

SARAH KANAKE

*Le Mai Huong*

Looking at your feet now, you reckon you should've listened to Henry. He told you when you first arrived in Nui Dat to double up on socks, but you thought he was taking the piss. "Fuck just wearing the army clobber," he said, "they're thin as shit. Wear a civvie pair underneath. Otherwise the boonies'll suck the skin right off your feet." And even though Debbie sends you new navy blue socks almost every month, you've never doubled up, not even when it started raining again. What was the point? Civvie socks weren't even thick enough for Aussie rain, let alone the mud, and slush, and dense fucking endless moss smelling swamp of Vietnam.

So, now your feet are crook with swamp rot.

One of the med blokes takes a look and gives you some kind of ointment in an unmarked tube, but it's the colour of bones, and stinks of insecticide. What they don't tell you about foot rot is that the skin's itchy, but how do you itch wet, white-puckered flesh? You'll never just wear one pair of socks again.

Henry hits his stomach. It makes a sound like tenderising meat. "Grub," he says. "Coming?"

You shake your head.

"Suit yourself," he says as he leaves.

Blokes like Henry really piss you off. He's third generation soldier but only here for the paycheck, and the pussy. Not you. You had a job at the sewing machine factory. It was fine. You have a girlfriend and a nice rented flat, but you wanted to come to Vietnam. Enlisted. Went through training. Made sure you were sent as soon as possible. You wanted things to change. "Wouldn't take much," you used to say, "just some elbow grease." But that was yonks ago and you've never seen a country so free of grease and oil and engines.

A few days into your stay at Nui Dat Henry asks what your girlfriend back home looks like and all you have is a photo from the Sunday social a few weeks before shipping out. Debbie's wearing a blue dress with her hair tied up. You'll probably marry her, you say. Even though the thought of a life with Debbie makes you feel like a wedge jammed into the space beneath a door. Holding it open for everyone but you. Henry takes one look at the photo and says you should've come with him to the brothel he affectionately calls the Hacienda Arms of Saigon, even though he knows you've already got a girl in Vietnam.

You see her walking on your first leave to Vung Tau. She's wearing a red dress with a print of white flowers and her legs are the colour of Darrell Lea hard caramels. The sort your dad likes.

"Hey!"

She stops and turns but keeps her eyes down and doesn't look at you. You ask her name, but she doesn't answer.

If she were a girl back home, and you were out on the prowl boozed up on a Friday night, you might tell her she was being up herself but in Vietnam it's different. The air is thick and wet and only the local people can move through it without closing their eyes like they're dreaming. Back home this sort of air would be filled with flies and complaints, but not in Vietnam. In Vietnam this girl's got an orchid in her hair and you can smell frying meat.

"Come on," you say again, "please tell me your name."

"Le Mai Huong."

"Leemay?"

She shakes her head. "First name is Huong."

"Who-ong?" you repeat but it doesn't sound the same. You try again, "Huh-ong?"

"Huu-ng," she says again and this time her name is a sigh and fills every part of you, "M-aye is second name... Huong Mai."

You try again, but the inside of your mouth is filled with consonants. "Do you have a nickname?" you ask.

She doesn't understand.

"A short name," you say, "shorter," and you make a sign with your hands that you reckon conveys smallness.

She smiles but shakes her head.

"Does anyone call you May?"

"Huong Mai," she says again and this time you give up.

You offer a flower. She coils it between her fingers until the petals fall away, she lets you walk beside her. She talks to you in a mix of Vietnamese and broken English. You ask who taught her, but she doesn't answer. At home that'd piss you off but here Huong Mai's voice is like music you've never heard before and so you nod and smile.

The toes on your left foot tingle.

Even though it's been months, Huong Mai is the first Vietnamese you've really spoken to. You've been propositioned, bartered with some in town, and seen more than a few dead, but you don't know who they are or what they do all day so you ask Huong Mai if she likes living in Vietnam.

She nods but tells you Vietnam is not just what you've seen.

“I’ve seen Vietnam,” you say and you mean the boonies. Waist up and thinking any minute something dead might float past. That’s Vietnam. This girl doesn’t know the boonies, or maybe she does. The Army’s taught you to think like that.

Huong Mai says she should be home by now. Her dad worries.

“No worries,” you say with a smile.

Huong Mai nods.

“No don’t,” you say and gesture for her to rise. You’re trying to be nice, liberal even, but she looks offended.

The tingling in your toes moves down the arch of your foot and pools above the heel. The skin starts to burn again.

Huong Mai turns to leave and she moves just like the blokes back home said they would. Back and forth, like a bell in a tower. Except Huong Mai thumps her fists into the side of the thighs like she’s pissed off or nervous. She turns around a corner and doesn’t look back. You wish you’d come here sooner. The platoon won’t be in Nui Dat for long.

That night you take off both pair of your socks, the navy blue from Debbie and the green army issue, and have a cold shower without looking at your feet. They feel better after, still itchy but not as bad. You towel them dry without looking, pull on your second last pair of clean army issue socks, and stuff your feet back into your boots.

The next day you meet Huong Mai on the outskirts of Vung Tau. She doesn’t want to meet in town and you don’t ask why. She says she’s going to show you the cliff and tells you the name but you can’t pronounce it. “Meaning is, breeze welcome,” and she floats her hand through the air like a tiny boat bobbing over a wave.

All you know about Vung Tau is that it’s the nearest safe town to Nui Dat and so you ask Huong Mai what the name means.

“On large boat,” she says and mimes something that looks like falling down a deep hole with her hands. “It... holds place, but also meaning many boats. Stopping together?”

“Port?” you ask but she shakes her head. You’re not sure what she’s getting at so you ask what her name means.

“You allow me,” she says.

Together you walk around the village to the hills beyond. It’s dry and thin, like the bush back home. “Real,” Huong Mai calls it, but you can’t see any difference and maybe she’s misunderstood what you asked. She says her “country needs change, or stay the same, but from our inside,” and you pat her on the shoulder and say, “that’s not how this works, love.”

She shows you the damage. “Crops gone,” she says and you want to tell her that a few crushed bushes are coming through this shit easy. You aren’t so lucky. Blokes hide in trees and crouch in fucking holes waiting for you. There’s no saying that to her though, so you tell Huong Mai it’ll all grow back.

You kiss, but she keeps her tongue behind her lips. Her skin smells like flowers. Not the way your mum and Debbie smell like flowers. Huong Mai smells like real flowers. Honey and sugar, dirt and sweat.

Huong Mai invites you to have dinner with her in the village but by the time you reach the outskirts of Vung Tau your feet are on fire again, so you kiss her cheek, tell her you'll see her tomorrow and leave her standing in the street.

Back in Nui Dat Henry wants to know where you've been.

"Moo-ee Phong something," you say. "The cliff."

Henry smiles like you're mates and asks you to set him up with a girl like yours. "Come on," he says. "I'm gagging for a root."

You imagine a girl tethering him to the ground, burrowing deep into the wet earth like the roots of a tree.

"There are no girls like Huong Mai," you say, and you mean it.

Henry laughs, pats you on the shoulder, and says, "sure mate, sure."

"Girls like that wouldn't go out with you anyway."

Henry whistles. "Tickets," he says.

Later that night you hear Henry telling a Private about all the girls you know in Vung Tau.

"Which one is he?" asks the Private and Henry points you out but you need to get your boots off and do something about the burning. The tent you share with Henry and Paul Johnston isn't far. Paul isn't there. He was KIA a few weeks back. You weren't with him when he died. No one's done much about his side of the tent. There's even a stack of Yippee Yarns still left beside his bunk and that shit usually gets snapped up quick smart.

Another bloke runs past, heading towards the officer's quarters.

Inside your tent you untie your laces and slip your boots off. The socks are damp and don't come away easy. You're sick of the humidity and damp. You're sick of the swamps and the smell of decay. Not even Huong Mai is enough to take away the stench of bog completely.

Inside your socks are big flakes of skin. Some drop from the material like tiny pink moths. You turn your foot so you can see the sole. The skin is in tatters. The flesh stinks like rot and new cut grass and fresh shit. It's the smell of the boonies.

Outside you hear a bloke shout.

You touch the hole beneath a flap of skin just above your heel. It's soft and pink, and should hurt, but instead it itches.

The Sergeant passes the tent and you put your feet down. It won't be long now.

Inside your locker there's a bundle of unopened letters from Debbie. Beneath the letters are all the socks she's sent you since you first arrived in Nui Dat. Each pair is navy blue, like she thinks you're a Pushead.

You rub a dollop of the cream the med bloke gave on the soles of your feet and between your toes, stretch the blue socks from home over the skin and a clean pair of army issue over them. They're shorter than the ones from home. You push your feet down into your boots and unroll the cuff of your daks. The blue disappears, and the green too.

Huong Mai will be waiting in the street for you tomorrow.

Henry smacks his hand on the side of the tent. "Come on," he shouts, "we're joining up with the Yanks."

You lace up your boots, and walk outside to join the rest of the platoon. As you follow Henry through the rows of greyish green tents you realise that even though your feet are covered in ointment and buried deep inside double socks, the itching is still there.