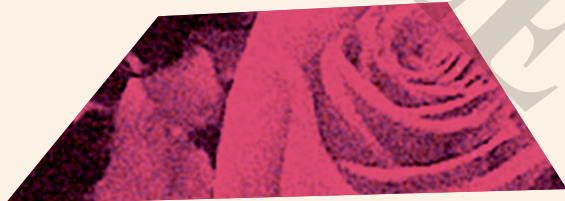


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Thuận

a novel

Translated by Nguyễn An Lý

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Thuận
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Sài Gòn

My mother died on a night of torrential rain. A night of unseasonal rain in 2004. In such a freak accident that our language probably had no word to name it. Mai, my brother, my only brother, had just constructed for himself yet another multistory house, this time with a home elevator, said to be the very first in the whole country. Such a momentous event called for celebration, so he bought my mother a plane ticket to Sài Gòn. Only after her inaugural push of the elevator button—he insisted—only after her round from the ground floor to the top and back, could his guests avail themselves of the device. Among said guests even were members of the press, print as well as TV. Such events always followed a predictable script, but I still spent the evening after my mother's funeral watching a sixty-minute DVD and flipping through a hundreds-strong album of photos of the inauguration, and then another sixty-minute DVD and another hundreds-strong album of that day's funeral, which I had attended from start to finish.

I'd realized at a very young age that my mother had always

been something of a stand-out, whether alone or in the middle of a crowd, at a party committee meeting or one for the local civil unit, as a recipient of a certificate of merit or bestower of a prize, and now, on the family altar, she was a stand-out among the dead, her dead, her parents and in-laws and elder siblings. And her husband. My brother had taken care to put their portraits side by side, nestling behind a vase of red roses, but they still looked like two strangers who'd never signed a marriage license, never lived together for two decades, never birthed two children (my brother Mai and me) who gave them two grandchildren (Mai's daughter Ngọc and my own son Mike). That evening, I tried and tried to evoke a family scene from our former life, but in vain; I could picture my mother's face clearly, but had to refer again and again to my father's portrait, wreathed by red roses and thick incense smoke. He had died ten years earlier.

We had dinner together, my brother and I and the two children. Mai said, "Those inspectors from the German elevator company looked into every corner they could but couldn't pinpoint the cause of the accident. The elevator worked perfectly well during the inauguration, perfectly well for the next three days, and perfectly well after the accident, so they simply couldn't comprehend how the car could have stayed stationary down below, oblivious to her call, when mother fell into the shaft, all the way from the top to the ground floor. And I can't comprehend what on earth mother could have been doing on the top floor at such an hour, in such rain, for such a long time."

He gazed at me intensely as he said this. I felt like what he meant to say was that it wasn't the rainy season, not even close, but what he said next was, "As I recall, I'd been lying on the sofa since early in the evening, I watched a

beauty contest and then fell asleep, Ngọc was at her mother's, the help had all gone home for the night, and even if the live-in housekeeper went upstairs to clean she would have retired to her room by nine, as she always does. And she said as much to the inspectors when they interrogated her, which was confirmed by the fact that the elevator was on the ground floor, where her room is. So, the sequence of events is as follows: mother took the elevator to the top floor before nine, then the housekeeper took it to return to the ground floor, then at around two a.m. mother called the elevator to go down, the doors opened, and she walked right into the shaft. The accident happened at two a.m. The coroner had confirmed that the time of death was two a.m. So what could mother have been doing from nine p.m. to two a.m. on the top floor?"

I said nothing. I too was baffled as to what my mother could possibly do on the top floor from nine p.m. to two a.m. What can you do on a top floor from nine p.m. to two a.m.? What is there to do on a top floor from nine p.m. to two a.m.?

"Madame fell from the top floor to the ground floor, the body was a wreck, only her face was intact."

That's all the housekeeper had to say to me about the accident. Presumably she didn't know much else because, as the coroner's concluded, the accident had occurred at two a.m. when everybody was fast asleep. But two a.m. or whichever a.m., there was no changing the fact: my mother was gone. And I couldn't help but visualize the way she'd fallen from the top floor to the ground floor in that dark tunnel-like space. And I suspected that during the fall, she had tried her best to keep her face upward, and wrap her arms around her head to protect her face, at the price of a more drawn-out

death, the terrible pain of which her brain would have tasted for several minutes before the end.

According to the housekeeper, moreover, the wreckedness of my mother's body had required the tailors and funeral house staff to work for three days nonstop, while the makeup artist only needed a little over an hour. When I finally got in, her face was already properly made up, powdered and mascaraed, the way she never was in daily life. Her body, clothed in a black brocade áo dài and surrounded with red roses, lay in a glass coffin, with AC and odor-controlled, housed in the funeral wing of a famous international hospital. Only when everything had been done to perfection did my brother let the guests in, from whose number I was not excepted. In truth, my protests were only perfunctory. I wasn't eager to behold a wreck of a body, my mother's or anyone else's. My imagination was at least more lenient. But maybe that's why, seeing her in her glass coffin, wholly intact, with the brocade dress and the red roses, the powder and the mascara, I was struck by the impression that she was only playing dead, and I didn't shed a tear. And tears would be incongruous in that oh so clean and elegant funeral house, amid the attentive and beaming staff, after crossing a door above which a sign, in both Vietnamese and English, advised that the ESTEEMED GUESTS PLEASE REFRAIN FROM MAKING NOISE.

My brother Mai was the sole orchestrator of mother's funeral. Most of the guests were his business partners, sleek in black, hauling giant funeral wreaths, their cars blocking the cemetery gate. The brass band in eight identical white suits, looking like eight brothers. A dozen young men with flashing cameras, perhaps hired for the occasion, perhaps press. Another dozen young men walking around talking into radios, perhaps my brother's men, perhaps security

guards from the local ward. An impressive plot of land, bounded by a thick wall on all four sides, a gravestone already erected, green granite, flanked by two hundred-year-old cypresses, and in the very middle of it all a censer as tall as a person. The glass coffin set in front of the censer, head to the east, feet to the west. The slanting rays of morning sun. The leisurely drift of clouds. The roses burning scarlet. *Amazing Grace*. Beyond the transparent glass, bathed in the pure, pure sunlight, my mother was an extraordinary vision haloed by the mystery of death.

My brother Mai and I stood facing the coffin, hands joined in prayer, faces grim and serious, heads slightly bowed. My brother in black áo dài and pants, I in black áo dài and pants, cut and color and material the same as my mother's, made by the same distinguished Sài Gòn tailor. I'd dressed early in the morning, my brother had taken one glance my way and reached for his phone. The makeup team with their tools materialized after only fifteen minutes, and my face was perfectly made-up, powdered, and mascaraed, the way I never am in daily life. My brother cast a second glance my way and again reached for his phone. His men came back after only fifteen minutes with a black hat, in a black box, perhaps ready-made, perhaps bespoke, but fitting my head to a tee. Little Ngọc and Mike were also at the funeral, standing behind me and my brother, wearing smaller versions of our same attire. The distinguished Sài Gòn tailor, busy with the adults' clothes, must have instructed his assistant tailors so that the outfits for the whole family, both the living and the dead, would be of the same cut, same color, same material. Everything was so prompt and exact, you would think a whole team of assistants was waiting on my brother, ready to leap into action every time he reached for his phone.

When a considerable crowd had assembled, a camera crew of three slowly made their entrance. The burliest, also the youngest, was shouldering a large camera, its lens already open, emitting a constant stream of whirring sounds. The trio seemed to have just returned from a round of the cemetery for establishing shots, and now were ready for the main sequence. The shortest, also the oldest, looked the quintessential secretary, notebook and phone ever at the ready, looking up from time to time to exchange a few words with the third, obviously the leader, a tall and slender man with a Rhett Butler moustache, a fedora, and a pipe. The leader pointed at the coffin, and the young cameraman made a beeline for it, thrust his camera at my mother's face for minutes on end, then zoomed out for a full-body take, and then recorded what else I didn't know, since my head had to be fixed in a slight bow. Someone, who turned out to be the short secretary, took my hand and gestured at me to bow my head still lower so that he could whisper in my ear that it was my turn now, which meant the camera would next focus on my face. I was still trying to register this information when the secretary explained that I would have to remain unblinking for minutes on end, so that I wouldn't look asleep in the pictures, and that I would have to be especially careful because the black hat cast a shadow that extended to my upper lip. I nodded silently. It was my first time facing a camera, and a professional camera at that. I imagined that the short secretary had to make a round, or rounds, to whisper into the ears of anybody the camera deemed worthy to focus on. Of course, some would understand right away while others would be clueless, and he would have to repeat the directions, discreetly, given the general solemnity. He might have to repeat something a

hundred times. A production secretary's job is no piece of cake, it turns out.

The sun was still gentle, the clouds still drifting, and the roses still exuding their head-spinning fragrance when *Amazing Grace* segued to *Requiem* and it was time to lower the coffin. After five minutes of music, my brother read a short eulogy along the lines of: our family is thankful for your presence and consideration, our beloved mother has led a simple life and would wish for a tranquil departure, grief is best kept in the heart, sorrows should not be overdone. His speech concluded in absolute silence on the part of the attendants (you could even hear the camera's whirring, perhaps partly due to his own heavy hints, but I enjoyed imagining that it was mainly because the guests were still in awe of the vision of my mother in her glass coffin. Without any instruction they had set their giant wreaths down in a corner and stood in neat rows, hands joined in prayer, faces grim and serious, heads slightly bowed, waiting for my brother's speech to conclude before they filed forward to admire mother one last time. Accompanied by the sound of the bugle, they each circled the gaping grave, paused a short while, threw a red rose and a handful of dirt into the grave, then turned to shake my brother's hand and mine, all in silence, heads still slightly bowed until they returned to their place. All gestures and expressions were done to perfection, suggesting plenty of opportunities to practice.

My brother shook everyone's hand and said thank you, and I also shook their hands and said thank you. My brother nodded, and I also nodded. My brother greeted someone as a Miss, and I did the same, or a Missus, and I followed suit, or a Mister, and I copied. In short, I parroted everything he did. His speech was the only time I was left on my own, looking

from my mother in the glass coffin to the red roses, from the freshly dug earth to the fire ant hill by a cypress tree, all the while with my head still slightly bowed, face still grim and serious, hands still joined in prayer. The twenty minutes swiftly passed, and my black hat was still fast on my head. So it was not that hard after all, all it took was some concentration. Even little Ngọc and Mike could do it. When I watched the sixty-minute video and looked at the hundreds of photos afterward, I realized that the children, standing behind my brother and me, had parroted everything we did. The adults' gestures and expressions suggested plenty of opportunities to practice. The children's too were done to perfection, suggesting the same. As if all these people had gathered here today not to facilitate my mother's funeral, headed by my brother and me, but to play out a movie script, with the cast list as follows:

My brother Mai as the Elder Son,

Me as the Youngest Daughter,

Little Ngọc and Mike as the Grandchildren by Son and Daughter,

The funeral guests as the Funeral Guests,

A dozen young men with cameras as Cameramen-cum-Members of the Press,

A dozen young men with radios as Security Guards of the Local Ward-cum-Mai's Men,

and, obviously,

Our mother as the Deceased.

If my mother's funeral was a veritable work of cinematic art (some later went as far as saying it was on par with the best Hollywood productions), the highest praise must go to my brother Mai as the producer-cum-director. But the second praise, and not any lesser, I venture to say belongs to my mother. My mother and no one else, my mother who had chosen terrible pain so that her face would remain intact. Can you imagine if her face had been as wrecked as her body? Even the most expensive powder and mascara would have been in vain, the most seasoned makeup artists would have thrown in their towels, a wooden coffin would have been the only option, and a black brocade áo dài and red roses wouldn't have been called for. And in that case, no amount of divine intervention could have turned the guests into such gracious and devoted actors, because their setting the giant wreaths in the appropriate place without any instruction was itself a thing to be marveled at. The quiet, elegant, organized funeral would have been replaced by a noisy, rowdy, disorganized affair. Perhaps my mother's very presence, so exquisite and refined in her glass coffin, as commanding as that of a silver-screen veteran, had inspired the others to be the best actors they could be. The result being that everybody's gestures and expressions were as perfect as if they'd really had plenty of opportunities to practice. When I watched the sixty-minute DVD and looked at the hundreds of photos, I was surprised to see what talented actors they all were. I was surprised, too, to see myself in the pictures. As if a woman my age, with an appearance similar to mine, had been invited to take my place. That woman was perfectly made up, powdered, and mascaraed, the way I had never been. That woman was meticulously dressed up in a black áo dài, black pants, black hat, things I had never worn. That woman was capable

of not blinking for minutes on end and displaying remarkable confidence before the camera. That woman was not me.

Suddenly I had a hunch that upon finding my mother's body, a wreck in a pool of blood, my brother had been no less impressed to find her face still intact. The dozen years building his career in Sài Gòn had given him ample opportunities to put various scripts into production (of which the elevator inauguration was on the modest side) and turned him into a shrewd director. He must have cast aside whatever emotion in his heart and immediately sketched in his head a script worthy of the opportunity presented to him. How promptly and exactly he must have acted, to commission a large glass coffin and have it shipped all the way from Singapore to Sài Gòn. And all in seven days, surely a record.