

# Interloper from Hanoi

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Early Sunday morning, like most mornings, Duc Nguyen rode his scooter through the dusty, smoggy, honking, screeching streets of Ho Chi Minh City, Duoi Xoe, his prized white-rumped shama, perched in a covered cage on the back. He zoomed past the Saigon Opera House and Reunification Palace, turned left at Cach Mang Thang Street, and motored up to Tao Dan Park. There, he joined with other men to read the newspaper and drink coffee, while their songbirds socialized and practiced for the annual singing competition held during the Tet holiday. Duoi Xoe had won the contest for the past three years. Duc had yet to hear any bird that could possibly defeat his champion this year.

Duc locked his scooter, pulled off his helmet, and ran his fingers through his matted gray hair. A small, thin man, he wore tan slacks due for a wash and a sky blue, short-sleeved shirt his wife had bought him years ago. He was sixty-one, and the years crinkled in his face. Outside the park gates, an old woman was selling bird treats. Duc bought a 5,000-Dong bag of live grasshoppers and carried Duoi inside.

A cacophony greeted them: whistles, warbles, chirps, trills, twitters, and tweets. For Duc, it was the sound of

paradise. Amid flowering orange flame trees, dozens of bird owners sat on red plastic chairs below a metal scaffold hung with cages. The birds inside flapped a rainbow, from rust and brown to iridescent lime and scarlet. From blue-winged pittas to red-winged laughingthrushes. From tiny yellow white-eyes to orange plumed hoopoes. From tanagers to flycatchers to caciques. In this avian school yard, they learned from each other and grew accustomed to performing in public, while people strolled by toward the park's gardens, playground, and tennis courts.

Duc joined his friends Hong and Anh.

"Xin chào," Duc said.

"Xin chào!" Hong said. A retired office worker like Duc, he was tall for a Vietnamese man, animated as the birds he'd been raising for thirty years. The stripes in his T-shirt were the same maroon as his oriole, *Nâu vú*, which sang above them.

"A little cooler today," Anh said, looking up from his newspaper. He was a badminton coach and wore a white polo shirt and sneakers, red shorts, and a neoprene brace on his left knee. He'd just turned fifty but looked forty. Anh's two birds, crested mynas, were young and shy. One myna's cage was uncovered and set on the ground, the bird still in the early stages of training. The second myna's cage hung from the grid but on a lower rung than *Nâu vú*: the higher the hook, the more comfortable the bird. Anh would not expose his pet to more stimulation than he could tolerate; an unhappy bird would not sing.

Duc set Duoi's cage on a chair beneath the grid and listened to *Nâu vú*'s song. The myna was a respectable singer but no threat; his voice lacked the clarity and volume of Duoi's.

"*Nâu vú* is in good voice," Duc said.

"Yes." Hong sipped his coffee. "I added peanuts to his feed as you suggested. It gives him more energy."

Duc nodded. The men in the park all knew each other and shared tips about food, care, and training. But Duc kept

some information to himself. He uncovered Duoi's cage and hung it on a hook next to Nâu vú. A custom design made from ebony wood with ivory inlays, the cage cost 45,000 Dong; no ordinary bamboo for Duoi. His cage befitted a champion.

The bird lifted his handsome black head, flicked his long, black tail, spread his glossy black wings, wiggled his bright white rump, ruffled his orange breast feathers, opened his sharp, black beak and began to sing. Oh the sound! The purring, rolling low notes. The crisp, sharp high notes. The clean, staccato tweets. The chee chee chees and chirp chirp chirps. Duoi Xoe was a virtuoso, an opera star, a shama of the highest physical caliber with the best voice of any bird Duc had trained. Other birders had offered him as much as 25,000 Dong for Duoi. Duc would never sell him. Duoi was family.

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