

*Quiet As They Come

Viet Tran raised his elbows, spread his wings, and was gliding through the white crane movement when he caught himself holding his breath. He tried his best to concentrate on a slow steady flow but was anxious and had to remember to exhale. He attempted his one-legged rooster posture, lost his balance, and had to brace himself on the couch's end. A wave of vertigo washed over him accompanied by a static buzzing in his ears. It imitated the roaring lull of the seas. It reminded him of how the dead always seemed to surface along with his dreams. Twenty years ago, Viet had seen himself as Chancellor at a University. Today, he would be content as an accountant, with a desk to sit at, a respectable salary.

Nobody would believe that Viet Tran had ever killed a man. His friends in Vietnam often described him as gentle, kind, a man of letters, fanatical about chess, a good family man. His co-workers from the post office would probably say he was a simple man, a hard worker, a great listener. Viet's physicality and bodily strength wouldn't be mentioned. And yet there was a time in history, between continents, when he had taken a man's life with his bare hands.

Slicing his palms through the air, Viet guided his *chi* into the golden platter, directing the energy clockwise and allowing the circle to grow with each rotation. His fingertips began to tingle and he'd just entered into a rhythm when he heard the flapping of sheets, the clacking of blinds, and then the patter of his wife's slippers on the plastic mats covering their floors.

The distraction ticked at him but he told himself, count your blessings. He reminded himself that just a year ago the *tai chi* was impossible when he, his wife, and their two daughters were all contained inside the four walls of one bedroom.

Huong said, “You should practice interviewing, not *tai chi*.”

Viet said, “You can’t practice for it.”

“I can dye your hair,” she said.

“You did it last month.”

She combed her fingers through his hair. He lost his posture. “Why are you up so early?” he asked. She didn’t hear him. Huong had moved on to the kitchen and was grinding her coffee beans.

His wife was a sensitive creature. She was a worrier and suffered from insomnia. The lack of sleep curled up in sulky half moons beneath her luminous eyes. Viet wanted to ask her for another thirty minutes for his practice, but he didn’t. He didn’t want her sullen, tucked away in her bedroom with the blinds drawn. Ever since the visit from Child Protective Services this past winter, Huong seemed to have grown even more tentative about the day-to-day activities of their lives. She had changed her work schedule at the electronics firm from nights to days. She claimed that in America, “The devil visits you not at night but in the daytime, when you’re alone and vulnerable.”

Huong remembered the CPS visit as an attack, an insult that she wore like a raw wound. Ever since the incident, without warning, an unforeseen slight could cause her to withdraw inside herself. Sometimes, Huong fortressed off from him and the girls for what could be days at a time.

Viet returned to his postures. He was determined to shut out the busy noise but heard rock music blaring from one room and a blow dryer firing from another. The girls were up now too. Huong tapped him with the TV remote. “Father, can you move over a little? I can’t see.”

In the waiting room at Linkenheimer LLP, Viet saw four other applicants. They were nicely dressed, attractive, well-groomed, and perhaps half his age. They reminded him of his students in the fall, at the start of the term, fresh-faced and eager, when school meant the promise of knowledge and smelled like a new book. Viet patted his hair, hoping to shift the gray into hiding. He shuffled the papers inside his manila folder. The person who had helped him put his resume together said, “You don’t need to bring those diplomas from Vietnam.” Nonetheless, Viet had taken them out from behind the glass frames in which they usually were displayed in his living room. He continued carrying these yellowed fading certificates to the interviews, reminders of who he was and what he’d once achieved.

The woman who gave him the written tests said, “Mr. Tran, you have a PhD in philosophy and a law degree too. Are you sure you’re not overqualified?” Her expression was sincere and she asked it without the skepticism he sometimes heard.

“I be fortunate as state tax associate here, Miss.”

She smiled and said, “Good luck, sir,” and closed the door behind her. She left him with tax laws to manipulate, sales and use taxes, property taxes, state tax controversy resolutions, and credit taxes too. He understood long ago that numbers, like letters, were

interpretable and malleable, dependent solely on perspective. His number two pencil swam through the test sheets.

Viet finished early. He pushed his chair back and stood to leave. But when he thought about how desperately Huong wanted him to get this job, he sat down again, remembering what she'd said the first time they met. "The man of perfect virtue is cautious and slow in speech."

He was a first year professor and she was a student at the University. They were in line at a deli near campus and Viet was with his best friend, an economics professor. The best friend was talking too much trying to impress the co-ed while Viet remained quiet, not sure what to say. He was unnerved by Huong's beauty, the haunting eyes, the see-through skin, the blue of the veins on her wrists. And then those eyes turned to him, her mouth opened, and she quoted the Confucian saying. Years later, Huong confessed that she'd known all along that he was a philosophy professor, "the one rumored to be obsessive about the ancient Chinese."

Yet as he sat on the 29th floor of a downtown skyscraper looking down at the tiny dots below, Viet held on to the advice of the clever young flirt. He double-checked his answers. The remaining time he spent writing down his favorite Confucian anecdotes on the back of an old grocery receipt.

Back at the post office, his co-workers, "the crew," they liked to call themselves, stood over their bins sorting mail by zip code.

"Where you been, little guy?" asked David.

Viet nodded a hello. He had told David before that in his country younger persons greeted elders with respect but the boy either chose to ignore it or had already forgotten. Viet thought how embarrassing it must be, to throw about careless words and not even realize it.

Melvin said “What’s up, little man?” and continued with his story. “Yep, like I was saying met me a sweet baby Saturday night.” Viet stepped in and took the only bin available between the part-time student and the playboy.

“How sweet?” asked David.

Melvin paused and licked his lips. “So sweet, she was like unwrapped candy. Sugar and molasses spilling outta her unbuttoned shirt.”

Viet felt sorry for the two women in the group. They were outnumbered and had to listen in on the talk of depraved men. One woman rolled her eyes and smacked her gum saying, “You’re so gross, Melvin.” But the other woman stepped forward. She blushed a guilty rouge color and wiped the steam from her glasses.

Perhaps I am too sensitive, Viet thought.

Viet didn’t talk much because his English embarrassed him. His co-workers didn’t ask much of him either. They told stories amongst themselves and whispered secrets he pretended he was oblivious to. He once heard a co-worker describe him by saying he was as “quiet as they come.” They were talking in general terms about the droves of Asians they noticed arriving in San Francisco over the past few years. They noted how passive they were and quiet too and how Viet topped them all by being the quietest of all, practically invisible.

Viet realized that each person possessed his own hopes and fears. But every day, it was the same continual banter. One woman always talked about her unfaithful boyfriend. The other gushed about the celebrity gossip she read in the news. David talked about the Chevy Malibu he was fixing up and the places he'd go. Melvin talked about the girls, the endless line of anonymous bodies with interchangeable heads.

He let their words pass with the hours. It was like the French cargo planes of his youth, white noise so thunderously loud it became an indistinguishable drone. The postal work was tedious and Viet kept his mind alive by composing poems in his head for his daughters. During breaks, he'd write out the lines on scratch paper and then in the solitude of night when all the women in the house were sleeping, he recopied the poems on a linen scroll in calligraphy. He was saving them as wedding gifts for the girls.

At lunchtime that day, his oldest daughter strutted into the post-office. It upset him to see her, mid-day, out of class. She made a striking impression though, big smile and lithe limbs swinging. Elle had her waist length hair braided into cornrows. They pulled so tight on her scalp it gave her a feline-like appearance.

“Everything ok? Why you not in school?” Viet asked.

“Hi to you too, Dad.” She was chewing bubble gum.

“Answer me.” He paused to look over the braids, the blackness of it; decided she still looked pretty, refrained from comment.

“Mom asked me to bring you lunch today.” She handed over a grocery-sized brown paper bag. She had recently turned thirteen and already stood his height. She leaned in and whispered, “How was your interview?”

“Good,” he said, “good.” He looked in the bag and saw a glass jar of homemade soymilk. There was also a Tupperware container with white rice and what looked like steak (and probably was because Huong always made his favorite dishes on special occasions). A fork and knife were rolled and rubber-banded in a paper-towel.

Melvin came up and said, “Viet, man, how come you never introduce me to your family before?”

“This my daughter, Elle,” said Viet. He was about to tell his daughter that this was his co-worker, Melvin. But when Viet looked up, Melvin already had his hand reaching out at the girl.

Melvin was smiling, all mouth, and big white teeth. “Pleasure meeting such a beautiful young lady. I’m Melvin. You call me Mel, alright?” He winked.

She shook his hand and said, “Good meeting you, Mel.” Then she stepped away, turned to Viet and said, “My friends are waiting outside.”

Viet walked her to the doorway and watched her clicking down the halls, stirring up dead air with her swinging arms. Viet was in awe of his daughters, their quick minds, their ability to adapt in this new world. He admired their pliable female tongues that danced and twirled in a storm of lyrical English. He marveled at their grace and courage, forced to age beyond their years. His wife always lectured them, “Be thankful we made it here. In Vietnam, they don’t even have food to eat.”

In such moments, Viet often thought his daughters did nothing to deserve their adult mess, their ugly wars. It seemed to belittle the human spirit, to always be grateful that things could be worse. Of course he’d never speak these thoughts to Huong. She already thought he was too easy on the girls. Instead, he left Huong to her couch, with her

remote control, vigilantly watching the twenty-four hour news channel, waiting for the next cruel blow to hit.

When Viet returned with his sure quiet steps, nobody noticed. Melvin was at it with another one of his stories. He said, “Shit, the girls be lovin’ the Mel machine.” Viet went about his last-minute chores. He barely listened while the other men surrounded Melvin with their eager attention. “Girls these days, might be lookin’ like nice little schoolgirls but you know they be all nasty in the bed.” The other men agreed, what with the make-up these girls wore, all done up, difficult to tell their age. Only young David rolled his eyes and mumbled something beneath his breath.

Viet put on his jacket and grabbed the can of stale breadcrumbs for the birds he’d feed from the park bench across the street. He was about to leave when he heard, “That Elle, wouldn’t mind having baby in bed.”

Viet couldn’t believe he heard his daughter’s name come out of Melvin’s mouth. “Who would’ve thought? Fine little thing coming outta...” Melvin continued on.

The room bulged. Viet’s vision flattened out and grew fuzzy all at once. In his ears there was a sound like ball bearings rolling and grinding against each other. Viet grew so hot his fingertips burned. He could feel the wet between his toes. He held on to the back of a chair to brace himself. When he took a seat, the cool of the metal folding chair shocked him. He tried taking deep breaths and even imagined himself back in his living room doing *tai chi*. None of it helped. Viet put the can and the bag on the floor by his feet. He leaned over and massaged his temples. Over the roar, he heard the bragging baritone voice saying with a chuckle, “Then at the end, she said *Mel*, playing all sweet and cozy like.”

Viet sized up the room. He looked at the sooty cloth bags bulging with mail, the bins overflowing with envelopes, and the dingy lockers. Melvin and his mouth stood exactly ten steps away. Viet counted. Melvin's foot rested on the wood bench in the center of the room. He was bent over with his elbow on his knee. The other men hovered around him like ants devouring dead debris. Viet picked up his lunch bag. Inside, the blade poked out from the paper towel.

Their boat had been drifting for a night and a day on the South China Sea. He was below deck with his youngest. They were molding rice balls with their palms and he was teaching her how to count. Already, his daughter was quick with numbers and he knew that by the end of the day, she'd be able to count to at least twenty-six for each of the mouths they had to feed.

She yelled "Twelve!" at the top of her lungs.

Viet reached over to pat her head just as the boat swayed forward and he lost his footing. "That must have been a big wave," he said. She giggled holding her belly but stopped when they heard a woman screaming overhead.

"Papa, what's that?"

A stampede of footsteps rushed to the side of the deck. "Shut up! Shut up!" The man spoke in a crude Vietnamese placing the emphasis on all the wrong vowels.

Viet put his finger to his lips. He kneeled down and placed a rice ball in her hand. "It's like playing hide-n-go-seek okay? Stay under this blanket until I come back for you." He kissed her forehead and closed the closet door.

Viet grabbed a knife and climbed the five steps knowing what he'd see before he even looked. Viet remembered his best friend, the brash economics professor warning, "It's suicide. Don't go. If the Communists don't catch you, you risk the boat sinking, if the boat doesn't sink, the pirates are there to kill you."

Through the hole of the rusted sheet metal Viet saw two men in shabby western dress. The taller one was unbearably thin. He wore bell-bottoms. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses and a mop of shaggy hair. He could have easily been one of Viet's students, languid, underfed, dreamy, with that fashionable look the girls were beginning to favor. Fashion boy shoved the families to the front and gestured with his knife like it was a wand. He yelled in his stilted Vietnamese, "Move! Faster! Faster!"

The shorter one looked like a bulldog with thick shoulders, a ferocious under-bite, and puffy eyelids. He wore a faded nicotine-white undershirt and brown pinstriped pants from the bottom half of a once nice suit. Viet couldn't identify their origin until the bulldog said, "We're never doing this again. We should have stopped. They have less and less, these fucking refugees." He spoke Chinese. Fashion boy was grinding his jaw at such a rate, Viet thought he'd wear his teeth down to a paste. The bulldog said, "Bitch, did you get high again?"

The short one was older and clearly the brains. He walked along the deck, assessing each passenger one by one. Finally, he picked old man Phuc. Viet thought, you fool let him go. He has nothing you'd want. Old man Phuc didn't care about money. He was a poet who'd fled his homeland with only a book of his own censored poems. He would read to the others at nightfall; memories of the Mekong, its dark fertile soil, and

the pelican-like tides of schoolgirls in the white *áo dài* from his youth. The old man had his arms raised in surrender when the bulldog slid the knife sweetly, gently, in a smooth line, as a warning slit across his throat.

When the blood rose and dripped down his collar, his wife finally broke through the crowd. “Take it,” she cried and pulled down her pants. Beneath the roll of the old woman’s pale belly and above her pubic mound, she had wrapped seven gold necklaces in a handkerchief, and duct-taped the couple’s life savings on her pelvis.

Only two men and two knives and yet Viet knew why his friends didn’t fight. They were boat people, half dead, no fight left, and so they dropped their gold and any fragments of hope into the dirty burlap sacks. The pirates moved through the crowd with ease. These families were already trained to lie down, close their eyes, take it, and wait for the abuse to pass.

When the men reached Huong, she took off her jacket and held it out by the collar. Viet thought, good girl, give them what they want. But the pirate stopped. He took his knife and pointed it at her chin. She covered her throat with her hand. He used his knife to wave her hand away. She dodged the blade but immediately slapped her hand back. Huong was covering the jade Buddha at the hollow of her throat.

The other passengers pleaded with her. “Forget it!” “Give it to him!” “Hand it over!”

Viet could hardly breathe. His fear tasted like a fist full of coins jammed in his mouth. He knew his wife wouldn’t give him up the family heirloom without a fight. Instead she pushed her jacket into the bulldog’s chest. With her hands she showed him

the hard nuggets of gold and jewelry she had hand sewn into the quilted lining of the fabric.

The bulldog screamed at her until a wad of spit landed on her chin. Huong would later say he had horrible decaying breath and because she found this so foul she couldn't stop her tongue. "You are animals, dogs." She sneered in his face, "You rape the raped."

He didn't understand her, but he knew she'd cursed him. He grabbed her hair and shoved her face into the deck. The other passengers flinched. They all of course recognized Huong from the commercials of her modeling days. One man later recounted, "The thought of damaging that face was criminal."

From below, Viet watched as the bulldog yanked her pants and panties down to her knees. Huong struggled and kicked beneath him, but he had her pinned. When he pulled his pants down, his zipper got caught. The bulldog tried to free himself with just one hand so he could hold on to his blade.

Viet knew this moment was all he had. He found the spot to aim for, the jugular. He counted the man about eleven paces away but he was nervous because his eyesight was poor, his glasses were foggy, and his lenses were scratched from wedging his face against the rusted hole of the sheet metal door.

From the closet, his daughter whined, "Papa, I don't want to play anymore."

He said, "The game's almost over." Viet chanted over and over in his mind, *Strike first, strike first*. With his knife pressed against his thigh, he thought, if I fail my girls will lose not just one but two.

Viet tightened his grip on the blade handle, slid his other hand on the door knob, inhaled, exhaled, and finally pounced. Once outside, he attacked the bulldog from behind

and snapped his chin back. The knife met resistance at first. Viet plunged in the blade. He worked it through and twisted it. The cut was deep and swift. The blood came flooding out.

Finding courage in the professor's bravery, the other men attacked the taller one. Fashion boy was so high he was practically defenseless despite his weapon.

Viet left the dead pirates on the deck, let the other men dispose of them, and went to retrieve Mai from the closet below deck.

Viet was the boat's official hero, but he retreated into silence.

Huong said, "You did the right thing. Why are you sad, Father?"

"I did the weak thing," he said. "It's easy to inflict harm. It takes nothing."

"You did it for us. Family," she said. Huong kissed his forehead and held him. She rocked him in her arms, her husband, who at home refused to kill a spider no matter how she begged. It too deserves life, he'd say before setting it free from his toilet paper grasp into her gardenia bushes.

Viet sobbed for days over the fragility of life, for the life he had taken, and the one he was given. He cried for having witnessed the weakness of men, who preyed on the innocent and the poor. He held his head in stained hands, believing he'd failed himself because he'd done the unthinkable and killed a man. He was common, crude as the rest, unable to live up to the non-violence he preached, wasn't the gentleman he always aspired to be.

Viet held his head in his hands. He had sweat stains under the armpits of his regulation short-sleeved postal shirt. His sack lunch was perched on his lap.

“She had her hair all braided up so you know she be liking the brothers,” Melvin said carrying on.

Viet’s heart had only had one desire and his body was moved to only one goal. *He needed to shut this man up.* He sat trembling with his entire arm hidden inside the brown grocery bag. Inside, he gripped the knife in his hand. David turned around, saw Viet, and signaled the others.

Melvin finally caught on. He said, “Damn Viet, why you be all eavesdropping and shit? Sitting there all quiet, man, I didn’t know. Shit.”

“You not a good man,” Viet said his chin up. “My daughter, she thirteen-years-old, she a nice girl.”

“I was only saying nice things about her, man. *Real nice.*”

A couple guys laughed under their breath, saying, Damn Melvin, you’re a nut.

Viet stood up and the folding chair squeaked across the floor. He cradled the paper bag with one hand while the other still clutched the knife inside. “You disrespect her,” he said. He felt the vein in the middle of his forehead pumping. It rushed blood to his ears. It brought him back to the emptiness of the seas, its violent waves. His vision swayed. But when he blinked and refocused, it was Melvin’s eyes that he tracked. The black man’s gaze stopped at Viet’s shirt. It was so wet it was now transparent and Viet’s ribbed undershirt showed through. Then the eyes moved to the brown paper bag and stayed there. They squinted, straining to understand what was inside. Viet tried to control his trembling and told himself; *shut him up, strike first, strike first.*

Melvin said, “I’m sorry, man.”

Viet wouldn't let him finish. "You disrespect her," he said. "You talk about her, only thirteen, like whore." Viet found his amplified voice almost unrecognizable.

"Don't do nothing crazy," Melvin said.

"You disrespect me!"

"I was just foolin' around but I shouldn't a been talking like that." Melvin held his hands up in front of his chest, palms out. "Don't be mad now, come on."

Viet whispered it again; you disrespect *me*, beneath his breath, and exhaled before letting go of the knife.

Melvin, arms wide-open said, "I like you, you a cool little cat. I didn't mean nothin'. I swear. I didn't mean no disrespect."

"You see her again, you apologize," Viet said, dropping the bag.

The glass jar cracked at his feet. The soymilk leaked through the brown paper. Nobody noticed. Their eyes were fixed on big Melvin's arms wrapped around Viet, hugging him tight.

"Next time, just tell me to shut up al'right?" Melvin laughed. Smothered in Melvin's overly jovial embrace of brotherhood, Viet remembered a Confucian saying and repeated it in his head. *Don't worry if people don't recognize your merits; worry that you may not recognize theirs.*

Melvin slapped him on the back and said, solemn and concerned, "Man, why don't you come with us today? Chill with the boys." Viet felt foolish looking down at his brown shoes and the soggy corners of the brown bag. He was thankful for their easy forgiveness, but declined. He wanted more than anything to sit alone, at the bench with the birds, and eat his lunch quietly.

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