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KARTIKA REVIEW



Thai Ban

MUC

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A Bravo 173rd soldier adopted a white puppy and named him Sarge. "This is one dog they (the Vietnamese) won't eat." The soldiers in his unit fed the dog so much whiskey, he walked backward all day. Then, the next week, the dog was left behind and lost as they raced into battle. See: www.eagerarms.com.

At age seven or eight, I loved my first dog like my mother loved me, without thought of the future. Việt Nam presented danger by its very nature without even having a war. Each time I returned from anywhere in the countryside, my mom would hold me close and whisper thanks to God I had returned unharmed by snakebites, scorpion stings, or sudden flood. She loved me enough to let me go. She loved me enough to let me experience my childhood while she waited unnerved at home for her child's return from ventures into the perils.

One day I noticed the family dog had swelled and become lethargic. As days went by, she stumbled around and slept more than usual, and the luster disappeared from her usually sparkling eyes.

“Mẹ, the dog seems sick.” My face crunched up in anxiety. I feared the dog would die.

“Hồng Thái, she is not sick. She will have puppies. You must treat her gently and not expect too much of her. You can be her nurse and assist her with the puppies.”

“How can I help?”

“You can warm water over the stove, bring clean towels to wipe the puppies clean, and give water to the mama, so her milk will flow.”

“How did the dog get babies, Mẹ?”

“She must have been lonely and wanted something to love.” Mẹ smiled and hugged me. “Like I wanted six babies to love.” Mẹ’s eyes had a faraway look in them. She had this same look always as she watched my father leave for the day.

“Why was she lonely when she had all of us children?”

“She doesn’t have any *ong* (dog) friends.”

“Oh.” I nodded with understanding. “Will we keep all the puppies?”

“No, we already have a dog. We will have to find homes for them.”

I held the mama dog’s head on my lap for an hour or more each day to let her know I was there to care for her. Her soulful eyes locked on mine as if she knew I was carrying the medicine bag.

The day arrived. She did not eat, and her body sweated. She circled around the towel we had put down for her to sleep on and fussed and whined all morning. I had to leave for school, but instead of playing with my friends after school, I hurried home to care for mama dog.

She had become quiet and lay still. Her breath grew heavy. I watched and waited, ready with clean towels. Water warmed in a pot on the stove the Tuy ét had lugged in from the well before entering the house. I was glad I had not

missed the big event.

Mẹ had moved the mama dog to the bathtub in the kitchen. I cradled her head in my lap as usual, but she pulled away, weaving her head back and forth, her eyes rolling up. She heaved. Mẹ crouched by the side of the tub, and shushed my exclamations.

“Be very quiet, Thái. We must not upset the mama,” she whispered.

She stroked the dog’s head and buttocks. Mama dog looked at us with love in her eyes, letting us know she trusted us to help her give birth. With fascination, I watched the puppies emerge in the next six hours, slick and slippery, with eyes stuck closed, gooey and crusty, and observed while my mother stroked the warm towel across the shiny membrane, and then I dabbed it on the next one.

Everything chugged along without a snag until the last pup. It was stuck. Mama dog began whimpering, her mournful eyes transformed with sharp pain. Mẹ reached her fingers inside the mama dog and poked around, careful not to hurt the mother any more than the searing pains running through her already. Suddenly, a light sparked in Mẹ’s eyes. She had found the pup. With the gentlest touch possible, she tugged at the last pup, keeping her fingers soft and making sure not to touch its head.

If a dog could scream, the mama dog did then. The birth had turned sour and frightening for her. I looked at Mẹ to get an idea if she agreed with this. Her face held no clue of distress, only a focus like her own child’s life was at stake. One more tug and the last pup slid out without a sound. No one had such a mama as I did. There was nothing she could not handle. The new pups were covered with sticky goo. Mẹ dabbed them with the wet towel and then the dry one, paying particular attention to their eyes, which were stuck shut. I didn’t want to hold one.

“Why are they so dirty, Mẹ?”

“The membrane protects the babies inside the mother. She will spend the next few days licking them clean.” As Mẹ spoke, mama dog began licking behind the ear of the littlest one. I noticed his legs were different than his body, like he wore ginger socks.

The puppies lay still for a few weeks and then pranced around the house in lively spirits. Bao, the little boy from down the street, stopped by before school to take one home. A truck had hit their dog, and they had found it dead

in the road. The one with the orange legs was the one I secretly wanted. Cha took the puppies to Bồng Sơn for a friend who worked in his office to take his pick. He came home with one, mine. I prayed Mẹ would change her mind and let me keep it.

“Mẹ, can I have the last puppy? Please?” My eyes swam with tears I was afraid to let fall. They pressured my lids, but I held onto them for dear life. What if she said no?

“I told you, we already have a dog, Thái.” Mẹ’s voice sounded caring, but her words were firm.

“Mẹ, I promise to take care of it.” I choked back the lump and swallowed hard. Mẹ did not like tears. Whenever I had cried before, she had given me a lecture about remaining calm at all times. I wanted her to talk about keeping the dog.

“No, Thái. We do not need another dog.”

“I want it to be my baby. I want to be a good mommy like you are.”

Mẹ’s eyes flickered with emotion, and she stared at me for a minute. I stood waiting.

“Thái, a dog is a big responsibility. If you do not feed it or give it water, I will have Cha bring it to Bồng Sơn to get rid of.”

“Yes, Mẹ.” My breath came in puffs. “I will always take care of my little one.” I did not know how hard that job would become.

I named my puppy Mực, meaning ink. His body, black and sleek, was supported by ginger and gold legs as fancy as a tiger’s fur. Nga wanted to claim the puppy for her own, and so did Thạch, but he followed only me everywhere I went.

If I went with the neighbors to play, he would sit and watch. While I picked fruit in a tree, he would police the bottom. If we canoed, we had to lug him along, or he would yowl to shake the neighbors. True to my word, I fed the dog table scraps from lunch or dinner, and convinced one of my sisters or brothers to draw fresh water from the well for him every day. The more I did for him, the more loyal he became.

One Saturday as we ate breakfast, all of us girls including Lan and Ái, two spy girls Cha brought home to brainwash the Communism out of them, told Mẹ

we planned to trek up the Thác Đá Mountain on a mulberry picking expedition.

“Girls, if you see a helicopter, you must not hide in the brush.”

“Wouldn’t it be safer to hide?” Thạch asked.

“No, they think only a communist would run and hide in Bồng Sơn. If you wave, whoever it is will not know whose side you are on and will not shoot at you.”

Mẹ packed sticky rice patties and cooked chicken in a canvas bag. We would also eat mulberries as we picked. The mountain swept up before us, a momentary escape from the strain of assault from the Việt Cộng, but an adversary in its own right. Sharp rocks pierced the soft canvas of my shoes on the trail and jabbed my feet. I made no noise, knowing my sisters would mock me, and Lan and Ái would join in. They did everything my sisters did now. With brief longing, I looked back at the pink and white painted balcony still visible on the second story of our house, but my child’s heart overcame me, and I craved the adventure.

Mực followed me up the mountain and panted with thirst and fatigue. I thought he would collapse, but we came upon a gurgling stream. I knew if the water flowed over rocks, it was clean enough for a dog, but not necessarily for a human. Mực slurped it up, stopped to rest, drank some more, stopped, swigged again, slobbering dribbles of saliva and licking his chops. He lay down, and so we rested, something we did not usually do on the mountain.

“Let’s eat our lunch,” Dung said.

“We might as well since we have to stop,” Nga replied, glaring at me.

Dung opened our sack and split up the food. I noticed she did not give a portion to Mực.

“Thạch we must divide it up again. Mực has none.”

“Ông không thể có bất cứ. *We don’t have enough.*”

“He’ll be hungry,” I wailed. I thought of Mẹ out in the field plucking green beans off the vines and digging potatoes out of the hot, dry dirt. She worked for our food; I would fight for Mực’s right to eat. He was mine to defend.

“No one asked him to come, you know,” Nga said.

“I can not go anywhere without Mực, not even to school.”

“Then give him your lunch.” All my sisters laughed as if they knew what I would decide.

“Look,” Lan said. “She’s feeding the dog her lunch. She won’t have any food.”

“That’s her own fault,” Thạch said.

Because he was hungry from the exercise, he snapped and gobbled the food I gave him. But I knew if I did not look after him, no one else would. When he lapped his last sip from the brook, I pulled with my fingers on his silky ears and raced to catch up with my impatient sisters.

After a year, Mực had worked his way into our home and was quite a busy, active animal. He loved to roll in the grass by the river. A snake could have darted out and bitten him each time, but his luck held out. If it rained, he would go out and roll in the puddles, and it always hardened to a stinky crust. One day, I invented a method for bathing him and set out to the well to try it. The well’s cement exterior rose from the ground about three and a half feet. Those neighbors who lived on our property and assisted Mẹ with the farming (sharecroppers) also accessed the water there.

With Mực in tow, I approached the well, glad to see no women from the neighborhood washing clothes to stand in my way. I had stolen a towel and a bar of soap from the kitchen. Mẹ would scold me later. My strategy: do not ask. Take the fuss later after the job was finished. The bucket caused my tiny arm to sag. I lifted it and plopped it into the water below. I whirled the rope around, until I jerked, and the metal pail felt loaded and heavy.

I yank and yank and feel myself creeping toward the edge. Panic sucks at my lungs. I know there is no one around to hear me if I fall. My head and neck crane over with the weight of the bucket. I do not think to let go. The cement scrapes my chest and stomach, and I slip into the tank a little. Hardly aware of the sea like smell of the algae clinging to the sides of the tank, I claw with my hands and flail my legs against the side. I skid down the side more, and I can feel my stomach is scraped raw. I fall head first downward. Miraculously, my toes connect with the rim and hook with a firm grip.

Screams rattle me and almost separate me from my tentative hold. With shock, I identify the earsplitting sound I hear as my own. My toes hang on with the strength of stress, but I know I can not sustain it long. Will someone happen by? If I plunge down in the water, I can tread for awhile but will likely be bitten by rats or a snake and drown.

Then, Mực barks and yips as if someone has ripped his heart out of his chest. That's my boy. He will save me. A minute later, as my toes are about to give, two women clutch my ankles, wrench me up, and place me on the ground. They must have shouted for my mother because she scampers up out of breath. The usual hugs keep her busy for a minute, and then she babbles non-stop.

"Thái, don't worry. It was just an accident." I cried and cried, still trembling. My mother raked her fingers through her hair and pulled several strands out of her tight bun and then ran her hands as if they were sweaty, up and down her white blouse and pants. "What will your father say tomorrow?" Her hands encircled my face. "What were you thinking?" She held me close and gripped my head so hard it pulled my hair. My temples beat from the pressure.

"Do not take such chances!" Mẹ beat my bottom hard with the palm of her hand. "Do not ever do that again!" Another slap sent me reeling. "Do not play at the well. Let your sisters get the water or just get a half bucket." Tears streamed down her face now, and she threw her arms around me and sobbed into my hair for a minute or two. Then she trudged off to the house, shaking her head and mumbling. I was lucky I could not hear.

"Mực, thank you," I said, crouching down and pulling him onto my lap. He rewarded me with a wet lick across my nose. My heart was filled with dread for what just happened and also full of love for my dog. If it had not been for him, I wouldn't have been around for the scolding.

A gloomy sky, threatening rain, pushed me into the house.

"Thái, wash and prepare those vegetables in the basket for dinner."

To make her forget how naughty I'd been, I slaved in the kitchen. I set the table and placed the rice in a pot with a small amount of water to heat. Then, I washed spinach and turnips and arranged them in another pot. Tuy ét came to the stove and took over, and I swung a tin pail over my arm with extreme caution to scoop a half bucket of fresh water to drink with our meal from the

well. Rain fell on me until I was soaked.

“Mục, why can’t you carry in this heavy bucket of water?” I laughed, forgetting my worries, but the sky darkened and lightning flashed in bright contrast. Mục sprinted ahead of me to get inside where it was dry.

We ate, missing our Cha, passing food for the first few minutes, and talking with everyone interrupting. Finally, like always, Mẹ hushed us for her dinnertime speech about safety.

“Children, you must listen to me when I tell you things. Everything I tell you is for your own good.”

“Yes, Mẹ,” said Thac, nodding her head in submission.

“Bân and Hồng Thái must not use the large bucket in the well. They must remove that one and place the smaller tin pail from the kitchen on the chain to be lowered.”

I did not argue that I could just fill the large bucket half full like she had suggested earlier. One did not argue with a parent at a meal or in fact anytime. Not listening was one thing, disagreeing was quite another.

“All of you older children, I expect when you are not at school, you should keep an eye on Hồng Thái and Bân.” It hurt me that she put my name first. Bân was the youngest. “Also, Hồng Thái, the teacher told me you missed school again last week. You must never go far nor stay long in the morning.

“Children, you must always be careful, no matter what you are doing. I do not make you stay in the house, but train you to stay out of danger. I expect you to hear my words and follow what I have told you. If you do not, you could end up with serious consequences.” Glass eyes glinted at me from her usually kind face. “If I was never hard on you, Hồng Thái, your whole life, you’d be dead already. You’re the most stubborn child of all six.” No one argued with that either. I hung my head in shame.

The rain poured down on the roof all night and still fell in the morning when I woke. No staccato of gunfire or pounding grenades had pierced the night, and I almost had not slept, I’d become so used to the war sounds. The marble floor by my picture window was slick with wet as I slid my feet over the edge of my full size bed. Nga now shared it with me since the Lan and Ái had come to stay with us. She moaned and turned over from her back to face away toward the window. She would have to get up soon. School for her and all my

brothers and sisters except Bân was in the morning.

It rained too hard for outdoor play. Even if we enjoyed sloshing around in the wet clay, if the rain turned into a worse weather pattern, which happened two to three times per year, we would not want to be on the river for sure. On the mountain, we would be separated from family and could be washed down in a torrent. I did listen to Mệ sometimes, and this was one of them. Mực remained indoors, too. He did not like rain, just puddles and mud.

At lunchtime, we discussed mainly whether school would take place in the afternoon or not. The teacher had not said whether afternoon school was on or off when Thạch and the others had left. Mother pushed out the front door and left us and Tuy ét, to clear the meal. She would take a poll around the neighborhood of how many were sending little ones to the schoolhouse. She would be back in half an hour. I was to wait for her return.

After I had collided with Khoa for the second time, he said, "You're just getting in the way and the dog is even worse." His voice rung harsh, a disciplinary voice he only used when Mệ was not around, as if he was taking over for her. I resented it. I had a mother and father already. "Leave the kitchen, Hồng Thái," he said.

Mực and I left, our tails between our legs. I chased him around the living room couch two or three times. Lightning flashed, and thunder boomed. He cried out and hid behind the armchair Cha loved to sit in when he finished a meal. As I gazed transfixed out the window, a bamboo tree bent halfway down to the ground in the strong wind. Mệ faltered on her way back to the house, clutching her hat, even though it was tied under her chin, and grabbing onto her clothes, so they would not be ripped off her body. She stumbled onto the front porch, and the sheets of water washed at us diagonally like waves hitting a ship.

"Children, Tuy ét, shut all the windows and doors, hurry," she shouted as she slammed the front door and snapped the window next to it closed. We all sped around the bottom floor, following orders.

The first of the neighbors started to arrive, carrying their most important possessions on their backs in rice sacks or in baskets used for gardening. We had the only house in our village with two stories, so everyone, about forty people, would come and crowd into our top floor. Mệ had all us children and Tuy ét each make three trips to get personal possessions and prepared food. The furniture would have to be replaced if it was ruined.

“*Hồng Thái*, hurry, go upstairs. Wait, grab this basket.” She handed me a basket almost too heavy to carry, and I staggered up the stairs. I looked around for *Mực* and did not see him. I thought he must have gone up already with neighbors. He liked meeting new people. Outside, the rain had risen to about two feet, and the current was swooshing by our house toward the river.

“*Bên*, go on now. Go,” I heard *Mẹ* call, but she remained downstairs until the last person arrived. When she finally came up, I approached her with tears in my eyes. Water surged against the door and sloshed up against the windows.

“*Mẹ*, is *Mực* downstairs? I can’t find him.”

“No, *Thái*. I did not see him.” She shook her head distracted. I didn’t really think she would have noticed if he was there. Too many things were on her mind. I headed down the stairs. “No, *Thái*, come back here.”

“But *Mẹ*, he is down there alone. I must make him come upstairs.” I was halfway down the stairs, and I could see though the doors and windows were shut, water had broken the panes and burst the door off its frame and was pouring into the first floor of our home.

“I forbid you, *Hồng Thái*.” Her eyes were filled with fear. I knew she was scared for my life like I was scared for *Mực*’s.

With each step I took back up the stairs, I felt years of growing older settle on my shoulders. I elbowed my way through the crowd to position myself by the back window in my parents’ room. I leaned out and scanned the yard. Some of our things were floating out to the main current and would be carried away. Yelp. Yelp. Yip. The writhing body of my poor dog pushed through the kitchen window and floated out toward the river. He dog paddled and made it a few feet but then was swept out double the amount he’d gained. I gasped and hung out the window sobbing.

As he floated closer to the shore, or what I assumed was the shore because it was covered in gushing water, he passed a small cluster of lemon trees. His paws clawed and batted at branches to no use. The current churned with more might than he possessed. I stretched my hands out toward him as if I could stop the current from bearing him away and wailed out into the walloping wind. He kicked and fought, leaping up above the water and then getting dunked beneath it, but it was no good.

As I watched, he twisted his head back to look at me, I thought, as if he expected me to come save him. Soon, he disappeared into the distance, out of

my eyesight, and my tears fell and splashed into the water below, unnoticed by anyone, except my mother, who came to stand beside me.

She put her arm around my shoulders and whispered in my ear. "It is not your fault, Thái. I heard you call him upstairs. He would not listen." Giving my shoulder a squeeze, she pulled my body to her and tried to stop my weeping.

"Mẹ, I'm sorry I do not always mind you." I buried my face against her, my shoulders shivering with grief, my crying drowned by the rush of waves below.

"I am only glad you followed my instructions today. You know, there is only so much you can do to take care of a child or even a pet. They have to be free. Keeping an animal or pet completely safe would make them unhappy." She smiled down at me. My dishonor disappeared in the clouds like a scarlet helium balloon. Today had sucked the life out of me. I swallowed hard.

Mẹ wrapped my heartache in her comforting arms and held me while the water surged on. My sisters and neighbors wandered around, pushing each other out of the way, grumbling about their lost belongings and ruined homes. I held Mẹ.



Amanda Griffith is co-writing a memoir of **Thai Le Nguyen**, a South Vietnamese woman who, as a child, survived the war in her hometown of Bong Son but fled in 1975 with her family to avoid repercussions stemming from her father's status in the South Vietnamese government. Ms. Griffith is a YA novelist and a secondary English teacher of twenty-five years. Ms. Nguyen holds a BA in Business Administration and owns and runs her own beauty salon.