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Mama-San Boom-Boom

Mama-san. Lighted by the soft glow of her deco vanity lamp with its pink tasseled shade, a precious souvenir from her former days with the French. With a broken smile and sing-song coquetry she comments: "Color is kind to my wrinkle."

The fragrance of incense—jasmine, I recall?—and the faint sound of music. Like a memory-play by Nathalie Sarraute. Even today the plaintive wail or jangle of some pop Vietnamese song takes me back to the quiet moods of her office/parlor/sitting room in the whorehouse outside Phu Bai.

And I wonder what it all signifies, what she can reveal to me of my present because she persists in memory, clamoring to be heard and set alongside the icons of my world now thirty years later. She and her girls: they'd seem so out of place now in the pages of *USA TODAY* in our freshly-scrubbed Bush America.

I'm comfortable there, relaxed, leaning back in one of her oversize, well-worn rattan armchairs. My automatic cradled in my lap, the safety on, but rock-'n-roll just a thumb-flick away. The muffled sounds of laughter and conversation, padding feet, occasional thumps and bumps, and the familiar grinding-clanking sound of the ancient French plumbing when someone turns the water on—the gentle acoustical mix filters down the long hallway, down the years to me.

I could say that I half-doze in her rattan chair, resting, laid back while Mama-san does her nails, draws on her water pipe, or softly chatters in her *patois* about this-and-that as the night draws on, ignoring the fact that I understand little of what she's speaking. She's a small, frail woman with a strong Asiatic face betraying nothing of her real age. Fifty maybe? Sixty? Bugs slap incessantly against the screens and the old electric fans

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with their Chinese red and turquoise blades turn lazily overhead, futilely pushing the muggy air about. When she rises from her desk she moves slowly, keeping her distance from the mahogany armoire where she knows I know she keeps her Kalashnikov. She smiles reassuringly as she moves. Idly I wonder if she's ever had to use it?

Clarence belches from the settee in the corner of the room, unconscious, his boonie hat flopped over his face. We both look over at him. He mumbles something incoherent, stuporous, twitches once or twice, an arm flailing listless to the floor. He'd come in drunk a half an hour ago, and Mama-san had screamed at him, refusing to let him in. They were shouting at each other in their usual fashion until he grabbed her, then I had to deck him with the butt of my M-16 and that was that.

"I no want him here! If he wake up. He numbah-ten. You take him now!"

"He's all right, Mama-san," I say. "He go with us soon." I wasn't about to carry Clarence, dead-drunk, out to the three-quarter ton by myself, get his throat slit or fall out on his head or some damned stupid thing maybe. But he snores now and Mama-san lets sleeping dogs and G.I.s lie.

Several times a week when our unit pulled back to base camp from the A Shau Valley I'd ride the truck into the ville with the guys visiting the whorehouse. They were very young, most of them, and Top practically ordered me to go along because I was older than the others. And also because he knew I didn't do the boom-boom.

"No way, Sarge," I told him when he first proposed the assignment. "You won't find me dipping into some black hole of Calcutta and carry the tropical disease back with me forever." He grinned and squinted at me and said nothing, probably thinking I was making some kind of joke. Doubtless he didn't recognize Kipling. Probably also wondering what outlaw VD he'd be bringing home in his own pants. Anyhow, he'd ordered me to keep an eye on the kids at

Mama-san's. Charlie had shot-up cathouses before, he said. Casualties of any kind looked bad in Saigon. Someone had to stay on guard.

Not much ever happened while I was there. Once or twice some of the locals dropped by while we were visiting, but I didn't have to mess with them. Mama-san told me to stay put, while she went outside and argued with them and chased them off. Not good to have VC and GIs in the same whorehouse at the same time. A couple other times someone had popped-off a few rounds at the windows in the middle of the night—drunks probably. So I had to rip off a couple clips into the nearby woodline and things quieted down.

I'd spend my time in Mama-san's parlor with her, sometimes joined by a few of the girls when they weren't busy with boom-boom.

Whores, I learned there, weren't like the hookers I'd seen back home. Especially these young Vietnamese girls who were certainly new to the trade and only did it because we Americans were there, because they'd been uprooted by the conflict, hooked now on easy money. If it hadn't been for the war—ours or the Frenchman's before us—they'd likely still be back in their villes: daughters doing laundry, wives taking care of kids or helping their husbands in the fields and paddies.

Mama-san had become a mother to them, taking care of them and feeding them well. She brought in the corpsmen every month to give blood tests and dispense drugs, and she gave the girls money when they needed it. Occasionally I'd hear a girl earnestly pleading with her, then Mama-san would deliver what seemed like a lecture to the girl—kind of like any parent. "Family values" I guess. And then she'd come into her office and reach down into a brass 75mm shell casing beside her desk where she stashed some of her greenbacks or M.P.C. (military money) and hand it to the girl. Family needs, clothes, something.

The girls told me she protected them, kept after them, made them feel like they belonged somewhere—here—which they liked. Because their village or their family was destroyed, or there were no young men around any more to marry them. Because they had no skills really, and because life as a bargirl in some city was more dangerous and left them to crime or drugs or to fall back on themselves all of the time, which wasn't so good.

"No boom-boom for you tonight?" one of the girls, Mai Li, asks me. She's only half-dressed, and very young, only thirteen or fourteen maybe. She's from the Meo, I can see: strong features, deep-set eyes framed by glistening black hair. Skinny, of course, and no chest, but gamine and really a knockout.

"No...thanks."

"You pliest maybe?" she jokes, grabbing my hand. "No—come on! Arways you come and sit here with Mama-san. Why you no like us?"

"I like you, Mai," I try to explain. "But not that way. You work hard, and I just give you more work, yes?"

"It no work!" she protests gaily, not understanding me. But she leaves me alone then, a smile on her pretty face, thinking perhaps she should at least *try* while Mama-san looks on approvingly. "You strange. But you come some time alone, okay? Mai here for you."

Before I went back the States I took her and one of her friends to the local orphanage our unit had "adopted." I taught English there sometimes when we weren't in the field, my M-16 slung over my shoulder as I scribbled words and sentence patterns on their pitted blackboard. A lot of my money went into the pot along with other people's to pay for the kids' schooling.

"No—I wanna give her a tip, Georgie!" It's Lonnie, stoned, protesting to someone in the hallway outside.

"So give her a tip, okay," George Pellegrino replies in his Brooklyn dialect. "But not that much, Lonnie. Shit, man! You spoil these people! Save some for next time, y'know?" Mama-san looks up at me from her account book where she's been working. I shrug helplessly and say:

"They're just children, Mama-san. They don't really understand."

"When they ever unnerstan'?" she asks. "They come here little time, fight war, get lots boom-boom, then go home. What they learn? Nothing," she mutters to herself, writing her entries.

What *did* they learn, I wonder even now? For a lot of them it was their first time away from home, a *long* way from home. And what freedom they had! When I first arrived in-country I remember being struck by their youth. Some of them were corn-fed, just-outa-high-school kids from Indiana or the Dakotas, and I was surprised to see them drinking and doping and toting loaded assault rifles around. Many of them, of course, weren't whitebread farm kids or from the burbs. They were inner city kids and their urban toughness didn't surprise me. A lot of them had been used to drugs and weapons since they were children. In base camps they'd gather in the field behind the tents and hooches to blow dope in the lazy afternoon, and they'd always be armed. Fifty or a hundred of them maybe, with automatic rifles. Even the M.P.s wouldn't mess with them.

But guys like Lonnie Dexter from Twin Falls, Idaho: what tough times had Lonnie ever known? Buying Friday-night Jack Daniels with someone's

fake I.D. maybe? His stomach churning nervously in some liquor store where they wouldn't challenge him? Or driving the long highway south towards Wendover, just to cross the state line into Nevada and hit the slots? And now he was ready to throw M.P.C. at every little chippie he got some with? The same way maybe he blew his dough on the girls back home?

Mama-san shows me photos of her own kids, a girl and a boy, whom she'd already sent overseas with profits from her cathouses (this one and two others she'd run during the French occupation). The boy was in Adelaide, the girl in Redondo Beach with relatives. I reassure her that, yes, she'll see them again. "When war is over, when all V.C. dead," she declares in her direct, childlike way. Gospel truth. But I don't tell her that it probably won't happen, and that she'd better get herself out before the end comes. It's the late 'sixties and I can see the writing on the wall: we're pulling back, soon we'd pull out altogether and leave them behind to face the music.

But she was a cagey old bird, and maybe she did get out. I picture her bowing and scraping to the M.P.s for a few more years, keeping her trade "necessary" and legit to the U.S. forces. ("Nevah no trouble here, Captain!") And then pulling a passport, a wad of foreign currency and an airline ticket from the polished brass shell casing at the final moment, hopping the last civilian flight out of Than Son Nhut to Bangkok or Singapore or Manila.

I never knew her true thoughts about all of that: about all she'd seen and done under the French and Americans. About leaving behind the walled graves of her ancestors and this spacious, beautiful, old plantation home where she lived with her girls. About ditching the livelihood that had made refuge possible for her kids (a young boy of twenty standing stiff in his cheap suit as he stares fearfully into the camera, an almond-eyed girl beaming a TV commercial smile and dressed like a mall rat).

Yet I thought, too, that she was a lot like my mom who moved from Chicago in the 'fifties when my dad died (and she had two little kids in tow), and came to California to start a business and support herself for the first time in her life. They weren't so different after all. Mama-san had lost her husband to the war, and she was forced to survive on her own, in a business world that was alien to her. At a certain level of survival everything becomes just a personal struggle and you deal day-to-day with that. And so I think Mama-san probably just walked away from her business one fine day, leaving it for someone to run with the local Vietnamese, while she went somewhere else in the Pacific to start afresh.

I can't deny that she made me think about all this back then, even though we rarely talked about it—the future, I mean. Each day was tough enough by itself for both of us. But of course one makes plans, I knew, and Mama-san was too shrewd a businesswoman to believe there'd be much profit in servicing politically-correct Victor Charlie after the war. I'm sure she got out.

And I'm thinking now that she didn't have such a bad life after all. It was certainly a lot more colorful, and she'd met a lot more interesting people than most folks I know. I look around me now at the post-yuppie young achievers. I wonder

sometimes how successful *they'd* be if they had to make their big bucks in a war-torn land, under foreign occupation, the way Mama-san had for thirty years. That took someone *really* clever, because the price of failure was your life maybe.

And it also took someone who was good for the long haul, who could hang tough. She had to extend political feelers among the locals and the magistrates and the reigning military, creating in a lawless land a kind of protected "free trade zone" for her oldest of all professional services. And no Starbucks to "start the day off" or on her lunch hour either. Nope, today you wouldn't find Mrs. Warren's Profession in the pages of *INC*.

"I like Tokyo. Maybe I go there," Mama-san says to me once. She'd taken a short vacation there not long before. "Lots money in Japan," she grins at me. "Lots people from all over. Not soldiers all' time, *rich men*. They unnerstan' my business, I think, ask no questions." Then her eyes go big with excitement, and for a moment I see in her the dream, the little girl filled with hope, the butterfly, as she continues: "An' there is already big business in Japan with girls and boys. I think I fit right in."

Life was simple and direct with her, prostitution just another trade where no moral strings need be attached (though she clearly realized that some other people didn't think so). Everyone is willing, consenting. And what of that, I ask

myself? Would it have been any different if she'd been running a garment sweatshop in lower Manhattan, a gang of fresh-off-the-boat kitchen workers in Chicago or Oakland? For that was certainly what she did best: handle raw human labor, hold it together like a critical mass in a containment vessel, make it work for her. And everyone had benefited: Mama-san, the girls, the Aussies and Americans who spent dollars at her place—even Westmoreland and his crowd who often ordered girls sent up to the camp for their private parties.

Mama-san's feelings towards U.S. servicemen were simple and direct, too. She tended to like officers because they weren't as crude as the enlisted men, and because they didn't fight so much. "That one—Semyon—come with all his medals, fry here in hericopter." Mama-san was obviously impressed. But I knew Major Semyon. He was a nerd in the Adjutant General section, a bean-counter. Every weekend he'd fly his laundry from the base camp into Phu Bai HQ, passing over a couple miles of "unsecured territory" (Injun country) as he did so. This qualified him for the Distinguished Flying Cross that he awarded himself.

"Every week different girl," Mama-san rattles on. "He call me up and say 'brack hair' or 'virgin' or 'fat' or 'plegnant' or something.... Always different, that May-juh!" According to her, Semyon would fly the girl up to Khe Lan Lake in the high mountains, park the chopper for a half-hour while he boinked her, then return the girl on her way back. In Phu Bai the girl could do some shopping. "That nice thing to do," Mama-san sighs wistfully, always grateful for little things. I often thought of Semyon while we were out on patrol wading through godawful muck, or stacking-up and counting the bodies after an ambush somewhere. Flying-in his laundry, for God's sake. And Mama-san happily filling his groin-order like Oriental take-out. Bizarre.

But Mama-san wasn't always so naive in her approach to her situation. There was always the Kalashnikov in the highboy, of course. She tells me she got it from a G.I. on the black market.

"He no have money and I think I use it maybe. He say it souvenir, so I buy for cash." Several of the girls tell me that Mama-san sometimes fires it at night when she thinks she hears people sneaking around outside, but they don't believe she ever hits anyone. Damned thing wasn't like an M-16, it probably knocked her on her wrinkled ass. I managed to get her a Browning automatic before I left. Lots lighter for her to handle, but still made a big noise.

The three-quarter ton bounces madly along the two-track on the way back to camp. I pray to God there are no mines recently planted by busy zips. The guys are really drunk, a few of them already unconscious. Clarence has woken up and is singing/braying like a mule with three or four others in the back. I drive as fast as I can, thinking the sooner we're through the razor-wire the sooner I can shuck-off the responsibility for these warrior-kids.

Mama-san, of course, has no razor wire around her place, no armed guards, no "secured position." She and the girls are alone out there in their big old house beside the river at night. I sometimes wondered if she really did sneak V.C. and N.V.A. in the back while we were going out the front? Well, why not? They're soldiers, too, far from home most of them. And God knows, Mama-san could always use the dough. Amusing thought: by day we'd chew each other up in firefights, and by night share the same boom-boom and hot tubs at Mama-san's.

Sounds like a Hollywood comedy. And what about Mama-san's loyalty? Maybe it's only a matter of use: Mama-san's usefulness to both sides, and everyone's usefulness to Mama-san and her girls. Oh, of course, I like to think we Americans treated her better than the V.C., and she bent over big time for us in return. But how would I ever know what she did for the enemy? Maybe the same thing? Could it be the other way around, I wonder? Suppose it were Victor Charlie who treated her better? After all, she *was* Vietnamese. And we Americans were the white devils—like the French—the interlopers, the ex-

plotters flying our dirty laundry around their country, killing people and poking their women. I don't like to think of those things nowadays.

I concentrate instead on Mama-san. Like Mother Courage, the war for her was just another form of business, run under different social conditions, for a living that had to be made. A bit more dangerous than other occupations perhaps, but nothing more complicated than that. I remind myself of her girls, too, like Mai Li and her fellow orphans challenged to grow up tough in the face of hard times, violence, personal threats, an uncertain future. Hell—maybe some of them are over here right now, considering what's happened to Indochina since the war.

But none of them will ever talk earnestly to Oprah or Ricky Lee, I'm sure, although they certainly should. They have stories to tell that we could stand to hear.

No question, I'd like to see that kind of ad: "Ricky Does Boom-Boom!" And then Hollywood could get into the act maybe, and rewrite our history a little. Just a little—to make it fit and not rock our boat too much.