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**Translations from the Vietnamese:
"The Blood Lily", by Vuong Tam**

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The Blood Lily

by *Vuong Tam*

*Translated from the Vietnamese by Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock**

Vuong Tam was born in 1946, in Hanoi. He graduated from Hanoi University of Polytechnic and started to write fiction as a child. He is a member of the Vietnam Writers' Association and currently is a news reporter for the New Hanoi. He is a prolific writer and has published both poetry and fiction for which he has won several awards. This short story is anthologized in *Chien tranh cung mang khuon mat dan ba (Women's Faces in War)*, published by Literature Press, Hanoi, in 2014. "The Blood Lily" is both romantic and traumatic: the female protagonist romanticizes her memories of the Vietnam War, although it causes her traumatic scars. The flowers she plants represent her bitter-sweet memories of the past.

Over the course of several years I would always run into her, the elderly woman, during the blood lily season. Usually, I was so mesmerized by the beauty of the flowers that everything else disappeared. I wanted to ask her name or why she didn't grow other kinds of flowers, but as I stood in front of the rows of potted blood lilies, I felt too overwhelmed to speak. Each pot contained only one flower that was just beginning to blossom, the vibrant red petals shyly starting to open. Each year, near the end of May, when the blood lilies began to blossom, I thought of this woman and returned to her stall to buy one of her flowers. I was not unique; every customer seemed to return to her again and again, each of us thinking his or her own flower was the most beautiful and thanking her excitedly, as if she'd done us a tremendous favor.

She was a mysterious woman. I wondered why she always kept her face covered with a handkerchief, only revealing her sorrowful eyes. She had a deep, warm voice when she spoke, which made me assume that she was a woman with a strong spirit and full of love. Another strange thing was that, every year, she added exactly one extra potted flower to sell. The most recent time I visited her stall, it was late in the season and she only had one blood lily left—the last pot, marked with a number 31, which I bought. This time, I couldn't resist asking her for an explanation.

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“Mam, excuse me but could you tell me why there are 31 pots this year?” I asked. Then added hurriedly, “Of course I feel very lucky to be the customer that purchased the 31st pot.”

She seemed hesitant at first, as if she preferred not to speak. Then finally she said, “The pot you just bought marks the 31st year I have planted and sold blood lilies.”

“But why don’t you grow more to sell each season?” I asked.

“I don’t need a lot of money,” she replied. “Anyways, goodbye for now. It’s late in the afternoon and I’ll be going home soon.”

She reached behind her head to tighten the handkerchief around her face then began sweeping up the scattered leaves and soil on the ground.

“Mam, I wonder if you would mind teaching me how to plant a blood lily. Maybe I can walk you home...?”

She was quiet again, then looked straight into my eyes and said, “Young lady, we can be friends—that would be alright. When you’re free, come to Tan Khai flower village and ask for Mrs. Hue. That’s my name. But for now take the 31st pot and get going. It’s late already. I need to do some shopping—tomorrow is the full moon. Good bye.”

I was surprised to see her walk so quickly down the busy street and vanish into the bustling crowd.

That Sunday, I decided to pay her a visit. When I got to the village and started asking around about Mrs. Hue, I was surprised by how nice everyone was and how eager to give me directions to her house. One little girl in particular wanted to help me find the way to the house. She walked eagerly alongside me.

“Who does Mrs. Hue live with?” I asked the girl.

“Nobody.”

“What about her husband and children?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said. “Ever since I can remember, she’s always lived alone.”

“Do you often go over to her house?” I asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because of her black cheeks. Everybody says you shouldn’t get too close to her, especially girls, because we don’t want to get ugly black cheeks from her.”

I knew right then why Mrs. Hue always covered her face with the handkerchief when she was in the city selling flowers. I'd been one of her most loyal customers for over ten years—this was the first I had learned about the secret behind her handkerchief.

As we got closer to the house, the little girl turned to me and asked hesitantly,

“Aren't you afraid of catching black cheeks from her?”

“No,” I replied, firmly.

I pulled my hand away from the little girl's and knocked on the door.

“Hello?” I called out. “Is Mrs. Hue home?”

After a moment, the door opened. An elderly woman stood in front of me. Her cheeks were covered in dark spots. I tried to act normal and looked directly into her eyes.

“I am Quy, your customer,” I said. “How are you?”

“I'm doing fine,” she said, recognizing me. “Please come in. I'm working in the garden behind the house. You can come take a look.”

I followed her through the house and then out into the garden. She moved surprisingly fast. When I reached the garden in the back I heard a melodious bird singing off somewhere in a corner. Her rows of flowers looked as if they were breathing. She must have recently watered them—threads of vapor rose from the pots.

She went over to a small mango-pine tree.

“I didn't pay attention to it yesterday, and now it looks so sad,” she said, giving the tree some water. “Since early this morning, I've been petting each of its leaves and whispering to it sweetly. It seems a bit happier now.”

Timidly, I came closer to the mango-pine tree, whose blooming burgundy flowers drooped over the stone planter. I was wondering to myself why this woman loved flowers so much, when suddenly she took my hand and pulled me to a corner of the garden. She pointed to a row of small porcelain pots.

“Those are your friends,” she said.

In front of us were just several pots filled with soil. She must have noticed my confusion.

“Those are the thirty-two pots that have the blood lily bulbs for next year.”

I looked up at her.

“But why do you count the years with the blood lilies?” I asked.

She stood there silently for a while, then replied, “Those are my loves. It has been thirty-two years of remembering. I don’t know why I am telling you all this...”

She sat down on a round rock at the edge of the garden and sighed. I sat on the ground, ready to hear her story. Slowly, she began to recount her memories from over thirty years earlier.

Those had been very special days spent in a forest along the Truong Son trail. She had been a young female messenger whom everybody loved. The male soldiers treated Hue like their younger sister. The jungle military hut they shared was always beautifully decorated with fragrant flowers; everyday, the soldiers went into the jungle to pluck fresh flowers for Hue that they would then put into a vase. Everybody wanted to help Hue feel more comfortable—they knew she had grown up in the flower village. Meanwhile, she tried to help them with whatever they needed, from fixing their clothes to taking medicine when they were sick. All the messengers in the unit lived in harmony, like a tight-knit family, and the men insisted that nobody hurt Hue’s feelings, or even tease her.

One day, Thuan, a new recruit who was meek and the shyest person in the unit, brought back a palm leaf packed with soil. Seeing the pieces of string tied securely around it, the other male soldiers started to ask questions.

“Hey kid, what you got there?”

“A flower,” Thuan said.

“So where’s the flower?” one soldier asked.

“It’s just soil you’re holding,” another said, dismissively.

Thuan ignored them. He walked over to Hue and gently placed the palm leaf in her hands.

“This is for you,” he said.

The other soldiers started laughing.

But Hue said, “Is there a bulb planted in the soil that will eventually sprout?”

“Yes,” Thuan replied. Then he added, “It’s a blood lily. A village girl showed me this flower. And this is a mother bulb.”

“Oh, I know this flower!” Hue exclaimed. She was obviously very excited. “I will take care of it and wait for it to bloom.”

Then Hue began to talk passionately about the beauty of the blood lily. None of the other soldiers were convinced because nobody had actually seen the flower besides Thuan and Hue.

As a shy person, whose face was often turning red with embarrassment, Thuan had been lucky to find such a special gift for Hue. After that, Thuan and Hue would take care of the bulb together, stirring and watering the soil, and eventually molding a clay pot to replace the palm leaf.

Time passed and everybody seemed to forget about the budding blood lily. The soldier's life they were all living consisted of hardships and important battles. One day, the enemy attacked and the infantry soldiers fought bravely to protect the entire region's communication system. All messengers were ordered to withdraw into an underground tunnel for an entire week. Once they were in the tunnel, Hue suddenly remembered the potted blood lily back in the hut.

"Just forget it," the other messengers advised her. "You can't think about flowers in a situation like this."

"Just leave it there. When we win, we'll go back and enjoy the flower together."

"The blood lily won't bloom for another year. That's plenty of time. Just wait."

But when Hue wondered out loud what would happen if a bullet or a fragment of a bomb hit the clay pot, everybody was silent.

"I will go up there and find the pot," Thuan said suddenly. Then, before anyone could stop him, he was running out of the tunnel.

"Thuan, do not climb up here," Hue shouted up after him. "It's too dangerous!"

Gunfire, canons, and exploding bombs together made a deafening, brain-aching noise. Everybody except Thuan had followed the commander's orders and stayed in the tunnel. Time seemed to pass especially slowly as they waited for Thuan to return. Hue started to get anxious. The other soldiers stared at her coldly—they knew that Hue had won Thuan's heart, and if there was something special between them, then Hue would no longer be theirs. Hue was fully aware of this, but what could she do? Everything was predetermined by the laws of fate.

Hue felt restless. Looking up suddenly she noticed a shadow hovering around the opening of the tunnel. The sound of gunfire was getting closer.

"Lie down!" everyone shouted.

But Hue was already running up out of the tunnel. As she reached the opening, a bomb exploded—she saw Thuan be thrown back from the force of the explosion. Then suddenly there were flames all around her and she felt an intense burning sensation on her face.

When she came to, Hue saw Thuan sitting next to her holding a broken clay flower pot. She blinked and smiled, then cried out, "The blood lily is already budding!"

Mrs. Hue suddenly stopped telling her story and sat in silence. Her tired eyes seemed full of melancholy. Without saying anything, I reached out and held her hands. She must have been thinking about that broken flower pot from the war while looking at the pot that contained the mother bulb.

“So,” I asked, “did the blood lily finally bloom in the tunnel?”

“Yes, it did. But Mr. Thuan was not able to see it, because a few days later he died heroically on the battlefield.”

Mrs. Hue had started to cry. She wiped at her tears with a loose flap of her shirt.

“Since then,” she continued, “no matter what it takes, I have been raising blood lilies.” She pointed at the pots in front of her in the garden. “The bulbs in those thirty-two pots all come from the original mother bulb that came from Truong Son.”

I was stunned. I hadn’t realized that the blood lilies I’d bought from her carried the breath of soldiers as well as blood spilled in combat.

Suddenly, I was at a loss for what else to ask Mrs. Hue.

“It’s been thirty-two years since I parted from that person...” she said finally, her voice very melancholy.

I hugged her there in the garden. Finally I understood why she added one extra potted blood lily each year. I told myself that I would buy the thirty-second pot from her next year.