

Khanh Ha

All the Pretty Little Horses

Brown earth, brown water. Mamma, I step out of the Jeep, walk to the riverbank. I look at the aquatic plants that float on the brown water. I look at the lush green of vegetation that grows wild coloring the banks. Riverboats and barges. The natives. Tiny and lithe. You never see so many streams and canals and rivers, so much water it drowns you in your dreams and in a dream you flow like driftwood, bobbing and swirling mindlessly in a creek, until you smell the salty air and the water tastes briny and you know then you have returned to the sea. You remember dwellings that cling to the waterside, lives that are stuck to the water's edge. Brown water, as rustic, as muddy, as tranquil as it flows and nurtures the Mekong Delta, as it becomes the aquatic paths that seem to replace any roads worthy of a name on land.

Mamma, you can see those waterways ablaze from the helicopter. White serpentine ribbons entwined and gleaming among the greens. You can see the seaside mangrove forest below. A glimpse of sunlit canals and the sparkling water of a waterfowl breeding colony. Here's a flower I have seen in this coastal mangrove forest. It looks like jasmine. It has that same fragrance. But it's the false jasmine. The Viets call it *lá ngón*. We call it *heartbreak grass*. Here on the edge of the forest it flowers yellow in straggling shrubs, twinning the tree trunks seeking life-giving sun. Had it not in flower, we would never spot it. But if you chew its spearhead-shaped leaves or its yellow flowers or eat its egg-shaped brown fruit, then in no time you'd find yourself frothing in the mouth, your jaw locked, your teeth clenched before you die. That day we were sent to rescue our Echo Company trapped in this mangrove forest by the Viet Cong 306th Battalion. Before we even had a firefight, we had a death in our company. The fellow who died had chewed a handful of false jasmine's leaves. He had a violent fit of stomach pain. He was foaming at the mouth moments before he died, eyes dilated like he saw something terrifying. Later on an investigation led us to believe that he died from suicide.

His death took something away from me, Mamma. Combat deaths often make me hollow inside and sadden me for those I care. But suicide deaths dishearten me. It has hung around with me since Papa was gone. I was in high school when he came back from Nam, this God-forsaken land. He never talked about it though. I only knew from what you told me that he was with the CIA and heavily involved with the Green Berets even before they both came under the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. I knew nothing about Vietnam from him until I went to the OCS. Then I knew what MACV was about. It was there to help train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam to defend South Vietnam against the Viet Cong and its manipulator the North Vietnamese communists. It also had a covert operation that, much later on, became officially known as the Operation Phoenix. It was then that I knew he must have been involved in the program's main objectives—neutralizing every Viet Cong suspect outside the judicial controls, terminating every identified active Viet Cong cadre and every South Vietnamese suspected collaborator. He wasn't the same man, you said to me, after he came back from Nam. Mamma, I would never know what he was like before he left for Nam. He

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was a reticent man. Even to you, Mamma. Then he became a distant figure even more the time he came back and fell in love with the Vietnam-born girl who taught Vietnamese to him and the men he was with. Then how quickly things would fall apart for you and him. You were forty-one then, I remember. She was twenty-four. I never forget the fall of 1963. She died in a car accident with him as her passenger. Papa survived. It was November. Ten days before Thanksgiving. A week later Papa killed himself.

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Mamma, I'm glad that you have kept my oak bed since I was gone. The little Vietnamese girl you adopted has always slept on one side of the bed since she was five. Did she tell you the bed was too large? Now she's no longer a child. And the bed fits her just right. Chi Lan. I can say her name with ease. Like saying the name of Papa's Vietnamese-language teacher. Thanh Hà. But many Viet names are harder to say. I can't help thinking about the time I was two when you put me in that bed, first with Papa, then by myself. Papa told me he missed the closeness between father and son as a child. So every night he would tuck me in, turn off the light and lie down beside me. In the dark, Papa would tell me stories about growing up in Georgetown, a few alleys away from a black neighborhood named Cherry Hill. People there had no indoor electricity or plumbing.

"The reason I'm telling you this," Papa said, "is so you'll remember that there's poverty out there. There are people not nearly so fortunate as we are. I don't want you to take anything for granted. Your grandma worked sixty hours a week and took home a dozen shirts to sew on Sunday and earned a pittance. And the sweatshop owner still threatened to fire her and her friends and bring in them Chinese. The Chinese were willing to work for thirty dollars a month. She raised me, put me through college. A cup of coffee and a loaf of bread was all she ate the whole day, and she ate that every day of her working life."

"Why didn't she live with you and Mamma?" I asked him.

"Would've been too far for her. She thought she needed to work. Grandma was only fifty when she died."

"Did Grandma tell you stories at night when you were a child?"

"She was too tired by the time she got home."

"What happened to Grandpa?"

"He was a soldier. Then in June nineteen seventeen, when I was just born, his outfit attacked the Germans in Belleau Wood to stop them from taking Paris, and he was killed."

One night I kept tossing and turning. Papa said, "What's wrong?"

"Why can't I sleep with Mamma?"

"Mamma goes to bed late."

"I don't mind."

Papa sighed. "She has insomnia," he said. "She needs rest."

"What's insomnia?"

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"Can't sleep. You can count sheep, but it won't help."

"Can anyone help her? Can I help her?"

"The docs treat her. Yes, they help her."

Papa explained that you took lithium to stabilize your mood because of the biochemical imbalances in the brain. You had insomnia during your pregnancy, and you could sleep only after a few glasses of wine. The insomnia got worse after my birth. You couldn't sleep at night. The piano tune you played downstairs would wake Papa in bed. *Go to sleep, baby child, Hush-a-bye, don't you cry. When you wake, you will have, All the pretty little horses.* Late at night, a bottle of gin would bring you back to bed. Soon the sandman came to take you to dreamland.

Papa worried about your biochemical imbalances in the brain, and the lithium you took to calm your nerves caused insomnia. You drank, Mamma. The doctors said you needed light to offset the biochemical imbalances and suggested a lamp with a bluish luminosity. Rainy days and wintry weather made Papa fret. Did she have enough light? Would she stay balanced? But he got used to seeing the lamp glowing blue, and still there was too much darkness.

Then the time I was a first grader, you and Papa wanted to put me in second grade. But that school system didn't accommodate advanced students. The principal convinced both of you that the child still needed to learn and develop his social skills, because intelligence and maturity went hand in hand. The principal said she was pleased to have me in her school. Then noting my bony legs, she mentioned the school's outstanding physical education program.

I rode the school bus every day. One evening Papa came home and found a note from the bus driver. It said I pushed a girl in the back on the bus steps. She scraped her knees and hands when she fell. She was the principal's daughter. Papa sat me down on the couch after dinner and asked me about the incident. I said the girl called me "Stupid."

"You must've done something to her," Papa said. "She wouldn't call you names for no reason."

"I didn't give her the seat she always sat in," I said. "She said it was her seat."

Papa squeezed my hand hard. "You don't push anyone in the back like that. It's uncalled for, it's dangerous."

"But I didn't push her. A kid behind me did."

"Nicola!" Papa glared at me. "Don't lie!"

"You don't trust me."

"I do trust you, Nicola."

Papa scribbled a note and put it in my hand. "I want you to give this to Miss Grace, the bus driver. I want you to apologize to that girl, you hear?"

Papa hated disorderly conduct. He thought everything would be all right once I said I was sorry.

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In the afternoon I came home with a note from Miss Grace.

Papa dropped the note and bent down to my face. "I'm ashamed of what you did, Nicola. Why didn't you tell her you're sorry?"

"I didn't do anything wrong! I didn't push her."

"Enough!" He grabbed me by the shoulder. "Say you're sorry, and go up to your room."

"I won't say it."

"Go to the basement, and stay down there until you do."

I went to the basement and shut the door. Papa made himself a sandwich and brewed a fresh pot of coffee. It was getting dark. After eating the sandwich Papa went down to the basement. I was sitting in the dark, cradling my head between my jacked-up knees.

"Stand up!" he said.

I tried, but my legs were gone under me. Papa grabbed me by the collar, yanked me up. "Have you come to your senses?"

I didn't answer him.

"I want to hear it."

I stood, tucking my chin against my chest.

"You know what I'm down here for," Papa said. "You know why you're down here, so let's hear it."

In a small voice I said, "I think I wet my pants."

Papa felt the seat of my pants. "Say you're sorry, then go up and change."

"I can't say I'm sorry. I didn't do it."

Then I sat back down, covering my head with my hands.

"Go upstairs! Wash up!"

I went upstairs, washed and ate my dinner. That night in my sleep I saw Papa stand in the doorway like a blanched photograph. I cried, "Papa, I didn't do anything wrong!" When I woke I heard the piano downstairs.

I climbed out of bed, padded barefoot downstairs and stood quietly at the foot of the stairs. A night-light as dim and soft as a low-burning candle lit the living room. At the piano you were singing, *Go to sleep, baby child, Hush-a-bye, don't you cry. When you wake, you will have, All the pretty little horses.* When you stopped, I went to you. Half turned, you saw me and pulled me to your bosom.

"What happened, baby?" you asked hoarsely.

"Nothing," I said, pressing my cheek against your warm chest.

"Did Mamma wake you up?"

"Why didn't you go to bed?"

"I'm not sleepy, Hon."

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You kissed me on the cheek, and on your breath I smelled the sweet odor of brandy. I put my arms around you and closed my eyes. I felt not sleepy but dreamy in your softness and warmth.

"Can I sleep with you?" I spoke into your chest.

"I go to bed very late, Hon."

"I'll wait for you."

"You know you have to get up for school early in the morning, don't you?"

I peeked at you with one eye open. "You won't wake me up when you come in. Papa never wakes me up. So can I?"

"I'm used to sleeping alone, Hon." Then you looked down at me and gently laid my head in your lap. "I need a drink or two," you said, "before I go to bed. They help me sleep."

"Will you ever be cured?"

"Listen, it's late. Go on back to bed." Then you glided your fingers across the keyboard. The sound rippled merrily.

"Can I stay here with you?"

You knitted your brows. "What for?"

"I just want to be with you."

"I don't want you to be tired in the morning."

You lifted my head from your lap, and I knew I shouldn't insist. You'd get upset at a slightest provocation.

I went back to my bed and soon I slept to the sound of piano. When I woke in the dark I sat up in bed, looking at the blurred white of the bedroom door, beyond it the hallway and your bedroom. As quietly as I could, I gathered my pillow in my arms and crawled out of bed. The floor creaked as I tiptoed from the room. The smell of brandy hung in the air in your bedroom. Light from the front porch gleamed on the white curtains. The breeze carried in the earth-dry smell of grass. Afraid to wake you from sleep, I lay down at the foot of the bed next to your feet under the bedcover. I watched the curtains rise and fall in the breeze, listened to the dry sounds of autumn leaves on the lawn, and finally no longer feeling the tugging at my heart, I slept.