

# Saigon Dark

by Elka Ray

*Black and white. Life and death. She made a choice. Can she live with it?*

*I am on a Ferris wheel by the sea, in the tropics. Although it's dark, it's still hot. A warm breeze lifts my hair and pushes the night's smells into my nose. I can smell salt, woodsmoke and frangipani flowers, plus the irresistible scent of Vinh, a mix of warm skin, tobacco and cinnamon. The lights of distant squid-fishing boats sparkle on the horizon.*

*Vinh has both arms around me, shielding me. We are laughing. Our carriage rises and stops to allow more passengers onboard, sways a little. This is repeated: rise, stop, sway. But each time, I'm caught off guard, that heady mix of anticipation, excitement and unease, deep down in my belly.*

*When the last carriage is full we glide upwards, smoothly. Down below, the town's lights twinkle. There are more diamond-lit boats out at sea. Vinh pulls me even closer and begins to kiss me.*

*I have never been happier. I have everything I want and yet the best is still to come. I am heavy with fulfilment and buoyant with anticipation. We glide higher, Vinh's long fingers twisting in my hair. The carriage sways a little.*

*And then we are at the top, poised, and everything changes. That warm, salty breeze turns cool. I smell decay instead of flowers. My heart plummets. I will fall. I know this with total certainty, the way you know a dropped stone won't float. It's a natural law. It's the order of things.*

*I start to twist away, frantically, but Vinh has a hold on me. Just before he throws me out, I wake up.*

*The dream is always the same. I wake up screaming.*

## Part 1: Ho Chi Minh City

*April 9th, 2005*

I'm woken by the sound of breaking glass. A woman screams. It's the neighbours, again. A boy—one of the older kids—yells, and a younger child starts to sob. I roll over. If only it would stop. Their youngest is smaller than my daughter.

Tired as I am, I know sleep is impossible. How can I sleep when the kids next door are being tortured? Without turning on the light I walk to the window. A row of trees hides their shack from view. I can hear the dad yelling. I want to punch him. But given that I'm five foot one, it wouldn't help. Another bottle shatters.

Even with the aircon full-blast, I'm sweating. April in Saigon. The hot season. I press my forehead against the glass. My yard lies dark. The child's cries are louder now. I think of Evie.

The man bellows. While my Vietnamese isn't perfect, I can understand this obscenity. He's calling his wife a fucking whore. I unlatch my window. "Stop it!" I yell. "I'm going to call the police!" I wish my voice sounded tougher, without that waver in it.

For a moment there's silence. But then the guy yells back. "Mind your own business you foreign traitor slut!"

I lean back. While this insult shouldn't matter, it does, for some reason. I left Vietnam at the age of three, on an overloaded boat. I was lucky to end up in the States. Behind the trees, I can hear the woman sob. I slam my window shut.

What am I doing here?

For a moment, I think of calling Vinh. But what good would that do? Why would he help with this when he's made it clear he wants nothing to do with us? He's never even seen his own daughter.

I sit on the bed, fighting the urge to cry. Should I call the police? Would they even come? But then I remember my maid's warning: The family next door are squatters, landless peasants come to Saigon from the countryside. The authorities would just evict them. Then where would they go—that small, thin woman with her thin dark children and her alcoholic asshole of a husband? I make a fist, feeling angry and helpless.

I've just gotten back into bed when my phone rings. My bedside clock glows 2:14. My heart rate picks up again. Is it about my mom? Or an emergency at the hospital? A ringing phone in the middle of the night is never good news. Unless it's Vinh, calling to say sorry. I take a deep breath, absurdly hopeful. "Hello?"

"Lily?" It's Yna, my best friend in Seattle. Just from the way she says my name, I know everything is fine.

"Yna," I say. "It's two in the morning."

“Oops.” There’s a pause. “Sorry.” She doesn’t sound sorry at all. “I guess I got the time difference wrong.”

I met Yna at the University of Washington, where we all went to med school. She and Vinh were the stars of our class, the ones everyone wanted to be--or jump into bed with. During the time Vinh and I specialised as surgeons, Yna did an MBA at Stanford. She just got a new job, managing some investment fund. “Is it something important?” I try to keep the irritation out of my voice. Brilliant as she is, Yna is a ditz—and details like time differences mean nothing to her. Like my ex-husband, she barely needs sleep.

“What’s up with you?” she says. “You sound upset, Li.”

For a moment, I consider telling her about the guy next door, how he beats his wife and kids. How helpless I feel. But how could Yna understand? She lives in the kind of gated community where people call security if neighbours play loud music after 9pm. I can picture her now. Sharp black bob. Size nothing suit. Smart, successful and beautiful.

“I’m just tired,” I say. “It’s been a long week. I’ve been working double shifts. ”

"How's Evie?"

I fight back a sigh. I don't want to talk about Evie, especially not now. "She's fine," I say. "Look, I need to work early, Na, so I'd better get some sleep."

"The Evergreen Clinic is looking for a plastic surgeon. I told Harvey you might be interested. They have a lot of paediatric patients--"

"I'm not interested," I say.

"But it's a great place to work," says Yna. "Great neighbourhood. Not far from a good school."

"Yna," I say. "I'm not ready to leave."

Throughout our conversation, I've heard her tapping on a keyboard. Multitasking. The tapping now stops. "But why?" she says. I can hear the mystification in her voice.

Why indeed? Although I was born in Saigon, I never felt any desire to return. I came because of Vinh, who was raised in an orphanage in Go Vap, then got a full scholarship to study in Seattle. He wanted to go home, said he wanted to give back. Like a fool, I believed him.

"Lily?"

I realise I've been lost in thought, trying to work out why Vinh changed. Or didn't he change? I rub my eyes. It's a waste of energy thinking about my ex. And it makes my stomach hurt. I take a deep breath. "It's interesting work," I say. "Meaningful work. Kids without access to modern medicine. Kids with facial tumours and cleft palates. I...I'm doing god things here, Na."

She sounds unmoved. "Those problems exist here too."

"I know," I say. But I also know that the bulk of my work at the Evergreen Clinic would be cosmetic. "I ah, I like it here." This comes out sounding lame, as it should, since the truth is, I don't like it here. The real reason I'm staying, which I can't even explain to myself, let alone Yna, is that

being here helps distract me from my failed marriage. If I were back in the States, and back in real life, I'd feel even more humiliated. Everyone I know knew Vinh. They all loved him. How can I explain he was Jekyll and Hyde, the perfect husband back in the States, then AWOL in Saigon's sleazy bar scene?

These thoughts are interrupted by a child's scream in the shack next door. My grip on the phone tightens.

"Lily? Are you still there?" From Yna's somber tone, I know what's coming next. We've had this conversation before. "It's time you came home," she says. "Why would you want to deal with this on your own? Has Vinh even seen her yet? Are you still hoping to work it out with him? Two epileptic fits in three months!" Her voice has risen. "She needs medical care they don't have over there. What tests are you running? Lily? Can you hear me?"

I'm tempted to hang up. I can call her tomorrow and say we were cut off. Instead, I take a deep breath. I know Yna means well. She was charmed by Vinh too, his dark dazzle. She's almost as bewildered as I am.

I take a deep breath. "I'm a physician," I say. "And I'm her mom. I'm on top of things, Yna."

I can hear her sigh. "I hope so," she says. "I just... You're so far away. First, everything with Vinh, and now Evie. I feel helpless. It's like...like bad luck over there." She gives a nervous laugh. "You know what I'm saying?"

"Evie will be fine," I say. I have to believe this. "How's Sofia?"

Sofia is Yna's baby, conceived after four rounds of IVF. Her voice lifts. "She's great, Lily. Six months old and already sitting up." I try to pay attention as she fills me in on Sofia's latest achievements. But I'm tired. She must realise she's been rambling because she says: "Wait. It's the middle of the night. I should let you sleep."

"Good night Na."

"Yeah, sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite." I hang my head. Vinh and I used to say that to each other. How could he have left me when I was eight months pregnant?

Only after I've hung up do I notice that next door, all lies quiet. No yelling. No crying. I guess that bastard passed out.

I wish he'd choke to death on his own vomit.

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