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In the mornings I love to watch my daughter as she takes her bath. In the warm weather, a great tub is placed in the courtyard. At this time, the garden is lush with vines and flowers. If she does not get into the tub quickly enough, cotillions of butterflies rush to settle on its surface and when she enters, she must spill them away with her foot. The birds come too, the place teeming with smells of the tropics and its deep sunlight. Katie is thirteen now, but she still loves to bathe this way, as she has bathed since she was small, free and easy in the open air.

I was told that when I had a child I would not ever tire of looking at it. This was not true. When the children were born, when they were infants, I took practically no interest in them and let the servants do everything. It was the old women from the village who were so fond of my babies that they would carry them everywhere, wrapped in shawls tied tight to their backs. I let them do this. The Vietnamese believe that this makes the child healthy and strong, that it protects not only the body but the spirit from the raucous and dangerous sensations of the world. It was all right with me. I was not interested in the children, not even in my son who still, at nine years, remains something of a mystery to me. I have never known much about boys, having grown up only with women.

But now my daughter has become so beautiful. Now I do not tire of looking at her. She is thirteen and just the first flush of hair has begun to show between her legs, just the first rise of breasts are there on her chest and her face is moving slowly from the foolishness of a little girl to the candid eyes of a woman. Her skin is absolutely clear and so smooth that it is as if air and light have not touched her yet. She moves gracefully with only a few wonderful childish echoes left in the way she turns her hand when she speaks or curls her hair with one finger

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when she studies. Her hair is long, as is the custom here, a Vietnamese custom that I have allowed the old women to keep although soon, I know, I will have to give her up to the colonial styles, letting her looks be made more formal and carefully groomed in the fashion of the times. I still wear my own hair long, but it has already lost its color, so I am excused and permitted to pull it back gently and formally in a bun at the base of my neck. It is 1948 and the colonists are all eager to look modern in the way of post-war Europe.

Perhaps I love Katie this way because I remember myself in a body so like her body. At thirteen I was still that free. I was both in love with the emerging woman and innocent of who she would have to be before it was all over. Ah, does every woman come to dream of herself when she was young? Is it because I have Katie here, my mirror? Or is it because I will always dream of myself before? Is it because when one is so young, one can love so hard? Looking at Katie, after so many years of standing aside, I can see again how sensual the world can be.

I was just thirteen when one of the most wonderful things in my life came to me. I was boarding at the Saigon School for Girls and attending the lycée. My father did not have the money to pay the boarding costs at the lycée. He was an administrator in a small province, and I did not know it then, but I know now that he was there because he had been caught pocketing funds from the taxes in his district many years before. Really everyone did such things, but there was a conflict and pressure to “clean up” the colonial administration so he and some twenty others were stripped of their posts and sent to small stations with only the barest salary and the poorest provinces to run. He was already an old man, sixty-two. He had met my mother when she was only twenty-two, married her, and lost her shortly after he lost his post, when she caught the cholera and died. So I was raised like my own children, by the old Vietnamese women—and then sent to boarding school very early to learn to be French.

I did not like the lycée where all of the girls came from high, colonial families and I fled each night, like an animal to its burrow, into the safety of the Vietnamese world of the boarding school. For many years I was the only European girl there. This may seem strange, but my father was so old, infirm, sad and shamed that he could not be bothered. He sent one of his clerks to find me a place and cared only about

the cost. But the old women had prepared me cautiously and even in the Saigon boarding school I was at home being the outsider yet knowing what to do. I went on this way from the year that I was ten until I was almost fourteen and Marguerite arrived.

Marguerite was also boarded at the school because, although she was European, she had even less money than I. Her father had died and her mother taught in a small lycée for Vietnamese children in the Mekong. She had two brothers, one very shy and one much older who had already started to use the opium dens of Saigon when Marguerite came to school with me. From the first day that she came, we were best friends as only young girls can be. I told her all I knew, but I hardly needed to. Marguerite was one of those who figures things out. We were quickly equals and together we navigated between the European world of the lycée and the noisy confusion and discipline of the boarding school.

Things will be different for Katie. She goes daily to the lycée and at the end of the day I am there with the car or I send a rickshaw. She and her brother ride together. They look like all of the other children. They are not outside. All the same, I think to myself when I see her like this, skin spotted with water, fragile looking: will she also have a chance to fall in love as I did—even though, I suppose, she will never need to love someone as much as I needed to love Marguerite.

Often, late at night when the others slept or talked through giggles in the singsong of Vietnamese, Marguerite would let me come and lie with her in her bed. We all slept then, as we do now, under the white web of a mosquito cloth. We would lie side by side, in the heat, long, lean, naked, young—and we would talk. I remember her sometimes when I lie down at night and look up through the webbing at the fan, and when my husband parts the cloth to come in to me, I sometimes remember, almost faster than a thought, the sensation of parting curtains as we did then, to talk about forbidden things.

This is what girls share that no one can share with you again . . . that talking of forbidden things. I remember the time when Alice, a sixteen year old from the north, was caught taking men just outside the gate of the school. Every night, when the others were asleep, at the very minute when, perhaps, Marguerite and I were talking, Alice would go out and stand behind the lamppost of the south wall and let herself be

bought by men. I remember Marguerite told me, "I would like to do that" and I remember thinking both how I agreed, how I thought it might be exciting, and how I felt afraid because it was obvious to me then that as soon as there were men, we would no longer have each other in the same way.

So I was prepared when it happened. One day as we were leaving the lycée, a great black car came up to the front gate. It was a gorgeous thing with fenders so shiny the sunlight grazed them and flashed in everyone's eyes. It had mirrors and windows so clear you could see deep inside the car. Inside the car was a man, a Chinaman, in a perfect white suit. Marguerite walked up to the car and looked inside the window. She didn't go inside, but she looked through the glass, deep inside and then she stepped away and came back to me to return to the lycée.

"He's the one," she told me as we lay under the white web and the spin of the fans. "He saw me on the ferry, crossing the Mekong, and he gave me a ride. He is just back from Paris where he has been studying. He lives in the blue house on the river at the edge of town. He is very, very rich."

"What is he like?" I asked. I wanted to know and I did not. He seemed a danger to me, but I also wanted to know.

"He is nervous when he talks to me. He smells of lotions and he has the cleanest skin I have ever seen."

"Did he touch you?"

"Yes, but only lightly. He touched my hand. I thought he wanted more, but I wasn't sure."

She giggled. I touched her leg and ran my hand over her thigh. Her skin was smooth, the smoothest I had ever seen. At night we often touched, feeling the sensations as we ran our fingers over each other. Would it be this way with men? For Marguerite, perhaps, with her Chinaman perhaps, but never for me.

"Will you see him again?"

"I suppose . . . if he comes to see me."

We were silent. It was not at all like Alice with her men outside the wall, or like the world will be for Katie who I shall send to proper schools with proper dances where she will meet proper young men. I am afraid for Katie, so this is what I say, but looking at how beautiful

her body is today, even seeing it through her summer dress, I almost dare to wish that she will also know what I knew.

The Chinaman did come back. At first he would only be there waiting at the lycée gate, sometimes before school, sometimes after. But then one day he came by and took her with him. She went in the car. They went to an apartment in the low side of town, the Chinese part, where he kept a room with only a bed and two chairs, a small table and two bonsai plants. Marguerite described it all to me. She told me that everything was clean and blue even though the street outside was dirty and crowded, but that he neglected things and she herself had to water the plants.

I would have been jealous right away, I suppose, but there was really no sign at first that the Chinaman would take her away from me. He came on a beautiful day. We were dancing, practicing the tango, the Charleston, holding each other, touching cheeks, laughing and moving fast. It was a one day holiday and the other girls were out, but having no relatives to take us home for only one day, we stayed alone in the empty boarding school thinking it was not so bad because we had found the key to the cabinet and the old phonograph and we were quite happy together. So even when the Chinaman came in the great black car, I had had such a wonderful day that I was more excited than sad when they drove away.

The best part of Marguerite's Chinaman was the way that they made love. At night, in bed, Marguerite would tell me all of the things they did. She would explain to me what his body was like and what it was like when he touched her and how he would grow hard and come inside and what it felt like and that she bled. While she talked, she would show me things he did and we would touch each other in the same way. It was amazing, the things our bodies would do with only someone touching them. I could see she was beautiful and it was love, the way we were to each other, the way we learned from him. The Chinaman was only a tunnel and through it we traveled to each other.

The hardest part of loving someone is not knowing everything that they are thinking. I know that Marguerite felt this happening to us, but she was cold sometimes and told me that she had a responsibility for her family. This responsibility was like a ghost that got between her and everything else that she felt she might love. I think that without

them, we might have gone on a long time, Marguerite, the Chinaman and I.

It was after some months that she came back one night with the money. I didn't understand at first what was going on. She told me that she had gone to dinner with the Chinaman and that her mother and brothers had come. She was arch when she said this, as she always was when she mentioned her family. After seeing them, she was often stiff and would not ask me to come to her bed at night or slip into mine. She would not kiss me goodnight while we stood with our feet on the hard floor between our beds. She would not embrace me or let me touch her. I could only lie alone, listening through the breath of the others for her. Often I would hear her crying. I would cry too, but even more softly so that she would not hear me and know about my listening.

There is one time in particular that I remember. It was the first night that they had all gone to dinner, the mother, the two brothers, the Chinaman and Marguerite. The Chinaman paid for the meal, of course, but afterwards, in the room where they made love, he grew angry and made her take money and carry it back to the school with her.

"So now I shall have money to send to my Mama," she told me, tucking it under the edge of her bed.

"Is it like Alice?" I wanted to know.

"No, it is not the same," she said and put me to sleep rubbing gently on the soft skin of my thigh but would not let me touch hers.

Making love where there is money involved, even when you are having fun, changes something. Often, Marguerite would not even return to school at night and when she did, she was faraway and cold. She would come in late at night, her breath heavy with the smell of wine, her hair matted, her face flushed and twisting when she smiled. At first, she would occasionally let me come into her bed again and lie beside her. When she was happy, she would tell me more about the strange room in Cholon where she was taken by the Chinaman. She would describe what it was like to make love and to listen to the sounds of the many people who passed the slats of her shutters in the narrow street. She said that often their voices and the sound of their feet were so close that they seemed to enter the room. She told me

how invisible she felt, lying next to the Chinaman, naked, under the waves of voices like smoke, coming in from outside.

When Marguerite told this to me, she would let me hold her and we would pretend to hear the sounds coming in through the tall windows of the sleeping dormitory. She would stroke me, speaking in her own echo of voices and together we would recreate the loving, only better, because I was not her Chinaman and I loved her as he could not.

But after some months this also began to change. Marguerite, who only wanted to write . . . Did I say that before? It is the very reason why I am thinking of this. I have just heard from others here in Saigon that Marguerite has written about her Chinaman and published a book in Paris. I am wondering as I listen to the others talk, does she mention me? Is our story there with the Chinaman? The stories she told me then were so beautiful. Will she tell them again? Will we both be there? I have seen a copy of her book in the window of the French bookstore. I am curious to see it, but find that I am afraid to buy it. On the back there is a photo. She is no longer girlish, but I recognized her immediately. If I could write, I would write about us.

It was not all good, after the Chinaman came. Some months after her visits to the Chinaman began, Marguerite stopped telling me stories. Tired and strange, she would sometimes order me to stay away from her bed, but then, suddenly, she would come in late at night and call out to me to come to her. She would hold me and rub my body, talking in a low, distant voice, not making sense.

I accepted her this way, but I began to know that it was jealousy that was growing up in me. When someone so beautiful is yours as only a best friend of a young girl can be, you do not give her up easily to someone else. I remember how she looked, crossing the street in front of the school. I would be up above, looking down from the dormitory window, watching as she stepped up into the depth of the black car. She knew I was watching, but she never looked back.

I wish that I had money then as I do now. I could have given her what she needed. I could have freed Marguerite from the Chinaman.

But this is a foolish thought. She would not have left him so easily even without the money. She was intrigued with the daring of it. I remember one day we went together, secretly, to the room. It was rain-

ing and she knew that the Chinaman had gone to see his father who was an old opium smoker, but very, very rich. We went into the room during the early afternoon, when nobody was out. All the way there I almost thought that she was too afraid and offered several times to give up the chance to see the place. But as soon as we slid into the room, the old Marguerite came back, giggling and laughing and showing me about.

She took me to each corner of the room which was not very large. Next, she poured us each a glass full of dark burgandy wine. She let me sit in his chair and showed me how she would sit across from him and cross her legs or occupy the stool, pulling her skirts up around her knees. We even ran our hands over his marvelous silken clothes. I took off my blouse and put on one of his pale blue shirts. It was the color of the sky and felt like wind on my skin. The burgandy wine was a warm river inside me.

Then we undressed completely, as she said that she did for the Chinaman. First Marguerite sat in the chair and let me undress before her and then I lay on the bed and let her do the same. Finally, both completely free of our clothes, we lay down together on the bed, her arm across my chest, my arm holding the softness of her breast as she said she often lay with the Chinaman, listening to the people passing outside. It was just as she said. As the afternoon went on and the streets filled up again with activity leaving the mid-day silence behind, they were almost upon us. It excited me, the perfection of the feeling of our two bodies, skins touching on the cool, clean, expensive sheets. We stayed there a long time listening as the world began to fill up outside. It was a beautiful day. It was a day when I was in love.

This is the truth of it. I was in love with her as women can love women and men never can. The man I have married is a rich man, an administrator quite a bit older than I who came to my father's house and arranged for his marriage to me. I had no place else to go. I was like Marguerite and her Chinaman, but without her beauty, without his beauty, with only the need to survive as a woman in a foreign place, a woman whose father was old and who soon would leave her without even his small protections.

I look at my children and my garden and my home. I have not done badly. I have only done with less love. I wonder, has Marguerite done

the same? I wonder, does she also remember me? Or only this Chinaman?

I have seen the Chinaman at the embassy. He is very wealthy and highly placed. He has a wife, chosen by his father, who often comes with him, but I think that he also has a mistress or many. He is known for his loving, even among my colonial sisters.

Marguerite knew that it would end this way, that finally he would leave her. She would tell me that with her eyes firm and staring hard at the world. She knew who she was to him and who she could not be. She knew from the first time that they made love that she could not marry him and then, because of him, could not marry the young men who might have courted her for her beauty in spite of her poverty. I was alarmed and afraid for her, but Marguerite laughed at me as I might laugh at my own children when they are fearful of a dark corner or the masks at a local temple dance.

I knew all this too, but did not realize that it would mean that Marguerite would have to leave Saigon. At that time, there was no other world for me, but she was already thinking of Paris and planning how the rest of her life would be. All the same, I know that it hurt her badly when the Chinaman came and told her that his father had decided the date for the wedding, that the young woman had been chosen and everything was being arranged. Even though Marguerite would not show a tear, her look was keen and hard when she laughed and called it the Chinaman's predicament. She told me that she even went to the wedding secretly. She stood with the crowd along the river where he and his bride were carried by boat to the house of his father. She told me, with pleasure, that the bride was veiled and manacled in gold. The Chinaman was forced to keep his head down and to follow where the father pointed.

Shortly after that, Marguerite left on a boat to France. He must have purchased her ticket and given her money for the trip and for her expenses in Paris. The mother came to Saigon and accompanied her daughter to the boat. Marguerite was bitter when she left. I will always regret that—the bitterness with which we parted. Her last words to me were distant and formal. They showed that she had erased all of the signs of our friendship. She would leave me nothing. If we spoke again now, would she regret this? What will she have made of me in her book? Will she remember?

Still, I have not told the whole thing. I have made myself out to be only innocent, but many of Marguerite's changes were also mine. It was one day when she had been supposed to meet him that she gave me the money to hold. I remember looking, incredulous, at the sum she placed in my hand. She had been carrying it for safety in her panties. It smelled that way, the way she smelled when I lay down with her at night. This was money, paid from him to her. She asked me to hold it until her young brother Paul came by the lycée and then to give it to him. She kissed me lightly as she said all this, and fled across the street to the black car.

Paul was late and terribly shy. He seemed afraid to take the money. To comfort him, I took him round to the garden, but when he took the money, he actually began to cry. That is how I discovered that he felt as I did. I've never been daring, not then or since. All the same, looking at his face which was an echo of our Marguerite, I got the idea that we should both go to the room where she went with the Chinaman and find them. I was not sure what we would do, but I was so overjoyed to find someone else to share my love, my anger, and my jealousy (By now I knew that this was jealousy and nothing else . . . the first jealousy may be as strong as the first love) that I became reckless and bold.

It was dusk when we got there and the door was shut. We listened but could hear nothing. I touched the shutter, not meaning to, and it fell open. For a moment I thought she would catch me there and it would all be over. But there was nobody inside. It was careless of them to go out without the key, but if the door was open, I had to go in. Paul hesitated a moment, but seeing that this was really the place (Marguerite had left a sign, a familiar blouse dropped on a chair), he followed me across the doorway.

Once inside, the door closed, I became much bolder. There was a bottle of wine on the table. I poured a glass for each of us showing him that I was not afraid. As we drank, Paul caught my daring and he began to talk, telling me about himself and his feelings for Marguerite.

I still remember how, in the half-light, he looked like her, the same graceful arch of his neck, the eyes, the slim bones. He was a fragile boy. What was strong and sly in Marguerite, became delicate and vulnerable in the boy. In the half-light, missing her, missing everything that had been so indebted in me, I began to stroke his hair. We drank that

same burgundy wine that I had tasted before and laughed and I stroked him gently, touching him first through the rough cotton shirt and then beneath, on his naked skin and bare chest.

Paul was light-headed too, not used to the wine. He told me stories about the foolishness of the people of his village in the Mekong. I told him of the girls and the mistresses in school. He told me about his brother and all of the cruelty that he had inflicted on Paul. I comforted him and held him. We were quite drunk. Then, in the shadow of Marguerite and the Chinaman, we made love that way, the way she had shown it to me, listening to the noises outside at the end of the day.

Looking back, I can see we took an awful risk. The woman I am now sees things that the girl did not. She sees a terrible scene in which Marguerite and the Chinaman come into the room and find me lying so with Paul. I see a look of such anger on the face of my friend that even though it is a daydream conjured now, so many years later, I am sure that it is enough to take away any one of the minutes in which we laughed, every one of the moments in which she might have remembered me as we were, best friends.

But this didn't happen. Paul and I simply slept and then, waking up and finding ourselves sober and shy again, stepped out of the room, leaving it as we found it. He took his money back to the Mekong and I went back to the dormitory where I slid late into my white web nest and waited for morning to come.

That was only a few weeks before the Chinaman's wedding. Marguerite showed up only once more at school, to gather her things. I followed her about, as one does a best friend in the dorm. She talked as she always had during the day, using that cynical voice that had become her way. I followed along because I did not know what to say. I was so used to losing things anyway. I watched her place things in her case. It seemed only fitting, that she too should come and go from that place. We made no fuss except for one thing. Just as she was closing the bag, she pulled a heavy ring from her pocket and placed it in my hand. It was a diamond in a gold band cut in the Chinese style.

"It's a gift," she said, "from the Chinaman. It belonged to his mother, but I have no use for it. My brother once tried to take it to sell for his opium. I want you to have this, a friendship ring I suppose."

She said this flicking her shoulders as she did to make everything seem so trivial, like an afterthought. And then she kissed me quickly on both cheeks, as girlfriends do. She bent over to lift her bag, showing me the outline of her body once more against the fabric of her skirt, and went away.

I kept the ring for a long time hidden under my mattress. I thought that I would give it away when I was married, but I did not. Now, I think, perhaps, that I shall give it to my daughter. She is so lovely there, her skin sparkling under the sun, young, flexible, reminding me of Marguerite, reminding me of love.