SHE IS A HAUNTING

by Trang Thanh Tran

[CT]mouth

This house eats and is eaten.

Memories mar the wood, pencil in the heights of children, and wear the scuff marks of well-loved feet. There are echoes that do not stop echoing, trapped in nooks and old curtains, until they're found again—still screaming or laughing, voices dead or gone. What parts are undigested lie waiting. There is no real organ here to rot, only soft wood that termites consider and wasps hollow. But shut the door tight and something can still die.

The body becomes full of things it did not ask for.

So, when a door opens, it is this: the first page of a menu.

[CN]Chapter One

I am a tourist in the country where my parents were born. Even my clothes have been here before me. All made in Vietnam by Vietnamese hands, then sent overseas where a Vietnamese American girl (that's me) picks it off the rack and one day brings it to a place she can't call home but the clothes can, if inanimate objects could claim shit. I'm not bitter or confused, at all.

My fingers tighten on the cart I'm pushing out of Đà Lạt's airport. People stream around me, laboring under giant backpacks, which really is the only thing that would make it more obvious I don't belong. Like hell I'd do one of those "finding yourself" trips though.

I only have this summer to make up the money for UPenn.

Lying to Mom about getting a full scholarship was the only way to stop her from taking out loans, when she works sixty-hour weeks at the nail salon already. My Walmart on weekends and scooping out "Ice Custard Happiness!" part-time every summer at Rita's was just enough to cover SAT registration and college application fees after my little sister's club expenses. That

leaves Ba. His money is the thing that's gonna make it happen, and I have to see him.

That's his condition.

"There he is!" Lily yells, bounding off the cart to sprint toward the idle cars. Ba steps out of a beat-up truck, opening his arms for my sister. He's still slight, tanned a reddish brown, with black hair trimmed thin. Lily's already telling him everything he's missed in the past, oh, four years of sparse calls.

"Jade," he says when I finally catch up.

"Dad." There're too many sounds in my mouth. This untrained tongue. I don't know how to say *hello* or *I miss you* in Vietnamese. We'd never said either much, and I don't miss him. I hate him.

Ba squeezes Lily's shoulder, but his eyes stay on me. I'm almost as tall as him now. "Where's your brother?"

"He stayed in Saigon with Mom," I say. Bren barely remembers Ba, or so he claims, so he'd rather hang out with our cousins on Mom's side for the rest of the trip.

We stare at each other before I toss both suitcases into the back, shuffling aside wood planks. I take the middle spot up front since the seat belt's shit, which makes Lily's face do a fake-angry thing until Ba gets in the truck. It shifts into gear, and we're on our way.

It's quiet, then quieter as the other cars and motorbikes fade away. Lily's voice is as familiar as a heartbeat, filling the space between us. The air cools against my face, smelling sharply of pine and flowers rather than Saigon's smoke-tinged lungs. Green and gray, soft hints of yellow, and a pink sunrise unfurl to my right.

Mountains rise from the mist like candles in an uneven buttercream. I want to smash them down with my thumbs. It's ridiculous that Đà Lạt is so beautiful when I am this angry.

"We're fifteen minutes from the city," says Ba. "Closer to our house."

I want to correct him: it's not my house. I don't belong here. *Stay the summer, five weeks, and you get what you want*, he told me during the April call. Will I? Ba spent years building the perfect houses that aren't ours, all time lost in a black hole where a thirteen-year-old girl had to become a father for her siblings.

"How's your mom?"

"You could call her." My attempt at casual comes out bitchy, which Lily confirms by lodging an elbow in my rib. I step on her toes. "But she's fine." It's the first time Mom's come back in decades, since she stepped onto a boat drifting for an American dream. From the moment we landed in Saigon from Philly, Mom started crying, then sobbing and laughing as she hugged her sisters and brothers. Her family is overwhelming in the best way, which means the entire week was food and karaoke, and so much of her laughing. It gnaws at me, how I could've taken this visit away from her just for tuition money.

Ba slows around another bend on the road. The forest closes in, branches near enough to brush the truck hood, like braided fingers urging us back to the earth. We're so tucked away no one would be able to hear a scream. Glass blinks between treetops, the dark eyes of abandoned houses.

"The French left them, after the Americans ran," Ba says. I roll my eyes. Communism: bad for real estate.

The truck veers onto a dirt driveway where pines cluster all around. The heady fragrance of flowers thickens, luring us closer. We stop.

The house juts upward, yellow and tangled in vines. Roots crisscross the body, grow into wood and drag it whole into the hill. Hydrangeas climb the crumbling walls beside tall and thin

windows, their white blooms kissed with lazy bees. They're the most loved thing here.

I stand in its shade, dizzy when I look up, either from jet lag or all these damn flowers, I don't know. An antique balcony, with iron bent at odd angles, leans from the second floor.

Below it, a girl sits on the stair's railing, balancing, precarious, her hair as shiny as oil over cast iron.

Beside me, Ba introduces his business partner Ông Sáu, who joined us from the other parked car. The bald man waves. "This is my niece, B—"

"Florence," the girl cuts in with a sawtooth smile.

"Nice to meet you, Florence," I say, emotionless and pleasant in the same way I greet white people. No handshake though. I drag the suitcase by her, hoping I don't look as greasy as I feel.

Her midriff is exposed beneath a loose bomber. She quirks a brow before twirling a hand as if ending a magic trick. "And you, as well." She speaks in English, accented with Vietnamese tones.

The two business partners are oblivious to our awkwardness as they talk about upcoming repairs before the house's grand opening. While Lily fidgets at our dad's side, Florence steps close to me at the top of the steps, her brown eyes clever and wrinkling as though we share a secret. She slides down the railing. Part of me is pulled along, wanting to learn how her perfect mouth moves between our languages.

It's the sound of Ba's laughter that drives me indoors. I'd thought only Mom could coax that joy out, but I am wrong, as always, about him. Mistakes take one moment to unravel, and I've nearly made several just now. Too much is riding on these next five weeks to entangle myself in the false hopes of reconciling with Ba or knowing this girl.

The door shuts behind me, and it's like I'm back in the thick heat of Saigon. Something here is newly sanded, freshly painted. I smell an unfamiliar life pressing itself around me before a sweet scent roots me back in Đà Lạt. Pastel blushes of hydrangeas are potted along the windows, their large shadows unfurled over empty rooms. Needing escape, I take the curved steps two at a time and land in a hallway of closed doors. All the doors, except one. A blade of light slices into the darkness, and I follow.

The room swallows me in brightness. Crown molding weighs the walls with such fancy, sharp edges that I expect Michelangelo's angels to be among them. The bed frame, carved with roses, has a headboard in upholstered velvet, also fancy, and I flop down without fuss. My suitcase falls over as the voices outside fade and a car starts.

I stay that way for a while, alone, because the truth is this: Ba left us, all three of us with Mom and no child support. He doesn't get to come back.

[LI#]

I nap past noon. Everything aches when I remember where I am. Between jet lag and my devotion to seeing as little of my dad as possible, it takes several minutes for me to admit that my stomach's close to eating itself. "Shit."

I blink away the pale ceiling and get up. The sheets cling to me, their print barely concealing a sweaty outline of my body. Gross. The windows look out to a swath of pine over the hills, and hydrangeas turn their heads up, sneaking a glimpse inside. I unlock the one closest to the desk and fumble for the lift, but something fuzzy squishes against my fingers. Bugs—many-eyed, too-many-legged, and sometimes no-winged—litter the entire sill. "For fuck's sake," I mutter.

They're not smashed or wrapped up in webbing. It's as if they dropped dead. Even the

webs along the glass panes are quiet with spiders turned on their gray backs. It doesn't surprise me how Ba would spray poison everywhere and call it home.

Ignoring the carcasses, I try the window again. When it doesn't give, I move on to the others. Pull up, push, breath held and unheld; none budge. I guess I'll just shrivel right here.

My stomach growls.

"Fine," *you traitorous organ*.

Quietly, I move into the hallway. A different door has been left open this time. Beyond it, branches extend across emerald wallpaper. At first I mistake them for the roots digging deep into the house, but moving closer, I see they're drawn. Birds sit on the trimmings, watching over the gorgeous claw-foot tub and gold-plated fixtures. Ba's restored this room already, as much as he can anyway, since some of the wallpaper's been eaten away by age.

My hands are sticky with sweat and probably bug guts, so I hurry to lather up at the sink. I pick under my short nails and think of what to say to Ba, if anything. We'd barely talked before the April call.

Before scholarships, $60,000 a year. After: $38,755. That is this summer's worth, plus the interest that would've added up for loans. Figuring out the other years will be future Jade's problems.

My anxiety decides then to create worries from nothing. *Don't look into the mirror*. It's a bad distraction. The Healthmind page pops up in my brain.

First, acknowledge the thought. This is an intrusive thought.

Next, accept and let it pass. There is no meaning behind it.

I look up. My reflection stares back. I'm alone, except for the birds' glossy eyes watching over my shoulder. I turn the faucet off and leave. The faucet drips behind me, but since I'm not

responsible for *this* bill, I don't spare a glance.

The house is stupidly large, at least twice the size of our town house back in Philly, even with all the thriving hydrangeas inside. My steps slow in the sitting room, where mostly blank space looms above the fireplace, dark and tunnel-like. It's made starker by walls as pale as soup bones. Mom, Bren, Lil, and I beam from cheap picture frames, shrinking even more in this vast room. This house was designed to make people feel small. I don't have to go close to know the pictures are old.

My stomach forces me away. Finding the kitchen is easy: the sizzling pan calls me. Ba hovers over a stove in the well-lit room, glancing when he hears the creak underfoot. "I'm making bánh xèo."

That was Bren's favorite; a picky eater then, it was the one food he took every bite of at three. And it's been at least three years since he's even asked for this. Suddenly, veggies did not taste so good to him, but I think it's because he didn't want to be reminded who made them best. "Okay, but Lily's a vegan now," I say.

Her ponytail tilts to one side as she tells me, by motion only, to shut up. Quick to cover up my blunder, she says out loud, "I'll eat it without the meat and shrimp." I give her a thumbs-down; I didn't start eating tofu at least twice a week to let Ba get away with it.

I light incense at the small altar in the kitchen's corner, burning three for Quan Âm's statue and one for my grandma on Ba's side. Prayer isn't required in Mom's house, and we don't go to the temple outside of Tết, but it always feels weird to step by the altar and not pay respects. Ba works rice flour batter into the pan, his presence too real, so I close my eyes.

Dear Bà Nội, please make your son not annoy me so much. Watch over us, and my mom, and Bren too. Then, remembering she didn't know any English, I ramble through a poor Viet

version. Ash flicks from the incense down to the rice-filled container. A wooden plaque bearing her name sits on the level below Quan Âm.

[Centered sign]Bùi Tuyết Mai

The only photo of her is tucked in Ba's wallet. "*See, Jade*," he would say, showing me. "*You have her eyes. Đôi mắt bồ câu*." Big as a dove's. But didn't he see that they are like his too? That mattered to me more, since I didn't know his family like I did Mom's. He is the youngest of six, the only one to make it to the US, and he never shared anything about them. He and Bà Nội spoke on the phone weekly but never us; the language barrier was too steep.

Settling at a table pushed against the wall, I stir the nước chấm so the garlic and sliced chili peppers swirl throughout. After shooting another look that very clearly said, "No fighting or I'll kill you," Lily heads to the bathroom. My little sister's sweet, until she's not. Ba moves at the corner of a glance, the paint smeared on his jeans crinkling.

He places a plate in front of me. "Did your mom tell Brendan not to come?"

"He's eight. He decided for himself." The acid in my stomach bubbles up, and my head tilts back so our eyes meet. "You can ask them in person if you fly back with us, but the deal is that I stay here, right?"

"I know what the deal is. I'm his dad. I'm your dad." The displeasure is clear: Don't talk to me like that.

I'd rather not talk at all, Dad.

You asked me to come. *You* dangled the money in front of me. I'm an ambitious gremlin, so of course I want it. I will take it, but that doesn't mean I have to respect you.

The smell of crisp crepe, yellow with turmeric and heaped with glistening pork belly, shrimp, and bean sprouts, makes the acid simmer down in my stomach. I wish, for a second,

Brendan had come too. He would've known the names of all the dead bugs. He would've been Lily's backup, so cute or annoying that Ba and I wouldn't ever have to talk to each other.

I ladle nước chấm into a small bowl and stick to facts. "My windows wouldn't open, by the way."

"I repainted them," says Ba, wrapping lettuce around his bánh xèo. "I'll fix it later." I imagine the space being perfectly sealed, coated with dry paint, holding in heat. Of course he would paint them as is. He always loved a good shortcut.

"So," I say, swallowing a mouthful. "You and Ông Sáu are making this into a bed-and-breakfast?" A wild concept, honestly. I'd rather dine and sleep at home for zero dollars than listen to some old people do their anniversary boning through the walls.

"That's right. We'll start taking reservations for the busy season as soon as you and Florence finish the website."

I stop. "What?" Shrimp falls from my bánh xèo. The website was always part of the deal, thanks to programming classes, but he'd said nothing about a group project.

"She translates everything into Vietnamese for you. Google gets it wrong all the time," he says. I couldn't care less about Google screwing up. This summer needs to be as uncomplicated as possible, which means no distractions, no teamwork, and no friendships. "She's also good with computers. Born here but did boarding school in the US."

"I don't even know her," I argue, even if it sounds immature.

"She's going to be a student at Temple next year. You'll know her."

"I don't want to be her friend." A laugh escapes my throat. How can he understand? Not only is UPenn my first choice for college, it is where my life will change. Where I can be close to home, Mom, Lily, and Brendan, but not actually be home. I feel inadequate in ways I can't put

in words, confused in others, but that can change in college. I can figure out who I am, and who I like, without consequence. Halle, my best friend, is the one other person I want to keep close. Was—I mean. I forget she's not mine anymore. "Fine."

We eat in silence. The house surrounds us like a cocoon, and I wonder if Ba believed it would birth us as something new and precious. No, that gives me too much weight.

I have my assignment.

A bead of sweat slips onto the greasy dish. "What are you calling this place?"

Against the straight lines of too-perfect cabinets, his back is slightly arched, probably aching from work. He sets unused batter onto a refrigerator shelf, breathing out the slight rot of things left too long.

"Nhà Hoa." *Flower House*. Simple, lush, and all-consuming.