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HÔTEL DES ARTS
 SAIGON

The Blue Lady

by Susan Norman

A story written for
 HÔTEL DES ARTS
 SAIGON

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The Blue Lady

with a sketch of a small rose. Melody flipped it over, looking for a date, anything to mark its place among the years Bà Rose had lived with her family.

Bà Rose came from Vietnam in the 1960's. Against the sameness of their boxy suburb, she stood apart. Like a drift seed that rides thousands of miles on ocean currents, Bà Rose found herself a patch of earth, aimed for the light and unfurled an exotic blossom of her own creation.

Every Saturday on International Boulevard, amongst the Asian grocery stores and temples, Bà Rose taught Vietnamese school to two-dozen kids of all ages. It wasn't school like Melody's other school: math, science, homework. It was a school about life. Vietnamese life.

Bà Rose travelled with four neat boxes out of which a school, and an entire country, appeared. Posters were rolled up neatly in two cardboard tubes: images of cloud-ringed mountains and beaches dotted with green islands, a monkey with red, furred legs, a cityscape called "The Paris of Vietnam." Three fat Buddhas – replete with an offering of coins, nuts, fruits, and cans of Squirt soda – emerged from the boxes each week. There were pronunciation charts and lists of pronouns and verbs, *anh ta* and *yêu*. And then, Melody's favorite. The blue lady. She came in her own tube. She had a name, *The Divinité*.

During Art, the other children did woodblock prints or worked on their water puppets, but from the day Bà Rose tacked her up in the art nook, Melody only wanted to sketch the blue lady. Bà Rose said the artist, Vu Cao Dam, had painted *The Divinité* in the style of the beaux-arts.

The woman in the painting wore a blue robe that bloused to frame a substantial figure and then dissolved into ephemeral impressions that hinted at forests and flowers, oceans and streams, all manner of nature suspended her just above the earth. The blue lady was, to Melody's delight, a Buddha. Unlike other Buddhas, whose gregariousness always made Melody feel on the outside of the joke, the *Divinité's* face was perfect serenity.

Minh was the same age as Melody. He had soft spikes of black hair, corduroy jeans and turtleneck sweaters, and intelligent, drowsy eyes. He was a constant, cross-legged presence in Melody's memory, sketching *The Divinité*, eating *banh xeo* and learning the language with an enthusiasm that matched her own, "Thank *thoát!* Bình *yên!*"

And then he was gone. She'd speculated in her journal as to the nature of his disappearance with guesses such as *witness protection program* and *polio*. The last time she'd seen Minh, his grandfather had come to collect him. It was clear from the expressions on their respective faces that Minh's grandfather and Bà Rose were already acquainted, and yet they'd introduced themselves as strangers. In her journal, next to this observation, Melody had ventured another guess – *kidnapping*.

Her grandmother died a few months later. The last quarter of Melody's journal contained sketches, the subject repeated with only slight variation – a rose.

There are exactly 8,870 miles between New York and Ho Chi Minh City. She'd arranged to take a shuttle from the airport, so Melody was surprised to see a driver – a woman in a smart, black suit with a silk driving cap and gloves – holding a sign with her name.

Melody jostled a dust-coated box into the backseat of her SUV. The box had remained untouched for the three years she'd been at Harvard. Why had she insisted on bringing it to law school? She'd just shuffle it along to the next apartment, the next top shelf of the next undersized closet. This time, however, things will be different. No longer a student, there would be time to unpack boxes, maybe even unpack herself.

Valedictorian of her all-girl prep school. Check. Cum Laude at Rice University. Check. Harvard Law Review. Check, check, check. All the boxes checked. Except this one. She gave the box a final shove to wedge it firmly between a laundry basket and her yoga mat, a blow that proved too much for the box's oily seams. The cardboard split unceremoniously, collapsing as it did into a lopsided grin and out slid the corner of an envelope, the edge of a photo frame, and the slender binding of a silk-covered book.

That book. Melody ran a finger down its edge and remembered: *the journal sits on her old desk, in her childhood room. A smell emanates from the kitchen. Fragrant and complex. Com tam.*

The Vietnamese dish spread its velvety richness across the palate of Melody's imagination. Melody turned over the photo. Her grandmother Bà Rose and a young Melody smiled out from the image.

Your face is so happy. In Vietnam, they would say you will bring your husband great luck.

What would Bà Rose say if she could see her now? Melody kneed a trash bag full of towels into place and slammed the car door.

There are exactly 221 miles between Boston and New York. She'd travelled only twenty of them before grey thunderheads bloomed on the horizon. Melody found herself beneath a gas station awning as rain streamed down on all sides. She looked over at the sealed envelope and the old journal on her passenger seat and sighed.

As soon as she saw the distinct script, she knew the note was from Bà Rose. *I know you are upset about Minh. I did not tell you the truth.* Her grandmother had signed the note

As they drove through Ho Chi Minh City, the driver pointed out the architectural details of the Opera House, the Notre Dame Cathedral, and the Saigon Central Post Office. The woman declared, "It is the Paris of Vietnam!" She gave Melody a sly glance in the rearview mirror as they pulled up in front of The Hotel des Arts Saigon.

"This isn't my hotel," Melody told her, glancing inside to the richness of the French-Indochinese décor.

"Oh yes," the woman said, and Melody noticed for the first time a familiar serenity in the woman's expression. "This is definitely your hotel."

As it turned out, Melody did have a reservation. As she made her way through the hotel's extensive collection of ancient and modern art, she felt the Vietnam inside her awakening once again.

And then there she was! The blue lady. Melody reached a hand out toward her.

Someone behind her cleared his throat.

"I wasn't going to touch it," she said, turning, somewhat embarrassed. "I know this painting."

"I would say this painting knows you, too." The man was handsome. He had an American accent and the most familiar, sleepy eyes. "Melody," Minh said, "I was just sitting here, thinking of you."

Melody and Minh made their way to the Social Club rooftop bar to catch up. It seemed that he had also been redirected to The Hotel des Arts by a mysterious driver. Minh then shared with Melody the nature of his disappearance years ago. It wasn't anything as scandalous as kidnapping or espionage. Minh had, in fact, simply moved.

As for his grandfather and Bà Rose? The two had been lovers in Vietnam before being separated by circumstances beyond their control. Minh said his grandfather regretted not saying more to her that day, and afterwards, often recalled Bà Rose to Minh with great affection.

They arranged to meet the next morning at *The Divinité* before heading out together to explore the city. They found each other easily, but in the spot where the painting had been the night before there now hung a beautiful landscape. The pair asked the concierge when *The Divinité* had been moved out of the lobby. He said it had been a couple of years since that painting had been at the hotel. *The Divinité* was now part of a private collection.

The two turned to each other with a knowing look and started out the door of the hotel into a city bubbling with possibility.

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