

## Invasion

*When the door opened*, Hieu Nguyen remained seated in the plastic classroom chair beside the head secretary's desk, talking pro basketball with Monty, the albino custodian. He'd been summoned to the main office a few minutes before by Peter Winchill's hoarse voice over the school's intercom. They happened often, the calls that had once seemed so ominous, what with Winchill's penchant for detailed conversations about anything that made him feel more authoritative as principal of a school widely regarded as one of the city's toughest. Hieu, though, like most of the other veteran teachers, had grown used to them, normally managing to swallow the hollow meetings as part of his duty. But this time there was no forced grin on Winchill's face when he emerged from his office, no *There he is* with the extended chubby-fingered hand.

Monty cut off his rant on the various mental illnesses of most big-time NBA stars he could name and reached to the front counter for his work order clipboard, eyeing Douglas Falsworth and Maggie Bailey from the district office who were seated before Winchill's desk. Lips puckered, brow raised, Monty glanced back down at Hieu and cocked his chin toward the seldom-seen visitors, and as he turned to leave said, "Cheers, bro."

In the office, Winchill clicked the door shut behind Hieu and offered up a chair without making eye contact. Falsworth and Bailey both gave tight-smiled hellos and immediately looked back at Winchill. A heaviness spread over Hieu's chest, and his mouth felt dry. District functionaries like the two sitting on either side of him came across town to Wilson Green High School for two reasons only: irresistible PR opportunities (or "ghetto hype," according to Terrell Martin, the band teacher) and sticky personnel issues.

In their rare, brief encounters at the central office and from all the spirit- and butt-numbing motivational speeches at the start of each year,

Falsworth had always struck Hieu as a tentative man, prone to spells of rubbing about his face and neck. As for Bailey, she seemed to be a soul lost even further in bureaucracy's labyrinth, her caffeine-activated eyes housed in a face ravaged by a hundred hungry details eating away at her.

Now fully attuned to the tension, Hieu steadied his breathing and searched the faces, the flexing jaws and still-averted eyes.

"Good news?" he said, watching Winchill roll a pencil between a thumb and index finger. Another pause hit before Falsworth turned and lifted a notepad and a pencil from the breast pocket of his coat.

"Please excuse my bluntness, Mr. Nguyen, but I need to be absolutely clear on this." Falsworth let out a small sigh, one that Hieu had trouble interpreting. "You've been charged with sexually touching two students. Sasha Anderson and Malisha Jones. The police have already been contacted, we just wanted to tell you first, get your side of the story."

Falsworth spoke with considerable poise, even a hint of bravado, Hieu initially noticed; while the man surely valued restraint and objectivity, the rush of scandal had begun to flood through him.

Hieu nodded occasionally and pretended to listen to the remainder of the speech, a thumb pressed to one side of his angular jaw, eyes steady in spite of the panic. He had heard Falsworth say *You've been charged with sexually touching two students*, then mostly blanked out. When the office went silent again, Falsworth done with his spiel on district policy, Hieu lowered his hands to the tops of his thighs, took a deep breath, and let out the only word he could think of: "Shit."

It was then that Winchill came around from behind the desk and knelt before him on the office's cement-grey carpet.

"You've worked in this building thirteen years," the principal said, "and your file shows nothing but good from you. Now you just need to tell us what happened fifth period, okay? Nice and easy."

While Hieu had always strained for, and usually achieved, patience with people who used a condescending tone or spoke too slowly or loudly, sometimes shouting, in order to make themselves clear to a person with a Vietnamese accent, something about Winchill's beef-witted ways had always managed to prick at his heart. Yet another unconscious insult on top of the horror he had just been handed made the world seem like it was leaving him. The stinging in his stomach intensified.

“Incredible,” he said, noticing his pulse in his throat. “I will not tell anything without a lawyer.” He stared into Winchill’s widened eyes. “Those girls are awful.”

Winchill nodded twice, the tip of his tongue massaging his upper lip, and after a time said, “Well, that’s fine.” He looked over at Falsworth, at Maggie Bailey, back at Hieu. “But I need to tell you you’re being placed on administrative leave. You won’t be allowed back into the building till the case is closed, and that is, of course, assuming everything’s cleared up.” He stood and bent over to brush off his tight-packed khakis, paying too much attention to the knee that hadn’t touched the carpet. “A Detective Sergeant Wallace will be here in ten minutes or so to take you to the North Precinct over on Hargrove for some questioning. You can grab anything you need from your room, contact whomever you’d like.”

As if aware of trying too hard to seem concerned, Winchill righted himself and paused again.

“Suppose this is good-bye for awhile.” He extended a hand, then returned to his chair when Hieu didn’t shake it. “I’m sorry about the shock. I do look forward to hearing your side.”

At this, Maggie Bailey scooted forward, her first noticeable movement since the beginning of the meeting. She turned toward Hieu and smiled, her teeth bleached to an alarming gleam. In a moment, the smile fell away and she said, “As I’m sure you can imagine, your testimony will be crucial, Mr. Nguyen. The detective needs to know *exactly* what happened. He’ll be interviewing a number of your students, too.”

Whether it was third-rate plastic surgery, eyeliner and rouge applied while battling a hangover, or simply his own torched mind, it appeared to Hieu that Maggie Bailey’s face barely hung on her skull. He was relieved when she gathered up her black leatherbound notebook and matching purse, consulted her gold watch, rose stiffly and approached Winchill’s desk for a low-volume exchange. Why he was so affected by her presence at such a poignant moment of his life was odd, but then again, the surreality of the previous few minutes could surely explain the strangest of feelings.

In his classroom, in the quiet of after school, he didn’t know where to begin. He walked twice around the room, weaving numbly around the lab

tables, and decided to gather up the framed photographs that had long been on his desk. His wife, Anh, standing in a mist before Haystack Rock on the Oregon coast, a haze of blowing sand nearly covering her from the knees down: would she believe his version of events? His seventy-one-year-old mother, Hoa, stern-faced beside a small sculpture of a beaver in the downtown transit mall: would she understand why her son suddenly wasn't allowed to work? His three children probably wouldn't be any easier to reach. Then of course there was his best friend in the room right across the hallway.

Hieu wrapped the photos in some old copies of lab instructions on proper dissection techniques and stopped to take in the room's stillness. He liked to think that he could sense the lingering energy from the daily battles: curious minds grappling malnourished bodies and spirits, instincts to understand fighting back hordes of fears. His classroom, he had always believed, was a place where powerful things happened.

From his office doorway, he scanned the wall posters, aware of his gut churning over the imminent arrival of Sergeant Wallace, and his eyes finally settled on the eight-by-ten black and white photograph next to the multicolor periodic table above the lab counter across the room. He walked over and leaned in closer. It was a scene of a partially bombed paddy, a print he had found down in San Francisco at an outdoor market. In the foreground, a young woman wearing a conical hat had interrupted her harvest, stretching her neck to look up at the photographer, an expression of surprise blended with annoyance. In the background: elephant grass, a water buffalo's glistening flank, a perimeter of stumps and shredded limbs, and in the far distance, the edge of a hamlet. The woman hadn't been asked permission for the shot, Hieu had always suspected; the ancient rhythm of wet hands pulling rice had been broken by yet another kind of invasion. For a good minute more he studied the woman's face, gradually admitting that he understood her expression more clearly than he had ever wanted to.