

Saigon

A cool day in Saigon is 85 degrees Fahrenheit, like the Tuesday of last week. Those days, the cobalt sky almost convinces me of serenity in our city, that air pollution is a figment of my anxious imagination. The air is sweet with tangy citrus that pinches the edges of nostrils as air skims against skin in fleeting blankets. Those were the days when you and I were as light as the swallows we watched dance from rooftop to rooftop—their weightless wings carrying them over the world that we could only dream to conquer. Those days we sat knee to knee with a single orange from your mother’s garden sheltered in the barrier created by our cross-legged limbs.

“Just enough time for us both to spare,” you said, as a perfect golden ringlet spilled onto the clay rooftop from your prying fingers. You’d apologize for the single orange and the fact that we would have to share. I’d promise that one day, I’d buy you a whole bag of them once we had all the time left in the world to spend together. And momentarily, as rich pulp coated our tongues in bursts of tart sugar, our dreams offered an excuse from the regular Saigon summer days.

On these days, the air is as volatile as the sticky syrup that sinks to the bottom of sugar-cane drinks. Scooters screech past the roadways that plead for new pavement, and voices screech deals, orders, and laughing gossip from across the street. Sounds relay from sign to sign and bounce off sunburnt clay buildings in violent leaps. The palm trees try their best to shelter us, but our Saigon sun is relentless.

On days like these, I stole glances at your family’s bakery across the street from my butcher shop. “Golden Delicacies” it was named, and the men on the street used to joke that it was an accurate description of you.

“If only we could buy her for the price of a *bonbon*.” I watched men wink and buy more *bonbons* than they needed in a day for an “accidental” brush of hands. My throat clenched at their actions, but jealousy was absent to leave room for my faith in our dreams for the future.

It was here where I also watched your hand first encased between that faceless man’s fingers. In my mind, I imagined that you cried and fought and screamed when he asked for your hand. Because Tuesday of last week, when you told me that you’d be off to America the next day, your face gave nothing away. You showed me the ring on your finger, a beautiful jade that I could only dream to afford, and told me that you had already given your love to him.

The Wednesday after that Tuesday, I watched from the window as you were ushered into a shining black BMW—a color that absorbed our cloudless days into a uniform sheen of poised composure. *I’ll leave at Port 32*, your words echoed in my head. When the wheels started rolling, twisting my reflection in a crescendo of movement, I ran—across the street, past your bakery, and towards the nearest vendor that I could think of. I snatched the biggest bag of oranges I could find, and by the time I had arrived at Port 32, you were already climbing up the ramp. The oranges held the weight of all the time we spent together, and my shoulders started to cramp. When I threw the bag over the railings towards your body and your eyes skimmed over the dimpled fruits, I thought I saw a tear peak the corner of your iris. But when the bag soared across the water to miss the edge of your feet by centimeters, I watched them plummet into the murky water of the South China Sea. With it, our time in the world disappeared into nothingness. The vendor for the oranges had caught up with me at this point—and so had my realization of our future.