

MOTHERLAND

THE FIRST IMPRESSION: GAZING, gawking, analysis of the site and its surroundings, discussion on whether it lives up to photographs from history books and brochures. Nods, murmurs, and smiles of recognition. It seems bigger. No, smaller. Opinions vary.

Then the historical context: tour guide Leah in her red visor and matching "Vietnam Specialist" T-shirt, motioning for them to keep up with her.

The Reunification Palace has gone through many transformations during the different political regimes in Vietnam, Leah says, her hand sweeping over her head for effect.

Once the home of the French governor, it is best known as the former central headquarters of the South Vietnamese government. The palace has survived several attacks and renovations through the years and now stands as a museum for us.

Members of the tour consider her their cultural ambassador, eagerly absorbing every word, since Leah has been leading tours in Southeast Asia for almost five years. She says without irony that she considers herself an honorary Vietnamese.

ese, to which her travelers, most of whom are white, nod approvingly.

While the palace, with its modern architecture and beautifully manicured gardens and fountains, is impressive, Huan is distracted by the activity surrounding it. On the main boulevard leading to the palace, mopeds and cars noisily tangle in five-lane rush hour. In the gardens around the palace, other tour groups snap pictures of the landmark, while pushcart vendors in conical hats and slippers creep around them, hopping to lure customers with their hot pastries and roasting meats.

Visual recordings come next and usually last the longest. Cameras and camcorders, of various sizes and qualities, emerge frantically once Leah steps out of the way. Postcardlike shots of the site, zoom in and out, then individual photos, and, finally, the group picture, which never takes less than ten minutes to organize.

All right, everyone, Leah yells, squinting behind the company camera. There is an option after the trip to purchase her professional-quality photographs. Get real close. We're one big family, right?

Huan must resist the urge every time to flee the mass photograph, wary of squeezing into another photograph with all those red shirts. But his mother insists. Gwen's eyes plead with him when he tries to edge away, and the dutiful son must acquiesce. He stands next to his old friend Mai, who rests her head against his shoulder. She, too, is tired of the group atmosphere, but they know it is ending soon, at least for today.

They've been sightseeing all morning: the former U.S. embassy, the Notre Dame Cathedral, the Old Post Office, and the Remnants of War Museum. Individually interesting, but packaged in one day, exhausting. The next stop is the Binh Tay

market, where Leah promises brief commentary and ample leisure time to wander.

Fifteen minutes are allotted for souvenirs while Leah flags down their motor coach. She instructs them to remain inside the palace garden, so that no one is left behind. She is always worried about losing people.

Do you want something? Gwen asks. The group is dispersing to various gift stands along the plaza, Mai already waiting in line at a dessert vendor. Although Huan's mother already has a large tote bag full of embroideries, a conical hat, and a miniature bronze Buddha statue, she is ready to hunt for more.

No, Huan says. I'm fine. His only purchases so far are postcards to send back to a few coworkers and friends.

Don't you want to come browse with me?

I'm tired, Mom. You go ahead. I'll wait for you here.

Okay. I'll look, and if I find something you might like—

Go, Mom. The bus will be here soon.

She leaves her tote bag with Huan and hustles to the nearest souvenir vendor. Ho Chi Minh City is a land of bargains, anything and everything on sale, an ideal match for Huan's mother, an avid shopper. Yesterday, Gwen was throwing up in the hotel bathroom all afternoon from a dubious rice pudding purchased from a sidewalk peddler. Today, fully recovered, she happily haggles with a vendor over a plastic replica of the palace.

Huan feels a tug on his pant leg. He peers over his sunglasses to the impediment.

A small boy grins a toothless smile, holding a stained cardboard box full of crumpled cigarette boxes, candy, and soda cans. He wears only shorts and rubber sandals. He bumps his merchandise against Huan's thigh. You buy now, suh.

Huan shakes his head.

C'mon. You rich American. Lots of dollahs.

He doesn't smile like he had this morning, when these child peddlers were still new and endearing. Their relentless pursuit and broken, cackling English have gnawed through his patience. Leah's advice is to avoid eye contact with tenacious vendors and beggars, and they will eventually move on. But Huan tries a different tactic, looking directly at the boy, hoping to intimidate him away permanently.

The stare-off lasts several minutes, the boy beaming and Huan scowling. The child thinks it's some kind of game with a prize at the end. Huan grows suspicious that the boy's patience can be greater than his own.

Have you made a friend? Gwen asks, quickly snapping a picture of the two.

Mom, don't, Huan says, as his mother slips the boy a Vietnamese coin piece, but it is too late. The child squeals victoriously and scampers off.

Oh, it's all right.

You've made yourself a target. Now they'll be chasing us down all afternoon.

You're exaggerating.

I'm not. He's going to tell all his friends to look for the American red-haired lady in the red T-shirt. She's giving away money.

Does somebody need a nap?

Mom.

Sweetie, his mother says, squeezing his shoulder. Relax. We're here to enjoy ourselves.

She is determined to do this. Traveling, especially in groups, is much more her thing than Huan's. On their first day, she quickly learns the names, occupations, and home states of all their fellow travelers. In exchange, they know all about Gwen

and her Amerasian son's trip to Vietnam, a belated quest to discover his roots, visit the Saigon orphanage he once lived in. She divulges this story to anyone who asks, so proud of Huan's decision to learn more about his native country, something she has encouraged his whole life.

Huan realizes this must come out sooner or later. It is obvious that he and his mother are not biologically related: she, a chubby Caucasian redhead, and he, a lanky half-black, half-Vietnamese with fuzzy black hair. Gwen's enduring strategy to combat raised eyebrows and sneers is to explain their situation frankly: she and her husband adopted Huan once he arrived in America with the Operation Babylift evacuation. The way she gushes over her miraculous family and beautiful son, even the most cynical keep their opinions to themselves.

To her credit, Gwen doesn't mention, not even once to their tour companions, that she isn't supposed to be on this trip. That she is taking the place of Emily, who originally suggested this vacation to Huan for their three-year anniversary. She thought it would be fun to explore his past. Huan didn't even want to go after their breakup, but since they didn't think to buy travel insurance, his mother convinced him not to waste such a lovely trip. She even called his friend Mai, who was teaching in Japan for the year, and persuaded her to meet up with them in Vietnam. Gwen said she was doing this for Huan. It will be good for him to get away and appreciate what he does have, which is so much. His mother tries to see the best in everything and, especially now, is determined to pass this trait down to her son.

The Binh Tay Market is in the Cholon district, a half hour's drive away, so the travelers use the downtime to rest in their

tinted, air-conditioned motor coach. There are enough seats for everyone to take two and lie down, but Huan's mother likes for them to sit together. They are on vacation.

The bus is quiet. They are normally a noisy, awkward band of travelers: a mix created solely by coincidental vacation times. They are mostly families, some with small children. One family is Vietnamese, the Vus, who immigrated to America shortly after the Fall and are returning for their first visit. There's a senior couple, the Lewises, who are spending their retirement savings to see the world. There are three U.S. war veteran buddies who never seem embarrassed by their prolific dropping of words like *gooks* and *Nam*. The old men stare at Huan when they think he's not looking, almost tempting Huan to ask if they left behind their own bastard child in Vietnam.

Mai sits across from them, napping. Her long black hair fans across the cushioned seat, reminding him briefly of Emily. He hasn't seen Mai in a few years and not regularly since high school. She seems comfortable in Vietnam, not complaining like the other tourists of the heat and humidity, probably because she's lived in Asia for the past year.

After college, Mai left for graduate school in England. Then a consulting job in Beijing. Now teaching English in Japan. She is living with a fellow teacher, a Canadian named Gordon, whom Huan has never met.

Too bad, Gwen later says, privately to Huan. She's become so pretty since high school. Good teeth. Mom. Don't start.

I'm not saying anything. Leah is rather charming, don't you think? I know you don't usually date Caucasian girls, but she seems worldly. Fluent in three languages.

Gwen claims she wants him to date regardless of color, but he knows she is worried that he has never brought home a

white girl. His last few girlfriends, including Emily, were Asian. She wants to know why her race is being unilaterally rejected.

Out the window, pink dust filters through the air, illuminating the abandoned colonial French mansions along the wide boulevards. The mopeds, cyclos, and pedestrians around their bus hustle past these ghosts, obsolete remnants of a forgotten foreign invader. The focus is on the bright gold pagoda, the center of the market, leading into hundreds of wooden vendor stalls. Twinkle lights, stuffed animals, and dangling clumps of neon rubber sandals decorate the market's tarp ceilings.

Under the pagoda, Huan's mother eyes him warily. I suppose you want to go off on your own now.

Mom, I love you.

Forget him, Mai says, leaning onto Gwen. He'll just get in the way of shopping. Huan's mother smiles. She has always liked Mai.

Fine, Gwen says. Do you want to meet us for dinner then? Sure.

Should we set up a meeting place?

I'll just find you.

As he wanders through the stands, Huan realizes there is no farmers' market like this in America. People bump against him, the locals, who are there to do business. Different languages barter and negotiate. Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian. In the livestock section, customers bend over wire cages, poking the live ducks, chickens, and pigs inside. Behind wooden tables soaked dark with blood, butchers prepare fresh meat for customers.

He walks through the aisles, stopping occasionally to watch and listen to exchanges between peddlers and patrons. Sometimes Huan believes if he listens carefully, he will understand the language. At a chicken stall where a woman is plucking a

fresh kill, a policeman stares pointedly at Huan. He is wearing a tattered olive green uniform and muddy black boots. A black nightstick and a clunky archaic pistol are prominently displayed on his plastic belt. The cop has to be at least a foot shorter than Huan.

Huan smiles, unsure what else to do. When the policeman only glares, Huan casually turns around, shoving his hands deep in his pockets, and walks away. A few minutes later, he notices the same policeman peering at him from behind a pile of bananas. Huan doesn't stop at any of the stands anymore, the cop only a few paces behind him. Huan pretends not to see him and continues walking, until reaching the edge of the market, then turns around, and walks again.

Twenty minutes of this and the policeman finally approaches him. One hand clenching his nightstick, jaw locked, he barks something at Huan.

Huan shakes his head. I don't understand.

This seems to infuriate the cop even more. He stalks in a circle around Huan, muttering. Huan looks around for the nearest merchant to intercede, but they all avoid eye contact, refusing to get involved. He broadens his circle for help, spotting Mai at a vegetable stall in another aisle. His mother isn't with her.

Mai! Huan yells. The policeman jumps back at this outburst. Embarrassed, the cop begins shouting and jabbing his finger at Huan's chest. His other hand nervously fumbles for the whistle around his neck. Huan realizes if other cops are called in, he will be in more trouble.

Mai walks up to them, carrying a small sack of mangoes. She interrupts the cop's railing, says something in Vietnamese, and the policeman quickly turns his anger on her. They stand eye to eye. She doesn't raise her voice, but she doesn't back

down. She listens to what he says and responds calmly. Then she looks over to Huan.

Take your hands out.

What? The cop returns his attention to him.

He thinks you're hiding something in your pockets, Mai says. Show him you're not.

Huan obeys, making a big show of waving his hands in the air.

The policeman huffs another order.

Mai bites her lip and looks at Huan. He wants to pat you down.

Are you kidding?

He thinks you stole something. Just let him do it.

By then, a curious crowd has gathered. Teenage girls, old men, tourists with cameras. Trouble happening to other people is always interesting. Huan hopes his mother is far away in another section of the market. Once Huan nods, granting permission, the cop nearly jumps him, quickly slapping into Huan's arms, legs, and midsection. Huan stares at the ground, trying to control his breathing, attempting to expel his growing rage.

The cop looks triumphant afterward, the humiliation complete. After releasing Huan, he nods, wags his finger at them, and walks off. The audience disperses.

Mai walks up to him. You okay?

Huan looks at her. I want to leave.

They go to the deli section, where faded plastic tables and chairs lie strewn around for weary customers. Mai buys them a plate of pâté chauds, golden flaky pastry shells with spicy meatball middles. They eat them in silence.

It's not fair, Huan finally says.

Yeah, Mai says.

It's bullshit. Did you get that guy's name?

What for?

I'm going to complain.

Mai looks around the market and back at him. To whom?

The police chief, the American embassy, Leah. Someone.

What were you expecting? For everyone to be nice to you? I didn't expect to be harassed.

This is Vietnam. If they can tell you're at least part-Vietnamese, they're going to have issues with you. I've been dealing with it, too. If you want courtesy for the rest of the trip, go stand next to Leah.

It's different for me.

It's not just you, Mai says. The authorities hate overseas Vietnamese. They think we're rude and arrogant to come back home, throw money around, and expect to be treated like royalty.

I'm not acting like that.

No. They don't know you. So don't take it personally.

He doesn't know why he is. He has experienced discrimination before, plenty of it in America, though his parents did their best to shield him from it. But it bothers him that the Vietnamese are looking down at him, angry at him. They want to show him how un-Vietnamese he is. Well, he knows that. He always has.

As he tries to relax, Huan focuses on his calm, patient companion. Hey, he says, patting her hand. Thanks. He realizes it's a little strange to have Mai, little Mai, rescuing him. Two years older, Huan remembers how nervous and awkward Mai was in high school, how she always sought him out for advice. She has matured during their years apart. She's grown up.

She pats him back. You're welcome.

Where's my mom?

She's standing in line to see a fortune-teller.

A scam.

No, just fun. It's cheap anyway.

Did she talk to you?

Mai hesitates, then smiles her answer.

I'm sorry, Huan says, staring at his food. She doesn't know when to shut up.

She's worried about you.

This isn't the first time I've been dumped.

I know it's not about Emily.

I don't know what I'm doing here, Huan says. Is. This trip was never my idea. First, it was Emily's, and now my mom's.

Mai looks down at the table. But it's a good idea. So what if it isn't yours?

I'm glad you're here.

Me too.

It's been years, Mai. Are you ever planning on coming back to America?

Sure I am. She takes a bite of pastry and fastidiously wipes her mouth with a napkin. Huan decides not to press her on when.

She tells him more about her classes in Japan and her boyfriend Gordon. He tells her about the new responsibilities at his job and how much work he'll have on his desk once he returns. They reminisce about old high school and college friends. She laughs for the first time on their vacation, a reminder of the old Mai.

What are you doing tomorrow morning? Huan asks.

Why?

We're not going to the tunnels until the afternoon. My mom and I are visiting the nursery center that handled my adoption.

Her face doesn't change at all, and Huan suddenly remembers. Mai is an orphan, too.

If you're busy, it's okay. He feels terrible. How can he forget? Mai grew up in foster homes her whole life. Sometimes she spent college breaks at his family's house.

I'm not, Mai finally says. I'll come.

Okay, Huan says. Thanks. Embarrassed, he looks away, into the crowded market, everywhere heads full of smooth, black hair.

The Children of Mary's Adoption Center is located in an old government building on the western side of District One. The morning traffic on the main boulevard in front of the center is heavy and noisy, and the children are instructed to stay within the building's gates at all times.

In the courtyard, young orphans bustle around Huan's mother. They coo at Gwen with outstretched hands, softly chanting the English word *please* over and over. She smiles at them, struggling with a plastic trash bag in her arms, and dramatically hands each child a stuffed animal, rubber ball, or plastic toy.

When one of the little girls gives his mother a kiss, Huan turns around and heads back inside. He remembers the argument he had with his mother before leaving for Vietnam, when he discovered half her luggage space devoted to these toys. She couldn't understand why he was so angry about the gifts.

These children don't have anything, Huan. What's wrong with giving if we can?

He couldn't bring himself to tell her. The toys would be played with for a few days, but they'd eventually get dirty, break, get thrown away, and the orphans would still be destitute. They didn't need this kind of charity.

He finds Mai in the hallway, looking at photographs of children on the wall. Huan walks up behind her.

Are you looking for her? he asks. Mai's childhood friend Kim was also on the Babylift. Huan never knew her very well, except that she always seemed angry, blaming the bad things that happened in her life on everyone else, often Mai.

Mai nods sheepishly. I don't even know which adoption agency she left from.

Too bad she couldn't come.

She's too busy with her kids and work. Besides, I don't think she would've anyway.

Why not?

Mai pauses for a moment. I think she might hate Vietnam more than she hates America.

Huan can understand that. He wonders if it is one of the few things he and Kim would ever agree on.

Do you ever talk to the Reynolds anymore? Huan asks.

We write. Christmas cards, birthdays.

No plans to visit?

Mai shakes her head. Not right now. I'm busy, they're busy.

They have a new foster child. He's only seven.

They walk along the halls, scrutinizing each picture. Mai slowly wanders ahead of him. Huan hangs back, remembering that Mai doesn't like people watching over her shoulder. She couldn't stand other people looking at the same picture as she at museums. She prefers observing alone.

Huan is grateful that Mai decided to come today. Their cyclo driver got lost twice, raising suspicions that he was trying to pad his fare. Mai sharply threatened him in Vietnamese. A few minutes and two turns later, they arrived at the center.

Eight years ago, the Vietnamese government granted permission for the adoption center to reopen in Ho Chi Minh

City. The facilities look spare, but well maintained, with a fresh coat of paint on the building's exterior and vibrant potted plants in each room. The staff and children seem happy. The orphans stare unabashedly at Huan, recognizing his mixed heritage and that he was once like them. But he isn't. These children are pure Vietnamese.

There are no more Amerasian children, the despised products of American military men and Vietnamese women finally aborting with the war's end. No, those bastards are grown. Some gone, but not all. Huan realizes he should be more worried about other Amerasians in Vietnam than anyone else. The Amerasians who were left behind have good reason to hate Huan. They had to bear the brunt of a country's devastation and poverty. Huan searches for them in the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, but he hasn't spotted any yet. Perhaps they have learned to fade into the scenery, granting the country's wish just to disappear. The children of the dust mercifully dissipated, the last bitter reminders of a hated war.

Huan feels a tickle on his elbow. Sophie, the center's founder and president, smiles at him. A bone-thin, white-haired American in her seventies, she looks at him like Gwen does, with naïve, hopeless affection. He is getting this a lot today, his status of Babylift orphan suddenly elevating him to Christ child. Sophie was on the same evacuation flight with Huan. She is the one who placed him in Gwen's arms twenty-six years ago.

Thanks again for taking the time to meet with us, Huan says.

Oh it's my pleasure, hon. I always enjoy seeing my babies all grown-up and successful.

Well, I don't know about that.

Oh, hush. She shakes her head at him. So many people loved you, Huan, so many wanted you for their own. I remember.

Huan smiles wanly. She probably says this to every orphan. Brunch is ready, Sophie says, looking around. Where's your mother?

She's still giving away her toys.

She is such a generous soul, Sophie says, shaking her head. You are so lucky to have her.

Brunch is set up on the patio, tame American cuisine of sandwiches and salads, which Gwen is grateful for.

Not that I don't love all the new, exotic things we're trying here, but I do miss plain, good American food. Am I right?

Sophie and the other staff at the table smile at her. Huan looks over at Mai, whose face appears carefully blank.

They have mementos to share. Sophie passes around photo albums taken during the Babylift, and in those washed-out black-and-white pictures, they try to distinguish Huan from crowds of little faces. There is only one individual photograph of Huan, which Gwen already has a copy of back home. His identification picture, full name Huan Anh Cung, scrawled on a sheet of paper and held in front of his gaunt, confused face.

The admittance and medical records are next. In a thick, faded green book on pages that record many other orphans' lives, they locate Huan's information. He stayed in Sophie's adoption center for nine months before the Babylift evacuation. His biological parents are listed as unknown. He was named by the nuns at the orphanage where he was abandoned. His medical records indicate he suffered from bronchitis, ear infections, and boils.

None of this is new. Huan's mother requested his background information from the adoption center long ago. But he nods and smiles when he is supposed to, because he knows they are all watching him, expecting gratitude and humility.

This information would have been more interesting for Emily. She was always curious about his vague heritage and couldn't understand why he wasn't, too. Emily was not adopted. Born to Korean immigrant parents, she was close to them and her extended family of cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Huan agreed to go to Vietnam with her, for her, because he liked that she was so interested in his past. He never realized until afterward that her motivation to learn about Vietnam was to prove to her family that he really was Asian, not just black. Her work went unfinished. She broke up with him after realizing her mother would never ultimately approve. Maybe if he were half-white it would be different, all Asian even better. She offered to buy out her half of the trip. She even suggested he still go with someone else.

You know, we arranged reunion tours for the adoptees last year, Sophie says, looking at Huan. I thought we sent the information packet to you.

He feels the others' eyes on him, expecting an explanation for the rejection. I couldn't take off work, Huan says.

That's too bad. Sophie grins. You would have enjoyed it. We organized the adoptees to visit the orphanages or maternity hospitals where they were first found. If I remember your file correctly, you came to us from Blessed Haven. That's just south of here in the Delta.

We're going to the Delta, his mother says. Tomorrow as part of our tour.

How lovely, Sophie says. Well, if you'd like to visit, I could make a call.

That would be wonderful, Gwen says, eagerly leaning forward.

Huan doesn't bring it up until after they leave the center.

He wants to wait until they get back to their hotel room, but he can't. They are in a taxicab, Mai sitting in front, and Huan tries his best to keep his voice down.

I never said I wanted to visit the orphanage.

Gwen looks at him, surprised. Why wouldn't you?

Maybe I don't feel like it. Maybe today's been enough.

I don't understand, she says. Why would we come all this way without talking to the people who once knew you and took care of you? Sophie says there is a nun who believes she remembers you.

You don't get to make that decision for me.

Why are you getting so angry?

If I wanted to do this, I would have asked. The reason you asked is because you wanted to.

Fine. If you don't want to go, we don't have to go.

They're already expecting us.

I'll call Sophie tomorrow. I'll fix it, don't worry.

Gwen is crying. From the front seat, Mai reaches over and hands her a tissue. For the remainder of the ride, they listen to street noise from the driver's rolled-down window. In the sun's noon position, Huan can see the city's smog hovering over its inhabitants. They breathe the pollution in easily, accepting the foul sight and smell as natural.

In a dense forest forty-five miles outside of Ho Chi Minh City, a guide in faded green army attire leads the tour group to an open-sided hut. They sit in dusty plastic chairs while a woman in black pajamas turns on the big-screen television.

Beautiful shade trees and smiling, simple Vietnamese peas-

ants, nature, serenity, safety in the town of Cu Chi. And then the looming American B-52s unleash their bombs. Bursts of gunfire crackle from the television speakers. Clouds of smoke overwhelm the screen, making the peasants on screen cry and suffer. Out of the dust, the valiant Communist liberators emerge. Young, beautiful, courageous faces. They will rescue their country.

The female guide must notice the audience fidgeting uncomfortably. She appears to expect this, laughs as she turns the video off, explaining that it is old, times have changed, and everyone, American and Vietnamese, are all friends now.

For their paying friends, Cu Chi Tunnels, the 250-kilometer underground headquarters of the Viet Cong during the war, is now a popular tourist attraction. The maze of tunnels especially widened to accommodate larger Western sightseers, a recreational firing range where visitors can shoot AK-47 rifles, souvenir booths selling Zippo lighters, pens made from bullets, rubber sandals, keepsake T-shirts.

Leah and the Vietnamese tunnel guide assure their group that the tunnels are safe and well maintained for the public. They are both much shorter than Huan.

The tunnel guide climbs down the ladder first, and one by one, each traveler follows. Some of the older, heavier people struggle to fit down the snug hole, with Leah's help. The ceiling in the underground areas barely reaches six feet and the tunnels themselves only three. They get on their hands and knees and crawl farther into the tunnels, the guide in front loudly reciting the tunnel's history.

Huan can't help admiring this vast underworld. These Vietnamese rat people whom the Americans so underestimated hand-dug and created a three-level network that once stretched to the Cambodian border. Protected by tiger pits, punji stake

traps, and firing posts, the tunnels successfully endured American bombs, allowing their intricate subterranean maze to flourish with kitchens, hospitals, sleeping chambers, and even a small theater. The American veterans are especially impressed, their eyes memorizing these once mythical caverns, finally permitted to see Charlie's side.

The damp earthy walls and moist air are making Huan dizzy. He is tired of bumping into people's sweaty bodies, aware they can't help it, but desperately needing space. There is no space here. Everyone is on top of each other. These Cu Chi guerrillas must have had incredible endurance. Huan feels he is not selfish about many things, but air, he decides, he cannot share.

As they crawl into another narrow tunnel, Huan stops, falling back on his heels. Although the guide has advised them to take small, short breaths, he inhales a lungful of stale air and immediately begins coughing.

Hey, Mai says. He feels her hand on his shoulder. You okay?

The exit is only twenty yards ahead. Huan creeps faster. When he sees sunlight poking along the walls, an adrenaline boost propels him forward, fingers digging through the clay earth until he reaches the surface. Then he remembers Mai is behind him and helps pull her out.

At the next tunnel-crawling station, which the guide warns is even smaller and longer than the first, Huan decides to sit out. Mai offers to keep him company and he doesn't argue.

They sit at a rusted picnic table, next to a B-52 crater pit the size of a small fishing pond.

I'm not claustrophobic, Huan says.

Yeah, Mai says. Neither am I.

No really, Huan says. It was very unreasonable down there. I agree.

Huan takes a long drink of the bottled water he bought at a

vendor's cart. The water tastes cloying, metallic, and Huan suspects it is a used bottle, refilled with tap water. A skinny boy carrying a pail of soft drinks sneaks up to them, tapping Huan on the shoulder. Coca? he asks, grinning and nodding vigorously.

Huan shakes his head and looks away. But the child is persistent. He runs to Huan's other side and asks again.

No buy, Huan says firmly.

It doesn't work. He won't leave, even when Mai sternly scolds him in Vietnamese. The boy pants loudly and steadily through his mouth. Whenever he feels Huan glancing his way, his posture straightens, his arms struggling to raise his scratched pail higher.

Help me, the boy says. Buy fresh Coca. Help me.

When the child nudges him again with the pail, Huan slams his water bottle down on the table, startling the boy and Mai.

I don't want your stupid drink, Huan says fiercely. Get the hell away from us.

The child jolts in shock, his mouth dropping open. Huan realizes the boy probably doesn't understand what he said, it is just the yelling that scares him. The boy's eyes turn red, his jaw begins to shake. But instead of tears, the child lets out a terrible howl.

You look down? the boy screams, dropping his pail. No better! You no better! The child is shaking violently, like he is suffering a seizure.

Mai stands up, trying to put a hand on the child's arm, but he ignores her, angry with her, too, continuing to scream. Tourists wander out of the gift booths, staring. The boy is crying in such terror. Finally, one of the tunnel guides rushes from the gate and grabs the boy by the arms, dragging him away, howling.

The boy's pail has fallen over in the rage, his soft drink cans

scattered over the dusty ground. Mai begins picking them up. I can't leave my hotel room, Huan says.

You didn't have to yell at him, Mai says, setting the pail on the table.

I know, Huan says. It was stupid.

Then why are you doing it?

I don't know. I don't know why I'm here.

You didn't want to come?

No. I was talked into it. I knew better, too, that's what pisses me off. Finding the past doesn't make anyone feel better when it's just bad.

What's bad?

Are you kidding? They hate me.

Who?

You've seen it. Cops, little boys, everybody.

Mai shakes her head. They don't even know you.

They don't have to. They hate Amerasians. They wish I didn't exist.

You can't blame them for not wanting to be here. They didn't do this.

I did?

Yes. Whoever said learning about your past is supposed to feel good? This is you, Huan, about how you feel. You're the one who hates them.

Huan sees two Vietnamese guides taking a cigarette break. They never wanted me, Huan says.

You don't know why your parents gave you up.

I'm supposed to accept that? It's different for you. You know your mother died and didn't abandon you on purpose. I have nothing to go on.

Do you really want answers? Then go to the orphanage tomorrow. I'll go with you.

It didn't help going to the adoption center.

That was your fault. Do you know how many orphans would love to know their histories? Remember Kim? She has no idea. And look what happened to her—married to a man she doesn't respect, with kids she doesn't want. You're taking it for granted.

Right, I should be more grateful.

Mai stands up suddenly. Forget it.

I'm sorry, Huan says. Really, I'm being a jerk. I don't mean to snap.

I know, Mai says, looking up. There's our group. We should go.

Across the woods, Huan can see the guide beginning to pull their travel companions from the hole in the ground. They poke their heads out and emerge into the sunlight, disoriented, panting for air. His mother is one of the last to surface. Her hair is disheveled, face pink with perspiration. She looks around frantically, until she sees Huan. Her relieved smile is genuine. Huan finishes his water and rejoins the group.

In the morning, they take a ferry and bus ride to the Delta, which, Leah says, is often referred to as the rice bowl of Vietnam. Out of the city, the air is fresh, the landscape clean and unspoiled. The tour charters a banana boat ride through local estuaries, where villages of wooden huts balance precariously on tall stilts and half-naked children splash in the yellow water. They visit a floating market and gaze at sampans overloaded with colorful vegetables, fruit, and fish.

Huan sits between Mai and his mother on the boat. While Gwen and the other tour members exclaim wonder over the

various sights, Mai remains silent. Huan observes his friend, who seems absolutely unaffected by the scenery around her. In retrospect, Huan realizes that Mai hasn't really expressed any great pleasure or disappointment in their last few days of sightseeing. She has declared no favorite landmark. Except for food, she has purchased no souvenirs.

During the bus ride through the rice paddies, Huan's mother spots a peasant family plowing a field with a water buffalo. Though Huan pleads with her not to, his mother convinces Leah to stop the bus to take pictures. Some of the other tourists think it is a good idea, too, pulling out their own cameras. The peasants appear irritated, confused by all the attention. His mother squints behind her camera, fiddling with the zoom function, trying to capture the perfect photographs. When she reboards the bus, smiling with satisfaction, Huan can't even look at her.

For lunch, they feast on a home-cooked meal at a family's sugarcane plantation. The food is diverse and sumptuous, probably not what this albeit wealthy family has for lunch every day. Everything, the housemistress joyously boasts, is fresh from the Delta: catfish, mangoes, rice, cabbage, pork, poultry, and, of course, sugar.

The tour group is encouraged to spend time exploring the grounds of the plantation estate. Huan stands at the balcony, looking down at the winding rows of sugarcane. Huan's mother approaches him, tapping him on the shoulder hesitantly.

I talked to Sophie this morning, Gwen says. She said that they won't expect you, but if you change your mind, you are welcome.

Okay, Huan says.

So I think you should. I think you want to, and if my being there will be distracting, then I'll stay with the tour.

Huan considers this. You sure?

His mother blinks in surprise, and Huan realizes she really does want to come. Yes, she says. Of course.

I'll see you tonight, Huan says.

Huan finds Mai outside, silently watching the laborers shuck sugarcane. Do you want to go? he asks.

Mai looks at him in confusion, then remembers. Oh.

You don't have to, Huan says. The afternoon activities they would miss include visiting a snake farm, a silkworm factory, and a Buddhist pagoda. Maybe she'd rather do that.

No, Mai says. I'll go.

They make plans to meet up with the group that evening for the ferry ride back to Ho Chi Minh City. Huan's mother insists he take her camera, in case he might want to take pictures. Leah arranges for a motorbike taxi to take them to the orphanage, which is near the Vinh Long province.

They drive past Delta villages, where the poverty is even worse than the homeless they see in the city. Young girls slap wet clothes against large rocks in the river. Small children run after their taxi, fading in the clouds of dust the motorbike kicks up.

After following a long dirt road for nearly twenty minutes, the taxi driver slows. Unlike the adoption center, the orphanage doesn't appear to have been renovated since Huan left. Only half a gate remains as the entrance to a run-down building connected to a chapel. Vegetation stretches over the chipped concrete walls.

Inside, Mai talks with a younger nun, Sister Trieu, who takes them to the prayer room to wait for Sister Phuong. She is one of the few remaining nuns who worked at the orphanage when Huan was still there.

Mai sits in a wooden chair, waiting, while Huan paces around the room.

Where are the kids? Huan asks. It is too quiet. He can hear his own footsteps and breathing.

Maybe it's not an orphanage anymore, Mai says.

An older nun comes in with Sister Trieu. They converge in the middle of the room. The three women talk, and Huan listens. Occasionally, the older woman looks at him, but then returns to speaking with Mai.

Mai turns to Huan. Sister Phuong says she remembers you. Huan nods and smiles obediently.

Sister Phuong points at Huan's face and laughs.

Mai smiles. She says you've grown into your big ears.

They confirm it is still an orphanage, but it is on the second floor. Sister Phuong invites them to come upstairs with her to look around.

In a small office stuffed with neglected bookshelves and filing cabinets, Sister Phuong peers over a large record book, fingering each name down the list, turning each page slowly. Mai and Huan sit across from her and wait. The office door is open, and Huan can hear the children moving around on the floor. They are remarkably quieter than the orphans at the adoption center, not much laughter or yelling, children's usual markers. Maybe it is naptime. One young girl passes their door. Her shoulders hunch over, her feet shuffle across the floor. She isn't curious enough to look in at the new visitors.

Ah, Sister Phuong says, looking up triumphantly. She gestures for Huan and Mai to come to her side and look.

The print is faded and nearly illegible. Huan looks at Mai.

It's your name, Mai says, her eyes lifting from the book. You weighed six pounds when you arrived. They estimated you were only a few days old.

Huan stares at where the nun's finger is still pointing, the

first evidence of his existence. Though he realizes the information is sketchy and unreliable at best, he believes it.

They walk through the nursery, where Sister Phuong says Huan lived. It is a large room with rows and rows of wooden cribs. Several nuns tend to the crying children. Some of the babies are strong enough to stand, their small hands gripping the rails. Most, however, are not.

Sister Phuong asks if they'd like to hold a baby. It occurs to Huan that the older nun may think he and Mai are a couple, perhaps wanting to adopt. But Mai wants to. She holds a baby girl close to her chest, caressing the child's face and cooing into her ear.

What do you think the chances are of this baby getting adopted? Mai asks, looking at Huan.

I don't know.

Mai presses her lips against the child's forehead. The baby struggles in Mai's near-suffocating embrace. Yes, you do, she says. The Babylift is over.

The taxicab is supposed to pick them up at four o'clock, but it is late. Since Mai and Huan have already said their good-byes, they stand at the orphanage gate by the side of the road, waiting.

You know she really can't remember me, Huan says.

What do you mean?

You saw the book. There were a dozen more on the shelves. There were hundreds of babies. Do you really think she remembers one baby from over twenty-five years ago?

Mai glares at him. I think she was very nice.

I'm not saying she wasn't nice.

Why would she lie to you? What good does that do? You were here, you know they took care of you and found you a good home, and you still want more?

Why are you so upset?

You have so much to be grateful for. And all you've done since coming here is complain.

Okay, enough. Stop acting like you're so fine with everything here.

Excuse me?

I don't love it here. And neither do you. If you did, you wouldn't be living in China or Japan. We both have a right to be pissed. This country orphaned you, too.

Just because I'm not disowning this country every other minute doesn't mean I don't have problems with it.

I know, Huan says. He takes a breath. Then why don't you ever talk about them? Why can't you just tell me?

Mai shrugs, looking away. I don't know.

They sit on the dusty ground, leaning against the concrete wall, shoulder to shoulder.

I haven't said anything, Mai says, because I'm not sure.

Huan waits for several breaths until he speaks again. Why haven't you come to Vietnam until now? You must have had chances.

I always meant to. I think I got scared. I didn't want to go alone, or even when Gordon offered to come with me. When Gwen called, I knew this was my chance. She looks at Huan. I knew I could come here with you and your mom. Even if I wasn't completely ready yet.

Is it hard for you to be here? Huan says. At an orphanage?

She shakes her head.

Were you in an orphanage? Huan asks hesitantly. For all the years he's known Mai, she has never talked about this, beyond admitting a few facts. But now that she has seen so much of his past, he feels more comfortable asking about hers. He thinks she might want him to.

No, Mai says. She pauses for a long time.

My mother was from the North. No one knew who her family was when she died. So our neighbor used the money my mother left behind and some of her own to put me on a boat escaping from Saigon. She attached a note on me that I should be adopted by an American family. I still have it. The social worker gave it to me a few years ago.

Huan knows very little of the boat refugee experience except what he has read in textbooks. The escapes were difficult, horrifying even, especially if they were caught by the Communists, or worse, Thai pirates.

Do you remember the boat ride?

I remember sleeping a lot. They kept telling us kids to sleep so we wouldn't think about how hungry we were. We got sick. I don't even remember how we got to the refugee camp.

Do you remember your mother?

A little. I was very young. We used to sleep in the same bed. When she was still alive she used to comb my hair, which she let grow long because she thought it was pretty. When she died, our neighbor cut it off. It wasn't practical. I cried so much. I thought I looked like a boy.

You're lucky that you knew her.

Mai glances sideways at him, annoyed. Huan, you have a mother.

Huan pulls away from her. I know that.

Then why does it matter if your biological mother willingly gave you up or not? Why do you only care about the people who've rejected you?

I don't.

Your mother tries so hard. Mai shakes her head. It might feel suffocating sometimes, but all that effort—it's for you.

The taxi still has not arrived. Huan looks back at the dilapi-

dated convent and orphanage, his first home. Can I ask you another favor? he says.

What?

Huan hands her his mother's camera. He jogs over to stand in front of the orphanage and waits for her to take the picture.

Huan can never really complain about his parents. They always showed him love, even during his angry years when he threw their devotion into their faces, sneering that they treated him like a charity case, their trendy Vietnamese baby whose life they rescued. How could they really love him? They didn't even know him.

They forgave him for all of this. They continued to love him, even when he couldn't believe or accept it. Though the workers at the orphanage and adoption center looked after hundreds of babies, Huan realizes they aren't to blame either.

It is Sunday night in Ho Chi Minh City, and the youths of the town are out to celebrate. They don their best clothes, buff their motorpeds to a shine, and prepare to coast the streets. There is no speeding or weaving through lanes tonight, no near accidents trying to rush from one place to another. No destination. The pleasure is in the journey, in the twenty-kilometer-per-hour ride.

It is Huan's idea to go out. It isn't on the itinerary. His mother is tired from their day in the Delta, but it is their last night in Ho Chi Minh City. Tomorrow they leave for central Vietnam. Huan hears from the hotel concierge that downtown on Sunday night is not to be missed. They are on vacation. Surprised but pleased, Gwen agrees to go out with him and Mai.

They sit at a sidewalk café on a busy boulevard, with an

unobstructed view of the cruisers loitering on the streets. Children effortlessly balance on the back of motorbikes without holding on, smiling and waving at passing friends and family. High school girls with bobbed black hair sail through traffic on bicycles, their brilliant white *ao dai* fluttering behind them. Street musicians strum mandolins and whistle into flutes for spare change. Teenage boys ignite firecrackers in the alleys, splashing smoky colors into the ink night.

I'm sorry you didn't come, Huan says to his mother. Mai has left to browse at the gift shop next door. That I didn't let you. It would have been nice.

I'm just glad you went. Gwen smiles at him. He thinks this isn't enough of an apology, but she is his mother. She knows who he is.

Mai returns with a gift bag. She shows them a deep red jade bracelet she has purchased. It is smooth, unblemished, with flecks of gold in it.

It's beautiful, Gwen says. It will look lovely against your skin.

It's for a friend, Mai says. But thank you.

Though it is getting late, the streets still grow crowded. They share the roads generously, so different from during the day when people viciously maneuver for room. For cruising, the more, the better. Huan's mother cannot resist any longer. She must come closer and take pictures.

I was afraid of hating everyone here, Mai says.

Huan looks at her.

They sent us to America because of you. Mai shrugs her shoulders. Our parents saw pictures of you full of food and in rich people's arms. They thought we'd get that, too. But we came too late. We weren't babies anymore, so nobody wanted us. It was no different from Vietnam.

Nearby, a little girl claps two blocks of wood together, entic-

ing customers to come to her family's pho stall for fresh noodle soup. Eager patrons squat on plastic footstools, slurping warm broth, simmering beef strips, and vermicelli noodles.

How do you feel now? Huan asks.

I know better. It's not our parents' fault. Or anyone else's here. How could I be angry with them, expect them to do right when there was no such thing? When everything here was wrong?

Huan nods, understanding. It was a war.

It was.

They look out onto the street again. The cruisers, so proud and happy. They are young, born after the war. They only know Ho Chi Minh City, while Saigon is a memory that their parents and grandparents speak of. Their futures are pure.

A young man and woman slowly ride past the café. He is wearing a leather jacket, his hair slick with styling gel. She wears a bright yellow dress, her hair in a braid down her back. The woman's arms are wrapped around the man's waist, not because she needs to, but because they are obviously in love. When the couple passes their table, they wave. After a moment, Huan and Mai wave back.