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The Son Returns

DISOBEDIENT SONS COST SO MUCH, Mother Binh thought. Her eyes darted from the sweat-dappled back of Mr Loc, the rickshaw driver, to the black lacquer box in her lap. She lifted the lid and peeped at the dried-up umbilical cord resting on a piece of white gauze. Her nose crinkled at the formaldehyde. Preceptor Vu would charge a pretty penny for bringing him her son's umbilical cord, but how else could she get Hai home when he'd refused to see her yesterday?

The crimson sun bloodied the paddy fields shimmering with transplanted rice shoots and dipped toward the pine trees of the Bo Drang forest. Mother Binh clutched the box tighter.

"Faster, faster!" she yelled. She leaned forward in her seat and peered anxiously at the shadows deepening behind the spurge hedge. "Before the ceremony is over. I must get my son back."

Mr Loc pumped his legs harder. It was Wandering Souls Eve, and if Preceptor Vu did not bury the umbilical cord in Mother Binh's yard by nightfall, she'd have to wait another year. The rickshaw rounded a bend in the Nam Hoa highway, and Mother Binh spotted the Temple of Buddha's Blessedness in the distance. She leaned back and sighed.

Her request was so simple: come take care of your mother. What could be more reasonable? Hai had been very dutiful before he went to Hue two years earlier, sweeping the hearth at Tet, dusting the family altar like a girl, preparing her betel nut every night when she returned from the market. Mother Binh liked to remind her friend Quoc of these little attentions. Quoc's own son Bao was a ne'er-do-well who pimped for a whorehouse in Hanoi and never even wrote. Mother Binh would choose a moment when Quoc was complaining about Bao's latest run-in with the police to talk about Hai's rectitude. The emperor had presented him with the "Model of the State" award, for example, or his essay on the moral beauty of politicians had won first prize in the courtiers' competition. Mother Binh's chest would swell as she read aloud his letters, while Quoc sat there grinding her teeth.

How they would envy her now! A First Rank mandarin, the emperor's aorta, come home to look after his aging mother!

The rickshaw trundled into Tran Bong, and Mother Binh shot her head up so her neighbors could see her arrive in state. She tried to look important as Mr Loc huffed to a halt in the center of the village, but her fingers toyed nervously with Hai's last note. She quickly shoved it into her duffel bag, sprang from the rickshaw, and strode toward the temple.

"Mrs Binh!" Mr Loc shouted. "My money!"

Mother Binh winced. She turned and fished a one piastre note from her pocket. She shoved it into his hand.

"The fare from Nam Hoa is *two*," Loc said. He scowled.

"Two nothing," Mother Binh snapped. "I have no more." She spun aside to prevent him from spotting the wad of banknotes in her pocket.

"Cheapskate!"

Mother Binh shook him off and turned to the temple porch again. Her heart began to flutter. Preceptor Vu had finished his prayers and was walking away.

"Father Vu! Father Vu!" she called. "Wait!"

She leaped onto the porch. Preceptor Vu wheeled. A green and red dragon snaked around the column next to him glowered at her. It was as though Master Vu had two sets of eyes.

"Oh, Father," Mother Binh burst out. "I'm *so* glad I caught you." She spotted his frown. "I hope... I'm not keeping you."

A muffled dinner gong sounded in the refectory behind him. The smell of stewed mung beans wafted across the porch.

"What *is* it, Mrs Binh?" Preceptor Vu said, clacking his tongue and breathing in the sweet aroma. She blushed at the sharpness of his tone. It was not what she expected from a man who should have appreciated her position. In his letters Hai had urged her to curry favor with Preceptor Vu, District Chief Tam, and other village notables. *Canaille* like Quoc and Loc were to be scrupulously avoided.

She thrust the lacquer box forward.

"Please, Dear Master," she said. Her voice trembled.

Preceptor Vu eyed the box suspiciously. Then his face brightened.

"An offering for Buddha?"

Mother Binh swallowed hard.

"My remembrance of my son Hai, Dear Master," she said. "To call him home."

Master Vu shook the box. His frown deepened. "What's this rattling?"

Mother Binh bit her lip. The crisis was upon her. What if he refused her now?

"As you know, Great Master," she said, hurriedly stepping forward, "Hai is the devoted confidant of the emperor." She scanned his face, but the mention of the royal name appeared to leave no impression. "His *Majesty*," she emphasized, speaking very loud now and wheeling to face the crowd, "holds him in *very* high regard." Her mouth jerked in disappointment. The crowd had melted away. She turned back.

Preceptor Vu snapped the box open. He crimped his nose and grimaced. A jackdaw looking down from a nearby kapok tree cawed in astonishment.

"This is most...irregular, Mrs Binh," he said. "I cannot say prayers for the return of your son over...*this*." He shoved the box back as though it housed an evil wood nymph. "It belongs in Nam Hoa, not here."

Mother Binh's face fell.

"How much?"

Father Vu smacked his lips. "Twenty piastres."

Mother Binh flinched. She fondled the piastres in her pocket, two-years' savings from selling corn cakes in the Tran Bong market. Was it worth it? She thought of Hai sweeping into the village on one of the emperor's palanquins, followed by a train of lackeys, concubines, and packhorses laden with gifts. Her hand peeped reluctantly from her pocket, then slowly came forth. Preceptor Vu had to pry the fingers loose.

"And five more for Buddha," he said, snatching another bill before she could tear away her hand. Mother Binh bit her lip again. A disobedient son was expensive indeed.

FROM HER FIRST MOMENT IN HUE THE DAY BEFORE, Mother Binh seemed to swell with the city, expanding to fit the rickshaw that whisked her through the streets and taking in the new sights, sounds, and colors with gusto. A royal zither player whistled at her outside the old citadel, and Mother Binh blushed like a flame tree. Once she'd had her way

with every man in Tran Bong, and even now the rice merchant Ngu, richest man in Thua Thien province, still sent her apricot branches at Tet with the message "To the loveliest blossom of all" pinned to the bark. She simpered at the musician and motioned the cabbie to drive on. At the Noontime Gate a scholar in scarlet robes and floppy hat gazed meaningfully at her, as though he read in her eyes her sensitive intellect, her artistic soul set free and wafting over the city like the sweet breezes of the Perfume River. She forgot about Tran Bong and its clunky ways. This was *her* town.

It was ten a.m., too early to disturb the lifeblood of the state. Mother Binh craned her neck and tried to pick out Hai's apartment in the crenellated towers of the imperial city. They all looked alike. Surely the emperor kept Hai close by him, perhaps in the Palace of Supreme Peace itself. Mother Binh closed her eyes and was instantly inside. She knelt at the throne, flicked aside the panels of her *ao dai*, and curtsied majestically. The empress and her daughters clapped their hands in delight, plunged to the ground, and bowed to Mother Binh in turn. The emperor stood with a flourish and handed her into the reception hall himself, where all eyes devoured her with envy. Mother Binh rose in the rickshaw like a balloon about to take off.

"Hey, old lady, you wanna stay here all day?"

Her eyes snapped open. She flashed the cabbie a withering look.

"In *my* village, young man," she said stiffly, "we do not call our elderwomen 'old lady.' We adhere to the ancient forms of respect."

Mother Binh liked this turn of phrase. It sounded royal.

"Where to, then, honorable *Aunt-ie?*" the driver said. "Though it's *your* money." He shrugged.

At the mention of money Mother Binh shifted uneasily. She clawed at her purse to make sure it was still there.

"Well, drive me across that bridge there," she said, pointing. "And be quick about it."

The rickshaw driver laughed.

"The Golden Water Bridge? You must be joking, lady," he said, resting on his haunches. "Only a *nha que* from the villages would think such a thing. That's reserved for the emperor."

Mother Binh bridled. Imagine him mistaking her for a pot-walloper like Quoc! But how could she get in to see her son?

"FANCY *you* SHOWING UP," Dung sniffed, when Mother Binh appeared on her doorstep fifteen minutes later. She abruptly turned her back on her sister-in-law and shuffled to the stove. Hot oil spat in the wok which looked to Mother Binh like an inverted metal conical hat. She wondered how anyone could cook in such a thing. Dung caught her staring at it.

"Well, all right, you can stay out there, by the cistern." She waved her spatula in the direction of a lean-to which Mother Binh spied through the back door. "Just don't snore. And *this* time, pay me." The visitor frowned, but Dung just shrugged, like the rickshaw driver Binh had sent back to the citadel with a note for Hai. Shrugging seemed to be a Hue habit. "I'm not running an almshouse, you know."

Mother Binh tried to carry her head high as she carted her duffel bag into the back, but she felt she was slinking like a thief. She hadn't wanted to come here, but Dung was the only person she knew in the capital besides Hai. And she had to wait *somewhere* for her son's reply.

Mother Binh had never been able to lord it over Dung. Dung felt her brother Kim had stooped too far in marrying her. A common village huckster, with blackened teeth and the smell of the barnyard! Kim liked to throw this in his wife's face whenever he drank, which was often. Rumor had it he'd been drummed out of Hue for dealing in contraband rice, though to hear him tell it the "siren's song of love" had called him to the boonies. The happy couple put down roots in Nam Hoa, where Mother Binh occasionally caught her husband digging in the yard late at night. In an unguarded moment she'd mentioned she had a "little something" stowed away for a rainy day. Kim was looking for a spot to bury their children's umbilical cords, he said. Just in case. Mother Binh had her doubts.

Then his sister got a job as the emperor's twelfth concubine's seamstress.

"*Now* who's the clodhopper, you witch?" he said to Binh. He stole some money from her and went on a binge that saved her further trouble. Dung couldn't make it to the funeral. It was too lowering.

Kim had died years ago, and Dung hadn't seen her sister-in-law very much in the meantime. But unwanted relatives had a way of showing up when least expected...

"Letter for you," Dung said, about an hour after Mother Binh lay down for a snooze.

Something feathery plopped onto Mother Binh's chest. She quickly opened her eyes. Sweet perfume wafted from the note, jarring with the kitchen grease. Mother Binh's heart pounded as she sat up and picked at the imperial seal. She puckered her mouth and tossed her hand in the air to dismiss her sister-in-law, then noticed Dung had already returned to the kitchen.

*Honored Mother:
Your respectful son Hai begs his
honored mother to understand that
His Imperial Highness the Emperor
does not approve of 'personal con-
tacts' between his servants and
individuals outside the royal pal-
ace. Such contacts, in the word
of His Great Nobleness, 'lack dig-
nity.' Your respectful son Hai there-
fore regrets that his official duties
preclude him, etc., etc*

Mother Binh read no further. Tears blinded the elaborately scrolled letters. How could he do this to her? The bubble of her state reception burst in an instant. She plunked down on the bed like a punctured bag of rice and felt as though her life was spilling out in front of her. The bed squeaked under her weight. She barely had time to wipe her eyes before Dung appeared in the doorway.

"Anything wrong, dear sister?" she asked, hands on her hips. "Got the sniffles?"

Mother Binh rammed Hai's note into her duffel bag and sprang from the bed. She cleared her throat and stretched on her toes. She was not about to sag in front of Dung.

"Nothing's wrong," she said. "Absolutely nothing." She snatched the bag off the bed. "Hai can see me now, that's all. The emperor wished to prepare...a proper reception for me."

Dung's eyes narrowed as though she didn't believe her. Mother Binh edged around her and tramped toward the door.

"With your duffel bag?" Dung taunted.

Mother Binh wheeled.

"Of course," she shot back. "I've been invited to stay in the Everlasting Longevity Palace." She tossed her head and blinked in satisfaction as Dung grimaced. This was a home thrust. Commoners were not allowed inside the Dien Tho.

She turned and marched through the door. Her step was lighter now. Hadn't she just received a letter from the emperor's favorite?

THE MINUTE SHE STEPPED INTO HER HUT after Preceptor Vu buried Hai's umbilical cord, Mother Binh dug the photographs of the Imperial Palace and of Hai in his mandarin uniform out of her duffel bag. She wiped them off and stepped to the amboyna chest in the middle of the room. She shunted aside the pictures of her parents and positioned their replacements in the center of the chest, where they would attract most notice. Then she stood back and admired them the way a Hat Boi director might admire his stage set.

Mother Binh's heart pattered with delight. She'd suddenly remembered that Wandering Souls Day was coming up while she was on her way home from Hue the previous evening. She stopped overnight in Nam Hoa and dug up Hai's umbilical cord from the yard where Kim had buried it. The decision to do so had been truly inspired, well beyond the limited capacities of Quoc and the other Tran Bong hicks. Mother Binh pursed her lips in satisfaction. Now she'd be able to draw Hai home in spite of the emperor and his snooty ways.

Just then, a duck waddled in from the garden and stood by the duffel bag. It popped its head up and seemed to stare at Hai's picture with his mother's rapture. Mother Binh flashed it a grateful look, but her jaw dropped when the duck rummaged in the duffel bag and snatched Hai's note along with a rice cake. She sprang forward, but the duck quickly dropped the rice cake and skittered from the hut with the note in its beak. Mother Binh thought of chasing it, but then her eye caught on Tuyen's "Guide to the Royal Palaces of Hue" peeping from the bag. She glanced at the mantel clock. It was eight. She'd invited Quoc and some others at nine to learn about the emperor's hospitality. She grabbed the book and plunked down at the dining table. She had a lot of facts to master. When she caught the duck, she'd cook him for dinner.

"He's quite the success there," she said to Quoc an hour later, glancing at Hai's photograph. She'd frowned when Quoc showed up alone but figured the rest of the villagers were cowed by her new grandeur and would come along later. She made sure Quoc was looking at her and then cooed with maternal pride:

"Such a devoted councillor. His Highness and I almost fell out over who needed him more, his mother or the state." She burst into a little laugh. "No thanks, dearie," she said, shaking her head at Quoc's cheap *nep* wine. "I'll take *this*."

She picked up a bottle of Napoleon VSOP from the table next to her and poured out a tumblerful. Then she recorked it and set it down.

"His Great Nobleness gave me this just as I was leaving," she said, tapping the bottle. In reality, Kim had stolen the brandy along with some other items from the French consul in Nam Hoa on his last binge. His liver caught up with him before he could uncork it. "He's *such* a kind man. Not at all stuffy. Unlike what they say, you know."

Mother Binh's gaze flew to the photo of the palace. She tried to remember where she was supposed to have stayed.

"Oh yes, I was quite the queen in that... Grandmother's Palace of theirs." She leaned forward and whispered confidentially. "It's reserved for *very* special guests. Madame Doumer, the governor-general's wife, was perfectly *furious* when she found out about it. She's been refused it three times, you know." Mother Binh sniffed in triumph. "She was quite snippy with me at the state dinner."

Madame Doumer would have been surprised to learn of Mother Binh's existence, let alone her "state dinner." But Quoc's eyes were as big as dinosaur eggs, and Mother Binh was satisfied.

She closed her eyes. "Goose down pillows, lotus bathwater, lackeys waving palm fans, pedicurists from Paris..." She sighed and opened her eyes. Quoc was staring at the brandy bottle. Mother Binh edged it away from her.

"What's that?" Quoc asked.

Mrs Binh winced at the rudeness of the question. The courtiers in Hue had been so refined...

"They say *keski-say* at the palace, my dear," she said didactically. Quoc still stared at the Napoleon.

"I'm thinking of selling my baskets," she quickly added, laying a

protective hand on the neck of the bottle. "Business isn't the thing for me now. Do you know anyone interested in buying me out?"

"You're giving up the concession?" Quoc asked. Her eyes shot to her friend's face. Mother Binh smirked. Quoc was as distractible as a puppy.

"Oh, yes. You see, Hai doesn't approve. In fact, in his last letter he urged me to be sensitive to our . . . altered circumstances. Brought about, of course"—and here she batted her eyelashes—"by his impending return." Mother Binh now rushed her words to keep from faltering. "We must be prepared to assume our rightful place in the community when that happens."

She rose up in her chair, and Quoc sank down accordingly, like a seesaw. Mother Binh was quite pleased with her magnificent new tone. Who would recognize the corn vendor in her now?

"Well, you will keep *me* in mind, won't you?" Quoc said. "After all, we've been friends for such—"

A low tapping sounded on the door, so soft, so tentative, that for a moment Mother Binh had the absurd idea the duck had come back to return Hai's note. The knock sounded again. Mother Binh gazed at Quoc, then cleared her throat and called in an exaggerated contralto:

"Come iiiinnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!"

The door swung to with a creak. Standing in the dim light, dressed in a filthy peasant's smock and cheap pantaloons, with a shabby hat pulled low over his brow and a battered valise in one hand, was her son Hai.

Mother Binh's jaw dropped. She blinked several times. Was it really Hai? Her heart beat rapidly. Suddenly she shrank back in her chair. Ghosts were known to pop in on their families like this, unannounced, and hadn't his note convinced her she was not likely to see him in the flesh again? She trembled all over. He certainly wasn't dressed like the emperor's favorite. Spirits sometimes did peculiar things to throw their loved ones off guard, in case they were tempted to forget them. Mother Binh swallowed hard and found it difficult to look at him. But then she recovered. The smell of alcohol on Hai's breath rapidly flooding the little room was very real indeed. So were his hiccups. She glanced quickly at Mrs Quoc, who stared stupidly at the new arrival. *She* had

to be kept in the dark in any event. Mother Binh sprang from her chair and pranced toward Hai the way the empress herself might.

"My soooooon!" she said, in her phony contralto. "I *knew* you would return." She tried to sound sincere, and felt from the idiotic expression on Quoc's face that she succeeded.

"How good of you to take time from your official duties to pay your respects to your old mother. And her *friends*, too."

She winked at Quoc to tip her off to her good fortune, then turned back to Hai, who slouched in the doorway. What was he up to?

Quoc coughed nervously, and Mother Binh looked at her. Her friend squirmed in her seat as though debating whether to rise or kneel. Mother Binh extended her hand.

"Come, dear Quoc," she said, with a little laugh. "You needn't be so timid. Greet the boy. The life and soul of the empire may depend on him when he's *down there*, but here in Tran Bong he is just a villager, like his mother."

She yanked her friend to her feet. Quoc scraped toward Hai like a whipped dog.

"Hello, great king, er, great sir," she sputtered. "I hope you had a pleasant—"

"That's enough," Mother Binh interrupted, laying a heavy hand on Quoc's shoulder. She noticed with dismay that Hai wouldn't look at them. His strange outfit still bothered her. And the alcohol on his breath wasn't Napoleon, either. She turned to her neighbor. "You may go now."

Mrs Quoc glared at her hostess, muttered something, and skulked toward the door.

"Such a pretentious old crone," Mother Binh said, glancing at Hai. The door banged. Mother Binh jumped. "These people must learn their place," she sniffed. She eyed her son uneasily. Why didn't he say something? What was he doing here? Her brow suddenly cleared. The umbilical cord had worked! Its magnetic power must be great indeed, since Preceptor Vu had buried it only a few hours before.

"Oh, my son!" she exclaimed, fluttering up to him. "Welcome home at last!"

Hai sprang back from her. He still clutched his valise.

"Snot home, Mother," he said. "Leastwise, won't be for long." His gaze shot to the door. "I'm on the lam."

"Nonsense, my son," Mother Binh said. Yet her voice wavered. "Of course this is home. You have come back to me, as Father Vu said you would." She clasped her hands. "Oh, what a good, wise man!" Hai did not reply. "Come, we must inform him of your return. He is the only person worthy to receive you."

Hai's valise thumped to the floor. He plopped down on the trundle bed by the door and hunched his shoulders against his mother's advances like a bristling porcupine.

"You're not paying attention," he said. "I'm on the run . . ." His throat stuck. "I've been selling the emperor's goods on the black market."

Mother Binh flicked her ear, hoping she hadn't heard right. It was perilous to listen to such ravings. The poor boy must have overworked himself down in Hue, straining his sensitive nerves. She had to soothe him into reason, not let him sink into irrational fantasy.

"What an imagination!" she scoffed. "Come, no more foolish chatter. You have had a long journey, my child. Tomorrow we will celebrate your return." Her eyes narrowed as she recalled how Quoc had practically slammed the door in her face. The impudent creature! "We shall invite only the cream of the village. Then we shall set you up properly."

MOTHER BINH HAD DIFFICULTY SLEEPING. Strange ideas buzzed in her head like bees around a hive. The thought that Hai might be a common thief unnerved her. There had to be a mistake! Hadn't he written her on the emperor's own stationery just the day before? Had he stolen *that*, too?

Tomorrow's reception would be delicate. Hai was on holiday, in need of rest, and was not to be tired out with frivolous questions. That was it! She'd gussy him up in the nice French suit Kim had pinched from the Nam Hoa consul, and the neighbors would be stricken dumb. And if he had to take off suddenly, well, the emperor found he couldn't get along without him. Mother Binh only hoped the cops didn't come looking for him. They could be difficult to explain.

Hai snored drunkenly on the trundle cot. Mother Binh kept a wary eye on him. He'd insisted on sleeping by the door, saying he'd have to

go pee in the night, but she suspected he might use the opportunity to sneak off. She'd caught him toping from a small flask right before he lay down, but didn't say anything. He'd have to sober up for the party, though...She drifted off at last.

A noise jarred her awake, and Mother Binh's dream floated away. The emperor's eldest daughter, Lao, had been bathing her feet in lotus water. Nong, the royal dwarf, had been stuffing her with bonbons. Mother Binh rubbed her eyes and glanced at the trundle cot. Hai sat bolt upright, his body rigid as a pointer's.

"What *is* it, my son?"

"Shh!"

Mother Binh cocked her ears. Voices rumbled outside, and lights flickered under the door frame. Her brow crinkled, then cleared. The emperor himself had come to install Hai in his new duties! She shot up in bed, licked her hair down with her palm, and frantically straightened the wrinkles in her nightshirt. But why had he picked such a strange hour?

"Come, my son," she whispered, flitting to the trundle bed. "It is your time."

"Shh!" Hai snapped again. A loud rap on the door. Hai sprang to his feet and slunk behind his mother, very unlike an emperor's pet. Mother Binh looked questioningly at him but puffed her chest out nonetheless.

"Come in," she said, turning to the door. She backed toward the dining table, where His Highness would see her in the warm light of the spirit lamp, and felt Hai patter along behind her. She drew herself up by the table, coughed slightly, and called with more authority, "Why don't you come in, Your Majesty?"

The door swung open.

"Your Majesty nothing, you old fraud," Mrs Quoc cried. "We've had enough of your blustering." Someone behind her yelled, "Yeah, yeah! That's right!" Mother Binh's heart snagged on the upbeat. Quoc stepped forward and brandished her lantern like a weapon. "You and your worthless son! Clear out!"

She shook a dirty paper. Mother Binh gasped. It was Hai's note.

"Yeah, clear out, you phony!" Mr Loc yelled. "The emperor's guest indeed!" Tears sprang to Mrs Binh's eyes. The ingrate! Hadn't she paid him liberally for carting her about?

"Move along!" other voices said, behind the leaders.

"But my dear friends!" Mother Binh said. She cupped her hands beseechingly.

"We're not your friends," snapped an old woman who'd once accused Mother Binh of stiffing her on her rice bill. She shook her fist. "The idea!"

The spirit lamp leaped in the breeze which rose behind Mother Binh, and her shoulders drooped as she picked out the endless crowd collected outside her door. She cried out in dismay and turned. Instinctively she stretched her arms out.

"My son! Protect me!"

Her hands clutched empty air. Hai had slipped through the back door.

MOTHER BINH HUNCHED DOWN IN THE SHED behind her hut and listened. They'd tossed her out, along with Hai's valise, and said they expected her gone by daybreak. She heard them rummaging through her home, looking for whatever they could find, and she leered as she picked up their muttered curses. Hai had snatched the Napoleon from under her nose and stuffed it in his valise in preparation for his departure. He must have pocketed her savings, too, for she couldn't find a single piastre. What a rogue! She didn't know whether to be angry or proud. Mother Binh uncorked the brandy bottle and took a long satisfying swig. She shrugged. He was still her son. The duck was the real villain.

She leaned out the shed and peered at the hut. Lights flickered inside. *You jackals*, Mother Binh thought, *see what good it does you!* She peeped at a little mound of earth beside the banyan at the back of the yard. Later, when they were asleep, she'd creep from the shed and dig up the lacquer ware box containing Hai's umbilical cord. "Fools," she said aloud. "You forgot that, didn't you?" She'd have no trouble duping some poor slob into buying the cord. Mothers wanted their children back all the time. Mrs Binh thought about her absent son with deep affection. He'd be proud of her. A skillful salesperson could sell anything on the black market.