

Dinh Vong

Threads

Ngo is mending his work jeans that have ripped along a seam. The shiny needle and white thread disappear in and out of the cloth under his dirty fingers. It is the first time he has ever sewn anything. Everything he knows about the craft is from memories of watching his wife. His stitches are uneven and loose. They will come apart. He thinks about using the machine, but decides against it. Mai had been fiercely protective of the industrial sewing machine she had bartered off a friend for fifty dollars.

“It’s worth eight-hundred. Ordinary people can’t buy it.”

The machine sits in a corner of the bedroom, beneath a dust cover Mai had sewn, its print of cherries and leaves long faded. Scattered across the bedroom floor are scraps of cloth and thread. A project Mai hadn’t finished is folded neatly in a plastic bag on the table. A fine layer of dust has settled over her things.

She leans her body forward, her face obscured by oversized glasses that are shining because of the reflection from the desk lamp, a lamp without a shade that she has affixed to the edge of her sewing table. Her eyes are weak, so she needs all the light she can get. Lulled by the hum of the sewing machine, her mind roams. Sometimes she laughs to herself. Sometimes she becomes indignant at a wrong done to her years ago. Always she is asking him, “do you remember?” Do you remember when Diep ran away with the American officer and broke her baya’s heart?

Ngo sets his jeans down. He places one trembling hand over the other to calm them. It’s hard holding his hands steady. Bad luck, he thinks, this uncontrollable twitching that is shaking his luck away. He is getting old and losing control of his body. Parts of him fall asleep at odd times. If he is watching television, a tingle will dance along his arm, travel up his neck. When he tries to shake the paralysis from himself, his limb will cry out in pain from the flow of blood streaming back into it. He is becoming

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absentminded. The other day, he drove to the hardware store and forgot why he had gone, only to remember when he returned home again that he needed eight-penny nails to reattach a doorframe that was coming away from the wall. He has always been meticulous, walking through every room and making sure every appliance, light switch, and faucet is turned off before leaving the house.

So it surprised him one afternoon to come home to billows of smoke. He ran to the kitchen. An empty pot was on the burner, the bottom of it completely black. He grabbed the pot by its rubber handles and burned the palms of his hands. He wrapped his hands in kitchen towels and pulled again with all his strength. The bottom of the pot fell away. Jagged black peaks of aluminum swirled up from the heating element. He hurled the ruined pot in the sink and turned the heat off. Holding his breath, he threw open a window before running out of the house. He sat on his front lawn coughing as cars hurried home in the late afternoon. He must have set water to boil and forgotten about it. How quickly the house could have gone.

The idea of growing old has never bothered him before. Even when he became riddled with hemorrhoids and bad eye sight, he had never tried to run away from it, didn't fear growing older. There is dignity to it. A time when children venerate their parents, and he can finally rest from manual labor. A time to read, work on his sketches. As a boy, he had loved to draw.

He had seen his mother becoming more stooped each year until she could only look at the ground when standing. He had seen his father lose his teeth, his sight, his hearing, before he lost his life. Together they grew more fragile. She was there to lead him from room to room and feed him rice gruel. He would help her out of chairs, place a protective hand over her bent spine. When his father finally died, his mother had become too riddled with dementia to realize it. Only frowned a little, and searched around as if looking for a misplaced object. She died shortly after.

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Though Ngo doesn't fear old age, he never expected to endure it alone.

His daughter and son-in-law are coming over later that night. He needs to buy groceries. He stands up to get dressed. The jeans he had been mending fall to the floor. Clumsy, he thinks, and stoops to pick them up again. He wonders what he should cook for dinner. He remembers the last conversation with Thanh was awkward. Conversations are always difficult without his wife negotiating them.

"Ba?"

"Hmmp?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing."

Ngo was accustomed to passing the phone to his wife. He stood in front of the phone's base, though it was cordless, and stared at the list of numbers Mai had scrawled down and taped to the wall. He had never spoken to his child longer than a few minutes, and even then it was about things that needed to get done—when the car insurance needed to be transferred to Thanh's name after she graduated from college, when he needed to get measured for a suit for her wedding.

"Keeping busy?"

"There's always something to do."

"You should call up Auntie Sen. Or your old friend, Uncle Lau. You shouldn't spend so much time alone."

Ngo didn't like when people suggested ways to change things, told him what he ought to do. They assumed he was unhappy. And what if he was? It was none of their business, nothing they could fix. He did not like his friends much, and didn't see any reason to spend time with them.

"It's hard without her isn't it?"

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He smoothed his thumb over a corner of the list that was peeling away from the wall, letting a long minute pass for an answer. He didn't see a need to acknowledge embarrassing questions.

"Ba?"

"Hmm?"

"It was Rachel's birthday last week. You didn't show up."

"I forgot. I have her present wrapped up here," he lied. He hadn't wanted to drive the four hours it took to get to their house. He had always been afraid of driving on the freeway.

"Are you busy? Should I let you go?"

A vein in Ngo's hand quivered. He thought maybe he should tell her about the house almost burning down, his sleepy limbs.

"It's late. I should let you go to bed."

Words were stuck at the top of his throat. He could not voice them.

"Good night."

"Good night," he finally said.

"We'll be coming next week with the kids."

"Yes."

"Goodnight, Ba."

What happened to the old days? Rooms full of generations of people, so that it nearly drove him crazy to never have a moment alone. It was a good system, a system he never questioned. And yet when it came down to his time, he must suffer it alone. All he has to do was ask. He has a

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right to ask. But the thought only itches in his throat and shame keeps him from it. Thanh has never offered that he live with them, but she would not refuse him, no matter what the American customs are. It is not right for an old man to spend the rest of his years alone.

But still, there is a risk. She might say no. Children are no longer loyal. They abandon old customs.

There is also his son, whom he hasn't seen in years. He hadn't shown up at her funeral. He had left one day in a rage, with piercings in his face, rail thin and hard-headed. It is best to consider him dead, Ngo thinks bitterly, remembering how Mai had wanted to see him one last time, remembering how much the boy had loved her as a child. And who knows where he is. How much suffering he put them through. No, such a son as that will not see him through in his old age.

If he asks and Thanh says no, he will still be in the same place he is now. But how can he ask without trembling? He has never depended on anyone for anything, has never been vulnerable. Sometimes he even says to himself out loud, "I have never imposed myself upon my children!"

But maybe one day he will come home to a pile of ash. And then there are the empty rooms that are becoming unbearable. One needs at least some human contact.

In the shower, Ngo washes his face three times. For breakfast, he has eaten three biscuits. He will check the stove and the lights three times before leaving the house. It is a habit he cannot shake.

He starts the car. It has an oily upholstery smell that he and Mai had endured for over a decade.

"We should buy a new car." She checks her hair in the side mirror for white strands, then folds her hands in her lap. "It's a shame driving this rancid thing for so long. My cousins are living better than us back home. Did I tell you Song's daughter is engaged? To a sixty-year-old man. She's

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twenty-three. It's tragic. How immoral people become when others are poor."

He presses the gas pedal three times before driving off. Mai had never noticed this about him, or if she had, she never spoke about it. Ngo only knows the repetition gives him comfort. If he does the same thing every day in the same way, with a few timed variations over a number of months, he will feel safe for a second—a second that lapses back into nothingness until he goes through the ritual again. Only sometimes he forgets the ritual, or when to change it. Even those brief seconds of safety are being lost. He doesn't remember himself how it began.

She sits back into the seat, smooths her hair. "You often forget things."

"What have I forgotten?"

"The first apartment we lived in. The day we were married."

"It's the night that I remember. You were terrified. You wouldn't let me touch you, and I didn't."

"And the time when you were born."

"No one remembers when they were born."

"You were abandoned by your parents because they were afraid their luck would kill you. They had already lost three sons before you. Even though the boys died soon after birth, hardly known, their memory is with you. Fourth son, fourth brother, fourth uncle. Forever you carried the memory of your dead brothers in your name. Down on into the past, when you were learning to count, you realized you were the fourth. 'Fourth of what?' you asked your parents. They found no use in being delicate. 'Don't be foolish,' your mother tells you. 'The reason you survived is because when you were born we fooled the spirits into thinking you weren't my son. Before I could lay eyes on you, you were taken from me. We paid a poor family to look after you. And the spirits

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believed it, believed you were the son of a washer-woman, and left you alone because you were too poor to amuse them. And when you were grown and hardy, so that the spirits could no longer pull your soul from out of your feet, we took you back. Ho you cried for that stupid washer woman, calling her mother.' So there you have it. Your dead brothers dance in the space of our name. Every time your name is said, they come alive again. The brothers you never knew."

"Foolishness. These are useless memories."

He looks at the empty seat that has been rounded out by her body. The space seems sad and heavy. He reaches out, moves his hand over the air, but feels nothing.

"Thanh says Jenny is not going to pour tea at the wedding. She says it's old-fashioned. How I hate that word. Well, it's her loss. At least she has enough sense not to marry a ghost."

At Wang's Grocery, he drives up to the third space in the third row from the entrance. On the occasion that he finds the spot is already taken, he will park, take out a tattered book from his glove compartment, and wait for the owner of the vehicle to leave. This time the space is unoccupied.

Inside the floor is scuffed, the lighting dim. He pushes his squeaking cart down the narrow produce aisle, stepping over lettuce leaves and an overripe tomato left where they have fallen. He hears his name being called. A woman's voice. He turns around. It's sister Iris, no real relation. She had helped Mai raise the children when they were young. She comes up to him. He allows her to take his hand in hers.

"I haven't seen you since the funeral," Iris says. "You should stay with us for awhile. We older folks need to keep each other company."

Ngo imagines waking up to Iris's congee with salted duck eggs, so different from Mai who preferred black coffee and crackers for breakfast. Yeung would be puffing on his morning cigarette, telling dirty jokes. Iris

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would rebuke him, but laugh anyway. And Ngo would smile uncomfortably, not sure how to respond. He would go about their house like a boy with no purpose.

"I keep busy," Ngo says.

"You're like a child. Never saying what you really feel. Mai said you would be like this."

Ngo begins walking away. What do they know? What do any of them know? Iris frowns at his departing back.

"You call us if you need anything. I might bring some of my sticky rice over. I've wrapped dozens of them. Yeung complains that the house always smells like boiled lotus leaves."

Ngo shuffles on, but after a few steps Iris catches up with him again.

"Ngo!"

He jumps a little, and turns around. She is standing so close he can see the small hairs on her face covered with powder.

"You're not that old of a man," she says in a low voice. "You should get another wife. I have a niece who wants to come to the states. She has no future back home. She could keep you company. She's a pure girl."

Ngo is startled by her nearness, and the smell of Chanel No.5 that his wife had also worn. It takes him a minute to collect himself. In that minute, his brain, which is much quicker than his mouth, thinks about the niece. She would be a virgin, timid, obedient. She would rely on him in this strange country, not knowing a word of English. His friends would shake their heads, but secretly they would envy him because of this young girl, forced to marry a ruined old man.

"Excuse me, sister," he says sternly, as if offended. He walks off to the

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dry goods aisle and doesn't look back.

"You're always so strange," he hears Iris mumble, before her voice is swallowed up by white noise.

He had never been close to their friends as she had. They were petty. They gossiped. Such things Mai loved — some bitterness of the past, finding out what terrible thing had become of someone's last born. Ngo always sat beside her quietly, smiling a slight glassy-eyed smile so that she wouldn't berate him later for being so glum. He only spoke when prompted, and then when he couldn't take company any longer, left the room with the excuse of steeping tea, and hid in the garage until their guests left. When Mai would find him later, digging through old magazines, he would tell her he had become distracted and had forgotten about the tea.

"I wish you wouldn't be so quiet. To others, they think you're strange. It would be nice if you would try."

"I do. It's hard for me."

Ngo doesn't see the necessity in making small talk, or talking at all for that matter. When people say things that don't interest him, he prefers to follow his gut and ignore them. He has his own richly imagined life. Sometimes this life will break forth in a strange note, a mumbled word, and the people around him will take him for a mild lunatic.

Once at a restaurant, he had written the waitress a note in front of his wife and daughter. When she read it, she became agitated. "What is this?" the woman asked. Ngo only smiled secretively, and the waitress quickly left to whisper and gesture at him to the wait staff. Mai asked him what he had written. He felt no need to explain himself when he never asked others to explain themselves. She became angry with him, accusing him of writing a love note. That night, she refused to sleep in the same bed with him.

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"So what did you write after all?"

"It was nothing. A few lines from a poem I read."

"You were flirting!"

"Forgive me. From the back, she resembled you when you were young."

"That makes it even worse."

He fills his cart with carrots, bok choy, tofu. Down the dried goods aisle, looking for bean curd, he catches the eye of the store's owner, Seng, and quickly looks away as if not having recognized him.

"Hey Ngo!" Seng yells out, waving.

Ngo looks up, feigning surprise, and waves back, grateful that Seng doesn't make an effort to come closer.

At home, he steams the carrots and sautés the Bok Choy in vinegar and soy sauce. Immediately, a foul and sour scent rises up from the pan. He hardly cooks, and guesses at ingredients. He adds some cornstarch and sugar to thicken the sauce. When he is done, the Bok Choy is overcooked and gummy, the carrots are falling apart. A slop bucket, he thinks to himself.

But when Thanh and Brian arrive with the kids, they bring food with them. His dishes sit next theirs, practically untouched except for initial portions taken out of politeness. They have a three-year-old daughter and a baby boy. Their girl, Rachel, speaks often to no one in particular. He wonders who she gets her personality from. She does not resemble him in looks. All the white ghost blood has muted her Chinese features. Her eyes slant only slightly, her dark hair, though straight and gleaming like Thanh's, is tinged with gold. Mai had decided not to fight with Thanh about her decision to marry Brian. She had grown ashamed of

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Thanh's age and her string of boyfriends, and had long ago stopped asking about their incomes. If Mai mentioned anything about Thanh's purity and honor, Thanh would storm out of the house and they wouldn't see her for weeks. So when Thanh brought Brian home, and they saw that he had a respectable job, Mai didn't complain. She would tell her friends later that it's true that dark haired people should be with dark haired people and that it was a good thing that Brian had darker hair. That she herself had never had anything against white people, who were people too, one had to realize.

The baby claps his hands, throws his spoon on the ground. For the first time in weeks, Ngo's heart feels calm. This is how it should be, he thinks. An old man with his grandchildren.

"Ye ye, why does it stink in your house?" His granddaughter asks him.

"It doesn't stink," Brian says, and gives her a threatening look.

"It's the vinegar," Ngo says. "Still learning how to cook."

"Ma was such a good cook. I wish she had written down her recipes," Thanh says.

"She never used recipes, or measuring cups. She was an expert with food."

"Thanh's a good cook in that way too," Brian says.

"Yes," Ngo says. He remembers that Mai never liked Thanh's cooking. Fusion, she called it when she made Peking duck wrapped in tortillas one New Year's.

Ngo doesn't say much after that. They are used to his silence, and begin talking to each other as they normally would, about work and Rachel starting preschool.

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"Maybe I should keep her at home for another year. It costs almost as much for daycare as I make working," Thanh says.

"Do you think the firm would keep you if you took more time off?"

"Keith thinks I'm irreplaceable. He would never fire me."

"Thanh went to school when she was two," Ngo says. They turn and look at him. "It was good for her. Gets them used to it."

Thanh thinks carefully.

"I was never happy in school. I remember one time I couldn't remember what Ma's face looked like because she worked so much," Thanh said, and then thinks better of speaking of a memory that had hurt her. "We'll think about it."

In actuality, there is nothing to fear. Ngo isn't conscious of any of Thanh's pain. They had worked hard to give her the best life they knew how. Ngo has never conceived that Thanh would want more than that.

"Rachel's probably bored at home with the baby. She likes to talk. She needs people." This is what Mai would have said, Ngo thinks, and the idea makes him sure of his opinion.

And then he realizes now is as good of a time as any. They are practically asking him. Why would they bring this up now over dinner?

"If you want, I could watch them," he says and falls silent, fearing to add anything else.

"What do you mean? You live so far away."

"I can move. There's nothing here for me now." There, he thinks. He has said it.

"I'm glad you've brought this up, because Brian and I have been talking

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about it. How you shouldn't live alone. It's not healthy. They have retirement communities for Chinese people. You could make friends. Speak your own language."

He is silent, his pride hurt. They don't want him, he thinks.

"Ba? Would you like that?"

"I need to rest." He gets up, leaving his half-eaten food. He goes to his bedroom and shuts the door. He sits down in Mai's sewing chair, closes his eyes. But he is conscious of their sounds, knows they are moving about, clearing the table.

"What did you think would happen? Acting like a stranger your whole life, and now you want your children to take you in with open arms?"

He pays attention to their hushed voices, to the faucet that is turned on. When they lock and close the door behind them, he is trembling again.

* * *

"Do you think he would actually want to live with us?" Thanh and Brian are home now, and undressing. They have already put the children to bed.

"He looked angry when you mentioned the retirement home."

"Didn't he? I'm horrible to ask that of him."

"You're just looking out for him. It would be better."

"No it wouldn't. He doesn't like strangers. He hardly likes friends. I

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don't think he likes me."

"This is what happens when you alienate yourself from everyone in your life."

"He can't help it. He doesn't know how to act normal. He was a good father when I was very young."

"That's why you were depressed. Because he was a good father."

"I would probably be the same way too if I was refugee. If I never got an education, or applied myself."

"What are you saying?"

"What do you think about him living with us. Here?"

"Where would we put him? It's a two bedroom house."

"We could move Joseph's crib in with us. He could share the room with Rachel."

"It's crowded as it is. And then there's all his hoarding and weird habits. How could we accommodate him?"

Thanh sits down on the bed and begins to cry. Brian sits next to her, holds her tightly against himself. She thinks about how her father has never held her that way, protectively. Has hardly spoken more than twenty words to her. She has tried her entire life to be normal, not anxious, not fearful of human beings. Even the smallest gestures, like smiling, require great courage.

After Mai died, he did not pick up the phone. When Thanh drove the two hundred fifty miles to visit him, he had unlocked the door, and then shuffled back to his room, without so much as looking at her. But after several months, he was visibly crumbling. He looked ashen and haunted, hadn't changed his clothes for days. When Thanh visited a second time,

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he began speaking a little, sitting with her in the living room as if terrified she would leave.

He seemed to take an interest in Rachel, who was too small to observe the boundaries adults created. She would run up to him, place an arm on his leg, rest against him. Thanh was surprised he did not fend off her touch. She realized he had not been touched since her mother had died.

He didn't know how much he had been accustomed to her presence until she was gone and his body felt odd without someone beside it. This made it difficult to sleep. When the dust crept in, he hadn't wanted to clean. But the staleness of an unkempt house makes him lonely. A hair on the ground, the cup she drank out of, serve as reminders that she is completely gone.

Tucked in bed and lying in the dark, he allows himself to cry a little. His moans are infantile, rising up from his belly to choke him. When he opens his eyes, she is staring at him.

"What is this?" he says.

"What do you mean?" she says.

"You know the feeling of a terribly real dream? A nightmare, where you're getting a tooth pulled and feel every nerve?"

"You speak so oddly."

"I've missed your old fat body."

"I'm not as fat as you say."

He reaches over.

He stares at her pillow and thinks about lying there interminably, with

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his stomach sweating into the sheets. He is already hungry. It wouldn't take long. Someone would eventually notice his absence. He imagines Thanh breaking down the door, preparing a quiet funeral. Such childish thoughts.

He is cold because he has left the window open. He goes to shut it, and then to the closet to find a sweater. The nearest is one Mai knitted—a navy blue aran knit sweater. It had taken her months to master the complicated design of overlapping cables and knots. She had seen the design in a catalogue and spent weeks figuring out how to execute it. “The kind fishermen wear,” she told him when he tried it on. The sleeves spilled over the cuffs. The neck hung wide and low. He looked like a child whose mother had bought him too-large clothes so that he would have a hard time growing out of them, like he hadn't dressed himself. She had knitted him a handful of sweaters that never quite fit. Either the shoulders were sloping, the sleeves an inch too short, or the chest was too tight in the armpits.

Afterwards, she would refuse to take it apart and start all over again. She didn't like undoing things. Instead she wore it. She liked her hands, which were always cold, to be covered. She liked wearing big clothes, she said. It made her feel slim and petite and this made her feel young.

He thinks about Iris's offer. He could find another wife easily. All he has to do is call a relative and it would be set up for him. He knows she wouldn't have wanted him to remarry. She would have wanted him to die sad and lonely because she was gone. She was selfish in that way.

Sometimes he wouldn't look up when she spoke to him. He would forget her birthday on purpose. Over time, she would become agitated. She would cry and he would walk out of the room.

She would withdraw, ignore him, grow used to his stubborn ways. Then he would need to touch and taste her, take her familiar body to his. He

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did this repeatedly over the years because habit made him cruel.

“How can you think of marrying another woman when you’re the only man I’ve ever known? Why didn’t you wear the sweater when I was alive?”

He runs his hand over the wool. Another wife would not understand his quiet ways.

“It would be easier to go to the store and buy it,” he told her, watching her knit for the third hour that day. “It’s why we came to America. So we wouldn’t have to do such primitive work.”

Ngo puts the sweater on and stands in front of the mirror to look at himself. How much he resembles a child as the years draw to a close.

“I like turning string into clothes. It’s proof of how I spent my time. And besides, this one will keep you warm like no machine made sweater can. I’ve touched every stitch of it.”

He gets up, picks up the phone, and dials Thanh’s number. When the answering machine finally clicks, he says quickly, “I can help you with Rachel. You don’t need to send her to daycare. Waste of money.” And then he feels he has run out of things to say, so he hangs up.