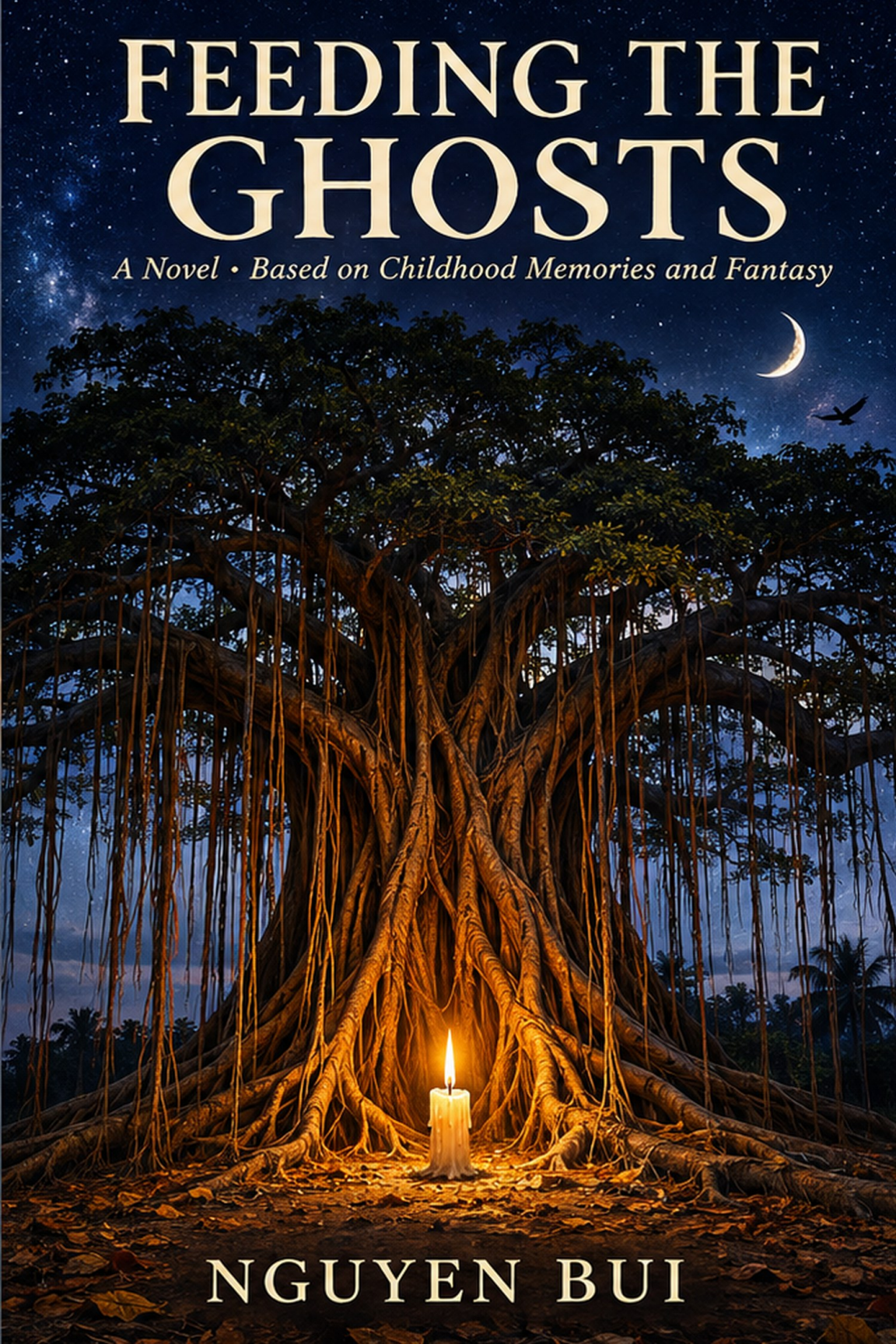
FEEDING THE GHOSTS

A Novel • Based on Childhood Memories and Fantasy



NGUYEN BUI

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Author's Note

The stories in this book are based on tales I was told as a child, by my mother and father, my older brothers and sisters, and the elders of our community. Many of them are real stories that have been passed down in Vietnam for generations: ghost stories whispered in villages, in bomb shelters, and around family altars, and carried with us across the ocean to Guam, to Michigan, and to Texas.

Every retelling in these pages is fiction. I have imagined scenes, invented characters and dialogue, and changed names, places, and events to make the stories more vivid for the reader. The folklore, the customs, and the history are drawn from real Vietnamese tradition, and I have tried to honor them faithfully.

For my mother, who kept two lamps burning.

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Prologue

Oak Street, 1998.

It's seventeen minutes past one in the morning, and I can see my breath.

I'm sitting on a wooden kitchen chair in the corner of a baby's nursery, in a small brick house in Texas that isn't mine. The baby isn't here. I sent her away with her parents at sunset, to sleep at my mother's house across town, and her crib stands empty against the yellow wall with the blanket folded at its foot. On the little table beside me are my breviary, the book of daily prayers every deacon and priest is bound to pray; a crucifix; a bottle of holy water, water a priest has blessed, which the Church has used against evil for as long as there has been a Church; a flashlight; and one blessed candle, burning. And a spiral notebook, open on my knee, with a pen.

A friend of mine, an old priest who has done this for forty years, told me to write everything down. *Write only what you see,* he said. *Not what you're afraid of. What you see.*

So I write: *1:17 a.m. Sudden cold. Can see my breath.*

The candle flame is leaning to the left. All the way over, as if someone is breathing on it from across the room. I hold my palm up beside it and feel nothing. The window is latched. I checked it twice.

I'm twenty-five years old. I'm a Catholic deacon, six months from being ordained a priest. I have a degree in philosophy and three and a half years of theology, and I can tell you in Latin what the Church teaches about angels, demons, and the souls of the dead. None of it is helping me at the moment.

Then the smell comes, faint at first and then not faint at all. Copper, like a mouthful of pennies. Like blood. And

under it something dry and dusty and fibrous that I can't place, until I can.

Rope. Old rope.

I write it down. My handwriting is bad.

Out in the hall, the floor creaks.

It's a heavy sound, slow, dragging a little, the sound of a big man in work boots who is tired. It comes down the hallway from the back of the house, one step at a time, and I sit with the pen pressed against the page and listen to it come. It stops in the doorway of the nursery. There's nothing in the doorway. I can see straight through it to the dark hall. But the floorboard in the doorway creaks again, the way a floorboard does when someone heavy shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

The canopy over the empty crib moves. A dent appears in the white cloth, as if someone has laid a hand on it, and the dent slides slowly along it, the way you'd trail your fingers along the side of a crib you were standing over.

I'm shaking now. I can't stop.

I've been here before. Not in this house; I'd never seen this house until a few days ago. But in this cold. I know it the way you know the smell of the house you grew up in. I knew it at four years old on a basement staircase in Michigan, and at five at the foot of my bed in Texas. It's the cold I've spent my whole life running from, and then, when I couldn't run anymore, chasing. It's why I'm here at one in the morning, sitting in the dark beside an empty crib that isn't mine, with a three-week-old girl's life depending on whether I understand what's in this room.

Something speaks above my head.

It comes from the ceiling, from the place where a painted beam crosses the room above the crib. It's very close and very low, a rough, wet whisper, like a man talking with his throat half closed.

She's mine.

The candle goes out.

* * *

To understand how I came to be sitting in that room, and what I found there, and what my mother did about it, you have to go back a long way. Back across an ocean, and a war, to a village between the jungle and the rice paddies, on a night with no moon in 1972.

I wasn't the first person in my family to meet the cold.

I was only the one who went looking for it.

PART ONE

Vietnam

Chapter 1

I Was Born

I don't remember the night I was born. What I have is my mother's account of it, told so many times over the years that it feels like my own memory. She told it the same way every time, and she never told it as a happy story.

It was 1972. Our village sat between the jungle and the rice paddies, far enough from the cities that a doctor was something you heard about, not something you had. The war was always close. You could hear the artillery at night, a dull thudding to the north that rattled the shutters of our house and set ripples moving across the water in the paddies. The children slept through it. The adults didn't.

My father was away with his unit. He was a soldier in the South Vietnamese army, somewhere in the jungle hunting an enemy he rarely saw. My mother was home alone with seven children, and she was pregnant with the eighth.

Her labor started after curfew. The sky was overcast, with no moon. The midwife lived in the next hamlet, and no one could walk the road at that hour without being shot by one side or the other. So the help came from our own village: an old woman who had delivered half the children on our road, two neighbor women, and a thầy, a ritual specialist who knew the old prayers. He came because my mother asked for him. In the old belief, a woman giving birth stands on the threshold between two worlds. A new soul is crossing over from the other side, and for those few hours the door between the living and the dead stands open, wide enough for a child to pass through, and wide enough for other things to come through with it. In peacetime, my mother said, that was danger enough. In a war, with so many men dead in the jungle around us and no one to bury them, the other side of

that door was crowded. You didn't stand in a doorway like that alone.

Our house was like most houses on our road: a wooden frame on a packed-earth floor, walls of woven palm, a tile roof my father had saved two years to buy. The front room held the ancestral altar, a narrow wooden shelf with my mother's parents' names written on red paper, a brass incense bowl, and a dish for fruit. Every Vietnamese home has one. It's the place in the house where the dead still live: where the family lights incense for its ancestors every morning, sets out food for them on holidays, and tells them the news. Above it on the same wall hung my father's crucifix. My mother lay in the back room on a low bamboo cot, the same cot on which she had given birth to all seven of my brothers and sisters.

They lit kerosene lamps. Before anything else, the thầy took a strip of yellow paper from his bag, wrote on it in red ink with a brush, and pasted it above the doorway. That was a bùa, a written charm. Then he burned incense and camphor, whose sharp smell spirits are said to hate, and walked slowly around the cot, murmuring the words that were supposed to keep the room closed. The neighbor women boiled water and tore cloth. My older brothers and sisters were sent to the back room and told to be quiet. They weren't. My oldest sister, Lan, told me years later that she lay awake listening to my mother try not to scream.

The village had a fear that nobody said out loud. So many men had died violently in the jungle around us, far from home and without proper burial, that people believed their spirits were wandering. They were cold and angry, and they were drawn to warmth. A newborn was the warmest thing there was. That was why the thầy was there. That was why the door was barred and a pair of scissors was laid open under the cot. Spirits are said to fear sharp iron and steel.

Open blades under a mother's bed are a warning to anything that comes reaching for the child: come any closer, and you'll be cut.

My oldest sister remembered one more thing about that night, and she was the only one who mentioned it. Every house on our road kept a dog or two, half-wild yellow dogs that slept under the porches and barked at everything: at the patrols passing on the road, at the shelling, at the moon. The old people said a dog barking at nothing was barking at something you couldn't see, and that ghosts won't come near a house where a dog is barking. All evening, while my mother labored, the dogs had been barking up and down the road.

Then, a little before midnight, they stopped. All of them, at once. My sister said it was the quietest she had ever heard the village. She remembered the old midwife lifting her head and looking at the door, and the thầy beginning to chant louder.

"When the dogs go quiet," my mother told me years later, "it isn't because nothing is there. It's because they're afraid of it."

Sometime past midnight, I was born. My mother always said I came out loud. No whimper, she said, a real cry, angry and strong. A healthy boy.

For a few minutes there was relief. The old woman wrapped me and laid me on my mother's chest. Then the bleeding started and wouldn't stop.

The neighbor women did what they knew. They packed cloth, raised her legs, pressed on her stomach. The old woman's face, my mother said, was the thing that frightened her most, because she had never seen that woman afraid. The thầy kept chanting. Outside, the shelling had come closer.

Somewhere outside, one of the dogs started barking again, and then another, and soon the whole road was barking. My oldest sister said she had never been so glad to hear a noise in her life.

At first light, as soon as the curfew lifted, a neighbor brought his ox cart to our door. They laid my mother in the back on a straw mat with me tucked against her, and he drove us down the rutted road to the district hospital. My mother remembered the jolting of the wheels and a gray sky going white, and that she kept one hand on me the whole way to make sure I was still breathing.

She lived. So did I. But for the rest of her life she believed that something had come close to our house that night, and that it had not gotten what it came for.

Chapter 2

Two Faiths

The district hospital was full of soldiers. My mother was given a bed in a long room with a dozen other women, and I was put in a small metal bassinet beside her. Through the open doorway she could see the corridor, where men on stretchers waited for a surgeon, and she could hear them. Some of them died there while she lay listening.

She was weak from losing blood, and she slept on and off through the first day. That night, she told me, she woke up to whispering.

It came from beside the bassinet. It was low and fast, several voices, she thought, though she couldn't make out any words. It sounded, she said, the way the radio sounded when my father's unit was being called on it: men talking over one another, urgent, from very far away. There was a smell with it, too, that she never forgot. Wet earth, like a freshly dug hole after rain. The lamps in the ward had been turned down. The woman in the next bed was asleep. My mother lay still and tried to tell herself it was the wounded men in the corridor. Then I started to scream. Not the cry of a hungry baby, she said, but a high, frightened shriek, and the whispering stopped the moment I began.

A nurse came with a lamp and found nothing. She told my mother she was exhausted. My mother didn't argue. She just held me for the rest of the night and didn't close her eyes.

In the morning she sent word to two places.

She had grown up Buddhist, in a family that kept an ancestral altar and believed the dead stayed near the living. The dead needed prayers and offerings, and those who died badly could become something dangerous. When she married my father, a devout Catholic, she took his faith

completely. But she never gave up her mother's. In our house, the crucifix and the ancestral altar hung on the same wall. She saw no contradiction in that. Both were protection, and with seven children and a husband at war, she wanted all the protection she could get.

So she asked for a monk from the pagoda near her native village and a priest from my father's parish. Both of them came.

The monk was old and wore faded saffron robes. He chanted a sutra over the bassinet with his beads clicking through his fingers. The priest was young. He sprinkled holy water on me, on the bed, and on the floor around it, and said the blessing in Latin. The ward smelled of sandalwood and frankincense at the same time. The other mothers watched without saying anything.

"Do you feel them, Father?" my mother asked the priest quietly. "The ones from the jungle. They came for him last night."

The young priest made the sign of the cross on my forehead. "Trust in God's protection," he said. "Nothing can take him from Christ."

She told me later that she noticed he didn't answer her question.

When the prayers were over, both men bowed to her and left. She felt a little better, but not much. To her, a hospital full of dying men was the worst place in the world for a newborn. As soon as she could stand, she took me home.

* * *

At home, my mother began her month of ở cữ, the lying-in. For a month after a birth, a Vietnamese mother isn't supposed to go outdoors, bathe in cold water, or let the wind touch her, and the baby is kept inside with her, away from strangers. My oldest sister and an aunt from the next hamlet

ran the house. They set up the bamboo cot in the back room with a clay brazier of charcoal underneath it, so that my mother lay over the warm embers day and night. They called it nằm lửa, lying by the fire. It was meant to dry out the body and drive the cold from her bones after so much blood. The room was always hot and smelled of charcoal and the ginger and black pepper the aunt cooked into everything my mother ate.

The house was guarded too. Over the doorway to the back room my sister hung a bulb of garlic and a cutting of cactus, xương rồng, whose spines were supposed to keep spirits from entering. My aunt tied a thin bracelet of mulberry wood around my wrist, a vòng dâu tằm, which mothers still put on babies today, because spirits are said to hate the smell of mulberry.

The danger wasn't only spirits. A newborn's vía, the light, fragile part of the soul, was believed to be easily frightened. Some people had a heavy vía. They brought bad luck into a house without meaning to, and a baby who met one of them would cry all night and refuse to nurse. So for that first month, visitors were kept out of the back room. On the few occasions someone came through anyway, and I screamed for hours afterward, my sister would light a twist of paper and wave the smoke over me and around the doorway to burn the bad vía away. Đốt vía, it was called. My sister did it so often that month she said she could do it in her sleep.

On the third day after my birth there was a small ceremony for the Bà Mụ, the Twelve Midwives. In the old belief, these twelve goddesses shaped every child in the womb, one making the ears, one the eyes, one the hands, and they stayed with the baby afterward to teach it to suck, to smile, to turn over. My aunt set out a tray of small dishes in twelve portions, sweet sticky rice and twelve little cups of

tea, and my mother thanked them from her cot for letting me live.

"When a baby smiles in his sleep," my mother always said, "the Bà Mụ are teaching him." When I asked her once, as a grown man, whether I had smiled in my sleep that first month, she was quiet for a moment. "You frowned," she said. "You frowned all the time. Like someone was talking to you that you didn't want to hear."

None of it was enough. My older sisters said that for the first weeks the floorboards creaked at night when no one was walking on them. The oil lamp in front of the altar went out when there was no wind. My mother slept sitting up beside my mat. Finally she went to see the oldest woman in the village, a widow who lived at the edge of the paddies and was said to see things other people couldn't.

The old woman was sitting on a mat outside her house when my mother arrived. She had a bowl of water in front of her and was moving her fingers through it slowly.

"Your son was born on a bad night," she said, before my mother could speak. "Too many men died in those trees this year. They don't hate the boy. They envy him. He has breath and they don't."

"What do I do?" my mother asked. "I've had him blessed by the Church. I've lit incense for the ancestors."

"Then take both to the banyan," the old woman said. "Your mother's faith and your husband's God. The living and the dead have to come to an agreement."

The banyan stood in a clearing a short walk into the trees, an enormous old tree with roots that hung down from its branches like ropes. There is an old saying in Vietnam: *thần cây đa, ma cây gạo*. The gods live in the banyan, the ghosts in the silk-cotton tree. Every village had a banyan like ours, usually with a little shrine at its foot, and nobody cut its branches or relieved himself near it. It was where the

village went to speak to things it couldn't see. That night my mother carried me there with the old woman beside her. The old woman set out rice wine and incense at the base of the trunk and began to chant. My mother knelt in the dirt with her rosary in one hand, the string of beads Catholics use to count their prayers, one Hail Mary for each bead, and her other palm pressed flat on the ground, and she prayed the Hail Mary over and over, and in between she prayed to her own dead parents to watch over me.

A wind came up through the clearing. My mother said it was cold, much colder than the night. It shook the hanging roots and then stopped as suddenly as it had started.

"That's enough for now," the old woman said.

My mother carried me home in the dark. She laid me down on my mat and sat watching me breathe. For the rest of her life, whenever she told this story, she ended it the same way. She would shake her head and say, "I don't know if it was finished that night. I only know he slept."

Chapter 3

The Church Road

In the months after the night at the banyan, our house settled down. My mother started every morning the same way. She polished the brass incense burner, lit three sticks of sandalwood for the ancestors, and then knelt under the crucifix to say her rosary. We children learned to walk around her quietly while she did it.

Once a week she walked to the parish church for evening Mass, two kilometers down a road that went through a stretch of old forest. She had walked it hundreds of times. She told me the story of the one time it went wrong so often, and in such detail, that I've come to see it through her eyes. This is how I see it.

* * *

It's the seventh lunar month, tháng cô hồn, the month of wandering souls, and the old women of the parish are waiting for her on the church steps like three crows on a wire.

"Chị Hai," says Bà Ba, who sells fish sauce in the market and has an opinion about everything. "You're not staying for evening Mass."

"I always stay for evening Mass."

"Not this month. You'll be walking that road in the dark."

"With a rosary in my pocket."

"Don't whistle," says the second one.

"Don't answer if somebody calls your name," says the third. "And whatever you hear behind you, don't look back. Never look back."

"God's house is the safest place in the world," my mother says. "Why should the road home be any different?"

Bà Ba sniffs. "Then why did Father Lâm buy himself a motorbike?"

My mother laughs at them and goes inside.

She stays because she needs it. That's the part she didn't say on the church steps. Her husband has been gone for eleven months, somewhere north in the jungle. The last letter came in the spring, four lines in pencil, and nothing since. At home there are eight children, the youngest a baby who frowns in his sleep and screams in the night, and who nearly died coming into the world. She hasn't slept a whole night since. The church is the only place in her week where nobody needs anything from her. She kneels in the third pew from the front, in the smell of candle wax and old wood and the frangipani the sacristan's wife puts on the altar, and for one hour she is nobody's mother and nobody's wife. She is only a woman on her knees in front of God, asking Him to keep her husband alive one more week.

So she stays. And the Mass runs long, because Father Lâm is new and likes his own sermons. By the time she comes out onto the steps, the sun is gone.

* * *

On her way back through the village she passes the tables for the wandering dead. Every family has one set outside its gate this month. Bowls of thin rice porridge, because the hungry dead have throats as narrow as a needle. Little heaps of salt and raw rice. Sugarcane cut into short pieces, popcorn, cheap hard candies in twisted paper, a stack of paper money waiting to be burned. Votive money, printed for the dead; burned, it's said to reach them on the other side, so they can buy what they need there. Incense smoking on every table, so that the whole lane is blue with it. Always outside the gate, never inside. You feed the wandering dead. You never invite them in.

Then the last house is behind her, and the forest closes over the road.

She knows this stretch the way she knows her own kitchen. The big tamarind with the split trunk where the boys climb. The place where the road dips and the rains have cut a gully. The old shrine to Ông Địa, the earth god who guards the land and everyone on it, no bigger than a birdhouse, at the bend. In daylight it's a pleasant walk, shady and green, full of birdsong. Now the light under the trees has gone the deep blue of ink in water. Her sandals slap on the packed dirt. Insects tick in the leaves. Somewhere far off, very faint, the artillery is talking to itself in the north.

Halfway through the forest, she realizes how dark it has gotten, and how far she still has to go.

Then a twig snaps off to her left.

She stops. She looks into the trees. Vines, black trunks, the gray shapes of leaves. Nothing. She walks faster. A moment later, she hears leaves rustling beside the road. Not behind her. Beside her, keeping pace. When she walks, it moves. When she stops, it stops.

She looks to her left, and then to her right.

There is a black dog on each side of the road.

They're enormous, bigger than any village dog, their fur coarse and matted and black all the way through, so black they're darker than the forest behind them. Later she will always call them wolves, though she knows perfectly well there are no wolves in that part of Vietnam. Because of their size. And because of their eyes. They don't shine yellow the way an animal's eyes shine in the dark. They're pale, almost white, like the eyes of a blind old man. And they look at her the way a person looks at you.

They walk beside her without a sound.

That's what frightens her most, more than their size. In her village, dogs are protection. Every child knows that ghosts won't come near a house where a dog is barking. Some old families set a stone dog by their gate to guard the side of the world that living dogs can't see. A dog is supposed to bark at the dead. These two don't bark. They don't pant or sniff the ground or growl. They walk with their heads level, step for step with her, and she understands, with a coldness that starts in her stomach and spreads outward, that whatever they are, they aren't on her side.

She wants to turn around and look at the road behind her. She wants it so badly her neck aches. She hears Bà Ba's voice, sour as fish sauce. *Never look back.*

She keeps her eyes ahead.

* * *

Then the voices start.

She will never be sure whether they come from the trees or from somewhere inside her own head. They're low and wet, many of them, speaking a Vietnamese so old she can barely follow it, the Vietnamese of her great-grandmother's generation. She catches pieces of it. Cold ground. Names nobody remembers. And then, clearly, one phrase she will never forget: *the child born under the dark sky.*

Her son. They're talking about her son.

"Hail Mary, full of grace," she says out loud. Her voice comes out thin and wrong. She keeps walking. Her legs are shaking. "The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women."

The dogs keep pace. The voices get louder. They're all around her now, in the leaves overhead, in the ditch beside the road. Mumbling, overlapping, hungry. She thinks of the tables back in the village with their bowls of porridge, and

she has a sudden, terrible thought. *We fed them. All month, we've been feeding them. And they're still hungry.*

Ahead of her, the road opens into a small clearing. She knows this clearing. On the far side of it the trees thin out, and beyond them are the paddies and the lights of her own hamlet, close enough to shout to.

The way out is blocked.

A tangle of dead bamboo lies across the road on the far side of the clearing. A dozen stalks or more, gray and brittle, crossed over each other like a fence, piled as high as her waist. It wasn't there this afternoon. She walked this road four hours ago.

Every child in the village knows about dead bamboo across a path. The spirits use it. It's a trap, a fence to keep the living from getting home.

She stops at the edge of it. Behind her, she hears the soft pad of feet, and without turning she knows that the two dogs have stepped out of the trees into the clearing, and lowered their heads.

She tries to climb over.

The moment her foot touches the bamboo, a cold goes up her leg as if she's stepped into a river in winter. Her knee buckles. She nearly falls. Behind her, she hears the dogs start forward.

She drops to her knees in the dirt. She pulls the rosary out of her pocket, holds the crucifix between her palms, squeezes her eyes shut, and shouts the prayer to Saint Michael as loud as she can, so loud it hurts her throat. Michael is the archangel who, in Catholic belief, threw Satan out of heaven, and his prayer is the Church's oldest plea for protection against evil. She has murmured it with the congregation a thousand times, at the end of Mass, since she was a girl. She has never once said it alone, out loud, in the dark.

"Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle! Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil!"

Cold air on her face. Something very close, close enough to touch. She keeps her eyes shut. She keeps shouting.

"May God rebuke him, we humbly pray! And do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host—"

She forgets the next words. Her mind goes completely white. She kneels in the dirt with something breathing cold on her face, and she can't remember the prayer.

So she says the only thing she can think of. It isn't Latin and it isn't in any prayer book. It's what she has said every morning of her life, kneeling at her altar.

"Má. Ba. Help me."

* * *

Then the cold is gone.

She hears crickets. Frogs in the paddies beyond the trees. Wind moving in the leaves.

When she opens her eyes, the clearing is empty. There are no dogs, and in the dust where they were standing there are no tracks. The bamboo has been pushed aside, scattered to both edges of the road, as if someone has cleared the way for her.

She gets up and runs.

* * *

My oldest sister, Lan, remembers her coming through the door that night with her face wet and gray and her knees black with dirt. She fell down in front of the altar and tried to light incense, and her hands shook so badly she burned her fingers on the match. Then she went to the back room and sat beside my mat, and she didn't move until morning.

The next day she did something she had never done before. Every night for the rest of that month, she set a small

table outside our gate, the way the other families did, with a bowl of thin porridge, a little salt and rice, and three sticks of incense. When the incense burned down, she threw the salt and rice out into the road in four directions, to tell the hungry dead that the meal was over and they should move on. The neighborhood children ran up and grabbed the candies from the table, and she let them.

"I gave them something to eat," she said, "so they would leave my son alone."

She told that story many times, and she never changed a detail. Except one. She never told anyone, not even my father, about the part where she forgot the prayer to Saint Michael and called on her dead parents instead. She told me that only once, when I was grown, and she seemed embarrassed by it, as if she'd failed some test.

"Who do you think answered, Má?" I asked her. "Saint Michael, or your parents?"

She looked at me for a long time.

"Did you hear what I said about the bamboo?" she said. "Somebody moved it. Does it matter which one?"

Chapter 4

The Long-Breasted Ghost

I was not much more than a year old the afternoon the shelling reached our village. I don't remember it. My older brothers and sisters do, and this is the story the way they told it to me, and the way my mother told it to them that day.

It started with a vibration in the floor, deep and steady, strong enough to make the brass burner on the altar rattle. Then the alarm went up through the village, and the gunfire started in the hills. It wasn't distant anymore.

My mother grabbed me, shouted for the others, and herded all of us out the back door to the shelter my father had dug into the clay behind the house before he left. It was a hole with dirt steps and a plank roof covered in earth. We crowded down into it and she pulled the wooden hatch shut over us.

It was dark and it smelled of wet soil and sweat. The shelter was about the size of a bed, with a bench cut into the clay along one wall and a clay jar of drinking water in the corner. There were nine of us in a space meant for five. My brothers sat with their knees against their chests. Every time a shell landed, the whole shelter jumped, and dirt sifted down from the roof onto our heads and into our hair and down the backs of our shirts. The younger children started to cry. My mother knew that frightened children make noise, and noise in a shelter was dangerous. She lit the small oil lamp, held me in her lap, and pulled the others in close.

"Listen to me," she said. "Look at my face and listen. I'm going to tell you a story from when I was a little girl."

My brothers say the artillery didn't stop, but after a few minutes they stopped hearing it.

"In my village," she said, "there was a ghost called Ma Vú Dài. The Long-Breasted Ghost. When she was alive, she was a mother who died before her time, and her spirit couldn't rest. At night she went looking for children. Especially children who slept with their mouths open."

My brothers and sisters shut their mouths tight. She noticed and went on.

"It started one summer when it was so hot that everyone slept with the shutters open. First the blacksmith's little boy got sick. He woke up saying his chest felt heavy, and by noon his skin was gray. When he tried to drink water, he threw up black mud, as if he'd been swallowing ditch water all night. In three days he was dead. Then a girl down the road got sick the same way. Then a child on the other side of the paddies. Parents sat up all night with lamps burning, and it still happened.

"Then a farmer named Old Ba decided to stay awake and watch. He sat in the dark holding his sickle, watching his little daughter sleep. Around two in the morning, the room went cold and his lamp went out by itself. Then he heard something above him. A wet, sliding sound.

"He looked up at the rafters. There was a woman up there, upside down, holding onto the beams like a spider. Her skin was the color of a drowned body and her hair hung down like river weeds. And her breasts were long, so long they hung down like two pale snakes.

"She came down without a sound and hung over his daughter, who was asleep with her mouth open. She put one breast into the child's mouth. And the little girl began to drink, because in her dream it was milk. But it wasn't milk. It was the mud."

A shell landed close enough that dirt poured off the roof. My mother didn't stop.

"Old Ba screamed and swung his sickle. It went right through her neck like she was smoke. She turned and hissed at him and melted into black mist and went down through the floorboards.

"In the morning he ran through the village telling everyone. Mothers tied cloth under their children's chins at night to keep their mouths shut. People hung iron nails over their doors, because spirits can't stand the touch of iron. Nothing worked. So the elders collected money and sent to the mountains for a Taoist priest, a master of the old Chinese arts of charms and exorcism, the kind of man you only called when everything else had failed."

She was quiet for a second, and when she spoke again her voice was different.

"I was there when he came. I was about your age," she said to my oldest sister. "He wore yellow robes and carried a sword made of peach wood. Peach wood is the one wood demons fear; a sword carved from it can cut a ghost the way steel cuts a man. He didn't talk to anyone. He sat in the middle of the village and wrote charms on yellow paper with red ink. That night he set up an altar in the square and burned incense and chanted for hours. Nothing happened. Then the wind stopped. It got so cold we could see our breath, in the middle of summer.

"Then we heard her scream from the top of the banyan tree. She came down at him with her hands out. He didn't move. He hit a brass bell with his sword and shouted one word, and the charms on the altar caught fire all at once. She burned up in the air like paper. Afterward there was only white ash, floating away. No child in our village got sick like that again."

When she finished, my brothers say, it was quiet in the shelter. It took them a moment to understand that it was quiet outside too. The shelling had moved on.

My mother pushed the hatch up and daylight came in. "It's over," she said. "Come up."

My oldest brother, Hùng, wasn't ready to let it go. "In my friend's village they tell it different," he said. "They say she lives in the trees and catches people walking at night."

"Every village tells it different," my mother said. And she was right. Ma Vú Dài is one of the best-known ghosts in southern Vietnam, and no two provinces agree on her. In some versions she sits high in a tree in a white robe, her hair hanging over her face, and drops down on travelers who are out after dark. She throws her long breasts over her shoulders, or forces the traveler to nurse, and in the morning the victim is found unconscious by the side of the road with his mouth full of dirt. In the 1960s, a version of the story even went around Chí Hòa Prison in Saigon, where people whispered that she haunted the cellblocks at night.

Mud. It was always mud, in every version. The ghost offers milk, and what she gives is earth. I didn't think much about that as a child. I thought about it a great deal later.

They climbed out. Two houses on our road were gone, and there was a crater in the paddy behind us still smoking. My mother stood at the top of the steps with me on her hip and looked at it for a long time.

An old man and his grandson had lived in one of the houses that were gone. That night, before she cooked dinner for her own children, my mother made a pot of thin rice porridge and carried two bowls of it down the road to the rubble, with incense and a candle. She set them on a broken piece of their doorstep and stood there praying until the candle burned down. People who die suddenly, she said, don't always know they're dead. Someone has to tell them, and feed them, and show them the way.

She told the story of Ma Vú Dài to every one of her children, and later to her grandchildren. When I was old

enough, I asked her why she told a ghost story to frightened children in the middle of a bombardment.

"Because a ghost can be beaten," she said. "The priest beat her. I wanted you to hear about something that could be beaten."

Chapter 5

The Soldier Who Came Home

Not long after the shelling, a message reached my mother: my father was coming home. A bullet had gone through his left shoulder during a firefight, and he was being discharged from the front.

My mother didn't treat it as good luck. A man coming home alive from that war was a debt, she said, and debts had to be paid. The house was cleaned top to bottom. The brass on the altar was polished. She arranged jasmine, mangoes, and small cups of rice wine for the ancestors and lit thick bundles of incense.

"Your father lived because your grandparents covered his head," she told my brothers and sisters. Then she wiped her hands on her apron and knelt under the crucifix and thanked the Virgin Mary and Saint Michael too. She wasn't going to leave anyone out.

Not every family on our road got that kind of message. For every soldier coming home there seemed to be several who weren't, and my mother spent those weeks in other people's houses. She helped Catholic widows prepare for Requiem Masses, the Masses said for the souls of the dead, and helped Buddhist families arrange offerings for the monks. She sat up with mothers who didn't want to be alone.

The funeral rites mattered more than anything. People believed a man who died violently, far from home, without proper rites, could become a vong hồn, a wandering soul. A spirit like that didn't know where to go. It drifted along the edges of the living world, lost and resentful, and envious of everyone who was still breathing.

The difference between a wandering soul and an ancestor, as my mother explained it, came down to a few

simple things the living had to do. A body had to be washed and dressed and buried properly, with the right prayers. Then the family wrote the dead person's name on a wooden tablet, a bài vị, and set it on the altar at home. As long as someone lit incense in front of that tablet and remembered the anniversary of the death, the soul had a home. It became an ancestor, and ancestors look after their families. A soul without a tablet, without a grave, without anyone to say its name, had nowhere to go. That was a cô hồn, a lonely soul. It went where there was warmth.

Every family that lost a son in those years was trying to get him a tablet. That was why the funerals mattered so much, even when there was no body to bury. Some families buried a shirt, or a photograph, or a handful of earth from the province where their son had died.

During one of those gatherings, while the women sat on mats rolling incense sticks, someone told a story from a hamlet near the rubber plantation. My mother heard it there and brought it home.

* * *

A family on the edge of the plantation had an only son, Minh. Months earlier they had been told he was missing in action. They grieved, but they refused to hold a funeral. There was no body, and as long as there was no body, there was hope. His mother wouldn't let anyone write his name on a tablet. To her, putting his name on the altar would have been the same as killing him.

Then one rainy evening, Minh walked through the front gate.

He was in his torn uniform, his face pale and caked with dried mud, and his eyes looked past everyone. His parents wept and held him and thanked heaven. They killed their best chickens and invited the neighbors and celebrated.

But Minh didn't talk about the war. He hardly talked at all. He wouldn't go outside during the day. He sat in the darkest corner of the back room wrapped in a blanket, in that heat, and came out only after the sun went down. The quiet boy who had left for the army had become someone who flew into rages over nothing. And he couldn't stand anything holy. When his mother hung a small wooden cross by his sleeping mat, he tore it down and broke it under his heel. One night his father woke to the sound of breaking pottery and found Minh at the ancestral altar, throwing the incense urns and the ancestors' tablets onto the floor and cursing in a voice that didn't sound like his.

The family was ashamed. They thought he had gone mad from the fighting. They locked the gate and told the neighbors to stay away while he recovered. The neighbors respected that.

About a month later, people noticed the smell. It was sweet and rotten, and it drifted from that house on the evening breeze. Finally a group of men from the hamlet broke the gate down.

They found the mother and father on the floor by the overturned table. They had been dead for days. There wasn't a mark on them, but they were wasted, as if they had starved to death in their own house with food in the kitchen. Minh was nowhere.

Three weeks later, a soldier from Minh's unit arrived with his belongings. Minh had been killed by a mortar shell a month before. It happened on the same day his parents saw him walk through their gate.

* * *

My mother told us this story in the evening, by the light of the altar candles. My brothers remember that she was angry when she told it. Not frightened. Angry.

"This is why we do the rites," she said. "Every soul has to be sent home properly, with light and incense and prayer. That family loved their son. But they left the door open, and something else came through it."

My oldest sister asked whether it had really been Minh who came home, or something wearing him.

My mother thought about that for a long time. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe it was him, and he didn't know he was dead, and he was so hungry he ate his own parents' lives without meaning to. Maybe it was something else that found an empty place and climbed into it." She looked at the altar. "It doesn't matter. Either way, nobody had told him where to go."

Afterward, the hamlet held the funeral the parents had refused to hold. The neighbors wrote Minh's name on a tablet and set it on the altar of the empty house next to his parents' tablets, and a monk came and chanted for all three of them. People said the smell left the house the same night.

Chapter 6

My Father Returned

The morning my father came home, our road was hung with red paper, the color of luck, and the neighbors set off firecrackers, whose noise frightens away bad spirits, until the air was white with smoke. People brought dragon fruit, sticky rice, and jars of rice wine. Pots of pork and lemongrass broth simmered over fires in our yard. In a village that had spent the year reading casualty lists, it was the first celebration anyone could remember.

My father sat on the bench on our porch in a clean white shirt with his shoulder bandaged underneath it. My mother said he smiled at everyone, but his eyes didn't move with his face.

All afternoon, people came to him quietly. Mothers, widows, old men asked about sons who hadn't come back. My mother saw him take an old woman's hands in his good one.

"He was next to me at the river, Auntie," he told her. "He didn't suffer. He kept the rest of us alive. I promise you that."

My mother never knew if it was true. She thought he would have said it either way.

In the weeks after, the house went back to its routine. My father got his strength back slowly. His laugh came back a little at a time. In the evenings he sat on the porch smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, and when he started to talk about the war, he told only the funny stories at first. The pranks in the barracks, the sergeant who was afraid of chickens. The stranger stories came later.

I heard them for years, on that porch and later on a porch in Texas, until I knew them by heart. This is the one he told most often.

* * *

"We were on a night patrol deep in the jungle," my father would say. "No villages anywhere near. We'd been on half rations for three days. Everybody was starving.

"Around midnight we came to a little pond in a clearing. The water was so still it looked like black glass. We knelt down to fill our canteens, and a soldier came out of the trees on the other side.

"He had on our uniform, but his helmet was down low and I couldn't see his face. Nobody knew him. We figured he was a scout from another unit. He didn't ask for the password. He just pointed at a spot along the edge and said, quietly, 'Fish there. The water is full tonight.'

"We had hand lines and some scraps for bait. We threw them in and the fish practically jumped out at us. Carp, catfish, big ones. Within twenty minutes we had more than we could carry. We were laughing like children. We took off our field jackets, tied the bottoms shut with cord, and filled them up like sacks. They were heavy and moving, full of fish.

"I turned around to thank the man. He was gone. No sound, nothing moving in the brush. Just gone."

At this point my father always stopped to take a drag on his cigarette. Somebody always asked, "Did you find his unit?"

"We walked back to camp feeling like kings," he'd say. "The mess sergeant laughed and said, 'Let's see what you've got.' I untied my jacket and dumped it out on the tray."

He would shake his head.

"There were no fish. It was black mud and rot and human waste. Every jacket was full of it. Two of my men threw up

right there. We stood there scrubbing our hands in the dirt. We had handled that for an hour, thinking it was fish.

"In the morning five of us took our rifles and went back. We followed our own boot prints through the mud, all the way back to the clearing."

Another pause.

"There was no pond. There had never been a pond. It was a dry field of tall grass with two water buffalo grazing in it. No water anywhere. Not even mud on the ground."

There was a coda to the story that he didn't always tell, and when he did, it was usually late, after the children were supposed to be asleep. I heard it for the first time when I was about ten, lying on the floor inside the screen door in Texas.

"There was an old sergeant in our company, from the Mekong Delta," my father said. "He heard us talking about it that morning and he went white. He took me aside and asked me, 'Did anyone go into the water?' I said no. We fished from the bank. He said, 'Then you're lucky.'

"He said it was a ma da. A drowned ghost. You know about them. The ones who drown, their souls are stuck in the water. They can't go on until they get someone to take their place. So they pull swimmers under, or they call people down to the river at night. He said a ma da can make a pond look full of fish. It shows you what you want. And sooner or later, one of the hungry boys wades out to grab the biggest one, and he doesn't come back up."

My father would stop there and be quiet.

"We were five boys who hadn't eaten in three days," he said. "If that fish had been a meter farther out, I would have gone in after it. I know I would have."

He'd put out his cigarette and look at the dark line of the trees.

"The war tore up the land with bullets and bombs," he said once, the version I remember best. "But there were

older things out there. Things that played with hungry men. You didn't just fight the enemy in that jungle. You walked next to ghosts."

My father did not believe things easily. He was the most practical man I ever knew. That's why I've always believed this story.

Chapter 7

The Hidden Boy

The year after my father came home, Ghost Month came early in the summer rains, and it took my brother Hùng.

He was thirteen that year, the oldest boy, and he had the kind of fearlessness that worried my mother more than any of the rest of us. He climbed the coconut palms behind the church for a dare. He swam the irrigation canal in flood season. He went out after curfew to set traps for field rats, and came home with a string of them over his shoulder and a grin, and took the beating my father gave him without making a sound. My father, I think, was secretly proud of him. My mother lit an extra stick of incense for him every morning.

"That one," she used to say, "walks like he has a second life in his pocket."

The seventh lunar month that year began in late July. The heat sat on the village like a wet blanket, and the rain came every afternoon at three, hard and straight down, and stopped at four as if someone had turned off a tap. The paddies were brimming. The frogs were so loud at night that my father, who had slept through artillery for three years, complained he couldn't sleep.

On the first day of the month, the old women went from house to house with the same warnings they gave every year: no swimming in the canal, nothing left on the line after dark, and children inside by sunset. My mother repeated every one of them at dinner. Then she looked straight at Hùng and repeated them again.

"Yes, Má," he said. He was already looking out the door.

* * *

The fifteenth of the month was the big day, the full moon, when every family in the village held its offering for the wandering souls. My sister Lan, who was fifteen that summer and whose memory is the best of anyone in our family, described it to me so many times that I can see it as if I had been old enough to remember.

All along our road, tables stood outside the gates. Each one had its bowls of thin rice porridge and its little heaps of salt and raw rice, its popcorn and sugarcane and candied ginger, its stacks of gold and silver paper money, its paper clothes cut in the shapes of shirts and trousers, so the dead would have something to wear. Incense smoked on every table. At the pagoda, the monks had set up a long altar under an awning, piled high with fruit and cakes, and chanted the sutras for the lonely souls from midafternoon until the light began to go.

The children of the village waited for the end. That was the best part of the day. When the prayers were finished, the paper money was burned in big iron drums, the salt and rice were thrown into the road, and then the families gave away whatever was left on the tables. It was bad luck to carry an offering for the cô hồn back into the house. So the children scrambled for it. They called it giật cô hồn, snatching from the ghosts. Boys dove for oranges rolling in the dirt. Girls held up the fronts of their shirts like sacks and filled them with candy. At the pagoda, a rich family from the market had wrapped coins in red paper and thrown them into the crowd by the handful.

Hùng came home at dusk with his pockets full of coins and candied ginger, his knees black with mud, his shirt torn at the shoulder. He dumped everything out on the porch for us younger ones and stood over us like a general distributing loot.

"There's more at the river end," he said. "The family by the bridge, they haven't even started yet. They have mooncakes."

"The sun is down," my mother said from the doorway.

"Má, it's ten minutes."

"The sun is down," she said again.

He went anyway. Lan saw him go. He slipped around the side of the house when my mother turned back to the stove, and he went down the road toward the bridge at a run, his bare feet slapping in the puddles. Lan said she almost called his name after him. Then she remembered the rule and closed her mouth.

She has never forgiven herself for that. She knows it's foolish. She has told me so. She still hasn't forgiven herself.

* * *

By the time dinner was on the mat, he wasn't back.

My father went down to the bridge with a flashlight. The family there had finished their offering an hour before. Yes, they said, Hùng had come. He'd grabbed two mooncakes and an orange and gone off laughing with another boy, the fisherman's son, Tý, toward the bamboo along the canal. They hadn't seen him since.

My father went to the fisherman's house. Tý was home, eating his dinner. He said Hùng had been right behind him on the path along the canal, and then he wasn't. Tý thought he had cut through the bamboo to beat him home. He'd called out for him once. No answer. Then he had remembered it was the night of the full moon of Ghost Month, and he had run home without looking back.

By nine o'clock half the men on our road were out with lanterns and flashlights, walking the canal path, wading the edges of the paddies, poking with poles into the water at the culverts. My father organized them the way he would have

organized a patrol, in pairs, each pair a section of bank. The women stood in a knot at our gate. My mother stood in the middle of them with her rosary in one hand and nothing in the other, because she had already burned every stick of incense in the house.

Around midnight, the old thầy came. He was the same man who had chanted over my mother the night I was born, Ông Tư, though people only called him Thầy. He was very old by then and walked with a stick. He listened to what had happened. Then he asked one question.

"Was the boy carrying offerings? From the cô hồn tables?"

"Yes," my mother said. "Candy. Mooncakes. Coins."

The old man nodded slowly. "Then they may think he took something of theirs," he said. "They may have taken him to keep him."

Every Vietnamese child of that time knew about ma giấu, the hiding ghosts. The stories were told in every village. A child would disappear at dusk, and the family would search all night and find nothing. Then in the morning, or the next day, or the next, the child would turn up somewhere impossible: wedged into the middle of a thick clump of bamboo where no grown man could reach, sitting on the high fork of a tree he could never have climbed, curled up in a dry well. Sometimes they were unharmed. Sometimes they were feverish and didn't know their own names. Often, people said, their mouths were stuffed full of dirt, or leaves, or earthworms, and they told the same story. A kind woman, or an old man, had met them on the path, and taken them by the hand, and given them sweet rice and cakes. A feast. What they had been eating was mud.

"What do we do?" my father asked. My mother said it was the first time she had ever heard him ask a thầy for anything.

"You make noise," the old man said. "The hiding ghosts don't like noise. Bang pots. Beat the drums. Ring every bell you have. And call his name." He looked at my mother. "Tonight you call his name. All of you, out loud, together. The rule is for a person alone in the dark. You aren't alone. Let them hear how many of you there are."

* * *

So that's what our village did, for the rest of that night.

Lan said she had never heard anything like it before or since. Every family on our road came out with a pot or a pan or a gong. The pagoda brought its big drum on a cart and two monks took turns beating it. The church rang its bell, over and over, until the young priest's arms gave out and the sacristan took over. The men walked the canal banks in lines, banging pots with sticks, and every few steps someone shouted *Hùng! Hùng ơi!* and fifty voices took it up. The sound went out across the paddies in the moonlight, and the dogs of three hamlets barked and howled along with it.

My mother walked with them. She wouldn't stay at the gate. She walked the canal path in her sandals with her rosary wrapped around her fist, and every time the men called his name she called it too, louder than any of them.

Lan stayed home with the rest of us. She sat on the porch with me asleep in her lap and the younger children huddled around her, and she listened to the noise going back and forth across the fields, all night, and she prayed the only prayer she could think of, which was *please, please, please.*

* * *

They found him a little after dawn.

It was Tý, the fisherman's son, who found him. He had gone back to the canal at first light, alone, because he couldn't stand it. On the path along the water, where the

bamboo grew thickest, he heard something. It sounded like a puppy whimpering, he said. He got down on his hands and knees and peered into the middle of the bamboo clump, a dense, thorny thicket of living stalks as thick as a man's wrist, so tightly packed that you couldn't have slid a hand between them.

In the very center of it, in a space no bigger than a rice basket, Hùng was curled up on his side.

Tý screamed for the men. It took them nearly an hour to get him out. There was no way in. Every stalk around him was whole and green and rooted. No opening, no gap, no broken cane. They had to cut through with machetes, one stalk at a time, from the outside in, while my mother knelt on the path and talked to him through the leaves and he whimpered and didn't answer.

When they finally lifted him out, my father carried him home in his arms. Hùng was thirteen and nearly as tall as my mother, and my father carried him the whole way with his bad shoulder and never put him down.

Hùng's lips were black. His mouth was full of earth. Lan helped my mother clean it out, scooping it from his cheeks and under his tongue with her fingers, and there was so much of it. Wet black mud from the canal bank, with grass roots in it, and bits of dead leaf, and something that moved that Lan threw out the window and would never describe to me. His ears were packed with it too. His pockets were full of mud, where the coins and the candied ginger had been.

He had a fever for three days. Ông Tư came and burned charms over him and tied a red thread around his wrist, to bind his soul to his body so it couldn't wander off again. The young priest came and anointed him with holy oil, the sacrament the Church gives the gravely sick. My mother sat by his mat and didn't sleep.

On the third night the fever broke, and he opened his eyes and asked for water, and then he told them what had happened.

He had been running along the canal path behind Tý, he said, in the last light. A woman stepped out of the bamboo onto the path in front of him. She was young and pretty and wore a white áo dài, and she smiled at him and said his name. She said her family was having a feast, the best feast of the whole month, and he was invited, and there would be more food than he had ever seen. She took his hand. Her hand was cold, he said, but soft. She led him into the bamboo, and the bamboo opened for them like a curtain, and on the other side there was a courtyard full of lanterns and long tables, and people, many people, all very thin, all very friendly, who made room for him and filled his bowl.

He ate sticky rice with mung beans, and sweet soup, and roast pork, and mooncakes. He ate until he was full and then he kept eating, because they kept filling his bowl and smiling at him, and it seemed rude to stop. He said it was the best food of his life.

At some point, he said, he heard drums. Far away at first, and then closer. And people calling his name. The thin people at the table stopped smiling. They looked at each other. The woman in white leaned over and told him to stay quiet, to stay with them, that if he answered, he would have to go back and he would never be invited again. He said he wanted to stay. He said that very clearly to my mother, and she said it was the most frightening thing he ever said to her. *I wanted to stay, Má.*

But the drums kept coming, and the bells, and then he heard my mother's voice above all the others, calling his name, and he started to cry. When he started to cry, the lanterns went out. And he was lying in the dark with something pressing in on him from every side, and his

mouth was full of something that wasn't food, and he couldn't move.

* * *

Hùng is in his sixties now. He lives in Houston and has grandchildren, and he's the most practical man in our family, an engineer who doesn't believe in much of anything he can't measure. He's never told this story himself, not once that I know of. If you ask him, he'll smile and say he was a stupid kid who ate something bad at a festival and wandered into the bamboo with a fever and got stuck.

I asked him once, when we were both grown, how he got into the middle of that clump of bamboo.

He was quiet for a while. "I don't know," he said. "I've thought about it for fifty years. I can't figure it out."

"Do you remember the woman?"

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he got up and went to the refrigerator for another beer, and when he came back he asked me about my kids. He never answered. But I noticed that he has never once eaten sticky rice with mung beans, not at Tết, the Lunar New Year, not at weddings, not at our mother's table. He passes the plate along without a word.

My father went back to the canal a few days after Hùng recovered, Lan told me. He walked around the cut bamboo clump for a long time, looking for the way in, the gap a thin boy could have crawled through. He got down on his knees and studied it. He didn't find one.

When he came home he went into the front room, where the ancestral altar was, and lit three sticks of incense. My mother said she had never once seen him do that without being asked. He stood there with his head bowed for a long time. Then he went out to the porch and sat down and rolled

a cigarette, and his hands shook so much he spilled the tobacco.

"I fought for three years in the jungle," he told her that night. "I thought I'd seen everything there was in this country that could kill a man." He shook his head. "I never saw anything like that."

From then on, every year on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, my father set out the offering table at our gate himself. He did it in Saigon, and he did it in Texas, and he never explained it to anyone. And none of his children ever went out after dark during Ghost Month again, not even Hùng.

Especially not Hùng.

Chapter 8

The Man in the Corner

After his discharge, my father was given a desk position with a government office in Saigon, keeping the records of soldiers' pensions. In the spring of 1974 we left the village and moved to the city.

My mother cried the whole day we left. She went out to her parents' graves at dawn and swept them one last time, pulled every weed, and lit a whole bundle of incense. She told them where we were going and promised to come back for Thanh Minh every year, the spring festival when families go out to sweep and repair their ancestors' graves. She kept that promise exactly once.

Saigon in 1974 was the loudest place any of us had ever been. We lived on the second floor of a narrow house at the end of a hẻm, one of the alleys that branch off the big streets like veins, so narrow that two motorbikes couldn't pass without one pulling into a doorway. Our street was a few blocks from the American Embassy. The house belonged to a Chinese-Vietnamese family who ran a noodle shop on the ground floor. From four in the morning, the smell of their broth came up through the floorboards: beef bones, star anise, charred onion, ginger. My brothers still say that it's the smell of Saigon to them, and that no phở in America has ever smelled quite right.

There were three rooms for ten of us, soon eleven, then twelve. My first younger sister was born that summer in a Saigon hospital, with a doctor. My mother said it was so easy she was almost disappointed. The second was born in February of 1975, in the last spring of the old country.

We children loved the city. There were movie theaters showing Hong Kong kung fu films, and street vendors

selling everything: sugarcane juice, grilled corn, sticky rice with coconut, balut, shaved ice with syrup. There were American soldiers' leftover comic books for sale on the sidewalks, and Lan and Hùng learned to read English from Superman before they ever saw a schoolbook. In the evenings the whole alley sat outside on low plastic stools in the cooler air, the old men playing Chinese chess and the women gossiping, and the children ran up and down between the stools until they were sent to bed.

And in our front room, on the second floor, above the noodle shop, there was a man in the corner.

* * *

I was two. I don't remember him at all. This story belongs to my mother and Lan.

It began in the fall, about six months after we moved in. I had just started talking in earnest, and I talked to everyone: to the noodle shop owner, to the cat, to the ducks hanging in the window of the shop across the alley. So when my mother found me one afternoon standing in the corner of our front room, waving and chattering at the wall, she didn't think anything of it.

"Who are you talking to?" she asked.

"Chú," I said. Uncle. I pointed at the corner. "Chú ướt." Wet uncle.

She looked at the corner. It was an empty corner, between the window and the family altar my father had set up on a shelf, with the photograph of my mother's parents and the crucifix above it.

"What uncle?" she said.

I waved at the corner again. "Chú lính," I said. Soldier uncle.

My mother said a cold feeling started at the top of her head and went all the way down her back. She picked me up

and took me into the kitchen and gave me a piece of candy. When she came back into the front room, she stood in the doorway and looked at the corner for a long time. There was nothing there.

But I went back to that corner almost every day for weeks. I'd stand there and wave and talk in my baby language, and sometimes I'd laugh as if someone had made a face at me. When Lan asked me what the soldier uncle looked like, I told her he was all wet, and that his shirt was red, and that he was sad.

"Why is he sad?" Lan asked.

"He wants Ba," I said. My father.

* * *

My mother told my father that night, after we were asleep. Lan, pretending to sleep on the mat next to theirs, heard every word.

My father didn't say anything for a long time. Then he got up, went into the front room in the dark, and lit the lamp on the altar. When my mother went to see what he was doing, he was kneeling in front of the corner where I always stood, with his forehead almost touching the floor.

"Sơn," he said. "Sơn, forgive me."

* * *

My father told the whole story only once in my hearing, many years later in Texas, after Ông Sáu's anniversary meal, when he'd had a little too much of the rice wine. I was in college by then. I've never forgotten it.

Sơn was his closest friend in the army. They'd been in the same platoon for two years. Sơn was from a village not far from ours, an only son, his mother's whole world. He was funny and could sing, and on bad nights he sang the old folk

songs from home until the whole platoon was half asleep and half in tears.

In the firefight at the river, the one where my father was wounded, Sơn was shot in the stomach. It wasn't quick. My father dragged him behind a fallen tree on the riverbank with his own shoulder bleeding, and held him, and pressed a field dressing against the wound that soaked through in seconds. They were pinned down for most of an afternoon. My father held his friend in the mud at the water's edge for four hours, and Sơn talked to him the whole time, about his mother, about a girl, about the food at home. Toward the end he was cold, even in that heat, and kept asking for water, which my father couldn't give him because of the wound. He died a little before dark, when the helicopters were already coming.

They couldn't take his body out. There wasn't room on the helicopter for the dead, only the wounded. My father was pulled aboard with his shoulder strapped up, and Sơn was left on the riverbank under a poncho, and the unit was supposed to come back for him. They never did. That ground was lost two days later.

When my father came home and Sơn's mother came to our porch at the celebration and took his hands, he looked into her face and told her what he thought she needed to hear. *He didn't suffer. He kept the rest of us alive.*

Neither of those things was true. He'd kept no one alive; he'd been shot in the stomach in the first minute of the fight. And he had suffered terribly for four hours, cold and thirsty, asking for his mother.

"I lied to her," my father said in Texas, twenty years later, with his glass in his hand. "I thought it was a kindness. And so his mother made him a funeral with no body, for a boy who died fast and brave and didn't suffer. A boy who never existed." He shook his head. "They gave the wrong boy a

funeral. The real one was still lying in the mud by the river, cold, asking for water, and no one ever came back for him."

* * *

In Saigon in 1974, my father knelt in front of that empty corner and wept.

Then he did what he should have done a year and a half before. He took the bus back to the village, three hours each way, on a Sunday, and went to see Sơn's mother. He sat with her in her front room, in front of the altar where her son's tablet stood, and he told her the truth. All of it. The stomach wound, the four hours, the cold, the water he couldn't give him, the poncho on the riverbank, the body that was never brought home.

My mother asked him later how Sơn's mother had taken it.

"She hit me," my father said. "Twice, in the face, as hard as she could. Then she held on to me and cried for an hour."

Together, they did it properly this time. Sơn's mother called the monk from the pagoda, and my father paid for everything from his pension. They held a new ceremony at the edge of the river nearest the village, the closest they could get to the place where he died. They set out a bowl of water, the one thing he'd kept asking for. They burned paper clothes, warm ones, a paper coat and paper blankets, so he wouldn't be cold. The monk chanted the sutras for the dead, and Sơn's mother called her son's name out across the water and told him he was found now, and that his mother knew everything, and that he should come home.

My father poured a cup of rice wine into the river. "Go home, brother," he said. "I'm sorry I left you."

When he got back to Saigon late that night, I was asleep. My mother said that the next day I went to the corner as usual and stood there for a minute looking puzzled. Then I

came back and climbed into her lap and asked for a snack. I never waved at the corner again.

Chapter 9

The Fall

Early 1975 was when everything came apart. The North launched its final offensive in March, and one provincial city after another fell. Refugees poured into Saigon from the north. The city filled with soldiers who had thrown away their uniforms, army trucks pushing through crowds, and families sleeping on the sidewalks. In April, President Thiệu resigned and fled the country. By then everyone knew how it would end.

My father had worked for the government. My mother understood what that would mean when the North arrived. There would be prison camps, or worse. They would have to leave.

For my parents, leaving was not just moving somewhere safer. It meant abandoning the graves of their parents and grandparents, the people my mother lit incense for every morning. In her belief, a family that left its ancestors' graves untended left those ancestors alone, with nobody to remember them. She cried about that more than about the house.

The last days of April were chaos. Helicopters went back and forth over the city constantly. Government offices burned their records, and the air smelled of smoke and jet fuel. My father came home one evening and told us to pack one bag each. Papers, a few photographs, the clothes we could carry. My mother wrapped the small wooden crucifix from our wall in a shirt and put it at the bottom of her bag. She couldn't bring the ancestral altar.

There's a part of our leaving that I've gone back and forth about for a long time, because it sounds too much like a

story. But my mother and Lan both swear to it, and they don't agree about much.

In the last week of April 1975, when the city was falling apart around us, my father had a plan. He had a contact, an American he'd worked with, who had promised him space for his family on a bus to the airport. The bus was supposed to come for us on the morning of the twenty-eighth.

On the night of the twenty-seventh, my mother said, I woke up screaming. I was not quite three. I sat up on the sleeping mat in the dark and screamed and screamed, and when she picked me up I was soaking wet, as if someone had poured a bucket of water over me. My hair and my clothes were dripping. The mat around me was dry.

When she finally calmed me down, I said one thing, over and over.

"Chú Sơn nói đi bây giờ." Uncle Sơn says go now.

My father was awake by then, standing in the doorway in his undershirt. My mother looked at him. He looked at me, dripping wet in her arms in the dark.

"Get the children up," he said.

Before we went out the door that night, my mother did the last thing she could do for the altar. She lit a full bundle of incense, more than she ever used on an ordinary day, and set out the last of our rice and a few bananas. She knelt in front of the altar with all of us kneeling behind her, and she spoke to her parents out loud in a voice my brothers had never heard her use. She told them we were going far away, across the ocean, and that she didn't know if she would ever come back to sweep their graves. She asked them to forgive her. She asked them to come with us if they could, and to watch over us wherever we ended up.

Then she took the photograph of her parents off the altar, wrapped it in a handkerchief, and put it inside her blouse. She left the incense burning. My oldest sister was the last

one out the door, and she said the smoke was still going up when she closed it.

We left that house before dawn on the twenty-eighth, on foot, carrying everything we owned. We never waited for the bus. We went to the river port instead, where my father had heard there were boats. That evening, the airport was bombed, and the next morning it was shelled. After that, no more planes left. Thousands of people who had been waiting for buses to the airport never got out.

I don't know what happened that night. I've spent a long career learning all the ways a frightened small child in a frightened household in a city under siege could wake up screaming and say something strange. I could write you three pages of very good explanations.

But I have never once in my life been able to explain why I was wet.

* * *

At the river port, all twelve of us held hands so we wouldn't be separated in the crowd. I was not quite three. My older brothers took turns carrying me. We got onto a crowded boat and went down the river to the sea, where larger ships were picking up refugees. My mother stood at the rail holding the baby, and she watched the coast until there was nothing to see.

The ship was an American cargo vessel, and it was so crowded that families slept on the open deck shoulder to shoulder, under the sun by day and the stars by night. There was little water and less food. People were seasick over the rails. An old woman near us died on the second day, and her family sat with her body wrapped in a blanket until the ship docked, because they wouldn't let her be buried at sea where no one could ever find her grave. My mother sat with them part of each night and prayed.

The ship took us to Guam.

* * *

Guam was a city of tents. The Americans called it Operation New Life. In a few weeks that spring, more than a hundred thousand Vietnamese passed through the island, and at the peak there were over fifty thousand of us there at once. The Navy's construction battalions, the Seabees, bulldozed hundreds of acres of jungle and put up thousands of canvas squad tents in long straight rows. Our camp was on an old abandoned airstrip on the Orote Peninsula, flat and white and baking in the sun, with the ocean on both sides.

Each tent held two or three families on folding cots. The canvas trapped the heat all day, and when the afternoon rain came it drummed so loudly on the roof that you had to shout. The first latrines overflowed within days. There were lines for everything: lines for food, lines for showers, lines for the doctors, lines for the officials with clipboards who asked my father the same questions again and again. At first the food came in big plastic barrels, rice and fish ladled out onto paper plates. The air smelled of salt, diesel, and wet canvas. The Americans worried constantly that a typhoon would hit the island while everyone was living under canvas. My mother prayed against typhoons every night along with everything else.

Families who had been strangers a week before shared food and watched each other's children. In the evenings people walked up and down the rows of tents calling out names, looking for brothers and cousins and parents they had lost in the crowds at the docks. Somebody set up a board where people pinned notes with names and tent numbers. Nobody knew where they would end up.

I have one memory from Guam, the first real memory of my life. It is a big, warm hand closing my small fingers

around a wooden bird. Everything else about the man it belonged to, I know from my mother and from Lan.

There were Masses every day in the open-air mess halls, and my mother went to every one of them. She sang the hymns in Vietnamese with hundreds of other people and kept her rosary moving through her fingers. When I think of her in Guam, that's how I see her. She had lost her country, her house, and her parents' graves. She still had her rosary and her twelve people, and she held on to all of them.

We were there several weeks, waiting for word about where we would be sent next.

One evening in Guam, my oldest sister told me, she found my mother standing at the edge of the camp, looking out at the ocean toward the west. It was the first time since Saigon she had seen her stand still.

"What are you looking at?" my sister asked.

"Home," my mother said. Then, after a while: "Who will light the incense for them now?"

CHAPTER 10

The Old Man of Orote Point

His name was Ông Sáu. Mr. Six. In the South, people are often called by their birth order, and he had been the sixth child of his parents, a long time ago, in a village outside Đà Nẵng that didn't exist anymore.

He was in the tent next to ours. My mother noticed him on the first day, because he was the only person in that whole row who was alone. Every other tent held three generations stacked on top of each other: babies, grandmothers, teenage boys who'd been soldiers two weeks earlier, cousins, in-laws. Ông Sáu had a cot, a canvas bag, a pocketknife, and a pile of driftwood he collected every morning from the rocks at the edge of the peninsula. He was perhaps seventy. He had a white wisp of beard and very large, careful hands.

He didn't talk much. My mother brought him a bowl of rice the first evening, because she couldn't stand to see anyone eating alone, and he thanked her and asked how many children she had.

"Ten," she said.

"Ten." He smiled for the first time. "Then you're rich."

After that he ate with us every night, and complained about the food at every meal. He held up a forkful of the camp's rice, boiled to paste in an army kettle, and studied it with deep suffering. "The Americans went to the moon," he told my father. "Six times. And they still can't cook rice." My mother started saving him the burnt crust from the bottom of her pot, the part the old people love, and he forgave America a little.

* * *

Lan remembers more of Guam than anyone, because she was seventeen and old enough to understand what was happening and young enough to be curious about everyone. She was the one who learned Ông Sáu's story, a little at a time, over several weeks, sitting outside the tent in the evenings while he carved.

He had been a fisherman, and then a carpenter, and then, in his old age, a man who did a little of everything around his village. He had a wife, two sons, and a daughter. The daughter had married a man in Huế and moved away. In 1968, during Tết, the North Vietnamese took Huế, and when the city was retaken weeks later, people found mass graves. Ông Sáu never found out for certain what happened to her. He went to Huế after the fighting and walked through the city for two weeks with her photograph, asking. Nobody knew. He had never been able to give her a funeral, because he never knew if she was dead.

His two sons were soldiers. One was killed in 1972, in the fighting in Quảng Trị. The other was in Đà Nẵng in March of 1975 when the city fell. In those last days, there were a million people in Đà Nẵng trying to get out, and the whole city went mad. Ông Sáu and his wife and his son's family made it to the beach where barges were taking people out to the ships. There were people drowning in the surf. Soldiers were shooting at anyone who tried to push ahead of them in the line. He was separated from his wife and his son's family in the crowd. He got onto a barge. He didn't see them get onto one. He spent the next week on a ship going south, walking the deck from end to end every day, looking at every face. They weren't there.

"Maybe they got on a different ship," Lan said to him.

"Maybe," he said. He kept carving.

He had been in Guam almost a month by the time we arrived. He'd checked the lists posted by the Red Cross

every morning. He'd walked every row of the tent city, which took most of a day, more than once. Nothing.

"I have three people waiting for me on the other side and three people I don't know about," he told my mother once. "If I knew they were dead, I'd know what to do. I'd burn incense, I'd write their names, I'd have them prayed for. But I don't know. So I can't mourn them and I can't stop looking for them. So I carve birds."

My mother didn't say anything. She just reached over and took his big hand in both of hers and held it.

* * *

He carved for the children. That was what he did all day. He sat on an overturned crate in the shade of the tent fly with a pile of driftwood beside him and turned out little animals with his pocketknife: water buffalo, ducks, fish, monkeys, dragons. Every child in that row had at least one. He never kept any. He said if he kept them he'd have to carry them, and he was tired of carrying things.

The bird was the last one he gave to me. It was a small brown bird with its wings folded, smoothed by the sea before he ever touched it, so that the grain of the wood ran along its back like feathers. He put it in my hand and closed my fingers around it.

"Keep flying, little one," he said. "The sky is big. But don't forget the tree where your nest was."

I was three. I don't remember the words, only the bird, and a big warm hand around my small one. My mother remembered the words. She told me them so often that I can hear them in his voice, though I have no idea what his voice sounded like.

* * *

In the middle of June, the radio began to talk about a storm.

The Americans had been afraid of this from the beginning. Guam is in the path of the Pacific typhoons, and there were fifty thousand people living in canvas tents on an exposed peninsula. When the warning came, there was a kind of controlled panic through the camp. Soldiers went up and down the rows checking tent ropes and stakes. Loudspeakers announced, in English and then in very bad Vietnamese, that if the storm came close, everyone would be moved to the hangars and the concrete buildings. People started packing their few things into bundles.

In the end it turned. It went north and passed the island at a distance, and we caught only its edge. But that edge was enough. The wind came up after dark and the rain came sideways off the ocean, and all night the tent canvas cracked and snapped like gunfire. Twice our tent lifted at one corner and my father and brothers had to throw themselves on the ropes to hold it down. Water ran across the floor in a sheet. We sat on the cots with our feet pulled up. My younger sister, the baby, screamed the entire night, and my mother walked up and down the tent with her, and the little one in her other arm, and prayed out loud.

Lan says she remembers thinking: we came all this way, and we're going to drown in a tent.

In the middle of that night, she says, Ông Sáu came into our tent soaking wet. His own tent had collapsed. He sat down on the end of my father's cot with water streaming off him, and my mother wrapped him in a blanket, and nobody said anything. In the morning, when the wind dropped, he went back out and found his driftwood scattered all over the row, and he spent the whole day collecting it again.

* * *

There was a young woman in the tent on the other side of ours, Cô Hạnh, maybe twenty-five, with a little boy about my

age. Her husband had been a navy sailor. They had left Vũng Tàu together on a fishing boat with thirty other people. On the second night at sea the boat was swamped in heavy water, and her husband went over the side trying to bail. They didn't find him. A freighter picked up the rest of them the next morning.

She didn't cry much in the daytime. She took care of her boy, stood in the lines, washed their clothes. But the night after the storm, Lan woke up and heard her talking quietly outside her tent, and when Lan looked out through the gap in the canvas, Cô Hạnh was standing in the rain in her nightclothes, facing the dark, holding the tent flap open.

"Come in," she was saying. "Come in, you're all wet. Come in out of the rain."

There was no one there.

In the morning my mother went to see her. Cô Hạnh told her, very calmly, the way you'd talk about a neighbor stopping by, that her husband had come every night since they'd arrived on Guam. He stood outside the tent at night in his white uniform, soaking wet, with seaweed in his hair, and looked at her. He never spoke. She had never invited him in before. But the night of the storm he had looked so cold.

My mother sat with her for a long time. Then she went next door to talk to Ông Sáu.

What the old man said, Lan heard, because she was sitting right there.

"She mustn't let him in," he said. "He doesn't know he's dead. He came to her because she's the only home he has left. But if she lets him in, he'll stay, and he'll get colder, and she'll get colder." He shook his head. "Somebody has to tell him where to go."

"How?" my mother asked.

The old man thought about it. "In my village," he said, "when a fisherman drowned and we didn't find him, we made him a boat."

That evening the three of them went down to the water together, my mother, Cô Hạnh, and Ông Sáu, and Lan went with them carrying the little boy. Ông Sáu had made a small boat from a piece of driftwood with a scrap of canvas for a sail. He'd carved a name into the side of it with his knife: the husband's name. On the deck he set a stub of candle, a pinch of rice, and three sticks of incense that my mother had been saving.

There, on the rocks at the edge of the airstrip, with the sun going down into the ocean in the direction of Vietnam, my mother prayed the prayers for the dead, and Cô Hạnh spoke to her husband. She told him he had died. She told him she and the boy were safe. She told him to go home now, to his parents, to his ancestors, and wait for her there, and she would bring their son to visit his grave someday, wherever they put it. She said she loved him.

Then Ông Sáu lit the candle and the incense and set the little boat on the water, and the tide took it out.

Lan said they watched it until it was too small to see. The candle stayed lit the whole way.

Cô Hạnh slept that night. She said he didn't come back.

* * *

Ông Sáu died two weeks later.

It was very quiet. He went to sleep on his cot one hot afternoon after lunch and didn't wake up. My mother found him when she brought him his tea. He had a piece of driftwood in his hand, a half-finished bird.

There was no one to claim him. The camp officials wrote down his name and his age and his village, and a Catholic priest and a Buddhist monk, both refugees themselves, held

a small service in the shade of a mess hall, and about thirty people came, most of them children holding wooden animals. He was buried on Guam, in a plot the Americans set aside for refugees who died on the island. My father and my two oldest brothers helped carry him.

That night my mother did something none of us had seen her do before. She had no altar, no tablet, no photograph. So she took a scrap of white cardboard from a ration box, and on it, with a ballpoint pen borrowed from a camp official, she wrote his name, his village, and the date. She stood it up on an upturned crate inside our tent, with a cup of rice in front of it, and lit the one stick of incense she had left.

"He has no one," she told us. "His wife, his sons, his daughter, they're all gone or lost. Nobody will light incense for him. Nobody will remember his death day." She knelt down in front of the scrap of cardboard. "So now he's ours. From tonight, he's one of our family. We'll remember him."

And she did. Every year for the rest of her life, on the anniversary of the day he died, my mother cooked a bowl of rice and set it out in front of a photograph that didn't exist, on an altar in Texas, and said his name.

The half-finished bird he'd been carving when he died, she kept too. She put it in the bag with the crucifix and her parents' photograph and the bird he'd made for me. All those things went with us when we finally left Guam a few days later: two wooden birds, one finished and one not, carried across the Pacific in the bottom of a refugee's bag.

PART TWO

Michigan

Chapter 11

Coming to America

In late spring the news came: we had been cleared to go on to the United States. My parents were relieved and scared in about equal measure. There was no going back now.

We flew from Guam to the mainland. My brothers remember pressing their faces to the plane window as we came down. They saw highways with more lanes than they could count, cars everywhere, buildings made of concrete and glass, and not a single palm tree. Everything was paved.

Our first stop was Fort Chaffee, an army base outside Fort Smith, Arkansas, that had been turned into a processing center for Vietnamese refugees. The first planeload had arrived only a few weeks before us. Within a month there were more than twenty-five thousand Vietnamese living on that base. We were given a section of a long wooden World War II barracks shared with about fifty other people, with army cots in rows and blankets hung on ropes between families for privacy. It was loud day and night, dozens of conversations in a dozen regional accents, babies crying, and people lining up for paperwork.

The Arkansas summer was almost as hot as home, but it was a different heat, dry and dusty, with red dirt that got into everything. There was a Vietnamese newspaper printed right there on the base, and my father read every issue cover to cover, looking for names he knew. There were English classes in the afternoons. My older brothers went every day and came back practicing words on us at dinner: *hello, thank you, how much, bathroom, where.* Babies were born on that base all summer, hundreds of them, American citizens whose parents had no country. My mother thought that was the most hopeful thing she had ever heard.

On the Fourth of July the soldiers put on a celebration for the refugees, with a band, hot dogs, and fireworks after dark. When the first rocket went up and burst, half the barracks hit the ground. Grown men pulled their children under the cots. My father, my brothers said, didn't move at all. He stood perfectly still with his fists clenched until the third or fourth explosion, when he understood. Then he laughed, a strange, short laugh, and sat down on the steps and didn't say anything for the rest of the night.

My parents threw themselves into the process. My father practiced English phrases from a pamphlet. My mother found the chapel.

Catholic volunteers were everywhere at Fort Chaffee. Nuns handed out clothes, priests said Mass, and church women served hot meals. My mother went to Mass every morning, and she got the camp chaplain to give her a bottle of holy water. Every night she walked around our bunks sprinkling a few drops on each metal bed frame while she prayed under her breath in Vietnamese.

"This is a strange land," she told my brothers and sisters. "The spirits here don't know us, and we don't know them. The holy water makes a fence."

No one could leave the camp without a sponsor, an American family, church, or organization willing to take responsibility for helping you get started. A big family was hard to place. Most sponsors could manage three or four people, not twelve. Week after week, smaller families around us got their papers and left, and we stayed. The summer ended. The barracks emptied out around us.

Finally, in the fall, through the Catholic Church's resettlement office, an American family agreed to sponsor all twelve of us. We were going to Michigan.

None of us had ever been anywhere colder than sixty degrees. We arrived in late fall. When the airplane door

opened, the wind went straight through our thin cotton clothes, and my sisters started crying from the cold before we reached the bottom of the stairs. A few weeks later we saw snow for the first time. My older brothers ran outside in sandals to touch it.

Our sponsors were Mr. and Mrs. Miller. They met us at the door of their big two-story house. Mr. Miller was tall and had a wide smile. He took my father's hand in both of his.

"Welcome," he said, slowly and clearly. "Welcome to Michigan."

My father bowed a little and said the first English words he had practiced. "Thank you. Thank you very much." His teeth were chattering.

Mrs. Miller knelt in the snow in front of us younger children with an armful of wool mittens and winter coats. "Here, sweetheart," she said, helping my sister into a coat that came down to her ankles. "Let's get you warm."

None of us could understand what the Millers said, and they couldn't understand us. It didn't seem to matter much. Their house was warm and smelled of pine and roasting meat. They showed us our rooms by pointing and smiling.

They were the ones who gave me my American name, Johnnie. Mrs. Miller couldn't manage the tones of my Vietnamese name, and she started calling me Johnnie the first week. It stuck. My mother went on calling me by my Vietnamese name for the rest of her life.

The first weeks were hard. We had never known cold like that. We didn't know what to do with snow boots, or radiators, or an early dark at five o'clock. But the Millers spent hours teaching us English words by pointing at things in the kitchen, and my mother taught Mrs. Miller to cook with star anise, ginger, and lemongrass. Their kitchen smelled like ours for the first time.

On Sundays we went to Mass at the parish church. We couldn't understand the sermon, but we knew the Mass. The bells, the kneeling, the Latin hymns the old choir still sang. It was the one place in Michigan that felt familiar.

Chapter 12

The Basement

After a couple of months with the Millers, the parish found us a house of our own. It was a tall old place on a quiet street, built sometime in the late 1800s, with four bedrooms and three bathrooms. Twelve of us could finally spread out. The parish was letting us live in it for very little. My parents couldn't believe our luck.

The house had tall narrow windows, radiators that knocked and hissed, and a front porch with peeling white paint. Snow piled up against the north side of it as high as my oldest brother's waist. The parish women had stocked the kitchen and made up the beds with donated sheets, and someone had left a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary on the mantel. My mother cried when she saw it.

On the first night, she walked through every room with the bottle of holy water from Fort Chaffee, sprinkling the corners and the doorways. Then she took her parents' photograph out of its handkerchief. In Vietnam it would have gone straight onto an altar with incense and fruit in front of it. She stood in the living room holding it for a long time. Then she put it in the top drawer of her dresser.

"It's the Church's house," she said when my oldest sister asked. "What will they think if they see incense burning to the dead? They'll think we're pagans." So for the first time in her married life, my mother kept the crucifix and not the altar. She told herself it was only for a little while.

The only room no one liked was the basement.

The door to it was in a narrow hallway behind the kitchen. When you opened it, cold air came up at you, a damp cold that stayed even when the furnace was running. The stairs were wooden and steep. Down there the air

smelled like wet stone and rust. There was no light switch at the top of the stairs. The only light was one bare bulb with a pull string, hanging from the middle of the ceiling, and to reach it you had to cross the floor in complete darkness, feeling your way along the wall.

I was three and a half. My first clear memory of that house is the first time I went down there.

My father wanted to bring up some old crates and folding chairs the last owners had left, to use as furniture. I wanted to help, so I followed him. The stairs creaked under us. It got colder with every step. At the bottom it was completely dark, and I reached out and grabbed a handful of my father's flannel shirt. I could feel his arm moving. I could hear him breathing just in front of me. We walked slowly across the floor toward the middle of the room.

"Stay next to me," my father said.

I held on tighter.

I felt him reach up for the string. There was a click and the bulb came on, yellow and weak.

I looked at my hand. I was holding nothing. My fingers were pinched shut on empty air, as though they were still holding a sleeve.

My father was on the other side of the basement, by the bottom of the stairs, with his back to me. He was looking through a stack of boxes.

I don't know how long I stood there. I remember that it got very cold, a cold that hurt. I remember trying to call him and not being able to make a sound. I remember a feeling of being looked at from the dark corners where the light didn't reach. That's all I remember.

The next thing I knew, I was on the living room couch. Through the kitchen doorway I could hear my parents arguing in Vietnamese, low and fast. My mother wanted to know why my father had left me alone in the dark. My father

said he hadn't. He said he had gone straight to the boxes and pulled the light on from there, and when he turned around I was lying on the concrete in the middle of the floor.

I didn't tell either of them what had happened. I was afraid they'd think I was lying, or that I'd be punished for something. I lay on the couch and pretended to be asleep.

There was a family two doors down with a big brown dog named Rusty, a friendly animal who let my sisters pull his ears and followed the mailman up and down the street. He'd walk with the mailman as far as the house next to ours, every single day, and then stop. He wouldn't pass our house. He would cross to the other side of the street, or stand on the sidewalk and whine until the mailman gave up and went on without him.

And sometimes at night we'd hear him in his yard, barking and barking in the direction of our house. Not at the front door. Low, at the ground. Toward the small window at ground level on the side of the house, the one into the basement that someone had painted black long ago.

My mother heard him too. I saw her standing at the kitchen window one night, listening, with her rosary in her hand.

* * *

The second time happened a few weeks later, in the evening. My parents were in the living room, and my older sister sent me to the kitchen to get a cup for the baby.

I was standing at the counter when I felt cold air on the back of my neck. I turned around.

The basement door was open. My mother always kept it shut and latched. Now it was standing open, and cold was coming up out of the dark, and I could hear a small, steady scratching sound on the stairs.

I stood there and couldn't move. Then the door started to swing toward me, slowly, all by itself. There was no draft. I could see that nothing was pushing it.

I dropped the cup and ran. I made it to the living room and threw myself down on the rug next to my mother, and behind me the basement door slammed so hard the dishes rattled in the cupboard.

My mother jumped up and asked what I'd done. I said I'd slipped. I don't think she believed me. But she didn't ask again.

CHAPTER 13

The Drawer

My mother told me this only once, when she was very old, sitting on my back porch on a warm night with her rosary looped around her wrist. She told it the way she told everything, quickly and with the important parts left out, and then she changed the subject. I've written it the way I imagine it happened. I think I'm close.

* * *

It was the second Sunday in January, and the priest had preached about superstition.

He didn't mean anything by it, she was sure. Father Thomas was a decent man, she thought then. Tired, overworked, a little stiff, but decent. The parish was full of new people that winter: two Vietnamese families, a Laotian family, a few Mexican farmworkers who stayed on through the winter. And somewhere in the middle of his sermon on the Epiphany, he said that when new Catholics came from far away, they sometimes brought old customs with them. Customs of their former religions. Charms and spirits and offerings to the dead. And part of the joy of the true faith, he said, was being set free from all of that. From fear. From the old darkness.

He wasn't looking at her when he said it. He didn't need to. She understood enough English by then.

She sat in the pew with her ten children in a row beside her and her husband at the end, and her face went hot, and she looked down at her hands.

That night she couldn't sleep.

* * *

The house was quiet except for the radiators, knocking and hissing in the dark like old men arguing. Her husband was on the night shift. The children were asleep, the little ones in the bed with her, Lan with her sisters in the front bedroom. She lay on her back looking at the ceiling, listening to the furnace come on and go off in the basement below.

At two in the morning she got up.

She went to the dresser in the dark, opened the top drawer, and felt under the folded sweaters until her fingers found the handkerchief. She took it out and went down to the kitchen, because the kitchen was the only room where a light wouldn't wake anyone. She sat at the table under the bare bulb and unwrapped her parents.

The photograph was small, the size of a playing card, brown with age and soft at the corners. Her mother and father sat side by side on two wooden chairs in front of a painted backdrop of mountains, in a photographer's studio in the provincial town, in 1950. It was the only photograph ever taken of them. Her father was in a dark áo dài and a turban, stiff as a fence post. Her mother was in white, very straight, with her hands folded in her lap and the faint shadow of a smile she had been told not to smile.

My mother was eleven when it was taken. She remembered the day. She remembered being made to wait outside the studio in the heat while her parents went in, and being furious about it, and her mother coming out afterward and buying her a sugarcane juice to make up for it.

She sat at the kitchen table in Michigan in her nightgown and looked at her mother's face.

"Má," she said, out loud, very quietly. "I'm sorry."

* * *

She was sorry for a great many things. She told me so on my porch, in the dark, all those years later, and then she listed them as if she'd been keeping the list for a long time.

She was sorry she had left their graves. She'd swept them that last spring before Saigon and promised to come back every year for Thanh Minh, and she had come exactly once, and now she would never come again. The weeds would be up over the stones by now. The rains would be cutting the earth away from the mounds. Nobody would light incense there at Tết. Nobody would set out rice on her father's death day in the tenth month, or her mother's in the second. Her parents would be hungry, and cold, and they would think their daughter had forgotten them.

She was sorry she had put them in a drawer. Her mother had kept an altar every day of her life, through the French and the Japanese and the French again, through famine and two wars. She'd kept it when soldiers came through the village and when there wasn't enough rice for the children. She lit incense every morning even when she had to trade an egg for it. And her daughter, in a warm house in America with a refrigerator full of food, had wrapped her in a handkerchief and hidden her under the sweaters, because a priest might see.

And she was sorry for being ashamed. That was the worst one. That she had sat in the pew that morning with her face burning, and had felt, for one moment, that the priest was right. That her mother's altar and her mother's incense and her mother's thorn branches were the old darkness. That she should be grateful to be free of them.

"I'm not ashamed of you, Má," she whispered to the photograph. "I'm ashamed of me."

* * *

She was going to do it. She decided, sitting there. She would set the photograph up right there on the kitchen counter, against the wall by the window. She had no incense; she'd used the last of what she brought from Guam. But she had a candle from the church, and she had an orange, and she had a cup. She would set them out, and in the morning she would let the priest and the parish and the whole of Michigan think what they liked.

She got up and took the candle from the drawer by the sink. She found the matches. She propped the photograph against the wall, and set the orange in front of it, and filled a teacup with water from the tap. She struck the match.

Behind her, somebody began to hum.

It was a woman's voice, soft and low, very close. It came from behind her left shoulder, from the direction of the basement door. A slow tune, a lullaby. She didn't know it. It wasn't Vietnamese.

The match burned down to her fingers. She dropped it in the sink.

She didn't turn around. That was the first thing she told me, sitting on my porch fifty years later. *I didn't turn around.* All her life she'd heard it: on an empty road at night, whatever you hear behind you, never look back. She had obeyed that rule on the church road with two black dogs walking beside her. She obeyed it now, standing at a kitchen counter in Michigan in her nightgown, with her hand shaking on the edge of the sink.

The humming went on. It came closer. She could feel, she said, someone standing right behind her, close enough that she should have felt their breath on her neck. She felt only cold.

She stood perfectly still and looked at her mother's face in the photograph, propped against the wall in front of her, and she prayed. Not to God. She told me that too, and her

voice went small when she said it, as if she still wasn't sure it was allowed. She prayed to her mother.

Má. Help me. Tell me what to do.

The humming stopped.

* * *

She stood there a long time. When she finally turned around, the kitchen was empty and the basement door was latched. The bulb burned over the table. The radiator knocked.

She looked back at the counter, at the photograph against the wall, the orange, the cup of water, the unlit candle.

And then she did the thing she regretted for the rest of her life.

She picked up the photograph, wrapped it back in the handkerchief, and went upstairs, and put it back in the drawer under the sweaters. She put the orange back in the bowl. She poured the water down the sink.

She told me she didn't know why, exactly. She was frightened. She thought that if she put her parents on the counter, whatever was humming in her kitchen would know they were there. She thought it might hurt them. She thought, too, of Father Thomas, and the parish ladies, and the Millers, who had been so kind, coming into the kitchen and seeing a dead woman's photograph with an orange in front of it. She thought she would explain it to her mother later, when things were better. When the house was quieter. When we weren't so new.

"I thought I was protecting them," she told me on my porch. "I was protecting myself."

She got back into bed with the little ones and lay awake until my father came home at four with black sand in his ears. She didn't tell him anything. He didn't tell her anything either. Weeks later, she would find out that he had come

home one night and found a woman sitting at that same kitchen table.

* * *

It was another month before she went down into the basement with the holy water and the thorn branches. Another month of crying in the vents and cold in the halls and red marks on her youngest son's ankles. She told me that every one of those nights, lying awake, she thought about the photograph in the drawer.

"When I finally went down those stairs," she said, "I wasn't only fighting that thing. I was fighting myself. For being ashamed. For hiding my mother." She was quiet a long time. "You understand? Two fights. I could only win one of them that winter."

I asked her which one she won.

She looked at me as if I were very slow.

"Neither," she said. "Not that winter. That's why we went to Texas."

Then she asked if there was any more tea, and that was the end of it. She never spoke about that night again.

But I've thought about it often. My mother at a kitchen table in the middle of a Michigan winter, alone, with a candle she couldn't bring herself to light. And I've thought about how many people I've sat across from in my office who were carrying some version of that drawer. Something they loved and were ashamed of loving, hidden under the sweaters, because they were new, and frightened, and wanted to be let in.

Chapter 14

Winter

That first winter, the house wasn't the hardest thing about Michigan. Michigan was.

My father found work in January at a foundry on the other side of town that made engine parts for the car companies. It was 1976, the auto business was in a slump, and men were being laid off all over the state. But the foundry needed someone for the night shift in the shakeout room, where the castings were knocked out of their sand molds while they were still hot, and nobody who'd grown up in Michigan wanted that job. My father took it. He left the house at nine at night and took two buses across town in the dark, and he came home at four in the morning with black sand in his ears and burn marks on his forearms and slept until noon. He never complained once. He said it was warmer than the jungle.

My mother cleaned offices downtown in the evenings with two other Vietnamese women from the parish, all three of them riding the bus together with their rosaries. During the day she kept the house, cooked for twelve, and fought a long, slow, losing war with American groceries. There was no fish sauce in Michigan in 1976. There was no fresh lemongrass. The rice was wrong, long and dry and separate, and she said it tasted like paper. Mrs. Miller drove her to an Asian grocery in Detroit once a month, nearly an hour away, and she came home with a jug of fish sauce in her lap like a newborn.

The older children went to school.

* * *

Lan was seventeen and started as a junior at the public high school three blocks away. Hùng started ninth grade. Below them, the rest of my brothers and sisters went to the parish grade school, where the nuns had agreed to take all of them for almost nothing. I went to the nuns' preschool in the church basement. The two babies stayed home with my mother.

Lan told me once that her first day of American high school was the longest day of her life. She knew perhaps fifty words of English. She had never seen a locker, or a cafeteria, or girls wearing pants. The hallways were so loud she thought there was a fight. Nobody in the whole building looked like her except Hùng, and he was a freshman and wouldn't be seen with her. She went to six classes that day and understood almost nothing anyone said. At lunch she sat alone with the rice and pickled vegetables my mother had packed, and some boys at the next table held their noses and laughed.

She went home and cried in the bathroom with the water running so no one would hear. Then she dried her face, came downstairs, and asked my father to help her with the words in her biology book.

By spring she was reading English novels. By the end of the year she had a friend, a red-haired girl named Karen who sat next to her in typing class and decided, for reasons Lan never understood, that the new Vietnamese girl was the most interesting person in school. Karen taught her slang and how to use a locker and which teachers to avoid. Lan taught Karen to use chopsticks. They're still friends today.

Lan wanted to be American more than anything in the world that year. She was embarrassed by our mother's áo dài at church, by the smell of fish sauce in the house when Karen came over, by the incense my mother had stopped burning because it was the Church's house. She was

embarrassed by the stories, by Ma Vú Dài and the wolves on the church road and Hùng in the bamboo. Those were village things. Superstitions. In America, she told herself, nobody believed in ghosts.

That's why she didn't tell anyone about the woman in the window.

* * *

It was February, a gray afternoon, almost dark at five. Lan was walking home from school with Karen. They stopped on the sidewalk in front of our house to finish a conversation, stamping their feet in the snow, and Lan glanced up at the house.

The front bedroom was hers. She shared it with my two next-oldest sisters, a big square room on the second floor with two tall windows facing the street. And in one of those windows, standing very still, there was a woman.

She was young, Lan said, maybe twenty-five, with long light brown hair hanging loose, in a white nightgown. She was holding something in her arms against her chest, a bundle wrapped in a blanket, and she was rocking it slowly from side to side. She wasn't looking down at the street. She was looking at the bundle.

Lan thought at first it was one of our neighbors, visiting. Then she thought it was Mrs. Miller. Then she understood that it couldn't be either of them, because no one in our house had light brown hair, and there was no baby in our family that small anymore, and her sisters were at the kitchen table doing homework. She could see them through the downstairs window, under the kitchen light.

"Who's that?" Karen said.

Lan looked at her. Karen was looking up at the window too.

When Lan looked back, the window was empty. Just the curtain, and the dark room behind it.

"I don't know," Lan said. "Nobody. My sister."

She went inside, said hello to my mother in the kitchen, and went upstairs. She stood in the doorway of the front bedroom for a long time with the light off before she turned it on. There was nothing there. The window was closed and latched. But the room was cold, much colder than the hall, and it smelled, faintly, of something she couldn't place. Something sweet, like baby powder, and under it something else.

She didn't say anything at dinner. She didn't say anything for years.

* * *

After that, she started hearing the singing.

It came at night, very softly, after everyone else was asleep. She'd lie awake in the dark with her sisters breathing on either side of her, and from somewhere close by, near the window, a woman's voice would begin to sing. It was very quiet, almost under the breath, the way a mother sings to a baby who's nearly asleep. The song was in English. Lan didn't know it. She lay rigid under her blankets and listened to the words until she had learned them by heart, and then the next day at school she wrote them down and showed them to Karen.

Hush, little baby, don't say a word.

"It's a lullaby," Karen said. "Everybody knows it. My mom used to sing it to my brother. Why?"

"No reason," Lan said. "I heard it on the radio."

The singing went on through the rest of that winter. Not every night. Two or three nights a week. Always in the front bedroom, always after midnight, always the same song. Sometimes it broke off in the middle. Lan said that was the

worst part, when it stopped in the middle of a line. Because then, sometimes, there was crying.

Lan told no one. She didn't tell my mother, because my mother would bring out the holy water and the garlic and the old village ways, and then everything Lan was trying to be would fall apart. She didn't tell Karen, because Karen would think she was crazy. And she didn't tell my father, because my father worked all night and slept all day and had enough to carry.

What she did instead was move. She dragged her mattress out of the front bedroom one night in March and slept on the floor of the upstairs hall, outside my parents' door. When my mother asked why, she said the front room was too cold. My mother looked at her for a long time and didn't ask again. My two sisters, who had never heard anything in that room, stayed put.

* * *

In the middle of that winter came our first American Christmas.

The Millers came over on Christmas Eve with their own three children and a carload of presents, and Mr. Miller dragged a fir tree in through the front door, shedding needles all over the hall. None of us had ever had a Christmas tree. In Vietnam, Christmas was midnight Mass and a family meal, and some years a paper star lantern hung on the porch. We'd never seen tinsel. We'd never seen a string of colored lights. My brothers and I stood in front of it with their mouths open while Mrs. Miller plugged it in, and when the lights came on, my littlest sister, who was not yet two, clapped her hands and screamed with joy, and everyone laughed.

My mother cooked for two days. She made chả giò, the fried spring rolls, and a whole roast chicken with

lemongrass, and a pot of the clear soup with meatballs that we always had for celebrations. The Millers had never eaten anything like it. Mr. Miller ate eleven spring rolls and asked for the recipe, and my mother, who was very proud of her spring rolls, pretended not to understand his English.

At midnight we all went to Mass together, Millers and Nguyens in two long pews. The church was full of candles and pine branches and the old choir sang "Silent Night." My mother sang along in Vietnamese, under her breath, and Mrs. Miller sang along in English, and I fell asleep against my father's shoulder.

That Christmas is one of the happiest memories my family has. Every one of my brothers and sisters remembers it. I put it here because I want to be honest that it wasn't all darkness in that house. There were good days, many of them. We laughed a lot that winter. We were together, we were warm, we were safe from the war, and every week a little more of the strange new country made sense.

But I remember one thing about that night that the others don't. I remember waking up in my bed after midnight Mass, when everyone had gone to sleep and the house was dark except for the colored lights of the tree glowing at the bottom of the stairs. I got up to go look at it, the way any four-year-old would. I came to the top of the stairs.

Someone was sitting on the bottom step, in the light of the tree, with her back to me. A woman in a white nightgown with long light hair, holding something in her arms, rocking.

I went back to bed. I pulled the blankets over my head. I didn't tell anyone, because it was Christmas, and I didn't want to ruin it.

Years later, when Lan and I finally compared stories, we were sitting at our mother's kitchen table in Texas long after midnight, with the house asleep around us. When I told her

about the woman on the stairs, she put her hand over her mouth and didn't say anything for a long time.

"I thought it was only me," she said finally. "All those years, I thought it was only me."

Chapter 15

What Lived Below

I want to be careful about this part. I was four years old. I know what it means to build a story out of a small child's memories, and I've spent much of my adult life studying how memory works. I can only tell you what I remember, and what my family remembers, as honestly as I can.

That winter, the house got worse.

It started with my name.

My mother had one rule she drilled into all of us from the time we could talk, a rule she brought from the village. You never called someone's name out loud outdoors after dark. And if you heard your own name called at night, and you couldn't see who was calling, you didn't answer. Not a word. The old people said that a spirit who learns your name can call you, and if you answer, you've given it permission. My older brothers thought the rule was silly in America. My mother didn't care. She made them follow it anyway.

I would wake in the dark early morning hours and hear someone whispering right next to my ear. First my Vietnamese name, the one my mother used, and then *Johnnie*, the name only the Americans used. It was dry and soft, like paper. Whatever it was knew both.

I remembered the rule. I lay still with my eyes shut and didn't answer. I told myself it was the radiator. Then I started hearing it in the daytime, when I was sitting at the kitchen table with crayons or helping my mother fold laundry. It came from the hallway behind the kitchen, from the direction of the basement door.

One afternoon, alone in the kitchen, I forgot the rule. The voice said *Johnnie* from the hallway, plain as anything, the way Mrs. Miller said it, and without thinking I said, "What?"

Nothing answered. But that night was the first night something touched me in my bed.

I have never been able to decide whether those two things were connected, or whether a four-year-old who had just broken his mother's rule went to bed so frightened that he felt hands in the dark. I know which explanation I'd offer a patient. I also know what it felt like.

The rest of my family started hearing things too. Heavy, dragging footsteps in the basement at all hours. Thumps against the ceiling joists. My oldest brother went down once with a flashlight to look and came up quickly and wouldn't say what he'd seen.

Then the crying started. Almost every night, the sound of a baby crying came up through the heating vents. Not my baby sister, who was asleep in my parents' room. My sisters heard it. My mother heard it. My mother would get up and check the baby and come back and lie down, and the crying would go on.

One night I went into the kitchen for water and there was something by the basement door. It was a gray shape, like smoke in a jar, about as tall as a man, with no face. It hung there in the air for what felt like a long time. Then it seemed to sink into the floor and was gone.

At night, in bed, I felt hands. A cold hand moving down my arm, or pressing flat on my chest so I couldn't breathe. And once, something grabbed my ankles and pulled me off the mattress. I hit the floor hard. I crawled back under the blankets and cried until it got light. In the morning there were red marks around both my ankles. My mother saw them when she dressed me, and she went very still, and she didn't say anything.

* * *

The night I remember most clearly was during a storm. The wind was loud around the house, and I was in the hallway near the kitchen for some reason I've forgotten. The basement door banged open. Cold air came up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs stood a shape. It was tall and black, so dark it seemed to swallow the light from the hallway, and it had no face, only two places where eyes should be that were darker than the rest. It raised one arm toward me and curled its fingers. *Come here.*

There was a humming sound. The hallway light flickered. And I went. I don't know why. I remember my feet moving and not being able to stop them. I stepped through the doorway onto the top stair and put my hand on the rail.

What happened next I've never been able to describe well. The basement below me seemed to go dark and soft, as if it were moving. I could still feel the rough wood of the handrail under my hand and the cold on my skin. But I saw things in the dark. A woman sitting on the floor with her head in her hands, crying. A baby crying somewhere I couldn't see. I heard a man shouting. I felt a terrible sadness, too big for a four-year-old to understand, and I understood that whatever was in that basement wasn't only angry. Something had happened in this house.

The shape touched my forehead with one finger. It was ice cold. There was a flash of white, and it was over.

I was standing at the bottom of the basement stairs with both arms wrapped around the wooden post in the middle of the room. The light bulb was on, swinging slowly back and forth on its string. The basement was just a basement.

I ran up the stairs and slammed the door and pushed the latch shut with both hands.

Chapter 16

Night Shift

My father was the last one in our family to believe, and the one who believed the hardest once he did.

That's the way it usually goes, Father Joseph told me years later. The skeptic in the family holds out longest, because he's the one holding everyone else up. When he finally falls, he falls all the way.

My father had seen a pond turn into a meadow. He had carried Hùng home out of the bamboo. He had lit incense at the altar with shaking hands. But all of that had happened in Vietnam, in the war, in the old country where everything was soaked in blood and spirits and nobody could be sure of anything. America was different. America had electric lights on every street and doctors in every town and a reasonable explanation for everything. My father had brought his family across the ocean to that reasonable country, and he wasn't going to let the old darkness follow us here. When my mother talked about cold drafts and smells from the sink, he said the house was old. When my sisters heard crying in the vents, he said it was the neighbor's cat. When the basement door slammed, he said it was the furnace pulling the air.

He said it to us, and I think he said it to himself, every day, on the two buses across town to the foundry and the two buses home.

This is what changed his mind.

* * *

It was a night in late February, the coldest week of that winter. The foundry had shut down the shakeout line early because of a broken conveyor, and my father caught an earlier bus than usual. He got off at the corner of our street

a little before two in the morning. It was about ten below zero. The snow on the sidewalks squeaked under his boots, and the air was so cold it hurt his teeth. All the houses on the street were dark.

All except ours. The kitchen light was on.

He thought it was my mother waiting up for him, which she sometimes did. Or Lan, who had started staying up late with her schoolbooks. He let himself in the back door into the mudroom, stamped the snow off his boots, and hung up his coat. The kitchen door was open a crack. Through it, he could hear something creaking slowly, back and forth, back and forth.

He pushed the door open.

A young woman was sitting at our kitchen table, in my mother's chair, with her back half turned to him. She was rocking. The chair wasn't a rocking chair, but she was rocking anyway, forward and back, slowly, and its legs creaked on the linoleum. She had long, light brown hair and was wearing a thin white nightgown, and her bare feet were on the cold floor. Her arms were folded against her chest as if she were holding something. She was humming.

"Lan?" my father said.

He told my mother afterward that he knew it wasn't Lan even as he said it. The hair was wrong. Everything was wrong. But his mind reached for the only explanation it had.

The woman stopped humming. She stopped rocking. Very slowly, she turned her head and looked at him.

My father never described her face to anyone except my mother, and my mother only told me about it once, many years later, when I was grown. He said she was young and had been pretty. He said her eyes were red, as if she had been crying for a very long time. And he said that the front of her nightgown, from the collar down to her lap, was soaked dark. He didn't say with what. My mother didn't say either.

The woman looked at him, and in a soft, flat voice, in English, she said one word.

"*Quiet.*"

My father couldn't move. He said later it was exactly like the night in the jungle when they found the pond. Some part of him knew he should run, or shout, or reach for something to defend himself, and his body wouldn't do any of it. He stood in the doorway in his work clothes, smelling of hot iron and sand, and the woman looked at him.

Then she got up from the chair without any sound at all and walked across the kitchen to the basement door. It was latched. My mother always latched it. The woman didn't touch it. It swung open in front of her, slowly, and she went through it and down into the dark, and it swung shut behind her and the latch dropped into place by itself.

The kitchen light went out.

* * *

My father didn't wake anyone. That's the part that tells me the most about him.

He found a flashlight in the drawer by the sink. He took the biggest knife from the knife block, a cleaver my mother used for chickens. He pulled a kitchen chair over against the wall where he could see both the basement door and the hallway to the stairs, the way he'd have set up a position on a night patrol. He sat in it all night with the flashlight in one hand and the cleaver in the other, and he didn't sleep.

Twice before dawn, he said, he heard the singing. Very faint, from somewhere above him in the house. And once, around four, something walked across the basement floor under his feet, slow and heavy, from one side of the house to the other, and stopped directly beneath his chair. He sat there and looked at the floor between his boots, and he

prayed the Our Father over and over in Vietnamese. He said he had never prayed so hard in the war.

When the sky started to go gray, he heard my mother come downstairs. He put the cleaver back in the block and turned on the coffee pot before she came in, so she wouldn't see.

She saw anyway. She saw his face.

"What happened?" she said.

"Nothing," he said. "Bad dream. I fell asleep in the chair."

She knew he was lying. They'd been married almost twenty years. She didn't push. She made him breakfast and sent him to bed.

* * *

He didn't tell her for weeks. He had his reasons, and later, when he finally explained them to her, they were good ones. She was already frightened. She already slept with a rosary in her hand and checked on the children five times a night. We had nowhere else to go. We had no money, no car, no friends in Michigan but the Millers and the parish, and the parish owned the house. If he told her what he'd seen at the kitchen table, he said, she would have packed us all up that same day and walked us out into the snow, and then what?

So he kept it to himself, and did what he could.

What he could do, it turned out, was what he'd learned in his village as a boy. The next Saturday he went to the hardware store and bought a box of big iron nails, the old square kind, and a hammer. While my mother was at the grocery store with Mrs. Miller, he hammered a row of nails into the frame above the basement door, nine of them, points out. He hammered nails over every door that opened onto the kitchen. Iron is supposed to keep out spirits; every Vietnamese grandmother knows that. He hung a pair of old

scissors, open, on a nail above the doorway of the front bedroom where Lan used to sleep.

When my mother came home and saw the nails, she stood in the kitchen with the grocery bags in her arms for a long time without saying anything.

Then she put the groceries down, went upstairs, and came back with her bottle of holy water. She sprinkled every one of his nails, one by one, and made the sign of the cross over each of them.

Neither of them said a word about it. That was how my parents talked about the house for the rest of that winter: without words. He hammered iron into the doorframes. She blessed it. Each of them knew the other knew. Each of them pretended not to, to protect the other one.

* * *

It was probably the worst thing they could have done, though neither of them could have known it. Whatever was in that house had been there long before us. And it was getting stronger.

The nails didn't stop it. Nothing stopped it. A week after my father hung them, the singing in the front bedroom stopped for good, and the crying in the heating vents began in earnest, every night, and the hands came for me in my bed.

And on the night my mother went down into the basement with her holy water and her thorn branches, the night she finally walked us all through the snow to sleep in the church, my father stood in the snowy street outside our house holding my littlest sister in his arms, and he looked up at the dark windows. Then he turned to my mother and told her everything. The woman at the table. The nightgown. The word she said to him.

My mother listened to the whole thing, standing there in the snow. When he was done, she didn't cry and she didn't scold him for not telling her. She took his free hand and held it.

"Now," she said, "we're two."

The next morning, when they sat in Father Thomas's office and the priest told them they were suffering from nerves, my father raised his voice for the first time I can remember, and said that he had seen it and heard it and smelled it, and that his family could not sleep in that house. I always wondered, as a boy, where that anger came from in my quiet father. Now I know. He had sat up all night with a meat cleaver at his own kitchen table, alone, for weeks, so his wife wouldn't be afraid.

And a man in a warm office in a clean collar was telling him it was his nerves.

Chapter 17

Father Thomas

I finally told my mother. I sat at the kitchen table with her while my sisters played in the next room, and it all came out in Vietnamese. The whispering, the hands, my ankles, the gray shape, the thing at the top of the stairs.

I watched her face change while I talked. She had noticed things too, I learned later: the cold drafts, the sour smell in the kitchen, the crying. She had been telling herself it was a new country and an old house. Now she stopped telling herself that.

"We don't give this house to that thing," she said. "Not this one. Not my children."

She went about it the way she knew. From the church she brought home bottles of holy water and a silver crucifix. From the hedge behind the house she cut bare, thorny raspberry canes. In her mother's village, thorned branches were used to drive spirits out of a room. It was the same idea as the cactus she had hung over my door when I was born: spirits don't like to pass through thorns. These were the nearest thing she could find in a Michigan winter. She tied a fresh bulb of garlic to the basement door handle, and she slipped a sewing needle into the hem of my shirt, the way her mother used to do for her when she had to walk somewhere at night.

Then she opened the basement door and went down.

I stood at the top of the stairs holding the door frame. She pulled the light on, and under that yellow bulb she began.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

She splashed holy water on the floor and the walls. She cut the sign of the cross in the air with the raspberry canes. She started the rosary, loud.

It was as if she had kicked a hornets' nest.

The cold came down all at once. I could see her breath. The light bulb began to swing in wide circles on its string, and the shadows swung with it. Something hit the old workbench in the corner hard enough to knock the jars and paint cans off the shelf, and they smashed on the concrete. Two metal folding chairs leaning against the wall went flying across the room and crashed against the stairs below my mother's feet. Then there was a sound, low and rough, like a growl, that I felt in my feet more than I heard it.

My mother came up those stairs faster than I've ever seen her move. She pulled me into the kitchen and slammed the door.

She didn't give up. She set up a small altar on the kitchen counter, the photograph of her parents that she had carried out of Saigon, and lit incense, and called on them to help us. The cupboard doors banged open and shut by themselves. Spoons slid off the counter. A smell like sulfur and rotting meat came up out of the sink drain so strongly that my sisters gagged.

That night my parents woke all of us, wrapped us in coats, and walked us through the snow to the parish church. We slept in the pews.

I remember lying on the hard wooden bench under my coat, looking up at the red sanctuary lamp burning beside the tabernacle, the one candle in a Catholic church that's never supposed to go out. My mother sat at the end of the pew with her rosary. Every time I opened my eyes she was awake.

Much later she told me what she had been thinking about that night. She had been thinking about the photograph in

her dresser drawer. "In the village I had two lamps," she said. "One for God, one for the ancestors. In Michigan I put one of them in a drawer. I thought God's lamp would be enough. Maybe it is enough. But I took my parents off the wall, and I left a dark place in that house, and something else moved in."

* * *

The next morning my parents went to see the pastor, Father Thomas. I went with them because my mother wouldn't let me out of her sight.

Father Thomas sat behind a big wooden desk and listened with his hands folded. My mother told him everything in the English she had. My father filled in the rest.

"Father, please," my mother said. "Something bad is in the house. It throws chairs. It touches my children at night. It smells like death."

Father Thomas took off his glasses and cleaned them. "Mrs. Nguyen," he said kindly, "your family has been through more than most people could imagine. A war, a refugee camp, a new country, a new language. It's natural for your nerves to be frayed. Stress can do very strange things. Especially to children."

"It is not nerves," my father said. I had almost never heard him raise his voice. "I heard it. I smelled it. My family cannot sleep in that house."

"Mr. Nguyen, I understand. But the Church doesn't jump to conclusions about evil spirits because a family is having trouble adjusting. Go home, get some rest, say the rosary together. Give it time."

We went home. It didn't get better. It got worse for weeks: the smell, the crying at night, things moving when no one was near them. One night the kitchen chairs slid back

from the table and tipped over in front of both my parents. The next morning my mother went back to the rectory alone, sat down in Father Thomas's office, and said she wasn't leaving until he came to see the house himself. She stayed until he agreed.

He came that afternoon with his assistant, carrying his ritual book, a crucifix, and a silver holy water vessel. He walked into our living room like a man who expected to be home for dinner.

"You see?" he said, looking around. "It's quiet. We'll say a simple blessing, and that will put everyone's mind at ease."

He opened the book and began the blessing in Latin. He didn't get through the second sentence.

A gust of cold air went through the room with every window shut and blew out the candles on my mother's altar. A crash came from the basement, metal on concrete, loud enough to rattle the window glass. In the kitchen, three coffee mugs came off the counter and smashed against the wall a few feet from where Father Thomas was standing.

He went white. I remember watching his hand holding the crucifix start to shake.

"Out," he said. His voice cracked. "Everyone out of the house. Now."

We went out into the snow. Father Thomas went down our front walk without looking back, got into his car, locked the doors, and drove away.

We spent that night in the church pews again.

Chapter 18

The Investigation

Whatever Father Thomas told the diocese, it worked. Within a week we were told the bishop had ordered a formal investigation.

Three people came. Father James was an older priest with a reputation in the diocese for handling cases like ours. With him were two lay investigators from a Catholic research group. Dr. Marcus was an electrical engineer, a careful, quiet man who carried a toolbox everywhere. Sarah was younger, and her job was to write everything down.

It was 1976, and their equipment was what you'd expect. Reel-to-reel tape recorders. A row of thermometers they taped to the walls in every room. A magnetic compass, which Dr. Marcus said would swing if there was a wiring problem or a strong current somewhere. A Polaroid camera. Notebooks.

"We look for natural causes first, Mr. Nguyen," Dr. Marcus told my father on the first day, while he set up a recorder at the top of the basement stairs. "Bad wiring. Pipes. A gas leak can make people see and feel things. Only when we've ruled everything out do we hand it to Father James."

"The cold down there is not from the pipes," my father said. "And pipes don't throw chairs."

They stayed three days. Sarah filled two notebooks. The thermometers in the basement dropped more than twenty degrees in less than a minute, several times, with the furnace running. The compass needle swung around in the middle of the basement floor, where there was no wiring at all. And when they played back the tapes from the empty basement, they heard whispering on them. You couldn't

make out words, but it was a voice. Dr. Marcus played it back three times, and then he turned the machine off and sat for a while without saying anything.

Before the bishop would allow an exorcism, the diocese required one more thing: a psychological evaluation of our whole family. They needed to rule out that the family was causing this, whether out of trauma, or hysteria, or something else.

A psychologist named Dr. Evans came and talked to each of us, one at a time, in the living room, with Sarah translating for my parents. He was gentle. He asked my parents about the war, about leaving Vietnam, about the camps. He asked my older brothers and sisters about school and nightmares.

When it was my turn, I sat next to my mother on the couch and didn't say anything at all. I was four. I didn't have the English for it, and I was frightened of him. My mother answered his questions for me. Then she reached down without saying a word, pulled down my socks, and showed him the marks around my ankles. They had faded to yellow by then, but you could still see the shape of fingers.

Dr. Evans looked at them for a long time and wrote something down.

He met with Father James that evening. We were never shown his report. But Father James told my parents afterward that Dr. Evans had found a family carrying a great deal of grief and fear, which surprised no one. He had not found anything that could explain what the investigators had recorded.

The bishop gave permission.

* * *

On the night of the exorcism, Father James put on a purple stole, the long narrow band of cloth a priest wears around

his neck when he acts with the Church's authority; purple is the color of penance, and of the rite of exorcism, and stood at the top of the basement stairs with his crucifix. Dr. Marcus and Sarah stood behind him with the tape recorder running. My family waited in the hallway behind them, all twelve of us, holding our rosaries. I was holding my mother's skirt.

In 1976 the Church was still using the rite of exorcism from the Roman Ritual of 1614, the same Latin prayers priests had read over the possessed and the haunted for more than three hundred years. Father James had a small black copy so worn that the binding was held together with tape. Under Church law, no priest could use that rite without the bishop's explicit permission, and Father James had waited for it in writing.

He began. I remember the sound of his voice going down into the dark more than the words. Much later I learned them: *I cast you out, unclean spirit, along with every satanic power of the enemy, every specter from hell…*

The answer came at once. Cold air rushed up the stairwell with every window in the house shut, so cold that frost spread across the edges of the hall mirror. Things crashed in the basement. The floor under our feet shook as if something were slamming the joists from below.

Father James went down one step and sprinkled holy water into the dark. "Depart," he said. "Give way to Christ, who commanded the wind and the sea."

From the bottom of the stairs came a scream. It wasn't human, and it wasn't an animal. The light bulb exploded in a shower of sparks, and the stairwell went black.

Something flew up out of the dark, a piece of wood, and broke against the door frame next to Father James's head. He didn't move. He kept praying, his voice steady, all the

way to the end of the rite. The shaking slowed. The cold drained away. The basement went quiet.

Father James stood there in the doorway with sweat running down his face. When he turned to my parents, he didn't look like a man who had won.

"It's been pushed back," he said quietly. "But I don't think it's gone. Something holds it to this house. Something happened here."

Chapter 19

Mrs. Gable

After the exorcism, the house was quiet. Nothing flew across a room again. But it wasn't peace. My mother said it felt like the quiet of a dog that has stopped barking but is still watching you from the yard.

The answer to Father James's question came from an old woman in the parish. Her name was Mrs. Gable, and she went to Mass every morning. One afternoon she found my mother praying alone in the church, sat down next to her in the pew, and looked over her shoulder at the rectory door before she spoke.

"Mrs. Nguyen," she said, "it isn't right, what they've done to you. Nobody told you about that house."

"Please," my mother said. "Tell me."

About eight years earlier, Mrs. Gable said, a young couple had lived there with a new baby. The young mother had been ill, some sickness of the mind that no one treated, and she had begun hearing voices. One winter night she killed the baby in the front bedroom. When her husband tried to stop her, she attacked him too. He got away and ran out into the snow, bleeding, calling for help. By the time the police came, it was too late for the child. The young mother died not long after, Mrs. Gable said, though she didn't know how.

"The husband couldn't set foot in the house again," Mrs. Gable said. "He signed it over to the diocese and left the state. The parish kept it shut up for years. And then your family came."

My mother came home and told my father. I remember that she didn't cry. She was too angry for that.

She repeated it at dinner, because she believed children should know the truth about the house they slept in. When she got to the words *the front bedroom*, Lan put down her chopsticks, got up from the table without a word, and went into the bathroom and ran the water. She had slept in that room for three months. She had learned the lullaby by heart.

The crying in the heating vents. The woman I saw in the basement with her head in her hands. My father confronted Father Thomas. Father Thomas said the house's history had nothing to do with our troubles, and that he was sorry for the family's distress. That was the end of the conversation.

Later that night, though, I heard her talking quietly to my oldest sister in the kitchen, and she wasn't angry anymore.

"A mother and a baby," she said. "Do you remember Ma Vú Dài? I used to tell it as a story to scare you. But the old women in my village said she was a real woman once. A mother who died wrong, and her grief went bad, and she went looking for children. Her milk turned to mud." She was quiet for a while. "That poor woman in the basement. Nobody ever prayed for her. Nobody ever prayed for the baby. They just locked the door and left them in the dark for eight years."

That week, though she had never met them and didn't know their names, my mother had a Mass said at our parish for the souls of a young mother and her child. Catholics can ask a priest to offer a Mass for someone who has died, so that the whole prayer of the Mass is said on that soul's behalf. She paid for it with grocery money. She didn't tell Father Thomas who it was for.

My parents decided we were leaving Michigan.

* * *

My father had cousins who had resettled in Texas, and they wrote that there was work there and plenty of other

Vietnamese families. Two weeks later we packed everything we owned into a used station wagon and a borrowed trailer and drove south. The Millers came to say goodbye. Mrs. Miller cried, and so did my mother.

I remember the drive as a long, hot dream: the snow disappearing somewhere in Missouri, the sky getting wider and bluer, the smell of the air changing. We found a small brick house to rent in a quiet neighborhood in Texas with a yard full of sun. My father found work within the month. My older siblings started school. For a few weeks, nothing happened. We slept through the night. My mother said it was the first time since Saigon.

Then the drain in the bathroom started to smell. It was the same smell as the Michigan kitchen, sour and rotten, the smell my sisters still can't talk about without making a face. Then the cold drafts came back, moving through rooms with the doors shut.

I was five. One night I woke up at two in the morning to a scratching sound at the window. I sat up. At the foot of my bed, in the light from the street, stood the tall black shape from the top of the basement stairs.

It didn't move. And it said, in that dry paper voice, *I'm still here.*

I screamed until the whole house was awake.

PART THREE

Texas

Chapter 20

Father Võ

The priest at our new parish in Texas was named Father Võ, and he was the first Vietnamese priest any of us had seen since Guam.

He had come out in 1975, like us. He'd been a parish priest in a fishing town on the central coast, and when the end came he'd led most of his parishioners down to the harbor and onto the boats, and stayed on the dock until the last boat was full. Then he jumped onto it as it pulled away. He was a short, round man of about fifty with thick glasses, a loud laugh, and a habit of saying Mass in Vietnamese so fast that the old ladies complained they couldn't keep up. The diocese had given him a small parish on the edge of town, and he had filled its pews with refugees in under a year.

My mother had been going to his Mass every Sunday since we arrived. But she didn't tell him about Michigan. She was ashamed, Lan thinks. She'd been called hysterical by one priest already. She didn't want to hear it from a Vietnamese one.

After the night I woke up screaming, she had no choice.

* * *

She went to the rectory the next morning, with me by the hand, and sat in his small, cluttered office with a picture of Our Lady of La Vang on the wall and told him everything. The house in Michigan, the basement, the woman, Father Thomas, the investigation, the exorcism, Mrs. Gable, the smell in our new bathroom drain, the shape at the foot of my bed.

Father Võ listened without interrupting. When she was done, he took off his thick glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Chị," he said, using the word for older sister, though she was younger than he was. "I believe you."

My mother started to cry.

"I believe you," he said again, "and I'm going to help you. But I'm going to do it properly, and you won't like all of it. The first thing is that the diocese will want another evaluation. I'm sorry. I know what you've been through. But I can't go to the bishop and ask for anything until it's done, and if I try to skip it, they'll take it away from me and give it to someone who doesn't believe you." He put his glasses back on. "Let them look. You have nothing to hide. Let them write it down. And then we'll do what needs to be done."

My mother was furious. Lan remembers her coming home and slamming pots around the kitchen for an hour. The Church had put us in that house in Michigan. The Church had known what happened there and said nothing. Now the Church wanted to know whether we were sane, again. But my father sat her down that night and said the same thing Father Võ had said. Let them look. We have nothing to hide.

* * *

The psychologist came from Catholic Charities in San Antonio. Her name was Dr. Reyes. She was young, quick, and kind, and she spoke enough Spanish and enough French that she and my father could find their way through his English with only a little help from Lan. She came to the house four times in three weeks. She talked to every member of the family, together and separately, for hours.

I was five. I remember her. She sat on the floor of our living room with me and a big box of crayons and a stack of paper and asked me to draw my family. I drew everyone: my

parents, Lan and Hùng and all the others, the two babies. I drew our house in Texas with a big yellow sun. She praised every one.

Then she asked me to draw our house in Michigan.

I drew the house. I drew the basement under it, a black rectangle, and I colored it in so hard the crayon broke. Then, without being asked, I drew the people in the basement. A tall black shape with no face. A woman with long yellow hair, holding a bundle. And a little stick figure, sitting at the bottom of the stairs, crying.

"Who is this?" Dr. Reyes asked, pointing at the stick figure.

"Me," I said.

"And who is this?" She pointed at the woman.

"The lady who sings," I said. "She sings to the baby. She's sad. She did something bad and she's sad."

Dr. Reyes looked at the drawing for a long time. She asked if she could keep it. I said yes. My mother told me, years later, that Dr. Reyes had sat in her car outside our house for nearly twenty minutes after that visit before she drove away.

Her report, which Father Võ showed my parents and which my mother kept in a drawer for the rest of her life, said what Dr. Evans had said in Michigan, in more words. A family that had been through war, flight, a refugee camp, and resettlement in a hostile climate, with evidence of significant trauma, especially in the older children. A family under great strain. No evidence of psychosis, delusion, or deliberate deception in any member. She recommended counseling for the children. And at the end, in a paragraph by itself, she had written something my mother read so many times the paper wore thin at the fold.

I am not qualified to evaluate the spiritual claims made by this family. I can say that I found them to be honest,

loving, and of sound mind, and that I believe they are describing their experiences as truthfully as they can.

* * *

Father Võ came to the house on a Saturday morning. He brought his stole, his holy water, a censer, the metal incense burner a priest swings on chains, and a bag of incense that I later learned was not the kind the Church used in the censer. It was sandalwood, from a Vietnamese grocery in Houston.

He blessed the house first. He went through every room with my father, sprinkling holy water and saying the prayers, and swung the censer in the corners until the house was blue with smoke. In the bathroom, where the smell came up through the drain, he stood for a long time and prayed in Latin, and then in Vietnamese, and then poured holy water down the drain itself. My brothers thought that was hilarious. My mother hit them.

When he was done, he came back to the living room and stood in the middle of it, turning slowly, looking at the walls. He saw the crucifix my father had hung above the couch, the one my mother had carried from Saigon. He saw the statue of the Virgin. He looked at the rest of the walls for a long time.

"Chị," he said to my mother. "Where are your parents?"

She didn't understand him at first. Then she did. She went to her bedroom and came back with the handkerchief, and unwrapped the photograph of her parents, and held it out to him.

"In a drawer," she said quietly. "Since Michigan."

Father Võ took the photograph and looked at it. Then he looked at her over his thick glasses.

"Why?"

"The house belonged to the Church," she said. "I was afraid the Americans would think we were pagans. Father Thomas would have thought—" She stopped.

Father Võ was quiet for a while. Then he said, "Chị, do you know what the bishops of Vietnam said about this? Years ago, before the war ended? They said that honoring our ancestors is not superstition. It's filial piety. It's the fourth commandment. Honor your father and your mother. They said a Catholic family may keep an altar for the dead, burn incense, bow before the photographs, set out food on the death anniversaries. It's not worship. It's love. It's remembering." He handed the photograph back to her. "Rome agreed. Nobody told Father Thomas, I suppose."

My mother stood holding the photograph and didn't say anything.

"In my parish in Vietnam," Father Võ said, "every family had both. The altar for the ancestors, and the cross above it. God on top, the family underneath, looking up. That's the right order. It isn't a contradiction. It's a family." He smiled. "You've been fighting with one hand tied behind your back, chị. Put your parents back where they belong."

* * *

They did it that afternoon. My father went to the hardware store and came back with a wooden shelf and brackets. He mounted it on the living room wall, under the crucifix, at the height my mother wanted, and checked it three times with a level. My mother set out the brass bowl she'd bought at the Vietnamese grocery, a plate of oranges, three small cups for tea. In the center, she set her parents' photograph in a new frame.

Then she took something else out of her bag. It was the scrap of white cardboard from Guam, cut from a ration box,

with Ông Sáu's name written on it in faded ballpoint pen. She set it at the end of the shelf.

Father Võ lit the sandalwood incense from his bag and handed three sticks to my mother. She held them in both hands and bowed three times to her parents' photograph, and then three times to the scrap of cardboard. Then she put the sticks in the bowl. Father Võ stood behind her with his hands folded and said an Our Father, and we all said it with him, all twelve of us crowded into that small living room, and the smoke went up past the photograph to the crucifix and curled around the feet of Christ.

"There," Father Võ said. "Now the house is guarded on both sides."

* * *

It didn't stop overnight. I want to be honest about that. That's not how it went. For another month or so there were still nights when the bathroom smelled, still cold drafts in the hallway with all the doors shut. Twice more I woke up to scratching at the window, though I never saw the shape again.

But it faded. The smell went first. Then the cold. Then the scratching. By the end of that summer, the house was simply a house: hot, crowded, loud, with the TV on and fish sauce in the kitchen and children fighting over the bathroom. I stopped waking up at night. My mother stopped sleeping with her rosary in her hand. One evening in September, Lan said, she realized she had just walked down the dark hallway to the bathroom without turning on the light, and she stopped in the middle of the hall and laughed out loud.

My mother had her own explanation for why it ended. She told it to me many years later.

"In Michigan," she said, "I forgot. I tried to be an American Catholic, and I put my parents in a drawer, and I

kept only one lamp burning. So there was a dark place in the house. Something cold came and lived in it." She shrugged. "In Texas, Father Võ reminded me. Two lamps. God's lamp and the family's lamp. No dark corner for anything to sit in."

"Do you really believe that, Má?" I asked her. I was in graduate school by then, full of theories.

She looked at me with great patience. "I believe," she said, "that I slept for the first time in two years. What do you believe?"

I didn't have a good answer then. I'm not sure I have one now.

Father Võ came to dinner at our house on the first Sunday of every month for the next twenty years. He always brought sandalwood. He always lit the first three sticks at our family altar himself, and bowed to my grandparents' photograph and to the scrap of cardboard with Ông Sáu's name on it, before he sat down to eat.

I grew up.

Chapter 21

A New Beginning

For a long time after that, my life was ordinary, and I was grateful for every ordinary day of it.

We grew up Texan. My father worked long hours, my mother kept the house and the altar, and the ten of us filled the little brick house with noise. My older brothers and sisters finished school, went to work or to college, and married, one by one. My mother cooked for whoever came through the door. On Sundays we filled most of a pew at Mass.

There were more Vietnamese families in Texas every year. By the early eighties our parish had a Vietnamese Mass on Sunday afternoons, said by Father Võ, and the parking lot afterward was full of aunties selling bánh mì and sticky rice out of their car trunks. For Tết, the Lunar New Year, the whole community rented a school gym, and the old men set off firecrackers in the parking lot until the police came.

My mother kept every holiday. At Tết she cleaned the house top to bottom, bought new clothes for each of us, and cooked for three days. She made bánh tét, the long rolls of sticky rice, mung bean, and pork wrapped in banana leaves, and set the first one on the altar. On the anniversaries of her parents' deaths she cooked their favorite dishes and set them in front of the photograph before any of us could eat. And every year, in the seventh lunar month, my father set a small folding table at the end of our driveway with a bowl of thin rice porridge, salt and rice, fruit, and three sticks of incense for the wandering souls. Our American neighbors watched from their windows. One of them finally came over and asked him, very politely, if we were having a yard sale.

"No," my father said. "We are feeding the ghosts."

The neighbor nodded slowly, as if that were a perfectly reasonable answer, and went back inside. After that, he waved every year when the table went up.

By high school I was a solid B student. I wasn't brilliant, but I worked hard, and I liked school because it had rules and the rules made sense. I ran track. I joined the debate club and lost more rounds than I won. I had a small group of close friends, and on Saturdays we drove the back roads with the windows down and the radio loud, eating fast food in the parking lot of the Sonic. None of them knew anything about Michigan. I didn't want them to. With them I was just Johnnie.

On Sunday mornings I served at the altar. I loved it. I loved carrying the processional cross up the aisle, ringing the bells at the consecration, and watching the smoke of the incense climb toward the ceiling. In Michigan, the Church had been where we ran at night, and the priest had been the man who ran away. In Texas the Church was beautiful and calm, and it felt like it belonged to me.

In my senior year I went on a "Come and See" weekend at a monastery that ran a seminary program. I sat in the chapel during evening prayer and listened to the monks chant the psalms, one side of the choir answering the other, and somewhere in the middle of it I knew I was going to be a priest. It wasn't a voice or a vision. It was simple certainty, the kind you feel maybe twice in your life.

After graduation I entered the college seminary. For four years I studied philosophy, church history, Latin, and Scripture. I made friends there I still have today. And I discovered something about myself that set me apart from most of my classmates.

I couldn't stop reading about evil.

While the other seminarians wrote papers on pastoral care or the history of the liturgy, I was in the library late at night reading about demonology, the discernment of spirits, the canon law governing exorcism, and medieval writings on angels and demons. I told myself it was academic. It wasn't. I was trying to understand what had happened in that basement.

In my third year, my spiritual director called me in to talk about it. Father Gerald was a quiet man with a study full of books and a teapot that was always warm. He had my latest paper outline on his desk, on the discernment of spirits.

"Your work is good, Johnnie," he said, looking at me over his reading glasses. "And your faith is real. I don't doubt that. But I notice that your heart keeps going to the dark. Demons. Exorcism. Possession."

"Is it wrong to want to understand the enemy, Father?" I asked. "If the Church is supposed to protect people, shouldn't somebody be ready for that?"

He set his cup down. "It isn't wrong to understand. But there's a danger in staring at the dark too long. You start to see it everywhere. A priest's first job isn't to hunt demons, Johnnie. It's to bring people Christ, in the sacraments and in love. The Church is cautious about exorcism for good reasons. Don't let the shadows become more interesting to you than the light."

I nodded and thanked him and kept reading. He was right, and I knew he was right, and I didn't stop. Most of my professors talked about evil as a philosophical problem. I had felt its hand on my ankles.

Chapter 22

The Stock Tank

My best friend in high school was Danny Ortiz. We ran the mile together on the track team, both of us too slow to win and too stubborn to quit, and we spent most of our sophomore year running in circles side by side, talking. Danny's family had been in Texas for six generations. Mine had been there for ten years. It didn't seem to matter to either of us.

The Ortizes had a small place out in the county, twenty acres of mesquite and pasture with a few head of cattle, a pecan orchard, and a stock tank. That's what people in Texas call a pond dug out for cattle to drink from, usually in a low spot where the rain collects. Theirs was big, maybe an acre, muddy brown, with cattails along one side and a wooden dock his father had built. In summer Danny and I would ride our bikes out there after practice and jump off the dock in our cutoffs, and his little brother Mateo, who was nine, would jump in after us and hang on Danny's neck until Danny pretended to drown him.

I loved that family. His mother fed me every time I walked in the door, the same way mine fed everyone. His grandmother, whom everybody called Abuela, sat on the porch in a lawn chair snapping green beans and calling everyone *mijo*. She had a little shrine in her bedroom with a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Mary who appeared to a poor man in Mexico in 1531 and has watched over Mexican families ever since, candles in tall glass jars, and old photographs of her dead husband and her parents and a baby sister who had died in Mexico before she was born. The first time I saw it, through her open bedroom door, I stopped in the hallway and stared. It looked so much like my

mother's altar that I felt homesick in a house five miles from my own.

"That's for the family that's gone," Danny said, embarrassed. "My grandma's old-fashioned."

"So is mine," I said. "My mom has one too."

* * *

Mateo drowned in July, the summer before our junior year.

It was a weekday. Danny and I were at a summer track meet in San Antonio. Mateo was home with Abuela, and he went down to the tank by himself in the heat of the afternoon, which he was not allowed to do, and jumped off the dock. Nobody saw what happened. Maybe he hit his head. Maybe he got tangled in the cattails, or a cramp took him. His father found him at dusk, floating face down near the dock.

I went to the rosary at the funeral home, the vigil of prayer the night before, and the funeral Mass and the burial. I'd been to Vietnamese funerals before, where the family wears white headbands, white being our color of mourning, and the air is thick with incense and chanting, but I'd never been to one like that. A small white coffin. Danny's mother had to be held up by two of her sisters at the graveside. Danny stood next to his father the whole time in a suit that was too big for him and didn't cry once, not in front of anybody.

After that he quit the track team. He stopped calling. When I rode my bike out to the house, his mother said he was sleeping, or out with his father, or not feeling well. I left messages. I let it go for a few weeks, because I didn't know what else to do.

In late August he called me at eleven o'clock at night. My father answered and handed me the phone with a look.

"Johnnie," Danny said. His voice was strange, high and tight. "Can you come out here? Right now?"

"It's eleven."

"I know what time it is." He was quiet for a second. "I need to show you something. You're the only one who won't think I'm crazy."

* * *

My father drove me. He didn't ask why. He'd heard something in my voice, or Danny's, and he just got his keys. He dropped me at the end of the Ortizes' gravel drive and said he'd wait.

Danny was waiting for me by the gate with a flashlight. He looked terrible. He'd lost weight, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He didn't say hello. He just turned and walked toward the pasture, and I followed him.

We walked down through the pecan trees in the dark to the stock tank. It was a hot, still night, with a big moon. The water was flat and silver, and the cattle were bedded down on the far side of the pasture. The frogs were going. Danny stopped at the edge of the trees, about fifty yards from the dock, and turned off his flashlight.

"Wait," he said.

We stood there for what felt like a long time. Ten minutes. Twenty. A coyote yipped somewhere. I was about to say something, and then the frogs stopped.

All of them, all at once, the way the dogs had stopped in my mother's story about the night I was born. One second there was a whole chorus, and the next there was nothing. The silence rang in my ears.

Out at the end of the dock, someone was sitting.

It was a small figure, a child, sitting on the end of the dock with his legs hanging down over the water, the way Mateo used to sit and wait for us to come back from a run.

He was very still. In the moonlight I could see the shape of his head and his shoulders, and that he was wet. His hair was flat against his head. Water was dripping off his elbows.

"He's there every night," Danny whispered. "Every night since the funeral. I come down here and he's there. He doesn't do anything. He just sits there. Sometimes he looks back at the house."

My mouth had gone completely dry. I could feel my heart in my throat.

"Has anyone else seen him?"

"Abuela." Danny swallowed. "She won't come down here. She lights candles for him every night. She says he's lost. My dad says I need to see a counselor. My mom—" He stopped. "My mom doesn't know. She can't know."

The figure on the dock turned its head and looked toward the trees where we were standing.

Danny made a sound I'll never forget, a small, broken sound, and started forward. I grabbed his arm. I don't know why, it was pure instinct. Something in my body that was older than I was. I held him back with both hands, and he fought me, and I kept holding on.

"Let me go," he said. "That's my brother. Let me go to him."

And all I could think of was my father on the porch in Texas, years before, late at night, telling the story nobody else heard. *It shows you what you want. And sooner or later, one of the hungry boys wades out to grab the biggest one, and he doesn't come back up.*

"Danny," I said. "Don't go in the water. Whatever you do. Please. Don't go near the water."

He stopped fighting me. He sank down onto his knees in the dry grass and put his face in his hands and finally cried, for the first time since July, huge heaving sobs, and I knelt down beside him and held on to his shoulders.

When I looked up again, the dock was empty. The frogs had started again.

* * *

My father was waiting in the car at the end of the drive with the engine running. I got in and we drove halfway home without a word. Then, at a stop sign on an empty county road, I told him.

He listened without interrupting. When I got to the part about holding Danny back from the water, he turned his head and looked at me for a long time. Then he pulled the car over onto the shoulder and turned off the engine.

"You remembered the sergeant," he said.

"Yes."

He nodded slowly. He rolled down the window and lit a cigarette, though he'd mostly quit by then. He smoked half of it before he spoke again.

"In the village," he said, "when a child drowned, the family made offerings at the water's edge. Every day for a hundred days. They burned paper clothes for him so he'd be warm, and they called his name, and they told him to go home. They told him his ancestors were waiting for him. They built him a little boat, sometimes, the way Ông Sáu did in Guam." He tapped the ash out the window. "Nobody's done any of that for that little boy. So he's sitting on the dock waiting for somebody to come get him."

"Danny's family is Catholic," I said. "Mexican Catholic. They don't do any of that."

My father almost smiled. "Your mother is Catholic," he said.

* * *

The next afternoon my mother drove out to the Ortiz place with me. She had never met them. She brought a pot of

chicken rice soup, because that was what she brought to every house with a death in it, and a bag of things she wouldn't let me see.

I was nervous about it. I didn't know what Danny's parents would think of this small, determined Vietnamese woman who spoke broken English and had come about their dead son. I needn't have worried. Mrs. Ortiz opened the door, took one look at my mother, and burst into tears. My mother put down the soup and held her in the doorway for a long time, two mothers who didn't share a language, and then Mrs. Ortiz brought her into the kitchen and made coffee.

Abuela came in from the porch. She and my mother looked at each other across the kitchen table. Neither spoke the other's language at all. But Abuela took my mother by the hand and led her down the hall to her bedroom and showed her the shrine, the Virgin, the candles, the photographs. She had added a new one, a school picture of Mateo, gap-toothed and grinning, with a candle burning in front of it and a small plate with a cookie on it.

My mother looked at it for a long time. Then she opened her bag. She took out a bundle of incense, a small brass bowl, and her rosary, and she held them out to Abuela, a little uncertainly, the way you'd offer a gift to someone when you didn't know whether it would be welcome.

Abuela looked at the incense. Then she nodded, firmly, and moved her own candles over to make room.

* * *

That evening, all of us went down to the stock tank together: Danny's parents, Abuela, Danny, my mother, my father, and me. Abuela carried a candle in a tall glass jar. My mother carried incense. Mr. Ortiz, who hadn't been back to the dock

since the day he found his son, walked with his wife holding his arm.

At the water's edge, Abuela knelt in the mud with her rosary and began to pray in Spanish. My mother knelt beside her and prayed in Vietnamese. They said the Hail Mary together, each in her own language, back and forth, one starting and the other finishing, without ever having agreed to do it that way. My father lit the incense and stuck it in the mud by the dock. Danny's mother took a small paper boat out of her pocket that Danny had made that afternoon, with Mateo's name written on the side in marker. She had put a birthday candle on it.

Mr. Ortiz lit the candle with his lighter, and Danny knelt and set the boat on the water and pushed it gently out. There was no wind. It drifted slowly out into the middle of the stock tank and turned in a slow circle, and the little flame burned steady.

"Go home, mijo," Abuela said to the water. "Go to God. Your grandpa is waiting for you."

"Go home," my mother said in Vietnamese. "Your ancestors are waiting."

The candle burned down and went out. We stood there until it was fully dark.

Danny never saw Mateo on the dock again. He came back to the track team in the spring. We ran the mile together until we graduated, and when I left for the seminary he was the one who drove me there, and when he got married I was standing next to him at the altar. His oldest son is named Mateo.

* * *

I was sixteen. I'd been carrying the basement in Michigan around inside me for twelve years like a stone I couldn't put down. I had never told anyone outside my family about it,

not even Danny. I had never been able to decide what it meant, whether it was something that had been done to us, or just a horror that happened, the way car wrecks and cancer happen.

But walking back up through the dark pecan orchard that night, behind two old women holding hands who couldn't say a single word to each other except the Hail Mary, I felt something change in me. For the first time, I thought that maybe what we'd been through hadn't been only something to survive. Maybe it was something I'd been taught. Maybe somebody needed to know these things, the old things and the Church things together. Somebody needed to stand at the edge of the water and call the lost home.

I didn't have a word for that feeling yet. A year later, sitting in the chapel of the monastery listening to the monks chant, I would find one.

Chapter 23

Discernment

The summer before major seminary, I almost didn't go back.

Her name was Linh. She'd been in the youth group at Father Võ's parish since we were both fourteen, a tall, sharp-tongued girl who led the choir and beat everyone at Chinese chess and once told me, at sixteen, that I prayed like a man trying to win an argument. That summer she was home from college in Austin, studying to be a pharmacist, and Father Võ asked the two of us to run the parish's summer catechism program together. Thirty children, every weekday morning, in a hot portable classroom behind the church.

I'd known her for eight years. I had never really looked at her. That summer, I couldn't stop.

It wasn't anything dramatic. We sat on the steps of the portable after the children went home, eating sugarcane from the auntie's cart in the parking lot. We argued about books. She made fun of my Latin. She asked me questions nobody else asked. Why the seminary? What did I want? Not what God wanted, what did *I* want? And I found that I didn't have a good answer. I'd been answering for God for so long I had forgotten I was allowed to want anything.

One evening in late July, after a youth group meeting, I drove her home. We sat in my father's car in front of her parents' house with the engine off and the windows down and the cicadas going, and talked until one in the morning about everything. When she finally reached for the door handle, she stopped and looked back at me.

"You know you don't have to go back," she said. "To the seminary. You know that, right? Nobody would think less of you."

"My father would," I said.

"Your father," Linh said, "would get over it."

She got out. I sat in the car in front of her house for a long time.

* * *

That was the most honest thing anyone had said to me in years, and it frightened me more than anything in the Michigan basement.

Because she was right about my father, and she had found the thing I was most ashamed of. My father had crossed an ocean. He had worked the night shift in a Michigan foundry with sand in his ears, and then nearly twenty years of jobs in Texas, and he had fed twelve people on what he made. When I told him I wanted to be a priest, he cried. It was the only time I had seen him cry since Guam. Every Saturday at the Vietnamese coffee shop, he told every man there that his son was going to be a priest. I was the son who was going to make it all worth something.

And I was not sure, sitting in that car, whether I was going back to the seminary for God or for him.

There was a worse question under that one, and I didn't let myself look at it until a week later, at two in the morning, in the empty chapel at Father Võ's church, on my knees.

I was not sure I wanted to be a priest because I loved God. I was afraid I wanted to be a priest because I was still four years old at the top of the basement stairs. Because priests were the ones who stood in the doorway with the book and the holy water and the stole, and the dark backed down from them. Or it was supposed to. I had watched Father Thomas run. I had watched Father James hold his ground. I had decided, without ever saying it to myself, that I was going to be the one who held his ground. That nothing

would ever stand at the foot of my bed again and find me without a weapon.

That isn't a vocation. I knew it on my knees in that chapel. That's armor.

* * *

I went to Father Gerald, who was spending the summer at a retreat house in the Hill Country, and drove three hours to sit in his small room and tell him all of it. Linh, my father, the basement, the armor.

He listened, as he always did, with his tea going cold.

"So," he said, when I was done. "Here's the question. Are you going back to become a priest, or to make sure you're never four years old on the stairs again?"

"I don't know," I said. "Both."

"That's honest. Most of us came in for mixed reasons, Johnnie. I came in partly because my mother wanted it, and partly because I was afraid of girls." He smiled. "God can work with mixed reasons. What He can't work with is a man who won't look at his. You're looking. That's good." He set down his cup. "So go back. Not because I'm telling you to. Go back and keep looking. If it's armor, you'll find out. Armor gets heavy. One day you'll want to take it off, and on that day, don't be ashamed to."

I went back in August.

I didn't call Linh to say goodbye. I didn't trust myself to. She married a doctor from Houston three years later, a good man. I heard it from my mother, who reported it at dinner with a sideways look at me, and I said I was happy for her, and I was. Mostly.

But I've thought about her question many times since. Not what God wants. What do you want?

It took me a long time, and a cold nursery, and a voice in a banyan tree, to answer it.

* * *

When I moved on to major seminary, the interest only grew. In my second year I asked for a meeting with my bishop. I told him I wanted, someday, to be trained as an exorcist, and I asked if the diocese would send me to Rome to study.

He listened without interrupting. Then he shook his head.

"Johnnie, the men I send to Rome have twenty years in a parish behind them," he said. "Exorcists come out of long pastoral experience, not the other way around. You are going to be a parish priest. Learn to be a good one first. We'll see where God takes you after that."

I was disappointed, but I understood. And a few weeks later, a different door opened.

There was an old priest in our diocese, Father Joseph, who had quietly served as the bishop's exorcist for more than thirty years and was getting close to retirement. I wrote him a letter, then drove out to his rectory on the edge of town to meet him. He was soft-spoken, with white hair and heavy eyebrows, and his study was stacked with old manuals, Church documents, and a coffee pot that never got turned off. I told him about Michigan. He listened to the whole story without saying a word. When I was done, he poured me another cup of coffee.

"All right," he said. "I'll teach you what I can. Lesson one is the one nobody wants to hear."

Over the next two years I spent many evenings in that study. What he taught me was not in the books.

Once I asked him what he made of my mother, with her incense and her thorn branches and her rosary all going at once. I expected him to call it superstition.

He took his time answering. "I've worked with Mexican families who call a curandera, a folk healer, before they call me," he said. "Cajun families who hang blue bottles in the

trees to catch evil spirits. Irish grandmothers with holy water in every room and a horseshoe over the door for luck. People have always known there was something out there in the dark. They've just used different words for it." He tapped the ritual book on his desk. "The Church has the authority to command it. I believe that. But your mother knows one thing a lot of priests forget. The dead need to be prayed for. Half the trouble I've seen in this work started with somebody nobody prayed for."

"The books tell you what prayers to say," he told me another time. "They don't tell you about the cold that gets into your bones, or how it goes after the things you're most ashamed of. And they don't tell you this. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it isn't the devil. It's grief, or illness, or loneliness, or bad wiring, or a house settling. Your first job is to prove the devil isn't there. Only when you've run out of every other explanation do you open the ritual book."

He let me come with him on some of the calls the diocese got. He was right every time. A woman hearing footsteps lived alone and hadn't slept in a month. A family with "knocking walls" had a water hammer in the old pipes. A teenage boy "speaking in voices" needed a psychiatrist and got one. I learned to ask questions, to listen, to look for the ordinary first. It was the most valuable thing anyone taught me in seminary.

But part of me was still waiting for the other one, the hundredth case.

* * *

One spring, word went around a few of us seminarians about an old cemetery in rural Louisiana. It was overgrown, half forgotten, said to be haunted by soldiers who had died in the Civil War. Nobody could say where the story came from.

Three friends and I decided to drive over and keep a vigil there one night.

We brought crucifixes, holy water, a flask of blessed oil, flashlights, and a thermos of coffee. It was after eleven when we pushed through the rusted gate. The air was hot and wet even at that hour. Live oaks hung with Spanish moss stood over leaning headstones, and the ground was soft and uneven under our feet. I noticed there were no insects singing. Just our own breathing.

We set up by a broken stone obelisk in the middle of the cemetery and laid our things out on a cloth. I began with the sign of the cross, and we prayed the rosary for the souls buried there. Then we waited.

For hours we sat in the dark. Every time a branch creaked, every time the air seemed to get cooler, my heart jumped. I kept waiting for the cold I remembered from the basement, the feeling of being watched.

It never came. Around five the sky started to go gray behind the trees, and then gold. The cemetery was just an old cemetery, quiet and sad and in need of mowing.

My friends were disappointed on the drive home. I was too, at first. Then I thought about what Father Joseph would say, and I started to laugh.

The supernatural doesn't perform on request. Most graveyards are just places where people are buried. Knowing that was its own kind of discernment, and I was glad, in the end, to have learned it in a quiet cemetery rather than a loud one.

Chapter 24

The Hundredth Case

It came in my last year of theology but one, a few months before I was ordained a deacon. Father Joseph called me at the seminary on a Thursday night.

"Can you get a weekend pass?" he asked.

"Probably. Why?"

"Because I think this one might be real," he said, "and I'm too old to do it alone."

* * *

Her name was Ruth Ann. She was thirty-four, the mother of three, and she lived with her husband, Wayne, and their kids in a double-wide trailer on five acres in the piney woods of East Texas, an hour from the nearest town of any size. Wayne drove a log truck. Ruth Ann had worked as a cashier at the Dollar General until about a year earlier, when things started going wrong.

They weren't Catholic. They were Baptists, and they had been through their own pastor, and a deliverance minister from a church in Tyler, and two psychiatric hospitalizations, before Wayne, at the end of his rope, had looked up the Catholic diocese in the phone book and called the chancery, the diocese's main office. The chancery passed it to Father Joseph. He drove out to see them. He went back three more times. Then he called me.

"I've seen a hundred of these, Johnnie," he said on the drive out. It was a Saturday morning in October, and the pines went by on either side of the two-lane road for mile after mile. "You've seen a dozen with me. You know what I look for."

I did. I'd learned his list by heart. Natural causes first. Is there a medical explanation: a tumor, a seizure disorder, a drug? Is there a psychiatric one? Is there a family story driving this, a grief, a secret, an abuse, a need to be seen? Is somebody faking, or exaggerating, or being egged on? Only when you'd gone all the way down that list and come up empty did you start to look at the other list. The one in the old Roman Ritual, written in 1614. The signs. Speaking or understanding a language the person had never learned. Knowing hidden or distant things they had no way to know. Strength beyond their age and condition. And a violent aversion to the sacred.

"She's been seen by three psychiatrists," Father Joseph said. "They've tried five different medications. Two diagnoses, both different. Nothing's helped. I've talked to her doctors. They're honest men. They're stumped."

"And the other list?"

He didn't answer for a mile or so. Then he said, "Last Tuesday I sat at her kitchen table and she told me what I had for breakfast. In Latin."

* * *

The trailer sat at the end of a long red-dirt driveway in a clearing in the pines. There were children's bicycles in the yard, a swing set, a vegetable garden gone to weeds. Wayne met us on the porch. He was a big man with a sunburned neck and huge, scarred hands, and he shook mine so hard it hurt. He looked like he hadn't slept in a year. The kids were staying with his sister in town.

"She's having a good morning," he said. "She knows you're coming. She asked me to make coffee."

Ruth Ann was sitting at the kitchen table in a sweatshirt and jeans, a thin woman with mousy hair pulled back in a ponytail and a face that looked older than thirty-four. She

smiled when we came in. She got up and poured us coffee and apologized for the mess. She asked me about the seminary and whether the food was any good. She was warm and shy and funny, and I liked her at once. For twenty minutes we sat at that kitchen table and talked about nothing, and I thought: Father Joseph is wrong. This is a sick, exhausted woman who needs a better doctor.

Then she set down her coffee cup and looked at me, and her face changed.

I've tried to describe it many times since, to colleagues, to my wife, to myself, and I've never done it well. Nothing moved, exactly. Her features stayed the same. But the person behind them was gone, and something else was looking out, and it was looking at me with a kind of bright, amused interest, the way a cat looks at something small that has just come out from under the porch.

"Hush," she said. "Hush, little baby, don't say a word."

I felt the hair rise on my arms.

She smiled. It wasn't her smile. "She sang it to you in the dark," she said. "Didn't she? On the stairs. Under the Christmas tree. You never told anybody. You went back to bed and pulled the blankets over your head like a good boy."

I couldn't speak. I looked at Father Joseph. He was watching her very steadily, with his hand resting on the stole folded in his lap.

"Don't look at him," said the thing in Ruth Ann. Then, in a voice that was suddenly very soft, very old, in perfect, unaccented Vietnamese, the Vietnamese of my mother's village, it said my name. My Vietnamese name. The one only my family used.

And then it laughed.

* * *

I had never told Father Joseph about the woman on the stairs. I had never told anyone. Ruth Ann had never been out of East Texas. She didn't know what Vietnamese sounded like, let alone the tones of my name. I sat at that kitchen table with my coffee going cold and the bottom falling out of my stomach, and everything I had told myself for twenty years, everything I'd built on top of the basement in Michigan to keep it down, cracked straight through.

Father Joseph stood up. He was seventy-one years old and had a bad hip, and he stood up slowly. He took the stole out of his lap and kissed it and put it around his neck. Then he took the small bottle of holy water out of his jacket pocket.

"That's enough," he said quietly.

The thing in Ruth Ann looked at the bottle and stopped laughing.

"We'll be back next Saturday," Father Joseph said. "With the bishop's permission. And we'll finish this. You know we will." He turned to Wayne, who was standing in the kitchen doorway, white as paper. "Wayne, I'm sorry. Sit with her. She'll be herself again in a little while. Call me if you need me. Any hour."

On the porch, my legs gave out. I sat down on the top step and put my head between my knees. Father Joseph sat down next to me, carefully, because of his hip, and put a hand on my back and left it there.

"That was the hundredth," he said after a while.

* * *

The bishop's permission came that week, in writing, naming Father Joseph as the exorcist and me as his assistant. A seminarian couldn't do anything but pray, hold, and watch. That was exactly what Father Joseph wanted.

"You need to see it," he said. "Not hear about it, not read about it. See it. And you need to see that it isn't a movie. It's mostly very boring and very long and very hard on everybody, and then sometimes, if you're lucky, it's over."

He was right. It wasn't like a movie at all.

We went back every Saturday for seven weeks. Wayne's brother came, a deacon at their Baptist church, a quiet man who stood in the corner with his Bible open and prayed under his breath the whole time, and a Catholic nurse Father Joseph had worked with for years, a gray-haired woman named Pat who brought a blood-pressure cuff and a bag of oranges. We used the trailer's small living room. Ruth Ann sat in a recliner Wayne had pulled into the middle of the floor. She came to every session willingly. She was the bravest person I have ever met.

Father Joseph read the rite. The old Latin rite, in his small, steady, unremarkable voice. *Exorcizo te, immundissime spiritus.* He read it the way he would have read the minutes of a parish council meeting, without drama, and when it shouted at him he simply waited until it was done shouting and read the next line. I sat on Ruth Ann's left and Wayne sat on her right, and we held her hands, and when it got bad we held her arms. Pat took her blood pressure every thirty minutes and made her drink water and eat orange slices.

Much of the time, nothing happened. Ruth Ann sat in the recliner with her eyes closed and Father Joseph read and the rest of us prayed, and an hour went by, and then another. Sometimes it came up out of her and fought. It cursed in English and in languages none of us recognized. It said things to each of us, things it shouldn't have known. It told Pat the name of the son she'd lost to drugs in 1979. It told Wayne's brother what he had done in the back of his truck when he was nineteen. It never stopped talking to me

about the house in Michigan, about the woman on the stairs, the dark at the top of the basement steps, the hand on my ankle.

The worst moment came in the fourth week. Ruth Ann, all hundred and ten pounds of her, threw Wayne off her right arm and across the room into the wall hard enough to crack the paneling. Then she turned to me, took my wrist in her thin hand, and squeezed, and I felt the bones grind together and heard myself scream. Pat and Wayne's brother pried her fingers off one at a time. My wrist was purple for two weeks. Father Joseph never stopped reading.

* * *

In the seventh week, it ended. Not dramatically. There was no flash of light, no voice crying out as it left. It was late afternoon. Father Joseph was near the end of the rite for maybe the thirtieth time, and Ruth Ann, who had been sitting very still with her eyes closed, suddenly began to cry. Just crying. Ordinary tears, an ordinary woman's crying, the kind you hear in any hospital waiting room. She cried for a long time, holding Wayne's hand, and Father Joseph closed his book and waited.

When she was done, she opened her eyes and looked around the room at all of us, and it was her. Only her. She looked at me and saw my wrist, which was still wrapped in an elastic bandage.

"Oh, honey," she said. "Did I do that? I'm so sorry."

Then she asked Wayne if there was any coffee.

* * *

On the drive home, I asked Father Joseph the question I'd been carrying for seven weeks.

"Was it a demon?"

He drove for a while without answering. The pines went by, black against an orange sky.

"Her new psychiatrist put her on a different medication about a month ago," he said finally. "Did you know that? He called me. He thinks it may finally be working."

I stared at him. "So it was the medication?"

"I didn't say that." He glanced at me. "I don't know, Johnnie. I don't know if it was the medication or the rite or her husband sitting next to her every Saturday holding her hand, or all three, or God working through all three. I know she's better. I know the doctors did their job and I did mine and Wayne did his. I've stopped needing to know which of us did it. You'll stop too, if you do this long enough."

"It knew my name," I said. "It knew about the stairs. Nobody knows about the stairs."

"Yes," he said. "It did."

We drove on in the dusk.

"You asked me a long time ago if it was wrong to want to understand the enemy," he said. "Here's what I understand, after forty years. The devil is real. I'm as sure of that as I am of anything. But most of the time, he isn't the one doing the damage. Most of the time it's grief, and illness, and fear, and loneliness, and the things people do to each other. And when he does show up, it's almost always because one of those other things opened the door for him. You close the door by healing the thing that opened it." He was quiet for a moment. "Which is a long way of saying, don't become a priest just so you can fight devils. You'll be disappointed. Most of the work is sitting with people while they cry."

I looked out the window at the dark pines. I thought about Ruth Ann in her recliner, crying the ordinary tears of an ordinary exhausted woman, and Wayne holding her hand. I thought about Danny on his knees in the dry grass by the stock tank. I thought about my mother walking down

into the dark of our Michigan basement with a bottle of holy water and an armful of thorns.

"I think," I said slowly, "that's the part I want."

Father Joseph smiled at the road. "Good," he said. "Then you might be all right."

Chapter 25

The Litany

I was ordained a transitional deacon, the last ordination before the priesthood, on a Saturday morning in May, in my fourth year of theology, in the cathedral downtown, with five other men from my class.

My whole family came. They filled three pews on the left side of the nave, twelve of us and then some: by then there were in-laws, and nieces and nephews, and my oldest sister's two little boys in matching clip-on ties, kicking the pew in front of them. My mother wore an áo dài of white silk embroidered with blue cranes, which she had had made in Houston for the occasion and which cost more, my father said, than his first car. My father wore a dark suit and his army medals, which he had never worn in public before. Danny Ortiz drove up from Austin with his wife. Linh came too, newly engaged, and sat near the back with her fiancé; when I came down the aisle she caught my eye and gave me a small nod, the way you nod to someone who has finally answered a question, even if it isn't the answer you hoped for. Father Joseph came, walking with a cane by then, and sat in the front row with the other priests. And Father Võ came, though he was very sick that spring and his doctors had told him not to. He sat at the end of my family's pew in his black suit and Roman collar, thinner than I had ever seen him, holding my mother's hand.

I remember the cathedral was cold. The air conditioning had been turned up for the crowd, and the marble floor of the sanctuary was cold through the soles of my shoes.

* * *

There is a moment in every Catholic ordination that I had seen many times as a seminarian and was afraid of for months before my own. After the candidates have been called forward and examined, after the bishop has asked each of us whether we are resolved to serve and we have each said *I am*, the candidates lie down.

We lie face-down on the floor of the sanctuary, flat, arms at our sides or folded under our foreheads, in front of the altar. It's called the prostration. And while we lie there, the whole church kneels and the choir sings the Litany of the Saints, calling on every saint in heaven, by name, one after another, to pray for the men on the floor.

I lay down on the marble with my forehead on the backs of my hands. The floor was so cold it hurt my cheekbones. I could smell floor wax and incense and the dust of the old carpet runner at the edge of the sanctuary. Five other men lay in a row beside me. Behind me, I could hear the shuffle and creak of a thousand people kneeling.

The cantor began.

Lord, have mercy. And the whole cathedral answered, *Lord, have mercy.*

Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

Holy Mary, Mother of God. And the answer came back, rolling up the nave like a wave: *Pray for us.*

Saint Michael. Pray for us.

Holy angels of God. Pray for us.

I had prepared myself for this for months. I'd been told by older priests that it was the moment they felt most completely held in their lives, lying helpless on the floor while the whole communion of saints was called down on top of them. I wanted to feel that. I lay there listening and waiting for it.

What came instead was cold.

It came up out of the marble into my face and my chest and down my arms. It was a cold I knew. I'd felt it on the top step of a basement in Michigan, in the corner of a nursery I hadn't yet seen, at the bottom of a staircase under the lights of a Christmas tree. It came up through the floor of the cathedral, and with it, very faint, very close to my ear, came a whisper. My name. My Vietnamese name, the one only my family used.

I lay frozen on the floor with my eyes squeezed shut. *Not here,* I thought. *Not here. Please. Not today.*

Saint John the Baptist. Pray for us.

Saint Joseph. Pray for us.

The whisper came again. Closer.

And then, from behind me, from somewhere in the left side of the nave, I heard another voice under the choir. It was very small and very clear, and it was saying the litany in Vietnamese.

My mother.

She wasn't singing with the choir. She was praying her own litany, out loud, on her knees, in the language she'd prayed in at the banyan tree and in the bomb shelter and at the top of the basement stairs. *Thánh Micae, cầu cho chúng con.* Saint Michael, pray for us. Under that I could hear a man's voice, low and rough, keeping time with her. My father. Then Lan's voice, and Hùng's. Then, one by one, all of them, three pews of my family on their knees in the cathedral, saying the litany together in Vietnamese while the choir sang it in English and Latin over their heads.

And somewhere among them, thin and hoarse, Father Võ.

The cold went out of the floor.

I don't know how else to say it. One moment it was there, in my face and my chest. The next, it simply wasn't. The marble was cold, the way marble is cold. The whisper was

gone. And in its place was exactly what the older priests had told me I would feel: held. Completely held, lying helpless on the floor, while a thousand people and my whole family and every saint in heaven prayed over me.

I lay there and cried into my hands. One of the men beside me told me afterward he thought I was having a religious experience. I suppose I was.

All holy men and women, saints of God. Pray for us.

* * *

After the ordination, there was a party at my parents' house that went on until midnight. My mother had been cooking for a week. The aunties from the parish brought trays of food in the backs of their cars. Somebody's uncle brought a karaoke machine, and my father, who had never sung in public in his life, stood up and sang an old Vietnamese love song for my mother. Every person in the house over sixty wept. Danny Ortiz and his wife ate so many spring rolls they had to lie down on the couch. Father Joseph sat in the place of honor on our back porch with a glass of my father's rice wine and talked for two hours with Abuela Ortiz, who had come with Danny, though neither of them spoke the other's language. They seemed to get along fine.

Father Võ didn't stay long. He was too tired. Before he left, he went to our family altar in the living room, the one he'd helped my parents put up when I was five, and lit three sticks of sandalwood and bowed to my grandparents and to Ông Sáu's scrap of cardboard. Then he came and found me in the kitchen and took both my hands in his.

"Con," he said. Child. "I heard them in there today. Under the floor. Didn't I?"

I stared at him.

"I've been doing this a long time," he said. "I know what that cold feels like." He squeezed my hands. "They'll come

for you, you know. All your life. Things like that know where the doors are. A man who has been through what you've been through is a door." He smiled his old smile. "But today you heard who else was in the room. Remember that. You are never on the floor by yourself."

It was the last time I saw him. He died in August. My mother wrote his name on a slip of red paper and set it on the shelf beside Ông Sáu.

* * *

Late that night, after everyone had gone home and the dishes were done and my father had gone to bed, my mother came and found me sitting on the back porch in the dark in my new collar.

She sat down next to me with a small bundle wrapped in cloth and put it in my lap.

"Open it," she said.

It was the bird. Not mine. Mine was in a shoebox in my room at the seminary. This was the other one, the half-finished bird Ông Sáu had been holding in his hand on Guam when he died. I hadn't seen it since I was a child. The head was done, and one wing; the rest was still a rough block of driftwood, with the old man's knife marks in it, frozen at the moment he stopped.

"I've kept it for twenty-two years," my mother said. "I didn't know what to do with it. I couldn't throw it away. It isn't finished."

I turned it over in my hands.

"You finish things," she said. "That's who you are. Since you were a little boy. Your brothers and sisters, they get frightened and they run, or they get frightened and they forget. You get frightened and you go back. You sit in the dark until you understand it." She put her hand on mine, over the bird. "Maybe someday you'll know how to finish it."

I didn't know how to carve. I told her so.

"Then learn," she said, and kissed the top of my head, and went to bed.

I sat on the porch for a long time with the bird in my hands. I didn't know yet, that night, that in less than a year I'd be standing in a cold nursery on Oak Street with my mother at my side, reading the old Latin rite with no one's permission. Or that within two years, I would take off the collar I was wearing.

But I've thought about what she said many times since. *You get frightened and you go back.*

It's the truest thing anyone has ever said about me. I'm still not sure whether it's a compliment.

Chapter 26

The House on Oak Street

My cousin's name is Khang. His wife's name is Trâm. Their daughter, the baby in the nursery, my goddaughter, is named Ngọc Anh, but everyone in the family has called her Bé Na since the day she was born, and I'll call her that here.

Before I tell what happened in that nursery, I should tell how they came to live there. Khang told it to me himself, months afterward, sitting in my parents' backyard with a beer he didn't drink, and he told it like a man confessing.

* * *

Khang is my mother's sister's son. His family came out in 1979, four years after ours, on a fishing boat from Rạch Giá with ninety people on a vessel built for twenty. They were at sea for eleven days. They were boarded twice by Thai pirates, who took everything, including my aunt's wedding ring and the gold fillings out of an old man's teeth. Khang was eight. He doesn't talk about the boat. My aunt, Dì Tư, talks about it constantly, the way some people worry a sore tooth with their tongue.

They spent two years in a camp in Malaysia before they were resettled in Houston. Khang grew up there, went to the University of Houston on scholarships, and became a pharmacist. He met Trâm at a Vietnamese student association dance. She was a nurse, born in Texas, and spoke Vietnamese with an American accent that my aunt teased her about mercilessly. They married when they were both twenty-six. They saved for four years for a house.

The house on Oak Street was in an older neighborhood on the north side of the city where Khang had gotten a job at a hospital pharmacy. It was a two-bedroom brick bungalow

from the 1940s, with hardwood floors, a deep front porch, a big pecan tree in the backyard, and a price nearly thirty thousand dollars below anything comparable on the street. It had been empty for over a year. The real estate agent, a cheerful woman named Debbie, said the sellers were an estate that wanted a quick sale.

"It was perfect," Khang said. "That should have been the first warning."

* * *

The second warning was the calendar.

They signed the papers in August. Trâm was four months pregnant. They wanted to be settled before the baby came. When Khang told his mother the closing date, Dì Tư looked it up on the lunar calendar she kept pinned to her kitchen wall and went pale.

"That's the seventh month," she said. "You can't move into a house in the seventh month."

Khang laughed at her. He was a pharmacist. He'd been in America since he was ten. He told her it was superstition, that the closing date was set by the bank, not by the gates of the underworld, and that if they waited a month the price might go up. Dì Tư argued for a week. She called my mother. My mother called Khang and argued for another week.

"You don't move house in Ghost Month," my mother told him. "The wandering ones are everywhere that month. A new house, an empty house, it's a door standing open. They'll walk right in ahead of you."

"Dì," Khang said. Auntie. "With respect. This is Texas."

They moved in on the twelfth day of the seventh month. Three days before the full moon.

* * *

The third warning was the neighbor.

On the day they moved in, while Khang and three friends from the pharmacy were carrying boxes up the front walk, an old woman came out on the porch of the house next door and stood watching them with her arms folded. She was very small and very old, in a housedress and slippers, with a cloud of white hair. When Khang waved, she didn't wave back.

That evening, when the friends had gone, she came over with a coffee cake on a plate. Her name was Mrs. Pruitt. She had lived next door for fifty-one years. She handed Trâm the cake and looked past her into the empty living room, full of boxes.

"You're the young couple," she said. "With a baby coming."

"In January," Trâm said.

Mrs. Pruitt looked at Trâm's stomach. She looked into the house again. She seemed to be making up her mind about something.

"Did they tell you about the house?" she asked.

"Tell us what?"

The old woman opened her mouth, then closed it. "Nobody ever tells anybody anything," she said. "That's always been the trouble on this street." Then she patted Trâm's arm. "You make sure that baby sleeps in your room with you, honey. At least at first. That's all. Welcome to the neighborhood."

She went back to her porch. Khang and Trâm stood in the doorway holding the coffee cake.

"What was that?" Trâm said.

"She's old," Khang said. "She's lonely."

Later, much later, Khang found out what Debbie the real estate agent hadn't told them. In Texas, the law doesn't require a seller to disclose that someone died in a house, from natural causes, suicide, or an accident unrelated to the

condition of the property. A murder is a gray area. An estate selling a house through a lawyer in another state isn't going to volunteer it. And nobody on Oak Street wanted to be the one to tell the nice young Vietnamese couple what had happened in their front bedroom fifteen years before.

* * *

For the first few months, nothing happened that either of them would have called strange.

Khang worked long shifts at the hospital. Trâm worked days in the labor and delivery ward at another hospital, until her doctor made her stop in November. They painted the front bedroom a pale yellow for the nursery. Khang put up a crib from Trâm's sister and assembled a dresser from a kit, swearing at the instructions. Dì Tư came over from Houston every other weekend with food and a list of complaints about everything.

There were small things. Trâm noticed them more than Khang did, because she was home. The front bedroom was always cold. Khang checked the vents and the windows and couldn't find a draft. The closet door in the nursery wouldn't stay shut; she'd close it and come back an hour later and find it open. She said sometimes she smelled something in that room, faint and metallic, like a mouthful of pennies. Once, folding baby clothes into the new dresser, she heard footsteps in the hall behind her, heavy ones, and turned around to say something to Khang, and there was no one there. Khang was at work.

She told herself it was pregnancy. Every nurse knows what hormones do to a woman's senses. She told herself it was an old house settling. She didn't tell Khang, because she knew what he'd say.

Mrs. Pruitt, next door, watched them from her porch. She brought another coffee cake at Thanksgiving. She

brought a little knitted blanket at Christmas, white with yellow ducks. Each time she looked past them into the house, the same way.

* * *

Bé Na was born on the ninth of January, healthy, seven pounds, with a full head of black hair. Trâm's labor was long, and Dì Tư sat in the hospital waiting room for nineteen hours with her rosary and a thermos of ginger tea.

They brought her home to Oak Street three days later.

Dì Tư moved in to help for the first month, the way Vietnamese mothers and mothers-in-law always have. She took over the kitchen. She made Trâm drink pork-trotter soup with green papaya to bring in her milk. She wouldn't let her wash her hair or drink anything cold. She set a heater by the bed, the closest thing she could find in Texas to a charcoal brazier. She tied a mulberry-wood bracelet around Bé Na's tiny wrist and hung garlic over the nursery door, and Khang rolled his eyes and let her.

And Dì Tư, who hadn't wanted them to move into that house in Ghost Month, took one step into the yellow nursery on the first day and stopped.

"This room," she said.

"What about it?" Khang asked.

She didn't answer him. She turned to Trâm and told her in rapid Vietnamese, so fast Trâm could barely follow, that the baby was going to sleep in their bedroom with them. Not in the nursery. Not for one night. Trâm agreed at once. She didn't even argue. She remembered what Mrs. Pruitt had said on the first day.

For nearly two weeks, Bé Na slept in a bassinet beside her parents' bed, and everything was fine.

Then, near the end of the second week, Dì Tư had to go back to Houston for two days because my uncle was sick.

Khang was exhausted from working double shifts. The baby was fussy and wouldn't settle, and he couldn't sleep with her right beside the bed, so at midnight he carried the bassinet next door into the nursery, just for one night, so the two of them could get a few hours of sleep. He left the door open. He turned on the baby monitor.

"Just one night," Khang said to me in the backyard, months later. He set his beer down on the grass. His hands were shaking. "One night. That's all it took."

That was the night the whispering started in the monitor.

Two weeks after that, the scratching at the glass, and the grip marks on her little body. And two nights after that, the empty crib, the frantic search, and the baby wedged under the closet drawers, wrapped in her blanket, ten minutes from the end of everything.

* * *

They called the parish priest. He came, said prayers, put up a crucifix, and told them they were sleep-deprived new parents. Khang half-believed him. He wanted to. He was a pharmacist. He was a scientist.

Dì Tư didn't call a priest. Dì Tư called my mother.

"She said one thing to me on the phone," my mother told me later. "She said, 'Chị Hai, it's the same as yours. In Michigan. It's the same thing.'"

And my mother hung up the phone and called me.

Chapter 27

A Summons to the Cradle

After my ordination as a deacon, I was assigned to a busy parish in another part of Texas for the year. I baptized babies, preached at weekday Masses, prepared couples for marriage, taught classes for adults coming into the Church, stood with families at gravesides, and brought Communion to the dying. My days were full. For the first time in years I wasn't thinking about the dark much at all. I thought I'd outgrown it.

Then, one humid Tuesday afternoon, my mother called.

I knew from the way she said my name that something was wrong. She spoke in Vietnamese, low and fast. My cousin and his wife had a new baby girl, three weeks old, and something was wrong in their house. The baby was sick and getting sicker. The parish priest had come and told them they were tired new parents.

"You have to come home," she said. "You're the only one who will believe them."

I went to my pastor, and he gave me a few days' leave.

The drive home was five hours across flat, sunburned highway. I spent most of it arguing with myself. I had finally become the kind of minister Father Gerald had wanted me to be, steady and pastoral, with my eyes on the light. Was I really going to drive back into the dark because my mother asked me to? I already knew the answer.

My mother met me at the door, held me, fed me, and then took me into the kitchen and told me what she knew.

She had already been to my cousin's house twice. The first time, she had done what any Vietnamese grandmother would do. She tied a mulberry-wood bracelet around the baby's wrist, hung a bulb of garlic and a cutting of cactus

over the nursery door, and told my cousin's wife to keep visitors away until the baby was a month old. When a newborn won't stop crying, the first thing the old women suspect is that someone with a heavy vía has come into the house, and they had a stream of visitors from church and work. My mother burned paper over the crib herself.

The second time she went, the bracelet was gone. They searched the whole room for it. They found it a day later in the backyard, under the big pecan tree, snapped in two.

"They had planned the one-month party," my mother said. "Đầy tháng. The offering to the Bà Mụ, the cake, the whole family invited." She shook her head. "They canceled it. They're afraid to have people in the house. A baby who doesn't get her đầy tháng."

The next evening I drove to my cousin's house. It was a small older house they had just bought, in a neighborhood where the trees had been growing for fifty years. They had cooked a big dinner. We ate and talked about family. Under all of it the house felt heavy, and they both looked like they hadn't slept in weeks.

After the dishes were cleared, I leaned across the table. "Tell me everything," I said. "From the beginning."

My cousin's wife started crying before she said a word.

It had started about two weeks after they brought the baby home. The nursery was the front bedroom, next to theirs. First there was whispering in the nursery at night, around midnight. They told themselves it was the baby monitor picking up a neighbor's radio. Then it got louder: several voices, low and rough, words they couldn't understand, that seemed to come out of the walls themselves.

"Three nights ago, at two in the morning, she started screaming," my cousin's wife said. "Not crying. Screaming. We ran in. It was so cold in there we could see our breath.

And something was scratching the window glass, from the inside."

She went to the counter and came back with a stack of snapshots, just picked up from the drugstore, and laid them on the table in front of me.

They were pictures of the baby's stomach and back. There were marks on her skin, red and darkening at the edges. They looked like the marks of a grip, of fingers.

I had seen marks like that before, on my own ankles.

"That's not the worst," my cousin said. His voice broke. "Two nights ago we woke up and the monitor was silent. Completely silent. We ran in and the crib was empty."

"We tore the house apart," his wife said. "We found her ten minutes later on the floor of the closet, pushed into the gap under the built-in drawers, wrapped in her blanket. She's three weeks old. She can't roll over. She couldn't have gotten out of the crib. Someone moved our baby."

They had convinced their priest to bless the nursery. He said the prayers and nailed a crucifix to the wall above the crib. For one night it was quiet. The next night they found the crucifix on the floor on the other side of the room, and heavy footsteps walked up and down the hallway outside the nursery door. Since then the baby had been running fevers that wouldn't break. She was barely eating. The pediatrician couldn't find a cause.

They couldn't afford to move. They had sunk everything into the house.

I looked at the two of them across the table, and all of it came back at once: the basement, the thing at the top of the stairs, my mother coming up the steps with the raspberry canes in her hand. Father Joseph's voice too. *Prove the devil isn't there first.*

"I'll stay in the nursery tonight," I said. "Take the baby somewhere else. We're going to find out what this is."

Chapter 28

Oak Street

I didn't stay that night. Father Joseph would have slapped my hand for even suggesting it before I knew more. Instead I sent my cousin's family to sleep at my parents' house with the baby, and in the morning I went to the public library.

If something had happened in that house, it would be in the newspapers. I spent two days in the basement of the library at a microfilm reader, scrolling through decades of the local paper, looking for my cousin's street address. My eyes ached. The machine hummed and clicked.

Late on the second afternoon, I found it. It was fifteen years old.

TRAGEDY ON OAK STREET: SCHOOL JANITOR DEAD IN MURDER-SUICIDE

The article was short, and it made me sick. The man had worked as a janitor at an elementary school for many years. He had been under investigation for molesting children in his care. On the day police came to the house with a warrant for his arrest, they found his wife dead in the hallway with her throat cut. They found him in the front bedroom, hanging from a beam in the ceiling.

The front bedroom was the nursery.

I sat in front of that screen for a long time.

When I called my mother from the library pay phone and read her the article, she was quiet on the line for so long I thought we'd been cut off.

"Ma thần vòng," she said finally.

I knew the term, vaguely, from childhood. A hanged ghost. In Vietnamese folklore, the spirit of someone who hanged himself stays at the place where he died. The old people say it's one of the most dangerous kinds, because it

can't move on by itself, and it's always looking for someone to take its place. The traditional remedy, my mother said, was to find the rope and burn it. Without the rope, the ghost has nothing to hold on to.

"There won't be a rope," I said. "That was fifteen years ago."

"Then find what's left," she said. "Something is always left." Then I printed the page, folded it, and put it in my shirt pocket. That night, with my cousin's permission and with the family at my parents' house, I went back to Oak Street alone.

* * *

I put a wooden chair in the corner of the nursery by the window, where I could see the crib and the doorway. On a small table I laid out what I'd brought: my breviary, a notebook and pen, a crucifix, a bottle of holy water, a blessed candle, and a flashlight. I turned the lights off and lit the candle. Then I sat and said the rosary and waited, and I tried to keep my mind honest. I reminded myself of the woman who lived alone, the knocking pipes, the boy who needed a doctor. I told myself I would write down only what I actually saw.

Midnight came and went. Nothing.

Then, at seventeen minutes past one, the cold came. I've already told how the next half hour went. The notebook still has it, in handwriting that gets worse line by line:

1:17 a.m. Sudden cold. Can see my breath. Candle flame bending to the left, no draft I can feel.

1:22 a.m. Smell of blood or metal. Also something like old rope. Windows shut.

1:30 a.m. Footsteps in hallway, stopped at door. Crib canopy pressed inward, moving. No one in room but me.

1:38 a.m. Voice from ceiling, above crib. "She's mine." Candle out.

I grabbed the flashlight and pointed it at the ceiling. For a second I saw a shape in the beam, the shape of a man hanging, his head bent at an angle no living neck can bend. Then it was gone, and there was only the beam and the shadow of the beam.

I stood up, held up the crucifix, and threw holy water toward the ceiling. "In the name of Jesus Christ," I said, "leave this child alone."

Something shrieked. I'll never be able to say whether it was in the room or in my head. Then the cold drained out of the nursery all at once, as if a door had closed somewhere.

I sat back down. It took me two tries to pick up the pen.

1:45 a.m. Saw what looked like a man's shape under the ceiling beam, a second or less. Voice. Reacted to holy water. Room warm again.

I stayed until it was light. Nothing else happened.

When the sun came up, I got the stepladder from my cousin's garage and climbed up to look at the beam. It had been painted over several times, the same pale yellow as the nursery walls. In the middle of it, under the layers of paint, my fingers found something hard: the stub of a heavy iron hook, cut off almost flush with the wood and painted over so many times it was nearly invisible. Someone had sawed off the rest of it, years ago, and never pulled out the base.

I stood on the ladder with my hand on it for a long time. *Something is always left.* When the sun came up, I read over what I'd written, and I knew two things. I knew Father Joseph would want to see this notebook. And I knew that whatever was in that room wasn't going to leave because a deacon told it to.

Chapter 29

A Desperate Covenant

The next morning I drove to the chancery with my notebook and the newspaper page and asked to see the vicar general, the bishop's second-in-command. I laid it all out and asked him to take it to the bishop and get permission for an exorcism as quickly as possible. A child was sick and getting sicker.

He read my notes. Then he closed the notebook and gave me a long look.

"You spent the night alone in that house," he said. "You're a deacon. You have no faculty for this, and you know it." He meant permission: a faculty is the Church's formal license to perform a rite. Only a priest the bishop names can perform an exorcism. "You could have been hurt, and you could have made it worse. This will go through the proper channels. The bishop will appoint someone. You will go back to your parish and wait."

"How long?"

"As long as it takes."

I called Father Joseph from a pay phone in the parking lot. He was sick that month and couldn't travel, and he wasn't the bishop's exorcist in my diocese anyway. He told me what I already knew: the process would take weeks, maybe longer.

"And the baby?" I asked.

There was a long silence on the line. "Pray for her," he said. "And do what you're allowed to do."

* * *

I drove to my mother's house. She was waiting at the kitchen table, as if she'd known I was coming. I told her everything: the janitor, the voice, the vicar general.

She listened, and when I was done she reached across the table and put her hand on mine.

"We don't wait," she said. "Not while a baby is sick. I didn't wait for the Church in Michigan, and I'm not going to wait now. You bring your prayers. I'll bring mine."

I knew what I was about to do was disobedience. I knew it could cost me my ordination. I told myself I'd stay inside what a deacon could do: the prayers any Christian could say, the Litany of the Saints, the prayer to Saint Michael, the psalms. I told myself that, and I believed it, right up until the moment I didn't.

My mother cut fresh thorny branches from a bush in her yard and brought her brass incense bowl and sandalwood. I brought my stole, the crucifix Father Joseph had blessed for me when I was ordained a deacon, holy water, blessed candles, and the old ritual book I had studied for years: a Latin copy of the 1614 Roman Ritual that Father Joseph had given me, the same rite Father James had read at the top of our basement stairs in Michigan. My cousin brought a hammer, a pry bar, and a red cloth, because my mother told him to. Red is the color that protects; you wrap something dangerous in it so it can't do harm.

We went to the house at sunset. My cousin and his wife sat in the living room with the baby, behind a closed door, praying the rosary. My mother and I went into the nursery and shut the door behind us.

It was already cold in there. The copper smell was faint but present. I lit the candles on a small table by the crib. My mother lit the sandalwood in her brass bowl, and the smoke rose toward the beam in the ceiling.

"Are you ready?" she asked me. She was holding the thorny branches in one hand like a switch.

"Yes, Mom."

I began with the Litany of the Saints. "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us. Saint Michael, pray for us…"

Next to me, my mother began her own prayers, low and steady in Vietnamese, calling on her parents and her grandparents, the old words I had heard her say at the altar every morning of my life. She swept the branches slowly through the air around the crib and along the window frame, the way her mother had done.

It didn't stay quiet for long.

Cold air moved through the room with the window latched. The candle flames flattened and went pale. Somewhere above us, near the beam, came a sound like a growl. A framed picture flew off the wall and broke on the floor. The stuffed animals on the shelf were thrown one by one against the door.

My mother stepped forward toward the beam, the branches raised, and her voice got louder.

"You have no place here," she said in Vietnamese. "This child belongs to God and to her family. Not to you. Go."

That was the moment I opened the ritual book to the Rite of Exorcism. I had no permission to read it. I read it anyway.

"I cast you out, unclean spirit…"

The shape appeared under the beam. I saw it plainly this time, by candlelight, for longer than a second: a man's outline, gray, his neck twisted, his face nothing but darkness. He was turned toward the crib.

I threw the holy water at him and kept reading. My mother struck the air in front of him with the branches, again and again, praying the whole time.

Then the shape seemed to fold in on itself. It didn't rush at us or scream. It folded, the way a sheet folds when you let go of it, and it sank downward, smaller and fainter. What came out of it then wasn't a growl. It was a sound I hadn't expected, and I've never been able to forget it. It sounded like a man crying.

The crying faded and was gone, and the place under the beam was empty.

But the cold didn't leave. It got worse.

The candle flames shrank to blue points. Frost crept across the inside of the window in a slow white fan. My mother's breath came out of her in clouds. And in the corner of the nursery, beside the closet where the baby had been found wedged under the drawers, the dark stood up.

It was tall, taller than the door. It was black, so black it seemed to drink the candlelight around it. It had no face, only two places where eyes should have been that were darker than the rest of it.

I knew it. I hadn't seen it in twenty-one years, since it stood at the foot of my bed in Texas when I was five. But I had felt it at the bottom of every staircase since. I'd felt it come up out of the marble floor of the cathedral. I'd heard it laugh in a trailer in East Texas, out of a stranger's mouth, saying my name.

It spoke in the same dry paper voice.

Still here.

My knees went weak. The ritual book shook in my hands so badly I couldn't read the lines. I'd come to Oak Street for a dead janitor. I hadn't come ready for this.

My mother turned and looked at it.

She had never seen it. I had never described it to her in detail. But I watched her face, and I saw that she knew exactly what it was. She wasn't afraid. She was angry, the way she'd been angry in Father Thomas's office and in the

kitchen in Michigan after Mrs. Gable. She lowered the thorn branches and took one step toward it.

"Tao biết mày," she said.

It was the roughest form of *I know you* in our language. The way you'd speak to a dog that had bitten your child.

"You're not anybody's dead," she said in Vietnamese. "You have no name. No mother lit incense for you. You're the cold that comes into the empty places. You came into the jungle where they left the soldiers unburied. You came into that basement because I put my parents in a drawer. You came here because nobody in fifteen years said one prayer for that miserable man." She turned her head, without taking her eyes off it. "Con. The names. Say the names."

I understood. I found my place in the litany, and I started again, and this time I didn't just say the saints. After every saint, I said one of ours.

Saint Michael, pray for us. "Sơn."

Saint Joseph, pray for us. "Ông Sáu."

All holy men and women. "Minh. The soldiers in the jungle. The mother and baby in the front room in Michigan. The man who died in this room. His wife."

My mother lit three new sticks of incense and held them up toward the beam where the janitor had hung, and spoke his name out loud, the name from the newspaper. She fed him, the way she'd fed the wandering dead at her gate every year of my life. Then she called her own parents, and her grandparents, and every one of our family's dead, one after another, by name.

With every name, the tall dark thing got thinner.

I don't know how else to say it. It didn't fight, or scream, or fly at us. It thinned, like smoke in a room when someone opens a window. The darkness of it went gray, and then the gray went faint, and I could see the closet door through it, and the edge of the yellow wall.

Still— it said, in a voice like paper tearing.

My mother said one more name. Her mother's.

And it was gone.

The candles were burning straight and yellow. The frost was melting off the window in thin streams. The cold was gone, and so was the copper smell. The room smelled only of sandalwood.

The door opened. My cousin stood there holding his daughter. For the first time in weeks, she was asleep. Not limp, not feverish. Asleep, breathing slow and even, one fist next to her face.

My mother sat down hard on the rocking chair in the corner and started to laugh and cry at the same time. I put the book down on the table. My hands didn't stop shaking for an hour.

There was one more thing to do. My mother wouldn't leave until it was done.

My cousin set up the stepladder under the beam, and with the hammer and pry bar he worked at the stub of the iron hook. It took almost half an hour. The paint cracked and flaked down onto the floor, and the old iron screamed coming out of the wood. When it finally came loose, he handed it down to my mother, and she wrapped it in the red cloth without looking at it.

We drove it to the river that night, my mother and I, to a bridge on a county road outside town. She stood at the rail with it in both hands and said something in Vietnamese I couldn't hear. Then she dropped it into the water.

"In my village they would have burned the rope," she said on the drive back. "You can't burn iron. So we gave it to the river. Running water takes things away."

I thought of my father's sergeant and the ma da, and I didn't say anything.

The baby's fever broke that night. Within a week she was eating normally. She is grown now, and healthy, and I'm her godfather.

* * *

I saw Mrs. Pruitt, the old woman next door, only once, and I've never forgotten her.

The night after the rite, after Bé Na's fever had broken and the iron hook had gone into the river, I was carrying my things out to my car on Oak Street a little before midnight. The old woman was standing on her front porch in her housedress, under the yellow porch light, watching me. She was ninety-one years old. She'd lived next door to that house for fifty-one years. She'd seen the police cars fifteen years before, and the ambulance, and the two covered stretchers coming out the front door.

"It's quiet," she said. "Isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

She nodded slowly. She looked at the dark front window of the nursery for a long time.

"I could hear him walking," she said. "All those years it was empty. At night. Back and forth. Back and forth. I'd lie in bed and listen." She pulled her housecoat tighter around her. "I prayed for those children he hurt every night for fifteen years. I never could bring myself to pray for him."

"My mother did," I said. "Tonight."

Mrs. Pruitt looked at me, then back at the window.

"Well," she said finally. "Good for her. Somebody had to."

She went inside and turned off her porch light.

* * *

Late that night, back at my parents' house, my mother and I sat at the kitchen table with tea neither of us drank.

"In Michigan," she said, "it was a dead mother and a dead baby. Tonight it was a dead man nobody would ever pray for. They're always the same kind. The ones nobody sends home."

She turned her cup in her hands.

"We left our own dead like that," she said. "My mother and father. Your grandparents. More than twenty years, no one lighting incense at their graves. No one sweeping the tombs at Tết. I think when you leave doors like that open, things come looking for the warmth. I think that's what has followed this family."

I wanted to tell her that wasn't how it worked. I had four years of theology and two of philosophy. I didn't say anything.

"Before I die," she said, "I want to go home. I want to clean my parents' graves and light the incense myself. Will you take me?"

"Yes," I said.

Chapter 30

Leaving the Altar

Two days after the rite on Oak Street, I went back to the chancery and told the vicar general what I had done. I could have kept quiet. I didn't want to become a priest with that on my conscience.

He didn't shout. That was worse. He said that Rome was about to publish an entirely new rite of exorcism, the first revision in nearly four hundred years, precisely so that it would be used carefully and rarely. And I had gone and read the old one over a crib without anyone's leave. He told me I had read the Rite of Exorcism without the bishop's permission, as a deacon, in direct disobedience of an instruction he had given me himself. He told me the bishop would decide what happened next. He told me to go back to my parish and say nothing to anyone.

The bishop didn't dismiss me. He was kinder than I deserved. He told me to take a leave from ministry for some months, to live at the seminary, pray, and talk with my spiritual director. We would see, he said, whether I was ready to promise obedience and mean it.

I went to see Father Joseph. He was in bed that month, thinner than I had ever seen him. He listened to the whole thing, and then he was quiet for a while.

"You saved that child," he said finally. "Or God did, through you and your mother. I believe that. And you disobeyed your bishop. Both of those are true." He looked at me. "You would make a good priest, Johnnie. But I'm not sure you'd make an obedient one. And they need to be both."

Then I told him about the other thing. The tall dark shape in the corner by the closet. The same shape from the

Michigan basement and the foot of my bed, the one that had laughed at me out of Ruth Ann's mouth. *Still here.*

He didn't look surprised. He lay back against his pillows and looked at the ceiling for a long time.

"I wondered when you'd get to that part," he said. "I've wondered about it since the trailer."

"What is it, Father?"

"You know what the Church would call it. You've read the same books I have." He turned his head on the pillow and looked at me. "But I'll tell you what I think, after forty years, and it isn't in the books. The ghosts you've met were people. The mother in Michigan, the man on Oak Street, the soldier in your father's corner. Sad, lost, sometimes dangerous, but people. That other thing was never a person. It has no grave and no name. It doesn't haunt a house. It haunts a family. It goes where love has gone cold, where the dead are forgotten and the living are too frightened to remember them. It followed yours out of the war, I'd guess. Wars leave a great many forgotten dead."

"Is it gone?"

He took a long time to answer. "I don't think a thing like that is ever beaten once, like a dragon in a story," he said. "I think it's starved. Your mother knew that before either of us did. Every candle lit for somebody nobody else remembers, it gets a little thinner. Every name said out loud." He smiled, tiredly. "So keep saying the names, Johnnie. All your life. That's the whole rite. The rest is Latin."

I spent the next months at the seminary trying to figure out which one I was. I prayed. I talked to Father Gerald for hours. And slowly I came to see something I hadn't wanted to see.

What had pulled me toward the priesthood was real. But what I cared about most, more than the altar, more than the sacraments, was the people who sat across a kitchen table

from me with their hands shaking, telling me something terrible that no one else believed. My cousin's wife with her stack of photographs. My mother in Father Thomas's office. I wanted to be the person who listened to them, and I didn't think I could do it on the Church's timetable. Next time, I knew I would make the same choice.

Before I wrote the letter, I went home to tell my father.

I'd been afraid of that conversation more than any other. My mother had known what I was going to do, I think, from the moment I put down the ritual book in the nursery. But my father had worn his medals to my ordination. He had sung for me. He had told every man at the Vietnamese coffee shop, every single Saturday for four years, that his son was going to be a priest.

We sat on the back porch after dinner. He rolled a cigarette, though he wasn't supposed to anymore, because of his heart. I told him everything: the vicar general, the bishop, Father Joseph, the months at the seminary, what I'd come to understand about myself. I told him I was going to ask to be released, and that I was sorry, and that I knew how proud he'd been.

He smoked the whole cigarette before he said anything.

"In the army," he said finally, "there was a lieutenant in our battalion. A good officer. One night his captain ordered him to leave three wounded men behind on a hill, because carrying them would slow the company down. He refused. He carried one of them himself, all night, through the jungle. All three lived." My father put out the cigarette. "They took his rank away for it. Sent him to a desk job in Saigon. He never got it back." He looked at me. "I'd have followed that man anywhere."

I couldn't say anything.

"You carried the baby out," my father said. "That's what matters. Let them take whatever they take." He put his hand

on the back of my neck, the way he used to when I was a boy, and squeezed once. "Your mother and I didn't cross an ocean so you could wear a collar. We crossed it so you could choose."

* * *

I served my last Mass as a deacon on a Sunday morning in March, at the seminary chapel, with only the community there. I read the Gospel. It was the story of the man born blind, which I hadn't chosen; it was simply the reading for that Sunday. *Was it this man who sinned, or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither, Jesus answered. It was so that the works of God might be made visible through him.* My voice shook so badly on that line that Father Gerald, who was presiding, looked up at me from the altar.

Afterward, in the sacristy, I took off the dalmatic, the deacon's outer vestment, and folded it, and took off the stole and kissed it the way I'd been taught, and laid it on the vesting table. Father Gerald stood in the doorway and watched me without speaking. When I was done, he came and put his hand on my head and blessed me, the way you would bless a man setting out on a long journey.

"You were never meant to be a priest, Johnnie," he said gently. "I think I knew it the summer you drove three hours to tell me about armor. You were meant to be something that doesn't have a name in the Church. Go and find out what it is."

That afternoon, I wrote the letter asking to be released from the path to ordination. It was the hardest letter I have ever written. When the answer came, I felt grief, and under the grief, something I was ashamed to feel at first: relief. Father Gerald had been right. Armor gets heavy. I had finally taken it off.

I packed up my room at the seminary and drove home to my parents' house. My mother met me at the door. She didn't ask me anything. She just held me for a long time and then went to make dinner.

Chapter 31

One Hundred Days

Bé Na never had her one-month party. By the time she turned a month old, her family was sleeping in my parents' living room and her mother was afraid to let anyone into the house. So when she reached a hundred days, everyone agreed that this one would make up for it.

In the old custom, a child's hundredth day is a milestone. In the villages, when so many babies died in their first weeks, a child who reached a hundred days was a child who had decided to stay. The family makes a feast and thanks the Bà Mụ, the Twelve Midwives, for shaping the baby and teaching it to suck and smile and turn over. The ceremony has a name, đầy tuổi tôi, which my mother translated for Mai once as "full of age," though it doesn't really translate.

It was held at the house on Oak Street. Trâm insisted. Khang wanted to sell the house and move, and Dì Tư wanted them to move, and half the family thought they were crazy to stay. But Trâm said it was her daughter's house now, that she wasn't going to let a dead man chase her out of it, and that if the Bà Mụ were going to come to the party, they'd come to the house where the baby lived.

"She's right," my mother said, when Dì Tư called her to complain. "Let them stay. It's quiet now. It's a different house."

* * *

I drove up the night before. I had been home for a few weeks by then, sleeping in my old bedroom, with no collar, no job, and no idea what came next. But for one weekend I didn't think about any of that. I was going to be a godfather at a party.

The house looked different. Khang had repainted the nursery, a pale green instead of yellow. There was a new light fixture in the ceiling where the old beam crossed, and fresh plaster over the place where the hook had been. Trâm had hung white curtains with yellow ducks on them, matching the blanket Mrs. Pruitt had knitted. The crib was against a different wall. The room was warm and smelled of baby powder and fresh paint, and nothing else.

I stood in the doorway for a long time, the night before the party, just to be sure. Nothing. It was a room.

* * *

The party began at ten in the morning, and by eleven there were sixty people in that two-bedroom bungalow and spilling out into the backyard under the pecan tree.

My mother and Dì Tư had cooked for three days. The offering to the Bà Mụ was set out on a low table in the living room, and it was elaborate, the way old women from the South make it. Twelve of everything: twelve tiny bowls of sweet soup, twelve little plates of sticky rice, twelve sets of tiny paper clothes and paper shoes, twelve small cups of tea, twelve sticks of incense. Three of each for the Three Patron Fathers, Ba Đức Ông, who preside over the midwives. A whole roast chicken, a plate of fruit stacked into a pyramid, flowers, betel leaves and areca nuts, the oldest offering in Vietnam, a symbol of love and faithfulness, and a bowl of xôi gấc, the bright red sticky rice cooked with gấc fruit that you make for good luck.

In front of it all, on a red cloth, sat a tray of small objects for the baby's thôi nôi game. That's when you set things in front of a child and see which one they reach for first, and it tells you their future. My mother had done it for every one of her children. There was a pen for a scholar, a stethoscope

for a doctor, a calculator, a small mirror, scissors, a comb, a little bag of rice for a farmer, a coin for money.

The custom is to do this at the first birthday, not at a hundred days. Dì Tư said that was nonsense; the baby had been through enough and deserved to know her future early. Nobody argued with Dì Tư.

* * *

At eleven o'clock, Dì Tư lit the incense and invited the Bà Mụ in a long prayer that rose and fell like a song, naming each of the twelve and each of the three fathers, and thanking them, and telling them about the baby: her name, her birth date, her parents, how she had been sick and gotten better. Then she asked them to keep teaching her to smile and to laugh and to grow up strong and kind.

When Dì Tư finished, Trâm, holding Bé Na in her arms, said something nobody expected. She turned to me.

"Anh Johnnie," she said. "Would you say a prayer too? The other kind?"

The room went quiet. Sixty people, most of them Catholic, half of them old enough to remember being told as children that offerings like this one were pagan. I looked at my mother. She nodded, very slightly.

So I stood in front of the Bà Mụ's table, in a borrowed white shirt with no collar, and made the sign of the cross, and said the old blessing for a child from the Roman Ritual, the one I had learned in the seminary. Then I added a prayer of my own in English, asking God to bless this child and her family and this house. And I asked Him to have mercy on all the souls of everyone who had ever lived in it, even the ones nobody prayed for.

When I said that last part, I saw Mrs. Pruitt at the back of the room near the front door. She'd come over in a church

dress and a hat with silk flowers, holding a coffee cake. She bowed her head.

When I finished, Dì Tư said, loudly, "Good. Now we eat." And everyone laughed, and the room came back to life.

* * *

Then they set Bé Na on the red cloth in front of the tray of objects to choose her future.

She was a hundred days old and couldn't sit up by herself, so Trâm held her in a sitting position, and everybody crowded around. The pen. The stethoscope. The calculator. The scissors. Sixty people holding their breath for a baby to pick up a toy.

Bé Na looked at all of it with great seriousness. She looked at the pen and the stethoscope, and she didn't reach for either. Then she turned her head and looked up at the ceiling over the crib, at the new light fixture where the beam crossed, where the hook had been. She looked at it for a long moment, without fear. Then she smiled, a huge toothless baby smile that took up her whole face, and laughed out loud.

Then she reached out and grabbed the little mirror.

Everyone cheered. Dì Tư declared that the mirror meant she would be beautiful, and also that she would be a woman who always knew exactly who she was. My mother said the Bà Mụ had been teaching her to smile, and you could see that they'd done a good job.

But I saw my mother glance up at the ceiling where the baby had looked, and then at me. Neither of us said anything.

* * *

The party went on until dark. There was karaoke, of course. Khang's friends from the pharmacy set up a grill in the

backyard and made lemongrass beef. Children ran in circles around the pecan tree. Mrs. Pruitt stayed for three hours, sat in a lawn chair in the shade next to my mother, ate an alarming amount of spring rolls, and let Bé Na fall asleep on her lap. She said it was the first party she'd been to on Oak Street in twenty years.

Late in the afternoon, I found Khang standing alone in the doorway of the nursery with a beer in his hand, looking at the ceiling.

"She looked right at it," he said. "Did you see?"

"I saw."

"She smiled at it." He was quiet. "I lie awake sometimes. I think about the night I carried her bassinet in here. Because I was tired. Because I didn't believe my mother." He took a breath. "I'm a scientist, Johnnie. I count pills. I check interactions. I don't know what to do with this."

I thought about Father Joseph, in the car, in the dark, driving away from Ruth Ann's trailer.

"You don't have to do anything with it," I said. "She's well. You're here. Your mother's in the kitchen telling everyone the baby's going to be a beauty queen. That's enough."

He laughed, a little shakily. "My mother told me not to move in during Ghost Month."

"My mother told yours that you'd say that."

"Next time," Khang said, "I'm listening to them both."

* * *

What I thought about, driving home late that night down the empty highway, was a hundred-day-old baby on a red cloth, looking up at the place where a dead man had hung for fifteen years, and smiling.

I know what very young babies look at: light, contrast, the edges of things. A new light fixture on a pale ceiling.

I also know what I saw. A baby looked at that place without fear, and laughed.

* * *

Lan drove down from Dallas the weekend after the hundred-day party. She said it was to see our parents. I knew it was to see me.

She was forty by then, a charge nurse in a cardiac unit, with two teenage sons and a husband who worked in software and a calm, dry, no-nonsense manner that terrified interns. She was the one in our family who had become the most American. She'd married a man from Iowa. Her boys spoke barely any Vietnamese. She went to Mass on Christmas and Easter and didn't keep an altar in her house. When our mother criticized her for it, which was often, Lan would roll her eyes and say, "Má, it's the twenty-first century," though it wasn't quite yet.

She'd always been the one I went to. When I was small, she'd carried me on her hip through the refugee camp. In Michigan, she held my hand on the walk to the nuns' preschool every morning through the snow. In Texas, she checked my homework and taught me to drive and covered for me when I came home late. When I told the family I was going to the seminary, she was the only one who asked me if I was sure. When I came home without my collar, she was the only one who called every night to ask how I was sleeping.

* * *

Our parents went to bed at ten. Lan and I sat at the kitchen table, the same table that had been in that kitchen since 1977, scarred and sticky from twenty years of homework and fish sauce. She made tea. I didn't drink mine.

For a while we talked about ordinary things. Her boys. The hospital. Danny Ortiz's new baby. Then she put her cup down and looked at me.

"Má told me about Oak Street," she said. "All of it. The hook, the river. You reading the rite." She was quiet a moment. "She also told me something else. She said that when you were sitting in that nursery alone, the night you kept vigil, you heard a voice."

"Yes."

"What did it say?"

"*She's mine,*" I said.

Lan nodded slowly. She turned her teacup around on the table, a quarter turn, then another.

"Did Má ever tell you," she said, "why I moved out of the front bedroom in Michigan?"

"She said you were cold."

"I told her I was cold." Lan took a breath. "Johnnie, I have never told this to anyone. Not Má, not Ba, not my husband. Not one person in twenty-two years."

And then she told me. The woman in the window, with the bundle in her arms, and Karen standing beside her on the sidewalk looking up. The cold in the front bedroom and the faint smell of baby powder. The singing at night, always after midnight, the song she learned by heart before she knew what it was. *Hush, little baby, don't say a word.* The way it broke off in the middle of a line, and then the crying.

I sat at the kitchen table and listened to my sister describe the woman I had seen on the stairs.

When she was done, I told her. The Christmas tree, the colored lights, the woman on the bottom step in the white nightgown, rocking. How I had gone back to bed and pulled the blankets over my head so I wouldn't ruin Christmas.

Lan put her hand over her mouth. For a long time she didn't say anything at all.

"I thought it was only me," she said finally. "All those years, I thought it was only me. I thought I was—" She stopped. "You know what they used to call girls like me, in the village? Girls who saw things? They'd send them to the pagoda, or to the thầy. They'd say she has a light vía. She's weak. Something's wrong with her." She laughed, not happily. "I wanted so much to be an American girl. American girls didn't see dead women in their bedroom windows. So I decided I didn't either."

"You moved your mattress into the hall," I said.

"I moved my mattress into the hall," she agreed. "And I never went into that room again after dark. And when Mrs. Gable told Má the story and Má told it at dinner, I went into the bathroom and threw up." She looked at me across the table. "And I never said a word. You were four. You had marks on your ankles. And I never said a word, because I was ashamed."

"Lan," I said. "You were seventeen."

"I know how old I was." Her eyes were wet, which I had seen perhaps three times in my life. "I'm a nurse, Johnnie. I've held people's hands while they died. I know what fear does. I know what grief does. I could give you a lecture. But that night, at the top of the stairs, I could have said something. Maybe if I had, Má would have done something sooner. Maybe they wouldn't have—" She stopped again.

"It wasn't your fault," I said.

"Everybody always says that," Lan said. "It's never true, and it's always the right thing to say." She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand, briskly, the way she'd wipe a patient's chart. "Anyway. That's my confession. You're the one who almost became a priest. You can absolve me."

"I can't absolve anybody," I said. "I'm not even a deacon anymore."

"Then just tell me it's all right."

"It's all right, chị Hai."

She nodded once, as if that settled it.

* * *

We sat there a while longer. The clock on the stove said ten past one. Somewhere outside a dog was barking, and I was glad of it.

"Can I tell you one more thing?" Lan said. "The really crazy part?"

"Go ahead."

She got up from the table and went to her purse on the counter, and came back with her wallet. From behind her driver's license she took out a small folded piece of paper, soft and worn at the creases, the way paper gets when you've carried it for years. She unfolded it and laid it on the table between us.

It was a page torn from a pocket notebook. On it, in blue ink, in a teenage girl's careful handwriting, there was a single line in English.

For the mother and the baby in the front room. Rest in peace.

"I wrote that the week we left Michigan," Lan said. "After Mrs. Gable. After Má had the Mass said. I didn't know their names. I still don't. But I couldn't stop thinking about them. That poor woman, singing to a baby she'd killed, for eight years, in an empty house." She smoothed the paper with her finger. "So every year since, on the night before we left that house, I go somewhere by myself where nobody can see me. I light one stick of incense, and I hold this paper, and I say a Hail Mary for them. I've done it every year for twenty-one years. In my car in the hospital parking garage, usually. Bill thinks I'm having a cigarette."

I stared at her.

"I don't keep an altar," Lan said. "I tell Má it's the twenty-first century. I don't believe in half the things she believes in." She folded the paper back up along its old creases. "But somebody had to pray for them. And I was the one who heard her sing."

She put the paper back behind her license, put the wallet back in her purse, and sat down again.

"Don't you dare tell Má," she said.

I didn't. Not for many years.

* * *

When I told my mother, finally, long after, she didn't say anything for a while. Then she got up from her chair, went to the shelf in her living room, and lit three sticks of incense. She didn't hold them up to her parents' photograph, or to Ông Sáu's tablet, or to Father Võ's slip of red paper. She held them up to the empty end of the shelf, where there was nothing at all.

"For the mother and the baby in the front room," she said. "Lan isn't the only one."

She had been doing it too. Every year. Since 1977.

Neither of them ever told the other. They each thought they were the only one carrying it.

I've thought about that a great deal, in my work. How many people walk around carrying a candle for someone in secret, sure that no one else remembers. How much lighter it would be if they knew.

Part Four

The Tree Where the Nest Was

CHAPTER 32

Saigon Again

My mother and I flew to Vietnam the next spring. She chose the date carefully: early April, so we would arrive for Thanh Minh, the festival of the graves. Every spring, for about two weeks, Vietnamese families go out to their ancestors' tombs to do tảo mộ, the sweeping of the graves. They pull the weeds, pile fresh earth on the mounds, repair whatever has cracked, and set out flowers, fruit, and incense. Relatives who live far away come home for it. A family that lets its graves go wild is a family that has forgotten its duty. My mother had missed more than twenty Thanh Minhs. She wasn't going to miss another.

My father didn't come. His heart had been giving him trouble for two years, and his doctor wouldn't hear of a twenty-hour flight. I think he was secretly relieved. He had left something in that country he didn't want to see again. But the night before we left, he sat at the kitchen table for a long time writing a letter on thin blue airmail paper, and in the morning he gave it to my mother sealed, with an address written on the front in his careful hand.

"If she's still alive," he said.

My mother put it in her purse, next to her passport, and didn't ask.

* * *

We landed at Tân Sơn Nhất late at night. It was the airport we had been supposed to leave from in April 1975, on a bus that never came, the morning after a dripping-wet child woke up screaming. Twenty-five years later, it was the airport we came home through. My mother held my arm going down the jetway, and when the heat hit us at the

bottom of the stairs, wet and heavy, smelling of jet fuel and rain and something sweet and rotten that I would learn was durian, she stopped and closed her eyes.

"Ah," she said. Only that.

The city around the airport was a place I didn't recognize at all, and neither did she. It was still officially Ho Chi Minh City, but everybody still called it Saigon, including the cab driver. Motorbikes poured through the streets by the thousands, whole families on each one, father driving, mother sidesaddle behind, a toddler standing between his knees, a baby in someone's arms. New buildings of glass and concrete stood beside old French villas with peeling yellow paint. There were neon signs, karaoke bars, billboards for Japanese motorbikes and Korean televisions, and on every corner, women with shoulder poles selling bánh mì, sugarcane juice, and grilled corn, exactly as they had in 1974.

My mother walked through all of it very slowly, holding my arm, looking at everything. She didn't say much. Once, on a crowded sidewalk, she stopped and closed her eyes again, and I realized she was listening. Vietnamese all around her, in her own Southern accent, from every direction at once. For twenty-five years she had heard her own language only at home, at church, and in the Vietnamese grocery. Now it was everywhere, on the street, from strangers, shouted between motorbikes, sung from radios. She stood still in the middle of the sidewalk with people flowing around her and listened to it, and tears ran down her face.

* * *

On the second day, she wanted to find our alley.

It took us all morning. The street names had changed, many of them, after 1975. Whole blocks had been torn down

and rebuilt. But my mother had a good memory and a stubborn heart, and late in the morning she stopped at the mouth of a narrow hẻm between a pharmacy and a motorbike repair shop, and said, "Here."

It was narrower than I'd imagined. Two people could barely pass. Laundry hung from the balconies overhead, and caged songbirds hung outside the windows, and an old man in an undershirt sat on a stool outside his door reading a newspaper. At the very end of the alley stood a narrow three-story house with a noodle shop on the ground floor. There were plastic stools on the sidewalk and a big aluminum pot steaming over a charcoal fire.

The smell hit me before I saw the sign. Beef bones, star anise, charred onion, ginger.

I had been not quite three when we lived there. I didn't remember the house, or the alley, or the noodle shop. But I remembered that smell. It went straight past my mind into somewhere much older, and for a moment I couldn't breathe.

The man behind the pot was about fifty, a heavyset Chinese-Vietnamese man with a towel over his shoulder. He looked at my mother. She looked at him. Then he put down his ladle.

"Bà Nguyễn?" he said. Mrs. Nguyen?

He was the son of the family who had owned the house. He had been twenty-four in 1974, working in his father's shop, and he remembered us: the soldier from the pension office with his ten children, and the baby who talked to the corner. His father had died in 1988. The family had stayed after 1975, had lost almost everything in the years after, and had slowly earned it back, bowl by bowl. He had never left the alley.

He sat us down on two plastic stools and brought us each a bowl of phở, and he wouldn't let us pay. My brothers had

always said no phở in America ever smelled quite right. They were right. I ate the best bowl of soup of my life sitting on a plastic stool at the end of that alley, with my mother beside me crying into hers, and the man stood over us with his towel and talked about the old days.

Before we left, he took us upstairs. The family lived in our old rooms now, his grandchildren's school things everywhere. The front room was smaller than I'd pictured. There was the window. There, in the corner between the window and the wall, was the place where a little boy had stood waving at a soldier uncle nobody else could see.

There was a small altar on the wall there now. The family's ancestors, with incense and a dish of oranges.

"My father put that there," the man said, following my eyes. "After you left. He said that corner was always cold. He said someone should keep a light there." He shrugged. "So we did. Twenty-five years."

* * *

On the fourth day, we hired a car and a driver to take us out to the country. My mother had the blue airmail letter in her lap the whole way.

Sơn's village was about twenty kilometers from ours, along the same river. It took two hours of asking to find the house. An old woman lived there with her granddaughter's family. She was ninety-two years old, tiny and bent nearly double, with milky eyes and a mouth stained dark red from a lifetime of chewing betel. She sat on a wooden bed in the front room, under the family altar, and peered at us as we came in.

"Who is it?" she said.

My mother knelt down in front of her and took both her hands. She told her who we were. Then she told her my father's name.

The old woman's face changed. She was silent for a long time. Then she said, "He never hit me back, you know." My mother didn't understand. "When I hit him," the old woman said. "That day he came and told me the truth about my son. I hit him twice in the face. He never moved. He just let me." She laughed, a dry, cracked sound. "I always wanted to apologize for that."

My mother opened her purse and took out the letter. The old woman couldn't read it; her eyes were too far gone. So her granddaughter read it aloud, standing by the bed, while my mother held the old woman's hands.

I never knew what was in that letter, and I've never asked. I only know that halfway through, the granddaughter's voice broke and she had to stop, and the old woman said *keep going, keep going*, and she did. And when it was over, the old woman sat for a long time with her eyes closed and her face wet.

Then she pointed up at the altar above the bed. In the middle of it, among the photographs of older generations, was a small black-and-white picture of a young man in a South Vietnamese army uniform, grinning, with his cap pushed back on his head. Beside it stood a wooden tablet with his name.

"He's there," she said. "Since your husband came. He came home. I know he did." She turned her milky eyes toward me, as if she could see me. "Is this the boy? The one he talked to?"

"Yes," my mother said.

The old woman reached out a bent hand, and I knelt down beside my mother, and she put her palm on my face. Her hand was dry and light as a leaf.

"He always was bossy," she said. "Even as a little boy. Always telling everyone what to do." She laughed again, and this time it was a real laugh. "Go now. Ha. That's my Son."

Before we left, my mother lit three sticks of incense and gave them to me, and I bowed three times to the young soldier in the photograph. I didn't know what else to do, so I said, in my bad Vietnamese, "Thank you, Uncle."

The old woman nodded from her bed, as if that were exactly right.

We drove on toward our own village in the late afternoon, with the paddies going gold on either side of the road and the line of jungle dark behind them.

Chapter 33

Return to the Village

Our own village was another hour down the river road. The road was paved now. The paddies were still there, and the line of jungle behind them. Our house was not. Somebody else's house stood where ours had been, a concrete one with a tin roof and a motorbike out front. My mother stood in the road looking at it for a while, and then she said, "Come," and walked on.

The banyan was still there. It was enormous, its hanging roots thicker than I'd imagined from the story, a small shrine with burned-out incense stubs at its foot. My mother put her hand on the trunk.

"This is where I brought you," she said. "The night after the hospital."

Then we went to find the graves.

It took us two hours to find them in the overgrown family plot behind what had been her parents' land. The tombs were buried in weeds and vines. My grandfather's stone was cracked across the middle. The names were almost worn off. My mother got down on her knees in the dirt, in her good clothes, and started pulling weeds with her bare hands. After a moment I got down next to her.

All around us, in the other family plots and out across the fields, people were doing the same thing. Whole families squatted around their tombs with hoes and buckets, children carrying armfuls of fresh earth in baskets, old women sweeping the stone with short straw brooms. Smoke from incense and burning votive paper drifted over the whole countryside. Ours was the only grave in that corner that had gone completely wild. My mother noticed, and I saw her face when she did.

We spent three days on those graves. We hired two men from the village with machetes to clear the brush. A stonemason repaired the cracked tomb and recut the names. My mother scrubbed the stones herself with a brush and a bucket of water. Some of the older people in the village came to watch. One old woman recognized my mother, and they held each other and cried for a long time and talked about people who had been dead for decades.

On the second evening, that old woman took my mother aside and told her something I only heard about on the plane home. After 1975, she said, after our family left, the graves in that plot had been untended for years. Nobody in the village wanted to touch another family's dead. And for a long time, people walking past that corner at night said they heard someone crying there. An old man and an old woman, sometimes. Sometimes just the old woman. It had stopped, eventually, sometime in the eighties. People assumed whatever it was had given up.

My mother asked her when, exactly, in the eighties.

The old woman couldn't remember. But she said it was around the time the overseas Vietnamese started sending money home, and that someone, she never knew who, had begun leaving a few coins and a stick of incense at our graves every year at Vu Lan, the festival of the seventh full moon, when the gates of the dead stand open and the living pray for their parents. A stranger, maybe. A neighbor with a guilty conscience. Someone who walked past and couldn't stand to hear the crying.

My mother turned and looked at me when she told me that part, and I could see her deciding whether to believe it. She decided to believe it. "Someone remembered them," she said. "Even when we couldn't."

* * *

Before we left Texas, my mother had written to the pagoda near her native village, the same pagoda the old monk had come from to chant over me in the hospital in 1972. That monk had long since died. But his student was still there, now an old man himself, Thầy Thích Đức. He agreed to come and perform a cầu siêu, a ceremony to pray for the souls of the dead, at the graves.

He was small and quiet, with a shaved head and very calm eyes, and he complained about his knees for a good five minutes while he lowered himself onto the mat. He also asked whether it was true that in America everyone had two cars, and seemed disappointed to hear that we had only one. He sat with us under a tree the day before the ceremony and asked my mother to tell him why we had come. She told him everything, from the night I was born to the nursery on Oak Street. I translated the parts she wanted me to say in my own words. He listened to all of it without interrupting.

When she was finished, he was quiet for a while.

"Thầy," my mother asked him, "is it my fault? Did we bring this on our family by leaving them?"

He shook his head slowly. "Nobody who runs from a fire is at fault for the house they left behind," he said. "But the house is still there. Now you've come back to it. That's what matters."

"So many people died here," he said at last. "In this province, in this war, in the wars before. Many of them were never buried properly. Nobody prays for them. We call them cô hồn, the lonely souls. They wander. They are cold, and they go where there is warmth."

He looked at me.

"Your mother has spent her life keeping the lamp lit," he said. "In two religions. In three countries. Some people would say that is confusion. I think she understood

something very simple. The dead need to be remembered. Even the ones no one wants to remember."

* * *

The ceremony was held at the graves late in the afternoon, the day before we flew home. Thầy Đức chanted the sutras for the dead and struck a small brass bell. My mother knelt in front of her parents' tomb with her rosary and prayed the Catholic prayers for the dead. I read the psalms beside her and said the prayer I had said at so many gravesides as a deacon: *Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.*

Then my mother did something I didn't expect. She asked Thầy Đức to pray for others too, and she named them. The soldiers who had died in the jungle around our village in 1972. Sơn, on the riverbank. Ông Sáu, buried on Guam, with no one left but us. Cô Hạnh's husband in the sea. Minh, the boy who came home. The young mother in Michigan and her baby. And the janitor on Oak Street.

I looked at her when she said his name. She knew what he had done. I had told her everything.

"Him too," she said to me in Vietnamese. "Especially him. Who else is going to?"

So we prayed for all of them. The monk chanted, my mother prayed her rosary, and I said the old Latin prayer for the dead under my breath. The incense went up straight in the still air.

When we finished, a wind came up. It moved through the trees and through the long hanging roots of the banyan at the edge of the field, and it was cool on our faces after the heat of the day. Then it was gone. It was a wind. It was late afternoon in the dry season, and the weather was changing.

My mother wiped her eyes and smiled at me.

Before we left the village, my mother did one last thing. She bought three plain wooden tablets from a woodworker in the market. She had him carve her parents' names into two of them, and Ông Sáu's into the third, with their dates, in the old style. In Texas, for more than twenty years, she had prayed in front of a photograph. Now they would have proper bài vị, the tablets that make a soul an ancestor instead of a wanderer. She wrapped them in red cloth and carried them in her lap the whole way home on the plane. She wouldn't let them go in the overhead bin.

And at the edge of the village, by the road, she set up one more small table: porridge, salt, rice, a few candies, and incense, for the cô hồn. For the soldiers who died in those trees in 1972 and were never found. For whoever was still out there with no one to remember them. When the incense burned down, she threw the salt and rice into the road in four directions, and the village children came running for the candy, the way they always had.

Before we left, I took something out of my pocket that I had carried all the way from Texas. It was the little carved wooden bird Ông Sáu had given me on Guam when I was three. My mother had kept it for me all those years, in the same bag as the crucifix from our wall. I set it on top of my grandparents' tomb, between the incense and the fruit.

Don't forget the tree where your nest was.

I hadn't.

Chapter 34

The Last Night at the Banyan

We spent our last night in the village at the house of the old woman who had recognized my mother at the graves. Her name was Bà Năm, and she had been my grandmother's neighbor and my mother's babysitter, and she insisted. Her house was small and very clean, with a packed-earth floor swept so smooth it shone. She fed us until we couldn't move. Then she and my mother sat on the wooden bed in the front room under the oil lamp and talked about the dead until almost midnight, while I lay on a mat in the back room under a mosquito net and listened to their voices through the wall.

I couldn't sleep. I lay on my back looking up through the net at the dark rafters, listening to the frogs out in the paddies and the occasional motorbike going by on the road. The house smelled of woodsmoke and incense and the jasmine Bà Năm grew by her door.

I'd been back in Vietnam ten days. I'd eaten the best phở of my life in an alley I didn't remember, knelt before the photograph of a soldier who'd told me to go, cleared my grandparents' graves with my own hands, and prayed for the janitor of Oak Street under a tree I'd last visited when I was two days old. I was twenty-seven years old. I had left the seminary. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. And I had the feeling, lying there, that something wasn't finished yet.

A little after one, I got up, put on my sandals, and went out.

* * *

The village at night was darker than any place I'd been since I was a child. There were no streetlights on the dirt lanes

between the houses, only a few windows with the blue flicker of a television. The moon was a thin crescent low in the west. The frogs were very loud.

I knew the rules. My mother had drilled them into me since I could talk. Don't go out alone after dark. Don't whistle. Don't call anyone's name. If you hear your own name, don't answer. And if you're walking an empty road at night, never look back.

It wasn't Ghost Month. It was April, the month of Thanh Minh, the month the living go to the dead, not the other way around. That was what I told myself, walking down the dark lane toward the edge of the village with my hands in my pockets. I also told myself I was a grown man with two degrees in philosophy and theology who'd sat with Father Joseph in a trailer in East Texas for seven weeks. I told myself a great many reasonable things.

I didn't look back.

* * *

The path to the banyan went out past the last house and along the edge of a paddy and into the trees. It was only a few hundred meters, but in the dark it felt like miles. Twice I heard something moving in the paddy beside me, and stopped, and it was only a heron lifting off the water. Once a dog barked at me from a porch, and then another, and I was ridiculously glad to hear them.

Then I was in the clearing, and the banyan was in front of me.

In daylight it had been enormous. At night it was something else. A dark mass that blotted out half the sky, with hundreds of aerial roots hanging down from its branches like the bars of a cage, or the strands of a curtain, so many and so thick that the trunk was a whole maze of wood. The little shrine at its foot still had the stubs of our

incense from the ceremony that afternoon. Somebody in the village had lit a fresh candle in the shrine since then. Its small flame was the only light in the clearing.

I stood at the edge of the trees for a while. Then I walked up to the shrine and knelt down in front of it in the dirt, the way my mother had knelt with me in her arms in 1972.

I didn't know what I'd come to do. I said an Our Father. I said a Hail Mary. Then I just talked, quietly, in a mixture of English and bad Vietnamese, the way you talk to someone in a hospital bed who can't answer. I told my grandparents I was sorry I'd never known them. I told them about Texas, and my brothers and sisters, and the grandchildren, and the shelf in my parents' living room. I told Sơn I'd met his mother. I told Ông Sáu I still had the bird. I told the woman in the Michigan basement, wherever she was, that my mother had had a Mass said for her and her baby. I told the janitor of Oak Street that we had prayed for him, which was more than he deserved and maybe more than anybody else would ever do, and that I hoped it was enough.

Then I ran out of things to say. I knelt there in the dark with the candle and the frogs.

The frogs stopped.

* * *

Every one of them, all at once, in every paddy around the village. One second the night was roaring with them. The next, there was nothing. The silence was so complete I could hear the candle flame.

I knew that silence. It was the silence of the dogs on the night I was born, of the frogs at Danny's stock tank, of the bottom of the stairs in Michigan. Every hair on my body stood up. The air in the clearing went cool. Not the grave cold of the basement. A cool like the inside of a stone church in summer, or well water, or the breeze before rain.

The hanging roots of the banyan began to move.

There was no wind. I could feel there was no wind; the candle flame stood straight up. But the roots swayed, slowly, all together, the whole vast curtain of them, the way seaweed sways in a current. They made a sound, a dry, soft whispering. Wood brushing on wood, like a thousand people sighing at once.

I stayed on my knees. I didn't run. I'm not sure I could have.

Then, from somewhere inside the curtain of roots, from the deep dark in the heart of the tree, a voice said a single word.

"*Con.*"

Child. It's what a Vietnamese parent or grandparent calls a child or grandchild. It's what my mother called me. It was an old voice, a woman's voice, very soft. I had never heard it before in my life.

Every rule my mother ever taught me came screaming up out of my childhood. *If you hear your name in the dark and can't see who's calling, don't answer. Not a word. If you answer, you've given it permission.* I had broken that rule once, in a kitchen in Michigan, when I was four. I knew what came of it.

I knelt there with my heart slamming against my ribs.

"*Con,*" the voice said again. Patiently. The way you say it to a child who's pretending not to hear you.

I have thought about the next moment more than any other in my life, and I have examined it every way Father Joseph taught me, natural causes first. I was exhausted and raw from ten days of graves. I know.

But kneeling there, I knew one thing with complete certainty. That voice, whatever it was, wasn't the thing in the basement. It wasn't the dry paper whisper that knew my name in Michigan, or the laugh that came out of Ruth Ann's

mouth in a trailer in East Texas, or the cold that came up out of the marble floor of the cathedral. I knew those voices. I'd know them anywhere. This was something else.

So I did what my mother taught me to do when an elder calls you. The thing every Vietnamese child learns before he can walk.

"Dạ," I said. Yes. Here I am.

* * *

Nothing happened.

That's the honest truth. There was no apparition. No figure stepped out of the roots. No light, no vision, nothing to write down in a notebook with a timestamp. The roots went on swaying for a few more seconds, whispering. Then they slowed and hung still.

And then the frogs started again. First one, out in the nearest paddy. Then another, and then all of them at once, in every field around the village, a roar of frogs. It was so loud and so sudden and so ordinary that I started laughing, on my knees in the dirt, and couldn't stop.

The air was warm again. The candle burned in the shrine. It was a tree. A very old tree, in a village in the southern countryside, at two in the morning, with a grown man laughing in front of it like a lunatic.

But I felt something I've never been able to describe well. The nearest I can come is this. All my life, since the basement in Michigan, I had carried a cold place inside me. A small, dark room in my chest that I kept the door shut on. I'd felt it at the bottom of every staircase, at every graveside, on the floor of the cathedral. I had built my whole life around guarding that door.

Kneeling in front of the banyan, laughing, I realized the room was warm. Someone had lit a lamp in it. And the tall dark thing that had followed my family out of the war, that

had waited for me at the bottom of every staircase for twenty-four years, wasn't there anymore. Not hiding. Not waiting. There was simply no cold place left for it to stand.

Keep saying the names, Father Joseph had told me. *That's the whole rite.*

* * *

I walked back to the village. The dogs barked at me all the way down the lane, from every porch, and I loved every one of them.

When I came to Bà Năm's house, there was a light in the front window. My mother was sitting on the wooden bed in the front room, wrapped in a blanket, with her rosary in her hands. She'd been waiting up for me.

"Twenty-seven years old," she said, "and you go out alone in the middle of the night like your brother Hùng. You want me to send the village out with pots and pans?"

"No, Má."

She didn't ask where I'd been. She looked at my face for a long time in the lamplight, and then she smiled.

"I had a dream," she said. "I fell asleep sitting here. I dreamed of my mother. She was standing in the doorway of our old house, the way she used to when I came home from school." She turned the rosary over in her hands. "She didn't say anything about the graves, or the tablets, or the ceremony. She only said, 'Con, I saw your boy. He's a good boy. He answered when I called.'"

I sat down on the bed beside her. I didn't say anything for a long time. Neither did she.

"Did you?" she asked finally. "Answer?"

"Yes, Má," I said.

She nodded slowly, as if I'd confirmed something she already knew. Then she put her arm around me, the way she had when I was small, and we sat together on the wooden

bed under the oil lamp and listened to the frogs until it got light.

Chapter 35

Mai

I met my wife in a graduate seminar on the psychology of trauma, in the fall of my first year in Houston, when she told the professor he was wrong.

The professor was a distinguished man with a gray beard and a famous textbook. He was lecturing on what was then called culture-bound syndromes: patterns of distress that appear in one culture and not others, and the ways people in different societies explain them. He had just finished describing a Vietnamese refugee patient he'd treated in the eighties, a woman who insisted that the ghost of her drowned husband visited her at night. He described it, with some amusement, as a textbook case of grief expressed through folk belief, which had resolved once she was properly medicated.

A young woman in the second row raised her hand.

"With respect," she said, "how do you know it resolved because of the medication?"

The professor smiled. "Because the visitations stopped."

"Did you ask her if her family had done anything else during that time?" the young woman said. "Made offerings? Held a ceremony for him? Built him a boat?"

The room went very quiet. The professor stopped smiling.

"I'm not sure that's relevant," he said.

"It's the only thing that's relevant," she said. "If you'd asked her, she might have told you. She was treating her grief the way her culture taught her. You were treating it the way yours taught you. Maybe both worked. But you only wrote down one of them."

I was sitting in the back row. I turned and looked at her. She was small and very straight-backed, with short black hair and big tortoiseshell glasses, and she wasn't blushing at all.

After class, I caught up with her in the hallway.

"Built him a boat?" I said.

She looked at me warily. "My grandmother did it for my grandfather. He drowned off the coast when they left in 1980. She made him a little boat out of a coconut husk with his name on it and floated it at Galveston. I was eight. I helped her light the candle." She looked at me more closely. "Why?"

"Because a man named Ông Sáu did it for a woman in the refugee camp on Guam in 1975," I said. "And my mother helped."

She stood there in the hallway holding her books and looking at me for a long moment.

"Do you want to get coffee?" she said.

* * *

Her name was Mai. Trần Thị Tuyết Mai, though she'd gone by Mai since kindergarten. She'd been born in Saigon in 1972, the same year I was born in my village. Her family had left in 1980 on a boat from Vũng Tàu. They were boarded by pirates in the Gulf of Thailand. Her grandfather was killed trying to protect her mother. She'd spent a year in a camp on an island off Malaysia, and then grown up in southwest Houston above her parents' nail salon. She was getting her doctorate in clinical psychology; I was in the master's program in counseling down the hall. She wanted to work with refugees, like me. She was Catholic, like me, though she went to Mass, she said, mostly to make her mother happy.

And her grandmother was a bà đồng, a spirit medium.

"Not in Houston," she said quickly, on our first coffee date, as if she were confessing a criminal record. "Not anymore. In Vietnam. In the north, before 1954, when the family came south. She did lên đồng. You know what that is?"

I did, a little. It was the ritual of the Đạo Mẫu, the old Vietnamese religion of the Mother Goddesses. A medium in brilliant silk costumes is possessed, one after another, by a whole pantheon of spirits: mandarins, princesses, holy mothers, little boys. Each one arrives to music, dances, gives blessings and advice, and departs. It's very old, and very beautiful, and the Catholic Church has never known what to make of it.

"My grandmother says when the spirits come into her, it doesn't feel like being taken over," Mai said. "She says it feels like being visited. Like opening your house to guests." She stirred her coffee. "She's ninety. She lives with us. She still lights incense to them every morning. My mother pretends not to see."

"My mother lights incense to her parents under a crucifix," I said. "And to a man she knew for six weeks on Guam who has nobody else."

Mai put down her spoon. "Tell me," she said.

* * *

I told her the whole story on our third date.

I'd never told it to anyone outside my family. Not Danny, not Father Gerald, not even, all of it, to Father Joseph. Not the woman at the kitchen table, the singing in the front bedroom, the iron nails over the door. Not Hùng in the bamboo or the wet uncle in the corner or the cold in the cathedral floor. Not Ruth Ann's laugh, or the hook in the beam on Oak Street, or the voice in the banyan that called me *con*. I'd always been afraid, I think, of what someone's

face would do while they listened. Polite disbelief. Pity. Or worse, the eager, greedy interest of someone who wants a ghost story.

We were sitting on the hood of her car in the parking lot of a phở restaurant on Bellaire Boulevard at eleven o'clock at night. I talked for two hours. She didn't interrupt once. She didn't laugh, and she didn't look away, and she didn't get excited. She just listened, the way my mother listened, and Father Joseph, and Father Võ. As if I were telling her something true, and important, and very sad.

When I finished, she was quiet for a long time.

"Do you believe it?" she asked finally. "All of it?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm going to be a counselor. I know exactly how memory works, and family stories, and trauma. I could explain away every single thing I just told you." I looked at her. "And I was there."

She nodded slowly, as if that was the right answer. Then she said something I've never forgotten.

"My grandmother says the question isn't whether the spirits are real. She says that's an American question. A professor's question." She smiled a little. "She says the real question is whether you treat them with respect. The living and the dead. Whether you feed them, and remember them, and send them home. If you do that, she says, it doesn't matter so much what they are."

I looked at her in the light of the phở restaurant's neon sign.

"Your grandmother," I said, "would get along very well with my mother."

* * *

She did. Mai took me home to meet her family a month later, and I took her home to meet mine, and within a year my mother and Mai's grandmother were talking on the phone

every Sunday afternoon for an hour, about what, neither of them would ever say. The first time they met in person, at a Tết party at Mai's parents' house, the two old women sat side by side on the sofa holding hands, and talked to each other in two very different accents, and ignored everyone else for the entire evening.

We were married two years later, in the spring, at my parents' parish in Texas. We did it the way our families wanted, which was both ways at once.

On the morning of the wedding, there was the lễ gia tiên, the ancestral ceremony. My family went in a procession to Mai's family's house carrying red lacquered boxes of gifts: betel leaves and areca nuts, tea, wine, sticky rice cakes, fruit, and a roast pig. At the door, the elders of both families made formal speeches. Inside, in front of the altar where Mai's grandparents' photographs stood, Mai and I lit incense together and bowed to her ancestors and asked their blessing. Then her grandmother, ninety-two years old, in a gold áo dài, stood up in front of the altar and called each of her dead by name and told them who I was. When she got to her husband, drowned in the Gulf of Thailand in 1980, her voice broke, and she had to stop, and Mai went and held her.

That afternoon we were married at a nuptial Mass in the church, by a young Vietnamese priest who'd been one of Father Võ's altar boys.

And that evening, at the reception, after the toasts and the dancing and the karaoke, after my father sang the same love song to my mother he'd sung at my ordination, I went and found my mother sitting at a table with Mai's grandmother.

"Má," I said. "Thank you."

"For what?" she said.

I didn't know how to answer that. For the banyan tree, and the bomb shelter, and the basement stairs. For two

lamps. For walking down into the dark with an armful of thorns. For teaching me to answer when my elders call.

"For everything," I said.

She waved her hand at me, embarrassed, and told me to go dance with my wife. Mai's grandmother laughed and said something to her in their private language of the old country, and both of them laughed. I never found out what it was.

* * *

A year before the wedding, I met my first real client, a sixty-three-year-old woman named Bà Hà. She taught me more about my profession than any professor I ever had.

It was the second year of my master's program, and I was doing my counseling practicum at a community mental health clinic in southwest Houston. It was in a strip mall between a Vietnamese bakery and a tax preparer, and it served the neighborhood's refugees. Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese, more and more Bosnians and Somalis. Most of the people who came through its doors had seen things the intake forms had no boxes for.

My supervisor was Dr. Weiss, a tall, stooped, kind man in his late fifties who had worked with Holocaust survivors in New York before he came to Texas. He had a reputation for being very hard on students who took shortcuts and very gentle with patients. He assigned me Bà Hà on my second week.

"She's been referred by her primary care doctor," he said, handing me a thin file. "Insomnia, anxiety, possible psychotic features. She reports hearing her dead son knocking on her door at night. The doctor started her on an antipsychotic six months ago. It made her drowsy and didn't touch the knocking. Her daughter brought her in." He

looked at me over his reading glasses. "I gave her to you because you speak the language. Don't make me regret it."

* * *

Bà Hà was small and very upright, with iron-gray hair pulled back in a tight bun. She wore a gray áo bà ba, the loose blouse and trousers of a Southern countrywoman, and plastic sandals, and she carried a rosary of brown wooden beads. She sat on the edge of the chair in my small office with her hands folded on her purse and looked at me with deep suspicion.

"You're very young," she said in Vietnamese.

"Yes, Bác," I said. Aunt. "I'm a student. Dr. Weiss supervises me."

"The American doctor gave me pills that made me sleep all day," she said, "and my son still knocks."

"Tell me about your son," I said.

She looked at me for a long time. Then she told me.

* * *

His name was Tuấn. In 1981 he was fifteen, her only son, with three older sisters. Her husband had died in a reeducation camp in 1978. She had nothing left in Vietnam but her children, and there was no future for them there. So she sold everything she had and paid for two places on a boat leaving secretly from the coast near Cà Mau, one for Tuấn and one for his oldest sister, with the plan that they'd get to a camp and send for the rest of the family.

The boat never arrived anywhere. It left on a moonless night in April with sixty-two people aboard, and it was never seen again. No camp ever recorded any of them. No body ever washed up. Bà Hà waited for a letter for three years. Then she got herself and her two remaining daughters out on another boat, in 1985, and went through a camp in

Indonesia, and finally reached Houston in 1987. She had been in America fifteen years. She had never held a funeral for Tuấn or his sister.

"How could I?" she said to me. "Maybe they're alive. Maybe in Malaysia, in Thailand, in prison somewhere. Maybe they lost their memory. People come back. I read in the newspaper about a man in California whose brother came back after fourteen years."

"And the knocking?"

She looked at her hands. "It started two years ago," she said. "At the full moon of the seventh month. Ghost Month. Three knocks on the front door, at two in the morning. Tap, tap, tap. Like Tuấn used to knock when he came home late, so I'd let him in without waking his sisters." Her voice didn't change at all. "I get up. I go to the door. Nobody's there. The next night, three knocks. Every night for a month. Then it stops until next year."

"And this year?"

"This year," she said, "it hasn't stopped."

It was February. It had been knocking every night for six months.

* * *

I went to Dr. Weiss after the session, with my notes and my heart pounding. I told him everything she'd said. Then I told him something I'd never told a professor: a short version of where I'd come from. The village, the boat, Guam, Michigan, Ông Sáu and Cô Hạnh, the little driftwood boat floating out to sea.

He listened without interrupting, the way the good ones always did.

"So what do you think is going on?" he asked when I was done.

"Clinically?" I said. "Complicated grief. She's never been able to mourn because she's never known for certain they were dead. Ambiguous loss. The knocking is a, I don't know, a dissociative phenomenon, or a hypnopompic hallucination, or a trauma intrusion that's become ritualized around the anniversary. It got worse this year because—" I stopped. "I don't know why it got worse this year."

"What else?" Dr. Weiss said.

"What do you mean?"

"You said 'clinically.' That means there's something else. What's the something else?"

I looked at him for a long time.

"In her culture," I said slowly, "in my culture, a person who dies at sea, without burial, without rites, without anyone knowing they're dead, is a lost soul. A cô hồn. He can't go home to his ancestors because nobody's told him he's dead. Nobody's given him a tablet. Nobody's lit incense for him." I swallowed. "If you asked her grandmother, or mine, they'd say it's her son. Knocking to be let in. Because his mother is the only home he has left, and she's never told him he died."

Dr. Weiss nodded slowly. "And which of those explanations is correct?"

"I don't know," I said. "Does it matter?"

"For your purposes as a clinician? Probably not as much as you think." He leaned back in his chair. "Here's what I learned from forty years of sitting with people who'd lived through hell, Johnnie. You don't have to share a patient's beliefs to work inside them. You don't have to believe her son is knocking. But you'd better believe that she believes it. And you'd better know that the way through her grief is going to go through her beliefs, not around them. If you try to argue her out of her son, you'll lose her. If you try to

medicate her out of her son, which is what we've done so far, you'll lose her too."

"So what do I do?"

"You're the one who speaks her language," Dr. Weiss said. "In every sense. You tell me."

* * *

It took four months.

We met every week. For the first six or seven sessions, I didn't mention funerals or ceremonies or tablets at all. I just let her talk about Tuấn. What he'd been like as a baby. The time he'd climbed the neighbor's mango tree and fallen and broken his arm. How he'd sung in the church choir. How he'd held her hand on the beach the night he left and said, *Má, I'll write as soon as we land.* She cried in almost every session. Sometimes she was angry at me, at America, at God, at her dead husband, at the boat. Sometimes she sat silent for twenty minutes and I sat silent with her.

The knocking continued every night.

Around the eighth session, she said something new.

"Last night I didn't get up," she said. "When he knocked. I was so tired. I just lay there. And he knocked again, three more times, very soft. And I said, out loud, in the dark, 'Tuấn, I can't let you in.'" She looked at me. "Then I lay awake all night thinking I'd killed him."

"Bác," I said carefully. "What would you need, to be able to let him go?"

She was silent for a very long time.

"To know he's dead," she said at last. "Or to decide it. And then to do it properly. The way it should be done. A funeral. A tablet. His name on the altar next to his father's. Prayers. A Mass. The monks." She twisted the rosary in her hands. "My daughters say it's superstition. Our priest says

pray for him and let God handle it. Nobody will help me do it."

"Would you want to do it?" I asked. "If someone helped?"

She looked at me. "Can you do that? Is that allowed? You're a counselor."

"I'm not a doctor, or a priest, or a monk," I said. "I can't hold the ceremony. That isn't my job, and it wouldn't be right. But I can help you think through what you want, and help you talk to your daughters, and help you find the people who can."

* * *

So that's what we did. I met with Bà Hà and her two daughters together, and that was a hard session. The older daughter, a nurse, thought the whole thing was nonsense and was furious that a counselor was encouraging it. The younger one, a pharmacist, cried and said she'd been hearing the knocking too, for a year, and had been afraid to tell anyone.

I called the pastor of their parish, an elderly Vietnamese priest who had come out on the boats himself, and explained, carefully, within the limits of what Bà Hà had given me permission to share. He was silent on the phone for a while. Then he said, "Of course. Why didn't she ask me?" I didn't tell him that she had.

With Bà Hà's permission, I talked to Mai, who by then was my fiancée. Mai's grandmother knew the abbot of a small Vietnamese pagoda in the east part of the city, and the abbot agreed to come.

The ceremony was held on the Sunday after Easter. In the morning, a Requiem Mass at the parish for Nguyễn Văn Tuấn and Nguyễn Thị Liên, his sister, lost at sea in April 1981, and for all sixty-two souls on their boat. In the afternoon, at the pagoda, the monks chanted a cầu siêu for

the same souls. Bà Hà had two tablets carved with her children's names and set them on the altar in her apartment, beside her husband's.

And in the evening, Bà Hà, her two daughters, Mai, Mai's grandmother, and I drove down to the beach at Galveston, where Mai had floated a coconut-husk boat for her own grandfather when she was eight.

Bà Hà had made a little boat herself, out of balsa wood from a craft store, painted blue and white like the fishing boats of Cà Mau. She'd written both her children's names on the side. On the deck, she'd set a candle, a small bowl of rice, and a tiny paper school uniform she'd cut out with scissors, the uniform Tuấn had worn when he was fifteen.

She knelt at the water's edge at sunset, an old woman in plastic sandals with her rosary wrapped around her wrist, and she told her son he was dead. She told him she was sorry. She told him he'd been a good boy and she was proud of him. She told him his father was waiting for him, and his grandparents, and that he should go home now and stop knocking, because his mother was tired, and she would see him again someday.

Then she lit the candle and pushed the boat out into the Gulf, and the tide took it.

* * *

I'd like to tell you the knocking stopped that night. It didn't, quite. Bà Hà told me in our next session that she'd heard it once more, three nights later. Three knocks, very soft, at two in the morning. She'd gotten up and gone to the door, and stood there in the dark, and said through it: "Tuấn, go home now. Má loves you. Go home."

That was the last time. She continued seeing me for two more months. Her sleep improved. Her appetite improved. Her primary care doctor took her off the antipsychotic. In

our final session, she brought me a box of bánh bò, steamed honeycomb cakes, that she'd made herself, and a small envelope with a twenty-dollar bill in it, which I wasn't allowed to accept, and which she refused to take back. Dr. Weiss told me to donate it to the clinic. I did.

When I wrote up my case report for the practicum, I struggled for a week over how to describe what had happened. In the end I wrote it the way Dr. Weiss had taught me: the diagnosis, the treatment plan, the culturally adapted interventions, the outcome. Complicated grief, ambiguous loss, intrusive phenomena resolved following culturally congruent mourning rituals facilitated in collaboration with the patient's religious community.

All of it was true.

At the bottom of my copy, the one I kept, I added one more sentence in pencil, for myself.

Somebody finally told him where to go.

Chapter 36

Was It Real?

When I came back from Vietnam I applied to graduate school, and two and a half years later I finished a master's degree in counseling. I've worked as a licensed professional counselor ever since.

People who know my history often ask me about that, sometimes kindly and sometimes not. The boy who saw ghosts grew up to be a counselor. Isn't that a contradiction? Doesn't my training explain everything that happened?

It's a fair question, so I'll answer it honestly.

My training explains a great deal. I know now how memory works, how a four-year-old fills in gaps, how a family that tells a story many times can come to share a memory none of them actually had. I know what trauma does to perception, what grief does, what a war and a refugee camp and a frightening new country can do to a mind. I know that whole families can come to believe things together. When people come to my office describing hauntings, I take Father Joseph's advice: I look for the ordinary first. I almost always find it.

But I also know what I can't explain. Thermometers dropping twenty degrees with the furnace running. A whisper on a tape recorder in an empty basement, played back three times by an engineer who then didn't want to talk about it. Marks shaped like fingers on my ankles, and the same marks on a three-week-old baby's back. A baby who couldn't roll over, found in a closet across the room. Two psychologists, a year apart, who examined my family and found nothing wrong with our minds.

I can't prove what was in that basement, or in that nursery. I'm not sure anyone could. What I can tell you is

that I was there, and that I've tried to tell it as truthfully as I can.

I've come to think "Was it real?" is a smaller question than it seems. The fear was real, and so were the grief and the bruises. So was a mother who walked down into a dark basement with a bottle of holy water and an armful of thorny branches because she wasn't going to give her children to anything. Whatever was in those houses, she faced it. She faced it again in a nursery twenty years later with her son beside her. And she knew, long before any of us, what it was really about: the dead who had been forgotten, and the doors we leave open when we stop remembering them.

That's what I try to bring into my work. Many of the people who sit across from me are veterans, refugees, and families who have lost someone and can't stop seeing them. I don't tell them their experiences are impossible. I don't tell them they're demonic either. I tell them I believe that they're suffering, and that we'll find the way through it together. I learned that from my mother before I learned it from any textbook.

* * *

Mai and I have three children now. They sleep through the night in bright bedrooms with the windows cracked open, and they've never once been afraid of the dark for any reason worth telling.

My mother is old now. On warm evenings she sits with us on the back porch, her rosary looped around her wrist, watching her grandchildren run around the yard in the last of the light. Sometimes she says something to me in Vietnamese without taking her eyes off them.

"Look at them," she said once. "They're free."

"Yes, Mom," I said. "They're free."

In the living room of our house there is a shelf. On it are three wooden tablets, two with my grandparents' names and one with Ông Sáu's, a photograph of my grandparents, a slip of red paper with Father Võ's name, a small brass bowl for incense, and a dish of fruit that Mai and I replace every week. On the wall above the shelf hangs the small wooden crucifix my mother carried out of Saigon in the bottom of her bag in 1975. She gave it to me when we came back from Vietnam.

And at the end of the shelf, there is a small wooden bird.

It took me sixteen years to finish it. I took a woodcarving class at a community center, the only man in a room of retired women making ducks. I practiced on a hundred pieces of pine. Every few years I took Ông Sáu's half-finished bird out of its cloth and looked at it and put it away again, because I was afraid of ruining it. Finally, one winter, when my oldest was ten, I sat down at the kitchen table with my pocketknife and the old man's bird, and my children sat around me and watched.

I followed his knife marks. I tried to carve the second wing the way he had carved the first, the grain of the wood running along the back like feathers. It isn't as good as his. You can see exactly where his hands stopped and mine began. But it's finished.

My mother held it in her lap for a long time when I brought it to her. Then she gave it back to me and told me to put it on the shelf, next to Ông Sáu's name.

"Now he can rest," she said. "He hated to leave things half done."

Not long ago, my youngest asked me why we keep a cross and an incense bowl in the same place, when none of her friends' families do.

I thought about how to answer that. About the wolves on the church road and the ghost in the bomb shelter, the

basement in Michigan and the nursery on Oak Street, the old monk under the tree and the wooden bird on my grandfather's grave.

"Because your grandmother taught me," I said. "We keep a light on for everybody. The living and the dead."

She thought about it for a minute, and then she nodded, as if that made perfect sense. Then she ran off to play.

Every year in the seventh lunar month, I set a small folding table at the end of our driveway. A bowl of thin rice porridge, a little salt and rice, some fruit, three sticks of incense. My children help me set it out. When the incense burns down, they throw the salt and rice into the street in four directions, the way their grandmother showed them, and then they eat the candy.

My neighbor waves.

Glossary

áo bà ba: The loose blouse and trousers traditionally worn by countrywomen in southern Vietnam.

áo dài: The long, close-fitting silk tunic worn over trousers; Vietnam's traditional formal dress.

Bà Mụ: The Twelve Midwives, folk goddesses believed to shape a child in the womb and teach a newborn to suck, smile and turn over. Honored with offerings at three days, one month, one hundred days and the first birthday.

bà đồng: A spirit medium in Đạo Mẫu, the Vietnamese religion of the Mother Goddesses.

bài vị: A wooden ancestral tablet bearing the name of the dead, kept on the family altar. A soul with a tablet and someone to remember it becomes an ancestor.

bánh tét: A long roll of sticky rice, mung bean and pork wrapped in banana leaves, made for Tết in the South.

bùa: A written charm or talisman, usually on yellow paper in red ink.

cầu siêu: A Buddhist ceremony of prayers for the souls of the dead.

chị / chị Hai: Older sister. In the South the eldest child is called Hai ("second").

chó đá: A stone dog, sometimes set at a gate to guard the spirit side of the world.

cô hồn: A "lonely soul": a wandering ghost with no descendants, grave or rites, who goes hungry and cold.

con: Child. What a parent or grandparent calls a son, daughter or grandchild.

Dạ: The respectful word a child uses to answer an elder: "Yes, here I am."

đầy tháng: The one-month celebration for a newborn.

đầy tuổi tôi: The hundred-day celebration for a newborn.

đốt vía: "Burning the vía": waving burning paper over a baby to drive off bad luck brought by a visitor.

giật cô hồn: "Snatching from the ghosts": children scrambling for the leftover offerings after a Ghost Month ceremony.

hẻm: A narrow alley branching off a city street.

lên đồng: A ritual in which a medium is possessed in turn by the spirits of the Mother Goddess pantheon.

lễ gia tiên: The wedding ceremony before the ancestral altar.

ma: Ghost.

ma da: The ghost of a drowned person, said to lure others into the water to take its place.

ma giấu: "Hiding ghosts," said to lead children away at dusk and hide them in impossible places, sometimes feeding them earth.

ma thần vòng: The ghost of a person who died by hanging, said to stay at the place of death; traditionally laid to rest by burning the rope.

Ma Vú Dài: The Long-Breasted Ghost of southern legend, whose victims are found with their mouths full of dirt.

nằm lửa: "Lying by the fire": the postpartum custom of a mother resting over a charcoal brazier.

ở cữ: The month of lying-in after a birth.

Tết: The Lunar New Year.

tháng cô hồn: Ghost Month, the seventh lunar month, when the gates of the underworld are said to open.

Thanh Minh: The spring festival of the graves, when families sweep and repair their ancestors' tombs (tảo mộ).

thầy: Teacher or master. Used for a ritual specialist, a monk or a teacher.

thần cây đa, ma cây gạo: "Gods in the banyan, ghosts in the silk-cotton tree": an old saying about where spirits live.

thôi nôi: The first-birthday ceremony, in which a child chooses among objects that foretell its future.

vía: A fragile part of the soul. A newborn's vía is light; some adults are said to have a heavy vía that brings bad luck.

vòng dâu tằm: A bracelet of mulberry wood put on babies to keep spirits away.

vong hồn: The soul of the dead, especially one that has not found rest.

Vu Lan: The festival of the seventh full moon, when the living pray for their parents and for the wandering dead.

xôi gấc: Red sticky rice cooked with gấc fruit, made for luck and celebrations.

xương rồng: Cactus. A cutting hung over a doorway keeps spirits out.