

Excerpt from *A Napalm Lullaby*, a novel

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

Vinh Long, South Vietnam, February 1972

The monks, swathed in gold saffron robes, sit cross-legged before the Lý household, eating steamed rice and eel with their fingers. Long-Vanh watches them from behind Lý Loê's cane chair. He has always been afraid of them, for he has never seen their feet when they go from house to house to receive food from those who are kind enough to give, and for this reason, Long-Vanh has always thought they were ghosts floating above the ground. Every time they look up from eating, Long-Vanh would whine, and either his grandfather Lý Loê or Uncle Ngô would purse his lips and shush him. But it is not the boy the monks are watching.

Past the curtain of beads hanging in the doorway in one of the back rooms, a woman's screams come loud and piercing, halting the monks' chewing, and when the screams stop, they return to their bowls, fingers pecking at the grains of rice.

All Long-Vanh knows of his mother are her screams coming from the back bedroom. They started earlier in the day, prompting the arrival of two women who went into the bedroom and closed the door. Long-Vanh has not seen his mother ever since, and he has been out on the porch with Uncle Ngô and Lý Loê. Although the sun has set behind the Central Highlands, there is still light left. The whole sky flickers with lightning and the faint rumblings of thunder struggles behind the ashen wall of clouds.

The men do what they can to stay awake since they did not take their afternoon nap. Lý Loê sits slouched in the cane chair sipping sake, his eyes close to near slits. Uncle Ngô sits at the edge of the porch, resting the curve of his spine against the post as he hand-rolls another cigarette.

He raises the Zippo to the cigarette, and the moment he opens it, it catches. He lights the cigarette and puffs.

When the monks are finished, they place the saucers atop their empty bowls, set them aside, and situate themselves on their knees. They bow until their foreheads almost touch the ground, rise, then fall forward in prayer. One of the monks places his palms together and says, “We pray for a safe delivery.” Lý Loê and Uncle Ngô bow, and the monks gather their robes in hands and stand. They take up their bowls and make their way to the other houses down the road. It is then Long-Vanh comes from behind Lý Loê’s chair and stands at the edge of the porch to watch the monks leave. Their robes are too long for him to see if they have feet, if they are floating.

Lightning sparks within the thick walls of clouds before gasping, and the moment the sky is calm again, another scream comes from inside the house.

All Long-Vanh knows is that he must stay outside. At three years of age he knows not to go in after the first time he tried, and Lý Loê stretched one leg out to block the doorway.

“No,” he told Long-Vanh. “Your mother is fine.”

“They hurt her,” Long-Vanh said, pointing past the rain beads.

“They are only helping her. Here. Keep playing with this.”

He has busied himself with a yo-yo whose string is now tangled, and Uncle Ngô has long given up undoing the string for him. With one finger inserted in the loop, Long-Vanh throws the yo-yo away from him and watches it land on the porch. He wants to “walk the dog,” a trick Uncle Ngô showed him before the monks came, but Long-Vanh can only tug on the string, coaxing it to move, to fumble toward him.

“It did not take this long last time,” Uncle Ngô says.

Lý Loê lowers his head, just as he is about to take another sip of sake, and stares at Long-Vanh who's bent over the yo-yo, imitating the tongue-clucking sounds he learned from Uncle Ngô. The boy grows impatient and yanks on the string commanding it to "*Walk. Walk. Walk.*" Lý Loê sets the dish on the table next to him and rests his hands on his lap to steady them.

He was not there when Long-Vanh was born. He had disowned Vu-An for marrying Wil Stiles. It wasn't until some months after Long-Vanh was born did Lý Loê decide to go see the child, not out of a need to make amends with Vu-An but out of curiosity. He wanted to know what a Vietnamese woman and a Negro man could produce. What Lý Loê saw that day he visited Asia Minor with its clotheslines draped with sheets and shirts stunned him. Though Long-Vanh had brown skin and curly hair, the oval shaped eyes were that of a Vietnamese person, as well as the big mouth, the sculpted jaw line, and the full bottom lip. When he saw Long-Vanh, he picked him up and held him in his arms and cried, not because he was absent from his grandson's birth, but because, as he later told Vu-An, holding the boy so close to him was like feeling him materialize from his own body. That afternoon he walked around Vu-An's home with the baby in his arms, one hand patting Long-Vanh's back as he gazed up at him while sucking on a pacifier, his eyes fixed on him, unblinking.

Lý Loê accepted Vu-An as his daughter and acknowledged Wil as his son-in-law. Only now Wil is somewhere in America where he has been for the past seven months when one morning he woke up, bathed, got dressed, and walked out of his home in Asia Minor and headed to the Nha Trang Airport, and boarded a plane with only his passport and military ID card. For the past seven months, Vu-An and her son have lived with Lý Loê, he has seen her launder Wil's clothes whenever they smelled musty from the humidity, watched as she folded his shirts, pressed his slacks, even polished his shoes. Most nights, Lý Loê could hear music coming from her room,

and one night he walked past her bedroom door and watched as she took out the reel of one music from its plastic cannister, affixed the reel to one end of a contraption that reminded him of a film projector. He watched as she slipped the tape through spokes and wheels, through tight-slit places, wound the end to another fixed reel and pressed the play button to listen to Ike and Tina Turner's primitive rendition of The Beatle's "Come Together," "Proud Mary," and "Mountain High," and she'd rewind the tape, take off the reel when finished only to slip on Little Anthony and the Imperials, then Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, and then Al Green. That night he watched her lying in bed, on her back, her hands clasped across her barely swollen belly as she frowned at the ceiling. Lý Loê realized she was trying to stay up for as long as possible so as not to fall asleep in an empty bed.

In the mornings, she'd turn to glance at the empty spot beside her, look at his clothes, and imagined as Lý Loê imagined Wil Stiles' legs filling the creased khakis, his arms filling out the sleeves, and even the polished shoes laced and knotted around his socked feet.

Just as Lý Loê takes up the saucer holding the cup of sake in his hands, a low and rising wail comes from the back bedroom. It continues to rise, then levels off, but soon her voice begins to quiver, her throat giving in to the stress of maintaining the pitch so that it cracks and becomes guttural.

Lý Loê and Uncle Ngô stare past the beaded curtain with mouths opened, a cigarette poised in hand, the sake dripping onto the lap. They continue to stare at the door long after the scream died. They wait until they hear another sound before blinking, before taking another puff or sip.

With the loop still fixed to his finger, Long-Vanh walks to the door, dragging the yo-yo behind him. He gets to the door and begins to part the curtains, and it is the string of beads hitting

one another that prompts Lý Loê from his chair. Having forgotten the dish of sake in his hands, he spills it onto the porch when he grabs Long-Vanh by the arm.

“Come here.”

Lý Loê picks him up and backs away from the open door until he is near the porch steps. Uncle Ngô rises as well. Long-Vanh wraps an arm around his grandfather’s neck, the yo-yo tapping the back of the old man’s legs in a clumsy rhythm. After hearing such a long steady wail, they expect something else to happen, but it is quiet.

Then, one of the two women comes from the room, cradling something wrapped in a white sheet. She passes through the stringed beads causing them to clang against one another. Strands of her hair are loosened from the tight bun. Her neck and face are wet with sweat, and her hands and forearms are smeared with blood. The midwife breathes through her mouth. As the beads settle into place, the men stare at the white bundle spotted in places in red.

“The boy is dead,” she says.

The men blink.

“It’s a boy,” Lý Loê.

“*Was*. Too small. Much too small.”

“And what of my daughter? How is she?” Lý Loê asks.

“She needs to sleep. A lot of sleep. But she will be fine.”

The midwife approaches Lý Loê with the bundle slightly held away from her body, and Lý Loê can only stare at it and imagine how small the boy is. Through the thin white sheet, he can make out the head’s cone shape. Because of the sheet’s dampness, he can even see the feet, each toe, and he thinks of something he will be too embarrassed to admit later: *The midwife did a beautiful job wrapping him, like a gift.* Lý Loê wants to remove the sheet from his head to see if

the hair matted against his soft skull by blood and placenta is as curly as Long-Vanh's. He wants to remove the sheet to compare the dead boy's skin color with that of his living grandson, to see if he has oval-shaped eyes, a big mouth, see how close to normal he came, and especially if the dead boy looks anything like him, or maybe more like Wil Stiles.

Lý Loê hands Long-Vanh to Uncle Ngô to accept the bundled baby, and though he is tiny enough to cradle in one arm, he takes him both hands. Lý Loê holds him, and he can feel him through the sheet. The limbs are so soft that he can feel the boy's bones move, and Lý Loê is convinced that if he can mend what is broken, then he'll come back to life. *But he is dead*, he reminds himself. The skin gives in and Lý Loê imagines his own hands bruising the places where he holds him. Lý Loê trembles from the warmth of the stillborn baby's blood. It rolls around in the body and it reminds Lý Loê of handling something as delicate as a water balloon, something as fluid as one of his wife's breast.

He turns away from the midwife and descends the porch steps. Uncle Ngô puts Long-Vanh down and says, "Stay here."

Lý Loê walks toward the rice fields with the midwife and Uncle Ngô. With shoulders hunched, he cradles the dead boy to his chest as he enters the field where the stalks are as high as his shoulders. The stiff blades swipe at his bare forearms, and he tucks the baby closer to his chest for fear of banana spiders latching onto him.

They arrive at the village cemetery with headstones of robed Mary's and Jesus's among the Buddha's and six-armed Ankor Wat's. Lý Loê hands the child to the midwife, takes the shovel spiked into the ground and begins digging. Sixty years old and he keeps a steady rhythm in tune with his own breathing. With each stomp of his foot atop the shovel head, he pries a large amount of earth and tosses it aside, and soon he begins to sweat; it forms at his forehead, runs down and

collects at his brows, courses down his temples, touches the corners of his lips, and hangs from his chin. Still it accumulates around his neck and shoulders and back and chest until his short sleeve white shirt sticks to him. The midwife holds the dead baby away from her as Uncle Ngô watches.

Lý Loê stops after he has dug three feet and says, “Ngô. Go and get one of the monks,” he points toward the other houses where they undoubtedly went. “Just one to say a prayer over my grandson’s grave.”

Uncle Ngô leaves and walks among the other graves and parts the stalks as he shoulders his way through the field. Lý Loê continues to dig, driving the shovel deep each time to remove as much as possible. His palms are hot and wet, and he knows that come tomorrow, his palms will harden to callouses, and his fingers will swell and stiffen, but he digs, and his breathing becomes hoarse with each shovelful he throws aside. When he has dug deep enough, Lý Loê climbs out of the hole, spears the shovel into the mound he created, and untucks one side of his shirt to wipe his face.

Above the tops of rice stalks, Lý Loê spots Ngô. All the monks follow him. Lý Loê wipes at his face again with the back of his forearm, but sweat continues to pour. Though his breathing is settling, there comes a steady throbbing in the back of his head, a pulse thumping the base of his skull, and his hands swell and throb to near numbness.

“Did my daughter ever say what name she wanted for the child?” Lý Loê asks.

She shakes her head and says, “You know you do not name a child until after six months.” She looks at the bundle that has grown damp and sticky.

“Still. He should be given a name,” Lý Loê says.

The midwife shakes her head at the bundle in her hands. He places one foot atop the shovel head and leans on it for support as he watches the men walk the next length of the dike before

making their way among the headstones. Before they arrive, Ly Loc takes the boy from the midwife to feel his soft skin again, the bones that are as pliable as a sparrow's, and the warmth of his blood that has now, to his disappointment, grown cold while he dug the hole. As they approach, he places his grandson in the hole. The monks align themselves on one side as they clasp their palms together and begin chanting.

Lý Loê starts shoveling dirt over the dead boy. The white sheet disappears with each shovelful. When done, he packs the dirt with the backside of the shovel. The monks continue to pray, and Lý Loê spikes the shovel into the ground. He takes a handkerchief from his back pocket and wipes his forehead, his brows and his neck, and it is then he names his dead grandson Wil Stiles.