

GLASS PENNIES: A REEDUCATION.

In the old palace of Hue, Vietnam, 1981. *Trại cải tạo*. Reeducation camp. **Tù. Prison.**

Y: *Can you hear me, son?*

THINH: *I'm here.*

Y: *Listen to me, son. Con có biết không? Do you know? Understand, son.*

This is the last call. When the night shift arrives, my father knows. He knows the smell of bloodied air, even though these calls come occasionally at their scheduled three month increments and most of the time not at all, and he has never smelt it before. He shifts his eyes sideways to unmarred panes of glass and meets the depth of brown eyes that mirror his, only they are not his, and he knows then that this is the last time.

Ông Nội watches, waits and sees how the irrevocability of the moment possesses his son despite the resentment the latter has harboured for three years now (my father cannot help but blame Ông Nội after all, for leaving his mother half-blinded and with five young mouths to feed). There is a quiet, loaded heartbeat. But the agonising stillness is heartbreak, a second later, when my father hears the *crunch, crunch, crunch* of footfalls—the night shift. Come, at last.

Y: *Ba xin lỗi, con.*

I'm sorry, he says. Literally translated, though, he tells his youngest, *I am begging for fault; I am begging for forgiveness*. In the end, he is still staring into the eyes of his biggest hope, a boy who will become a man, and then a father himself. But at nine years old, staring into the sunken eyes of his mirror, my father is only shattered.

This is the start of it, after all. Not just the looking glass through which he sees his father for the last time, though that is prized beyond measure amongst the old guard. No—this all begins with the extermination of Southern chronicles, when the Việt Cộng were looking for something very particular, something ancient. The war was fought over economies and politics, yes, but at its core, the entire world knew where their enmity stemmed from: terror—of the unexplainable, of the ancient ways, and *especially* of the objects where threads of the phenomena embedded themselves. And, of course, the violence came as their perturbation whetted itself into the points of knives and bullets. Fratricide came next, but it too was justified in the propaganda posters pasted across Ho Chi Minh Square after '75. *Wicked*, they called it. Something once useful but turned corrupt, poisoning the likes of our family. An evil to be eradicated everywhere. The West called it magic, the Việt Minh *ảo thuật*. But the name didn't matter, anyways. The West had already normalised a collective sense of malaise towards the ways of our people that they didn't immediately understand, even if the condemnation wasn't nearly as overt as that of the Northern government.

It was the idea of communism versus the helpless underdog, though, that America could never stand for, and so it only made sense that their troops came to the aid of the South. And after Saigon fell, they said it was just bad luck, and that withdrawing had been a necessity for them. An accident, really, that after eight years, their soldiers happened to take with them bits and pieces of illicit matter and introduced the advanced crafts of our people to

the elite of America. Of course, the world didn't know about that then—wouldn't know, really, for years to come.

My father, at twenty-one in 1992, is a refugee with a soon-to-be minted U.S. visa, an exaltedly glorified perception of American ambition and meritocracy, and a feverish hunger for all that our family lost in the war: power, money, status. Of course he knows what it will mean to be himself in white America—wartorn and the son of a South Vietnamese operative and general, a part of the population that *người Mỹ* both pity and fear. But to him, it is better this way. Anything is. His family's heritage has only ever brought them trouble after all.

For his mother: drops of acid in the eyes for having used the mirror of her powder compact to divulge whispers she heard in the womens' restrooms at Northern compounds. For his father: imprisonment in the skyscraping tower of the old palace as punishment for the espionage and strategy work he did as a covert general during the war. The new government had told them that Y's "reeducation" would last but six months if his *kiểm điểm*, self reflection, confessed the entirety of his war crimes, but imprisonment in Hue's *trại cải tạo* meant really only one thing: when the night shift arrived at a floor—weeks, months, or years into a sentence—it would be empty come morning.

My grandfather had been on the thirtieth level, a place reserved for former high-ranking nobility and army men. The worst of the psychological torture existed on the thirtieth, where daylight and nighttime switched on and off at random, varied intervals. It was a feature of the tower that came from its ancient roots; condemned, yes, by the Việt Cộng, but ironically weaponised by them well after the war. *Two sides of the same coin*, my father always said. Most men on the thirtieth were either driven to madness or death from constant

insomnia, long before the night shift ever reached them, three years into Ông Nội's sentence. It was sheer luck that the family's looking glass, ostensibly a window in the west wing, connected to the small mirror in Ông Nội's cell and kept him relatively sane. A mirror which the Việt Cộng had left only because it was unremovable and unbreakable, a remnant of the vein of power that once flowed through the entire palace.

It is now the winter of '92, and the family is sponsored by a distant cousin to come to Louisville. America, to them, is new and shiny, a place of constant rebirth. And so they use the last of the gold hidden under elaborately laid herringbone floorboards to purchase grey-market, one-way tickets to Kentucky. Here, my father leaves the ghosts of *ảo thuật* behind at last. Here, his broken English, previously consisting of *hello* and *goodbye*, grows to include Southern vocabulary such as *bourbon* and *derby*, his first of which he is invited to six months into living in Louisville.

That May, as with every other May, the stands of Churchill Downs teem with fedoras and fascinators, abuzz. For the first time in over a decade, my father dons a three-piece suit and pocket watch, all previously belonging to his father before him. With his thick frames matching the depth of his brown eyes and his leather shoes polished to the same umber shade, my father looks, at last, like he belongs.

And yet, an uncomfortable notion nudges him as he moves deeper into the racing complex, hoping to catch a glimpse of the sprint. It is both natural and not, a feeling organic and intuitive but decidedly *other*. The announcer's voice booms, louder and louder, as the sensation persists until my father stands ramrod straight, like *cây cọ*, palm trees, in a monsoon. He is waiting for lightning to strike. And when he sees the leading horse in his

final furlong, he knows: silver, in the glint of the bridle. Threads of it, nascent in its Western existence but potent nonetheless. It is exactly like his mother's mirror and the glass in their former home, like the neck scarf turned bloodied rag his sister's friend wore to her premature death at the hands of American soldiers who said they had understood her—and the other five hundred villagers—to be Việt Cộng. *Magic*, to the Americans. Scorned and vilified, yes, but not technically illegal. And my father laughs because at long last, despite the posters pasted across the Belvedere that uncannily resemble those back home, this so-called witchcraft has undeniably been brought into the most quintessentially American of spaces.

My father closes his eyes then, hears the *crunch, crunch, crunch* of Sea Hero's final stretch across the finish line. Sees, in his head, the Garland of Roses that will adorn the winner's back and conceal the furtive gleam in his bridle. Sees, too, the likeness between his adopted country and the insurgents back home, in some abstract space in his mind. And when he blinks at last, there is a penny glinting mid-toss, jostled out of the purse of an exhilarated fan. It spins right in front of his eyes—slowing, slowing, slowing, until it reaches its peak—and then falls so rapidly he can no longer see which face it will land on. He thinks to himself,

Hai mặt của một đồng xu.

Two sides of the same coin.