

RADIANT GREEN STAR

Lucius Shepard

Here's a powerful, darkly elegant and high-intensity novella that takes us to the strange, haunted landscape of a high-tech future Vietnam for a study of hatred, compassion, betrayal and redemption—and of the many different kinds of ghosts.

Lucius Shepard was one of the most popular, influential and prolific of the new writers of the eighties and that decade and the decade that followed would see a steady stream of bizarre and powerfully compelling stories by Shepard, stories such as the landmark novella "R&R", which won him a Nebula Award in 1987, "The Jaguar Hunter", "Black Coral", "A Spanish Lesson", "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule", "Shades", "A Traveller's Tale", "Human History", "How the Wind Spoke at Madaket", "Beast of the Heartland", "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter", and "Barnacle Bill the Spacer", which won him a Hugo Award in 1993. In 1988, he picked up a World Fantasy Award for his monumental short-story collection *The Jaguar Hunter*, following it in 1992 with a second World Fantasy Award for his second collection, *The Ends of the Earth*. Shepard's other books include the novels *Green Eyes*, *Kalimantan* and *The Golden*. His most recent book is a new collection, *Barnacle Bill the Spacer*, and he's currently at work on a mainstream novel, *Family Values*. Born in Lynchburg, Virginia, he now lives in Vancouver, Washington.

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SEVERAL MONTHS BEFORE MY thirteenth birthday, my mother visited me in a dream and explained why she had sent me to live with the circus seven years before. The dream was a Mitsubishi, I believe, its style that of the Moonflower series of biochips, which set the standard for pornog-raphy in those days; it had been programmed to activate once my testos-terone production reached a certain level, and it featured a voluptuous Asian woman to whose body my mother had apparently grafted the image of her own face. I imagined she must have been in a desperate hurry and thus forced to use whatever materials fell to hand; yet, taking into account the Machiavellian intricacies of the family history, I later came to think that her decision to alter a pornographic chip might be intentional, designed to provoke Oedipal conflicts that would imbue her message with a heightened urgency.

In the dream, my mother told me that when I was eighteen I would come into the trust created by my maternal grandfather, a fortune that would make me the wealthiest man in Viet Nam. Were I to remain in her care, she feared my father would eventually coerce me into assigning control of the trust to him, whereupon he would

have me killed. Sending me to live with her old friend Vang Ky was the one means she had of guaranteeing my safety. If all went as planned, I would have several years to consider whether it was in my best interests to claim the trust or to forswear it and continue my life in secure anonymity. She had faith that Vang would educate me in a fashion that would prepare me to arrive at the proper decision.

Needless to say, I woke from the dream in tears. Vang had informed me not long after my arrival at his door that my mother was dead, and that my father was likely responsible for her death; but this fresh evidence of his perfidy, and of her courage and sweetness, mingled though it was with the confusions of intense eroticism, renewed my bitterness and sharpened my sense of loss. I sat the rest of the night with only the eerie music of tree frogs to distract me from despair, which roiled about in my brain as if it were a species of sluggish life both separate from and inimical to my own.

The next morning, I sought out Vang and told him of the dream and asked what I should do. He was sitting at the desk in the tiny cluttered trailer that served as his home and office, going over the accounts: a frail man in his late sixties with close-cropped grey hair, dressed in a white open-collared shirt and green cotton trousers. He had a long face—especially long from cheekbones to jaw—and an almost feminine delicacy of feature, a combination of characteristics that lent him a sly, witchy look; but though he was capable of slyness, and though at times I suspected him of possessing supernatural powers, at least as regards his ability to ferret out my misdeeds, I perceived him at the time to be an inwardly directed soul who felt misused by the world and whose only interests, apart from the circus, were a love of books and calligraphy. He would occasionally take a pipe of opium, but was otherwise devoid of vices, and it strikes me now that while he had told me of his family and his career in government (he said he still maintained those connections), of a life replete with joys and passionate errors, he was now in the process of putting all that behind him and withdrawing from the world of the senses.

"You must study the situation," he said, shifting in his chair, a movement that shook the wall behind him, disturbing the leaflets stacked in the cabinet above his head and causing one to sail down towards the desk; he batted it away, and for an instant it floated in the air before me, as if held by the hand of a spirit, a detailed pastel rendering of a magnificent tent—a thousand times more magnificent than the one in which we performed—and a hand-lettered legend proclaiming the imminent arrival of the Radiant Green Star Circus.

"You must learn everything possible about your father and his associates," he went on. "Thus you will uncover his weaknesses and define his strengths. But first and foremost, you must continue to live. The man you become will determine how best to use the knowledge you have gained, and you mustn't allow the pursuit of your studies to rise to the level of obsession, or else his judgment will be clouded. Of course, this is easier to do in theory than in practice. But if you set about it in a measured way, you will succeed."

I asked how I should go about seeking the necessary information, and he gestured with his pen at another cabinet, one with a glass front containing scrapbooks and bundles of computer paper; beneath it, a marmalade cat was asleep atop a broken radio, which—along with framed photographs of his wife, daughter and grandson, all killed, he'd told me, in an airline accident years before—rested on a chest of drawers.

"Start there," he said. "When you are done with those, my friends in the government will provide us with your father's financial records and other materials."

I took a cautious step towards the cabinet—stacks of magazines and newspapers and file boxes made the floor of the trailer difficult to negotiate—but Vang held up a hand to restrain me. "First," he said, "you must live. We will put aside a few hours each day for you to study, but before all else you are a member of my troupe. Do your chores. Afterwards we will sit down together and make a schedule."

On the desk, in addition to his computer, were a cup of coffee topped with a mixture of sugar and egg, and a plastic dish bearing several slices of melon. He offered me a slice and sat with his hands steeped on his stomach, watching me eat. "Would you like time alone to honour your mother?" he asked. "I suppose we can manage without you for a morning."

"Not now," I told him. "Later, though . . ."

I finished the melon, laid the rind on his plate, and turned to the door, but he called me back.

"Philip," he said, "I cannot remedy the past, but I can assure you to a degree as to the future. I have made you my heir. One day the circus will be yours. Everything I own will be yours."

I peered at him, not quite certain that he meant what he said, even though his words had been plain.

"It may not seem a grand gift," he said. "But perhaps you will discover that it is more than it appears."

I thanked him effusively, but he grimaced and waved me to silence—he was not comfortable with displays of affection. Once again he told me to see to my chores.

"Attend to the major as soon as you're able," he said. "He had a difficult night. I know he would be grateful for your company."

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Radiant Green Star was not a circus in the tradition of the spectacular travelling

shows of the previous century. During my tenure, we never had more than eight performers and only a handful of exhibits, exotics that had been genetically altered in some fashion: a pair of miniature tigers with hands instead of paws, a monkey with a vocabulary of thirty-seven words, and the like. The entertainments we presented were unsophisticated; we could not compete with those available in Hanoi or Hue or Saigon, or, for that matter, those accessible in the villages. But the villagers perceived us as a link to a past they revered, and found in the crude charm of our performances a sop to their nostalgia—it was as if we carried the past with us, and we played to that illusion, keeping mainly to rural places that appeared on the surface to be part of another century. Even when the opportunity arose, Vang refused to play anywhere near large population centres because—he said—of the exorbitant bribes and licensing fees demanded by officials in such areas. Thus for the first eighteen years of my life, I did not venture into a city, and I came to know my country much as a tourist might, driving ceaselessly through it, isolated within the troupe. We traversed the north and central portions of Viet Nam in three battered methane-powered trucks, one of which towed Vang's trailer, and erected our tents in pastures and school yards and soccer fields, rarely staying anywhere longer than a few nights. On occasion, to accommodate a private celebration sponsored by a wealthy family, we would join forces with another troupe; but Vang was reluctant to participate in such events, because being surrounded by so many people caused our featured attraction to become agitated, thus imperilling his fragile health.

Even today the major remains a mystery to me. I have no idea if he was who he claimed to be; nor, I think, did *he* know—his statements concerning identity were usually vague and muddled, and the only point about which he was firm was that he had been orphaned as a young boy, raised by an uncle and aunt, and, being unmarried, was the last of his line. Further, it's unclear whether his claims were the product of actual memory, delusion, or implantation. For the benefit of our audiences, we let them stand as truth, and billed him as Major Martin Boyette, the last surviving POW of the American War, now well over a hundred years old and horribly disfigured, both conditions the result of experiments in genetic manipulation by means of viruses—this the opinion of a Hanoi physician who treated the major during a bout of illness. Since such unregulated experiments were performed with immoderate frequency throughout Southeast Asia after the turn of the century, it was not an unreasonable conclusion. Major Boyette himself had no recollection of the process that had rendered him so monstrous and—if one were to believe him—so long-lived.

We were camped that day near the village of Cam Lo, and the tent where the major was quartered had been set up at the edge of the jungle. He liked the jungle, liked its noise and shadow, the sense of enclosure it provided—he dreaded the prospect of being out in the open, so much so that whenever we escorted him to the main tent, we would walk with him, holding umbrellas to prevent him from seeing the sky and to shield him from the sight of god and man. But once inside the main tent, as if the formal structure of a performance neutralized his aversion to space and scrutiny, he showed himself proudly, walking close to the bleachers, causing children to shy

away and women to cover their eyes. His skin hung from his flesh in voluminous black folds (he was African-American), and when he raised his arms, the folds beneath them spread like the wings of a bat; his face, half-hidden by a layering of what appeared to be leather shawls, was the sort of uncanny face one might see emerging from a whorled pattern of bark, roughly human in form, yet animated by a force that seems hotter than the human soul, less self-aware. Bits of phosphorescence drifted in the darks of his eyes. His only clothing was a ragged grey shift, and he hobbled along with the aid of a staff cut from a sapling papaya—he might have been a prophet escaped after a term in hell, charred and magical and full of doom. But when he began to speak, relating stories from the American War, stories of ill-fated Viet Cong heroes and the supernatural forces whose aid they enlisted, all told in a deep rasping voice, his air of suffering and menace evaporated, and his ugliness became an intrinsic article of his power, as though he were a poet who had sacrificed superficial glamour for the ability to express more eloquently the beauty within. The audiences were won over, their alarm transformed to delight, and they saluted him with enthusiastic applause but they never saw him as I did that morning: a decrepit hulk given to senile maundering and moments of bright terror when startled by a sound from outside the tent. Sitting in his own filth, too weak or too uncaring to move.

When I entered the tent, screwing up my face against the stench, he tucked his head into his shoulder and tried to shroud himself in the fetid folds of his skin. I talked softly, gentling him as I might a frightened animal, in order to persuade him to stand. Once he had heaved up to his feet, I bathed him, sloshing buckets of water over his convulsed surfaces; when at length I was satisfied that I'd done my best, I hauled in freshly cut boughs and made him a clean place to sit. Unsteadily, he lowered himself onto the boughs and started to eat from the bowl of rice and vegetables I had brought for his breakfast, using his fingers to mould bits of food into a ball and inserting it deep into his mouth—he often had difficulty swallowing.

"Is it good?" I asked. He made a growly noise of affirmation. In the half-dark, I could see the odd points of brilliance in his eyes.

I hated taking care of the major (this may have been the reason Vang put me in charge of him). His physical state repelled me, and though the American War had long since ceased to be a burning issue, I resented his purported historical reality—being half American, half Vietnamese, I felt doubly afflicted by the era he represented. But that morning, perhaps because my mother's message had inoculated me against my usual prejudices, he fascinated me. It was like watching a mythological creature feed, a chimera or a manticore, and I thought I perceived in him the soul of the inspired storyteller, the luminous half-inch of being that still burned behind the corroded ruin of his face.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

He swallowed and gazed at me with those haunted fox fire eyes. I repeated the

question.

"Philip," he said tonelessly, giving equal value to both syllables, as if the name were a word he'd been taught but did not understand.

I wondered if he was—as Vang surmised—an ordinary man transformed into a monster, pumped full of glorious tales and false memories, all as a punishment for some unguessable crime or merely on a cruel whim. Or might he actually be who he claimed? A freak of history, a messenger from another time whose stories contained some core truth, just as the biochip had contained my mother's truth? All I knew for certain was that Vang had bought him from another circus, and that his previous owner had found him living in the jungle in the province of Quan Tn, kept alive by the charity of people from a nearby village who considered him the manifestation of a spirit.

Once he had finished his rice, I asked him to tell me about the war, and he launched into one of his mystical tales; but I stopped him, saying, "Tell me about the real war. The war you fought in."

He fell silent, and when at last he spoke, it was not in the resonant tones with which he entertained our audiences, but in an effortful whisper.

"We came to the firebase in ... company strength. Tenth of May. Nineteen sixty-seven. The engineers had just finished construction and . . . and . . . there was still..." He paused to catch his breath. "The base was near the Laotian border. Overlooking a defoliated rubber planta-tion. Nothing but bare red earth in front of us ... and wire. But at our rear . . . the jungle ... it was too close. They brought in artillery to clear it. Lowered the batteries to full declension. The trees all toppled in the same direction ... as if they'd been pushed down by the sweep ... of an invisible hand."

His delivery, though still laboured, grew less halting, and he made feeble gestures to illustrate the tale, movements that produced a faint slithering as folds of his skin rubbed together; the flickerings in his pupils grew more and more pronounced, and I half-believed his eyes were openings onto a battlefield at night, a place removed from us by miles and time.

"Because of the red dirt, the base was designated Firebase Ruby. But the dirt wasn't the colour of rubies, it was the red of drying blood. For months we held the position with only token resistance. We'd expected serious opposition, and it was strange to sit there day after day with nothing to do except send out routine patrols. I tried to maintain discipline, but it was an impossible task. Everyone malingered. Drug use was rampant. If I'd gone by the book I could have brought charges against every man on the base. But what was the point? War was not truly being waged. We were engaged in a holding action. Policy was either directionless or misguided. And so I satisfied myself by maintaining a semblance of discipline as the summer heat and the monsoon melted away the men's resolve.

"October came, the rains slackened. There was no hint of increased enemy activity, but I had a feeling something big was on the horizon. I spoke to my battalion commander. He felt the same way. I was told we had intelligence suggesting that the enemy planned a fall and winter campaign building up to Tet. But no one took it seriously. I don't think I took it seriously myself. I was a professional soldier who'd been sitting idle for six months, and I was spoiling for a fight. I was so eager for engagement I failed to exercise good judgment. I ignored the signs, I... I refused ... I..."

He broke off and pawed at something above him in the air—an apparition, perhaps; then he let out an anguished cry, covered his face with his hands, and began to shake like a man wracked by fever.

I sat with him until, exhausted, he lapsed into a fugue, staring dully at the ground. He was so perfectly still, if I had come across him in the jungle, I might have mistaken him for a root system that had assumed a hideous anthropomorphic shape. Only the glutinous surge of his breath opposed this impression. I didn't know what to think of his story. The plain style of its narration had been markedly different from that of his usual stories, and this lent it credibility; yet I recalled that whenever questioned about his identity, he would respond in a similar fashion. However, the ambiguous character of his personal tragedy did not diminish my new fascination with his mystery. It was as if I had been dusting a vase that rested on my mantelpiece, and, for the first time, I'd turned it over to inspect the bottom and found incised there a labyrinthine design, one that drew my eye inward along its black circuit, promising that should I be able to decipher the hidden character at its centre, I would be granted a glimpse of something ultimately bleak and at the same time ultimately alluring. Not a secret, but rather the source of secrets. Not truth, but the ground upon which truth and its opposite were raised. I was a mere child—half a child, at any rate—thus I have no real understanding of how I arrived at this recognition, illusory though it may have been. But I can state with absolute surety why it seemed important at the time: I had a powerful sense of connection with the major, and, accompanying this, the presentiment that his mystery was somehow resonant with my own.

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Except for my new programme of study, researching my father's activities, and the enlarged parameters of my relationship with Major Boyette, whom I visited whenever I had the opportunity, over the next several years my days were much the same as ever, occupied by touring, performing (I functioned as a clown and an apprentice knife thrower), by all the tediums and pleasures that arose from life in Radiant Green Star. There were, of course, other changes. Vang grew increasingly frail and withdrawn, the major's psychological state deteriorated, and four members of the troupe left and were replaced. We gained two new acrobats, Kim and Kai, pretty Korean sisters aged seven and ten respectively—orphans trained by another circus—and Tranh, a middle-aged, moon-faced man whose potbelly did not hamper

in the slightest his energetic tumbling and pratfalls. But to my mind, the most notable of the replacements was Vang's niece, Tan, a slim, quiet girl from Hue with whom I immediately fell in love.

Tan was nearly seventeen when she joined us, a year older than I, an age difference that seemed unbridgeable to my teenage sensibilities. Her shining black hair hung to her waist, her skin was the colour of sandalwood dusted with gold, and her face was a perfect cameo in which the demure and the sensual commingled. Her father had been in failing health, and both he and his wife had been uploaded into a virtual community hosted by the Sony AI—Tan had then become her uncle's ward. She had no actual performing skills, but dressed in glittery revealing costumes, she danced and took part in comic skits and served as one of the targets for our knife thrower, a taciturn young man named Dat who was billed as James Bond Cochise. Dat's other target, Mei, a chunky girl of Taiwanese extraction who also served as the troupe's physician, having some knowledge of herbal medicine, would come prancing out and stand at the board, and Dat would plant his knives within a centimetre of her flesh; but when Tan took her place, he would exercise extreme caution and set the knives no closer than seven or eight inches away, a contrast that amused our audiences no end.

For months after her arrival, I hardly spoke to Tan, and then only for some utilitarian purpose; I was too shy to manage a normal conversation. I wished with all my heart that I was eighteen and a man, with the manly confidence that, I assumed, naturally flowed from having attained the age. As things stood I was condemned by my utter lack of self-confidence to admire her from afar, to imagine conversations and other intimacies, to burn with all the frustration of unrequited lust. But then, one after-noon, while I sat in the grass outside Vang's trailer, poring over some papers dealing with my father's investments, she approached, wearing loose black trousers and a white blouse, and asked what I was doing.

"I see you reading every day," she said. "You are so dedicated to your studies. Are you preparing for the university?"

We had set up our tents outside Bien Pho, a village some sixty miles south of Hanoi, on the grassy bank of a wide, meandering river whose water showed black beneath a pewter sky. Dark green conical hills with rocky out-cropping hemmed in the spot, and it was shaded here and there by smallish trees with crooked trunks and puffs of foliage at the ends of their corkscrew branches. The main tent had been erected at the base of the nearest hill and displayed atop it a pennant bearing the starry emblem of our troupe. Everyone else was inside, getting ready for the night's performance. It was a brooding yet tranquil scene, like a painting on an ancient Chinese scroll, but I noticed none of it — the world had shrunk to the bubble of grass and air that enclosed the two of us.

Tan sat beside me, crossed her legs in a half-lotus, and I caught her scent. Not perfume, but the natural musky yield of her flesh. I did my best to explain the

purpose of my studies, the words rushing out as if I were unburdening myself of an awful secret. Which was more or less the case. No one apart from Vang knew what I was doing, and because his position relative to the task was tutelary, not that of a confidante, I felt oppressed, isolated by the responsibility I bore. Now it seemed that by disclosing the sad facts bracketing my life, I was acting to reduce their power over me. And so, hoping to exorcise them completely, I told her about my father.

"His name is William Ferrance," I said, hastening to add that I'd taken Ky for my own surname. "His father emigrated to Asia in the Nineties, during the onset of *doi moi* (this the Vietnamese equivalent of *perestroika*), and made a fortune in Saigon, adapting fleets of taxis to methane power. His son—my father—expanded the family interests. He invested in a number of construction projects, all of which lost money. He was in trouble financially when he married my mother, and he used her money to fund a casino in Danang. That allowed him to recoup most of his losses. Since then, he's established connections with the triads, Malaysian gambling syndicates and the Bamboo Union in Taiwan. He's become an influential man, but his money's tied up. He has no room to manoeuvre. Should he gain control of my grandfather's estate, he'll be a very dangerous man."

"But this is so impersonal," Tan said. "Have you no memories of him?"

"Hazy ones," I said. "From all I can gather, he never took much interest in me . . . except as a potential tool. The truth is, I can scarcely remember my mother. Just the occasional moment. How she looked standing at a window. The sound of her voice when she sang. And I have a general impression of the person she was. Nothing more."

Tan looked off towards the river; some of the village children were chasing each other along the bank, and a cargo boat with a yellow sail was coming into view around the bend. "I wonder," she said. "Is it worse to remember those who've gone, or not to remember them?"

I guessed she was thinking about her parents, and I wanted to say something helpful, but the concept of uploading an intelligence, a personality, was so foreign to me, I was afraid of appearing foolish.

"I can see my mother and father whenever I want," Tan said, lowering her gaze to the grass. "I can go to a Sony office anywhere in the world and summon them with a code. When they appear they look like themselves, they sound like themselves, but I know it's not them. The things they say are always appropriate. But something is missing. Some energy, some quality." She glanced up at me, and, looking into her beautiful dark eyes, I felt giddy, almost weightless. "Something dies," she went on. "I know it! We're not just electrical impulses, we can't be sucked up into a machine and live. Something dies, something important. What goes into the machine is nothing. It's only a coloured shadow of what we are."

"I don't have much experience with computers," I said.

"But you've experienced life!" She touched the back of my hand. "Can't you feel it within you? I don't know what to call it... a soul? I don't know ..."

It seemed then I could feel the presence of the thing she spoke of moving in my chest, my blood, going all through me, attached to my mind, my flesh, by an unfathomable connection, existing inside me the way breath exists inside a flute, breeding the brief, pretty life of a note, a unique tone, and then passing on into the ocean of the air. Whenever I think of Tan, how she looked that morning, I'm able to feel that delicate, tremulous thing, both temporary and eternal, hovering in the same space I occupy.

"This is too serious," she said. "I'm sorry. I've been thinking about my parents more than I should." She shook back the fall of her hair, put on a smile. "Do you play chess?"

"No," I admitted.

"You must learn! A knowledge of the game will help if you intend to wage war against your father." A regretful expression crossed her face, as if she thought she'd spoken out of turn. "Even if you don't... I mean ..." Flustered, she waved her hands to dispel the awkwardness of the moment. "It's fun," she said. "I'll teach you."

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I did not make a good chess player, I was far too distracted by the presence of my teacher to heed her lessons. But I'm grateful to the game, for through the movements of knights and queens, through my clumsiness and her patience, through hours of sitting with our heads bent close together, our hearts grew close. We were never merely friends—from that initial conversation on, it was apparent that we would some day take the next step in exploring our relationship, and I rarely felt any anxiety in this regard; I knew that when Tan was ready, she would tell me. For the time being, we enjoyed a kind of amplified friendship, spending our leisure moments together, our physical contact limited to hand-holding and kisses on the cheek. This is not to say that I always succeeded in conforming to those limits. Once as we lay atop Vang's trailer, watching the stars, I was overcome by her scent, the warmth of her shoulder against mine, and I propped myself up on an elbow and kissed her on the mouth. She responded, and I stealthily unbuttoned her blouse, exposing her breasts. Before I could proceed further, she sat bolt upright, holding her blouse closed, and gave me an injured look; then she slid down from the trailer and walked off into the dark, leaving me in a state of dismay and painful arousal. I slept little that night, worried that I had done permanent damage to the relationship; but the next day she acted as if nothing had happened, and we went on as before, except that I now wanted her more than ever.

Vang, however, was not so forgiving. How he knew I had taken liberties with his niece, I'm not sure—it may have been simply an incidence of his intuitive abilities; I

cannot imagine that Tan told him. Whatever his sources, after our performance the next night he came into the main tent where I was practising with my knives, hurling them into a sheet of plywood upon which the red outline of a human figure had been painted, and asked if my respect for him had dwindled to the point that I would dishonour his sister's daughter.

He was sitting in the first row of the bleachers, leaning back, resting his elbows on the row behind him, gazing at me with distaste. I was infuriated by this casual indictment, and rather than answer immediately I threw another knife, placing it between the outline's arm and its waist. I walked to the board, yanked the blade free, and said without turning to him, "I haven't dishonoured her."

"But surely that is your intent," he said.

Unable to contain my anger, I spun about to face him. "Were you never young? Have you never been in love?"

"Love." He let out a dry chuckle. "If you are in love, perhaps you would care to enlighten me as to its nature."

I would have liked to tell him how I felt about Tan, to explain the sense of security I found with her, the varieties of tenderness, the niceties of my concern for her, the thousand nuances of longing, the intricate complicity of our two hearts and the complex specificity of my desire, for though I wanted to lose myself in the turns of her body, I also wanted to celebrate her, enliven her, to draw out of her the sadness that sometimes weighed her down, and to have her leach my sadness from me as well—I knew this was possible for us. But I was too young and too angry to articulate these things.

"Do you love your mother?" Vang asked, and before I could respond, he said, "You have admitted that you have but a few disjointed memories of her. And, of course, a dream. Yet you have chosen to devote yourself to pursuing the dictates of that dream, to making a life that honours your mother's wishes. That is love. How can you compare this to your infatuation with Tan?"

Frustrated, I cast my eyes up to the billow of patched grey canvas overhead, to the metal rings at the peak from which Kai and Kim were nightly suspended. When I looked back to Vang, I saw that he had got to his feet.

"Think on it," he said. "If the time comes when you can regard Tan with the same devotion, well. . ." He made a subtle dismissive gesture with his fingers that suggested this was an unlikely prospect.

I turned to the board and hefted another knife. The target suddenly appeared evil in its anonymity, a dangerous creature with a wood-grain face and blood red skin, and as I drew back my arm, my anger at Vang merged with the greater anger I felt at the anonymous forces that had shaped my life, and I buried the knife dead centre of the

head—it took all my strength to work the blade free. Glancing up, I was surprised to see Vang watching from the entrance. I had assumed that, having spoken his piece, he had returned to his trailer. He stood there for a few seconds, giving no overt sign of his mood, but I had the impression he was pleased.

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When she had no other duties, Tan would assist me with my chores: feeding the exotics, cleaning out their cages and, though she did not relish his company, helping me care for the major. I must confess I was coming to enjoy my visits with him less and less; I still felt a connection to him, and I remained curious as to the particulars of his past, but his mental slippage had grown so pronounced, it was difficult to be around him. Frequently he insisted on trying to relate the story of Firebase Ruby, but he always lapsed into terror and grief at the same point he had previously broken off the narrative. It seemed that this was a tale he was making up, not one he had been taught or programmed to tell, and that his mind was no longer capable of other than fragmentary invention. But one afternoon, as we were finishing up in his tent, he began to tell the story again, this time starting at the place where he had previously faltered, speaking without hesitancy in the deep, raspy voice he used while performing.

"It came to be October," he said. "The rains slackened, the snakes kept to their holes during the day, and the spiderwebs were not so thick with victims as they'd been during the monsoon. I began to have a feeling that something ominous was on the horizon, and when I communicated this sense of things to my superiors, I was told that according to intelligence, an intensification of enemy activity was expected, leading up to what was presumed to be a major offensive during the celebration of Tet. But I gave no real weight to either my feeling or to the intelligence reports. I was a professional soldier, and for six months I'd been engaged in nothing more than sitting in a bunker and surveying a wasteland of red dirt and razor wire. I was spoiling for a fight."

He was sitting on a nest of palm fronds, drenched in a spill of buttery light—we had partially unzipped the roof of the tent in order to increase ventilation—and it looked as if the fronds were an island adrift in a dark void and he a spiritual being who had been scorched and twisted by some cosmic fire, marooned in eternal emptiness.

"The evening of the Fourteenth, I sent out the usual patrols and retired to my bunker. I sat at my desk reading a paperback novel and drinking whiskey. After a time, I put down the book and began a letter to my wife. I was tipsy, and instead of the usual sentimental lines designed to make her feel secure, I let my feelings pour onto the paper, writing about the lack of discipline, my fears concerning the enemy, my disgust at the way the war was being prosecuted. I told her how much I hated Viet Nam. The ubiquitous corruption, the stupidity of the South Vietnamese government. The smell of fish sauce, the poisonous greens of the jungle. Everything. The goddamn place had been a battlefield so long, it was good for nothing else. I kept

drinking, and the liquor eroded my remaining inhibitions. I told her about the treachery and ineptitude of the ARVN forces, about the fuck-ups on our side who called themselves generals."

"I was still writing when, around twenty-one hundred hours, something distracted me. I'm not sure what it was. A noise ... or maybe a vibration. But I knew something had happened. I stepped out into the corridor and heard a cry. Then the crackling of small arms fire. I grabbed my rifle and ran outside. The VC were inside the wire. In the perimeter lights I saw dozens of diminutive men and women in black pyjamas scurrying about, white stars sputtering from the muzzles of their weapons. I shot down several of them. I couldn't think how they had got through the wire and the minefields without alerting the sentries, but then, as I continued to fire, I spotted a man's head pop up out of the ground and realized that they had tunneled in. All that slow uneventful summer, they'd been busy beneath the surface of the earth, secretive as termites."

At this juncture the major fell prey once again to emotional collapse, and I prepared myself for the arduous process of helping him recover; but Tan kneeled beside him, took his hand, and said, "Martin? Martin, listen to me."

No one ever used the major's Christian name, except to introduce him to an audience, and I didn't doubt that it had been a long time since a woman had addressed him with tenderness. He abruptly stopped his shaking, as if the nerves that had betrayed him had been severed, and stared wonderingly at Tan. White pinprick suns flickered and died in the deep places behind his eyes.

"Where are you from, Martin?" she asked, and the major, in a dazed tone, replied, "Oakland . . . Oakland, California. But I was born up in Santa Cruz."

"Santa Cruz." Tan gave the name a bell-like reading. "Is it beautiful in Santa Cruz? It sounds like a beautiful place."

"Yeah ... it's kinda pretty. There's old-growth redwoods not far from town. And there's the ocean. It's real pretty along the ocean."

To my amazement, Tan and the major began to carry on a coherent—albeit simplistic—conversation, and I realized that he had never spoken in this fashion before. His syntax had an uncustomary informality, and his voice held the trace of an accent. I thought that Tan's gentle approach must have penetrated his tormented psyche, either reaching the submerged individual, the real Martin Boyette, or else encountering a fresh layer of delusion. It was curious to hear him talk about such commonplace subjects as foggy weather and jazz music and Mexican food, all of which he claimed could be found in good supply in Santa Cruz. Though his usual nervous tics were in evidence, a new placidity showed in his face. But, of course this state of affairs didn't last.

"I can't," he said, taking a sudden turn from the subject at hand; he shook his head,

dragging folds of skin across his neck and shoulders, "I can't go back any more. I can't go back there."

"Don't be upset, Martin," Tan said. "There's no reason for you to worry. We'll stay with you, we'll..."

"I don't want you to stay." He tucked his head into his shoulder so his face was hidden by a bulge of skin. "I got to get back doin' what I was doin'."

"What's that?" I asked him. "What were you doing?"

A muffled rhythmic grunting issued from his throat—laughter that went on too long to be an expression of simple mirth. It swelled in volume, trebled in pitch, becoming a signature of instability.

"I'm figurin' it all out," he said. "That's what I'm doin'. Jus' you go away now."

"Figuring out what?" I asked, intrigued by the possibility—however unlikely—that the major might have a mental life other than the chaotic, that his apparent incoherence was merely an incidental by-product of concentration, like the smoke that rises from a leaf upon which a beam of sunlight has been focused.

He made no reply, and Tan touched my hand, signalling that we should leave. As I ducked through the tent flap, behind me the major said, "I can't go back there, and I can't be here. So jus' where's that leave me, y'know?"

* * * *

Exactly what the major meant by this cryptic statement was unclear, but his words stirred something in me, reawakened me to internal conflicts that had been pushed aside by my studies and my involvement with Tan. When I had arrived to take up residence at Green Star, I was in a state of emotional upheaval, frightened, confused, longing for my mother. Yet even after I calmed down, I was troubled by the feeling that I had lost my place in the world, and it seemed this was not just a consequence of having been uprooted from my family, but that I had always felt this way, that the turbulence of my emotions had been a cloud obscuring what was a constant strain in my life. This was due in part to my mixed heritage. Though the taint associated with the children of Vietnamese mothers and American fathers (dust children, they had once been called) had dissipated since the end of the war, it had not done so entirely, and wherever the circus travelled. I would encounter people who, upon noticing the lightness of my skin and the shape of my eyes, expressed scorn and kept their distance. Further fuelling this apprehension was the paucity of my memories deriving from the years before I had come to live with Vang.

Whenever Tan spoke about her childhood, she brought up friends, birthdays, uncles and cousins, trips to Saigon, dances, hundreds of details and incidents that caused my own memory to appear grossly underpopulated by comparison. Trauma was to

blame, I reckoned. The shock of my mother's abandonment, however well-intended, had ripped open my mental storehouse and scattered the contents. That and the fact that I had been six when I left home and thus hadn't had time to accumulate the sort of cohesive memories that lent colour to Tan's stories of Hue. But explaining it away did not lessen my discomfort, and I became fixated on the belief that no matter the nature of the freakish lightning that had sheared away my past, I would never find a cure for the sense of dislocation it had provoked, only medicines that would suppress the symptoms and mask the disease—and, that being so masked, it would grow stronger, immune to treatment, until eventually I would be possessed by it, incapable of feeling at home anywhere.

I had no remedy for these anxieties other than to throw myself with greater intensity into my studies, and with this increase in intensity came a concomitant increase in anger. I would sit at Vang's computer, gazing at photographs of my father, imagining violent resolutions to our story. I doubted that he would recognize me; I favoured my mother and bore little resemblance to him, a genetic blessing for which I was grateful: he was not particularly handsome, though he was imposing, standing nearly six and a half feet tall and weighing—according to a recent medical report—two hundred and sixty-four pounds, giving the impression not of a fat man, but a massive one. His large squarish head was kept shaved, and on his left cheek was the dark blue and green tattoo of his corporate emblem—a flying fish—ringed by three smaller tattoos denoting various of his business associations. At the base of his skull was an oblong silver plate beneath which lay a number of ports allowing him direct access to a computer. Whenever he posed for a picture, he affected what I assumed he would consider a look of hauteur, but the smallness of his eyes (greyish blue) and nose and mouth in contrast to the largeness of his face caused them to be limited in their capacity to convey character and emotional temperature, rather like the features on a distant planet seen through a telescope, and as a result this particular expression came across as prim. In less formal photographs, taken in the company of one or another of his sexual partners, predominantly women, he was quite obviously intoxicated.

He owned an old French Colonial in Saigon, but spent the bulk of his time at his house in Binh Khoi, one of the flower towns—communities built at the turn of the century, intended to provide privacy and comfort for well-to-do Vietnamese whose sexual preferences did not conform to communist morality. Now that communism— if not the concept of sexual morality itself—had become quaint, a colourful patch of history dressed up with theme-park neatness to amuse the tourists, it would seem that these communities no longer had any reason to exist; yet exist they did. Their citizenry had come to comprise a kind of gay aristocracy that defined styles, set trends, and wielded significant political power. Though they maintained a rigid exclusivity, and though my father's bisexuality was motivated to a great degree—I believe—by concerns of business and status, he had managed to cajole and bribe his way into Binh Khoi, and as best I could determine, he was sincere in his attachment to the place.

The pictures taken at Binh Khoi rankled with me the most—I hated to see him laughing and smiling. I would stare at those photographs, my emotions overheating, until it seemed I could focus rage into a beam and destroy any object upon which I turned my gaze. My eventual decision, I thought, would be easy to make. Anger and history, the history of his violence and greed, were making it for me, building a spiritual momentum impossible to stop. When the time came, I would avenge my mother and claim my inheritance. I knew exactly how to go about the task. My father feared no one less powerful than himself—if such a person moved against him, they would be the target of terrible reprisals—and he recognized the futility of trying to fend off an assassination attempt by anyone more powerful; thus his security was good, yet not impenetrable. The uniqueness of my situation lay in the fact that if I were able to kill him, I would as a consequence become more powerful than he or any of his connections; and so, without the least hesitancy, I began to plan his murder both in Binh Khoi and Saigon—I had schematics detailing the security systems of both homes. But in the midst of crafting the means of his death, I lost track of events that were in the process of altering the conditions attendant upon my decision.

One night not long after my seventeenth birthday, I was working at the computer in the trailer, when Vang entered and lowered himself carefully in the chair opposite me, first shooing away the marmalade cat who had been sleeping there. He wore a threadbare grey cardigan and the striped trousers from an old suit, and carried a thin folder bound in plastic. I was preoccupied with tracking my father's movements via his banking records and I acknowledged Vang's presence with a nod. He sat without speaking a while and finally said, "Forgive my intrusion, but would you be so kind as to allow me a minute of your time."

I realized he was angry, but my own anger took precedence. It was not just that I was furious with my father; I had grown weary of Vang's distant manner, his goading, his incessant demands for respect in face of his lack of respect for me. "What do you want?" I asked without looking away from the screen.

He tossed the folder onto the desk. "Your task has become more problematic."

The folder contained the personnel file of an attractive woman named Phuong Anh Nguyen whom my father had hired as a body-guard. Much of the data concerned her considerable expertise with weapons and her reaction times, which were remarkable—it was apparent that she had been bred for her occupation, genetically enhanced. According to the file her senses were so acute, she could detect shifts in the heat patterns of the brain, subtle changes in blood pressure, heart rate, pupillary dilation, speech, all the telltales that would betray the presence of a potential assassin. The information concerning her personal life was skimpy. Though Vietnamese, she had been born in China, and had spent her life until the age of sixteen behind the walls of a private security agency, where she had received her training. Serving a variety of employers, she had killed sixteen men and women over the next five years. Several months before, she had bought out her contract from the

security agency and signed on long-term with my father. Like him, she was bisexual, and, also like him, the majority of her partners were women.

I glanced up from the file to find Vang studying me with an expectant look. "Well," he said, "what do you think?"

"She's not bad looking," I said.

He folded his arms, made a disgusted noise.

"All right." I turned the pages of the file. "My father's upgrading his security. That means he's looking ahead to bigger things. Preparing for the day when he can claim my trust."

"Is that all you're able to extract from the document?"

From outside came voices, laughter. They passed, faded. Mei, I thought, and Trinh. It was a cool night, the air heavy with the scent of rain. The door was cracked open, and I could see darkness and thin streamers of fog. "What else is there?" I asked.

"Use your mind, won't you?" Vang let his head tip forward and closed his eyes—a formal notice of his exasperation. "Phuong would require a vast sum in order to pay off her contract. Several million, at least. Her wage is a good one, but even if she lived in poverty, which she does not, it would take her a decade or more to save sufficient funds. Where might she obtain such a sum?"

I had no idea.

"From her new employer, of course," Vang said.

"My father doesn't have that kind of money lying around."

"It seems he does. Only a very wealthy man could afford such a servant as Phuong Anh Nguyen."

I took mental stock of my father's finances, but was unable to recall an excess of cash.

"It's safe to say the money did not come from your father's business enterprises," said Vang. "We have good information on them. So we may assume he either stole it or coerced someone else into stealing it." The cat jumped up into his lap, began kneading his abdomen. "Rather than taxing your brain further," he went on, "I'll tell you what I believe has happened. He's tapped into your trust. It's much too large to be managed by one individual, and it's quite possible he's succeeded in corrupting one of the officers in charge."

"You can't be sure of that."

"No, but I intend to contact my government friends and suggest an investigation of the trust. If your father has done what I suspect, it will prevent him from doing more damage." The cat had settled on his lap; he stroked its head. "But the trust is not the problem. Even if your father has stolen from it, he can't have taken much more than was necessary to secure this woman's services. Otherwise the man who gave me this"—he gestured at the folder—"would have detected evidence of other expenditures. There'll be more than enough left to make you a powerful man. *Phuong Anh Nguyen* is the problem. You'll have to kill her first."

The loopy cry of a night bird cut the silence. Someone with a flashlight was crossing the pasture where the trailer rested, the beam of light slicing through layers of fog, sweeping over shrubs and patches of grass. I suggested that one woman shouldn't pose that much of a problem, no matter how efficient she was at violence.

Vang closed his eyes again. "You have not witnessed this kind of professional in action. They're fearless, totally dedicated to their work. They develop a sixth sense concerning their clients; they bond with them. You'll need to be circumspect in dealing with her."

"Perhaps she's beyond my capacity to deal with," I said after a pause. "Perhaps I'm simply too thickheaded. I should probably let it all go and devote myself to *Green Star*."

"Do as you see fit."

Vang's expression did not shift from its stoic cast, but it appeared to harden, and I could tell that he was startled. I instructed the computer to sleep and leaned back, bracing one foot against the side of the desk. "There's no need for pretence," I said. "I know you want me to kill him. I just don't understand why."

I waited for him to respond, and when he did not, I said, "You were my mother's friend—that's reason enough to wish him dead, I suppose. But I've never felt that you were *my* friend. You've given me . . . every-thing. Life. A place to live. A purpose. Yet whenever I try to thank you, you dismiss it out of hand. I used to think this was because you were shy, because you were embarrassed by displays of emotion. Now, I'm not sure. Sometimes it seems you find my gratitude repugnant... or embarrassing in a way that has nothing to do with shyness. It's as if—" I struggled to collect my thoughts "--as if you have some reason for hating my father that you haven't told me. One you're ashamed to admit. Or maybe it's something else, some piece of information you have that gives you a different perspective on the situation."

Being honest with him was both exhilarating and frightening—I felt as though I were violating a taboo—and after this speech I was left breathless and disoriented, unsure of everything I'd said, though I'd been thoroughly convinced of its truth when I said it. "I'm sorry," I told him. "I've no right to doubt you."

He started to make a gesture of dismissal such as was his habit when uncomfortable with a conversation, but caught himself and petted the cat instead. "Despite the differences in our stations, I was very close to your mother," he said. "And to your grandfather. No longer having a family of my own, I made them into a surrogate. When they died, one after the other... you see, your grandfather's presence, his wealth, protected your mother, and once he was gone, your father had no qualms against misusing her." He blew out a breath, like a horse, through his lips. "When they died, I lost my heart. I'd lost so much already, I was unable to bear the sorrow I felt. I retreated from the world, I rejected my emotions. In effect, I shut myself down." He put a hand to his forehead, covering his eyes. I could see he was upset, and I felt badly that I had caused these old griefs to wound him again. "I know you have suffered as a result," he went on. "You've grown up without the affection of a parent, and that is a cruel condition. I wish I could change that. I wish I could change the way I am, but the idea of risking myself, of having everything ripped away from me a third time . . . it's unbearable." His hand began to tremble; he clenched it into a fist, pressed it against the bridge of his nose. "It is I who should apologize to you. Please, forgive me."

I assured him that he need not ask for forgiveness, I honoured and respected him. I had the urge to tell him I loved him, and at that moment I did—I believed now that in loving my family, in carrying out my mother's wishes, he had established his love for me. Hoping to distract him from his grief, I asked him to tell me about my grandfather, a man concerning whom I knew next to nothing, only that he had been remark-ably successful in business.

Vang seemed startled by the question, but after taking a second to compose himself, he said, "I'm not sure you would have approved of him. He was a strong man, and strong men often sacrifice much that ordinary men hold dear in order to achieve their ends. But he loved your mother, and he loved you."

This was not the sort of detail I'd been seeking, but it was plain that Vang was still gripped by emotion, and I decided it would be best to leave him alone. As I passed behind him, I laid a hand on his shoulder. He twitched, as if burned by the touch, and I thought he might respond by covering my hand with his own. But he only nodded and made a humming noise deep in his throat. I stood there for a few beats, wishing I could think of something else to say; then I bid him good night and went off into the darkness to look for Tan.

* * * *

One morning, about a month after this conversation, in the little seaside town of Vung Tao, Dat quit the circus following an argument with Vang, and I was forced that same evening to assume the role of James Bond Cochise. The prospect of performing the entire act in public—I had previously made token appearances along with Dat — gave rise to some anxiety, but I was confident in my skill. Tan took in Dat's tuxedo jacket a bit, so it would hang nicely, and helped me paint my face with

Native American designs, and when Vang announced me, standing at the centre of our single ring and extolling my legendary virtues into a microphone, I strode into the rich yellow glow of the tent, the warmth smelling of sawdust and cowshit (a small herd had been foraging on the spot before we arrived), with my arms overhead, flourishing the belt that held my hatchets and knives, and enjoying the applause. All seven rows of the bleachers were full, the audience consisting of resort workers, fishermen and their families, with a smattering of tourists, mainly backpackers, but also a group of immensely fat Russian women who had been transported from a hotel farther along the beach in cycles pedalled by diminutive Vietnamese men. They were in a good mood, thanks to a comic skit in which Tan played a farm girl and Tranh a village buffoon hopelessly in love with her, his lust manifested by a telescoping rod that could spring outward to a length of fourteen inches and was belted to his hips beneath a pair of baggy trousers.

Mei, dressed in a red sequinned costume that pushed up her breasts and squeezed the tops of her chubby thighs like sausage ends, assumed a spread-eagled position in front of the board, and the crowd fell silent. Sitting in a wooden chair at ring centre, Vang switched on the music, the theme from a venerable James Bond film. I displayed a knife to the bleachers, took my mark, and sent the blade hurtling towards Mei, planting it solidly in the wood an inch above her head. The first four or five throws were perfect, outlining Mei's head and shoulders. The crowd oohed and ahed each time the blade sank into the board. Supremely confident now, I flung the knives as I whirled and ducked, pretending to dodge the gunshots embedded in the theme music, throwing from a crouch, on my stomach, leaping—but then I made the slightest of missteps, and the knife I hurled flashed so close to Mei, it nicked the fleshy portion of her upper arm. She shrieked and staggered away from the board, holding the injury. She remained stock-still for an instant, fixing me with a look of anguish, then bolted for the entrance. The crowd was stunned. Vang jumped up, the microphone dangling from his hand. For a second or two, I was rooted to the spot, not certain what to do. The bombastic music isolated me as surely as if it were a fence, and when Tranh shut it off, the fence collapsed, and I felt the pressure of a thousand eyes upon me. Unable to withstand it, I followed Mei out into the night.

The main tent had been erected atop a dune overlooking a bay and a stretch of sandy beach. It was a warm, windy night, and as I emerged from the tent the tall grasses cresting the dune were blown flat by a gust. From behind me, Vang's amplified voice sounded above the rush of the wind and the heavier beat of the surf, urging the audience to stay seated, the show would continue momentarily. The moon was almost full, but it hung behind the clouds, edging an alp of cumulus with silver, and I couldn't find Mei at first. Then the moon sailed clear, paving a glittering avenue across the black water, touching the plumes of combers with phosphorous, brightening the sand, and I spotted Mei—recognizable by her red costume—and two other figures on the beach some thirty feet low; they appeared to be ministering to her.

I started down the face of the dune, slipped in the loose sand and fell. As I

scrambled to my feet, I saw Tan struggling up the slope towards me. She caught at the lapels of my tuxedo for balance, nearly causing me to fall again, and we swayed together; holding each other upright. She wore a nylon jacket over her costume, which was like Mei's in every respect but one—it was a shade of peacock blue spangled with silver stars. Her shining hair was gathered at the nape of her neck, crystal earrings sparkled in the lobes of her ears, her dark eyes brimmed with light. She looked made of light, an illusion that would fade once the clouds regrouped about the moon. But the thing that most affected me was not her beauty. Moment to moment, that was something of which I was always aware, how she flowed between states of beauty, shifting from schoolgirl to seductress to serious young woman, and now this starry incarnation materialized before me, the devi of a world that existed only for this precise second. No, it was her calmness that affected me most. It poured over me, coursing around and through me, and even before she spoke, not mentioning what had happened to Mei, as if it were not a potentially fatal accident, a confidence-destroyer that would cause me to falter whenever I picked up a knife—even before that I was convinced by her unruffled manner that everything was as usual, there had been a slight disruption of routine, and now we should go back into the tent because Vang was running out of jokes to tell.

"Mei..." I said as we clambered over the crest of the dune, and Tan said, "It's not even a scratch." She took my arm and guided me towards the entrance, walking briskly yet unhurriedly.

I felt I'd been hypnotized — not by a sonorous voice or the pendulum swing of a shiny object, but by a heightened awareness of the ordinary, the steady pulse of time, all the background rhythms of the universe. I was filled with an immaculate calm, distant from the crowd and the booming music. It seemed that I wasn't throwing the knives so much as I was fitting them into slots and letting the turning of the earth whisk them away to thud and quiver in the board, creating a figure of steel slightly larger than the figure of soft brown flesh and peacock blue silk it contained. Dat had never received such applause—I think the crowd believed Mei's injury had been a trick designed to heighten suspense, and they showed their enthusiasm by standing as Tan and I took our bows and walked together through the entranceway. Once outside, she pressed herself against me, kissed my cheek, and said she would see me later. Then she went off towards the rear of the tent to change for the finale.

Under normal circumstances, I would have gone to help with the major, but on this occasion, feeling disconnected and now, bereft of Tan's soothing influence, upset at having injured Mei, I wandered along the top of the dune until I came to a gully choked with grasses that afforded protection from the wind, which was still gusting hard, filling the air with grit. I sat down amidst the grass and looked off along the curve of the beach. About fifteen metres to the north, the sand gave out into a narrow shingle and the land planed upwards into low hills thick with vegetation. Half-hidden by the foliage was a row of small houses with sloping tiled roofs and open porches; they stood close to the sea, and chutes of yellow light spilled from their windows to illuminate the wavelets beneath. The moon was high, no longer

silvery, resembling instead a piece of bloated bone china mottled with dark splotches, and, appearing to lie directly beneath it among a hammock of coconut palms was a pink stucco castle that guarded the point of the bay: the hotel where the tourists who had attended our performance were staying. I could make out antlike shapes scurrying back and forth on the brightly lit crescent of sand in front of it, and I heard a faint music shredded by the wind. The water beyond the break was black as opium.

My thoughts turned not to the accident with Mei, but to how I had performed with Tan. The act had passed quickly, a flurry of knives and light, yet now I recalled details: the coolness of the metal between my fingers; Vang watching anxiously off to the side; a fiery glint on a hatchet blade tumbling towards a spot between Tan's legs. My most significant memory, however, was of her eyes. How they had seemed to beam instructions, orchestrating my movements, so forceful that I'd imagined she was capable of deflecting a blade if my aim proved errant. Given my emotional investment in her, my absolute faith — though we'd never discussed it—in our future together, it was easy to believe she had that kind of power over me. Easy to believe, and somewhat troublesome, for it struck me that we were not equals, we couldn't be as long as she controlled every facet of the relationship. And having concluded this, as if the conclusion were the end of all possible logics concerning the subject, my mind slowed and became mired in despondency.

I'm not certain how long I had been sitting when Tan came walking down the beach, brushing windblown hair from her eyes. She had on a man's short-sleeved shirt and a pair of loose-fitting shorts, and was carrying a blanket. I was hidden from her by the grass, and I was at such a remove from things, not comfortable with but accepting of my solitude, I was half-inclined to let her pass; but then she stopped and called my name, and I, by reflex, responded. She spotted me and picked up her pace. When she reached my side she said without a hint of reproof, merely as if stating a fact, "You went so far. I wasn't sure I'd find you." She spread the blanket on the sand and encouraged me to join her on it. I felt guilty at having had clinical thoughts about her and our relationship—to put this sort of practical construction on what I tended to view as a magical union, a thing of fate and dharma, seemed unworthy, and as a consequence I was at a loss for words. The wind began to blow in a long unbroken stream off the water, and she shivered. I asked if she would like to put on my tuxedo jacket. She said, "No." The line of her mouth tightened, and with a sudden movement, she looked away from me, half-turning her upper body. I thought I must have done something to annoy her, and this so unnerved me, I didn't immediately notice that she was unbuttoning her shirt. She shrugged out of it, held it balled against her chest for a moment, then set it aside; she glanced at me over her shoulder, engaging my eyes. I could tell her usual calm was returning—I could almost see her filling with it—and I realized then that this calmness of hers was not hers alone, it was ours, a by-product of our trust in one another, and what had happened in the main tent had not been a case of her controlling me, saving me from panic, but had been the two of us channeling each other's strength, converting nervousness and fear to certainty and precision. Just as we were doing now.

I kissed her mouth, her small breasts, exulting in their salty aftertaste of brine and dried sweat. Then I drew her down onto the blanket, and what followed, despite clumsiness and flashes of insecurity, was somehow both fierce and chaste, the natural culmination of two years of longing, of unspoken treaties and accommodations. Afterwards, pressed together, wrapped in the silk and warmth of spent splendour, whispering the old yet never less than astonishing secrets and promises, saying things that had long gone unsaid, I remember thinking that I would do anything for her. This was not an abstract thought, not simply the atavistic reaction of a man new to a feeling of mastery, though I can't deny that was in me—the sexual and the violent break from the same spring—but was an understanding founded on a considered appreciation of the trials I might have to overcome and the blood I might have to shed in order to keep her safe in a world where wife-murder was a crime for profit and patricide an act of self-defence. It's strange to recall with what a profound sense of reverence I accepted the idea that I was now willing to engage in every sort of human behaviour, ranging from the self-sacrificial to the self-gratifying to the perpetration of acts so abhorrent that, once committed, they would harrow me until the end of my days.

* * * *

At dawn the clouds closed in, the wind died, and the sea lay flat. Now and again a weak sun penetrated the overcast, causing the water to glisten like an expanse of freshly applied grey paint. We climbed to the top of the dune and sat with our arms around each other, not wanting to return to the circus, to break the elastic of the long moment stretching backward into night. The unstirring grass, the energyless water and dead sky, made it appear that time itself had been becalmed. The beach in front of the pink hotel was littered with debris, deserted. You might have thought that our lovemaking had succeeded in emptying the world. But soon we caught sight of Tranh and Mei walking towards us across the dune, Kim and Kai skipping along behind. All were dressed in shorts and shirts, and Tranh carried a net shopping bag that—I saw as he lurched up, stumbling in the sand — contained mineral water and sandwiches.

"What have you kids been up to?" he asked, displaying an exaggerated degree of concern.

Mei punched him on the arm, and, after glancing back and forth between us, as if he suddenly understood the situation, Tranh put on a shocked face and covered his mouth with a hand. Giggling, Kai and Kim went scampering down onto the beach. Mei tugged at Tranh's shirt, but he ignored her and sank onto his knees beside me. "I bet you're hungry," he said, and his round face was split by a gaptoothed grin. He thrust a sandwich wrapped in a paper napkin at me. "Better eat! You're probably going to need your strength."

With an apologetic look in Tan's direction, Mei kneeled beside him; she unwrapped

sandwiches and opened two bottles of water. She caught my eye, frowned, pointed to her arm, and shook her forefinger as she might have done with a mischievous child. "Next time don't dance around so much," she said, and pretended to sprinkle something on one of the sandwiches. "Or else one night I'll put special herbs in your dinner." Tranh kept peering at Tan, then at me, grinning, nodding, and finally, with a laugh, Tan pushed him onto his back. Down by the water Kai and Kim were tossing pebbles into the sea with girlish ineptitude. Mei called to them and they came running, their braids bouncing; they threw themselves belly first onto the sand, squirmed up to sitting positions, and began gobbling sandwiches.

"Don't eat so fast!" Mei cautioned. "You'll get sick."

Kim, the younger of the sisters, squinched her face at Mei and shoved half the sandwich into her mouth. Tranh contorted his features so his lips nearly touched his nose, and Kim laughed so hard she sprayed bits of bread and fried fish. Tan told her that this was not ladylike. Both girls sat up straight, nibbled their sandwiches—they took it to heart whenever Tan spoke to them about being ladies.

"Didn't you bring anything beside fish?" I asked, inspecting the filling of my sandwich.

"I guess we should have brought oysters," said Tranh. "Maybe some rhinoceros horn, some ..."

"That stuff's for old guys like you," I told him. "Me, I just need peanut butter."

After we had done eating, Tranh lay back with his head in Mei's lap and told a story about a talking lizard that had convinced a farmer it was the Buddha. Kim and Kai cuddled together, sleepy from their feast. Tan leaned into the notch of my shoulder, and I put my arm around her. It came to me then, not suddenly, but gradually, as if I were being immersed in the knowledge like a man lowering his body into a warm bath, that for the first time in my life—all the life I could remember—I was at home. These people were my family, and the sense of dislocation that had burdened me all those years had evaporated. I closed my eyes and buried my face in Tan's hair, trying to hold onto the feeling, to seal it inside my head so I would never forget it.

Two men in T-shirts and bathing suits came walking along the water's edge in our direction. When they reached the dune they climbed up to where we were sitting. Both were not much older than I, and judging by their fleshiness and soft features, I presumed them to be Americans, a judgment confirmed when the taller of the two, a fellow with a heavy jaw and hundreds of white beads threaded on the strings of his long black hair, lending him a savage appearance, said, "You guys are with that tent show, right?"

Mai, who did not care for Americans, stared meanly at him, but Tranh, who habitually viewed them as potential sources of income, told him that we were, indeed, performers with the circus. Kai and Kim whispered and giggled, and Tranh

asked the American what his friend—skinnier, bead-less, dull-eyed and open-mouthed, with a complicated headset covering his scalp—was studying.

"Parasailing. We're going parasailing ... if there's ever any wind and the program doesn't screw up. I woulda left him at the house, but the program's fucked. Didn't want his ass convulsing." He extracted a sectioned strip of plastic from his shirt pocket; each square of plastic held a gelatin capsule shaped like a cut gem and filled with blue fluid. "Wanna brighten your day?" He dangled the strip as if tempting us with a treat. When no one accepted his offer, he shrugged, returned the strip to his pocket; he glanced down at me. "Hey, that shit with the knives...that was part of the fucking plan! Especially when you went benihana on Little Plum Blossom." He jerked his thumb at Mei and then stood nodding, gazing at the sea, as if receiving a transmission from that quarter. "OK," he said. "OK. It could be the drugs, but the trusty inner voice is telling me my foreign ways seem ludicrous . . . perhaps even offensive. It well may be that I am somewhat ludicrous. And I'm pretty torched, so I have to assume I've been offensive."

Tranh made to deny this, Mei grunted, Kim and Kai looked puzzled, and Tan asked the American if he was on vacation.

"Thank you," he said to Tan. "Beautiful lady. I am always grateful for the gift of courtesy. No, my friend and I—and two others—are playing at the hotel. We're musicians." He took out his wallet, which had been hinged over the waist of his trunks, and removed from it a thin gold square the size of a postage stamp; he handed it to Tan. "Have you seen these? They're new ... souvenir things, like. They just play once, but it'll give you a taste. Press your finger on it until you hear the sound. Then don't touch it again—they get extremely hot."

Tan started to do as he instructed but he said, "No, wait till we're gone. I want to imagine you enjoyed hearing it. If you do, come on down to the hotel after you're finished tonight. You'll be my guests."

"Is it one of your songs?" I asked, curious about him now that he had turned out to be more complicated than he first appeared.

He said, yes, it was an original composition.

"What's it called?" Tranh asked.

"We haven't named it yet," said the American; then, after a pause: "What's the name of your circus?"

Almost as one we said, "Radiant Green Star."

"Perfect," said the American.

Once the two men were out of earshot, Tan pressed her fingertip to the gold square,

and soon a throbbing music issued forth, simply structured yet intricately layered by synthesizers, horns, guitars, densely figured by theme and subtle counter-theme, both insinuating and urgent. Kai and Kim stood and danced with one another. Tranh bobbed his head, tapped his foot, and even Mei was charmed, swaying, her eyes closed. Tan kissed me, and we watched a thin white smoke trickle upwards from the square, which itself began to shrink, and I thought how amazing it was that things were often not what they seemed, and what a strange confluence of possibilities it had taken to bring all the troupe together — and the six of us were the entire troupe, for Vang was never really part of us even when he was there, and though the major was rarely with us, he was always there, a shadow in the corners of our minds ... How magical and ineluctable a thing it was for us all to be together at the precise place and time when a man—a rather unprepossessing man at that — walked up from a deserted beach and presented us with a golden square imprinted with a song that he named for our circus, a song that so accurately evoked the mixture of the commonplace and the exotic that character-ized life in Radiant Green Star, music that was like smoke, rising up for a few perfect moments, and then vanishing with the wind.

* * * *

Had Vang asked me at any point during the months that followed to tell him about love, I might have spoken for hours, answering him not with definitions, principles or homilies, but specific instances, moments and anecdotes. I was happy. Despite the gloomy nature of my soul, I could think of no word that better described how I felt. Though I continued to study my father, to follow his comings and goings, his business manoeuvres and social interactions, I now believed that I would never seek to confront him, never try to claim my inheritance. I had all I needed to live, and I only wanted to keep those I loved safe and free from worry.

Tan and I did not bother to hide our relationship, and I expected Vang to rail at me for my transgression. I half-expected him to drive me away from the circus—indeed, I prepared for that eventuality. But he never said a word. I did notice a certain cooling of the atmosphere. He snapped at me more often and on occasion refused to speak; yet that was the extent of his anger. I didn't know how to take this. Either, I thought, he had overstated his concern for Tan or else he had simply accepted the inevitable. That explanation didn't satisfy me, however. I suspected that he might have something more important on his mind, something so weighty that my involvement with his niece seemed a triviality by comparison. And one day, some seven months after Tan and I became lovers, my suspicions were proved correct.

I went to the trailer at mid-afternoon, thinking Vang would be in town. We were camped at the edge of a hardwood forest on a cleared acre of red dirt near Buon Ma Thuot in the Central Highlands, not far from the Cambodian border. Vang usually spent the day before a performance putting up posters, and I had intended to work on the computer; but when I entered, I saw him standing by his desk, folding a shirt, a suitcase open on the chair beside him. I asked what he was doing and he handed

me a thick envelope; inside were the licences and deeds of ownership relating to the circus and its property. "I've signed everything over," he said. "If you have any problems, contact my lawyer."

"I don't understand," I said, dumbfounded. "You're leaving?"

He bent to the suitcase and laid the folded shirt inside it. "You can move into the trailer tonight. You and Tan. She'll be able to put it in order. I suppose you've noticed that she's almost morbidly neat." He straightened, pressed his hand against his lower back as if stricken by a pain. "The accounts, the bookings for next year . . . it's all in the computer. Everything else ..." He gestured at the cabinets on the walls. "You remember where things are."

I couldn't get a grasp on the situation, overwhelmed by the thought that I was now responsible for Green Star, by the fact that the man who for years had been the only consistent presence in my life was about to walk out the door forever. "Why are you leaving?"

He turned to me, frowning. "If you must know, I'm ill."

"But why would you want to leave? We'll just..."

"I'm not going to recover," he said flatly.

I peered at him, trying to detect the signs of his mortality, but he looked no thinner, no greyer, than he had for some time. I felt the stirrings of a reaction that I knew he would not want to see, and I tamped down my emotions. "We can care for you here," I said.

He began to fold another shirt. "I plan to join my sister and her husband in what they insist upon calling—" he clicked his tongue against his teeth "--Heaven."

I recalled the talks I'd had with Tan in which she had decried the process of uploading the intelligence, the personality. If the old man was dying, there was no real risk involved. Still, the concept of such a mechanical transmogrification did not sit well with me.

"Have you nothing to say on the subject?" he asked. "Tan was quite voluble."

"You've told her, then?"

"Of course." He inspected the tail of the shirt he'd been folding, and finding a hole, cast it aside. "We've said our goodbyes."

He continued to potter about, and as I watched him shuffling among the stacks of magazines and newspapers, kicking file boxes and books aside, dust rising wherever he set his hand, a tightness in my chest began to loosen, to work its way up into my throat. I went to the door and stood looking out, seeing nothing, letting the strong

sunlight harden the glaze of my feelings. When I turned back, he was standing close to me, suitcase in hand. He held out a folded piece of paper and said, "This is the code by which you can contact me once I've been . . ." He laughed dryly.

"Processed, I imagine, would be the appropriate verb. At any rate, I hope you will let me know what you decide concerning your father."

It was in my mind to tell him that I had no intention of contending with my father, but I thought that this would disappoint him, and I merely said that I would do as he asked. We stood facing one another, the air thick with unspoken feelings, with vibrations that communicated an entire history comprised of such mute, awkward moments. "If I'm to have a last walk in the sun," he said at length, "you'll have to let me pass."

That at the end of his days he viewed me only as a minor impediment—it angered me. But I reminded myself that this was all the sentiment of which he was capable. Without asking permission, I embraced him. He patted me lightly on the back and said, "I know you'll take care of things." And with that, he pushed past me and walked off in the direction of the town, vanishing behind one of the parked trucks.

I went into the rear of the trailer, into the partitioned cubicle where Vang slept, and sat down on his bunk. His pillowcase bore a silk-screened image of a beautiful Vietnamese woman and the words HONEY LADY KEEP YOU COMFORT EVERY NIGHT. In the cabinet beside his bed were a broken clock, a small plaster bust of Ho Chi Minh, a few books, several pieces of hard candy, and a plastic key chain in the shape of a butterfly. The meagreness of the life these items described caught at my emotions, and I thought I might weep, but it was as if by assuming Vang's position as the owner of Green Star, I had undergone a corresponding reduction in my natural responses, and I remained dry-eyed. I felt strangely aloof from myself, connected to the life of my mind and body by a tube along which impressions of the world around me were now and then transmitted. Looking back on my years with Vang, I could make no sense of them. He had nurtured and educated me, yet the sum of all that effort—not given cohesion by the glue of affection—came to scraps of memory no more illustrative of a comprehensible whole than were the memories of my mother. They had substance, yet no flavour ... one, that is, except for a dusty grey aftertaste that I associated with disappointment and loss.

I didn't feel like talking to anyone, and for want of anything else to do, I went to the desk and started inspecting the accounts, working through dusk and into the night. When I had satisfied myself that all was in order, I turned to the bookings. Nothing out of the ordinary. The usual villages, the occasional festival. But when I accessed the bookings for the month of March, I saw that during the week of the seventeenth through the twenty-third—the latter date just ten days from my birthday—we were scheduled to perform in Binh Khoi.

I thought this must be a mistake—Vang had probably been thinking of Binh Khoi

and my father while recording a new booking and had inadvertently put down the wrong name. But when I called up the contract, I found that no mistake had been made. We were to be paid a great deal of money, sufficient to guarantee a profitable year, but I doubted that Vang's actions had been motivated by our financial needs. He must, I thought, have seen the way things were going with Tan and me, and he must have realized that I would never risk her in order to avenge a crime committed nearly two decades before—thus he had decided to force a confrontation between me and my father. I was furious, and my first impulse was to break the contract; but after I had calmed down I realized that doing so would put us all at risk—the citizens of Binh Khoi were not known for their generosity or flexibility, and if I were to renege on Vang's agreement they would surely pursue the matter in the courts. I would have no chance of winning a judgment. The only thing to do was to play the festival and steel myself to ignore the presence of my father. Perhaps he would be elsewhere, or, even if he was in residence, perhaps he would not attend our little show. Whatever the circumstances, I swore I would not be caught in this trap, and when my eighteenth birthday arrived I would go to the nearest Sony office and take great pleasure in telling Vang—whatever was left of him—that his scheme had failed.

I was still sitting there, trying to comprehend whether or not by contracting the engagement, Vang hoped to provide me with a basis for an informed decision, or if his interests were purely self-serving, when Tan stepped into the trailer. She had on a sleeveless plaid smock, the garment she wore whenever she was cleaning, and it was evident that she'd been crying — the skin beneath her eyes was puffy and red. But she had regained her composure, and she listened patiently, perched on the edge of the desk, while I told her all I'd been thinking about Vang and what he had done to us.

"Maybe it's for the best," she said after I had run down. "This way you'll be sure you've done what you had to do."

I was startled by her reaction. "Are you saying that you think I should kill my father...that I should even entertain the possibility?"

She shrugged. "That's for you to decide."

"I've decided already," I said.

"Then there's not a problem."

The studied neutrality of her attitude puzzled me. "You don't think I'll stand by my decision, do you?"

She put a hand to her brow, hiding her face—a gesture that reminded me of Vang. "I don't think you have decided, and I don't think you should... not until you see your father." She pinched a fold of skin above the bridge of her nose, then looked up at me. "Let's not talk about this now."

We sat silently for half a minute or thereabouts, each following the path of our own thoughts; then she wrinkled up her nose and said, "It smells bad in here. Do you want to get some air?"

We climbed onto the roof of the trailer and sat gazing at the shadowy line of the forest to the west, the main tent bulking up above it, and a sky so thick with stars that the familiar constellations were assimilated into new and busier cosmic designs: a Buddha face with a diamond on its brow, a tiger's head, a palm tree—constructions of sparkling pinlights against a midnight blue canvas stretched from horizon to horizon. The wind brought the scent of sweet rot and the less pervasive odour of someone's cooking. Somebody switched on a radio in the main tent; a Chinese orchestra whined and jangled. I felt I was sixteen again, that Tan and I had just met, and I thought perhaps we had chosen to occupy this place where we spent so many hours before we were lovers, because here we could banish the daunting pressures of the present, the threat of the future, and be children again. But although those days were scarcely two years removed, we had forever shattered the comforting illusions and frustrating limitations of childhood. I lay back on the aluminium roof, which still held a faint warmth of the day, and Tan hitched up her smock about her waist and mounted me, bracing her hands on my chest as I slipped inside her. Framed by the crowded stars, features made mysterious by the cowl of her hair, she seemed as distant and unreal as the imagined creatures of my zodiac; but this illusion, too, was shattered as she began to rock her hips with an accomplished passion and lifted her face to the sky, transfigured by a look of exalted, almost agonized yearning, like one of those Renaissance angels marooned on a scrap of painted cloud who has just witnessed something amazing pass overhead, a miracle of glowing promise too perfect to hold in the mind. She shook her head wildly when she came, her hair flying all to one side so that it resembled in shape the pennant flying on the main tent, a dark signal of release, and then collapsed against my chest. I held onto her hips, continuing to thrust until the knot of heat in my groin shuddered out of me, leaving a residue of black peace into which the last shreds of my thought were subsumed.

The sweat dried on our skin, and still we lay there, both—I believed—aware that once we went down from the roof, the world would close around us, restore us to its troubled spin. Someone changed stations on the radio, bringing in a Cambodian programme—a cooler, wispier music played. A cough sounded close by the trailer, and I raised myself to an elbow, wanting to see who it was. The major was making his way with painful slowness across the cleared ground, leaning on his staff. In the starlight his grotesque shape was lent a certain anonymity—he might have been a figure in a fantasy game, an old down-at-heels magician shrouded in a heavy, ragged cloak, or a beggar on a quest. He shuffled a few steps more, and then, shaking with effort, sank to his knees. For several seconds he remained motionless, then he scooped a handful of the red dirt and held it up to his face. And I recalled that Buon Ma Thuot was near the location of his fictive—or if not fictive, ill-remembered—firebase. Firebase Ruby. Built upon the red dirt of a defoliated plantation.

Tan sat up beside me and whispered, "What's he doing?" I put a finger to my lips, urging her to silence; I was convinced that the major would not expose himself to the terror of the open sky unless moved by some equally terrifying inner force, and I hoped he might do something that would illuminate the underpinnings of his mystery.

He let the dirt sift through his fingers and struggled to stand. Failed and sagged onto his haunches. His head fell back, and he held a spread-fingered hand up to it as if trying to shield himself from the starlight. His quavery voice ran out of him like a shredded battle flag. "Turn back!" he said. "Oh, God! God! Turn back!"

* * * *

During the next four months, I had little opportunity to brood over the prospect of meeting my father. Dealing with the minutiae of Green Star's daily operation took most of my energy and hours, and whenever I had a few minutes' respite, Tan was there to fill them. So it was that by the time we arrived in Binh Khoi, I had made scarcely any progress in adjusting to the possibility that I might soon come face-to-face with the man who had killed my mother.

In one aspect, Binh Khoi was the perfect venue for us, since the town affected the same conceit as the circus, being designed to resemble a fragment of another time. It was situated near the Pass of the Ocean Clouds in the Truong Son Mountains some forty kilometres north of Danang, and many of the homes there were afforded a view of green hills declining toward the Coastal Plain. On the morning we arrived those same hills were half-submerged in thick white fog, the plain was totally obscured, and a pale mist had infiltrated the narrow streets, casting an air of ominous enchantment over the place. The oldest of the houses had been built no more than fifty years before, yet they were all similar to nine-teenth-century houses that still existed in certain sections of Hanoi: two and three storeys tall and fashioned of stone, painted dull yellow and grey and various other sober hues, with sharply sloping roofs of dark green tile and compounds hidden by high walls and shaded by bougainvillea, papaya and banana trees. Except for street lights in the main square and pedestrians in bright eccentric clothing, we might have been driving through a hill station during the 1800s; but I knew that hidden behind this antiquated facade were state-of-the-art security systems that could have vaporized us had we not been cleared to enter.

The most unusual thing about Binh Khoi was its silence. I'd never been in a place where people lived in any considerable quantity that was so hushed, devoid of the stew of sounds natural to a human environment. No hens squabbling or dogs yipping, no whining motor scooters or humming cars, no children at play. In only one area was there anything approximating normal activity and noise: the marketplace, which occupied an unpaved street leading off the square. Here men and women in coolie hats hunkered beside baskets of jackfruit, chilies, garlic, custard apples, durians, geckos and dried fish; meat and caged puppies and monkeys and

innumerable other foodstuffs were sold in canvas-roofed stalls; and the shoppers, mostly male couples, haggled with the vendors, occasionally venting their dismay at the prices this despite the fact that any one of them could have bought everything in the market without blinking. Though the troupe shared their immersion in a contrived past, I found the depth of their pretence alarming and somewhat perverse. As I manoeuvred the truck cautiously through the press, they peered incuriously at me through the windows—faces rendered exotic and nearly unreadable by tattoos and implants and caps of silver wire and winking light that appeared to be woven into their hair—and I thought I could feel their amusement at the shabby counterfeit we offered of their more elegantly realized illusion. I believe I might have hated them for the fashionable play they made of arguing over minuscule sums with the poor vendors, for the triviality of spirit this mockery implied, if I had not already hated them so completely for being my father's friends and colleagues.

At the end of the street, beyond the last building, lay a grassy field bordered by a low whitewashed wall. Strings of light bulbs linked the banana trees and palms that grew close to the wall on three sides, and I noticed several paths leading off into the jungle that were lit in the same fashion. On the fourth side, beyond the wall, the land dropped off into a notch, now choked with fog, and on the far side of the notch, perhaps fifty yards away, a massive hill with a sheer rock face and the ruins of an old temple atop it lifted from the fog, looming above the field—it was such a dramatic sight and so completely free of mist, every palm frond articulated, every vine-enlaced crevice and knob of dark, discoloured stone showing clear, that I wondered if it might be a clever projection, another element of Binh Khoi's decor.

We spent the morning and early afternoon setting up, and once I was satisfied that everything was in readiness, I sought out Tan, thinking we might go for a walk; but she was engaged in altering Kai's costume. I wandered into the main tent and busied myself by making sure the sawdust had been spread evenly. Kai was swinging high above on a rope suspended from the metal ring at the top of the tent, and one of our miniature tigers had climbed a second rope and was clinging to it by its furry hands, batting at her playfully whenever she swooped near. Tranh and Mei were playing cards in the bleachers, and Kim was walking hand-in-hand with our talking monkey, chattering away as if the creature could understand her—now and then it would turn its white face to her and squeak in response, saying "I love you" and "I'm hungry" and other equally non-responsive phrases. I stood by the entranceway, feeling rather paternal towards my little family gathered under the lights, and I was just considering whether or not I should return to the trailer and see if Tan had finished, when a baritone voice sounded behind me, saying, "Where can I find Vang Ky?"

My father was standing with hands in his pockets a few feet away, wearing black trousers and a grey shirt of some shiny material. He looked softer and heavier than he did in his photographs, and the flying fish tattoo on his cheek was now surrounded by more than half-a-dozen tiny emblems denoting his business connections. With his immense head, his shaved skull gleaming in the hot lights, he himself seemed the emblem of some monumental and soulless concern. At his

shoulder, over a foot shorter than he, was a striking Vietnamese woman with long straight hair, dressed in tight black slacks and a matching tunic: Phuong Ahn Nguyen. She was staring at me intently.

Stunned, I managed to get out that Vang was no longer with the circus, and my father said, "How can that be? He's the owner, isn't he?"

Shock was giving way to anger, anger so fulminant I could barely contain it. My hands trembled. If I'd had one of my knives to hand, I would have plunged it without a thought into his chest. I did the best I could to conceal my mood and told him what had become of Vang; but it seemed that as I catalogued each new detail of his face and body—a frown line, a reddened ear lobe, a crease in his fleshy neck—a vial of some furious chemical was tipped over and added to the mix of my blood.

"Goddamn it!" he said, casting his eyes up to the canvas; he appeared distraught. "Shit!" He glanced down at me. "Have you got his access code? It's never the same once they go to Heaven. I'm not sure they really know what's going on. But I guess it's my only option."

"I doubt he'd approve of my giving the code to a stranger," I told him.

"We're not strangers," he said. "Vang was my father-in-law. We had a falling-out after my wife died. I hoped having the circus here for a week, I'd be able to persuade him to sit down and talk. There's no reason for us to be at odds."

I suppose the most astonishing thing he said was that Vang was his father-in-law, and thus my grandfather. I didn't know what to make of that; I could think of no reason he might have for lying, yet it raised a number of troubling questions. But his last statement, his implicit denial of responsibility for my mother's death, it had come so easily to his lips! Hatred flowered in me like a cold star, acting to calm me, allowing me to exert a measure of control over my anger.

Phuong stepped forward and put a hand on my chest; my heart pounded against the pressure of her palm. "Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"I'm ... surprised," I said. "That's all. I didn't realize Vang had a son-in-law."

Her make-up was severe, her lips painted a dark mauve, her eyes shaded by the same colour, but in the fineness of her features and the long oval shape of her face, she bore a slight resemblance to Tan.

"Why are you angry?" she asked.

My father eased her aside. "It's all right. I came on pretty strong—he's got every right to be angry. Why don't the two of us ... what's your name, kid?"

"Dat," I said, though I was tempted to tell him the truth.

"Dat and I will have a talk," he said to Phuong. "I'll meet you back at the house."

We went outside, and Phuong, displaying more than a little reluctance, headed off in the general direction of the trailer. It was going on dusk and the fog was closing in. The many-coloured bulbs strung in the trees close to the wall and lining the paths had been turned on; each bulb was englobed by a fuzzy halo, and altogether they imbued the encroaching jungle with an eerily festive air, as if the spirits lost in the dark green tangles were planning a party. We stood beside the wall, beneath the great hill rising from the shifting fogbank, and my father tried to convince me to hand over the code. When I refused he offered money, and when I refused his money he glared at me and said, "Maybe you don't get it. I really need the code. What's it going to take for you to give it to me?"

"Perhaps it's you who doesn't get it," I said. "If Vang wanted you to have the code he would have given it to you. But he gave it to *me*, and to no one else. I consider that a trust, and I won't break it unless he signifies that I should."

He looked off into the jungle, ran a hand across his scalp, and made a frustrated noise. I doubted he was experienced at rejection, and though it didn't satisfy my anger, it pleased me to have rejected him. Finally he laughed. "Either you're a hell of a businessman or an honourable man. Or maybe you're both. That's a scary notion." He shook his head in what I took for amiable acceptance. "Why not call Vang? Ask him if he'd mind having a talk with me."

I didn't understand how this was possible.

"What sort of computer do you own?" he asked.

I told him and he said, "That won't do it. Tell you what. Come over to my house tonight after your show. You can use my computer to contact him. I'll pay for your time."

I was suddenly suspicious. He seemed to be offering himself to me, making himself vulnerable, and I did not believe that was in his nature. His desire to contact Vang might be a charade. What if he had discovered my identity and was luring me into a trap?

"I don't know if I can get away," I said. "It may have to be in the morning."

He looked displeased, but said, "Very well." He fingered a business card from his pocket, gave it to me. "My address." Then he pressed what appeared to be a crystal button into my hand. "Don't lose it. Carry it with you whenever you come. If you don't, you'll be picked up on the street and taken somewhere quite unpleasant."

As soon as he was out of sight I hurried over to the trailer, intending to sort things out with Tan. She was outside, sitting on a folding chair, framed by a spill of hazy

yellow light from the door. Her head was down, and her blouse was torn, the top two buttons missing. I asked what was wrong; she shook her head and would not meet my eyes. But when I persisted she said, "That woman . . . the one who works for your father..."

"Phuong? Did she hurt you?"

She kept her head down, but I could see her chin quivering. "I was coming to find you, and I ran into her. She started talking to me. I thought she was just being friendly, but then she tried to kiss me. And when I resisted—" she displayed the tear in her blouse "--she did this." She gathered herself. "She wants me to be with her tonight. If I refuse, she says she'll make trouble for us."

It would have been impossible for me to hate my father more, but this new insult, this threat to Tan, perfected it, added a finishing colour, like the last brush stroke applied to a masterpiece. I stood a moment gazing off towards the hill — it seemed I had inside me an analog to that forbidding shape, something equally stony and vast. I led Tan into the trailer, sat her down at the desk, and made her tea; then I repeated all my father had said. "Is it possible," I asked, "that Vang is my grandfather?"

She held the teacup in both hands, blew on the steaming liquid and took a sip. "I don't know. My family has always been secretive. All my parents told me was that Vang was once a wealthy man with a loving family, and that he had lost everything."

"If he is my grandfather," I said, "then we're cousins."

She set down the cup and stared dolefully into it as if she saw in its depths an inescapable resolution. "I don't care. If we were brother and sister, I wouldn't care."

I pulled her up, put my arms around her, and she pressed herself against me. I felt that I was at the centre of an enormously complicated knot, too diminutive to be able to see all its loops and twists. If Vang was my grandfather, why had he treated me with such coldness? Perhaps my mother's death had deadened his heart, perhaps that explained it. But knowing that Tan and I were cousins, wouldn't he have told us the truth when he saw how close we were becoming? Or was he so old-fashioned that the idea of an intimate union between cousins didn't bother him? The most reasonable explanation was that my father had lied. I saw that now, saw it with absolute clarity. It was the only possibility that made sense. And if he had lied, it followed that he knew who I was. And if he knew who I was ...

"I have to kill him," I said. "Tonight... it has to be tonight."

I was prepared to justify the decision, to explain why a course of inaction would be a greater risk, to lay out all the potentials of the situation for Tan to analyze, but she pushed me away, just enough so that she could see my face, and said, "You can't do it alone. That woman's a professional assassin." She rested her forehead against mine. "I'll help you."

"That's ridiculous! If I..."

"Listen to me, Philip! She can read physical signs, she can tell if someone's angry. If they're anxious. Well, she'll expect me to be angry. And anxious. She'll think it's just resentment... nerves. I'll be able to get close to her."

"And kill her? Will you be able to kill her?"

Tan broke from the embrace and went to stand at the doorway, gazing out at the fog. Her hair had come unbound, spilling down over her shoulders and back, the ribbon that had tied it dangling like a bright blue river winding across a ground of black silk.

"I'll ask Mei to give me something. She has herbs that will induce sleep." She glanced back at me. "There are things you can do to ensure our safety once your father's dead. We should discuss them now."

I was amazed by her coolness, how easily she had made the transition from being distraught. "I can't ask you to do this," I said.

"You're not asking—I'm volunteering." I detected a note of sad distraction in her voice. "You'd do as much for me."

"Of course, but if it weren't for me, you wouldn't be involved in this."

"If it weren't for you," she said, the sadness even more evident in her tone, "I'd have no involvements at all."

* * * *

The first part of the show that evening, the entrance of the troupe to march music, Mei leading the way, wearing a red and white majorette's uniform, twirling—and frequently dropping—a baton, the tigers gambolling at her heels; then two comic skits; then Kai and Kim whirling and spinning aloft in their gold and sequined costumes, tumbling through the air happy as birds; then another skit and Tranh's clownish juggling, pretending to be drunk and making improbable catches as he tumbled, rolled, and staggered about ... all this was received by the predominantly male audience with a degree of ironic detachment. They laughed at Mei, they whispered and smirked during the skits, they stared dispassionately at Kim and Kai, and they jeered Tranh. It was plain that they had come to belittle us, that doing so validated their sense of superiority. I registered their reactions, but was so absorbed in thinking about what was to happen later, they seemed unreal, unimportant, and it took all my discipline to focus on my own act, a performance punctuated by a knife hurled from behind me that struck home between Tan's legs. There was a burst of enthusiastic cheers, and I turned to see Phuong some thirty feet away, taking a bow in the bleachers—it was she who had thrown the knife. She looked at me and

shrugged, with that gesture dismissing my poor skills, and lifted her arms to receive the building applause. I searched the area around her for my father, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The audience remained abuzz, pleased that one of their own had achieved this victory, but when the major entered, led in by Mei and Trinh, they fell silent at the sight of his dark, convulsed figure. Leaning on his staff, he hobbled along the edge of the bleachers, looking into this and that face as if hoping to find a familiar one, and then, moving to the centre of the ring, he began to tell the story of Firebase Ruby. I was alarmed at first, but his delivery was eloquent, lyrical, not the plain-spoken style in which he had originally couched the tale, and the audience was enthralled. When he came to tell of the letter he had written his wife detailing his hatred of all things Vietnamese, an uneasy muttering arose from the bleachers and rapt expressions turned to scowls; but then he was past that point, and as he described the Viet Cong assault, his listeners settled back and seemed once again riveted by his words.

"In the phosphor light of the hanging flares," he said, "I saw the blood and ground spread out before me. Beyond the head-high hedgerows of toiled steel wire, black-clad men and women coursed from the jungle, myriad and quick as ants, and, inside the wire, emerging from their secret warrens, more sprouted from the earth like the demon yield of some infernal rain. All around me, my men were dying, and even in the midst of fear, I felt myself the object of a great calm observance, as if the tiny necklace-strung images of the Buddha the enemy held in their mouths when they attacked had been empowered to summon their ribbed original, and somewhere up above the flares, an enormous face had been conjured from the dark matter of the sky and was gazing down with serene approval.

"We could not hold the position long — that was clear. But I had no intention of surrendering. Drunk on whiskey and adrenaline, I was consumed by the thought of death, my own and others', and though I was afraid, I acted less out of fear than from the madness of battle and a kind of communion with death, a desire to make death grow and flourish and triumph. I retreated into the communications bunker and ordered the corporal in charge to call for an air strike on the coordinates of Firebase Ruby. When he balked I put a pistol to his head until he had obeyed. Then I emptied a clip into the radio so no one could counter-mand me."

The major bowed his head and spread his arms, as though preparing for a supreme display of magic; then his resonant voice sounded forth again, like the voice of a beast speaking from a cave, rough from the bones that have torn its throat. His eyes were chunks of phosphorous burning in the bark of a rotting log.

"When the explosions began, I was firing from a sandbagged position atop the communications bunker. The VC pouring from the jungle slowed their advance, milled about, and those inside the wire looked up in terror to see the jets screaming overhead, so low I could make out the stars on their wings. Victory was stitched

across the sky in rocket trails. Gouts of flame gouged the red dirt, opening the tunnels to the air. The detonations began to blend one into the other, and the ground shook like a sheet of plywood under the pounding of a hammer. Clouds of marbled fire and smoke boiled across the earth, rising to form a dreadful second sky of orange and black, and I came to my feet, fearful yet delighted, astonished by the enormity of the destruction I had called down. Then I was knocked flat. Sandbags fell across my legs, a body flung from God knows where landed on my back, driving the breath from me, and in the instant before consciousness fled, I caught the rich stink of napalm.

"In the morning I awoke and saw a bloody, jawless face with staring blue eyes pressed close to mine, looking as if it were still trying to convey a last desperate message. I clawed my way from beneath the corpse and staggered upright to find myself the lord of a killed land, of a raw, red scar littered with corpses in the midst of a charcoaled forest. I went down from the bunker and wandered among the dead. From every quarter issued the droning of flies. Everywhere lay arms, legs and grisly relics I could not identify. I was numb, I had no feeling apart from a pale satisfaction at having survived. But as I wandered among the dead, taking notice of the awful intimacies death had imposed: a dozen child-sized bodies huddled in a crater, anonymous as a nest of scorched beetles; a horribly burned woman with buttocks exposed reaching out a clawed hand to touch the lips of a disembodied head—these and a hundred other such scenes brought home the truth that I was their author. It wasn't guilt I felt then. Guilt was irrelevant. We were all guilty, the dead and the living, the good and those who had abandoned God. Guilt is our inevitable portion of the world's great trouble. No, it was the recognition that at the moment when I knew the war was lost—my share of it, at least—I chose not to cut my losses but to align myself with a force so base and negative that we refuse to admit its place in human nature and dress it in mystical clothing and call it Satan or Shiva so as to separate it from ourselves. Perhaps this sort of choice is a soldier's virtue, but I can no longer view it in that light." He tapped his chest with the tip of his staff. "Though I will never say that my enemies were just, there is justice in what I have endured since that day. All men sin, all men do evil. And evil shows itself in our faces." Here he aimed the staff at the audience and tracked it from face to face, as if highlighting the misdeeds imprinted on each. "What you see of me now is not the man I was, but the thing I became at the instant I made my choice. Take from my story what you will, but understand this: I am unique only in that the judgment of my days is inscribed not merely on my face, but upon every inch of my body. We are all of us monsters waiting to be summoned forth by a moment of madness and pride."

As Tranh and I led him from the tent, across the damp grass, the major was excited, almost incoherently so, not by the acclaim he had received, but because he had managed to complete his story. He plucked at my sleeve, babbling, bobbing his head, but I paid him no mind, concerned about Tan, whom I had seen talking to Phuong in the bleachers. And when she came running from the main tent, a windbreaker thrown over her costume, I forgot him entirely.

"We're not going directly back to the house," she said. "She wants to take me to a club on the square. I don't know when we'll get to your father's."

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea. I think we should wait until morning."

"It's all right," she said. "Go to the house and as soon as you've dealt with your father, do exactly what I told you. When you hear us enter the house, stay out of sight. Don't do a thing until I come and get you. Understand?"

"I don't know," I said, perplexed at the way she had taken charge.

"Please!" She grabbed me by the lapels. "Promise you'll do as I say! Please!"

I promised, but as I watched her run off into the dark I had a resurgence of my old sense of dislocation, and though I had not truly listened to the major's story, having been occupied with my own troubles, the sound of him sputtering and chortling behind me, gloating over the treasure of his recovered memory, his invention, whatever it was, caused me to wonder then about the nature of my own choice, and the story that I might someday tell.

* * * *

My father's house was on Yen Phu Street—two storeys of pocked grey stone with green vented shutters and a green door with a knocker carved in the shape of a water buffalo's head. I arrived shortly after midnight and stood in the lee of the high whitewashed wall that enclosed his compound. The fog had been cut by a steady drizzle, and no pedestrians were about. Light slanted from the vents of a shuttered upstairs window, and beneath it was parked a bicycle in whose basket rested a dozen white lilies, their stems wrapped in butcher paper. I imagined that my father had ridden the bicycle to market and had forgotten to retrieve the flowers after carrying his other purchases inside. They seemed omenical in their glossy pallor, a sterile emblem of the bloody work ahead.

The idea of killing my father held no terrors for me—I had performed the act in my mind hundreds of times, I'd conceived its every element—and as I stood there I felt the past accumulating at my back like the cars of a train stretching for eighteen years, building from my mother's death to the shuddering engine of the moment I was soon to inhabit. All the misgivings that earlier had nagged at me melted away, like fog before rain. I was secure in my hatred and in the knowledge that I had no choice, that my father was a menace who would never fade.

I crossed the street, knocked, and after a few seconds he admitted me into a brightly lit alcove with a darkened room opening off to the right. He was dressed in a voluminous robe of green silk, and as he proceeded me up the stairway to the left of the alcove, the sight of his bell-like shape and bald head with the silver plate collaring the base of his skull... these things along with the odour of jasmine incense led me to imagine that I was being escorted to an audience with some mysterious religious

figure by one of his eunuch priests. At the head of the stairs was a narrow white room furnished with two padded chrome chairs, a wall screen and, at the far end, a desk bearing papers, an ornamental vase, an old-fashioned letter opener, and a foot-high gilt and bronze Buddha. My father sat down in one of the chairs, triggered the wall screen's computer mode with a penlight, and set about accessing the Sony AI, working through various menus, all the while chatting away, saying he was sorry he'd missed our show, he hoped to attend the following night, and how was I enjoying my stay in Binh Khoi, it often seemed an unfriendly place to newcomers, but by week's end I'd feel right at home. I had brought no weapon, assuming that his security would detect it. The letter opener, I thought, would do the job. But my hand fell instead to the Buddha. It would be cleaner, I decided. A single blow. I picked it up, hefted it. I had anticipated that when the moment arrived, I would want to make myself known to my father, to relish his shock and dismay; but I understood that was no longer important, and I only wanted him to die. In any case, since he likely knew the truth about me, the dramatic scene I'd envisioned would be greatly diminished.

"That's Thai. Fifteenth century," he said, nodding at the statue, then returned his attention to the screen. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Very," I said.

Then, without a thought, all thinking necessary having already been done, and the deed itself merely an automatic function, the final surge of an eighteen-year-long momentum, I stepped behind him and swung the statue at the back of his head. I expected to hear a crack but the sound of impact was plush, muffled, such as might be caused by the flat of one's hand striking a pillow. He let out an explosive grunt, toppled with a twisting motion against the wall, ending up on his side, facing outward. There was so much blood, I assumed he must be dead. But then he groaned, his eyes blinked open, and he struggled to his knees. I saw that I'd hit the silver plate at the base of his skull. Blood was flowing out around the plate, but it had protected him from mortal damage. His robe had fallen open, and with his pale mottled belly bulging from the green silk and the blood streaking his neck, his smallish features knitted in pain and perplexity, he looked gross and clownishly pitiable. He held up an unsteady hand to block a second blow. His mouth worked, and he said "Wait.. ." or "What. . ." Which, I can't be sure. But I was in no mood either to wait or to explain myself. A clean death might not have affected me so deeply, but that I had made of a whole healthy life this repellent half-dead thing wobbling at my feet—it assaulted my moral foundation, it washed the romantic tint of revenge from the simple, terrible act of slaughter, and when I struck at him again, this time smashing the statue down two-handed onto the top of his skull, I was charged with the kind of fear that afflicts a child when he more or less by accident wounds a bird with a stone and seeks to hide the act from God by tossing his victim onto an ash heap. My father sagged onto his back, blood gushing from his nose and mouth. I caught a whiff of faeces and staggered away, dropping the Buddha. Now that my purpose had been accomplished, like a bee dying from having stung its

enemy, I felt drained of poison, lull of dull surprise that there had been no more rewarding result.

The penlight had rolled beneath the second chair. I picked it up, and, following Tan's instructions, I used the computer to contact a security agency in Danang. A blonde woman with a brittle manner appeared on the screen and asked my business. I explained my circumstances, not bothering to characterize the murder as anything other than it was—the size of my trust would guarantee my legal immunity — and also provided her with the number of Vang's lawyer, as well as some particulars concerning the trust, thereby establishing my bona fides. The woman vanished, her image replaced by a shifting pattern of pastel colours, and, after several minutes, this in turn was replaced by a contract form with a glowing blue patch at the bottom to which I pressed the ball of my thumb. The woman reappeared, much more solicitous now, and cautioned me to remain where I was. She assured me that an armed force would be at the house within the hour. As an afterthought she advised me to wipe the blood from my face.

The presence of the body—its meat reality—made me uncomfortable. I picked up the letter opener and went down the stairs and groped my way across the unlit room off the alcove and found a chair in a corner from which I could see the door. Sitting alone in the darkness amplified the torpor that had pervaded me, and though I sensed certain unsettling dissonances surrounding what had just taken place, I was not sufficiently alert to consider them as other than aggravations. I had been sitting there for perhaps ten minutes when the door opened and Phuong, laughing, stepped into the alcove with Tan behind her, wearing a blue skirt and chequered blouse. She kicked the door shut, pushed Tan against the wall, and began to kiss her, running a hand up under her skirt. Then her head snapped around, and although I didn't believe she could see in the dark, she stared directly at me.

Before I could react, before I could be sure that Phuong had detected me, Tan struck her beneath the jaw with the heel of her left hand, driving her against the opposite wall, and followed this with a kick to the stomach. Phuong rolled away and up into a crouch. She cried out my father's name: "William!" Whether in warning or—recognizing what had happened—in grief, I cannot say. Then the two women began to fight. It lasted no more than half a minute, but their speed and eerie grace were incredible to see: like watching two long-fingered witches dancing in a bright patch of weakened gravity and casting violent spells. Dazed by Tan's initial blows, Phuong went on the defensive, but soon she recovered and started to hold her own. I remembered the letter opener in my hand. The thing was poorly balanced and Phuong's quickness made the timing hard to judge, but then she paused, preparing to launch an attack, and I flung the opener, lodging it squarely between her shoulderblades. Not a mortal wound—the blade was too dull to bite deep—but a distracting one. She shrieked, tried to reach the opener, and, as she reeled to the side, Tan came up behind her and broke her neck with a savage twist. She let the body fall and walked towards me, a shadow in the dark-ened room. It seemed impossible that she was the same woman I had known on the beach at Vung Tau,

and I felt a spark of fear.

"Are you all right?" she asked, stopping a few feet away.

"All right?" I laughed. "What's going on here?"

She gave no reply, and I said, "Apparently you decided against using Mei's herbs."

"If you had done as I asked, if you'd stayed clear, it might not have been necessary to kill her." She came another step forward. "Have you called for security?"

I nodded. "Did you learn to fight like that in Hue?"

"In China," she said.

"At a private security company. Like Phuong."

"Yes."

"Then it would follow that you're not Vang's niece."

"But I am," she said. "He used the last of his fortune to have me trained so I could protect you. He was a bitter man ... to have used his family so."

"And I suppose sleeping with me falls under the umbrella of protection." She knelt beside the chair, put a hand on my neck, and gazed at me entreatingly. "I love you, Philip. I would do anything for you. How can you doubt it?"

I was moved by her sincerity, but I could not help but treat her coldly. It was as if a valve had been twisted shut to block the flow of my emotions. "That's right," I said. "Vang told me that your kind were conditioned to bond with their clients."

I watched the words hit home, a wounded expression washing across her features, then fading, like a ripple caused by a pebble dropped into a still pond.

"Is that so important?" she asked. "Does it alter the fact that you fell in love with me?"

I ignored this, yet I was tempted to tell her, No, it did not. "If you were trained to protect me, why did Vang discourage our relationship?"

She got to her feet, her face unreadable, and went a few paces towards the alcove; she appeared to be staring at Phuong's body, lying crumpled in the light. "There was a time when I think he wanted me for himself. That may explain it."

"Did Phuong really accost you?" I asked. "Or was that..."

"I've never lied to you. I've deceived you by not revealing everything I knew about Vang," she said. "But I was bound to obey him in that. As you said, I've been conditioned."

I had other questions, but I could not frame one of them. The silence of the house seemed to breed a faint humming, and I became oppressed by the idea that Tan and I were living analogs of the two corpses, that the wealth I was soon to receive as a consequence of our actions would lead us to a pass wherein we would someday lie dead in separate rooms of a silent house, while two creatures like ourselves but younger would stand apart from one another in fretful isolation, pondering their future. I wanted to dispossess myself of this notion, to contrive a more potent reality, and I crossed the room to Tan and turned her to face me. She refused to meet my eyes, but I tipped up her chin and kissed her. A lover's kiss. I touched her breasts—a treasuring touch. But despite the sweet affirmation and openness of the kiss, I think it also served a formal purpose, the sealing of a bargain whose terms we did not fully understand.

* * * *

Six months and a bit after my eighteenth birthday, I was sitting in a room in the Sony offices in Saigon, a windowless space with black walls and carpet and silver-framed photographs of scenes along the Perfume River and in the South China Sea, when Vang flickered into being against the far wall. I thought I must seem to him, as he seemed to me, like a visitation, a figure from another time manifested in a dream. He appeared no different than he had on the day he left the circus—thin and grey-haired, dressed in care-worn clothing—and his attitude towards me was, as ever, distant. I told him what had happened in Binh Khoi, and he said, "I presumed you would have more trouble with William. Of course he thought he had leverage over me—he thought he had Tan in his clutches. So he let his guard down. He believed he had nothing to fear."

His logic was overly simplistic, but rather than pursue this, I asked the question foremost on my mind: why had he not told me that he was my grandfather? I had uncovered quite a lot about my past in the process of familiarizing myself with Vang's affairs, but I wanted to hear it all.

"Because I'm *not* your grandfather," he said. "I was William's father-in-law, but..." He shot me an amused look. "I should have thought you would have understood all this by now."

I saw no humour in the situation. "Explain it to me."

"As you wish." He paced away from me, stopped to inspect one of the trained photographs. "William engineered the death of my wife, my daughter, and my grandson in a plane crash. Once he had isolated me, he challenged my mental competency, intending to take over my business concerns. To thwart him, I faked

my suicide. It was a very convincing fake. I used a body I'd had cloned to supply me with organs. I kept enough money to support Green Star and to pay for Tan's training. The rest you know."

"Not so," I said. "You haven't told me who I am."

"Ah, yes." He turned from the photograph and smiled pleasantly at me. "I suppose that would interest you. Your mother's name was Tuyet. Tuyet Su Vanh. She was an actress in various pornographic media. The woman you saw in your dream—that was she. We had a relationship for several years, then we drifted apart. Not long before I lost my family, she came to me and told me she was dying. One of the mutated HIVs. She said she'd borne a child by me. A son. She begged me to take care of you. I didn't believe her, of course. But she had given me pleasure, so I set up a trust for you. A small one."

"And then you decided to use me."

"William had undermined my authority to the extent that I could not confront him directly. I needed an arrow to aim at his heart. I told your mother that if she cooperated with me I'd adopt you, place my fortune in the trust, and make you my heir. She gave permission to have your memory wiped. I wanted you empty so I could fill you with my purpose. After you were re-educated, she helped construct some fragmentary memories that were implanted by means of a biochip. Nonetheless, you were a difficult child to mould. I couldn't be certain that you would seek William out, and so, since I was old and tired and likely not far from Heaven, I decided to feign an illness and withdraw. This allowed me to arrange a confrontation without risk to myself."

I should have hated Vang, but after six months of running his businesses, of viewing the world from a position of governance and control, I understood him far too well to hate—though at that moment, understanding the dispassionate requisites and protocols of such a position seemed as harsh a form of judgment as the most bitter of hatreds. "What happened to my mother?" I asked.

"I arranged for her to receive terminal care in an Australian hospital."

"And her claim that I was your biological son . . . did you investigate it?"

"Why should I? It didn't matter. A man in my position could not acknowledge an illegitimate child, and once I had made my decision to abdicate my old life, it mattered even less. If it has any meaning for you, there are medical records you can access."

"I think I'd prefer it to remain a mystery," I told him.

"You've no reason to be angry at me," he said. "I've made you wealthy. And what did it cost? A few memories."

I shifted in my chair, steepled my hands on my stomach. "Are you convinced that my . . . that William had your family killed? He seemed to think there had been a misunderstanding."

"That was a charade! If you're asking whether or not I had proof—of course I didn't. William knew how to disguise his hand."

"So everything you did was based solely on the grounds of your suspicions."

"No! It was based on my knowledge of the man!" His tone softened. "What does it matter? Only William and I knew the truth, and he is dead. If you doubt me, if you pursue this further, you'll never be able to satisfy yourself."

"I suppose you're right," I said, getting to my feet.

"Are you leaving already?" He wore an aggrieved expression. "I was hoping you'd tell me about Tan ... and Green Star. What has happened with my little circus?"

"Tan is well. As for Green Star, I gave it to Mei and Trinh."

I opened the door, and Vang made a gesture of restraint. "Stay a while longer, Philip. Please. You and Tan are the only people with whom I have in emotional connection. It heartens me to spend time with you."

Hearing him describe our relationship in these terms gave me pause. I recalled the conversation in which Tan had asserted that something central to the idea of life died when one was uploaded into Heaven—Vang's uncharacteristic claim to an emotional debt caused me to think that he might well be, as she'd described her parents, a coloured shadow, a cunningly contrived representation of the original. I hoped that this was not the case; I hoped that he was alive in every respect.

"I have to go," I said. "Business, you understand. But I have some news that may be of interest to you."

"Oh?" he said eagerly. "Tell me."

"I've invested heavily in Sony, and through negotiation I've arranged for one of your old companies—Intertech of Hanoi—to be placed in charge of overseeing the virtual environment. I would expect you're soon going to see some changes in your particular part of Heaven."

He seemed nonplussed, then a look of alarm dawned on his face. "What are you going to do?"

"Me? Not a thing." I smiled, and the act of smiling weakened my emotional restraint—a business skill I had not yet perfected—and let anger roughen my voice. "It's much more agreeable to have your dirty work handled by others, don't you

think?"

* * * *

On occasion, Tan and I manage to rekindle an intimacy that reminds us of the days when we first were lovers, but these occasions never last for long, and our relationship is plagued by the lapses into neutrality or—worse—indifference that tend to plague any two people who have spent ten years in each other's company. In our case these lapses are often accompanied by bouts of self-destructive behaviour. It seems we're punishing ourselves for having experienced what we consider an undeserved happiness. Even our most honest infidelities are inclined to be of the degrading sort. I understand this. The beach at Vung Tau, once the foundation of our union, has been replaced by a night on Yen Phu Street in Binh Khoi, and no edifice built upon such imperfect stone could be other than cracked and deficient. Nonetheless, we both realize that whatever our portion of contentment in this world, we are fated to seek it together.

From time to time, I receive a communication from Vang. He does not look well, and his tone is always desperate, cajoling. I tell myself that I should relent and restore him to the afterlife for which he contracted; but I am not highly motivated in that regard. If there truly is something that dies when one ascends to Heaven, I fear it has already died in me, and I blame Vang for this.

Seven years after my talk with Vang, Tan and I attended a performance of the circus in the village of Loc Noi. There was a new James Bond Cochise, Kai and Kim had become pretty teenagers, both Tranh and Mei were thinner, but otherwise things were much the same. We sat in the main tent after the show and reminisced. The troupe—Mei in particular—were unnerved by my bodyguards, but all in all, it was a pleasant reunion.

After a while I excused myself and went to see the major. He was huddled in his tent, visible by the weird flickerings in his eyes ... though as my vision adapted to the dark, I was able to make out the cowled shape of his head against the canvas backdrop. Tranh had told me he did not expect the major to live much longer, and now that I was close to him, I found that his infirmity was palpable, I could hear it in his laboured breath. I asked if he knew who I was, and he replied without inflection, as he had so many years before, "Philip." I'd hoped that he would be more forthcoming, because I still felt akin to him, related through the cryptic character of our separate histories, and I thought that he might once have sensed that kinship, that he'd had some diffuse knowledge of the choices I confronted, and had designed the story of Firebase Ruby for my benefit, shaping it as a cautionary tale—one I'd failed to heed. But perhaps I'd read too much into what was sheer coincidence. I touched his hand, and his breath caught, then shuddered forth, heavy as a sob. All that remained for him were a few stories, a few hours in the light. I tried to think of something I could do to ease his last days, but I knew death was the only mercy that could mend him.

Mei invited Tan and me to spend the night in the trailer—for old times' sake, she said—and we were of no mind to refuse. We both yearned for those old times, despite neither of us believing that we could recapture them. Watching Tan prepare for bed, it seemed to me that she had grown too vivid for the drab surroundings, her beauty become too cultivated and too lush. But when she slipped in beside me, when we began to make love on that creaky bunk, the years fell away and she felt like a girl in my arms, tremulous and new to such customs, and I was newly awakened to her charms. She drifted off to sleep afterwards with her head on my chest, and as I lay there trying to quieten my breath so not to wake her, it came to me that future and past were joined in the darkness that enclosed us, two black rivers flowing together, and I understood that while the circus would go its own way in the morning and we would go ours, those rivers, too, were forever joined—we shared a confluence and a wandering course, and a moment proof against the world's denial, and we would always be a troupe, Kim and Kai, Mei and Trinh, Tan and I, and the major ... that living ghost who, like myself, was the figment of a tragic past he never knew, or—if, indeed, he knew it—with which he could never come to terms. It was a bond that could not save us, from either our enemies or ourselves, but it held out a hope of simple glory, a promise truer than Heaven. Illusory or not, all our wars would continue until their cause was long-forgotten under the banner of Radiant Green Star.

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