



*it's just a phase*

*Written by Deanna Nguyen | Photographed by Ron Lach*



Night had settled in by the time Hằng finished hauling in the last cardboard box filled with her belongings into the apartment. Hands on her hips, she let out a huff as she surveyed her new home. The studio apartment, with its chalky white walls and simple hardwood flooring, left its personality up to her.

Over the next few weeks, Hằng would slowly transform the space into a writer's den: bookshelves lined up against an entire wall, a large desk littered with journals, stationery, books, her laptop, and a cup of matcha tea, book quotes enlarged on framed posters, and piles of sherpa blankets on the sofa and bed.

Hằng smiled to herself. It'd taken several years of saving money and dealing with her parents' constant nagging before she was financially comfortable enough to live on her own. The accomplishment was one of many—Hằng still had more to chase after.

For now, she plopped down on her sofa and leaned her head back with her eyes closed. The vibration coming from her phone interrupted her moment of repose. She lifted her hip and pulled her phone out from the back pocket of her jeans. Seeing the caller ID, she answered before the call went to voicemail.

"I just settled in, Mom," Hằng said, getting up from the sofa. The fatigue of lugging her belongings around all day kicked in her voice.

"It's late now so don't go back outside," her mom cautioned. "Lock your doors and don't answer to any strangers."

Hằng started unloading one of the cardboard boxes on the kitchen counter. She picked up her Studio Ghibli mug and tried to decide if she wanted to leave it on the countertop or place it in one of the cabinets. As she pondered over this, she told her mom, "I know, I know. I already told you I was going to set up the security cameras as soon as I finished moving in."

Her mom continued her barrage of concerns. "We aren't nearby so we can't help you right away if something happens. Did you meet any of your neighbors?"

"No, I'm an introvert." Hằng left the mug on the countertop. She began her search for the box in which she packed the security cameras.

"I'm just worried about you," her mom chided. "Stay alert of your surroundings, okay?"

With a sigh, Hằng paused her search and stood by the doorway. She looked through the peephole. “I’m fine, Mom. This neighborhood is pretty safe. I saw a security guard making his rounds earlier.” She stepped away from the door and returned to the sofa. “I’m tired right now. I’ll call you tomorrow and give you an update.” Before her mom could protest, she said in a rush, “Loveyoubye!”

Ending the call, Hằng mentally planned how her day would go tomorrow. The first priority, the one her mom thought she was going to do right now, was to set up the security cameras. Then she remembered that the cameras needed Wi-Fi to work, which meant she had to set up the internet router first.

As Hằng rearranged her to-do list in her head, she stood up from the sofa and walked over to the gray curtains which concealed the floor-to-ceiling window. Drawing it open slightly, she peeked out and took in the nighttime scenery—twinkling lights above and below, though only one light shone the brightest.

She lived on the fourth floor and the apartment had six floors in total, so she wasn’t exactly at the top but she still had the perfect view of the waxing moon—a slice of the night’s source of light.

In gazing at the moon, Hằng basked in the silence and freedom of being alone with anticipation of a new chapter.



Something tugged at Hằng’s skirt while she was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. She peered down to see her four-year-old daughter, Neoma, rubbing her eyes.

“Morning, baby,” Hằng said, stirring the sizzling sausages around on the frying pan. “Breakfast is almost done. Are you hungry?”

Neoma still clung to her mom but she nodded. Smiling, Hằng turned off the stove and moved the sausages onto Neoma’s meal tray. She began to cut up fruit: strawberries, bananas, and oranges. Seeing that her mom was busy, Neoma let go of Hằng’s skirt and left the kitchen—probably to wake up her dad.

After placing everyone’s breakfast at the dining table, Hằng was greeted by her husband who carried a giggling Neoma on his shoulders. Seeing the two of them seized her heart with so much love and adoration. Her husband set Neoma down on her chair before giving Hằng a kiss.

“Thanks for making breakfast,” he said, even though he didn’t have to. Hằng sat down next to him at the table with Neoma on her other side. She watched her daughter pick up her fruit carefully with a fork before stuffing it in her mouth.

Her husband made an exaggerated sound after taking a bite of toast. “Mm! So good!” Chewing and swallowing, he said to Neoma, “Isn’t Mama’s cooking the best?”

Neoma nodded and gave a thumb’s up. She looked so much like her dad at that moment. Hằng planted a kiss on her daughter’s head. “Aw, thank you. Make sure to finish everything, okay?”

Once breakfast was over, Hằng turned on *Miraculous Ladybug* on the living room TV for Neoma. The little girl immediately started singing along to the theme song while bouncing up and down on the sofa, the excitement over watching her favorite show palpable.

Hằng thought about washing the dishes but her husband intercepted her path to the kitchen and wrapped one arm around her waist while he gently placed his hand on her belly.

“Can’t believe we’re going to meet Aruna in a few weeks,” he said softly, as if he didn’t want to wake up their unborn second child. He met Hằng’s eyes, his gaze matching the tone of his voice. “You’re amazing, you know that right?”

Warmth bloomed across Hằng’s cheeks. She’d dated this man for three years, got engaged for two years, and married a year after that. Despite their long history together, he still managed to make her feel like a teenager falling in love for the first time.

They met at a writing workshop where he was also an aspiring novelist, only to later work for a digital marketing agency while Hằng continued to pursue her dreams. With his support, she was able to finish writing a few books, query them to an agent, sign a book deal, and had recently launched a pre-order campaign.

With a book launch and a baby on the horizon, Hằng couldn’t believe that this stage of her life was the happiest and most fulfilling. She thought moving into her own apartment was exciting, but being surrounded by her own family, by people she loved who loved her back, was incomparable to anything she’d ever felt before.

Neoma came over and pressed her ear to Hằng’s protruding belly. As if sensing her big sister, Aruna kicked and everyone looked at each other in delight. In the background, the episode of *Miraculous Ladybug* showed the two main characters gazing



up at the full moon.



Cloudy skies hinted at rain but the only drops that Hằng could feel were the ones falling from her cheeks. She watched as relatives and close friends paid their condolences to the open casket where her husband rested. It wouldn't be long until they would close the lid and place the casket in the ground, burying him until there was nothing left of him.

Standing on either side of her were her daughters, Neoma and Aruna. They'd grown up so well and were as deeply saddened by the loss as Hằng. After hearing that he'd been diagnosed with stage four cancer, they booked direct flights to return home, departing from their own families. The girls—women now—spent as much time as they could with their dad before he could no longer recognize them, instead numbed by the pain that he no longer felt now that he passed on.

Familiar, tear-streaked faces came and went, hugging Hằng and voicing their grief. So many of them had also adopted wrinkles around their eyes and mouths, a sign that time didn't stop for anyone. The days that followed since learning about her husband's diagnosis, Hằng had to come to terms with death being a natural part of the life cycle. If death didn't come for them now, it would eventually arrive later.

Still, the pain of losing a loved one was far too great to be considered a human emotion.

The time had finally come for the casket to descend beneath the surface. Hằng shared a final moment with her husband before they closed the lid and proceeded with the burial. She wept and wept, her shoulders hunched and shaking uncontrollably.

After the funeral was over, Hằng lost track of time. It wasn't until she was back home, now filled with an emptiness that couldn't be replaced because her husband was no longer around, that she realized the day had flown by so fast. Aruna guided her to the bedroom while Neoma video-called her husband and kids who waited for her back at her home.

As Neoma's conversation temporarily replaced the silence, Aruna sat down next to Hằng and squeezed her hand. "Neoma told me she's flying back home the day after tomorrow but I can stay here as long as you need me, Mom," she said, her eyes rimmed in red.

Hằng shook her head. She was already grateful that Neoma

and Aruna stayed for as long as they did when their dad was still alive. “I’ll be okay. Your family needs you.”

Aruna’s bottom lip trembled. “*You’re* my family too.”

Eventually, Hằng’s daughters relented after she told them that she would call if she wasn’t feeling fine. Neoma was the first to bid goodbye and then Aruna shortly after.

Now Hằng was truly alone. She stood in the middle of the living room, staring at the sofa where she would sit with her husband as the two watched movies on TV. The spot where he always sat had sunk in, as if he were actually sitting there right now. Hằng took her place next to him and wondered if his spirit was still hanging around.

She didn’t realize how dark it’d gotten and turned on the lights in the house. Every movement, every sound that she made echoed all around her. Her chest hallowed and she leaned forward with her hands on the kitchen countertop, taking a few deep breaths. Loneliness was its own disease, invisible yet all the more fatal to anyone who didn’t know how to live with it.

Hằng decided she needed some fresh air. She put on her cardigan and stepped out onto the back patio. Crossing her arms, she gazed up at the sky and found the waning moon. Hằng now found it easier to breathe and a strange calmness settled over her the longer she stared at the crescent light.

In this quiet moment, the two were each other’s company, sharing a loneliness that they would come to accept.

