THE MANICURIST'S DAUGHTER

Susan Lieu

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A MEMOIR

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is a true story, although some names have been changed and some characters merged to protect their privacy.

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For Má, Ba, Art,
and every person who wishes to heal.
It's possible.

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THE MANICURIST'S DAUGHTER

Prologue

THE WAITING ROOM

"Your ovary is angry," the ER ultrasound technician told me. "We need to figure out if it's strangling itself." Was this guy serious? I knew I had self-destructive thoughts, but I had no idea my body was capable of punishing itself. I tried to keep quiet as he twisted the probe inside me, up and down and sideways like a competitive baton twirler. He captured image after image, his right hand touching a combination of six round buttons so fast he looked like a DJ at a rave. My entire pelvic region was tender, but when he touched the spot, I gripped the metal bed railing and howled.

"Right there! Please stop!" It was 10:00 p.m. on a mid-December evening, and I was in the emergency room.

Up until noon that day, I was at an idyllic artist residency on Vashon Island, a quick ferry ride from urban Seattle. The opportunity was a blessing from the Universe that fell into my lap. Seventeen days in a gorgeous waterfront house with three other artists: a paper cutter devoted to the shape of hands, an animator obsessed with a Russian mirror catalog and CGI fashion, and another writer who had a history with notorious stalkers. This would be like *The Real World*, but for artists, and I was the lucky one who got a detached cottage so

I could finally be alone. I could turn off the nonstop demands of being a wife and a mother of a toddler. No responsibility with a capital *R*. I couldn't wait, and frankly, I was running out of time.

I had promised my editor a "killer" draft in the new year. Originally, I'd said October, which was pushed from my August hope. My advance money dried up, so I took on some side hustles, which ate up more writing time. As if I didn't have enough typical writer angst, there was one constraint I could not wriggle my way out of. I wanted to publish this memoir when I was thirty-eight, the same age my mother was when she died from a tummy tuck. That meant I had to get a polished draft to my editor in January, which meant I had to perform a literary miracle with my manuscript. As a procrastinator, I needed deadlines with actual consequences. This was a real deadline.

I was ten days into my residency and finally in the flow when an electric shock drove up into my pelvic area. I attempted to stand from my computer chair, but I couldn't move. The pain was at a level ten with sharp pangs coming from every direction. I started yelling, but no one could hear me—I was in my prized cottage, separate from the rest of the house.

It was happening again. The first time was a little more than a month earlier. I couldn't stand, sit, or walk, so I spent a few hours on the floor in the happy baby pose after popping ibuprofen and a THC gummy. To get to my bed ten feet away, it took five minutes of very tiny shuffling fully supported by my husband. Thankfully, it went away the next day. In the morning, I called my doctor, but she wasn't that concerned. No referral, no nothing.

Now the pain was back, and I was on an island that didn't have a hospital. But none of this should be happening. I had been diligently journaling my morning pages, meditating with an app, and bathing myself in affirmations on YouTube with galactic background music. Plus, I was training for a marathon while listening to *Oprah's Master Class* podcast. I thought I had the whole self-care box checked off.

Plus, I couldn't afford time away from the residency. My deadline was just two weeks away.

I looked around for my phone. I thought I was being clever by putting it in different drawers so I could be less distracted. But now I couldn't reach it. I got another thirty-second shock, a cramping pain so severe it felt like I was in labor again. When the pain subsided, I knew this was my chance. I hobbled to my front door, but before I could twist the knob, the lightning came again, even deeper. I slipped slowly onto the cold granite tile and flopped over into a fetal position. Right when the pain faded again, I made what felt like a fifty-foot dash for the residency director's office. Instead, I moved like I had gunshot wounds, holding my stomach, dragging a leg, grunting to move a few feet. I looked like a mummy who had to go potty.

"Heather? I need help." I tried to be calm, but the pain came again, and then I grabbed onto her desk to break my fall, giving her all the relevant details as I crumbled onto the floor. Eventually, we sped away in her tiny Chinese electric car, which topped out at a whopping thirty-five miles per hour. After an excruciatingly painful fifty-minute wait for the ferry (where I called several urgent care facilities only to be informed that their next appointment was in four hours), we went to the closest emergency room.

After my insurance company reassured me there would be no multi-thousand-dollar surprise, I checked into the facility at 2:30 p.m., where they took my vitals and a blood sample. I waited. And then waited some more. After two hours of leaning on the sides of my thighs to relieve the abdominal pressure, I couldn't take it any longer. I asked if I could lie down somehow.

"We don't have any empty beds. Sorry," said the apathetic receptionist, who was mostly texting on her phone. Then I asked for a mat or a sheet so I could lie on the floor with legs up on a chair, my lazy happy baby pose. "That's not recommended" was all she said. I asked her again, but now smoke was flaring out of my nose like an angry dragon.

"Please!" I begged. Didn't she understand that I didn't come here to hang out for fun? This pain was nonstop, but she didn't seem to care. "Fine!" I threw down my coat and carefully moved my body to the ground so I could relieve the pressure buildup. It was then that the receptionist appeared with three sets of sheets.

"Here," she said, tossing them down on the ground. I looked at the twentysomething employee the way I look at my toddler when I'm upset, scowling. As I lay down on the worn sheets, I started to cry. I didn't like being vulnerable. I hated that I couldn't fix my way out of this. A woman sitting in the waiting room asked if she could be with me. I let her. She seemed like a mom. I emoted. She listened. Three hours in, two other women also commiserated about their health ailments until we all got wheeled away by different nurses, waving until the double doors closed.

I spent the next five hours on a hospital bed doing more waiting. I still had waves of pain, but they were at a pain level of four or five. This time, I had more comfort from cable television featuring a *Friends* marathon. When my ER doctor came in, he said he'd ordered an ultrasound.

"My triage nurse said CT scan. Are we doing that too?" I asked. The doctor thought about it and agreed, which surprised me. "Wait, I'm not the medical professional here. Could we do both, or what's the benefit of doing one before the other?" I was confused. How could I have swayed him so quickly? He said he forgot what he read on my chart. The CT scan would give us a more comprehensive picture, and if needed, the ultrasound would zoom in on the problem. The last time I checked, I was an artist and he was the doctor. I had always been a little skeptical of relying on just Western medicine, but this interaction made me feel even more nervous. Was there anything else he forgot to consider?

The CT scan revealed a burst cyst on my right ovary, which led me to the ultrasound technician. My blood flow was regular, which

meant my ovary wasn't actually strangling itself—yet. I could grow another cyst, and if it was much bigger than the one I had now, it had the ability to double over and choke my ovaries. I was discharged with the recommendation to have a follow-up with my ob-gyn.

"But what if the pain comes back?" I asked. "What exactly do I do?" My only tool would be ibuprofen and returning to the ER. Western medicine could only confirm what they saw. I arrived home at midnight after an almost ten-hour hospital visit and six episodes of Ross and Rachel giving each other mixed signals. The next morning, I hopped on the 9:30 a.m. ferry to return to Vashon Island. Jill, the writer from my residency, picked me up from the ferry. She was kind, lanky, and spoke in whispers.

Back at the residency, I kept hitting a wall with revising my memoir, so I kept doing irrelevant tasks to feel productive—that is, until the Universe intervened. At 4:00 p.m., another knife up my entire midsection. My phone was on the shelf, and I had ibuprofen ready, but I couldn't move my body to reach it. When the first wave passed, I got my provisions and slid onto the bed in the fetal position. I called my ob-gyn triage nurse, and in between my yelling and crying, she told me to call 9-1-1.

"But what if the pain goes away?" I screamed. Clearly, it hadn't. She urged me to get help so someone could come check my vitals. Amid the stabbing pain, I managed to call Jill because it was Heather's day off. Then I called my husband, Marvin, and asked him how much the ambulance would cost with our insurance. When Jill arrived, I gave her my phone. I kept trying to call 9-1-1 but kept pressing 6-9-9. I was useless.

Firefighters came, and I was eventually wrapped in a series of sheets and carried to the icy gravel driveway. They put me on a gurney and wheeled me backward into an ambulance as my residency friends waved goodbye. The doors slammed shut, I got strapped in, and then it hit me. This is what my mother went through the day she went into a coma and never returned. Rushed into an ambulance

without any loved ones riding with her, completely subject to an EMT stranger. The parallels made me weep.

My mother was in an ambulance all alone when she was thirty-eight. A botched plastic surgery from a negligent surgeon. She went without oxygen to her brain for fourteen minutes before he made the 9-1-1 call. Here I was, thirty-seven years old, about the same height and weight as she was, also alone. I wasn't ready to die. My son was almost three. My mother died when I was eleven.

I started talking to my Creator. *Give me until I'm sixty—wait, no, seventy-five. And I'm not ready yet. I have to publish this book!* That was my real answer. I didn't say *spare me because of my son.* I wanted more time so I could tell my family story. Guilt, then shame set in. Then it was the pain that shocked me back to the present moment. I had also been listening to Eckhart Tolle on my runs, where he said "the now" was all there was. The Universe had a sick sense of humor.

My EMT, Bridgette, who was an on-call volunteer (and in the middle of making a fettucine alfredo when the firefighter called her cell), took my vitals as the ambulance raced to the ferry dock. I called out "Pain!" every time it came, while she took note of time intervals. I was having body shocks every three to five minutes for thirty seconds. If my cyst had already burst, why was the pain back in full force? They said once it ruptured, I should feel better, but I was only feeling worse. When I arrived at the hospital in the city center, it was 6:30 p.m. Since I'd come in on a stretcher, I had to wait only thirty minutes instead of three hours to be admitted. My privilege made me feel conflicted, but I was so relieved when they started giving me care.

For the next four hours, I was on a bed in hallway 9, and it was bustling. There was a woman in her eighties who kept wandering outside her room saying it wasn't her fault she beat up the man. She kept insisting for a clock, because without knowing the time, she found everything disorienting. There was another elderly woman whose eye was completely swollen shut with a busted lip from a bad fall. Her son and husband took turns sitting next to her as doctors rolled different

devices in to treat her. An unhoused man with no socks grumpily ate some hospital food and slept. A social worker reviewed his history with him, trying to figure out if he had anyone in his life who would pick up a call. There were two temporary health care workers just sitting around looking at their phones, trying to avoid getting moved to another facility late at night. Another worker sanitized a room in a full hazmat suit. Nurses and doctors walked briskly in Hoka shoes past the nurse's station lit with blue Christmas lights. Maybe a nod to code blue.

The first nurse to check my vitals asked me where I was from. Santa Rosa, California, the artery of the wine country, I liked to say. He told me, as a young boy, he frequented the town's small airport to meet his father, who was a pilot. Somehow knowing that he took the same highway exits I once did calmed me down. It was irrational, but aren't most things we use to comfort ourselves?

After much poking and prodding, the ER doctor gave me the same diagnosis as the day before. But this time, I was prepared. I looked down at my handwritten list of questions. Doctors were like celebrities. There was so much anticipation to talk to them that I knew I would instantly forget my laundry list of concerns. I would only be able to react to whatever they said.

I started rattling off my questions. *What activities should I avoid? Should I only eat anti-inflammatory foods? Should I get a colonoscopy? My blood test says I'm low on that thing I can't pronounce. When I keep clicking on links and cross-referencing that with where my pain is—do I have liver cancer? What causes have been eliminated? What aggravates it? If I have another episode, what do I do?* She told me to carry pain relievers and cautioned me not to get too paranoid from internet research. Then I asked to see the on-call ob-gyn from the Northwest Women's Clinic who delivered babies at the hospital, including my own the last time I was in this hospital. I wanted a second opinion.

"I have a follow-up with the group's nurse next week, but since I'm here, can I see the doctor instead?" I asked.

The ER doctor leaned in close. “She’s just going to tell you the same thing I told you,” she said without much compassion.

I knew she was probably right, but no one had solved my body’s mystery. Could this happen tomorrow or never again? Was this about the cyst or something else? And what was her deal?

“It would just give me peace of mind since I’m already here.” I held my ground and waited, but I was now feeling a little scared for even asking.

“I’ll call, but she’s not going to tell you anything different,” she mumbled as she walked away.

Her behavior was so unsettling. Since I started telling my family story about my mother’s medical malpractice death, I learned about patient advocate principles: make a list of questions, bring a person to help support, ask for what I need. But even knowing all of this, having to insist on talking to my ob-gyn felt extremely uncomfortable.

Then it hit me again. The frustration and confusion I was feeling was just a fraction of what my Vietnamese refugee father went through when my mother was in a coma after her plastic surgery. No way was he going to challenge authority or know what questions to ask. The person he conferred with on all the decisions was my nineteen-year-old brother. Here I was with my two Ivy League degrees, communicating in my native language, and eager to make requests. He didn’t have a high school education and spoke broken English. Even with all my advantages, I still felt belittled and intimidated by my doctor. My father didn’t stand a chance.

The gynecologist came, bringing comfort and new information. The cyst did burst, but the ongoing pain was unusual. She was confident it was not an issue related to my uterus and encouraged me to keep investigating with my physician. It felt reassuring that the behemoth medical system still had individuals who cared.

The next morning, I decided I would not return to Vashon Island and just focus on my health instead. Since no one actually had answers, I did what I do when Western medicine can’t cure me—I

scheduled acupuncture. After waiting on hold for far too long with my primary care team, I did the thing that would make me feel undeniably good. I made an appointment for a haircut. My split ends had been looking obnoxious for months and agitated me every time I looked in the mirror. My biannual haircut was long overdue. Even though I despised driving, I hopped in the car and roughed it through the rain and dense traffic to a salon across town because my girlfriend said the style was nice and the price was right. Plus it was owned by a Vietnamese single mom.

Once I arrived at Hiếu Organic Spa, I waited with two other customers who were getting their nails done. When the stylist called my name, I decided to treat myself with a shampoo. Soothing circles around my temples, feeling held at different acupressure points, being bathed like a baby with warm water. I felt like I could finally relax after the nonstop forty-eight-hour health scare.

When it was time for my cut, I did what I usually do in Vietnamese salons—I pretended I didn't understand Vietnamese. Eavesdropping was such a guilty pleasure, and I wanted to see if they talked smack about me. I made my guess at who the owner was, the power broker out of them. The one who answered the phone and triaged all the walk-in customers was also my hair stylist, which comforted me. Owners take pride in their work, so I felt like I would be in good hands. As she twirled the black haircut cape around my front, customers kept coming through asking how long the wait time would be for a pedicure. The shop was so busy, she had to turn people away.

Above her station mirror, I saw a picture of her toddler boy posing in a 1930s-era outfit with an antique train. Whenever I met mothers of young children, I felt an instant affinity. We spoke about the shape of my cut and settled on layers like Rachel's from *Friends*. Television can be so influential. Then my stylist asked if I'd heard about the winter light show at Tulalip Resort Casino, the one by the outlets. She was thinking about taking her seven-year-old son to see that and the headlining singer.

"Vietnamese?" I asked.

"Yes, how did you know?" she asked, a bit surprised.

"I'm Vietnamese." I smirked. And so began our intense conversation. Where was the newest phở place to try? Which bánh mì place had the best bread? Then I nonchalantly brought up my family story. I had to.

"I'm writing a book on nail salons. My mom had two, but she died. She was thirty-eight." The stylist stopped thinning my hair with a razor. "Tummy tuck," I explained. I told her everything. The plastic surgeon's probation, his lack of malpractice insurance, Má having four kids. My hair stylist simultaneously translated to all her nail workers: her niece, her husband's sister, and her sister.

"San Francisco! Nineteen ninety-six!" she exclaimed. Before I could finish my story, she pulled up her long white-sleeve shirt. "Look!" Her arm was covered in goose bumps. "I've been thinking about getting a tummy tuck for the last three months," she admitted. "People have been saying Florida, Korea, maybe even Bellevue. But now you come here and sit in my chair and tell me this! I shouldn't do it." I looked at the hair that stood straight up on her arm and then at her son's photo. Earlier she had said my Vietnamese was so bad, I sounded cute, like a toddler. That may be true, but the Vietnamese I did know was the Vietnamese she needed to hear.

"Rồi bây giờ chị còn muốn thử mạng nữa không?" I asked. *So now, do you still want to keep playing with your life?* She complained about her C-section scar. "Think about who you're doing it for," I urged. And then she answered how I think my mother would have answered.

"For me," she said confidently.

"But why?" I pressed.

She replied right back without hesitation. "I want to be pretty," she said unabashedly. An answer so honest, what could I say back? Didn't I also squeeze my own belly fat and wish things could be different? I tried to stay neutral.

"Just let me send you my show" was all I said, trying to keep

the urgency I felt out of my voice. I had written and performed a one-woman show about my family's tragedy, where I played fifteen characters. My mother thought plastic surgery was safe. After all, everyone was doing it. I wanted my stylist to see how my family's unprocessed grief still impacted us two decades later. She went by Felicity on Zelle, but she was Út to her workers, meaning the *youngest*. I was the út in my family too. She obliged and gave me her cell phone number.

With my new freshly cut locks, I pushed open the door and headed to my car, marveling at the fortuitous encounter. There were plenty of salons in my neighborhood, but there was a reason why I came all this way to sit in her chair, on this day, at this moment. Maybe my mother had a hand in it. When I got home, I sent my show link and another Vietnamese saying. Hôm nay có duyên. *Today was serendipitous.*

The salon was named after her son. Hiếu, meaning *filial piety*, was the Confucian concept of a child demonstrating care and respect for one's parents, especially in their older years. But how could her young son fulfill this virtue if Felicity died an early death? If anything bad happened with her plastic surgery, she wouldn't be around to see him become a young man to execute his duty. This was all hitting too close to home.

I didn't see Felicity as weak or insecure. She was entrepreneurial and running a successful salon. In so many ways, she reminded me of my mother, which was why I was afraid for her.

After three days without pain, I returned to Vashon Island refreshed and ready to write. I didn't need the Universe intervening with any more surprises, and I was simply tired of waiting—in the hospital, in the salon, in the writing chair. Who knew how much grace I would be given to finish what I set out to do with this memoir. This book couldn't wait any longer—body's orders.

Vengeance

EVERYONE KNOWS THE TRAGEDY OF THE DEAD,
BUT LET'S TALK ABOUT THE TRAGEDY OF THE LIVING.

It all began the first day of solo performance class with the task to tell a five-minute story. I was there because I didn't want to be a coward anymore. As a budding stand-up comic, I was in my orbit onstage, but a heckler at a charity comedy show made fun of me so bad, I avoided the microphone for three years. Now married, I was getting nonstop pressure from my father and aunts to have children, but a part of me felt disappointed with the adult I thought I would be (a revolutionary stage performer) and the one I actually became (a thirty-two-year-old with a corporate desk job as a contractor at Microsoft, not even FTE status). How could I tell my future kid to pursue their dreams when I hid from my own?

It was 2017, and I was sitting in the basement of a small community theater with four white women all decades older than I was. I let them go first. A bohemian shaman recounted how a neighbor obnoxiously interrupted her drum circle and how she retaliated by bitching her out. A spunky woman in her eighties fawned over a legendary Miami hairdresser named Alfonso, who changed women's lives. A soccer mom sang a song about sorting through her estranged late father's possessions. I tried to be present, but I kept thinking about what I

would say. I had been quiet about my family story for twenty-one years, shaking the details back and forth like a two-liter soda bottle. When Paul, the instructor, asked me to speak, I tried to unscrew the cap with control, but it flew off like a cannon.

On the last day of her life, Má, my Vietnamese refugee *mother* and proud owner of two nail salons, went in for plastic surgery—a tummy tuck, the narrowing of her nostrils, a chin implant—and figured she would be home the next day with her beautiful new body. Two hours into the operation, she lost oxygen to her brain. The human brain can go without oxygen for up to four minutes before permanent brain damage occurs. Fourteen minutes passed before the surgeon called 9-1-1. After five days in a coma, she flatlined. And when Má died, when my sun fell out of the sky, she was thirty-eight years old. I was eleven.

After that, my family was never the same. Ba, my *father*, stopped singing karaoke on Sunday mornings. My aunts and grandparents on my mom's side moved out, so we had all these rice bowls we never used anymore. And nobody ever talked about it. Every year, on her death anniversary, we would light incense for her. Then we ate in silence. My mother was dead, but in a sense, we were too, and I was powerless to change it.

It wasn't until I went to college that I learned words like "capitalism," "exploitation," and "intergenerational trauma." In grad school, far away from my family, I began to plot my revenge. I realized my mother's death wasn't just tragic, it was complex. It was the result of a negligent white man with a track record of preying on vulnerable Vietnamese refugees. It was classist and sexist, and he got away with it, never paying my family a dime. Prior to my mother's procedure, he had been sanctioned by the medical board on two separate occasions, and he didn't even carry malpractice insurance. This was not some shady back-alley operation. This happened in San Francisco, on Geary Boulevard in 1996.

I wanted to make him suffer. I wanted to sue him for all the money he had and give it to my dad because he didn't have a retirement

fund—he did nails. I started fantasizing about a multipronged marketing campaign with targeted Facebook ads to the doctor, a billboard by his clinic, an exposé in his local paper. I wanted him to never mess with Vietnamese people ever again. This was how I would avenge my mother's death.

And right when I was going to launch my smear campaign, I found out he died a month prior. Parkinson's. Picking cherry tomatoes in his garden. The gall. The very person that would free me from my misery slipped like oil through my fingers, along with any hope to bring redemption to my family. I had hit a wall. I could not win without an enemy. It was a sign that I had to finally move on. But three years after the doctor's death, I still had so many questions about my mother. I couldn't stop searching for her, because the very people who knew her best—my family—wouldn't let me in.

When I finally let it all out, I looked up at my instructor, Paul, feeling like I just did something illegal. I tried to read the stoic light-skinned faces in the room. For some reason, I wanted to apologize for burdening them. What the fuck had I done? My instructor began to clap.

"Have you performed this story before?" he asked. No, I told him, a little worried I'd just betrayed my family. I was conditioned to them yelling at me to stop. But here, to my shock, no one made me feel bad for talking about Má. Instead, Paul said my story needed to be told. I heard his words, but I didn't believe him. Adrenaline was surging through my veins, and alarm bells were going off in my head. I had done the thing I was not supposed to do.

"It's dirty laundry," I muttered to my hands. "Only my husband knows." And he knew it all too well. Inside our Seattle apartment, there was a small den that had all the clues I had been collecting over the years hastily hung with torn blue painter's tape like a crime scene investigation. A newspaper article on Dr. Moglen and my mother. The addresses of his plastic surgery clinics. Medical board verdicts. His obituary. The name of the Vietnamese magazine where Má probably saw his ad. Normal people have hobbies like book club, a socially

acceptable excuse to drink wine and get a night away from their husbands. I had an obsession that I was not allowed to talk about. So I would eat edibles at my dining table and go down internet rabbit holes late into the night, wondering if the doctor and his family suffered the way mine did. Contemplating why my mom did it when she had gotten the American dream and then some. Why was she willing to risk it all when everything she had was already picture-perfect?

After the solo performance course ended, I began doing more research on who Má was, taking my findings to the stage so I could make sense of it all in real time. As I sorted through the few pictures I had of Má, searching for a clue as to who she was, I was tickled by her poses. There was a time when Vietnamese women loved taking portraits with their eyes gazing off camera as their face graced a beautiful rose. The mood was soft, gentle, forlorn. Over an eight-year period from 1988 to 1996, there were five photos of her, a fashionable statue in the flesh looking right into the camera with her jade-green bracelet, impeccably polished nails, and an elegant hairdo. She stood in bright jumpers and chic dresses in matching heels, but on tall rocks. It was as if she knew she would be immortalized.

Má was the general of the house and the center of our livelihood, our nail salon. And since all her employees were our bà con, *our relatives*, both were one and the same. From her perch at the head table closest to the salon door, her word was truth. She did not plead with anyone, she commanded. Somehow, she always knew what to do, and we dutifully obeyed. She had the master plan, leading with the omniscience of Oz, the high expectations of Confucius, and the charm of Princess Diana.

Má never whined, she manifested. After arriving penniless to America as boat people, we moved from a small subsidized apartment in Emeryville, California, to a two-story house in San Pablo that we owned in just eight years. One day, five relatives showed up all the way from Việt Nam to help us build our nail salon empire. Then, we had a second nail salon, a third car.

Má had a hot temper. Sometimes she would start yelling at my father, and he never fought back. When that would happen, all of us kids would wait and watch, not sure what would happen next. When she found out my older brother, Kang, was smoking pot in college, she changed the locks on the front door. She didn't give him a new key until he made the dean's list again.

Even though Má was completely responsible for everyone's livelihood, she never seemed scared; she was just scary. When I was six, Lan, our Vietnamese neighbor friend, accidentally cracked my forehead with an aluminum baseball bat when I was trying to get his attention behind home plate. I teetered, walking backward in shock with blood dripping down my face. Instead of tending to me, Lan started freaking out to my brothers: "Oh, man! Your mom is gonna kill me!" She was that mom who frightened all the neighborhood children.

Má was at the epicenter of our thirteen-person household, which meant I rarely had alone time with her. I can only recount four memories when it was just the two of us, and only one of those memories is not filled with shame. I observed my mother more than I interacted with her. My idea of hanging out with her was spinning in the black leather swivel chair at her station when we weren't busy. It was a space where she gave her full attention to customers, a place where I wanted to get to know her, but she always had me on another chore: fill the cotton containers, confirm the next day's appointments, vacuum the floor. Even though I never had those heart-to-heart conversations I saw on *Full House* between the kids and adults, it was nice to be needed by her.

Since she vanished, every experience I have in life goes through the sieve of my mother's death. Even when I dress my body, I think about her. I know which pieces fit a little too snugly, the ones that make me feel too self-conscious to wear. This has made me feel especially guilty because that kind of thinking killed her. And after I got married at thirty, my motherhood journey became a group decision

with Ba and my aunts on my mother's side pounding their fists and me freaking out inside.

My elders insisted I start as soon as possible. "You're not a kid anymore," reminded Dì Phương, *Aunt* Phương. She was Má's youngest sister of her ten siblings. I laughed it off and said I didn't want kids, citing climate change and saving money for an early retirement. But the real answer I could never say to their faces was that if the baby came and I didn't know what to do, who would I call? How could I become a mother if I never knew my own?

When I am with my family, we talk about three things: how to make money, how to save money, and what we are going to eat next. Whenever I brought up a conversation that had the slightest whiff of vulnerability, I would get a series of stonewalled faces—my elders and Americanized siblings alike. Innocent questions about Má's personality became land mines. Even on her death anniversary, when we huddled around her grave offering her favorite foods, talking about her was off-limits.

As the youngest of my four siblings, I was not allowed to challenge anyone older than I was, which was everyone. I had to save face, even at the expense of my own. I was supposed to shrink to make space for others to be comfortable. Even though I was a hojicha-latte-drinking, downward-dog-bending, Ivy League–educated American, I would be forever microchipped Vietnamese. I was not, under any circumstances, allowed to talk about our secrets, or else I would risk my relationship with my family.

Má was more mystery than mother. In Vietnamese, there are six tones that can change the definition of a word. The mid-level tone "ma" means *ghost*. The high-rising tone "má" means *mother* in the southern Vietnamese dialect we speak at home. The low-falling tone "mà" means *but*, the word I kept saying when my family kept dismissing my insistence to know more. The low-rising or questioning tone "mả" means *tomb*, the place where we think we buried just a body but many

more things are buried there too. The high broken tone, that kind of sounds like a bleating sheep, "mã" means *horse* (a Sino-Vietnamese word), my father's zodiac sign. And finally the heavy glottal stop "mạ," which means *newborn rice seedling*, the quintessential ingredient to a Vietnamese meal—and sometimes, unfortunately, the only way my family shows they care.

With just another diacritic mark, the same root word takes on a different meaning. It has taken me years, but now I know how all their meanings tie together to help me understand what happened to Má and to my family after her sudden death. For over two decades, we didn't speak of her. It was as if she never existed, which was worse than becoming a myth. At least with a myth, you had details. Instead, I had fragmented, fading memories. Perhaps sharing details would force my family to relive the pain of the past. Perhaps there was too much shame tied to how she died. But avoiding her altogether, that's how she truly died for me.

As the youngest child, I felt like I never knew her, and no one would let me in. They accused me of being too much of a baby, too emotional.

"Bỏ qua đi," said Ba with exasperation. *Let it go.* The verb "bỏ" is also used when throwing away trash.

"Có gì để nói?" whispered Dì Phương. *What else is there to say?*

"Live in the now," insisted Kang, my oldest sibling.

"Go wash your face!" ordered Hang, my second-oldest sibling, whenever I started to cry.

"Can we talk about something else?" squirmed Wendy, the next in line.

Even though we were boat people who came to America in 1983, Má's awful death made us refugees a second time in 1996. We had to rebuild our lives all over again, but instead of doing it together as we had always done with Má at the helm, each of us did it alone in silence. I have tried to process her death with therapists over the years, but retelling the narrative over and over again wears down even the

steadiest of treadmills. Without my family providing me with more memories of Má or joining me in processing the worst experience of our lives, I have been stuck running in place going nowhere. And that can make a person do crazy things, like join a cult, track down the killer's family, seek justice through the help of spirit channelers, and put on a touring one-woman show about my family tragedy. But I'll get to all of that later.

Two decades after we lost her, I was still trying to reconstruct who she was, but no one—not Ba, my siblings, or my mother's sisters—wanted to talk. On the brink of motherhood myself, I felt scared. How could I become a mother if I never knew my own? I still had so many questions. I wanted to know why my self-empowered feminist mother wanted plastic surgery. I wanted to know who she was and how I was like her. And most of all, I wanted to know if I could heal from this trauma when my family could not give me what I need. I was on the hunt for answers, and this was my attempt to resurrect her so I would never forget what my family is capable of and where we come from. Seeking the truth was how I would avenge my mother's death. I am the manicurist's daughter, and this is our story.

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