

PIONEER GIRL

a novel



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author of **STEALING BUDDHA'S DINNER**

Also by Bich Minh Nguyen

Stealing Buddha's Dinner: A Memoir

Short Girls: A Novel

Pioneer



Girl

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For Po, Henry, and Julian

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PROLOGUE

In August 1965 a woman named Rose walked into my grandfather's café in Saigon. That much is known. My grandfather would say that's the beginning of this story. My mother would say I should have left it at that.

Back then, my mother and grandfather lived in the rooms above the café. She was twelve, an only child whose own mother had died the year before. In the evenings my grandfather taught her English from a friend's borrowed textbook. He had a feeling, he used to say, that it was the language of the future. On that day when an American woman sat down at one of his teak tables, looked around at the blue-trimmed doorways and the ceiling fans that had paddles shaped like ginkgo leaves, he took it as a sign. She asked for coffee or tea, whichever was freshest, and he brought her a cup of French roast with condensed milk and half a baguette, using his most careful pronunciation to ask if she needed any kind of help. It was monsoon season, the part of the year when heat and steam were the same, unrelenting. The traffic of bicycles and mopeds and pedicabs crisscrossed the windows, and the woman seemed glad to be free of it. There weren't many American women in Vietnam, and she didn't seem like a nurse or aid worker. She was old, surprisingly so, hair a silver sweep beneath a straw hat.

Oh, I don't need help, she said. I need conversation.

She was a reporter, on assignment for a magazine that wanted her to write about the war in Vietnam from a woman's point of view. She was supposed to spend a month getting a sense of the country, the people, the culture, and distill it all into an article. My grandfather, always interested in other people's stories, sat and talked with her, while my mother watched from the kitchen. I have imagined the languorous way Rose might have sat, the way her dress folded around her, making her seem protected, somehow, as if she knew the war would not touch her.

Rose stopped by the café often during her week in Saigon, and though she and my grandfather talked for hours, he remembered little about her history. If Rose revealed her full name, if she spoke about her own mother and father, or anything about the roots of her family, he didn't remember. He recalled, instead, her lively voice, her many questions about Vietnam; he remembered her largeness, how she always wore a hat. In anticipation of her visits, he reserved pineapple and lychees for her. He offered her delicacies usually eaten on holidays—sticky rice buns stuffed with sweet sausage, candied ginger snacks, curls of dried coconut. She ate them heartily. He gave her advice about lodgings in Da Lat and Hue and, whenever she bade farewell, he helped her cross the street. One day, when Rose complained of a cramp in her leg, he had my mother run out to fetch some balm that Rose later said cured her instantly. *You are lovely*, my mother remembered Rose saying. *The loveliest little family.*

Ten years later, when my mother and grandfather fled Saigon for America, one of the few things they took with them was a small gold pin, engraved with a picture of a house, that had belonged to Rose. She had dropped it, perhaps, forgotten it. Left it sitting on the table where a plate would be. They had kept the pin safe, but Rose never came back.

When I was growing up my grandfather liked to tell these stories about Rose. Once in a while my mother joined in too. *That big white lady with a purse and a notebook*, she would say. *All by herself, Saigon, in a war.* Her voice would take on a kind of tenderness, wonder, that I rarely heard otherwise.

We would usually be packed in the car when they got to remembering like this, but I didn't pay much attention until the time we moved from a town in southern Wisconsin to a town in central Illinois. I was eight years old and book-crazy, could read for stretches in the car without getting sick, while my brother, Sam, listened to the same music on his Discman over and over. Even then, at age nine, he had the ability to close himself down to everyone around him. That year, my obsession was the *Little House on the Prairie* box set my grandfather had given me for my birthday. As we drove toward our new town I imagined every farm we passed was Laura Ingalls Wilder's and that I could see her, calico-bonneted, walking in wheat. I'd been following her, book to book, from childhood to adulthood when, one Christmas, her new fiancé Almanzo gave her a present.

There in a nest of white cotton lay a gold bar pin. On its flat surface was etched a little house, and before it along the bar lay a tiny lake, and a spray of grasses and leaves.

It sounded just like Rose's pin, the narrow shape and delicate weight I'd known from helping my mother clean her jewelry.

Outside, wildflowers along the road blurred together as my mother accelerated to pass a minivan. She was a faster driver than my grandfather, who liked to point out the semis ahead and keep a watch for police cars.

Ong Hai, I said, which was what we all called him. Listen to this. I read the description aloud.

How funny, he said. Isn't that funny?

You read too much, my mother said to me.

I say Rose's pin was a gift too, my grandfather went on. Even if by accident. Can't refuse something like that.

My mother said nothing more, but I figured it must have meant the same for her. Why else would they have kept the pin, brought it to America?

We drove on, all of us confined together in the old Mercury. We were, if nothing else, accounted for and heading in the same direction. A new restaurant. A new town. A new apartment. My mother and grandfather would take turns behind the wheel, fiddling with the temperature controls. The urn that carried my father's ashes rode up front with them. In the back, Sam and I stared out the windows at the electric wires leading us deeper into the big Midwest that was the only landscape we knew.

I decided to pretend that the two pins were the same, that Almanzo's gift to Laura was not just based on a true story, but a real treasure now hidden away in my mother's jewelry box. In books, characters were always keeping secrets. This would be one of mine. I didn't know it would stay that way for years, waiting to be brought out into the light.

I went back to my books. My mother gripped the steering wheel; my grandfather searched the radio for weather and news. Sam leaned against his door, eyes closed, arms tucked beneath the marle blanket our mother had knitted the previous winter. Outside, the afternoon had long given in to cloud. We drove on, together, toward our next new home.

I always thought when I left my mother's house there'd be no looking back. That the restaurant life my family had followed for so long would not figure into mine. If there was one thing Sam and I had always agreed on, it was that. In college I'd majored in English, then kept on for a PhD that my mother called a waste, meaningless compared to dentistry, engineering, or at the very least, accounting. So when I had to move back to Franklin after grad school, nowhere else to go, I said it was because I'd lost the lease on my apartment in Madison. I wasn't about to admit that I'd struck out on the academic job market.

My mother put me to work right away at the coffee-slash-noodle shop that she owned with Ong Hai. Within days I was fixing summer rolls, chopping up onions and herbs, learning how to blend dark-roast coffee and condensed milk into a perfect cafe sua. At first there was something soothing about the routine, the symmetry of a shrimp sliced lengthwise onto a bed of rice noodles. But soon the panic crept in. I'd seen girls like me before. Sullen daughters, stringy-haired and oily-faced, wearing stained aprons and shuffling around their parents' restaurants, all hope lost for lives of their own. They were like a modern-day version of the docile spinster daughters who had always terrified me in the books of my childhood.

Then there was the name of the café: the Lotus Leaf. When I said out loud that it sounded excessively exotic, my mother told me that proved I had no sense. Too much education for my own good. *We been running this place two years and everyone else likes it just fine.* Ong Hai's Vietnamese coffees and lunchtime pho had generated good reviews on Yelp and a small mention in the suburb section of the *Chicago Reader*. But I knew that business was thinning and that he was worried. I told myself that these were matters that Sam was supposed to inherit—my mother had taken on the café in the first place for him. But Sam had flouted all of us by leaving, dropping out of contact two Christmases before. They'd argued, that much I knew, though I never learned about what.

So when, three weeks after my own return, Sam called my phone and hung up without leaving a message, my mother cleaned the whole house down to the window blinds. I told her the missed call was probably a mistake but she believed it meant he was coming home.

It turned out she was right.

A couple of days after the phone call I left the café early, taking a long route back to the rental house my mother and Ong Hai had claimed as home. The space between their neighborhood and the Lotus Leaf was a soul-numbing continuum of chain restaurants and local efforts with names like Itemz and If It's Baskets. You wouldn't even know Chicago was less than twenty miles to the east.

I wanted to forget about the long summer, or more, that stretched ahead of me. My brother was far from my mind.

So when I saw him on the cement stoop I wondered, for half a second, if he was the ghost—sound crazy to say now—of our father. A spirit in the way of Vietnamese belief. And then I realized I was thinking the way my mother probably would. And then I realized that she was right, that Sam's call had been a signal. A long time later, I would understand that the signal wasn't for her but for me.

In a burst of fury, my mother had changed all the locks after Sam left. So he was just sitting there

hanging around waiting for someone to open the door. I parked in front of the black SUV that must have been his and as I walked toward him I wondered who would speak first. What were you suppose to say to someone who had reappeared after more than a year of silence?

Sam cast his gaze around me as if checking out the neighborhood. In warm weather, the old couple across the street liked to set up lawn chairs just inside their open garage, where they would wait for their grandkids to come visit and wave to anyone who happened to walk by. Their chairs were empty at the moment but two drink cozies were sitting on the garage floor.

A city bus stopped at the corner, exhaled, then heaved its way onward again.

“How long have you been here?” I finally said.

Sam shrugged at the question. He had started doing that in high school—a practiced, careless shrug, full of dismissal, hinting at derision. He looked older, just as thin, but more gaunt in the face, if his skin were doing extra work to pull itself around his fine features.

“I need your help with something,” he said.

As we walked into the house Sam glanced at the corner of the living room where our mother kept the shrine to the dead: our father’s urn, a small statue of Buddha, candles, incense, a plate of fruit, and a photograph from the eighties, turning sepia-toned in the glass frame. Our father was perpetually starting to smile. He was outside somewhere, blue sky and stilled clouds behind him.

Instead of heading to the kitchen, where I always went first, Sam went down the narrow hall to our mother’s room.

“Hey,” I said, following. “What are you doing?”

He opened her closet and started checking pockets, the insides of shoes, the insides of shoe boxes. She had a few old purses lined up and he looked in those too.

“Where do you think she keeps it?” he asked.

“Keeps what?”

“The money. Jesus.”

I was so surprised I laughed a little. “Seriously?” When he didn’t reply, I said, “Sam. What money?”

Finished with the closet, he went over to the old mahogany dresser that our mother had gotten for twenty bucks at a garage sale because it had a cloudy water stain on its top. I didn’t stop him. Maybe part of me was curious too if he would find anything.

He was messing up her clothes, I told him. And besides, was he really going to look through her underwear and bras?

He hesitated, then shut the top drawer. “I’m talking about Hieu’s money.” Hieu. It was a name I hadn’t heard in a long time. He and our father had been best friends back when we lived in La Porte, Indiana, where I’d been born. They had talked about starting a restaurant together. Later Hieu had moved with us to Battle Creek, then back to La Porte. He had persuaded my father to go on a weekend trip with him, up to Michigan to fish the St. Joseph River, where my father had drowned.

When I told Sam I didn’t know what he was talking about he studied my face for a moment, deciding whether or not to believe me. Then he said, “Hieu gives her money. She’s been guilting him into it for years, ever since Dad died. I thought I was the only one who hadn’t known.”

My immediate reaction was distance. “That’s ridiculous,” I said. “Are you on something?”

He turned to the bed, lifted up the top mattress, and stuck an arm in there, looking for holes in the box spring.

“If you don’t know about that, then I guess you don’t know about the money that’s yours. Or was yours.”

I didn’t want to know what he was going to say next, already disbelieving him. At the same time, thought: *Of course*. Of course my mother would have done this, whatever this was—the crazier the

better. "All right," I said. I straightened the bedspread. "Tell me."

He said that years back, Hieu had set up accounts for us, to help pay for college. Our mother had taken the money instead and used it to open the Lotus Leaf. "Last year, I followed her and saw her with him. Then she saw me. You can imagine how she reacted. I confronted her about it and told her I wanted my share of the money. She said that *you* wanted the money to go to the café."

"No," I said, too stunned to say anything else. *College* accounts?

"Didn't think so."

"What makes you think he's still giving her money?"

"You don't need a fucking PhD to figure things out. The guy is loaded. He drives a Mercedes. I asked Ong Hai about it and he didn't deny it. He wouldn't talk about it, but he didn't deny it."

I watched Sam go back to the dresser, open the middle drawer, and pat down the sweaters and shirts. "What's wrong with you?" he said. "Aren't you pissed?"

"This is what you guys argued about last year, then. At Christmas."

"Yeah, remember what a fun holiday that was? A couple of days before you got here I found out her secret. That money is blood money, Lee. It belongs to me, or you, just as much."

"It's not blood money. Don't be so melodramatic."

"Dad would never have gone fishing if Hieu hadn't made him."

We'd never talked like this before, broken into plain speech about our father. Sam's words echoed thoughts I'd had thousands of times. But still I said, "It was an accident."

"The money is no accident."

"What makes you think she'd even keep any of it here? She's not an idiot."

"You know how old-school she can be."

The bottom dresser drawer held my mother's winter scarves, a couple of old Vietnamese magazines, some Christmas gifts she'd never used: a bottle of Calvin Klein Eternity, still in its packaging, an empty leather photo frame, a Mylar space blanket.

"Look at all this crap," Sam said. He touched the blanket, which was supposed to be one of those emergency items to keep in the trunk of a car. Ong Hai had bought it at a kiosk at the mall.

Sam eyed our mother's ballerina jewelry box, which no longer had a ballerina and no longer played music. In it she kept the four gold and jade necklaces that had been her grandmother's, the jade bracelet I'd been made to wear as a toddler, and the double-strand gold chain bracelet my mother used to wear before deciding it got in the way of work. And the little gold piece, engraved with a faint image of a house, that the American woman, Rose, had left in Ong Hai's café in Saigon. I hadn't seen the jewelry in years, not since high school. As far as I knew, my mother never had occasions for dressing up.

I picked up Rose's pin. "Remember this?"

"Not that stupid story again."

"It was a big deal to them."

"Their first white American customer. Wowee."

"I'm pretty sure it was more than that." Not that I could have explained what. I almost started telling him how, as a kid, I'd imagined the pin to be an heirloom from Laura Ingalls Wilder. But it seemed silly, a faraway thought, so I put the pin back with the rest of the jewelry, closed the box, closed the drawer.

Sam stood up, glancing around the room once more. I fixed the wrinkles in my mother's nubby yellow comforter. She always made her bed: the slight hill of one flat pillow, the sheets tucked tight. She had no patience for decoration, and the room showed it. Nothing had ever hung on the putty-colored walls, here or anywhere else she'd lived.

"You know Ong Hai would give you money, if he has it. Or just ask Mom. She went nuts cleaning

this whole place after you called.”

“Whatever I found wouldn’t be stealing. It would be my money too. Hell, it’d be yours too.”

“They’re going to be home any minute.”

At that, he seemed to waver. I wondered if he was thinking of escaping to his car and driving away, so I said, “Come on. Let’s get something to eat and you can figure out the money later.”

He relented, but I knew he was far from done with the pursuit.

In the kitchen, Sam helped himself to one of Ong Hai’s Corona beers. The fridge was crammed as always, plastic-wrapped bowls and plates balanced on each other. Like me, my mother and grandfather had this compulsion to hang on to even the smallest amount of leftovers. Then we’d forget how long something had been there.

Sam said again, “How is it you’re not pissed?”

“I *am*,” I said, though I sounded calm, felt it, even. There wasn’t much I’d put past my mother.

“She mentioned that you’d moved back.” Sam said that easily, conversationally, like he hadn’t just been scouring her room for money.

I didn’t know they’d communicated at all since that day he had stormed out, over a year ago.

Sam must have read as much on my face. “She sends me these texts,” he said. “Every once in a while.”

“Do you reply?”

The answer was no, of course. He didn’t reply. Just let her keep texting into the void.

“So why’d you move back?” he asked.

I gave him my standard lie—in between semesters, waiting to see where I’d end up in the fall.

“Does that mean you’re staying here?”

“Are you?”

I’d been away in Urbana, in my last year of undergrad, when my mother and Ong Hai and Sam moved into this rental house. Sam had halfheartedly enrolled in a few classes at the nearby community college but soon dropped out. For a while the name of their new street, Durango Road, gave us something to joke about. When I came home during winter break we’d whistle Wild West tunes and talk in cowboy accents about our home on the range. *What’s Ma Kettle a-cookin’ for supper?* I’d say *best be moseying*, Sam would say. *It’s just about high noon at this semi-OK corral.*

It was a three-bedroom, larger than what we were used to, and since Sam claimed the basement mother left the last bedroom for me, certain that I’d come back home after graduation. She didn’t know that, in high school, I’d counted down the days to the start of college, that I couldn’t get to the dorms fast enough. Back then I went home as little as possible; summers, I took extra classes and worked retail on campus. Of course I had to go to grad school right away.

Sam drank his beer and said, “Everything looks the same here on Durango Road. Except we got ourselves some problems.” He spoke with a cowboy twang, but I couldn’t keep it going. I was thinking about my mother and Hieu.

Then she was there, at the kitchen door, she and Ong Hai, and I felt as nervous as Sam seemed to be, setting the beer bottle down too quickly. Would she notice that we’d been in her room? Did she really have a stockpile of money extorted from my father’s best friend?

“Hey, Sam!” Ong Hai called out, as though Sam had only been away for a semester at college.

“Hey.” Sam gave his first genuine smile, and Ong Hai reached forward and grabbed at his forearm.

“Too skinny,” he said. “You working?”

“Sure.”

“Then work less, eat more. That your SUV too? It’s nice.”

To me, Ong Hai never aged. His hair had always been a floaty sheen of gray and he’d always worn the same round glasses. He favored old-man short-sleeved button-downs with patch pockets, yet he

was as quick as my mother, could stand all day making pho and spring rolls.

~~My mother paused before setting a plastic bag of café leftovers on the counter. She didn't—~~ acknowledge Sam by voice—she wasn't going to make it *that* easy—but glanced at him while getting some plates from the cupboard. I took out the shrimp and tofu summer rolls, banana bread, containers of pho that were our dinner.

“Where you working?” Ong Hai asked Sam as I put the soup in the microwave.

“I've got a friend who has a computer business.”

“Lots of money with computers.”

“It's just selling them.”

“You tell your friend to feed you more food. Tomorrow, you come to the café. Maybe you'll eat more.”

The dining area next to the kitchen had the same oval wood table, the same candlestick-spindled chairs, that Sam and I had sat at throughout our childhood. Ong Hai brought forth chopsticks and paper napkins and my mother and I set out the dishes and food. This was the way we ate. Always had. Eating without talking, not bothering to cover up the sounds of our chewing. We ate with a swiftness that would have alarmed any non-Asian. Though my mother and Ong Hai knew to eat in a quiet American style out in public, at home they ate the old way, bringing their bowls close to their chins and sweeping food into their mouths. The sight was a strange comfort to me, as much as it was just to gather at the same table, the Lien family of Durango Road. This had never been a normal occurrence, not with restaurant schedules to keep.

As soon as we were done my mother jumped up to clean. I helped her, as was my eternal duty, while Ong Hai and Sam went to the living room TV. I could hear Ong Hai asking Sam if he liked the computer work.

“Sure,” Sam said. “It's all right.”

“Downtown Chicago?”

“Sort of. Nearby.”

I rinsed my mother's old coral-pink Fiestaware dishes. When I set the plates in the drying rack she rearranged them. She wiped down the counter, the sink, even the rice cooker, faintly printed with flowers, that we'd had for probably fifteen years. She didn't say anything and I wondered what would happen if I blurted out Hieu's name. If I had the nerve. Which I didn't.

In the living room the guys were watching a *Seinfeld* rerun. There almost wasn't enough space for all of us, suddenly packed in as if it were a holiday. I pulled up an ottoman near Ong Hai, and my mother brought her knitting bag to the recliner. We watched the same television, lifeblood and anchor of our household, beloved distraction and focal point. The room still had these giant, formal-looking window swags that a previous tenant, or maybe the owner, had installed. They were heavy, poly-satin burgundy edged with golden tassels, at once pompous and sad, and they seemed to lord themselves over us.

Ong Hai found a movie, a comedy about race-car driving, and as we let the flow of it get us through the next hours of that night, I thought about my mother, pouring Hieu's money—if it was true—into the Lotus Leaf Café. I had gone to college and grad school mostly on fellowships and grants. I'd never expected my mother to afford any of it, and she hadn't.

When my mother folded up her knitting and rose from her chair, she said, “Wake up early. We go at six.” Though she didn't look at Sam, she was speaking to him, for the first time since he'd arrived. Ong Hai got up too and gave a little pat on the head to me and Sam—his grandfatherly good night.

Sam picked up the remote control and searched the channels. It was ten o'clock, yet somehow the whole house, the whole neighborhood, seemed closed down.

I had imagined, many times, my brother returning to our lives, but hadn't factored in how much h

absence, all those months adding up, would enshroud his homecoming.

“What do you need the money for?” I asked him.

He clicked over to *The Daily Show*. “For one thing, I’m moving.”

“Where?”

“California.”

Of course. I didn’t even need to ask why. Stereotypical sunlight and seacoast. As a kid he had often whined to our mother that we should live there—just pick a city. In high school, when one of his friends moved to the Bay Area, Sam was jealous for months.

“Why the urgency?”

He took a moment to answer. “If I don’t go now, I might never go.”

I understood that, more than I could admit. But instead I said, “So you’re going to disappear again?”

“You went off to school. You got away. It’s my turn now.”

He didn’t see how easy he’d had it. It wasn’t personal, I told myself; this was traditional, a Confucian-influenced truth: the boy was entitled to more; the boy was subject to few verging on no obligations. Sam had always worked that system. He got our mother to buy the running shoes his friends wore and the electronics he coveted. He convinced her that he needed newer and better cell phones. He would take money from her purse and she would pretend not to notice.

Sam turned up the volume on the television, perhaps so no one else could hear us talking. “I’m not saying you owe me anything. But she sure as hell does.”

“When you saw her with Hieu—why were you following her?”

“I got bored one night.”

“I’m serious.”

“It’s her own fault. She’d go out every once in a while and refuse to say anything about it. So I followed her. They were having dinner at a Thai restaurant and he gave her something in an envelope.”

“I’ve never known her to go anywhere other than her friends’ houses.”

“I told you, she’s been lying to everyone.” Sam stood up, turned off the TV.

“So that’s it? That’s all there is to say?”

He was already headed to the basement stairs, so certain his old space would be the way he’d left that he hadn’t even bothered to ask. Pausing for a moment, he said, “Oh, yeah, I almost forgot. Welcome back home.”

In the morning Sam actually did get up early and follow me to the Lotus Leaf, driving that huge SUV. When we arrived our mother and Ong Hai were already in the kitchen, preparing the shrimp and vegetarian rolls and rinsing herbs for the pho. The morning breads, scones, and doughnuts had already been delivered, and I set to work arranging them on their trays.

Sam said he could run the cash register, no problem. He talked to customers in a friendly voice that was unrecognizable to me. If someone pronounced pho incorrectly, calling it *faux*, he didn’t even correct them the way I always did.

The Lotus Leaf was supposed to be an American realization of what Ong Hai had started in Saigon: his old Café 88, a name he had chosen because the number was lucky. And look at the luck it brought Ong Hai would say when he reminisced about it. *We had customers so loyal they wouldn’t get their coffee and tea anywhere else. We met that nice American lady. We got lucky enough to make it to America.* If I attempted to point out all the bad luck—the fact of war, loss, displacement—he waved these away. *That’s not good or bad luck; that’s life*, he said. *Life is a temporary stop on the way home*

to death. It was an old proverb he would repeat with disconcerting cheer.

The Lotus Leaf was also supposed to mean a bigger future for our family—for Sam. But that was because my mother had counted on him caring. Even after he left and she refused to speak about him, I knew she harbored hope. Ong Hai too had been patient, believing Sam could return any day, that the boy just needed some space to grow up. For me, away in grad school in Wisconsin, one month turned easily into another, and Sam's being gone didn't disrupt, really, what I'd already gotten used to. But surely for my mother every unreturned text, every phone call that wasn't his, must have felt like punishment or revenge.

Now that Sam was restored to his proper place, helming the money machine, my mother already seemed more relaxed, on her way toward glad. Maybe she imagined that we'd all head back home together, toward dinner and television again, and that slowly the summer would find a shape: our family, reunited, two kids in their twenties yet kids all over again, everyone under the same roof, working in the same place, eating the same meals. The last year could be erased or overlooked; Sam would be back in the basement room; questions wouldn't be asked and answers wouldn't be given. A very Vietnamese.

After lunch my mother went out for supplies and Sam ducked into the kitchen, where I figured he was asking for money from Ong Hai. A few minutes later Sam returned to the front with no discernible change in expression. I was cleaning off the tables and chairs and when I looked at my brother I wondered if I had long passed the point of being able to read him. Still, I knew enough to think, *Forget it*. That dream of a family-run café was nothing but a small-time, small-town wish. Money or no money, now that Sam knew how to be gone, he was never really coming back again.

I swept up crumbs from the floor. Sam folded his apron and left it on the counter. The café was empty, and it was a good time to take a break, eat a late lunch, have a cup of tea.

"I'm heading out. Ong Hai asked me to get a few things," Sam said to me. "You gonna stay here a day?"

The question made me feel trapped. "Not necessarily."

I straightened some of the paintings on the walls—a dramatic series of wilting daffodils by a local dude who'd walked in one day and asked if he could hang his work there for sale. Before that the wall had been empty, so it was all the same to my mother. That had been many months ago now, and it didn't look like any of the paintings had sold.

"Let me know what you find out," Sam said.

I watched him drive the SUV out of the parking lot. I wondered whose car it really was. I should have guessed what he would do, should have guessed from his good-bye. I suppose I wanted to believe him in that moment, to think that he would go to the Asian market to pick up some extra rice-paper wrappers and maybe some fish sauce, and that he would be back soon, however briefly. I wanted to believe he would stay another day or two, enough to gather the rest of his things from the basement, enough to try to figure out how to get his hands on the mythical money.

Ong Hai came out from the kitchen and waved me over. He punched a couple of buttons on the cash register. The drawer popped open, revealing the empty spaces where the day's cash transactions had been. Sam had even taken the quarters.

"You saw him?" I asked.

Ong Hai shook his head. "He asked me for money. I told him no, not until he stays long enough to earn it."

He didn't have to admit that he'd all but let Sam open the register in front of him and take the cash. He had too much of a soft spot for us kids; even when he said no, he never really could deny us. Not an ice-cream cone, not a toy, and not this.

It wasn't the right time to bring up Hieu, but I did anyway, using Sam as my shield. "Sam said that

Mom's been getting money from Hieu."

Ong Hai looked embarrassed, but he wasn't going to cross his own child, even for his grandchild. "That's her business, Lee."

"He said she used that money for the café."

I'd made Ong Hai uncomfortable, but he said nothing. We could hear my mother returning, the heavy back door slamming shut. There could be no hiding the cash register from her. Ong Hai and I had no words of explanation, no excuses, and my mother had no reaction. In spite of everything, just one day at the Lotus Leaf would have been enough for Sam to reclaim his spot as the favored one. He would have gotten his money if only he could just stay.

Somehow we got through the rest of that afternoon. I went home first, taking the same route, past nail salons and tanning salons, to the house on Durango Road. The basement showed no sign that Sam had ever been back. The frameless bed kept its blue plaid cover; the torchère floor lamp from the early nineties still leaned at an angle. Who knew how much damp the russet carpeting held? No doubt Sam had searched the whole place for any possible hiding spot.

I made sure to be back in my own room, door closed, by the time my mother arrived. No telling what she would do next, how her rage would vent itself.

That's when I saw what Sam had left for me.

For a long time after, I wondered at the gesture. Some days I still do. He couldn't have known what path he was pointing me toward, and yet maybe he had sensed there was something more to know. I have not asked him this; maybe one day I will.

Sitting on my worn copy of *The Age of Innocence*, the text that had been the center of my dissertation, was a scrap of paper where Sam had written down his new phone number. Stuck to it was a little golden spear: the pin my mother had kept for some forty-five years, an accidental gift from a woman named Rose.

When my mother and Ong Hai landed here as refugees in 1975, their only plan had been to try to get somewhere warm. But then my mother met my father at the refugee camp while waiting in line for a meal, and that was that. They got married quickly so they could be resettled together, which turned out to be in a small town fifty miles west of Chicago. For the next eight years the three of them chased opportunity—a stint at chicken farming, a try at running a grocery. But mostly they worked as Chinese, or what people back then called Oriental, buffets.

My mother once said that everything was easier before Sam and I came along. Came along, as though we'd had a say in the matter. What she really meant, though, was me. Sam was the wanted child, the boy, born in Rockford, Illinois, in 1983. My arrival a year later, a surprise, no doubt, came soon after my family first moved to La Porte.

I was six years old when Hieu and my father took that fishing trip. They'd become friends in the refugee camp, and Hieu had followed us to the Midwest. To me and Sam he was Chu Hieu, Uncle Hieu, a bachelor who came over for dinner and weekends and holidays and who always brought us candy and toys. My parents had taken him in, Ong Hai said. Hieu looked up to my father, wanted to have a family like he did and learn how to run a restaurant too.

In later years, I couldn't hear the sound of his name, *hue*, *hew*, without thinking of my father, his death, what his last moments might have been. He had gotten up early to fish alone, using a pair of Hieu's waders. It may have been that he wasn't accustomed to them, or that he didn't expect the river to have such a current, calm as it must have seemed. The tow of it took him by force. When did it happen? How early had it been? How had Hieu found out? As many times as I had imagined this, I couldn't stop myself from imagining, I had never dared to ask my mother or even Ong Hai. What I knew came from eavesdropping, bits of talk gleaned during the funeral and visitation, when my parents' friends, a surprising number of them, traveling from other towns where we had lived, showed up with food and money and tins of jasmine tea. I hadn't seen Hieu since then. No one talked about him, and I never knew where he'd ended up.

At the time of my father's death, he and Hieu had been making a plan to move us all to Naperville, Illinois, where a friend wanted to partner on a new venture. I didn't remember much from that year, except that my mother wanted to keep our part of that plan. Hieu had receded by then, unmentionable. I recalled how Sam and I sat in the backseat of the Mercury Marquis, surrounded by towels and bedding and pillows, the whole car rattling with cooking gear; Ong Hai was in the passenger seat, garbage bags of clothes stuffed around his feet, while my mother drove, keeping next to her the urn that held my father's ashes. I grew up keeping that urn in sight. Its place in every living room we had became a reminder, a kind of homing device, for all the ambitions he'd held. We were supposed to see them through.

We didn't last long in that Naperville business deal. Soon we were in other small suburbs, tracing a wide arc from Wisconsin to Illinois to Indiana, often near colleges, where the public schools were decent and the buffet business a sure thing. My mother picked up where my father had left off, and my brother and grandfather and I followed. Every time we drove past Chicago—the city skyline distant,

cloud-covered—it seemed phantasmal to me. Fitting, I suppose, for a family on the lookout for the next thing.

So Sam and I grew up as American kids, though we might have looked to others like foreigners. That was our mother, we would have been quick to say. We learned early on to explain away her behavior—her fondness for clearance centers, her wariness of school sporting events, her absolute disbelief in compliments. She was one of those fresh-off-the-boat types, we would have said to our friends. Old-school, old-fashioned, old-generation. We called her a total immigrant, made fun of her accent—whatever got a laugh. We'd sell her out in a second if it would make anyone understand that we, Sam and I, were different. We didn't like weird food. In fact, the only way we liked Chinese food was the same way our friends did, deep-fried and covered in syrupy sauces. Once, in a bid to boost popularity, we told our classmates they could eat for free in whatever restaurant our mother was running. This backfired, of course, when she came around to demand payment from everyone. But at the very least, we made sure people knew that we were nothing like her. If they thought she was strange and scary, we agreed. We had never been to Vietnam and had no desire ever to go there. We'd much rather go somewhere like Australia or Fiji or Iceland.

It was a given that Sam, as the son, and firstborn at that, didn't have to wash dishes or get As or justify every dollar spent. I don't think I ever questioned this. The resentment I sometimes felt was directed toward our mother instead. I would have said that Sam was a good brother. He had no problem letting me play his *Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario* games. He showed me how to roast marshmallows over the gas flame of our stove. As we got older, he would sign field trip permission slips for me, forging our mother's name.

In high school we drifted into different crowds, and there were days, weeks, when we didn't really say anything to each other. But there wasn't, I thought, any real animosity or rivalry. We watched the same sarcasm-driven sitcoms and action blockbusters and could always fall back on shared jokes about our mother. But mostly we got absorbed into separate circles. I took AP classes; he hung out with the skateboarders who sold weed out of their cars in the school parking lot.

By the time I left for the University of Illinois, Sam was already flunking out of his first stint at community college. But at least he stayed at home. My mother liked the idea of education just fine, especially since all of her friends did, but everybody knew that Vietnamese kids were supposed to live with their parents until they got married. College and grad school were just a temporary leave of absence.

That's probably why my mother never questioned my coming back. Didn't ask what happened to my roommates or why I didn't get another apartment in Madison. She didn't know that most of my cohort already had their plans set, from tenure-track and visiting assistant professorships to postdocs secured in hand. I was one of the walking losers, stuck in the wait-and-see, having to hear people say things like, *Something will turn up. Hang in there.* I told my mother and Ong Hai that a job offer could come in anytime and all I had to do was be patient, but I needn't have bothered. For my mother, home was the only answer.

We'd lived in worse towns. Franklin had an art museum and a farmers' market and neighborhood of colonials butting up against McMansions. We stayed at the edge of the gentrification, though, in the grotty section overrun with strip malls and payday advance shops. And, as always, we were renters. First apartments, then duplexes, and finally a whole house: your standard middling ranch, bricked, carpeted, and vinylled, in a neighborhood where tricycles were left to rust in the winter, TV satellite dishes clung like bats to eaves, and empty houses still had *Beware of Dog* signs stuck to metal fences.

Being home was endurable only because of Ong Hai. He and I could have been retirement buddies listening to NPR, sharing a pot of tea, playing cards, him telling stories about the eccentrics he'd known in Saigon. It was the antidote to my mother's thousand criticisms and complaints. Nothing wa

too minor for her to notice: from the way my ponytail sagged to the way I folded towels to the mealy state of tomatoes at the store. Hers was a lifelong habit of pointing out the loose threads on a stranger's shirt buttons, scorning the groceries in other people's carts. She would criticize a bride's makeup (but scold me for commenting on the duration of the wedding), find fault with every other restaurant—too expensive, too slow, too fast, music too loud, utensils too scratched. If I microwaved leftovers for two minutes she would say it should be two and a half. I chopped vegetables too loudly, too slowly. The lightbulbs I bought weren't the right wattage. My umbrella, drying on the back porch, stayed there too long.

In many ways my mother was a traditionalist, and that meant she had to defer to her father, the oldest in the family and therefore head of the household, even though the gesture was symbolic. This made for a tricky power balance that Sam and I had always used to whatever advantage we could. For me that meant making sure Ong Hai was on my side. He was the one who told my mother I should be allowed to go to homecoming and prom. He helped me with security deposits for apartments. And he had always given me money. Restaurant wages, was how he justified it, a supplement to whatever job or stipend or fellowship I had. A few hundred-dollar bills slipped into my book bag. Whether my mother knew about this, I never asked.

If it was true that she had been accepting—demanding?—money from Hieu all these years, then I went against her stance of self-reliance, what she called the *Ronald Reagan pull-up-your-bootstraps* way. Like a lot of Vietnamese immigrants from the older generation, she had a hatred of communism that defined all of her political views. Had my father been like that too? I didn't really remember my mother before his death, though a part of me wanted to believe that she had been sweeter then, softer and that his dying had changed that. A part of me wanted to believe maybe she simply couldn't pull herself up and had had to turn to Hieu. And as always, the children didn't need to know about it.

Those first three weeks at home, before Sam's arrival and rupture, I worked at the Lotus Leaf during the day and tried to avoid revising my dissertation at night. I sent my CV to a bunch of colleges in the area, some I'd never even heard of before, asking if they needed any adjunct instructors in the fall—the higher education version of substitute teaching. My adviser, Valerie, had said I should use the summer to shape my chapters into articles and submit them to journals. *Your degree won't be fresh for long*, she warned. Meaning that the more distance that came between it and a decent job, the less viable I would seem. We had often met at coffee shops and when she crossed her legs I couldn't help looking at the surprisingly high heels she wore. They made a resolute kind of sound when she walked, which I guessed was the point. She was one of the younger professors, recently tenured, and she had a collection of scarves—cashmere in the winter, chiffon in the spring—that seemed intimidating. When she talked she leaned forward, sipping her coffee, and I would think, *Yes, I want to be like her. I can do this, I can write this, I can wear heels with a purpose*. Valerie was the one who'd asked what none of my other professors had broached: Was I sure Wharton was my thing? Ethnic lit, she reminded me, was hotter right now and might make me more marketable. What she meant was: Why was an Asian girl so interested in studying such white American lit? I didn't blame her for wondering. But I couldn't explain why I'd loved Edith Wharton—the escape, the very whiteness seeming like escape, the fact that her life was the opposite of mine. At least, I'd loved her until we spent so much time together. Now that she and I had crossed the finish line, I was almost as tired of her words as my own. Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska had begun to seem stilted and caricaturish, waxen figures of elegant misery and stifled longing. I would think of them sometimes while washing dishes at the café or handing change to a customer. I would see Archer sitting with his crate of imported books, dreaming of touching the wrist of his would-be lover. He would be too far away for anyone to approach, me least of all. I was becoming that sullen, dirty-haired daughter consigned to a lifetime of scrubbing out restaurant kitchens. The fact that I had no desire to leave the café early,

hurry back to my desk to do what was supposed to be my real work, was an altogether new kind of despair for me.

Late at night, shut in the third bedroom with its twin bed and the ceiling light that looked like an upturned ashtray, I stared at my laptop screen. I e-mailed, read food blogs, edited the sentence structure of Wikipedia entries. I clicked the hours away, link by link, from news sites to recipes, celebrity gossip, celebrity babies, fashion bloggers who posed like flamingos in the middle of SoHo streets. I wondered if I had the guts to leave the way Sam had. My best friend from college had a two-bedroom condo in San Francisco where she worked for a pharmaceutical company, and she'd been saying I should move there too. Back in undergrad Amy and I had both applied to Stanford, she for med school, me for a literature PhD, but I hadn't gotten in. Now we could be roommates again, she said, and it sounded so simple, so *normal*. I could do that, I told myself: gather my things, sell my car, put a plane ticket on a credit card, and get the hell out of here. But then I'd feel guilty, start weighing Amy's offer against my grandfather's worries about the Lotus Leaf. He hadn't put any pressure on, but it was there: If I didn't help at the café, who would? If I didn't help, how would it last?

I had already started suggesting improvements, irritating my mother with every one. If they couldn't change the name of the café or the exterior—it was in a strip mall that had been designed to look like a village, albeit a cheap one, with forest-green awnings and false fronts—they could at least change the Lotus Leaf sign, which had calligraphic letters evoking gongs and Far East bamboo. They could replace the white-tiled floor and the plastic teal-green countertop and those black metal chairs with fan-shaped backs. One afternoon when my mother wasn't around, I threw out the artificial orchid plants and the credit union calendars. I ordered a chalkboard menu to replace the ugly whiteboard. I told Ong Hai about my ideas: add banh mi to the offerings; negotiate a new plan with the bakery that supplied our pastries, cutting back on bagels and upping the doughnuts; set up a display of Sriracha bottles because white people loved Sriracha now. Why not have a prettier-looking menu, font, and logo, start up the social media accounts that had become, for every other business, a requirement? He didn't disagree, he said, but what about the cost? Mainly, he knew as well as I did that my mother had to call the shots.

As it happened, the day after Sam left us again was the day the chalkboard arrived at the café. I'd ordered it a week before, with a plan to install it secretly, figuring my mother would have a harder time objecting to it once it was in place. But she was standing right there when the UPS guy delivered the box and she said, "What is *that*?" like she'd just spotted some gross mold.

I tried to convince her that the chalkboard would bring some warmth to the place. "It'll be more like a cozy coffee shop."

"Says who?" She stood, thick-legged, hair kept in a continual no-fuss bob, a small but solid tyrant. "How much did this cost?"

"Hardly anything."

"Nobody said you could do this."

"I'm trying to make the place look better."

We were standing in the fluorescent-lit back room next to the kitchen, where my mother kept all the nonrefrigerated supplies. She folded her arms, ready for a fight, and said, "Oh, now you think the business is your business."

I knew better than to challenge her, especially in the wake of Sam's fresh absence. But I couldn't stop myself from saying, "I'm just trying to help out here."

"It's such a good thing you got the PhD, then."

"Tran," my grandfather intervened, emerging from the front with a yellow canister of Café du

Monde in hand. He looked at the half-opened chalkboard box and said, "Maybe it's nice-looking, eh? Maybe we keep it here."

"This is a restaurant, not a school. Have you ever had a Viet teacher? Do they make enough money? I don't think so. Vuong, Thi, Hanh," she named some of her friends. "Their kids are engineers."

"Can we just try it out for a while?" I said. "See how it goes."

"You been here a few weeks and now you think you own the place. You think you're some hotshot big degree, big decision maker now. You don't know anything about a restaurant."

I looked at Ong Hai, who shook his head, silently advising me to back down.

"Whatever," I said. "What do I care? It's your place."

"Don't forget it," my mother said.

When she left, Ong Hai said to me, "No sense fighting mean."

"Sometimes it's hard not to."

He smiled a little but said, "That's the trouble, Lee. You and your ma both think that."

He urged me to go home early, since business had been slow. "Jennie will be here later," he said. She was their one part-time employee, whose hours had been so reduced lately that she'd mentioned she might have to quit.

I knew Ong Hai just wanted to put some space between my mother and me, and he was right. When I looked at her now I thought about money, Hieu, and all my brother had claimed. Probably when my mother looked at me she thought of my brother too—his disappearance, my failure to fill his space. We both had reasons to stay away from each other.

I knew that Sam's leaving me his new phone number, stuck through with that gold pin, was supposed to be a message, some sibling code that we were in this together. Maybe he thought I'd round up the money, call him when it all got figured out. But when I returned to the house that afternoon, twenty-four hours after Sam's second escape, his offering seemed just another mess he'd left behind. He had gotten away and I had not.

I went to put the pin back in my mother's room. It looked just as it had when Sam had searched it, what I used to think of as a widow's spare landscape. I wondered what would have happened if Sam had found a stash of money. Would he have taken it—would I have let him? Would he have slipped away without ever facing our mother?

I opened the bottom dresser drawer and reached for the ballerina box. I thought I knew my brother well enough, yet I didn't figure that the rest of the jewelry—the gold necklaces, the jade and gold bracelets—would be gone. The only thing left was the pin in my hand.

I turned it over and over, hating Sam, fearing my mother. I remembered myself at eight years old imagining the pin as something more real than it was. Mostly I had known it—Sam and I both had—the vestige of a story that didn't really belong to us. Still, it seemed wrong, somehow, to leave it in the dresser drawer by itself. So I didn't.

When my mother and Ong Hai came home that night I was hiding out in my room. Ong Hai knocked on my door and handed me a bag of leftover summer rolls and pastry, understanding. Soon enough I could hear their two televisions murmuring. I thought about telling Ong Hai about the jewelry but worried that he'd feel obligated to tell my mother. There was a good chance it'd be a while before she uncovered it herself. Sam's renewed absence and theft at the café were bad enough; knowing this could only cause more trouble for me.

Laughter rose from Ong Hai's TV show, while a blast of commercials came from the living room. He liked sitcom reruns and competitive reality shows; she preferred legal dramas, medical mysteries

It was a collapsing sort of moment, these sounds of made-up lives overlapping in my solitary room.

I set the gold pin back down on *The Age of Innocence*, where Sam had left it, as if to point out how old-fashioned both were. In my childhood imagination the image of the house sitting in a field of tall grass had seemed so important, come to life from a *Little House on the Prairie* book. In actuality it looked like something from a garage sale, which was probably the real reason Sam hadn't taken it.

The jewelry, the stories—they all referred to a gone time, long before my mother and grandfather fled the country of their birth and landed in the country of my birth.

Opening my computer, I checked my e-mail again, still wishing for a good-news message, a *Congratulations, this job is yours!* But nothing new had arrived.

I picked up Rose's pin once more. And it was then that I considered what had never seemed significant before: Hadn't Ong Hai always said that Rose was a reporter working on an article about Vietnam? If that was true, had she written the article? And if so, couldn't it be found?

I pulled up Google, my default page, and stared at the blinking cursor. I typed, *Rose article Vietnam*. Before I hit return I thought to add the year: 1965.

I didn't expect anything to come up, but the third result listed the Rose Wilder Lane Papers in West Branch, Iowa. Rose. Born 1886, died 1968, daughter and only child of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Author of the once-popular, now-obscure novels *Free Land* and *Let the Hurricane Roar*. Alleged ghostwriter of the *Little House on the Prairie* books. And correspondent in Vietnam for *Woman's Day* magazine, 1965.

In the closet I had a collection of books and college papers kept through our years of moving. I didn't have a lot—my mother thought owning books a waste, especially when libraries were free—so I had cherished the ones Ong Hai had bought for me, like *The Great Brain*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Superfudge*, *Sweet Valley High*. And my favorite: the *Little House on the Prairie* box set circa 1986, the spines wrinkled and softened by countless rereadings. *Little House in the Big Woods*. *Little House on the Prairie*. *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. *The Long Winter*. *Little Town on the Prairie*. *These Happy Golden Years*. And the two outliers—*Farmer Boy*, about the childhood of Laura's future husband, Almanzo, and *The First Four Years*, a posthumously published account of the early, difficult years of Laura and Almanzo's marriage.

I slid out the copy of *These Happy Golden Years*, turning to that passage where Almanzo gives Laura a gold pin as a Christmas present. *On its flat surface was etched a little house, and before it along the bar lay a tiny lake, and a spray of grasses and leaves.*

I hadn't read or thought about the description in so long. Now a shiver went through me as I wondered what was real. Could it actually be the pin my mother and grandfather had kept? Was it a call, or maybe a message, staring straight at me as it had all these years, though I'd never before noticed? Was this the same Rose?

I opened *The First Four Years*. It didn't belong to the original arc of the books and didn't read like it either. Here the language is spare, the feel of something private and unedited, a space where a storyteller's voice hasn't yet tempered the rawness of remembering hard times. Maybe because of this, I hadn't liked the book when I was a kid. The heartache, the deprivation, had little redemption: Laura and Almanzo lose their wheat crops to hail and heat, get themselves into terrible debt, have a baby boy who dies soon after being born, and lose their house in a fire. The only bright spot is the child who survives it all: Rose, described by Laura as her precious flower of December.

Surely, if the gold pin were real, if it had existed, Laura would have handed it down to her daughter.

Back at my computer it was easy enough to find the *Woman's Day* article from 1965. Titled "August in Vietnam," it was Rose Wilder Lane's last publication before her death a few years later.

She gives a genial tourist's view of the country, describing the "resilience" of the Vietnamese people especially the women, whose skin seemed to her as "smooth as cream and yellow as gold." It was a little too *Miss Saigon* for comfort, but I didn't care. I was looking for Ong Hai. Yet nowhere did Rose mention meeting a family in Saigon, a man and his daughter who served her coffee and fruit at Café 88.

I stepped into the hallway with my laptop, intending to talk to Ong Hai, but my mother called my name. She was knitting in front of the living room TV.

"What are you doing?" She sounded suspicious, as if guessing the trouble I was about to court.

"Just going to talk to Ong Hai."

"He's asleep."

"Are you sure?" But I realized his door was closed, his television off.

"What are you talking to him about?" Her gaze turned back to the screen, where good-looking men and women students were arguing with each other as a way to build up sexual tension. She made a little *tsking* sound and her needles clicked as they seesawed against each other, shaping a baby blanket. I had never learned how to knit and my mother had long since given up trying to teach me. Whenever I saw her do it, no matter what argument we'd just had, I couldn't get over the magic of being able to get a spool of yarn to build and bend into something like that.

"What are you talking to him about?" my mother repeated.

She didn't sound angry but I knew that was never more than a blink away. We could never have conversations the way parents and kids did on TV, all banter and affection. What would she say if I dared to admit what Sam had stolen, had left? What if I told her about Rose? What if I brought the name Hieu out into the open?

"Hold on," she said before I could answer, nodding at her show, which was heading toward its sound-track-thundering denouement. She pulled out more yarn from a plastic grocery bag. She was always carrying things around in these plastic bags and tying the handles together too tight. Finally: "Hurry up—next show's coming on."

There was nothing to say to her. My mother, who had once referred to a PhD in literature as a fake degree for a fake doctor, was so focused on the television, expectant and almost docile, that I suddenly wondered if *she* was the one who couldn't discern the real from the fake. It was startling and new to think of her this way—compliant, complacent, given over to a lifetime of watching. Someone getting older.

"Nothing," I said, and she didn't pursue it.

I stayed up too late, rereading the *Little House* books, thinking about what was fact and what was imagined. What did it mean, anyway, to be based on a true story? How many times had Ong Hai told the story of Rose? How many times during the years of my *Little House* obsession had I pretended the pin was Laura's secret gift to me?

In a way, Rose had been part of the dream, the memory, that had pushed my mother and grandfather out of Vietnam, back when the city of Saigon was crumbling around them. They had taken only a few things. Photos, money. The jade and gold jewelry. And the gold pin. Maybe to my mother and Ong Hai it had been some kind of proof—that Rose had mattered, maybe, or that she and Ong Hai had mattered.

So much immigrant desire in this country could be summed up, quite literally, in gold: as shining as the pin Rose had left behind. A promise taken up, held on to for decades, even while Sam and I were reckless with our own history, searching for things we couldn't yet name. If this Rose was the same Rose of the *Little House* books, the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder, then she had defined a part of American desire that my mother understood just as well.

America is mostly made up of small towns, and no matter where you go, mountains or seaside or flatness, you will always find, just off an interstate or county road or tucked into a strip mall or a commercial pass, a worn-out-looking Chinese buffet. It might be called the Golden Panda or New China or New Golden Panda Buffet, or just plain Asia Buffet—Oriental Buffet if it's a real backwoods area—the words spelled out in Kung Fu chop suey font or, depending on the economics of the neighborhood, utilitarian block lettering, sans serif. Some of the buildings will have a pagoda look to them, with faux-clay tiles and gold trim. Others will be more to the point: cement, windowless, cheap real estate. They will have rutted lots, signs that say *More Parking in Rear*. When you open the door an electronic two-tone bell will announce your arrival.

Inside, the lighting will be dimmed, concealing the fine layers of grease that have settled into the surfaces, settling even now into your hair, your clothes, your skin. But don't think about that. Look, instead, at all the Asian stuff! Dusty red lanterns; pictures of dragons and fishermen; paper place mats printed with the signs of the Chinese zodiac. Everywhere you look there will be plastic, vinyl, PVC: the plants in the corners, the seat of each chair, the amber-colored cups at the water dispenser, and, at the cash register, the little altruistic trays that tell you to go ahead, take a penny, leave a penny.

But remember what it is you came for. The goal, the crux, the mother lode: gleaming rows of insect-chafing dishes where steam rises to meet the plastic roofs known as sneeze guards. The setup will tell you about the restaurant's ambitions. Are there two buffets, lined up like parallel stalwarts, dependable, traditional even, or do they form one line as in a middle school cafeteria? Are they perhaps angled, even perpendicular, in a nod to a newer, avant-garde style of enterprise? Are the buffets close to the kitchen, which is easier for the workers but more of a trek for some of the diners? Or do they take the center of the room, proud to claim the spotlight?

You might agree that one of the best things about a buffet is no waiting. The plates and bowls are always ready and someone will always take away the dirty ones. As experienced diners know, time can work for you at the buffet. Play it right and the span between walking in the door to biting into an egg roll is no more than two minutes. But what is your methodology? Do you move from left to right, appetizers to dessert? Do you pace yourself, dish by dish, or do you crowd as much as you can into each helping? How do you gauge your hunger to your greed? How do you figure the difference between eating and consuming?

You might choose to begin at the tureens of soup: wonton, hot and sour, yellow egg drop, thickened into goo. From there you might be distracted by mounds of fried rice, shining with oil (white rice available only upon request), sesame balls, and steamed buns—plenty of carbs for the rookies who fill up on them first. There will be piles of those cabbage-filled egg rolls, their skins turning obstinate under the heat lamps. The whole array of fried will be impressive: fried wonton strips, fried shrimp, fried chicken wings, fried crab puffs, fried dumplings, and the essential crab rangoon. All that happens even before the entrees: lo mein, spare ribs, Mongolian beef, sweet-and-sour pork, sweet-and-sour chicken, cashew chicken, almond chicken, sesame chicken, and, of course, the famous deep-fried nubs named after the mysterious General Tso. It's all gloriously American,

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