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THE REFUGEES

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For all refugees, everywhere

WAR YEARS

Before Mrs. Hoa broke into our lives in the summer of 1983, nothing my mother did surprised me. Her routine was as predictable as the rotation of the earth, beginning with how she rapped on my door every morning, at six, six fifteen, and six thirty, until at last I was awake. When I emerged from my bedroom, she was already dressed, invariably wearing a short-sleeved blouse and skirt of matching pastels. She owned seven such outfits, and if she had on fuchsia, I knew it was Monday. Before we departed, she switched off the lights, checked the burners, tugged on the black iron grills guarding our windows, always in that order, and then, in the car, ordered me to lock my door.

As my father steered the Oldsmobile and I sat in the back reading a comic book, my mother worked on her makeup. By the time we arrived at St. Patrick ten minutes later, she

was finished, the flags of blush on her cheeks blending in with her foundation. Perfume was the last touch, a pump of the spray on either side of her neck. The dizzying scent of gardenias clung to me in Ms. Korman's summer school classroom, where, for seven hours every day, I spoke only English. I liked school, even summer school. It was like being on vacation from home, and at three o'clock, I was always a little disappointed to walk the four blocks to the grocery store my parents owned, the New Saigon Market, where English was hardly ever spoken and Vietnamese was loud.

My mother and father rarely left their posts, the cash registers flanking the entrance of the New Saigon. Customers always crowded the market, one of the few places in San Jose where the Vietnamese could buy the staples and spices of home, jasmine rice and star anise, fish sauce and fire-engineered chilies. People haggled endlessly with my mother over everything, beginning with the rock sugar, which I pretended was yellow kryptonite, and ending with the varieties of meat in the freezer, from pork chops and catfish with a glint of light in their eyes to shoestrings of chewy tripe and packets of chicken hearts, small and tender as button mushrooms.

"Can't we just sell TV dinners?" I asked once. It was easy to say *TV dinners* in Vietnamese since the word for television was *ti-vi*, but there were no Vietnamese words for other things I wanted. "And what about bologna?"

"What?" My mother's brow furrowed. "If I can't pronounce it, my customers won't buy it. Now go stamp the prices on those cans."

"They're just going to ask for a lower price." I was thirteen, beginning to be brave enough to say what I had suspected for a while, that my mother wasn't always right. "Why do they haggle over everything? Why can't they just pay the price that's there?"

"Are you going to be the kind of person who always pays the asking price?" my mother demanded. "Or the kind who fights to find out what something's really worth?"

I wasn't sure. All I knew was that in the New Saigon, my chore every afternoon was to price the cans and packages. I was on my knees, rummaging for the stamp pad on the shelf behind my mother, when Mrs. Hoa introduced herself. Like my mother, she was in her late forties and dressed in monochrome, a white jacket, white pants, and white shoes, with bug-eyed sunglasses obscuring her face. As my mother bagged her purchases, Mrs. Hoa said, "I'm collecting funds for the fight against the Communists, my dear." I knew the basics of our history as well as I knew the story of Adam and Eve: the Communists had marched from North Vietnam in 1975 to invade South Vietnam, driving us out, all the way across the Pacific to California. I had no memories of the war, but Mrs. Hoa said others had not forgotten. A guerrilla army of former South Vietnamese soldiers was training in the jungles of Thailand, preparing to launch a counterattack in unified Vietnam. The plan was to stir the unhappy people against their Communist rulers, incite a revolution, and resurrect the Republic of the South.

"Our men need our support," Mrs. Hoa said. "And we need good citizens like yourself to contribute."

My mother rubbed one ankle against the other, her nylons scratching. A seam had opened behind her knee, but my mother would keep wearing the same hose until the run nipped at her heels. "I wish I could help, Mrs. Hoa, but times are hard," my mother said. "Our customers are cutting back on everything, what with the recession and the gas prices. And our daughter's in college. Her tuition is like a down payment on a house every year."

"I struggle making ends meet, too." Mrs. Hoa unclasped and clasped the silver latch on her purse. A thin gold band encircled her ring finger, and the red enamel on her nails was as polished and glossy as a new car's paint. "But people talk. Did you hear about Mrs. Binh? People say she's a Communist sympathizer, and all because she's too cheap to give anything. There's even talk of boycotting her store."

My mother knew Mrs. Binh, owner of Les Amis Beauty Salon a few blocks farther west downtown, but changed the topic to the steamy June weather and the price of gold. Mrs. Hoa agreed about the temperature, smiling and displaying a formidable wall of teeth. She glanced at me before leaving my mother with this: "Think about it, dear. Taking back our homeland is a noble cause for which we should all be proud to fight."

"Idiot," my mother muttered after Mrs. Hoa was gone. As we drove home that evening along Tenth Street, my mother recounted the episode to my father, who had been too busy at his own register to overhear the conversation. When she mentioned the guerrillas, I imagined them to be unshaven,

mosquito-bitten men with matted hair wearing ragged tiger-stripe fatigues; living on rainwater, wild boar, and aphids; practicing hand-to-hand combat skills by bayoneting jackfruit. From the backseat, I said, "How much are you giving Mrs. Hoa?"

"Nothing," she replied. "It's extortion."

"But they're fighting the Communists," I said. Also known as Chinese and North Koreans, with Cubans and Sandinistas threatening infiltration and invasion from south of our border, as President Reagan explained on *World News Tonight*. "Shouldn't we help them?"

"The war's over." My mother sounded tired. "There's no fighting it again."

I was outraged, for Mrs. Hoa's appearance proved the war was not over, in that she had somehow followed us from the old Saigon to the new one. What was more, I had read *Newsweek* in the dentist's office and knew we were in the midst of an epic battle against the evil empire of the Soviet Union. But if I was unhappy with my mother's response, I was even more upset with my father's.

"The war may be over," he said, wiggling his little finger in his ear, "but paying a little hush money would make our lives a lot easier."

My mother said nothing, merely drumming her fingers on the armrest. I knew she would have her way with my father, a bald man with the deliberate moves and patient eyes of a turtle. Late that night, hurrying from the kitchen to my room with a glass of water, I heard my mother working to persuade

him behind their closed door. There was no time to eavesdrop. We had recently read "The Fall of the House of Usher" in Ms. Korman's class, and the fear of seeing someone undead in the dark hallway made me rush past their door, just as my mother said, "I've dealt with worse than her."

Dread was stronger than curiosity. I shut my door and jumped into bed shivering, pushing aside my summer textbooks, which were wrapped in brown covers I had cut from a shopping bag and upon which I had scrawled "Math" and "American History." Perhaps my mother was talking about the famine at the end of the Second World War, when she was nine. Last year, an evening television report on the Ethiopian famine had prompted my mother to mention this other famine while I plucked the gray hairs from her head. "Do you know a dozen children in my village starved to death?" she said, even though I obviously did not know. "Older people, too, sometimes right on the street. One day I found a girl I used to play with dead on her doorstep." My mother lapsed into silence as she stared at a point on the wall above the television, and I did not say anything. It was the kind of story she told all the time, and in any case, I was too distracted to ask questions. She was paying me for every strand I found and I was intent on my search, each gray hair bringing me one nickel closer to the next issue of *Captain America*.

In the days and nights that passed, my mother never brought up Mrs. Hoa, but the woman had unsettled her. My mother

began talking during our evening bookkeeping, a time when she was usually completely focused on calculating the daily receipts. We worked at the dining table, counting cash, rolling coins into paper packages the size of firecrackers, and stamping the New Saigon's address onto the back of the personal checks, the Monopoly-money food stamps, and the yellow coupons from Aid to Families with Dependent Children. When I added the sums with a humming mechanical calculator bigger than our rotary telephone, I never needed to look at the keypad. I knew every number's place by heart. It would be the only time I was ever good at math.

As we did the day's reckoning, my mother reported on the rumors of former South Vietnamese soldiers organizing not only a guerrilla army in Thailand but also a secret front here in the United States, its purpose to overthrow the Communists. Grimmer than rumors was how unknown assailants had firebombed a Vietnamese newspaper editor's office in Garden Grove (he died), while another editor had been shot to death, along with his wife, in the doorway of their house in Virginia (the murderers were never caught). "They just said in public what a lot of people already say in private," my mother said, wetting her fingers on a sponge. "Making peace with the Communists might not be such a bad thing."

I wrote down figures in a ledger, never looking up. My father and I worked in T-shirts and shorts, but my mother wore only a nightgown of sheer green fabric without a bra. She wasn't aware of how her breasts swayed like anemones under shallow water, embarrassing me whenever I saw those

dark and doleful areolas with their nipples as thick as my index finger. My mother's breasts were nothing like those of the girls in my class, or so I imagined in fantasies that had been confirmed the week before when I had seen Emmy Tsuchida's nipple through the gap between two buttons of her shirt, pink and pert, exactly like the eraser on the pencil in my hand. Without raising my gaze from the ledger, I said, "But you always tell me the Communists are bad people."

"O-ho!" my father said with a chortle. "So you do pay attention. Sometimes I can't tell what's going on behind those thick glasses of yours."

"The Communists are evil." My mother riffled through a stack of twenty-dollar bills. She had never finished grade school, her father forcing her to stay at home to care for her siblings, and yet she could count money by hand and add figures in her head more quickly than I could on the calculator. "There's no doubt about it. They don't believe in God and they don't believe in money."

"But they believe in taking other people's money," my father said. He spoke often of his auto parts store, which according to his brothers no longer had any parts to sell under Communist ownership. We had lived above the store, and sometimes I wondered if a Communist child was sleeping in my bed, and if so, what kinds of books a Red read, and what kind of movies he saw. *Captain America* was out of the question, but he must have seen Luke Skywalker crossing light sabers with Darth Vader. I had seen *Star Wars* a dozen times on videotape, and if anyone was so deprived as to have

not watched it even once, then the country in which he lived surely needed a revolution. But my mother would not have agreed. She wrapped a paper band around the twenties and said, "I hate the Communists as much as Mrs. Hoa, but she's fighting a war that can't be won. I'm not throwing away my money on a lost cause."

My father ended the conversation by standing and sweeping the cash, coins, checks, and food stamps into the vinyl satchel he carried every morning to the Bank of America. My parents kept some of their profits in the bank, donated a portion to the church, and wired another percentage to the relatives in Vietnam, who periodically mailed us thin letters thick with trouble, summed up for me by my mother to the tune of no food and no money, no school and no hope. Their relatives' experiences and their own had taught my parents to believe that no country was immune to disaster, and so they secreted another percentage of the profits at home, just in case some horrendous calamity wiped out the American banking system. My mother wrapped blocks of hundred-dollar bills in plastic and taped them underneath the lid of the toilet tank, buried dog-tag-sized ounces of gold in the rice, and stashed her jade bracelets, twenty-four-karat gold necklaces, and diamond rings in a portable fireproof safe, hidden in the crawl space underneath the house. To distract thieves, she devised decoys, placing a large glass vase heavy with coins high on a bookshelf by the front door, and a pair of gold bracelets on top of her dresser.

Her fear of robbery was proved justified last October, when, on an otherwise forgettable Tuesday evening, someone

knocked on the door. My father was in the kitchen, having just turned on the stove, and I reached the door a few steps ahead of my mother, already in her nightgown. When I peered through the peephole, I saw a white man who said, "I got mail for you, sir." If he had spoken in Vietnamese or Spanish, I never would have unlocked the door, but because he spoke English, I did. He used his left hand to push his way into the house, a young man in his twenties with feathered hair the color of old straw, long enough to brush the collar of his frayed jeans jacket. Not much taller than my mother, he was slightly built; when he spoke, his voice squeaked like rubber soles on a gym floor.

"Get back," he said. His forehead was slick with sweat, and in his right hand was a gun. Even with the passage of decades, I can still see that gun clearly, a black-barreled .22 revolver that he waved before him with a trembling hand as he stepped past the threshold, kicking at the jumble of shoes we kept there and forgetting to close the door. My mother concluded later that he was an amateur, perhaps an addict desperate for money. He pointed the gun past me, at her, and said, "You understand English? Get on the floor!"

I backed away, while my mother threw her hands in the air, saying, "*Khong, khong, khong!*" My father had appeared, halfway between the kitchen and the front door, and the man fixed his aim on him, saying, "Get down, mister." My father got onto his knees, raising his hands high. "No shoot," my father said in English, his voice faint. "No shoot, please."

I had never seen my father on his knees outside church, and I had never seen my mother tremble and shake with fear.

Pity overwhelmed me; I knew this was neither the first nor the last time someone would humiliate them like this. As if aware of my thoughts, the man pointed the gun at me wordlessly, and I got down on my knees, too. Only my mother did not sink to her knees, her back against the wall and her face, freshly peeled of makeup, very white. Her breasts undulated behind her nightgown, like the heads of twin eels, as she kept saying *no*. The man was still aiming his gun at me as he said, "What's her problem, kid?"

When my mother screamed, the sound froze everyone except her. She pushed past the man, nudging the gun aside with her hand and bumping him with her shoulder as she ran outside. He stumbled against the bookshelf by the door, knocking over the glass vase full of coins. Falling to the ground, it shattered, spraying pennies, nickels, and dimes all over, the coins mixed with shards of glass. "Jesus Christ!" the man said. When he turned toward the door, my father leaped up and hurled himself against the man's back, shoving him across the threshold and then slamming the door shut. Outside, the gun went off with a short, sharp little *pop*, the bullet ricocheting off the sidewalk and lodging itself in the wall next to the mailbox, where a policeman would dig it out a few hours later.

On Sunday morning before we left for church, my mother used a dab of Brylcreem and a black Ace comb to slick my hair and part it down the middle. I was horrified at the way

I looked, like Alfalfa from *Little Rascals*, but I didn't protest, just as I hadn't said anything to her after the police brought my mother back home from a neighbor's house. "I saved our lives, you coward!" she yelled at my father, who smiled weakly at the police sergeant taking down our report while we sat at the dining table. To me, as she yanked my ear, she said, "What did I say about opening the door to strangers? How come you never listen to me?" When the police sergeant asked me to translate, I rubbed my ear and said, "She's just scared, officer."

The police never caught the man, and, after a while, there was no more reason to mention him. Even so, I thought about him every now and again, especially on Sunday mornings during mass when I rose from kneeling. It was then that I remembered how I had gotten off my knees to see my mother dashing by the living room window, barefoot on the sidewalk before all the people in their cars, hands raised high in the air and wearing only her nightgown in the twilight, shouting something I could not hear. She had saved us, and wasn't salvation always the message from our priest, Father Dinh? According to my mother, he was already middle-aged when he led his flock, including my parents, from the north of Vietnam to the south in 1954, after the Communists had kicked out the French and seized the northern half of the country. Fantastically, Father Dinh still had more hair than my father, a tuft of white thread that shone under the light illuminating the stained glass windows. His voice trembled

when he said, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," and I could not help dozing in the hard-backed pew while he sermonized, remembering Emmy Tsuchida's nipple and looking forward only to the end of mass.

It was in the crowd jostling for the exit that Mrs. Hoa touched my mother's elbow one Sunday, a few weeks after the break-in. "Didn't you enjoy the father's sermon?" Mrs. Hoa said. Her eyes were curiously flat, as if painted onto her face. My mother's back stiffened, and she barely turned her head to say, "I liked it very much."

"I haven't heard from you yet about your donation, dear. Next week, perhaps? I'll come by." Mrs. Hoa was dressed formally, in an *ao dai* of midnight velvet embroidered with a golden lotus over the breast. It must have been unbearably hot in summer weather, but no perspiration showed on her temples. "Meanwhile, here's something to read."

She produced a sheet of paper from her purse, the same fake alligator skin one with the silver clasp I'd seen last week, and offered it to me. The mimeograph was in Vietnamese, which I could not read, but the blurry photograph said it all, gaunt men standing at attention in rank and file under fronds of palm trees, wearing exactly the tiger-stripe fatigues I'd imagined.

"What a handsome boy." Mrs. Hoa's tone was unconvincing. She wore the same white high heels I'd seen before. "And you said your daughter's in college?"

"On the East Coast."

"Harvard? Yale?" Those were the only two East Coast schools the Vietnamese knew. My mother, who could not pronounce Bryn Mawr, said, "Another one."

"What's she studying? Law? Medicine?"

My mother looked down in shame when she said, "Philosophy." She had scolded my sister Loan during her Christmas vacation, telling her she was wasting her education. My father had agreed, saying, "Everyone needs a doctor or a lawyer, but who needs a philosopher? We can get advice for free from the priest."

Mrs. Hoa smiled once more and said, "Excellent!" After she was gone, I handed the mimeograph to my mother, who shoved it into her purse. In the parking lot, crammed with cars and people, my mother pinched my father and said, "I'm following Mrs. Hoa. You and Long run the market by yourselves for a few hours."

My father grimaced and rubbed his hand over his head. "And what, exactly, are you planning to do?"

"She knows where we work. I'll bet she knows where we live. It's only fair I know the same things, isn't it?"

"Okay." My father sighed. "Let's go, son."

"I want to go with Ma."

"You, too?" my father muttered.

I was curious about Mrs. Hoa, and helping my mother was an excuse not to spend my morning at the New Saigon. My mother and I followed her in our Oldsmobile, heading south. Mrs. Hoa drove a small Datsun sedan the color of an egg yolk, peppered with flakes of rust. Superimposed upon

the Datsun was the Virgin Mary, her image reflected in the windshield from her picture on the dash, as dim as our handful of fading color photos from Vietnam. My favorite featured a smiling young couple sitting on a grassy slope in front of a pink country church, Ba in his sunglasses as he embraced Ma, who wore a peach *ao dai* over silk cream pants, her abundant hair whipped into a bouffant.

"*Nam xu*," my mother said, turning left onto Story Road. Thinking she wanted a translation into English, I said, "A nickel?"

"Five cents is my profit on a can of soup." As my mother drove, she kept her foot on the brake, not the accelerator. My head bounced back and forth on the headrest like a ball tethered to a paddle. "Ten cents for a pound of pork, twenty-five cents for ten pounds of rice. That woman wants five hundred dollars from me, but you see how we fight for each penny?"

"Uh-huh," I said, beads of sweat trickling from my armpit. Looking back so many decades later, I wonder if she was exaggerating or if I am now, my memory attempting to approximate what our lives felt like. But I am certain that when I rolled down the window and flung out my hand to surf the breeze, my mother said, "A bus might come along and rip your arm off." I pulled my arm back in and sighed. I yearned for the woman she once was in that old photograph, when my sister and I were not yet born and the war was nowhere to be seen, when my mother and father owned the future. Sometimes I tried to imagine what she looked like when she was even younger, at nine, and I could not. Without a photo,

my mother as a little girl no longer existed anywhere, perhaps not even in her own mind. More than all those people starved by famine, it was the thought of my mother not remembering what she looked like as a little girl that saddened me.

Mrs. Hoa turned off Story Road onto a side street, a neighborhood of one-story homes with windows too small for the walls. Well-worn Ford pickups and Chrysler lowriders with chrome rims were parked on the lawns. The front yard of Mrs. Hoa's house was paved over, and her yellow Datsun joined a white Toyota Corolla with a crushed bumper and a green Honda Civic missing a hubcap. After Mrs. Hoa walked inside, my mother cruised forward to inspect the house, painted with a newish coat of cheap, bright turquoise, the garage transformed into a storefront with sliding glass doors and a red neon sign that said *NHA MAY*. The blinds on the tailor shop's windows and the curtains of the living room were drawn, showing their white backs. The man who had invaded our house must have followed us home in the same way, but my mother did not seem to recognize this. Instead, her voice was full of satisfaction when she spoke. "Now," she said, easing her foot off the brake, "we know where she lives."

When Mrs. Hoa came to the New Saigon on Wednesday afternoon of the following week, I was in the wooden loft my father had hammered together above the kitchenware at the

rear of the store. We stored enough long-grain rice in the loft to feed a village, stacked nearly to the ceiling in burlap sacks of ten, twenty-five, and fifty pounds. The clean carpet scent of jasmine rice permeated the air as I sat astride a dike of rice sacks, reading about Reconstruction. I had reached the part about the scalawags and carpetbaggers who had come from the North to help rebuild, or perhaps swindle, the South, when I saw Mrs. Hoa at the doorway, wearing the white outfit from her first visit.

By the way my mother gripped the sides of the cash register as if it were a canoe rocking in the waves while Mrs. Hoa talked to her, I knew there would be trouble. I climbed down the ladder, made my way past aisles stocked with condensed milk and cellophane noodles, shrimp chips and dried cuttlefish, lychees and green mangoes, ducking my head to avoid the yellow strips of sticky flypaper dangling from the ceiling, and reached the front of the store as my mother was saying, "I'm not giving you any money." A crack showed in her foundation, a line creasing her cheek from nose to jawbone. "I work hard for my money. What do you do? You're nothing but a thief and an extortionist, making people think they can still fight this war."

I stood behind a row of customers, one of them reading the same mimeograph Mrs. Hoa gave me in church. Mrs. Hoa's face had turned as white as her outfit, and red lipstick smeared her ochre teeth, bared in fury. She glared at the customers and said, "You heard her, didn't you? She

doesn't support the cause. If she's not a Communist, she's just as bad as a Communist. If you shop here, you're helping Communists."

Mrs. Hoa slammed a stack of mimeographs onto the counter by the register, and with that, she left. My mother stared at my father at the register across from her, and neither said a word as the Datsun sputtered into life outside. The customers in front of me shifted uneasily. Within an hour, they would be on their telephones, all telling their friends, who in turn would tell their friends, who then would tell more people, until everyone in the community knew. My mother turned to the customers with her face as carefully composed as the letters she sent to her relatives, showing no signs of worry, and said, "Who's next?"

Throughout the rest of the day, my mother made no mention of Mrs. Hoa, and I thought that she would simply ignore her, hoping she would not return. But the moment we got into the car, my mother began talking about her counterattack, and I realized that she had been simmering for hours, keeping quiet for the sake of the customers. My mother would go to Mrs. Hoa and demand an apology, for her accusation could cost my mother her reputation and her business, given the depth of anti-Communist fervor in our Vietnamese community. My mother would call Mrs. Hoa a disgrace and slap her if she refused. My mother would point out the hopelessness and self-delusion of Mrs. Hoa's cause, reducing her to tears with logic. As my mother rehearsed her plans, my father said nothing, and neither did I. We knew better than to oppose her,

and when we reached our house, he went wordlessly inside to start dinner, as instructed. My mother drove on to Mrs. Hoa's house, taking me with her because, she said, "That woman won't do anything crazy with you there."

It was eight thirty when my mother parked the car in Mrs. Hoa's driveway, behind the Datsun. Mrs. Hoa answered the door wearing an orange tank top and a pair of shorts in a purple floral print. Her hair was pinned back in a bun and her face, bereft of mascara, lipstick, or foundation was creviced, pitted, and cracked—it belonged to a woman years older. Her small breasts were no bigger than those of Emmy Tsuchida, and a map of varicose veins on her skinny thighs and shins led south to gnarled toes, the yellowing nails spotted with red dabs of chipped polish.

"What are you doing here?" Mrs. Hoa said.

"I want to speak to you," my mother said. "Aren't you going to invite us in?"

Mrs. Hoa hesitated and then stepped back begrudgingly. We took off our shoes and picked our way past the loafers, sneakers, pumps, and flip-flops jammed around the door. Racks on wheels, crammed with hangers for girls' clothes, hid the window, while a pair of bunk beds ran along two walls of the living room. In the center was a long folding table, stacked with notebooks and textbooks.

"We're having dinner," Mrs. Hoa said. Other voices rang from the dining room. An aerosol of grease clung to the air, along with the warm, wet sock odor of cooked rice. "Have you eaten yet?"

"Yes." If my mother was surprised at Mrs. Hoa's politeness, she didn't show it. "I'd like to talk in private."

Mrs. Hoa shrugged and led us past the dining room. At the packed table sat eight or nine people with heads turned our way, little girls with bowl cuts, a quartet of grandparents, and a man and woman around my mother's age, the shadows under their eyes so pronounced they looked as if someone had punched them again and again. Just as crowded was Mrs. Hoa's bedroom, the first one down the hall. An industrial steel-frame table, a sewing machine fastened to it, dominated the middle of the room, while the velvet *ao dai* and the white jacket and pants hung from the bunk bed, blocking the window. Mrs. Hoa sat on the only chair, behind the sewing machine, and said, "What do you want?"

My mother glanced at the closet, doors removed to reveal hand-built pine shelves stacked with bolts of silk and cotton. One of the two clothing racks behind Mrs. Hoa was hung with everyday clothing—women's slacks and blouses, men's suits and dress shirts—while the other was hung with uniforms, olive-green fatigues and camouflage outfits patterned with blotches of brown, black, and green in varying shades, the same kind issued to the marines who had liberated Grenada not long ago. My mother said, "You tailor uniforms for the soldiers?"

"American sizes are too large for Vietnamese men and the proportions aren't right. Plus the men want their names sewn on, and their ranks and units." Mrs. Hoa reached under the sewing table and lifted a cardboard box, and when we

leaned over the table to peek inside, we saw plastic sandwich bags filled with chevrons and the colorful badges of Vietnamese units. "Some of these uniforms are for the guerrilla army in Thailand, but others are for our men here."

I wondered if she meant the rumored secret front, or the men my father's age and younger that I saw at Tet festivals, veterans of the vanquished South Vietnamese army who welcomed the New Year by wearing military uniforms and checking tickets at the fairgrounds where the festivals happened.

"Your husband's a soldier?" my mother said.

"He's a commando. The CIA parachuted him into the north in 1963. I haven't heard from him since." Mrs. Hoa spoke without any change in inflection, clutching the box to her chest. "The Americans sent my younger son's division to Laos in 1972. He never returned. As for my eldest son, he was in the army, too. The Communists killed him. I buried him in Bien Hoa in 1969. My daughter wrote to tell me the Communists scratched the eyes out of the picture on his grave."

My mother was silent, fingering a tiger-stripe camouflage jacket hanging from the rack. At last, she said, "I'm sorry to hear about your husband and your sons."

"Sorry for what?" Mrs. Hoa's voice was shrill. "Whoever said my husband was dead? No one saw him die. No one saw my youngest son die, either. They're alive, and no one like you is going to tell me otherwise."

I studied the patterns in the beige carpet, shapes of a frog and a tree, trapped there along with odors of garlic and sesame, sweat and moisturizer. My mother broke the silence

by opening her purse and digging inside. From the crumpling of paper, I knew she was opening the envelope with the day's cash. She extracted two hundred-dollar bills and laid them on the sewing table in front of Mrs. Hoa, smoothing the face of Benjamin Franklin on each bill, the same way she ran her palm over my hair before entering church.

"That's it," my mother said. "That's all I have."

I calculated the cans of soup, the pounds of rice, and the hours of standing on her feet that made those two hundred dollars possible, and I was astonished that my mother had surrendered the money. When Mrs. Hoa looked at the cash, I thought she might demand the five hundred dollars she'd asked for, but she swept up the bills, folded them, and dropped them into the box on her lap. As she and my mother stared at each other after that, I thought about how years ago my mother had bribed a general's wife with an ounce of gold, buying my father's freedom from the draft. My mother had mentioned the incident one night to my father as they inspected another ounce they had just purchased, and he, glancing at me, had said, "Let's not talk about that." They would file this incident with Mrs. Hoa under the same category of things better left unspoken.

"We'll see ourselves out," my mother said.

"You see how the Communists weren't satisfied with killing my son once?" Mrs. Hoa aimed her gaze at me. "They killed him twice when they desecrated his grave. They don't respect anybody, not even the dead."

Her voice was urgent, and when she suddenly leaned forward, I was afraid she was going to reach across the sewing machine and grasp my hand. I willed myself not to back away from her fingers, two of them bandaged as if she had pricked herself with needles. I felt that I had to say something, and so I said, "I'm sorry." I meant that I was sorry for all that had happened, not only to her but also to my mother, the accumulation of everything I could do nothing about. My apology made utterly no difference, but Mrs. Hoa nodded gravely, as if understanding my intentions. In a subdued tone, she said, "I know you are."

Those were her last words to me. She did not say good-bye when we left, and indeed, did not even look at us, for as my mother closed the bedroom door, Mrs. Hoa was gazing down into the box, her bent head revealing a furrow of white roots running through her scalp, where the hair's natural color revealed itself along a receding tide of black dye. It was a trivial secret, but one I would remember as vividly as my feeling that while some people are haunted by the dead, others are haunted by the living.

When my mother exited the freeway, she surprised me for the second time. She pulled into the parking lot of the 7-Eleven off the exit, two blocks from home, and said, "You've been such a good boy. Let's get you a treat." I didn't know what to say. My parents did not grant me so much as an allowance. When I had asked for one in the fourth grade, my father had frowned and said, "Let me think it over." The next night he

handed me an itemized list of expenses that included my birth, feeding, education, and clothing, the sum total being \$24,376. "This doesn't include emotional aggravation, compound interest, or future expenses," my father said. "Now when can you start paying *me* an allowance?"

My mother stopped under the bright lights at the door of the 7-Eleven, pulled a crisp five-dollar bill out of her purse, and handed it to me. "Go buy," she said in English, motioning me inside. Whenever she spoke in English, her voice took on a higher pitch, as if instead of coming from inside her, the language was outside, squeezing her by the throat. "Anything you want."

I left her on the sidewalk and went in, the five-dollar bill as slick as wax paper in my hand, remembering how my mother's lips moved whenever she used the fingers of one hand to count on the fingers of her other hand. The 7-Eleven was empty except for the two Sikh men at the registers, who gave me bored looks and returned to their conversation. Disinfectant tinted the air. I ignored the bank of arcade games and the racks of comic books, even though the covers of *Superman* and *Iron Man* caught my eye and the electronic whirring of Pac-Man called to me. Past the cleaning products and canned soups was an aisle stocked with chips, cookies, and candy. I glanced down the aisle, saw the glint of gold foil on a chocolate bar, and froze. While the clerks chatted in a language I could not understand, I hesitated, yearning to take everything home but unable to choose.

THE TRANSPLANT

Many unexpected things had happened to Arthur Arellano, and the transformation of his modest garage into a warehouse, stacked with boxes upon cardboard boxes of counterfeit goods, was far from the most surprising. Written on the boxes were names like Chanel, Versace, and Givenchy, designers of luxuries far beyond the reach of Arthur and his wife, Norma. Their presence made Arthur uneasy, and so it was that in the week after Louis Vu delivered this unforeseen wealth to the Arellanos, Arthur found himself slipping out of his rented house at odd hours, stealing down the pebbly driveway past his Chevy Nova, and opening the garage door to ponder the goods with which he was now living so intimately.

Even under the cover of night, Arthur resisted the urge to pocket a Prada wallet or a pair of Yves Saint Laurent cuff links, even though Louis ended nearly every phone call by