather, though once one of them made a sound like the horns of the little cream and blue taxi that rushed past in the streets. But they never spoke any words, and my grandfather took care to explain to me that these parrots were too recently captured to have learned anything. He said that they were probably not as smart as Mr. Green either, but one day they would speak. Once after explaining this, he leaned near me and motioned to a parrot that was digging for mites under his wing and said, "That bird will still be alive and speaking to someone when you have grown to be an old woman and have died and are buried in the ground."

I am forty-one years old now. I go each day to the garden on the bank of the bayou that runs through this place they call Versailles. It is part of New Orleans, but it is far from the center of the town and is full of Vietnamese who once came from the North. My grandfather never saw the United States. I don't know what he would think. But I come to this garden each day and I crouch in the rich earth and I wear my straw hat and my black pantaloons and I grow lettuce and collards and turnip greens and mint, and my feet, which were once quite beautiful, grow coarse. My family likes the things I bring to the table.

Sometimes Mr. Green comes with me to this garden. He rides on my shoulder and he stays there for a long time, often imitating the cardinals, the sharp ricochet sound they make. Then finally Mr. Green climbs down my arm and drops to the ground and he waddles about in the garden, and when he starts to bite off the stalk of a plant, I cry, "Not possible" to him and he looks at me like he is angry, like I've dared to use his own words, his and his first master's, against him. I always bring twigs with me and I throw him one to chew on so that neither of us has to back down. I have always tried to preserve his dignity. He is at least fifty years older than me. My grandfather was eighteen when he himself caught Mr. Green on a trip to the highlands with his father.

So Mr. Green is quite old and old people sometimes lose their understanding of the things around them. It is not strange, then, that a few weeks ago Mr. Green began to pluck his feathers out. I went to the veterinarian when it became clear what was happening. A great bare spot had appeared on Mr. Green's chest and I had been finding his feathers at the foot of his perch, so I watched him one afternoon through the kitchen window. He sat there on his perch beside the door of the back porch and he pulled twelve feathers from his chest, one at a time, and felt each with his tongue and then dropped it to the floor. I came out onto the porch and he squawked at me, as if he was doing something private and I should have known better than to intrude. I sat down on the porch and he stopped.

I took Mr. Green to the veterinarian and he said that when parrots do this, it may be because the

lack a certain vitamin or mineral. But more often the reason is that the bird is bored. I tried to convince myself that this is what it meant when Mr. Green stopped plucking his feathers as soon as I appeared on the porch. Keep him busy, the doctor said. So I got Mr. Green a new climbing tree with lots of fresh bark to peel and I spent more time with him. I took him to the garden even when he didn't ask to go and I brought my sewing and even some of my cooking—the preparation of the foods—onto the porch, and while I did these household things, I talked to him. It was just idle chatter but there were plenty of words, and often Mr. Green looked at me sharply as I spoke and I could hear how I sounded, chattering away like a blackbird.

But I felt driven to do something for him. He was old and he was sick and I felt I had to do something. My grandfather took six months to die and he lay in a bed on the top floor of our house and Mr. Green was always on a perch beside him. I remember a wind chime at the window. It was made of brass and I've never had a wind chime in my home because when I hear one, another sound always comes with it, the deep rattling cough of my grandfather. I would visit him in his room with my mother and once he called me back as we were about to leave. I came to him and my mother had gone out the door and I could hear her talking rapidly with my grandmother. My grandfather motioned for me to come very near and he twisted his body in the bed. His face crumpled in pain as he did it, but he forced himself because he wanted to tell me a secret. I leaned close to him. "Do you hear the women talking?" he said. He nodded toward the door and he obviously meant my mother and grandmother.

"Yes," I said.

He frowned. "How foolish they sound. Chattering and yammering. All the women sound like that. You don't want to grow up sounding like all these foolish women, do you?"

I did not know how to answer his question. I wanted very much to be like my mother, and when my grandfather said this, I felt the recoiling begin inside me and the tears begin to rise. But my mother called my name at that moment and I did not have to find an answer to my grandfather's question. I turned my back on him and ran across the room without saying a word. As I got to the door, however, Mr. Green cried, "What then?" and it sounded as if he had actually finished my grandfather's thought. You will grow up to be a woman—what then?

And maybe he did finish the thought. Parrots are very smart. Mr. Green in particular. And he knew more than just my grandfather's words. The Buddhists believe in the transmigration of souls, though I suppose it's impossible to transmigrate into some creature that's already alive. But after a few days of angry looks from Mr. Green when I filled the porch with talk that was intended to save his life, he began to cry, "Not possible" over and over until I stopped speaking. Perhaps a male voice would have been acceptable to him, but mine was not, and then Mr. Green began to pluck himself once more, even with me sitting there in the room. I went to him when he began to do this and I said, "Not possible" but he ignored me. He did not even raise his head to look at me but tore away at his feathers, each one making a faint popping sound as it came out. Then the next day he began to cough.

I knew the cough well. But I took Mr. Green to the veterinarian and he told me what I expected, that the cough was not the bird's. This was a sound he was imitating. "Did someone in your household recently have a cold or the flu?" the doctor said.

"It is my grandfather," I said.

On the last visit to my grandfather's room he began to cough. My mother went to him and he waved her away. She backed off and I came forward, wanting to help him. He was sitting up now and hunched over and the cough rattled deep inside his chest and then there was a sudden silence and I drew nearer, thinking that my step forward had actually helped, but my grandfather lifted his face and

his eyes were very sad, and I knew he was disappointed. My brothers were not yet born and I held my breath so that this silence would go on, but the sound raked up from his chest and filled the room again.

This morning I went to the back porch and Mr. Green was pulling out a feather and he did not acknowledge me, even to taunt me by calling me "sir." He dropped the feather and began to pluck another from beneath his left wing. His chest was naked now and the skin looked as slack as my grandfather's throat. I stood before him and I offered my arm for him to come and sit on my shoulder. Yesterday he had said, "Not possible," but today he said nothing. He dropped a feather and leaned over and bit me hard on my arm. I bled. But I did not move my arm and he looked at me. His eyes were steady in their sadness, fully dilated, as if he was considering all of this. I pushed my arm to him again and he knew that he had no choice, so he climbed on, but he did not go to my shoulder.

I held my arm aloft and carried Mr. Green outside. The sun had still not burned the fog off the bayou and I went straight into the garden. My feet were bare, like a child's, and the earth was soft and wet and I crouched there and I quickly reached to Mr. Green and grasped him at his chest, lifted him and caught him with my other hand before he could struggle. His wings were pinned and he was bigger in my hands than I had ever imagined. But a Vietnamese woman is experienced in these things and Mr. Green did not have a chance even to make a sound as I laid him on his side, pinned him with my knee, slid my hands up and wrung his neck.

I pray for the soul of my grandfather. I do not bear him any anger. Sometimes I go to Mass during the week. Versailles has a Catholic church just for the Vietnamese and the Mass is celebrated in our language. I sit near the back and I look at the section where all the old women go. They take the Eucharist every day of their lives and they sit together wearing their traditional dresses and with their hair in scarves rolled up on their heads and I wonder if that is where I will finally end up, in the old women's section at Mass each day. No one in my church will likely live as long as a parrot. But our savior lived only thirty-three years, so maybe it's not important. There were women around Jesus when He died, the two Marys. They couldn't do anything for Him. But neither could the men, who had all run away.

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