Paradise of the Blind

Paradise of the Blind is set in the Soviet Union and Vietnam in the 1980s. Its narrator heroine, Hang, a Vietnamese woman in her early 20s, is forced by her economic need (and the economic plight of Vietnam) to be an "export worker" in a Russian factory. She supports her mother, Que, whose leg has been amputated after having been struck by an automobile. A gifted student, Hang has cut short her university education to undertake this responsibility.

A telegram—"Very ill. Come immediately."—comes from her despised Uncle Chinh, her mother's younger brother, who has used his connections in a Communist Party cadre to secure a position in Moscow. Hang does not know it, but the illness is a fraud. Though rebellious about her duty, ill and short of funds, she takes the train to Moscow to fulfill her family obligation, a tradition of honoring a male family member maintained initially by her mother. En route she recounts family history and relives her childhood experiences.

Orphaned in their late teens, Que and Chinh followed different paths. Que stayed in their northern village and married "handsome Ton"; Chinh joined the Liberation Army and became a Communist Party functionary. Upon his return to the village, in charge of the campaign for land reform and needing to protect his own image and status, he insists on the break-up of his sister's marriage. Ton's family has been designated as belonging to the "exploiting class"—they owned a few acres of rice paddy, and during the harvest season they hired migrant workers. Working in the fields herself, Aunt Tam, Ton's older sister, is considered a "pillar of the countryside," yet the family is to be "denounced and punished." Ton, unable to face the humiliation, feels forced to flee, assisted by his sister. Hang reveals:

My mother never understood the tragedy that had befallen her. Like so many others at this time, she began to live in constant terror. Uncle Chinh struck hard and fast. My grandmother and my aunt were forced to prostrate themselves, heads bowed, arms crossed behind their backs, in the communal village courtyard. Facing them, behind a blaze of torches, sat the people of our village. They obeyed orders: "Listen to our denunciation of their crimes. Then, shout a slogan: 'Down with the landowning classes!' Raise your fist like this and scream: 'Down, down!!'"

Land reform devastates fields and rice paddies and also foments misery and anger. Some years later, when the Rectification of Errors program is initiated to return rice paddies to their rightful owners, Chinh goes into hiding, so the villagers turn on Que as the target of their vengeance. Rescued by Aunt Tam, Que escapes to Hanoi, where she earns her livelihood as a food vendor. During this interval, Ton, who has made another life for himself, locates Que; the love rekindled, Hang is conceived, but Ton dies before being able to settle the affairs of his second life in order to return to Que.

Hang's memories weave two tapestries: Que and Hang's relationship with Aunt Tam, who, with constant hard work, persistence, and cleverness, reestablished herself and became wealthy; and Que and Hang's relationship with Uncle Chinh and his wife, who have achieved some party hierarchy. These memories encompass Hang's childhood through her 20th year.

Hang meets Aunt Tam during her childhood. The event is fraught with emotion. Aunt Tam, recognizing her brother in Hang's face—"She's a drop of his blood. My niece"—is ecstatic. In keeping with family tradition and the legacy of male authority, she undertakes to provide for Hang with feasts of food, gifts of jewelry, money, clothes, and university living expenses. The bond between the two grows beyond duty to include respect and affection, although Hang is troubled by the excess of gifts.

Que maintains the same obeisance to tradition in her response to her brother. Despite Chinh's criticism of her working as a vendor in the manner of a capitalist entrepreneur and refusing to take a job in a factory—that is, refusing to join the working class at a lower salary—Que fawns on him and his family. She expends her energy and her funds to provide food for them to supplement his meager party salary. She deprives herself and Hang, becoming in her fervor significantly self-destructive, emotionally and physically. Hang, recognizing her uncle as a fraud—corrupt, conniving, self-aggrandizing, arrogant, and cruel—distances herself.

The sisterly relationship between Que and Tam is undermined and ultimately destroyed by Chinh. When Tam sees how Hang's well-being is affected, holding Chinh in contempt as the de facto murderer of Ton and destroyer of their lives, she accuses Que of
misplaced loyalty. She determines to support only Hang. This creates a schism between mother and daughter that Hang is unable to bridge. Indeed, before her mother's accident, Hang had left home, expelled by her mother's anger, to live in the university dormitory. Later, when Hang goes to her uncle to seek aid for her disabled mother, she receives excuses and avoidance. This leads to her employment in the Soviet Union and her abhorrence of Uncle Chinh.

Superimposed on this tapestry of family relationships are the manifestations of the Communist Party and the corrupt manipulation of the government officials who betray the revolution. Uncle Chinh is the party's champion and its embodiment, although not the only one. He berates an erring subordinate:

> The party has led the people to victory, a huge victory. It has made us humanity's conscience, the flame of the liberation of oppressed people everywhere. Of the three great international revolutionary trends, we are the touchstone, the standard. You must commit yourself to this truth.

Ironically, on another occasion he lectures, "Comrades, you must behave in an exemplary manner while you are in this brother country. Each one of you must show you are capable of perfect organization and discipline." Yet he engages in illicit trading of goods, using his position to access Vietnamese goods to exchange for Russian consumer products to be resold in Vietnam for his profit. He leeches on Hang to serve this purpose, the real reason for the "Very ill" telegram.

Other examples of corruption: Aunt Chinh, a senior party member, is the dean of an entire philosophy department; she supervises truly educated persons, though she has completed but two short remedial courses designed "for workers and peasants." The vice president of the village, misusing his power, evicts a widow from her land, upon which she is dependent for her livelihood, and he brags about his accomplishment because he wants it for his daughter, who is to be married. There are other examples of repression and misery, fear and humiliation. Hang comes to grips with the overpowering effect of these evils when she watches a small group of young Japanese traveling in the Soviet Union.

> What did these people have that we didn't have? Hundreds of faces rose in my memory: those of my friends, people of my generation, faces gnawed with worry, shattered faces, twisted, ravaged, sooty, frantic faces. Our faces were always taut, lean with fear. The fear that we might not be able to pay for food, or not send it in time, the fear of learning that an aging father or mother had passed away while waiting for our miserable subsidies.

Hang leaves Moscow to return to her factory dormitory, even more disillusioned with Uncle Chinh, even more conscious of his corruption. His life is a lie, she has discovered, for in Moscow he works as a cook/servant for a group of young men.

Learning of Aunt Tam's imminent death, Hang hurries back to Hanoi. There, she is partly reconciled with her mother; Uncle Chinh's legacy stands between them. Upon Aunt Tam's death, she participates in the funeral and orchestrates the several necessary ceremonies. As Aunt Tam's beneficiary, she becomes wealthy. However, as she contemplates the village around her, she comes to a resolution:

> And I saw the pond again, the stagnant water, stinking, bloodied by the sunset. I saw my village, this cesspool of ambition, all the laughter and tears that had drowned in these bamboo groves.

Comets extinguish themselves, but memory refuses to die, and "hell's money" has no value in the market of life. Forgive me, my aunt: I'm going to sell this house and leave all this behind. We can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere. I can't squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes.

Further Information


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