

Once upon a Mulberry Field — Excerpt

Dick had provided some options for where to go downtown. “The main pastime, of course, is people-watching,” he had declared with the self-assurance of an old hand. “The Shelf is a great spot for that, but it’s all foreign correspondents, and you won’t find a table after two o’clock anyway. La Pagode nearby also has a nice *café terrasse*, but mainly for locals, so you’ll stick out like a sore thumb. Forget Givral as well. It’s the favorite haunt of spoiled brats from rich families in the city. That leaves Brodard as your best bet.”

Located at the corner of Tỵ-Do and Nguyễn-Thiếp Streets, one block up from the Hôtel Continental Palace, Brodard was a cozy, intimate restaurant-ice cream parlor popular with both Vietnamese and Western crowds.

“Delicious espressos and French pastries. You can also order light meals or sandwiches, with a milkshake or ice cream for dessert,” Dick had said, giving me the spiel. “Make sure you get a table on the second floor where you can look out the big windows at Rue Catinat below, in both directions. That’s one fine view you don’t want to miss.”

Armed with insider knowledge, I felt confident enough to suggest to Lee Anne we try the place. The taxi driver dropped us off in front of the restaurant, and it was our good fortune to walk in at the same time a table for two became available upstairs. We were seated next to the expansive glass wall that opened onto the street scene below. The place exuded casual elegance.

Its quiet air conditioner felt like heaven, which might account for the never-ebbing crowd inside. Excellent choice, Dick, I thought, as the waiter handed us the menus.

“Have you been here before?” I asked Lee Anne. She hadn’t said much since we came in.

She simply shook her head, her face hidden behind the menu.

“Is something the matter?” I reached and gently brushed aside the *carte*.

She avoided my eyes. Still, I could glimpse the shadow in hers.

“What’s wrong, Lee Anne?” I asked softly. “Please tell me.”

She composed herself before returning my gaze, then struggled to explain in a faint voice, “I have heard this is a very nice place. But it is so expensive.”

“You’re my guest,” I said, smiling. “This is on me.”

“That is not what I mean.” She shook her head again, her eyes opening wide, pleading for understanding. “A meal on the menu costs more than one week’s pay for my husband. How can I sit here and enjoy while he makes sacrifices for our family? It is not right. I—I don’t belong in this place.”

I reached across the table, covered her nervous hand with mine. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. We don’t have to stay here if you’re not comfortable. Would you rather leave?”

She hesitated. “Are you sure that is okay? You made effort so we can spend the afternoon downtown. I don’t want to . . .”

Then an idea appeared to strike her, and she gave me a timid smile. “Can I show you *my* Sài-Gòn? Very simple, nothing fancy. But I promise we will not get lost.”

I smiled back, surprised. “It’s more than I dare ask. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” I stood and helped her with her chair.

From Brodard we strolled over to Lê-Lợi Street, another wide avenue downtown, away from the ritzy hotels and posh restaurants on TỰ-ĐO. Beyond the fountained traffic circle in front of

the Rex Hotel, the bustling sidewalks became crowded with peddlers' stalls of all kinds, like a teeming flea market.

“Most important thing first,” Lee Anne said, taking her tour guide duty seriously. “I want you to try a drink we all love. *Nước mía*, or fresh sugarcane juice mixed with mandarin orange juice. Best thing for you in this heat.”

My heart quickened at her suggestion, but I managed a smile so as not to offend her. Repeatedly, we'd been cautioned against consuming native foods and beverages lest we succumbed to “Uncle Hồ's Revenge,” a debilitating form of gastroenteritis.

What the hell, I thought. Live big. Enjoy the adventure. Hopefully, Kaopectate and Lomotil would combat any nuisance later.

We rounded a street corner and arrived at a large juice stand with a long line of thirsty, noisy patrons in front. A weathered awning displayed “Nước Mía Viễn-Đông” in faded red letters. Lee Anne left me waiting on the sidewalk and got in line. She emerged minutes later with two big glasses filled with a golden, frothy liquid.

“Viễn-Đông is very well known,” she said, offering me an ice-cold glass. “It has been here for years. Its name means ‘Far East.’ I am happy I can show you this tradition of real Sài-Gòn.”

She smiled shyly and raised her glass. “To my wonderful friend, Roger, who has been very kind to me. I have not said it enough times, but thank you again with all my heart.”

I'd never seen her more carefree or radiant than that afternoon, standing on the sidewalk among the crowd, relishing her favorite fruit drink. In the sunlight, her long hair shimmered like black silk against the exquisite lavender of her *áo dài*. It was an unforgettable sight, a soothing and welcome vision in the jungle heat of the capital.

I drank my cold juice in one gulp—greedily, insatiably. It was delectable and went down smooth and easy, leaving a frothy mustache that I licked off in one big smack, much to Lee

Anne's delight.

"Where to next—boss?" I asked.

She laughed. "Sài-Gòn Zoo and Botanical Garden?"

Squinting into the bright sunlight, I declared, "I'll follow you to the ends of the earth."