

Lotus Roots

When I was seven, my mother—my Canadian mother, not the one who left me swaddled in a hospital blanket in Hoa Binh—brought home a lotus plant from the Asian grocery store. She set it on the windowsill, its leaves drooping, a pale bud curled tight as a fist. I eyed it with suspicion. I'd only seen lotuses in storybooks and in the blurry photos she kept of Vietnam, the ones she showed me when I asked too many questions.

"It's your flower," she said, grinning like she'd solved something. "Did you know it blooms from mud?"

I nodded, but I didn't really know. I didn't ask what kind of mud made a girl like me.

The apartment was always too clean, too quiet. Mom hummed when she cooked, her voice drifting past the kitchen door like steam. Sometimes, I'd catch her watching me, her smile both proud and worried. At night, I'd lie in bed and listen for a language I almost remembered—soft consonants, words like gentle water. Instead, I heard the fridge humming, the occasional siren outside, her footsteps shuffling down the hall.

At school, they called me "Lotus" once. It was supposed to be a compliment, but it felt sticky, like gum under a desk. The teacher explained to the class, "The lotus is very important in Vietnamese culture." She looked at me, expecting me to nod, but I just shrank into my chair, wishing I was invisible. I wanted to tell her: I don't know how to say "lotus" in Vietnamese. I don't know how to say anything important.

At home, the lotus plant drooped. Mom tried to coax it to life—moving it from sun to shade, changing the water, whispering to it as if it were a child. I watched the bud refuse to open, stubborn as my tongue when Mom tried to teach me Vietnamese from a dusty old phrasebook.

Some nights, I'd sit by the window and stare at the city lights, wondering if someone in Vietnam was thinking about me. Maybe a woman with my eyes, my hair, who'd left me behind so I could have more than mud. I tried to picture her face, but it always shifted, soft and unfinished, like wet paint. Other nights, I'd lie awake, clutching the old blanket from the hospital box, tracing its worn edges with my fingers as though it held answers to questions I didn't yet know how to ask.

When I was thirteen, I stood in the middle of a bustling market in Hanoi, surrounded by colors and sounds I'd only dreamed of. The air was thick with the smell of frying dough, grilled fish, and a sweetness I couldn't place. I was here on a two-week exchange trip, though it felt more like walking through a doorway to another life.

Every chance I got was spent days asking about my birth mother, following scraps of stories and faces that vanished before I could reach them. Every lead was a dead end—too many people had moved, forgotten, or simply didn't know. Each unanswered question felt like a door closing, tighter and tighter around my chest.

I was frustrated to say the least. I hated that she felt like the missing piece I was supposed to need, the reason for the emptiness I couldn't explain. Why did my heart ache for a past that felt like a foreign country? Why couldn't I just be enough here, now?

At that point I wanted nothing more than to go back home to Canada—to the safe, familiar silence of my life there. But instead, I found myself drawn to a small lotus tea stall, a quiet reminder of home.

I hesitated before pointing to the tea. “Hoa sen trà?” I asked quietly, my Vietnamese rough and unsure.

The vendor smiled warmly, catching me off guard in my storm of thoughts and confusion. “Your Vietnamese is very good,” she said, her accent sharp but kind. I thanked her awkwardly, clutching the small bag of tea to my chest. My Vietnamese wasn’t good, but I’d practiced enough to get by, enough to not feel entirely like an intruder. I wondered if she saw the hesitation in my face, the way I lingered too long, searching for something I couldn’t name.

That evening, our tour group visited Hoan Kiem Lake. The water was still, reflecting the ancient Ngoc Son Temple and the soft glow of lanterns. I stayed behind as the others moved on, the pull of the lake too strong to resist. A woman selling flowers approached, balancing a basket of lotuses on her hip.

For a moment her eyes glanced on my sneakers—bright white and out of place in the dusty market. “Cháu đã nhớ ngôi bao nhiêu lâu?” she asked. *How long have you been away?*

Her question hit me like a sudden wind. “Mười ba năm,” I replied. Thirteen years.

She nodded knowingly, as if she’d heard my story before. She pressed a lotus into my hand, its petals soft and cool. “Welcome home,” she said.

I stood frozen, the anger and ache softened, holding the delicate bloom as though it were a lifeline. The scent, faint but unmistakable, carried a memory I couldn't place—a mix of earth, rain, and something that felt like longing. The lotus was not just a flower from mud; it was a symbol of resilience, of growing despite the hard places life plants us in.

Tears welled up unexpectedly, and I wiped them away quickly, embarrassed at my own vulnerability. But the woman only smiled, as if she understood.

In another life, I stayed. I grew up in Hoa Binh, playing in rice fields, my feet muddy, my laughter mingling with the hum of cicadas. I spoke Vietnamese without hesitation, each word a thread connecting me to the land and its people. My mother—my Vietnamese mother—braided my hair and sang to me at night. She taught me how to cook, how to balance on a bicycle, how to plant lotuses in the shallow pond behind our house.

But there were days of hunger, too, and nights when the roof leaked, and mornings when she wiped her tears before sending me to school with nothing but rice and salt. I'd sit by the window, watching planes trace lines across the sky, wondering if a better life waited somewhere far away.

The lotus plant Mom buried all those years ago bloomed every spring. Its leaves were broad and green, its petals pale pink, almost translucent.

On my last night before starting high school, I sat by the pond in our backyard, staring at its reflection in the water. Mom joined me, carrying two mugs of lotus tea.

"Do you remember when we learned *hoa sen* together?" she asked, handing me a mug.

I smiled. "I still don't think I say it right."

She laughed softly, her gaze on the flower. “It’s funny, isn’t it? How things grow. From mud, from places you wouldn’t expect.”

“Do you ever wonder what would’ve happened if you hadn’t adopted me?” The question slipped out before I could stop it.

Her grip on the mug tightened, but her voice was steady. “All the time. But I don’t think I could’ve stayed whole without you.” She looked at me then, her eyes full of something I couldn’t name but felt deeply. “You were always meant to bloom here.”

I leaned my head against her shoulder, the scent of tea and earth wrapping around us. In that moment, the ache of what could have been softened, replaced by the quiet certainty of what was. I felt a deep relief settling in—the comfort of belonging, of being loved and seen exactly where I am. Here, with Mom, was enough.

Years from now, I’ll tell this story to someone who needs it. I’ll say: You don’t have to bloom in perfect water. Sometimes, beauty comes from the mud. Sometimes, family is the hand that coaxes you toward the sun, no matter where your roots begin.

And I’ll remember: *hoa sen*. Lotus. Me.