

ALEX MINDT

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## KING OF AMERICA

**I** HANG FOR MY FATHER. I hang for what I can't remember. And what I can. I hang for the foot my mother found, bloody, in the mangrove tree. Mother said the Viet Cong did it to scare us, to stop us from running. She found his arm two days later in the palm fronds. It was his arm, she knew, from the mark of a bullet that had grazed him in the war. A bit of scar tissue on the inside of his forearm. Besides the picture I carry everywhere, this is what I remember of my father: an arm here, a leg there.

I live in Vegas now. Everything is lights here. So much light the stars refuse to shine. And the wind, it pushes on windows until they moan. It never stops. Wind and lights all day and night. The slots ping and whirl below me. They make noise when they're angry. They scream and howl. Old people are plugged into the machines. Little chains connect their hearts to the diamonds and cherries.

In our small village on the Mekong River, my father was known as an organizer. He hid boats in the reeds, and guided people out to the bay in darkness, paddling at night through gunfire. My mother said the wind told them he was the one. And one day he went from human being to anatomy. They called him an agitator. But he was just a farmer who wanted freedom, who made up love poems to my mother. In the reeducation camp he wrote poems on little scraps of paper, poems about birds and the sky. They found them and burned them, and then punished him with isolation. But he remembered in his head. He would say them to me when I lay down to sleep.

Now, seven days a week except Wednesday, I am lowered from the ceiling to “Louie, Louie.” Every hour on the hour it is Mardi Gras for twenty minutes. There is a main stage where singers sing and dancers dance. A float goes around the room on rails, hanging from the ceiling. Girls dance on the float in colorful costumes with fruit on their heads. They throw beads to the people below. Then there is Bobby and me, hanging from cables above the casino floor. We dance and lip-synch in mid-air. We are the later King, in all white jump suits, rhinestones, sunglasses and sideburns. Bobby wears a wig. I use my real hair. Bobby hangs ten feet away, facing me. He doesn’t curl his lip. *They can’t even see our faces*, he says. I curl my lip. Before the music starts we are on a platform on the ceiling. It is dark. *You ready gook-face?* Bobby says. The music starts. I can feel the ceiling shake into the soles of my feet. And then it slides open and we are lowered above the people who sit at slot machines and blackjack tables, cigarettes in their mouths, large plastic cups in their hands.

After they killed my father, the fleeing stopped. For a time anyhow. Two years passed. I was nine years old. My mother cried and whispered to me to be strong. And then she told me a story. It was during the war, she said. My father was a brave soldier. He didn’t like American GI’s and they didn’t like him. But sometimes they had to fight side by side. My mother moved her sleeping pad and showed it to me. *This*, she said, *was a gift from an American to your father*. Something was wrong because she cried again. *This is yours*, she said. *Keep it. Don’t let go*. In my hands she placed The King.

Above the crowd we dance to “Love Shack.” Bobby doesn’t even move his hips. He says everyone is watching the fruit. He says he’s eaten the entire float. He says Miss Strawberry liked his big banana. And then he laughs. There is strawberry, pineapple, watermelon, a slice of lemon and lime, a coconut and mango. Lynh is mango. She is the most beautiful mango. Even with her chest made bigger. *Big mangoes*, Bobby says. I speak Viet with her. But she sneers at me. *We’re in America now, dumbass! Speak American!* Lynh is someone I could love. Underneath she is sweet. I can see it when she looks at herself in the mirror. There is softness in her eyes. Other fruits are nice. But Lynh is from Vietnam and Mother would be happy about that. Bobby says he ate mango too. He says mango was the sweetest.

My mother told the story of how the GI saved my father’s life. He carried Father for miles on his back through the forest and bullets flying. Somehow my father found him later, and gave the GI several *taels* of gold, from trinkets and jewelry he had found or stolen. The GI told him to stay there, and went away. *He came back later with this*, my mother said, pointing at

the record cover. *He gave it to your father and said this is the King. If you want to know where I come from, the soldier said, listen to this.* And then she told me that we could never listen in Vietnam. But that someday soon I would be able to listen. Then one day Mother said Grandma was sick in the district hospital in Thong Nhat near Ho Nai City. I was to stay with Uncle while she went to visit. *Take this,* she said. Her fingers touched the record of the King. His lip was curled, his collar turned up. *Take this with you,* she said.

In the green room, after the first show, Lynh is nowhere. Tracy (strawberry) and Pam (lemon) are eating crackers and talking about the soap opera that plays on the TV. *Where's Lynh?* I ask. *I don't know, Cowboy.* Pam calls everyone Cowboy. The green room is where we wait for the next show. I don't know why it is called green. The walls are pink. A large mirror is on one wall. My hair is big and combed back. My sideburns look real. Glue holds them down. Sometimes Lynh helps me put them on. Her fingers touch my face like meditation. Her fingers become the whole world. It is then that I tell her how much I practice, alone in front of the mirror for hours, trying to get my voice deep enough. It is then that I tell her of my dream to get out of this place, and play the biggest stages on the strip, to be the best King in Vegas.

I stayed with my uncle for two weeks when everything changed. One night, he woke me from a very deep sleep. *Come on,* he whispered. *We are leaving now.* He told me to be quiet, to crawl behind him to the banks of the river. *Your aunt and cousins will be waiting for us.* I grabbed the record cover and pushed it under my shirt. It was a windy night and the trees were bending. I crawled quickly on my knees through the wind and the darkness. My uncle kept low and moved fast like an animal. Coconuts fell from the sky, pounding on the ground around us. We crawled until we got to rows and rows of willow trees that were whipping and hissing in the wind. A dark cloud moved overhead and rain started to fall. There were many people crawling to the banks of the river. Wind pushed the water, slapping the shore and the sides of the boat. My uncle held the boat while we climbed in. My aunt was already on board and my cousins Phuoc and Mai were pushed up against the barrels of fuel in the small engine room. More and more people climbed on. Water was rising.

**L**YNH IS A SAD GIRL. The curse words that come from her mouth, her smart comments, these are just the armor she wears. She was on a boat too. But she only tells part of her story. Once they land in Hong Kong, she stops, and her eyes turn down. And then she talks about San José. Maybe one day she will tell me. Stories are told down at Xinh Xinh Restaurant, stories about rape and starvation in those camps in Hong Kong. Vo and Huong tell of the separation of men

and women and how they were forced to stay in their tents for days on end, starving with other men, not knowing what was happening to the girls, and that was the worst thing, they say. But I don't want to think about that. Not until Lynh tells me what happened to her, then I will listen and be strong. I want to marry Lynh. I want to take her to Xinh Xinh Restaurant one night and order her the #92 special with Cari Tom and a spring roll. I will invite all of our friends and they will be in the kitchen waiting for me to get down on my knee. And then we will clear out the tables and we will dance. There is not a woman more beautiful than Lynh. We will be married at Our Lady of La Vang on a Sunday afternoon. And while we say our vows, the wind will quiet down. From that day on she will no longer need to dance in casinos. She will only dance for me.

We tried to push the boat out. It wouldn't budge. So many people pushing it down into the sand. My uncle ordered men out. They refused. My uncle pulled out a gun and pointed it at them. Rain was coming down. Two men climbed out, and then two more. They helped push us out of the sand and into the river and then they tried to climb back on. There were already too many people, but my uncle knew we could not fight. The guard would hear us and start shooting.

The next show is going to start in a half-hour. Bobby is nowhere. I chew on a crab leg and practice a dance move. I ask Lynnette (pineapple) if she's seen Lynh. *Oh, yeah, sweetie. She was running out to the parking lot. Bobby was chasing after her, she says. They were really going at it.* The hallways are long here. Bobby says the whole city is a maze. We are fucking mice, he says, all racing for the cheese. The hot wind blows on me as I walk out the door. In the far corner of the parking lot, Bobby dressed as The King, with his hands in the air, yells at Lynh, who stands by her car with the mango on her head. A family gets out of their car and points at me as I run across the lot. *Oh Jesus, Bobby says. Look who's here!*

The orders were to push the boat out past the National Guard post one hundred meters down the river. Once quietly past, the engine would be started and hopefully we'd make it out to the bay and to freedom. But the wind was angry and the rain fell hard. Men pushed the poles into the river's sandy bottom, but we weren't moving. We were out in the middle of the river for a long time. The wind did not let up. Uncle wanted to turn the boat around and go back to the shore. Maybe try again later. But then a light, a bright light moved across the river and stopped on our boat. *Start the engine, Uncle shouted. Start the engine!*

Lynh is crying. Dark tears run down her face. I ask if she is okay. Bobby tells me he will pound my sushi head if I don't leave. The sun is very hot

and the wind dries everything up. *What is going on, Lynh?* I say in Viet. She tells me that there was a red line this morning, and then she did it again and another red line appeared, and Bobby is probably the reason. *What the hell did you say to her?* Bobby asks.

Uncle got to the engine room and Hoa was wrapping a cord around the engine wheel. *What happened?* Uncle screamed. Hoa's fingers shook as he struggled with the cord. *Phuoc wrapped it the wrong way*, Hoa said. Uncle pushed Hoa back and pulled on the cord. The engine sputtered and popped and then it started. Guns exploded all around us. Red bullets scraped the wind. *Everybody down!* Uncle shouted. *Khanh, turn the boat to the West! No, too many rocks, keep straight. Straight!*

*That baby ain't mine*, Bobby says. *Could be any crackhead dealer in this town for all you know.* Lynh looks at Bobby so angry and then she goes after him, the mango on her head crashing into him, her fingernails tearing at his face and neck. Bobby tries to hold her off. I don't know why, but I pull her away. Her arms and legs flap like a bird. I push her back against her car. *Fucking bitch!* Bobby says. *I gotta' fucking show to do.* Bobby straightens the wig on his balding head. A small crowd has gathered—an old couple, a few college-aged boys, and the family that saw me run across the parking lot. *Can you believe this?* Bobby says, looking around at the strangers.

**W**E WERE MOVING DOWN THE RIVER and the gunshots were fading now. Soon all we could hear was the engine and the knocking of water on the sides of the boat. As we moved out into the bay and then into the wide ocean, a storm came down on us. Water splashed into the boat. Uncle got sick into the water that was around my ankles. Many others got sick. We started bailing out the vomit and water. The pump was not getting it all out. Some used cups and buckets. I used my hands. In the water I saw blood. Uncle told us to keep bailing and then he passed out. Kanh saw the blood in the water and crawled up the boat. Two men had been hit by gunfire, and they were dead. A woman was screaming and crying. Kanh touched the neck of one of the dead men and then lifted him up and pushed him overboard. The woman's little fists pounded on Kanh's back. He turned and touched the other man's neck, and then he got sick. Kanh crossed himself and said a prayer, and then he pushed the man's body into the raging sea.

Bobby holds the wig down on his head. The wind is trying to push it off. He takes a deep breath and says something that surprises me. He is almost tender. *Let's talk about this later, okay? Okay Lynh?* He reaches out and touches Lynh's wrist. She slaps at him and screams. I pull her away

from him. *Goddammit, Bobby says. Fucking boat people.* He turns to the strangers. *They're crazy. Fucking nuts.* And then he shakes his head and walks back toward the casino. The crowd looking on is concerned but there is amusement in their eyes. Some of them are enjoying this. This is the time for our language. I ask Lynh if she is okay. She says, *I want to have this baby.* I ask her why. She shakes her head and says, *I don't know.* Many of us came here like broken bamboo—without roots, splintered. She says she doesn't care who the father is. She just wants something that is her own.

Black walls of water, rising and falling. That was all you could see. All night long. When the morning came the sun was shining and the sea was flat. The engine room smelled of diesel fuel and vomit and urine. The engine growled and most of us were too sick to eat. Later that morning, dolphins started swimming beside the boat. In Vietnam it is said that dolphins bring good luck. I saw smiles for the first time. My older cousin Phuoc held his hand out and almost touched one. Uncle slept late, but when he awoke he shouted at Kanh for steering us to the south toward Con Son Island, the most eastern part of Vietnam, a place where many were imprisoned. Uncle took over and set us on course due east. Eventually the dolphins left us alone and we moved on for two days across calm seas.

*I will help you,* I say to Lynh. The strangers are moving away now. *Tomorrow I try for better jobs,* I say, *on the strip. I'll make a lot more money.* Air comes out of her lips. She shakes her head and opens the door to her car and gets in. *You know I love you,* I say. She is crying again, the dark lines on her face filling with salt tears. *You wouldn't say such things, if you really knew me.* She pulls the mango off her head and closes the door. *I know you Lynh. We come from the same place.* She starts the car and the window comes down. *You look at the future,* she says, *and then when it comes, it doesn't look like you thought it would.* I ask her where she is going. *For a drive,* she says, *away from here,* and I get the feeling I may never see her again. She might drive away forever. She has secrets. Secrets that push her away from love like the waves that night that pushed me from my home. *Lynh, I say. I will help you. I will raise the child up like it is my own. I will be a good father.* Her hand reaches out of the window and touches my knuckles.

**M**Y UNCLE WAS VERY SICK. And many others were too. For several days our motor pushed us east, and we were running out of food and water. I was dizzy from hunger, my head and stomach aching. Uncle asked me one morning if I had prayed. I told him I prayed many times. He said that nothing makes God so strong in your mind as when you're lost at sea. And then he told me that

my father had organized this escape just before he died. He told me that my father was the reason so many were free. And he never did it for money, like many men. My father was a hero, he said, a dreamer whose dreams were too big for Vietnam. Later that morning we spotted a boat in the distance. Kanh and Hoa pulled out their guns and told everyone to stay down. Thai pirates might come and kill us all, they said. Take everything we had. When the boat got closer we grew more frightened. My aunt put her arms around Phuoc and Mai while I kept my eye out the window of the cabin, watching as the boat got bigger and bigger. I had heard stories of pirates, pulling the gold teeth out of a man's head, and then throwing him overboard to be eaten by sharks. There were many stories. On the Thai Island of Koh Kra, all the men were killed and their daughters and wives raped.

Lynh drives away from me, into the desert. On Flamingo she turns right and I lose sight of her. The wind is hot, but so dry you don't sweat. It will blow forever.

We were lucky. They were not pirates, only fishermen. But they had guns and they were pointing them at us. They were scared too. But when they saw what they had run into, they put their guns away and tried to tell Kanh something. They were from Malaysia. They pointed and smiled. And then Kanh gave them our guns in exchange for a barrel of fuel. People were angry that he traded the guns. *We need guns!* they shouted. *We are nothing without protection! We need to defend ourselves!*

**I**N THE CASINO I become a rat racing for the cheese. The green room is deserted. Everyone is in their places. I head up the back steps to the ceiling, where Maggie and Ben strap me into my harness. Before the ceiling opens the lights are on. Bobby is ready to go. *She okay, Superman?* he says. Maggie rushes to make sure I am secure. The cords are attached. She gives two good tugs and then runs off to the control booth where Ben is sitting. The music starts thumping. "Louie, Louie, oh, hoh, we gotta' go!" *She's full of shit, Kung Fu,* Bobby says. *You know how many cocks she's sucked, Grasshopper?* The lights click off. It is now pitch black. In a few seconds the ceiling will slide open and we will be lowered down into smoke and clapping. But I will not attempt to explain why I do the things I do. Sometimes you do things because they need to be done. It is so dark, I can not see him, but I have seen him in my mind many times, standing there in the darkness. And I have also seen what I am about to do. My feet push me backward in my harness. Swinging as high as I can, I tuck my legs up and move towards him at a great speed. As I get close to him, his white suit flashes in my mind, and I know where his head is.

After several days at sea, an island grew big on the horizon. There was a man on a beach. He was waving at us to come in. As we moved closer, men in uniforms came out onto the sand. When we got to the shallow water, many jumped out of the boat, crying and shouting, crawling onto the shore. The soldiers shouted at us, telling us with their hands to sit down on the sand. One of them spoke French to Kanh. He translated, telling us that we were on a small Malaysian island, and that the soldiers were going to take us to a refugee camp. We got on a bus and went deep into the island behind barbed wire. There was a mound of fire. Kanh told us they were going to burn some of our clothes and belongings for fear of disease and bad smells. They were going to shave the lice off our heads. I still had *The King* folded against my stomach. A tall soldier pointed a gun at my uncle and made him take off his clothes and then he did the same to my aunt and Phuoc and Mai. When he shouted at me, I stepped forward.

The ceiling slides open. Bobby hangs in front of me like a limp, dead king. His eyes are closed and his wig lies back on his head. There is a deep cut across his nose. The music is thumping all around us. My lip is curled, like I trained it, all those hours in front of a mirror. My feet are spread out. My hand is raised in the air. Below us, people push their retirement into machines. We are lowered into the smoke that floats above them. People shout up at the fruit float as it moves around the room. Trish (watermelon) throws beaded necklaces down to the people. But now there is no mango. Her platform is empty.

My mother had told me to hold on to *The King*. She wanted me to remember my father and his dream of taking us to America. So I held him tight against my stomach. But the barrel of the gun was staring me in the face. My legs were shaking. The soldier shouted again and again, until I pulled off my shirt and threw it onto the fire. The soldier looked at the record cover in my hands and asked something. *The King*, I said. He didn't understand. He pointed at the fire. I looked down and saw what the water had done to his face. There was a wisp of black hair, the curled lip, an eyebrow. The rain and the ocean had taken most of him away. As I threw him onto the fire and watched what was left of his face bubble up and disappear, I wondered who he was.

**B**OBBY DROOPS ACROSS FROM ME, passed out, slowly waking. Nobody cares. They don't watch us. They are too busy losing their money, or watching the main show, or chasing necklaces. I wonder what my father would think of me now. I have my own apartment. I send part of my check every month to my mother who lives with my aunt in Thousand Oaks. There are things you should never forget. My father sacrificed everything so I could be here. I throw my

right hand up, pointing to the ceiling, mouthing the words to “Louie, Louie.” Bobby opens his eyes and looks around. His nose is bleeding. He reaches up and touches the blood, and then looks at his bloody fingers. I twist around and shake my hips. But this is it, tonight is the end of hanging for me. Tomorrow I will audition for booking agents and soon, next week maybe, I will be on a stage at the Mirage or in a lounge at the Luxor. I have worked very hard for this. I have learned every move, every word to every song. Someday people will come from all over to see me. They will buy tickets and get dressed up. They will go out to dinner and then wait in line, excited, talking about what songs I might sing. During “Love Me Tender” women will throw flowers on the stage. I will pick them up and smell them, lower my sunglasses and wink, and they will scream. There will be groupies who hang out after the show, asking for my autograph, wanting me to sign parts of their anatomy. *Tran Nguyen*, I’ll write on a leg extended to me. *King of America*, I’ll scribble on a forearm. If there is something I have learned, it is that in this country, no dream is too big.