

DOUBLE

J. ANNIE MACLEOD

April 1968, and First Lieutenant Brian Ballanger rapes Xuan Nguyen, a prostitute. After dating four men earlier that afternoon, Xuan doesn't think of it that way, and even Brian will tell his friends later on that he's nailed some whore. First the two of them eat across a table, drinking wine out of scotch glasses, and then Brian holds Xuan, crying all his tears. But soon he pushes her to the floor and closes his hand over her eyes, moves into her—deep and then deeper. Xuan doesn't cry out. Just yesterday she took a bowl of food out of the lap of an old woman, sleeping against a wall. She too is hungry.

Early in 1969, Xuan gives birth to a boy. She calls him Toan, but he looks more like a Tom, with his bamboo skin and round eyes, his nose like a small grape. Xuan loves him more than life, but soon after his birth, she returns to dating.

At first Toan is teased, then knocked down by other children, his eyes purpled with blood. He's *bui doi*, the dust of life. In 1987, Toan turns eighteen, and the Amerasian Homecoming Act is passed, called the biggest paternity settlement in history. Xuan urges Toan to go to the officials, to prove that he is the child of an American serviceman. "You will go to America," she says. "You can be Tom."

In exchange for becoming Toan's relatives, neighbors offer food and clothes and medicine. One young woman, Phan Thi Thuan, knows a plastic surgeon in Saigon who will cut her eyelids to make a double fold.

"Last night I pushed tiny sticks up here," she says, widening her eyelids with her fingers. "And I looked like you. If I have this surgery, if I pay to have this surgery, they will think I'm your sister. I can go with you."

Because she is persistent and Phan Thi's mother gives Xuan her treasure—a string of akoya pearls, buried under a certain tree—Phan Thi spends all of her parents' and grandparents' savings and has the eyelid surgery, light-thin scars along the folds.

Carrying nothing but one bag each and two gac fruits, more sour than sweet, Phan Thi and Toan play a game on their long bus ride to the Amerasian Transit Center. They try to see who knows the most about the United States. Toan knows the words to Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer," but it's Phan Thi who's been practical. She's learned that an average house costs \$85,000 and that the stock market crashed in October. She's read about disposable contact lenses and that the singer Sonny Bono now leads a city in California. When Phan Thi says "Palm Springs," Toan thinks of open hands under running water.

When they arrive at the Transit Center, they have to wait. The building is trim and clean.

Toan and Phan Thi have no documents. When it is their turn, they are shown into a small room and are told to stand up straight. Two uniformed men look hard at them, finger their hair, touch Phan Thi's cheek. One holds Toan's chin as if it is a cup of tea. But neither is thought to look American enough for passage to Utica.