

MISS LIEN

Lien was fighting them again. Clawing at their arms, kicking her feet, pushing them away.

Go get the boy. This one is strong.

She rolled her head from one side to the other. Her skin was slick, sweat squeezing from every pore in her body, but there were still so many hands holding her down. Lien tried to focus on the ceiling. She knew it was dark cement, she remembered that from several hours earlier, but all she saw were bright blues and purples, growing lighter and lighter.

Push. Push now.

She tried to do what they said, she knew it would make the pain stop. But they still weren't satisfied. They kept wanting her to push harder. They were beginning to sound angry.

We need more sheets. It's getting slippery.

Why is all this blood coming from such a small girl?

That's probably why. Her body is still so young. It isn't prepared for this.

Little slut. All right. Let's try this again. Push. Push now.

Their voices were getting fainter. Lien tried to lift her head up to hear them better, but a rough hand pushed it back on the mat. Another gripped at her hair, pulling her head even further back, ripping several strands from her damp scalp.

Push. Push.

All she could see were the colors now. She wanted to tell them she was trying. She really was. But the only thing they could hear were her soft, shallow breaths, quieter and quieter.

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The silt below Lien's feet was soft. Silky. She felt her heels, then the soles and toes sink into the soil until finally she looked down to see that the earth had swallowed her up to her ankles. Lien twisted playfully, testing her balance. The earth's grip on her was tight, secure.

Her brothers' voices rang far away. They were playing beyond their family's rice paddy, near the main road where the ground was solid enough to run on. It would take them a while to grow bored enough to come bother her. By then, her parents would be home from the market and she and her sisters would help their mother and her grandmother prepare dinner. But for now, she was alone. A slight breeze rustled the still water and cooled the sweat pooling on the back of her neck. She closed her eyes, enjoying this. The oldest of seven children, Lien was hardly ever alone.

The July monsoon season had ended and for the first time in weeks the sky was clear and the sun soared high, brightening the rich green of the fields and thick shade trees. Soon they would be planting rice seedlings for a new crop. While her family's plot of land was not nearly as vast as the rich plantations farther north in the Mekong Delta, it was adequate enough to feed Lien, her grandparents, parents, and younger siblings.

She looked to the earth. Her shadow stretched across the field, long and looming, intimidating. Since she could remember, Lien had always been impatient to grow, wanted to be as imposing as her father and grandfather. She imagined that with each passing year, she would grow taller and taller until she was as lofty as the trees and could step into heaven and be with her other grandparents, her mother's parents, the ones who died before she was born. When she confided this plan to her parents—she must have been only four or so—they'd laughed.

And what will you say to them, Miss Lien? her mother asked, using the family's favorite endearment for their oldest child.

I will say I am your granddaughter. I am your family. Love me.

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The air was getting thick again. Lien couldn't breathe.

Mother. Turning slightly, Lien's spine curled to the cramping in her stomach.

Mother. A cool, callused hand brushed her forehead and Lien lifted her neck instinctively to the touch. But then the hand went away and was soon replaced with fresh beads of sweat.

The fever is gone. Rest more.

Mother, wait. It was all Lien could manage. Her mouth was dry. It hurt to swallow.

Go to sleep.

The voice was harder this time, full of sternness and authority. So she did.

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Their water buffalo was old, but tough. Nearly twelve years old, he could still plow fourteen-hour days, as familiar with the paddy as Lien was. The rides happened after the day's work, when the air was cooling and Lien's father was sure their grandparents weren't around to see. They wouldn't approve of wasting the animal's precious energy, which should be reserved solely for plowing the fields.

Lien sat in the front, while her two younger sisters Hanh and Doanh clutched her waist from behind. The buffalo moved surely and steadily through the swampy ditches, but the children still shrieked with elated terror, a gratifying scream after so many hours spent quietly hunched over a muddy field, poking fussy rice seeds into the water, one by one.

Up high, Lien observed her family's land. Her youngest brothers and sisters played with the pigs and ducks in the wire pen next to the house, chasing them, imitating their screeching and flapping. Her mother and grandmother squatted in the garden, pulling up ripened vegetables. Her mother rolled back on her heels, trying to keep a delicate balance over her swollen stomach.

Grasping the buffalo's thick black fur, Lien remembered the night her mother announced her most recent pregnancy. The adults' reaction had been different from previous ones. There were no smiles or shouts of good fortune. Her father's face had

turned red, though he said nothing in front of the children. Her grandparents spent most of the night praying to their ancestors. This confused Lien, who'd always been told that every child was a blessing, an extra pair of hands and feet to enrich and strengthen the family.

They are worried about my health because I'm getting older, Lien's mother had said when they were in the kitchen scrubbing potatoes. Certainly they will love this child too.

We want this baby, don't we?

Of course. Silly girl. Every child born in our family is wanted.

Her mother was right. After several days, her grandparents and father were smiling and speaking of the baby with anticipation. But Lien soon realized it wasn't her mother's age that worried them.

Beyond the hills, the sky was smoking, but not with the soft pinks and oranges Lien had grown up watching every evening. The fiery shades were pointed and harsh. Cinders lingered in the air.

What is that smell? her sister Hanh asked.

They must be burning crop stubble, their father said.

Lien said nothing and neither did her sisters. They clung closer to her waist. The buffalo shifted his weight restlessly.

The war is far away, their father assured them, far up in the north. We are safe here.

Because he was their father, because they never remembered him ever being wrong, they tried to believe him.

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This time, Lien remembered where she was. She didn't have to open her eyes. Though the river breeze drifting in from the window was cool, biting even, her thin blanket clung to her back, already soaked with sweat. Long strands of hair pasted to her cheeks. The pungent aroma of peppermint oil tingled her nose. Laying on the sleeping mat these past two days, she recognized every sound the midwife and her servants made. Shuffling feet kicking up dust from the dirty floor. The steady drip of sheets and rags wrung clean. Jugs of water splashing into shallow clay bowls. The persistent, steady chorus of moaning and whimpering from the other girls. Lien vainly remained silent, hoping the others would recognize the dignity in swallowing back the pain. Hoping they would follow her example. But they didn't care. Their bodies, so recently torn open were still in shock and ached, bled and throbbed, resentful of what they'd been put through.

The midwife was making her rounds, checking temperatures and bandages while chewing on a baguette. Lien sat up when she came near. Sparks of colors swirled around her eyes. She tightened her grip on the blanket to steady herself.

When can I leave?

The midwife placed her palm on Lien's forehead. What about the child?

Lien blinked several times and inhaled stale air. When can we leave?

The midwife spread her lips, revealing black lacquered teeth. Lien realized she must have come from a family of wealth. Lien wondered how the woman had fallen from her upper status. The war, probably. It explained her bitterness. She disdained this place as well, thought she didn't belong here either.

You haven't paid me yet, the woman said.

Lien had been in and out of consciousness for the past two days. She knew the little money she did have, stuffed deep in the stitching of her clothes, was gone by now.

I will pay you back.

You had a difficult labor. We had to send for a boy to help hold you down.

I have nothing to offer you now, unless you want me to work the payment off.

Around them, girls shuffled about the house, changing bed sheets, sweeping the dirt floor, tending to others either recovering or approaching labor. The midwife had enough people working off debts.

The midwife's eyes were distracted by something. Lien followed the woman's gaze to her wrist. A thin jade bracelet, her last possession of value. Without hesitating, Lien wrapped her fingers and wrenched it off, ignoring the dull pain it left behind.

I will be back for it when I have your money.

You can stay one more day, the midwife said, taking the bracelet from her and slipping it inside her blouse pocket. The bleeding should stop by tomorrow.

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It is only a safety precaution. It is nothing to worry about. We can always use more room in this house with the new baby.

These were the things Lien's father kept saying while he, her mother and grandparents began digging for a bunker behind their house. Almost every family in the village was building one. A ditch dug up for every house. Children started standing closer to their parents, holding on to their legs. The shelling, once barely audible in their village, was increasing in volume and frequency. The earth shook from these mounting

explosions, unstable, uncertain, rattling the people who depended on its rich soil for their livelihood.

At first their father insisted the children concentrate on the rice planting while the adults tended to the bunker. He said the rice was more important, the backbone of their family and the entire country. They depended on the crop for survival. Nothing should ever come before it or compromise its growth.

It promised to be an abundant crop. The monsoon season had provided plenty of water and the mud's consistency was especially soupy this year. If successful, they would have enough rice left over to sell to the market for extra food and supplies to stock up for the winter.

Though Lien sternly instructed her brothers and sisters to watch the paddy, she couldn't help also feeling curious about the adults' new project. She found herself walking along the edge of the paddy close to where they were digging and setting up plates of cement for the bunker walls. She prodded the buffalo absentmindedly with her bamboo stick as it plowed the field, all the while watching her father and grandfather fit the poles along the walls. She could only see the tops of their heads, light with dust and bent close together, like they were deep in conversation.

Perhaps we should send the women and children away, Lien's grandfather said. In the bunker's trench, they couldn't even see Lien.

Where would we send them? her father said. We don't know anyone in Can Tho.

They should go to the city. It's better protected. They will be safer there.

We have no money. We can't afford to. And we can't leave the land unguarded.

What good is this land going to do you if your family is dead?

Crazy old man. Has the village been attacked yet? I already agreed to build this bunker because you wouldn't stop nagging. No one is going to die. You heard Dat, it will never get this far south.

I am crazy? All my life this country has been at war, on this very land. How did I raise a son so blind?

The buffalo snorted loudly, restless from standing still for so long. Lien's father and grandfather looked up, squinting at the sun.

What are you doing, Miss Lien? her father asked. What do you need?

Nothing. The buffalo is just tired. She slapped the ox on the back with her stick and they walked on.

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The common room in the midwife's house was divided into five sections with bamboo screens for every two sleeping mats. The girl sharing Lien's partition, who'd given birth yesterday and slept most of the afternoon away, awoke just when the sun was setting, soft yellow light drifting over as her eyes fluttered open. A slow smile appeared on her face, her arms lazily stretching over her head. She was beautiful with shiny waist-long black hair and delicate slender hands.

I'm starving. She sat up a little and looked over at Lien. When is supper?

Soon.

Ay-yah. The girl lay back suddenly, but her smile only grew wider. You think it would get easier after a few times, but it never does. Her eyes scanned Lien head to toe. Your first?

Lien nodded.

Oh look at this one. One of the midwife's servants was walking toward them holding a small bundle wrapped in cloth. The girl held her arms out for it, quickly cradling and cooing at it softly. This will be a handsome one. Daddy's an American GI. Beautiful green eyes. But it's too soon to tell if it will get those.

Do you want to see your baby?

It took Lien several moments to realize the midwife's servant was talking to her. Even then Lien couldn't speak, only staring back at the servant's expectant eyes and then the girl's. Both were waiting for Lien's response, ready to judge her. Finally, reluctantly, Lien nodded.

The girl had pulled her blouse down to breastfeed the infant. Lien turned on her back so she could stare at the ceiling.

It's all right, the girl said after the servant left. I wasn't sure about looking at my first either, knowing I had to give it up.

Lien rolled her head to the side and looked at her. Where did you take it?

There's this orphanage run by some Catholic nuns. The girl shifted the infant so she could sit up more easily. They take every child in, no questions.

How far is that from here?

Just outside of Vinh Long. About fifteen kilometers north. The girl smiled sympathetically. You know, this baby could help you, if the father's an American. That's why I'm keeping this one.

Lien didn't say anything.

Unless you don't want to see the father. Once again the girl's eyes traveled the length of Lien's face and body, as if she could tell just by looking at her. Unless it was bad. Then no one could blame you for getting rid of it.

Lien twisted in her sheets until she found a comfortable position facing the wall. I can't keep it.

They were silent then, the only sound in the room the persistent, greedy suckling of the infant. Lien resisted the urge to cover her ears, though the nursing only grew louder and more desperate.

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They had to be quiet. The roof of the bunker was made up of thin layers of straw and sand. If they made too much noise, the Viet Cong would discover them. Lien held her brother An in her lap, urging him to stop wiggling and hushing his crying. No one spoke. The family spent most of the time listening to the fighting and burning above, trying not to envision the worst.

When it had been silent for nearly five hours and her father deemed it safe, they emerged from the bunker with tentative steps, squinting, like it had been years since they'd seen the sun and breathed fresh air, instead of only two days.

We're alive, Lien's mother reminded them. We need to be thankful we are alive.

But as the family wandered around their property to assess the damage, they could not remember this. It didn't matter that the house was spared. Everything around it was not.

Most the livestock had been stolen from their cages. The vegetable garden was covered in shrapnel. They found their water buffalo near the main road slaughtered,

rotting, covered with flies. But the worst of it was the rice paddy. The crop was ruined. The smell of fire drifted through the air. They'd have no rice for the coming season.

Lien was the only one to follow her father into the rice paddy. He walked through every ditch, as if to confirm that every seedling had been uprooted, destroyed. Lien kept up as best she could, but the burnt rice stalks sliced deep into her bare feet, slowing her down. When she caught up to him near the edge of their property, he was staring at the ground. He sank his knees into the crusty, dry dirt and dug his hands into the earth with both hands. He held it up to Lien. All their work, all those hours, weeks and years. Now ash and gunpowder.

We can replant, Lien said. We can try again.

Her father shook his head. It's too late. We'll have to wait for next season.

But what are we going to eat? She could feel it creeping into her voice. She swallowed hard, wanting to will the fear away.

Since she was little, Lien had always been grateful to be born into her family. Unlike others in the village, their family valued daughters as highly as sons. Each child considered special and important. They looked down on other families who spoiled their sons and ignored their daughters, thought them to be old-fashioned, outdated, cruel.

Lien had always been treated like a first-born son, with all the privileges and honors. Now she suddenly understood the responsibility that came with those benefits and for the first time, wished she were a boy. Sons could go out and make money in place of the father and support the family. Daughters didn't have the same liberties.

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The servant returned with it. Tiny. Wrinkly. Slippery. Smelling like sour milk and feces. Its eyes hadn't opened yet. Lien held it away from her, tilting and inspecting it like her fish at the market.

The baby looks strong, the girl said. It looks like you.

No it doesn't.

The servant said the infant had already been fed. Lien wordlessly handed it back to her.

Every patient's possessions lay beside their mats against the wall. On the girl's side were several bags neatly stuffed with clothes and toiletries. There was nothing on Lien's side. Lien was used to the look the girl was giving her now: compassion, pity, a little smugness. She tried to ignore it.

You know, if you need money, the girl said, I know some people—

I already have a job.

What do you do?

I work on a fishing boat in Can Tho.

But you know you can make a lot more—

I'm not a whore. Lien didn't mean to sound so rude. But she was tired. The walls were beginning to bend and wobble again.

The girl didn't seem to take offense. She even smiled. I wasn't either. And I won't be for much longer. But it's nice to eat. It's nice to provide for your family.

Later that evening, a servant arrived with their suppers. Rice porridge with chicken shreds. Lien savored every bite, even swallowing her pride to ask for another

bowl. Part of her regretted that she'd be leaving tomorrow. She hadn't eaten this well since she was home. But she would be home soon.

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She should have left immediately. Instead, waiting a week only served to divide the family even more. Lien's grandparents did not approve of her leaving for the city alone. Her parents felt there was no other choice. There was no money and their food rations were dwindling. Lien's father couldn't leave his young family and land unprotected. Her mother was expecting the baby in a few weeks. Lien's grandparents were too old. Her brothers and sisters were too young. Lien would go to Can Tho, the largest city in the Delta, to find work in the floating market. She would send money home and return after the next monsoon season in time for replanting the rice.

The night before she left, their family cooked a small chicken and the last of the wild sweet potatoes, giving the largest portion to Lien so she would have plenty of strength for her journey. Her brothers and sisters took turns sitting next to her while they ate, mostly in silence. She rubbed each of them roughly behind their ears, reminding them to be good for their parents.

Her grandfather reminded Lien of their country's long history of oppression and survival: first the Chinese, then the French, the Japanese, now each other. He'd been imprisoned and released from three regimes because it was his fate to survive. You will too, Miss Lien. You will because you are strong like me.

Her grandmother gave her several gold-plated necklaces and a jade bracelet, which she'd been saving as part of Lien's dowry. Her hands were cold when she held

Lien's cheeks. Remember you are a good girl. Stay away from bad people. Do not do anything to shame us.

Her father dressed her in his warmest coat. Look how tall you are getting. Almost as tall as me. Your father is getting old now. He is not as smart as he once was. But you are, more than I ever was. You are my hope. You are my consolation.

Her mother's eyes were wet but she put on a bright smile for her daughter. She brushed Lien's long black hair and tied it into a knot on the top of her head. You should keep your hair up so people will know you come from a good family. I won't be able to do it for you anymore. You have to. You're an adult now.

Take care of yourself.

We are so proud of you.

Come home safe.

Do not let us down.

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Lien leaned over and saw her reflection, exaggerated and ugly, bleeding into dirty water and lily pads, frowning back. At least eight meters.

There was no other way to cross the canal but to use the monkey bridge. The child's weight bore heavily in Lien's arms, though it couldn't have been more than six, seven pounds. Alone, she'd prance across the creaky bridge, vine-stitched skeins of mangrove and bamboo, without another thought. She'd done it so many times before. But now this extra weight on her hip. This unfamiliar caution. It compromised her balance. It made her weak.

She'd left the midwife's house that morning. Lien had to wrap up the infant in old newspaper since they needed the blanket for other babies. She hadn't been walking for that long, but her back and feet already throbbed. Someone at the midwife's house had stolen her conical hat and though she tried to stay under the shade of trees, there was no escaping the humidity. She had to stop frequently to breathe properly. Her hair stuck to her forehead and temples, the sweat dripping down and stinging her eyes. It wouldn't be that much farther. She would reach the orphanage before sun down.

Right foot on the bamboo. Don't look down. Left foot. Careful of the loose bamboo. Hold the infant closer. Closer. Hold it near the center of the chest or you'll tip over. Right. Left. Again. Again. Keep the weight on the balls of the feet. Light steps, light steps. Stay moving. Right. Left. Ignore the baby. Keep on moving. It's awake. It's squirming. Stop squirming. Right. Left.

Halfway across, the baby started to cry and without meaning to, Lien looked down to the water. Her balance shifted and she felt the weight pull at her from the side. Instinctively, she swung the other way, trying to right herself. She pressed the infant's head with her left hand into her chest, muffling its cries. A flutter in her stomach, the realization that she could fall, threw her forward, running across the bridge until she finally reached the other side, falling onto the dirt road, and could breathe again.

The infant was bawling now. Its wrinkly face screwed up in pain, infuriated that it was startled awake. It had been so good until now, so quiet. Now its screams were all she could hear.

It's okay, she said, patting the infant on the back, it's okay. She pulled the infant away and looked into its face, its eyes folded slits, face blood red, mouth a tiny oval,

wailing. It looked no different from any one of Lien's younger brothers or sisters when they were born. Pure, blameless. She reached for the newspaper cradling its head, pulling it over to cover its face. It didn't stop the crying, but Lien felt better.

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Hey little thing.

Lien looked up, squinting beneath her conical hat, at the blond-haired GI hovering above her, his large hairy hands on his hips. He stood at the edge of the dock. Lien crouched on the fishing sampan, safe with a foot of green water between them.

Wanna buy? Lien asked. She knew only a few phrases of English, enough to haggle against experienced bargainers for the fish she sold. Number one fish. Very good.

Not the fish, honey.

Cai Rang was the largest floating market in Can Tho and all of the Mekong Delta. Lien awoke before dawn, gutting, cleaning and selling fish until sundown in exchange for food, lodging and a small cut of the profits. The fishermen, two brothers who looked as old as her father but with no families of their own, seemed kind enough, but she felt uncomfortable sleeping in the same cabin with them. Lien talked of her father often, how large and angry he was and how he would be visiting Can Tho soon.

Still, they'd stroke her hair, squeeze her hip. She felt compelled to allow this. It had taken her several weeks wandering Can Tho to find this job and she couldn't lose it.

The city was different from what she remembered. The floating market was still the center of commerce, where boats and sampans gathered to sell their fish, vegetables and fruit. Her grandmother had taken her here several times to barter their rice. Lien

remembered it to be friendlier than it was now. Maybe it was because she was younger then.

But the people did seem colder, more distant, perhaps because of the Americans. Soldiers, taller than she ever imagined people could be, were everywhere. It made the merchants nervous. Many of the soldiers stared at Lien curiously when she would yell to them, waving catfish in their faces. Some even tried to talk to her, like this one.

C'mon. You want to get some lunch with me, little thing?

Lien tilted her head to the side and smiled softly at the G.I. No speak good. Sorry. You buy fish or no?

He stepped toward her, one heavy black boot landing on the sampan. Surprised, Lien fell backwards, her hands desperately reaching behind to clutch the soggy wood floor. A large curly-haired hand reached for her shoulder.

C'mon, honey. You don't have to be scared of me.

A crate of fish dropped on the floor, rocking the sampan. Both Lien and the G.I. turned to see one of the fishermen, the older of the two brothers, approach them. The G.I.'s hand released Lien and he retreated to the dock. Smiling sheepishly, he offered a mock salute before turning to leave.

The older brother knelt at the edge of the boat, scowling at Lien. You better stop flirting with those white soldiers.

I wasn't flirting.

Don't lie to me. He strode towards her, his face a deep red in the bright sun. I won't tolerate whores or liars on my boat.

She flinched when he raised his hand towards her, but it was a caress that came and not a strike. Along her cheek and down her neck, fingering a strand of hair from her bun that swept past her shoulder.

Stay away from those men. His eyes were soft now, his mouth relaxing into a disapproving frown. We've lost too many of our girls to them.

Lien nodded, trying to hide her relief when he took his hand away. He stared at her for a long time before he gathered his fishing nets and returned to the back of the boat.

At nights, she would remember her family and this allowed her to eventually drift into sleep. The money she earned would go to them and once there was enough, she would leave to help for the next rice planting. But after the February monsoon season, her father sent her a letter asking if she could stay in Can Tho for a bit longer. The money was too valuable. So Lien stayed, though she missed home terribly, because she understood this was necessary. This was her responsibility.

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It wouldn't stop crying. They were resting in a cool spot under a papaya tree, a little off the main road where beggars and American soldiers couldn't hassle her. Her bare feet were bleeding again. She dug them into the moist soil to cool them off. She shook the child softly, trying to coax it back to sleep, but it would have none of that, howling with lungs that Lien had to admit were impressive. Lien was hungry. She hadn't had lunch. That was when she realized it hadn't eaten since that morning either.

Gingerly, she lifted her blouse to expose her left breast. Holding the hem of her blouse up with her teeth, she tucked the infant's head to her breast until its quivering

mouth latched onto her nipple. Its grip was tight, painful, and she nearly pulled the infant away. But the screaming stopped. The infant's face relaxed, finally getting what it wanted. She held it there for what seemed like hours until it was sated and even then Lien couldn't get up to start walking again right away. She was drained and unlike the infant, had no food readily available.

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Lien stumbled along the market street, her arms crossed around her midsection trying to contain the pain.

It's too strong, the herbalist had told her, it won't die.

She walked as quickly as she could but people kept getting in her way. Shoulders bumping into her. She swerved to avoid a cyclo taxi backing out of an alley and slipped on the loose gravel, landing hard on her side. Her right hand scraped from the fall, bleeding. Someone tried to help her up but she pushed him away. Lien couldn't stand to be touched anymore. She took a few steps, trying to regain her balance and direction. Faces all around stared at her. Lien wanted to yell at them to leave her alone. She never meant for this to happen.

Because it wouldn't die, it had gotten angry at the herbs Lien ingested, retaliating with more nausea, more cramps. Five months. She had five months until it was out of her body. She needed to work as much as she could until then.

Finally she regained her sense of direction. She walked in silence, jealously taking in all the yelling and noise around her. They had the freedom, the luxury to speak, complain, cry and release. Lien could tell no one of this. She could never confide to her mother and father. It wouldn't make anything better. Silly and childish to think it would.

They would only blame her. They would never believe that they were partly responsible. No, Lien would take care of this on her own. She survived this long in the city by herself. She could handle this.

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A long dirt driveway led to a tall rusted gate surrounded by an equally large concrete wall. Blessed Haven for the Children of God. Lien pushed the broken gate open and walked up the driveway to a two-story building with peeling paint and covered vine. She could already hear the crying from inside, seeping through the cracks of the walls.

Lien had been crouching in the bushes outside the driveway for several hours until the nuns had closed the windows after sunset. From what she could see, it seemed like an adequate place. It would be well taken care of here.

She cautiously walked up the driveway, ready to retreat should someone open the front door. Once there, she carefully laid the infant on the front step. It squirmed and for a brief moment, Lien feared would scream again. But its mouth only opened to yawn and settle back into sleep.

Lien pulled at the bell hard. She turned and ran, suddenly overcome with an energy that had been sorely missed all day. Each step felt so light the wind was almost carrying her until she passed the gate and turned, hiding behind the wall.

Someone had opened the front door. A nun wearing a black habit stepped out, looking down at the bundle on the front step. She peered beyond the gate, but Lien remained out of sight. Lien waited.

The nun simply stood there, looking out, hands on her hips, waiting. Could she see Lien? It was impossible. What was she looking for? Lien crouched lower, breathing

heavily through her mouth. The girl said this orphanage took all babies, no questions. What was she doing? They couldn't refuse the child. They were nuns. Did they need the mother's approval? Did they need Lien to say she couldn't keep this child, that there was no possible way she could ever care for it?

It wasn't fair. So many open mouths and outstretched hands, expecting her to fill them. She couldn't have another one. She didn't ask for this.

Finally, the nun bent over and picked up the infant. One final look out on the road, one last chance, and she turned her back and stepped in. Lien rested her head against the cool cement wall. This child was safe. This child would not have to suffer. The door shut behind the nun. Lien watched for several minutes, waiting, resting, breathing, and then turned and began for the main road.