

Star Anise

by Kari Nguyen

I

It is hot. Her black hair, like everyone else's, is fraught with steam. Sweat collects at her hairline and sits above her lip. They need hats, she thinks. Hats would help.

It is the first hot day, and the third at sea. The wind has stopped, for the moment, but the boats carry on. Lang sits quietly. She wears a yellow collared shirt rolled up at the sleeves, back streaked with perspiration. Her cotton shorts she made herself, like much of her clothing. Thanh, her sister, sits beside her. She looks asleep, reclined as she is, head back and eyes closed, but Lang knows she's just resting. Minh, however, has long since dozed off, overcome by the heat and the boat rocking. He sleeps beside her in his little basket, shaded by the brim, and cooled by her hand as she waves a palm frond back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. The breeze is pleasant to him, or so it seems, his little face pulled together in a sleepy, contented expression.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Lang feels a hand on her shoulder, and realizes she's been sleeping too.

"For long?" she asks Thanh, who has shaken her awake.

"No. Just a moment," Thanh says, although it has been over an hour. She had sensed Lang falling asleep, and had opened her eyes to take the frond from her hand to fan Minh.

"Thank you," says Lang, and she turns to lift Minh from the basket.

Lang had dreamt of her father. While asleep, she'd watched him slipping out of the family house, returning very late, swaggering in quietly to drop into a sleep on his mat, overwhelmed by Tiger Beer and the exhaustion of worry. He'd reeked of cigarettes and booze. "This business must be done when drinking," he had told her many times. "That is the only way." The men would meet late, in back rooms of big houses, talking of boats, of timetables, of money. You

had to have money, and Lang's father had a little saved up, just enough for his two daughters. He resolved to get them out, especially now that Lang's husband was gone, gone, gone. But in the dream she'd seen him, her husband, in a back room somewhere, though she'd never been, but he was there, in her dream, clear and alive. He was looking tired, his shirt rumpled and hair longer than she'd remembered it to be, falling near his eyes, deep brown, but empty eyes. How long had they been empty now? He was in a room she'd never been to, never seen, but she could remember the color of the wallpaper, the pattern of faded red roses on eggshell white, and the table in the corner with a giant bowl of — and then she lost the dream memory, just like that.

She thinks again of her father. She pictures him in the family house, the one she'd grown up in, the one where they'd laid out her mother and her grandfather and her husband in death robes and kept quiet vigils with incense and flowers and beautiful portraits of the dead. It was home, but she was running away, as many others were, from a place where they could never grow.

Minh starts to cry. She juggles him softly in her arms, and falls to rocking him and talking softly of cool green jungles and singing dolphins. "It's for a better life," she whispers. "Forever." Minh falls back asleep, and so does she. She's dreaming of hats this time.

II

We are standing in her kitchen. I'm leaning up against a counter, watching her work. It's a small, dark kitchen, but she doesn't need much room. An outside observer would note the quickness of her movements and think she has known this place, this house, this kitchen, her whole life. Her long, black and slightly silvered hair is pulled behind her in a tie, following her feet in acquiescence, an old, trusting friend who knows the steps too. She moves from cupboard to cupboard, from fridge to freezer and back to cupboard, and now to the dishwasher where she stores clean bowls and spoons. We don't usually talk when she cooks, I just look on, studying her movement and the way her clothes, the ones she still makes for

herself, fall about her: the short pants with the patterns in black and gold, and the matching shirt with no sleeves.

She's making Pho today, Vietnamese beef noodle soup. It was the first dish she ever made for me, and since then I've had many more bowlfuls, both of her making and from other places. I've come to learn that hers is the best.

I know why she cooks Pho. It's love. It's home.

She turns to me. She asks me if I want to help.

III

The girls run screeching out of the house. Thanh, seven years old, is first, hollering to raise the dead, as her grandmother would say, feet beating the dirt, headed for the path toward the river. Lang, though older at ten, is slower and smaller, but she's determined, and she chases behind as quickly as her legs allow.

"Slow down!" she yells.

"Come on Lang!" Thanh shouts back.

Lang is breathing hard but she tries her best to close the distance between them. They race down the path to the river, and Thanh stops when she reaches the top of the bank. Lang arrives a minute later, breathing deeply, the sun glinting off the water.

"Why are you running?" Lang shouts once she catches her breath. She holds her hand to her face to shield her eyes from the sun.

Thanh grins. "Because I know you'll follow!" And she takes off like a shot down the bank.

IV

Lang has been saved, so far, by Minh. His cries in the night have saved them both. Tonight she sobs softly alongside of him, knowing Thanh, across the boat and down the stairs, is in a hell. It had started the night before, and she'd known right away, had woken up, eyes adjusting to see that her sister was gone. She hadn't heard anything, hadn't heard her being pulled away, across the boat, down the stairs, but she'd heard the rumors whispered about others, nearly right from the start, had seen tears on stoic faces in the light

of day, and had feared. She wonders if Minh knows fear, if it is something that forms in the womb, like fingernails. She is awake later as her sister creeps back to her, crying silently, and Lang knows her cries not because she hears them, but because she can see her body slumped over beside her, the dark outline of her side heaving up and down. She places Minh in his basket, then pulls Thanh closer and holds her, stroking her damp hair and holding her hand, until nothing else matters, and the anger, for a moment, can't touch.

Later that night the sisters hear a fall to the sea, just across the boat. First it is a cry — mournful yet light, and falling away- and then they hear the heavy drop in the water. Some men call from the boat, and someone moves a light over the sea, but it is too late. A young woman had tied bags of rice to her feet with rope, so that her weight would carry down quickly. A heavy flight. Lang wonders if she'd regretted her fall, in that last moment. She thought she had heard something in the falling cry that wished it back.

The next day, the crew members confiscate rope and secure heavy objects. Thanh holds Minh to give Lang a break. She tells Lang that no matter what happens, she will never leave her.

V

In her kitchen, I'm cutting beef into pieces. She looks over my shoulder, and tells me to put the beef into the water, now boiling in a stockpot on the stove. I carry the cutting board to the pot, and use the knife to gently slide the pieces of meat into the bubbling water. She dips in a spoon and stirs the beef, and then she is taking the pot by the handles to the sink, where she drains out the liquid. She sets the pot back down, and handing me a pair of tongs and a plate, asks me to take the meat back out. I've done it wrong already, I think, and my face flushes as I pull out the pieces, one by one, and place them on the plate provided. "It's part of the cooking method," she says, as she fills the pot with new water, and she tells me to return the beef to it when the water boils again. I feel better, glad I haven't failed just yet. This second start of liquid will be the base of the

broth, the key to the whole dish. "Once it is boiling in the pot," she says, "we turn it all down to a simmer."

She takes some ginger, three finger lengths worth, and smashes it once on another board. "Into the pot," she says, and I toss it in, the strong scent of the ginger sticking to my fingers. Now she shows me star anise. The smell is deep and pungent, like licorice. I pick one up and hold it between my fingers. I'm taken with its star shape, its small size and weight, and the way it contains all of itself so delicately. We take ten pieces and lay them on a paper towel, which she then wraps up in a bundle and secures at the top with a rubber band. I place it down into the simmering liquid, this compact little package set afloat, and I think how nice it is that all the little stars are kept together, able to release their spice and scent without the fear of dissolving away in the heat and water.

We toss in some cinnamon sticks, some salt and sugar, and the carrot, onion, and daikon radish she'd sliced up earlier, the vegetables floating. We leave it all simmering, three to four hours, and wait for the meat to cook. Every now and then we tend it, skimming the skin from the top, dumping the foam down the sink drain, watching the steam rise.

VI

The boats stop in the water, no shore in sight. A larger boat has come to meet them, ready to collect the refugees for the longer journey. They know it is late in arriving, so its presence is a relief. The crews work to secure the smaller boats to the new vessel.

Lang and Thanh wait their turn to jump aboard, standing with the others near the rail, keeping close. Lang holds Minh tight to her chest. She has heard about this. He will be thrown.

Thanh tells her everything will be okay. "You won't be able to jump while holding him," she says. Then she reaches over to Minh, who is awake, eyes wide and alert, and he takes Thanh's offered finger in his hand and squeezes on. "Pretty boy," she tells him, and he giggles.

It's their turn now, and Lang is to go first, to be on board when Minh is thrown. There's no going back. She hands the child to Thanh, and then, with the help of a crew member, she climbs over the rail, and jumps lightly to the new boat, where she's helped on deck by strong arms.

Thanh hands Minh to the man beside her, saying something to him that Lang cannot hear. Lang's heart is pounding and she's praying and suddenly she feels the boat beneath her feet, she feels it taking her out to sea, breaking away from the small boat, away from the only family she has left. It's a fleeting moment but she knows it won't work, it can't work, and her baby will be lost, fallen to the sea floor, his brown eyes empty like his father's. But she's standing on firm footing and she watches her prayers flying as Minh is tossed into the air, and it's a good throw and he's high up there and everything else is stopped and it takes just a moment but the moment is eternal and then he's landed, cushioned, in the arms of the man beside her. She can breathe again. He's back in her arms. Minh laughs, and he's still smiling when his aunt jumps aboard. Lang wipes her tears with Minh's hands.

VII

Good broth is essential to Pho. It is that blend of spices and flavors and smells that makes the dish.

Once the meat is tender, we pluck out the bundle of star anise. It has steeped long enough.

We add fish sauce and more salt and sugar to the pot, to taste. It's nearly done.

We take rice noodles, boiled earlier, and heap them into huge bowls. To the bowls she ladles spoonfuls of broth, meat, and vegetables from the pot, and I set the bowls on the table once they are filled. We spoon hoisin and chili sauce into smaller bowls, self-serve style, and add these to the table as well, along with a plate of mung sprouts, cilantro, mint and basil from the garden, and limes we've cut in quarters.

I place cups on the table, and she pours green tea in each one. The door opens, and Minh walks in from outside, dirt stuck to his forehead but he doesn't know, so she goes to him, standing on the tip of her toes so she can reach him, using her thumb to edge the earth from his face, then pats his cheek in approval. "Mom" he says to her, leaning away from her hand, still her son but thinking he needs this less, you know, and he heads to the kitchen to wash up. A moment later he comes back with chopsticks, spoons, and napkins, and he puts them on the table.

Then he walks over to me.

He's sweaty from yard work, but I love that he does it for her, and I wrap my arm around his waist. "Is he sleeping?" Minh asks me, and I nod my head yes, looking back toward the room off the kitchen. He follows my gaze, says, "That's good."

The three of us sit down to eat, and I tell him I helped make it this time. His mom says, "If it tastes bad, blame it on her!" Her eyes sparkle a bit when she says this, and soon her smile betrays the joke. "You did a good job," she tells me, and I'm happy as I pile my Pho high with basil and mung.

I breathe it in. I start with the broth. It's warm going down.

VIII

The sea was there to save them. It transported their boats, orchestrated their escape, and pushed them toward a free life. But the sea was a living thing, and something that couldn't be counted on.

Lang still has the nightmares. She always will. Sleep for her is far more dangerous than waking. It is often the same dream, played out with slight differences as to plot or appearance, but always real. Another black night, the moon tucked out of sight by black haze, but still she can see. Thanh is walking along the ship's low railing, unable to sleep. The sea is restless, churning in ancient

conversation. The boat dips sharply to the side, and Thanh loses her footing, then regains it, grabbing the rail for support, grateful not to have fallen overboard. But the thought is short-lived. The dip comes again, the other side of a roll, and sharper this time, and her hands release the rail, tossing her off, discarded, to dark water. In her dream Lang is standing on the deck of the righted boat, looking down to the sea, and her husband is down there, pulling Thanh under, and Thanh struggles for only a brief second, and then they are gone, under the waves, and Lang hears desperate cries and looks around her —

But she's home now, and the crying is all hers.

IX

There are some stories you want to tell. There are some stories you don't. But they are all there, just below the surface. It takes just a scratch, sometimes, to reveal a gash.

I am lucky. I've never lost a sister, or a husband. I've never had to leave my family, or my home. I've never feared for my life, or a child's life. Lang made it. And now she's here, cooking Pho. She wonders, afterwards, why I wrote everything down: the ingredients, the directions, the special tips. Why I want measurements. She doesn't cook that way, she tells me. It's all in her head. The soup, the stories, even her family. I understand, but still, I want to write it down. To pass on. To remember. Because it's important. And I don't ever want to forget.

"When you lose so much you never forget what you have," she says.

I write it all down.

X

We're done eating now, and Minh pushes himself away from the table. He's going to shower. Lang and I take up the bowls and the spoons and the chopsticks and the leftover toppings and bring them

back to the kitchen. I offer to do the dishes, but then I hear a little voice from around the corner. He's talking to his dad.

"Did you have a good nap, buddy?"

"Mmmhmm," says the little, sleepy voice. I can picture him on the edge of the mattress, the one on the floor of the guest bedroom we use when we stay over, rubbing his eyes, perhaps one sock about to come off of his foot.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Let's go see Mom and Grandma. They'll give you something to eat."

