

## Hush

I don't like Trang Duc's eyes. They are flat, black, with less emotion than a porcelain doll. They follow me. I can feel them on me – cold, oily – on my hair, on my legs, on my bottom. Wanting. Waiting for the moment I stray too close – then he grabs me, laughing too heartily, “Ah hah! Hee hee! Gwan tickle you! Gwan tickle you!” While his hands roam everywhere – grabbing my bottom, between my legs, over my chest. I know he's not supposed to touch me this way. But he does – in front of everyone: my father, my mother, his mother, his wife, his 2-year-old daughter.

I cry out for him to stop, to leave me alone – the red runs to my face. He laughs, this time with a hint of sincerity. He is enjoying himself. His eyes gleam as his hands and nasty fingers probe and grope my body. The other adults laugh with him, at me, at my frenzied, pathetic, terrified humiliation. Trang Duc smiles paternally and allows me to escape, but it is clear in his smile that it is not over between us, and I am ashamed. Somehow it seems I am his guilty accomplice. Only he knows and I know how he has touched me and how he will touch me.

“Bye now, honey. Be a good girl for Mrs. Trinh, and watch out for your sister. I know you girls will have such fun together tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow morning bright and early, so don’t stay up too late,” and my mother kisses me goodbye. I start to cry, holding desperately to her hand.

“Lisi? Honey? What’s the matter with you? Stop this now.”

Mrs. Trinh pulls me away, her arms around me. “Shhh. Hush, hush now. No need carry on so! You like it here. Come – I give you piece candy.” My parents make their escape while my back is turned, my vision blocked by the wily body of Mrs. Trinh.

The evening passes in a blur, despite my efforts to keep everyone awake and in the same room – particularly myself, my sister, and Mrs. Trinh, my only protection. “Come. Seepy time! We seep. All go to bed. Seep! Seep!” and we’re herded into bed.

I will not sleep. Just to be sure, I poke my sister periodically to make her cry. But I am so tired. I drift away, thinking of my dog, Fluff and how he’s sleeping on my pillow at home, and I wonder if he’s missing me. He’s not supposed to be on the bed, but I know he is. I wish I was.

At first, I am dreaming. I think my mom is petting me, then that Fluff is snuffling in my ear, licking me to get up. Then I am awake and it all comes back – I fell asleep and he is here, in bed with us, stroking me and panting, licking my ear while his hands slide under my pajamas. I pretend to sleep, moaning and trying to roll away, as if I’m about to waken in an attempt to frighten him off, but his roamings become wilder and more insistent. He pins me beneath him and smothers me with his mouth, choking me with his tongue when I try to cry out.

I pinch my sister as hard as I can with my nails – on her leg where I can reach her. She wakes screaming, and he jumps. I grab her and drag her toward the bathroom, almost shrieking over her protests, “You have to go to the bathroom! Come on – you don’t want to wet the bed! You’ll

get into trouble and get a spanking!”

The bathroom has a lock. My sister is whining. She's tired; she doesn't have to go to the bathroom. She wants to go back to bed. I ignore her. I know he's out there –waiting. There's a knock on the door. I jump and put a hand over my sister's mouth. Another knock. “Girls? You come out now. No play now. Must go bed.” It's Mrs. Trinh. I open the door, babbling, “I can't sleep. My sister needed to go to the bathroom. We need you to sleep with us.” Talk, talk, talk, so fast I talk, saying nothing and everything, if she'll only listen.

She walks us back to bed. He's still there. She knows. She speaks to him in Vietnamese. It's all very polite, but she knows. He leaves.

“I seep here with you tonight,” she says. I fall asleep under her watchful gaze and protective arm. I know she will not sleep.

The next afternoon, at home with my mom, I wait for my moment, when we are alone. “How do the Vietnamese kiss, Mommy?” I ask her. Slyly, because I already know. They kiss like my father, and I'll tell her if she'll only listen.