

## PART THREE



*Dew's Memoir (Hue, 1949)*

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### 1. Aunt Ginseng, Daughter of the Revolution

The first beautiful woman I met in my life was my own mother. The villagers of Quynh Anh called her Princess Cinnamon. The silk merchants called her Madame Que. I called her Ma.

The silk traders and villagers of Quynh Anh who came to the house to take orders from Ma and helped her prepare festivities for ancestors' worships said the porcelain skin of her cheeks was like lotus petals. They said the stream of her black hair was shinier than polished lacquer, and compared her slender frame to the best of willow trees that bent graciously in the strong wind without breaking. They alleged that as a young girl, Ma once took a nap under a magnolia tree, her stream of black hair spreading around her head, emanating the fragrance of cinnamon oil, which she loved. A snake was enticed by the fragrance, and crawled onto the stream of her hair. Struck by the beauty of Ma's face, the snake became spellbound, frozen as though it had seen a goddess. When Ma woke up and moved her head, the snake silently crawled away. Even the meanest of creatures would be awed by Ma's beauty, they said.

I was the ugly daughter of a beauty queen. The silk traders and villagers said I was a cute and nice little girl, but no one described me in terms of lotuses, lacquer and willow trees. My nose was too flat, my mouth too full, my skin so pale it almost reflected a bluish shade. Only my eyes resembled Ma's, which the traders and

villagers compared to longan nuts in autumn ponds.

Ours was a household full of women and no men. Ma had all kinds of domestic help, all coordinated by Nanny Mai. Like a fortress of humans, they surrounded Ma, catered to her needs, and supposedly protected her. Yet, unknown to Ma, the servants gossiped, feeding me with information about certain things. For example, the servants disputed the traders' overblown ideas about Ma's beauty. Even Nanny Mai would join in and agree that Ma was not anywhere as pretty as the *Mystique Concubine* herself. Or Ma's twin sister, my Aunt Ginseng.

Ma told me the *Mystique Concubine* had died at the height of her beauty, falling into a deep slumber from which she never emerged. Her soul just simply flew away, escorted by nightingales. Ma was twenty-five years old when the *Mystique Concubine* passed on. Aunt Ginseng had already left home, too busy fighting in the jungles of north Vietnam to return home for her mother's funeral. Like Lady Trieu of ancient Vietnam fighting the Wu's from China, Auntie Ginseng wore her golden armor, pointing a sword to the sky, riding an elephant. Every little girl born in Vietnam (even a product of French elementary school like me) knew the legend of Lady Trieu, who pledged she would ride the wind to save her people from drowning in slavery. The enemies were looking for Aunt Ginseng all the time, so, I had to keep a secret. I was never to mention Auntie Ginseng to anyone, except within the household.

"I don't understand why your mother had to tell these tales," Nanny Mai said one day.

"Your grandmother died in a fire in the middle of a war, and your Auntie has been in a French jail up north for having spied for Ho Chi Minh troops. There's no such thing as a young woman riding elephants nowadays."

When I repeated Nanny Mai's words to Ma, she went after Nanny Mai and slapped the poor woman in the face.

"How can you betray me so?" Ma clenched her teeth.

Nanny Mai teared and apologized over and over again. Seeing the red marks on Nanny Mai's cheeks, Ma knelt down on the floor and begged for the Nanny's forgiveness, apologizing to the woman who had helped raise both her and me. Shocked to see Ma on the floor, Nanny Mai asked me to ignore the bad stories she told me

earlier, saying she was very sorry to have confused me, confirming that indeed my aunt was a woman warrior riding elephants like Lady Trieu. I watched the two grown-ups with amazement and amusement. I knew, instinctively then, that not only did Ma have beauty, but she also had a genuine, fierce flare for the dramatic.



Despite the number of female servants, Ma insisted on doing certain things herself. Like taking care of the altar room.

It was in the altar room that my father, the black-and-white photograph of an Annamese mandarin, lived together with his father, the *Hong Lo Tu Khanh*, first rank literary officer and astronomer of the Nguyen court, and Admiral Nguyen Tung, who adopted Ma. They all lived in an array of black-and-white photographs framed in rosewood carvings, which Ma polished everyday with fresh lemon juice to make the rosewood shine.

All photographs and silk paintings were placed lower than the picture of my emperor grandfather, King Thuan Thanh of Annam, taken at his coronation. Later on, I discovered the same picture had made its way to history books. My grandfather had become the legend in Vietnamese history as an exiled, anti-French king, admired by generations of Vietnamese patriots. But in the picture sitting in that smoky altar room, my emperor grandfather looked like a boy and did not seem much older than I. He was not even all that handsome or smart, just a dazed boy dressed up in fancy clothes. At least he was a real person. His wife, the dead Mystique Concubine, on the other hand, was preserved in a silk portrait. There were no photographs of her anywhere. In the silk painting, she looked surreal, and I could not imagine her face.

Much later, there was a time when I turned sixteen and I was about to leave home to study at the French convent in the highlands. This was a costly and complex arrangement that Ma painstakingly accomplished, since the Convent was not just for any girl. Before I left, I asked Ma whether she loved my father. She looked at me as though the question was totally inappropriate, as if love was a concept meant to remain unspoken forever.

I couldn't remember exactly when Ma first took me to the altar and made me learn those names and faces of those dead men, including my father's. When the children I played with asked me where my father was, I would say automatically that he was on the altar. Ma would burn incense everyday and place plenty of fresh fruits there. The spirits could only consume those fruits symbolically, so I got to eat them all, getting all the blessings of my ancestors by devouring their leftovers, each time Ma rearranged her tray.



Three items on the altar received Ma's special attention. She polished them with cinnamon-scented oil and covered them with a satin red silk cloth. I often watched her handle them with utmost deference. Occasionally she let me touch them. Just a light touch. The bright green jade phoenix that shone under candle light, and the two ivory plaques, each bearing carved red Chinese characters, spoke of Ma's royal and mandarin heritage. The jade, as well as the elephant tusks from which these plaques were made, must have been thousands of years old, Ma said. The older they were, the prettier they got. The phoenix, a gift from King Thuan Thanh to his Mystique Concubine, identified my grandmother as the uncrowned Queen of Annam. The two ivory plaques were like ID cards, held by my two grandfathers, commemorating their lifetime career and loyalty to the Nguyen Court.

When I touched the items, the coldness of jade and ivory sent chills along my spinal cord. To reach them, I would have to stand on the lacquer divan, studded with mother-of-pearl inlay, imposingly situated in front of the altar table.



On the altar, there were two rosewood frames that remained blank. Ma reserved them for Aunt Ginseng and Uncle Forest. She polished the empty frames the same way she polished the dead men's photographs. She said her sister and brother had left home. Either

they would return one day, or they would become spirits to join the ancestral altar.

"Why did they leave home?" I asked.

Ma pulled me into her lap and whispered the stories to me. There was an airplane circling the air over the village Quynh Anh once, and a young village girl, friend of Auntie Ginseng, had taken out a hand-held mirror she always carried in her blouse pocket. French soldiers thought she was trying to send a signal to anti-French rebels who could shoot down the plane. So French soldiers shot the young village girl. Aunt Ginseng saw this. She became mad. So she left home to make sure no innocent young girls would ever get shot again.

Uncle Forest, on the other hand, left for an entirely different reason. He had been raised, not only by his mother, the Mystique Concubine, but also by his adoptive father, Admiral Nguyen Tung. The Admiral died when Uncle Forest was eight years old. Years later, after a devastating flood swept through the village of Quynh Anh, the family had to move the Admiral's skeleton to a new burial ground. The Admiral's remains were uncovered, and the young Forest got to hold the skull of his adoptive father in his hands. Something touched the core of his soul during the experience. He made his decision then. He left a note for both the Mystique Concubine and Ma bidding farewell, announcing that he'd be joining Auntie Ginseng somewhere in the north. He even wanted to go to Japan to study the Japanese experience of industrialization. That was what both his biological father and adoptive father would have wanted him to do, he wrote in his note.

The year was 1925. My Uncle Forest was fifteen.



"What do they look like?" I asked Ma.

"Like Lady Trieu and Thai Hoc the Patriot."

It was easy for a young girl to get a notion of Lady Trieu, because even the maids who couldn't read a newspaper would talk about the gold-armored woman. It was not as easy to get acquainted

with Thai Hoc the Patriot.

"Did he look anything like Napoleon?" I asked once.

"No, no, no, no," Ma's voice shrilled. "Not at all! Napoleon was French!"

I was disappointed. Napoleon was the conqueror, the patriot, the greatest man of all men.

Something must have clicked in Ma's head after my question that day. She abruptly withdrew me from French Catholic elementary school to enroll me at Lycée Dong Khanh. I had to sit through an examination first, and to the best of my recollection, I did very poorly. The maids in the house gossiped that when one was the daughter of the richest woman in Hue, one got admitted to wherever one wanted to be! There, on the steps of the red brick schoolhouse called Lycée Dong Khanh, a group of older students showed me a leaflet with Thai Hoc the Patriot's face on it. I formed my first notion of Uncle Forest then. On the leaflet appeared a short-haired, square-faced man with a trim moustache and bushy brows, looking on grimly. He was no Napoleon, but he had his own appeal.

The students told me Thai Hoc the Patriot led a revolution and died at 26 years of age on a French guillotine before I was born. Before he died, he said something like this: "If a man does not achieve success, at least he achieves a legend." Thai Hoc the Patriot died, so he became a legend. Legend meant death. Death was what happened to a man who led a revolution and achieved no success. Those who succeeded lived.

At least my matriculation to Lycée Dong Khanh helped me understand why Ma left those two frames blank. Auntie Ginseng and Uncle Forest left home to become legends. They could be dead at any time. Then, they would join the spirits that became my roots, my home. Meanwhile, I was to keep another secret. I was not supposed to mention Uncle Forest to anyone, except within the household. I did not want Uncle Forest to be guillotined like Thai Hoc the Patriot. I pledged to myself I would keep my lips sealed.



## 2. White Magnolia

Growing up with Ma in her ancestral house on the slope of Nam Giao also meant getting to know her magnolia tree in the front yard. It was Ma who had made it grow so tall and spread its leaf-heavy branches over the red tiled roof, sprinkling petals all over the front yard. The tree became the benchmark of how far I could go back to my earliest memory of living with Ma.

Ma said white magnolias reminded her of Ginseng. As a young girl, Auntie Ginseng often picked a magnolia bloom and placed it next to her face. She would cock her head and pretend she was being photographed like a silver screen star of the West. The translucent white petal shone onto her young skin. And then Auntie Ginseng would take the bloom and place it next to the Mystique Concubine's face to compare. Mother and daughter would laugh, and Ginseng would throw the bloom at Ma, asking Ma to do the same thing. Ma would refuse, just to irk Ginseng. Ma called Ginseng the magnolia thrower of the house. At times, Ma said, the magnolia thrower would lick off the fresh drops of dew on the white petals.

"Sweet, sweet, sweet," she would claim, licking her lips.

Ginseng said when she grew up, she would get married and have a baby girl, whom she would name Dew. Not just any Dew, but the best of Dew. Mi-Suong. Beautiful Dew. That was the origin of my name.

Of course, as a grown woman, Ginseng had no time for a baby because she was busy wearing golden armor, even wooden shoes like Joan of Arc. My aunt pointed her sword at the sky and rode giant elephants in the misty jungles of north Vietnam.



I was grateful for the absentee Auntie Ginseng for having given me such a beautiful name, and I was equally fascinated with her riding elephants. But I could never understand how she could throw those dainty magnolia blooms around like table tennis balls. Ginseng must have had a mean streak in her to treat magnolia blooms that harshly.

The big blooms rested tender in my hand; those whitish, ivory petals, large enough to fill up a porcelain winter melon soup bowl that could feed five adults. Ma would place the blue and white translucent bowl out on the mossy porch to collect rainwater. Every day, she would pick a fresh bloom, severing it from its grainy, long stem with a pair of scissors. She would float the cut bloom inside the bowl and place it on the rosewood altar table. The floral scent filled up the room, lingering upon the ivory lace curtains and the edges of the dark furniture that shone with lemon juice.

Much later, I fell in love and married a philosophy student at Sorbonne whose *nom de guerre* was *L'Espoir*, the French word for "Hope." When he brought home to me my first bottle of Christian Dior perfume from Paris, I sat dumbstruck until I could recall what the scent reminded me of: the cut magnolia blooms that permeated Ma's altar room.



I imagined, too, the flowers would turn into a woman's face, smooth and white like magnolia, with painted brows like two slanting ink strokes, just like in the silk painting that supposedly captured her in the altar room. The woman became my notion of my grandmother, the Mystique Concubine of the Violet City and the matriarch of my family, a household consisting of women and no living men. Through generations, Ma said, we the women and young girls of the ancestral house would be bound together by that absentee woman, who became the spirit of the River Huong.

I imagined she would evaporate into a tiny stream of air, traveling so lightly from her silk portrait to the porcelain bowl, and eventually becoming the bloom of magnolia floating in the rainwater that smelled like the early morning dew of the perspiring glass window behind curtains. And then like smoke, she would curl herself out of the bowl, her long black hair floating behind her back. Like Ma, she wore white silk pajamas, the soft fabric reminding me of the rich, smooth texture of the white bloom petals that covered the ground of our front yard.

In that dark altar room, I imagined my grandmother would float through the dark space, her naked feet suspended slightly above the

tiled floor. At times, my three dead grandfathers would also come alive, walking out of their black-and-white frames. The emperor boy would pull my sleeves, making me bow. The two old men—a paternal grandfather and an adoptive maternal one—would approach me, placing their dehydrated hands onto my forehead, their long, curled fingernails dragging across my temples like the touch of a dry bamboo branch.

And I would faint.

Of course, Ma knew nothing about my fantasy. She would think I was impious.

The fear and excitement combined made me regard the altar room with both love and awe. Most of the time, I avoided the altar room by spending my days in the front yard, drunk in the sweet smell of waxy blooms. They were mine and not just Auntie Ginseng's little table tennis balls.

But soon, I discovered that just like Auntie Ginseng, I had my own mean streak.

When the white blooms fell like rain onto the damp ground, I picked them up and placed them in a bamboo basket. I had a little shovel, and one morning, I tried to replant those blooms into a flower bed that followed the shape of my bedroom window, directly underneath it.

I wanted to create my own magnolia tree.

In the process, I never expected to see those pitiful earthworms. At the sight of them, I threw the shovel and ran back to the house. The reddish brown creatures were shaped like chopsticks, yet grotesquely soft and wriggling. They could crawl through the cracks between my fingers. My shovel had stabbed them in half, each half still corkscrewing through the dirt as though gasping for life.

I had seen earthworms living and dying. I held my dirty hands together and stared at my palms. A tear fell into the middle of my joined hands. In my joined palms, I saw a clear little pond in which I could still imagine shadows of the reddish creatures wriggling in despair. Even in death, they still moved. I cried into the pond of my palms because I knew I had killed them.



Yet I would do it again, trying to plant my tree. I had become obsessed with the idea even though I knew the planting of my dream tree had killed, and would continue to kill.

In the only two times I met Aunt Ginseng, I never got a chance to ask the thrower of magnolia blooms why she did such a thing. What was so compelling that she had to pull a petal apart, the same way I had to stab earthworms to get to my version of a dream?



The first time I met Aunt Ginseng, it was in the middle of an autumn night, yet the air outside was full of fog. It was the day of the August Moon festival. We were supposed to get a clear, full moon.

I had eaten lots of greasy sesame cakes during the day and woke up in the chill of the night, my eyes catching the stream of August moon from the open window. I was busy listening to the rumbling noises in my stomach, concentrating all of my attention on my belly button.

In the stillness of the night, I realized that the window was wide open. It was the fog that had gotten inside and made me sick. It had got into my belly button and given me a stomachache. I turned over on my stomach and hid my face into the pillow. From the corners of my eyes, I raised my eyelids and glanced upward at the window frame.

Ma was standing outside the window, holding the lantern, staring back at me. Ma, standing still, behaving oddly and strangely dressed. She had on dark cotton pajamas and a funny-looking, unattractive green hunter's hat. Her eyes were fixated onto my face, intensely like a stranger. Her hair was divided and tightly woven into two Chinese braids, hanging on both sides of her face, protruding from under the hat rim. The lantern flickered in her hand. I noticed she was not wearing the green jade bangle and the gold carved bracelet, which had been blessed with Quan Yin's holy water by a monk.

Something was not right. Ma wore that jewelry all the time, even in sleep. The intensity of her glare was so haunting I could not continue looking at her. I had to close my eyes again.

And then the terror struck.

It was not Ma at all at the window frame. It was a stranger I had never met. She had Ma's face.



I must have fainted for a few minutes. When I regained consciousness, I caught myself still frozen in fear. I opened my eyes again and the first thing I saw was the empty window frame. The woman was gone.

I heard voices, coming out of the altar room, racy and competing. I listened and listened. Ma was speaking to another woman.

"She betrayed all of us," the stranger said.

"Don't say that about your own mother," Ma was pleading. It was strange to hear her voice choked and weak.

"You and your bourgeois life! Think of the sufferings of this country!"

"But I am your flesh and blood!"

I got out of bed and left my room. The voices became clear and clearer. I was approaching the altar room. I pushed lightly on the door, already ajar. I peeped in. The room was well lit. All lights had been turned on, and all lanterns and candles were burning.

There were two of Ma in the room. But no, there was only one Ma. My Ma in her ivory silk pajamas, her dark long hair falling to one side, the jade bangle and gold carved bracelet circling her wrists, the velvet slippers enclosing her feet. The other woman, a replica of Ma, was everything I did not want Ma to be. If Ma was a willow tree, the other woman was a bamboo shoot. In the black pajamas and rubber sandals, she looked and acted like a foul peasant, almost too robust, too monstrous. And she was yelling at my Ma.

"Face up to reality, your revered mother slept with the enemy for wealth and security...People are dying every day, and you are well fed! Why?"

Ma's hands covered her face.

"You know what the irony was, sister?" the replica continued.

"It was Foucault who secured my release. Without him they

would have executed me along with Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, the first Vietnamese woman to join the Party in Moscow!"

I pushed on the door and stepped in.

"Stop yelling at my mother, you monster, you scared me at the window!" I screamed hate at her.

The two versions of Ma turned toward me simultaneously, both standing awkwardly in front of me, as though they were caught stealing.

I burst out crying. The two versions of Ma stood there and watched.

"Dew, meet your Aunt Ginseng," Ma said softly, brushing her long fingers through my entangled hair.

I looked at the woman who was supposed to be Auntie Ginseng. There was no gold armor. No wooden sabots. No pointed sword. Just a dark-skinned version of Ma in coarse peasant's pajamas and an ugly hat.

"Come here, Dew," she extended her arms, her eyes softened and her voice soothing.

"No."

"Don't be sullen, Dew. Your aunt has come back home for a few minutes. Just a few minutes. She is fighting a war for the good of all of us, remember, like Lady Trieu," Ma said desperately.

The unwelcomed auntie was approaching me. I could smell her peasant smell, like dirt and rainwater and wild cookoos and roosters. I turned away, but she got me just in time.

I struggled against her embrace, but finally yielded to her warm hand and amazingly soft touch.

"Hello, Dew. I saw you sleeping from the window," she said, her voice sturdy and friendly.

"Where's your gold armor?" I asked.

Aunt Ginseng chuckled.

"In here, my gold armor is in here," she said, pointing to the middle of her chest.

I looked at her face and acknowledged the resemblance. In close proximity, she was indeed my Ma. The exact same face, except the skin was coarser and darker — a shade between amber and brown sugar.

"I'll give you something to replace the gold armor," she said,

reaching inside her blouse pocket and displaying in her palm a pebble. "I found it in a stream near the Chinese border. I saved it for you".

I stared at the tiny pebble, the size of a huge peanut. It was a very pretty pebble, multi-colored and smooth.

"Look closely at it. It gives off golden light, see?" she said.

I looked and she was right. I saw the golden spark. Maybe she was right. Maybe the pebble had Lady Trieu's gold armor in it. Maybe it was magic.

"I love you very much. I have to go before sunrise."

And then she let go of me.



So that was how I met my only aunt. Aunt Ginseng came and went like a ghost, a dream, a wind, between the midnight moon and dawn, in all that fog. I could not decide whether to love or dislike her. For one thing, she made Ma plead. I knew, however, the servants were right. Auntie Ginseng was very beautiful, even in those dirty looking, ill-smelling black pajamas and funny hat of hers. The amber-brown-sugar skin shone like the color of light from the lantern she held in her hand the moment she left us. Yet, she could not be as beautiful as my Ma. She was never graceful like a willow tree. Ma said wherever Ginseng went, in that long journey of her's, her fate was probably with the goddesses of Vietnam.

I kept Aunt Ginseng's pebble in a little satin bag that used to hold Ma's pearl strand, and from that day on, I thought of Aunt Ginseng in a different light. She was no longer the elephant rider but instead, a lone traveler who chopped down bamboo logs and walked through muddy ponds, in humid whirling winds, across winding streams which held golden frogs and silver trouts. There, she collected golden pebbles for me. Lady Trieu's golden armor had shattered into pieces that sank into the bottom of those streams and turned into smooth pebbles. The woman warrior with braided hair, clad in black pajamas, jumped from tall trees like leopards and crawled through marshes like crocodiles.



### 3. A Way Homeward

In a way, I wished Aunt Ginseng had never come home the second time, so that I could continue dreaming about her as the black-clad tigress whose fate belonged to the Vietnamese goddesses.

But she did return home the second time. And the last.

The years past and I reached my teens, eventually celebrating my sixteenth birthday in 1949. The news of Aunt Ginseng's return arrived in the summer of 1949 in a telegraph. Ma started crying after reading it, almost hysterically, and then the household was suddenly animated because Ma ordered the servants to make preparations. Weeks of preparation, anticipation, and celebration ensued. Ma announced to everyone in the house that although Aunt Ginseng had been captured again and imprisoned for years at Hoa Lo—that infamous prison in the north—with the intervention of the progressive liberal socialist Albert Sarrault, formerly Governor General of Indochina, Auntie Ginseng had just been pardoned by the protectorate government.

The female warrior would return home to rest.

And since Aunt Ginseng would be returning home soon, Ma joyfully announced, perhaps we would soon be hearing from Uncle Forest. Her eyes sparkled, her voice became an octave higher, and all her words started running together with the excitement of an earnest child. Prospect of a reunion between the three children of the Mystique Concubine became the rejuvenating potion that made Ma a new woman.

The hopes were high and the preparation lavishing. Ma hired teams of seamstresses to cut, sew, and embroider silk and linen for Aunt Ginseng. A new bed was built by the carpenters out of rosewood. New lace curtains were made. And birds' nest soups were prepared daily in anticipation of her homecoming.

I was still going to school daily. The students of Lycée Dong Khanh talked about my aunt's release, confirming to me my aunt was indeed legendarily famous. Everyday after school I came home

to Ma's joyful eyes and the house's bubbling spirit of festivity. Her laughs rang in the air as she paraded around, supervising the teams of cooks and seamstresses. She wanted everything to be perfect. Weeks went by and Ma's happiness was almost too full and her animation too high.

I came home from school one day to an abnormal silence. No light had been lit, and the house was absolutely quiet as though the heat of the desert had brushed through the air.

I went into the new quarter set up for Aunt Ginseng and found Ma sitting alone in the dark. All the servants had retreated to their own quarters. The door to the bedroom reserved for Aunt Ginseng was left ajar.

"Don't go in there, Dew. Your aunt has come home and needs to rest," Ma said quietly as though she had no energy left.

I dashed my eyes around, knowing something had gone wrong. Very wrong.

I pushed the bedroom door open. The room, decorated with hanging silk scrolls, lace curtains and satin blankets, was empty. I stood in the middle of the room, bewildered and upset. And then I heard someone speaking, out in the interior courtyard, together with the sound of uneven footsteps.

I rushed to the courtyard and found her, the shadow of the woman who had come home. Ma had followed me, trying to catch up.

"Dew, your aunt is very ill."

The shadow turned around and I had to jerk back. I found not the young vivacious woman in black pajamas who had yelled at Ma and had given me a pebble. Instead, I found a stooping, limping old woman with dead eyes and a scarred face. Parts of her brows were missing. She stared at me, yet not seeing me

"Do you have a womb and a pair of breasts?" she asked.

I approached her and grabbed her hands. The wrists, too, were full of scars. One little finger was missing.

"Do you have a womb and a pair of breasts?" she repeated.

"Don't listen to her, Dew, she is not herself," Ma said.

I felt her face. No longer that amber-sugar-brown skin. The scar tissues rubbed against my fingers. She smiled. The mouth was crooked. I noticed, too, part of her upper lip was missing.

I let go of her and stood dazed, while Ma tried to catch the disfigured woman and brought her inside. She faintly resisted, and managed to push Ma aside.

Limping on her foot, the old woman ripped off her blouse. Under the dying twilight, I saw scar tissues on her breasts. The nipples were missing. I covered my eyes.

The topless woman was singing senselessly in gibberish. "Do you have a womb and a pair of breasts?" she sang the question like a chorus.



Ma had forbidden the servants to come in. That night, I helped Ma feed Aunt Ginseng her bird's nest soup, and then we washed her together in the porcelain tub, rubbing a hot towel over her scarred and nippleless breasts. I felt her rough scar tissues, thinking of the smoothness of white magnolias. My tears dropped onto her shoulders, and I could not make a sound. Ma was biting her lips all the time. She did not cry.

That night I sat by my bedroom window looking out at the magnolia tree. Aunt Ginseng was singing her question like an imbecile.

*"Do you have a womb and a pair of breasts?"*

I saw Ma walking the front yard under all that moonlight. She circled the magnolia tree several times, bent to pick up blooms from the ground and placed them next to her face. And then she threw them at the tall tree. She repeated the gesture several times and I watched the white petals scattering around her.

I called out to her and she turned toward the window where I sat. I could see her face under that moonlight. It was full of tears.

"I will not take this, Dew, I will not," she yelled, competing with the sound of Aunt Ginseng's gibberish.

"You and I, Dew, we will write Albert Sarraut. We will write Sylvain Foucault in Paris," she kept yelling.

I saw Ma springing forward and then falling to the ground, among all those white petals. I climbed onto the window and grabbed the iron rods, my hand reaching out to her.

From the bed of white magnolias covering the damp ground,

Ma looked up at me:

"They've butchered my beautiful sister. They've destroyed her brain."



In the following weeks and months, Ma prohibited most of the servants from entering my aunt's quarters. Caring for Aunt Ginseng became the exclusive task of Nanny Mai. Ma and I wrote letter after letter, and Ma started making trips to Saigon and Hanoi to appeal my aunt's case. She contacted newspapers and hired translators to prepare papers to be sent to Paris. I had never seen Ma so feverish.

While Ma was away for her trips, I cut magnolia blooms and floated them in the porcelain bowl. I cleaned the rosewood frames with lemon juice and burned incense sticks. Aunt Ginseng would limp around the house singing her favorite line. She took off her shirt at least once a day, displaying her disfigured torso and smiling her crooked smile.

I no longer dreamed about Lady Trieu's golden armor or the black-pajama tigress. My aunt had come home, but my perfect notion of an unbeatable female warrior had tarnished. As it turned out, the former Governor General Albert Sarraut did not respond to Ma's plea for justice, and my Uncle Forest never came home to join his sisters.

The return and disfigurement of my aunt in 1949 imprinted tragedy onto my otherwise peaceful, well-protected life. Understanding the tragedy became my entree to the turbulence of Vietnamese history. That summer, I learned that in 1945, when I celebrated my twelfth birthday safe and secure in Ma's big house in Hue, the Viet Minh occupied Tonkin up north and declared independence for the country. But France returned to Indochina shortly thereafter, and the Viet Minh fought the French. My aunt Ginseng and my absentee Uncle Forest became legends in that war. They were among the famous sons and daughters of the Vietnamese revolution. But to me, my aunt Ginseng became my notion of tragedy, and my Uncle Forest remained just a name. Their pictures never filled the empty frames in Ma's well-polished altar room.

After the summer of 1949, I lived through the revolution and

greeted my young adulthood in the false sense of protection offered by Ma's beautiful house and its beautiful garden. In my growing ambivalence about my sheltered existence, I watched the dying days of French colonialism. In 1954, the Viet Minh won the war, at last. Defeated in the battle of Dien Bien Phu, France let go of Indochina, leaving space for the Americans, the Chinese and the Russians.

And another war ensued, allegedly against the Americans, making Vietnam famous.



During the summer of 1949 when Aunt Ginseng stayed with us, no one in the house spoke very much. But in all that sadness, fate had a way to make me believe, again, in the mystical relationship between me, my aunt and Ma's magnolia tree. It happened one night when Ma was away from home, somewhere in Cochinchina or Tonkin, searching in vain for justice and for a forum to prosecute the colonists' crime committed against her twin sister.

I woke up in the middle of a summer night, feeling the heat coming from outside. I saw the window open, framing imbecile Ginseng's scared and crooked face. The moon was hanging behind her. Apparently she had wandered into the front yard and had pushed my window open. She was staring at me, with a lantern in her hand, just like the first time we met.

"Come inside, Auntie, you are letting in the heat," I said.

She did not respond, the lantern flickering in her hand.

I reached out for the satin bag underneath my pillow, where I had stored her pebble, and showed her the stone: "Remember this?"

She was still staring. I approached the window, holding the pebble against her lantern, the iron rods of the window frame separating us.

"See this? The golden shine. It's a piece of your golden armor, Auntie."

She grabbed onto the iron rods to scrutinize the stone in my hand.

"It's yours, Dew," she said.

Oh Heaven, she had just called me Dew.

"I am Dew, you remember?"

I was overjoyed. My aunt was lucid. "You named me, remember?"

"Of course I remember. You are Dew, my niece. I am in Hoa Lo, behind bars, and you've come to visit me."

My aunt had regained her memory. I wished Ma were here to see for herself.

"You are no longer in prison, Auntie, you are home now," I said, and she nodded.

I rushed to the front yard and took her to her bedroom. She began taking off her shirt.

"Don't, Auntie," I took her hands and led her to the mirror.

"You are a lady. Don't take off your shirt."

I sat her down in front of the mirror and combed her coarse, prematurely gray hair. I divided her hair into halves and made two braids.

"Remember how you came home the first time? You had braided hair like this. You were very beautiful then."

She stared at herself in the mirror, motionless.

"You are still very beautiful, Auntie," I hurried on, wanting her to feel good. She looked at me with the gaze that exposed my lies. I looked down to the floor in shame.

"Can you keep a secret for me, Dew?" she said, dreamily.

"Yes, I would do anything for you, Auntie," I responded without thinking.

She reached out for my shirt pocket and removed the pebble. Very swiftly she put it on her tongue and swallowed. She was quick and determined and I was too stunned to react. Then, her eyes dilated while she choked and coughed vehemently. I screamed out, but the door to Aunt Ginseng's bedroom was tightly closed, and the servants, including Nanny Mai, were all soundly sleeping in their own quarters separated by the interior courtyard. My aunt put one hand over my mouth and the other hand over my throat. For a moment, I could not breathe. She was smothering me. We struggled for a while until she cooled down, and we collapsed together.

But the pebble was just the size of a huge peanut and it had not hurt my aunt, although I knew she would eventually get sick. Lying next to me, the invalid woman began to talk.

"Dew, that's the secret. I just swallowed the secret. You promised you would keep a secret."

"You are ill, Auntie. I need to tell someone. You need to go to the hospital. That pebble..."

"No I won't, I won't go anywhere. I am home, remember? This is where I grew up. I won't be sick anymore. I just swallowed Lady Trieu's armor and it stayed with me."

I stared at the tissues around my aunt's crooked lips. The tissues vibrated together with her speech. My aunt was not crazy. Not at the moment. She knew what she was doing.

"To get this secret, Dew, they would have to cut open my stomach, and I won't let them. They already pierced my womb and cut my breasts, Dew."

"Auntie, please." I winced. "Don't talk about it."

"But I have to, Dew, I have to talk. I have to..."

I got up and rushed out. I went to my room and locked the door. I left my aunt alone.



I heard noises from her quarters all night. Strange noises. Like the moving of furniture, the dragging of chairs, and the tearing of cloth. I did nothing. Nothing. I just sat by the window and stared out at the magnolia tree under all that silver moonlight. Hours passed and then I saw my aunt limping out to the front yard. Just as I had seen Ma the night of Ginseng's homecoming. The servants were all in their quarters and nothing could stop Ginseng.

"Where is your gold armor, Auntie Ginseng?" I whispered from the window.

My very ill Aunt Ginseng all of a sudden became very strong, and she was dragging and moving chairs to the yard all by herself. She tried to pile them up underneath the magnolia tree. She struggled. She failed. She fell. She got up again. She limped herself around until she achieved what she set out to do. Overall, she was very skillful and determined. After all, she was the female warrior who pursued Lady Trieu's dream and picked up the golden pebble for me from a stream and she kept going until they pierced her womb and cut her breasts. And then she swallowed the secret and

made me join her.

So I joined her by watching from my bedroom window. She dragged the lace curtains into the yard with her and then she climbed on the pile of chairs and reached out for a strong branch. She knew how to pick the strongest of all branches like an expert. No matter what, she had come home.

The lace curtains Ma's seamstresses had sewn for Ginseng's homecoming flew around the disfigured woman who reached out for the magnolia tree. And then she became the falling bloom herself, dangling in the air, forever, until the moonlight caught her and off she flew. I knew it was too late. And I, her beautiful dew, sat by the window and watched. The same way I had watched the earthworms die.

The air was still and cool, as though my aunt had brought back the fog.

I left my aunt fluttering in the night and went to the mirror and took off my shirt. I saw a skinny girl, so pale her skin was almost tinted blue. I was no female warrior and could only hold a shovel. My world was confined to Ma's front yard and the steps of the red brick schoolhouse called Lycée Dong Khanh.

I imagined myself without nipples and a pair of stabbed breasts and wondered how it felt like to have darts of hatred pierce through my womb. When streams of blood flowed, they would permeate the ground and become alive as reddish earthworms. I whispered to Auntie Ginseng that I wanted neither the footsteps of Lady Trieu nor the solitude of Ma, who was always waiting. I whispered that for the rest of my life I would just plant, plant, and plant. I promised Auntie Ginseng that I would give her the best of magnolia trees bearing the smoothest petals so the young cheerful girl could pick them and throw them around like table tennis balls, in ripples of laughter surrounding a peaceful childhood.

I brought my palms together and formed a little pond, in which I could see the wriggling helpless earthworms stabbed to death, their blood smearing all the lace curtains that circled and strangled my aunt. I went to bed while white magnolias danced around my aunt, drops of dew gathering on her damp skin, healing scars and softening rough tissues to make her beautiful like the past. I had let her be.

I placed my head onto the pillow and realized I had never asked my aunt why she loved throwing magnolia blooms. Out there, I knew she would find a way to tell me, somehow, some time, and she would not blame me for sitting and watching. After all, it mattered very little why she did what she did. To me, in the end, she had chosen to return home. To her magnolia tree.

