

Abbi Nguyen

### The Foreign Dream

Linh has heard of them before-- the girls of the night—they were hunters, scouring their territory, swarming like a disease through District One and Three. They were perhaps the lowest class of their kind, vagrants who slept in different beds when night fell. In Ho Chi Minh city, there were other professional fronts like hairdresser, masseuse, hostess, that served the same purpose—men with money. But Linh did not go to those places. It was easy to tell from the glass entrance of the shop whether or not it was a real business. The ladies in tight yellow dresses and bright orange lipstick sat in a row on a bench, at the front of the shop. They waved and smiled at passerby. A young boy stood outside guarding the motorcycles. He pulled on the arms of foreigners and spoke in a thick Vietnamese accent.

‘Need a haircut? Come in, we have nice ladies. Good for you!’ He was jovial and persistent, a combination hard to refuse.

At 4 am, the street lamps flickered before shutting off. The red horizon stretched over the city as it began to wake up. It was Linh’s favorite time of the day. The shadow of the girls in stiletto heels stretched over the alley wall. Their silhouettes walked unsteadily but quickly, and disappeared before the first sun ray hit the concrete. The street was

mostly empty except for a few night owls that vroomed by on their moped. Linh helped her mother set up the shop, treasuring the peaceful quiet that would disperse soon as the people started for work. It was not much of a shop--a simple straw mat on the side walk displaying an array of motorcycle helmets. They were cheap knock-off and would shatter into smithereens of sharp plastic bits, piercing the rider's skull if he ever got into an accident. But it was the law to wear one and most people were unwilling to spend 500 thousand dong on an item they considered a nuisance. She arranged them in five rows with precision. The helmets provided food and lodging for them. She could not be careful enough.

Linh liked the foreigners the most. They always looked strong and beautiful. Their biceps surged beneath their sweat soaked t-shirt. And they never bargained. A man that looked like Brad Pitt stopped by on a yellow Vespa. He pointed at a simple black helmet with a large *Winner* sticker stamped on the lid.

'How much?'

Linh was about to point to the carton board marked *50.000 D/Helmet* when her mother pinched her waist. She shrieked in surprise.

'75 thousand dong' Her mother gestured.

The man looked at Linh and hesitated for a few seconds before he took the money out and paid.

After he drove off, she prayed God to forgive them.

At lunch, mother bought them each a large bowl of vermillion soup and tender beef loins, Linh forgot all about how they had cheated the foreigner.

The sun was at its peak in the sky. Everyone hustled indoor to avoid the heat. Mother was having a rough cough and took off early. 'Keep an eye on our stuff. Don't start dreaming now.' She warned before gathering her straw hat and blended into the crowd of people. Linh took out her English book and scanned the words distractedly. At her

high school, she received an honor award for graduating with the top score in her English class. She had studied hard even though it was only a public high school with no money to invest in foreign instructors. She wished that she could afford to join the Language school, where all the teachers spoke native English, then she could improve her speaking proficiency. But that dream had been buried long ago by the more urgent burden of food and other necessities. After she dropped out of 11<sup>th</sup> grade in high school, Linh knew college would never come. But she had continued to steal off in free moments to read her English textbooks. The words rolled on her tongue awkwardly. She threw the book at the tree trunk and thought of the foreigner. 'I wonder what he is doing in Vietnam. I guess he must be an engineer, building new homes for the villagers. Or a doctor! He is here to help the poor and sick. He must be angel from God.' She rested her head on her knees and remembered Mai Anh, her professor who had married an American. She was a tour guide and he listened eagerly when she recounted the tale of Turtle Lake. Mai Anh had said to her 'Learn English, it may change your life.'

When the sun disappeared behind the tower of Foreign Currency, the sky returned to its hazy gray. During the day, the rolling wheels kicked the dirt up into the atmosphere, forming little dirt devils. At night, the dust settled on the pavement, cloaking the city with a thin layer of white smog. Linh sold five helmets. It was a little past nine, she decided to wrap up and finished the day. As she strapped the helmets on the back of her bicycle, she heard a shrill laughter of a girl.

They walked pass Linh without so much of a glance. The gentleman with a reddish mustache encircled his arm around the girl's tiny waist. He chattered amiably as she nodded and exclaimed random English words in a sugared Vietnamese accent. Linh felt a sudden wave of nausea that both excited and irritated her. She got on her bicycle and peddled quickly.

Linh and her mother shared an apartment complex with five other ladies. Most of the time, she avoided the tiny, cramped space and walked alone at night until she was weary for sleep. She climbed the fifteen flight of stairs to get to the apartment. The door was slightly opened. She was surprised and curious. Mother and all the other ladies were always so worried of theft. Their crates filled with handmade purses, potteries, Gucci and Louis Vuitton imitations of t-shirts and belts, were their sole possession. Without them, they would be back on the street begging again. Just last week Chi and her handicapped son had moved out. Chi would push while he sat in the wheelchair, waving lottery tickets at any gullible soul fancying for a lucky break. They were unfortunate to wonder in the wrong territory. A boy of around seventeen had snatched the tickets and ripped them in pieces. By the time she could open her mouth and screamed “THIEF!,” the boy was long gone. Linh scanned the apartment. The lower level of the bunk bed was not slept in; her mother was not home. It was the first time she was in here alone. She felt strangely satisfied.

From a large leather satchel, Linh pulled out an old red dress. Some of the seams were frayed but the whole was intact. On the shoulder strap embroidered a golden rose. She put on the dress and admired her reflection from the window pane. She pulled on the hair clip and a heap of silky black hair fell on her shoulder. ‘Suppose I can be beautiful. Suppose mother walked in right now, she would laugh and ask what silly game am I playing. She might say ‘you’re too old to play dress up’. Linh giggled to her self, swaying her hip back and forth. A children’s rhyme she had learned in preschool suddenly occurred to her. She sang it loudly, exaggerating each syllable with pleasure. Outside the colorful flashing lights showered the streets. Steady beats from the clubs and bars pulsed on her skin. Linh slipped into her rubber flippers and followed the vibrations.

The Buffalo Bar was bustling with foreigners. Linh could not understand them. Out of an intermingle of languages, she managed to pick out a few English words ‘order, fries, whiskey.’ The waitresses wore black spandex dresses with the Heineken label across their chests. They slid among tables, taking down orders, and remained composed when an unsuspecting arm reached out and squeezed their behind. Linh has never been inside a bar before. The contrast between the dim light and bright orange of cigarette ends somehow branded exclusivity. She spotted an empty couch at the corner of the room and walked in an tentative steps toward it. Not until she was close that Linh saw someone was already sitting there. He wore a full black suit and Converse shoes. It was too late to turn around. The stranger smiled. Linh sat down at the edge of the seat uncommitted.

‘Hi. Do you speak English?’ He said to her.

‘A little.’ She turned and noticed his pale blue eyes.

‘You’re very pretty.’

‘Thank you. Your eyes are pretty too.’ She noticed a familiarity about them.

The foreigner laughed, surprised at the outspoken compliment. He put out his cigarette and shifted his complete focus on the new girl.

‘How much?’ He asked her.

As soon as she heard the question, Linh realized where she had seen this foreigner. He had bought a helmet from her for 25 thousand dong more than the price. She was glad that it was dark in here because her face reddened to a deep scarlet.

She studied the foreigner’s face. Under the blue florescent light, his skin was a shallow and sickly complexion. She held her breath and only took in a minimum amount of oxygen. The scent of perfume was overwhelming. She coughed into her hand. The foreigner shifted closer and pat her back. He massaged his fingers into her neck.

‘There, there. Is that better?’ A smile was arrested on his face.

Linh had never been intimate with another man before. At school she’d had a few admirers, Tuan being one of them. Even though he lived in District five, nearly an hour away from her house, he’d always offered to bike next to her the whole way. On her birthday, he hid a jars full of paper stars in her bag. Linh poured them onto a table to count the stars. She secretly thought that the number of stars equaled the number of years she had to wait to find her true love. There were a hundred stars. When she thanked Tuan, he grabbed her hand and held it until both their hands were sweating. She thought the stars must be wrong. Then Tuan’s parents sent him to Russia to study medicine. At the airport, he embraced her and promised he would come back to marry her. He had tried to kiss her then, for the first time. But Linh turned away and said she’d wait for his return. He looked at her, hurt and disappointed. It had been three years since she stood alone at the waiting area, waving until her wrist was sore and the shadow and his rolling suitcase disappeared behind the security gate.

The foreigner’s touch sent a shiver up her spine. But Linh did not want to move. She sank back into the leather couch comfortably. She was present and captivated. She was no longer waiting for the dream promised to her. It would have been nice to be a wife of a doctor. When the foreigner handed her a glass of a strange, glowing liquid, she put it to her lips and swallowed until there was nothing left. A surge of heat ebbed from her throat to her stomach. She straightened herself and stared into the foreigner’s wanting eyes.

‘I’m not ...’ She cleared her throat and pointed at two girls across the room, who were each sitting on the side of an Indian man with a large stomach and a long, thin beard tied into a knot at his chin.

But the foreigner was not listening. He wrapped one arm around her waist and led her out of the bar.

The hotel room was spacious and brightly lit. Linh studied each piece of furniture. Everything looked new and Western.

‘Take your clothes off and wait on the bed.’ The foreigner said in a detached voice. He was no longer smiling. He unhooked his belt and his pants dropped on the carpet.

‘God damn, do you not know how to take off your own clothes?’ He chuckled and lifted her dress up. Linh reached out her hand and caressed his face. She tugged the fallen hair behind his ears and wiped the sweat from his brow.

‘Please, slow down. I am very happy to be here.’ She pulled his face toward her and kissed his lips. The foreigner allowed himself a few moments of uncertainty before prying Linh’s head away from his.

‘What do you think you’re doing? Is this some kind of romantic date night for you?’ He laughed.

‘I like you.’ Tears started to swell from her eyes.

‘Baby, you’ll like me even better after this.’

The foreigner pushed Linh down to her knees. She shrieked in surprise of the pain but was resolute to remain absolutely still. She did not want to make a mistake. A few minutes later, the foreigner collapsed onto the bed and heaved heavily.

‘Are you on your period? There is some blood here...’

‘I’m not.’ Linh whispered. Her throat was dry.

‘You are a virgin? You’ve got to be kidding me.’ He cupped his hand over his eyes. ‘Why didn’t you tell me? Come here, let’s sleep.’

Linh put her dress back on and crawled into the bed. When she closed her eyes, she began dreaming of America or England, a foreign place she had never been before. The women wore long black coat with rabbit fur collar. The

children were blond and beautiful. Frozen ice melted from the roofs of bakery shops. It was so cold that when the people talked, there was only a cloud of smoke .

Linh woke up in an empty bed. Her hair was matted with sweat. She heard the shower running.

‘Hey! Want to shower together?’ The foreigner’s voice echoed from the bathroom. He whistled cheerfully. The sun light flooded the room. Linh tip toed on the brown carpet, stained with spills of food and alcohol. The air smelled damp and mildewy. She picked up a wallet from the night stand. In the plastic pouch was a picture ID. It read:

John Lorry Carson

Dob 11/7/1974

A mix of Vietnamese dong and crisp dollar bills were tugged behind the ID. She smoothed them out and counted—One million dong and five hundred and twenty dollars. Linh put the ID and a twenty dollar bill inside her bra. She opened the front door and slipped out quietly.

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The baby laid asleep on a bundle of cloth on the pavement. Under the sun, his cheeks was a bright red. Linh tickled his hand and he giggled. He stared at a leaf from a tree above. The lashes on his pale blue eyes fluttered. Linh’s mother hovered above, fanning the wiggling child. She frowned at him but her lips curled upward into a smile.

‘How pretty you are. Now help us sell some helmets’ She sighed.

The baby attracted much attention. Linh’s mother determined that he was a pot of luck. Ever since Linh started bringing him with her every morning, they had sold twice as many helmets. Housewives on their way to the market bent down to lavish kisses on him. ‘You’re so lucky,’ they’d say and walked away with a smile still across their face.

Linh loved the baby. She admired and fixed her eyes on him ardently and only looked up when there was a customer. The blond strands of hair, delicate nose bridge, and thin pink lips were alien to her. Yet as soon as she held him against her breast, she knew the warm blood underneath his skin was hers. After twenty minutes of cradling, the baby snored, bubbles of milk forming at the corner of his mouth. A docile baby, he rarely cried. Only when shook deliberately, did noises of protest actually escaped his mouth. A bald white man stopped in front of their shop. He eyed the helmets for a fraction of a second before drifting his gaze to the baby.

‘Your baby?’ He asked.

‘Yes’ Linh replied engagingly as confirmation of the baby as much as her English fluency. She had spent nights under a small bulb of light studying. One day, she’d teach the baby too.

‘A foreigner in his own country eh?’ The man smiled, shook his head, nodded, then shook it again. He reached into his pocket and took out a few crumpled bills- some were Vietnamese, some were dollars. He handed her two tens in foreign currency. Linh was not sure of the exchange value, she’d check later.

The motorcycles began to disperse, then emptied from the street. Linh sat, tired and dazed from the heat. But she was happy, because in her head, she was beginning to thread tales of love, of tragedy, of hope. The day her baby had grown old enough to ask the question. She would be ready. He’d glide his fingers over the glossy surface of the picture ID and ask ‘Who is he?’ and she might say ‘no one’ or ‘your father’. Yet the baby would not be a lost baby. He’d have a background, a story, and a green twenty dollar bill to question and to discover a whole other world that seeped through his veins. He wasn’t just a baby. He was special—a foreigner’s baby.