

Death, Part One

March 1976, Tam Ky, South Vietnam

When I was two months old, my parents, on orders from my paternal grandmother, took me to an herbalist in Da Nang and offered the old man gold bars to give me a concoction that would make me sleep forever. Because I was born blind, to my Chinese grandmother, I was broken. I would be a burden and an embarrassment to the family. Unmarriageable. Besides, my grandmother reasoned, she was showing me mercy—I would be spared a miserable existence.

That morning, my mother dressed me in old baby clothes soiled with brownish-yellow stains from my sister's or brother's shit that she had not been able to wash away, even after countless scrubblings. My grandmother had ordered my mother to put me in these clothes and now stood in the doorway to my parents' bedroom, watching my mother dress me. "It would be a waste for her to wear anything else," she said when my mother was finished, as if to confirm the rightness of her instruction.

These were the clothes in which I was to die. In desperate times such as those, there was no point in throwing away a perfectly good baby outfit on an infant that was soon to become a corpse.

Our family drama played out in the red-hot center of the Cold War. South Vietnam had been "liberated" by the North eleven months earlier, and a geopolitical domino came crashing into the lives of the Yips.

By 1972, the war had turned decidedly against the South, and my father was terrified of losing what few possessions he had risking his life for a country for which he, as an ethnic Chinese man, felt little to no nationalistic pride. In his four years of military service, my father never talked to anyone in his family during his brief home leaves about what horrible things he had seen or done. His mother's attempts to spare him the ugliness of war by using bribery to get him a position as a driver for an army captain had not been as successful as they had all hoped. He found himself driving into enemy territory, uncertain where the snipers and land mines lurked, and sleeping in the jungle at night, afraid of the stealthy Vietcong slitting his throat while he slept on the jungle floor, and then jerking into motion by explosions that ripped open the silence of a tenuous calm. In the end, the constant fear of death—or, worse yet, of losing a limb, as had happened to some of his friends—overwhelmed whatever notions he had of honor and his fears of being labeled a coward. One day, he walked away from camp on the pretext of retrieving supplies from his jeep and didn't look back. For a week, he walked and hitchhiked his way to Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, where he hid in Cholon, an old district inhabited by at least a million ethnic Chinese. Cholon was a place with such bustling activity and such a large population of those not loyal to the war effort that he could hide while still being able to move freely about the community.

My grandmother, to whom my father managed to get word of his whereabouts, trusted no man's ability to remain faithful, including her son's, and suggested to my mother that she join my father in Saigon. And so my mother, with my two-year-old sister, Lyna, in one arm and my infant brother, Mau, in the other, went to Saigon, and there they lived in limbo with my father until the end of the war, waiting until it was safe for him to return to Tam Ky without the fear of being imprisoned or, even worse, forced to continue military service in a rapidly deteriorating situation. It was not the time to have another child.

When Saigon fell on April 30, 1975, my parents rejoiced with the rest of Saigon, not because they believed in the new Communist

regime but because the war was finally coming to an end. As Saigon changed hands, they celebrated by joining the feverish mobs ransacking abandoned stores and warehouses, taking tanks of gas and sacks of rice and whatever else their hands could carry away. They celebrated by welcoming the news of my pending arrival into this world, and after Saigon fell, they finally went home to Tam Ky, where I came into the world on an unremarkable January evening eight months later. I weighed a little more than three kilograms (between six and seven pounds), big by Vietnamese standards, but not so big that my mother and I were at the risk of dying during childbirth. Hospitals were filthy, and cesareans were not an option in those days; no one knew how to perform them, except maybe in Saigon. My father named me , which is pronounced “Lijing” in Mandarin Chinese and “Lising” in Hainanese Chinese, and translated literally means “Quintessence of Jasmine.” My name was intended to convey a sense of vibrancy, vitality, and beauty. My mother, who had waited so long for a new baby, was thrilled. And so was my grandmother—at first, anyhow. Two months later, wrapped in my brother and sister’s old baby clothes, I was in my father’s arms, on a bus, making the two-hour trip north to Da Nang on Highway 1, sentenced to death.