

Tire tracks and puddles and nobody to greet her. A day earlier she'd wept after hiking up Mount Phousi, arms laden with coconut cakes and a string of marigolds. The sight of the women selling tiny birds, captive in still tinier cages, had her curling into herself and crying on a high ledge. She could neither bring herself to buy one, nor forgive herself for not having set a single bird free. And all the while, the temple looming out of the white wall of stone. Not so much inviting, but obliging her to continue up the remaining steps, even as she no longer recalled her intention. Inside, the temple was more incense than air. She draped the garland near the foot of the deity cloaked in a snake and offered the coconut cakes to a group of children instead. They gobbled them up, taking her hand and leading her to a side altar containing a kau cim cup with its one hundred narrow sticks, each inscribed with a number, the corresponding fortunes printed on small slips of paper and stacked on a table nearby. The kids giggled and smiled and jostled, motioning to her to shake the cup until a single stick bounced out. When one fell to the floor, they all rushed to retrieve her fortune. Number twenty-seven. But none could read or translate it, so they became bashful and scattered. She folded the strange script into her pocket and sat down on the small prayer rug, staying until the darkness whirled around her and hers were the only sandals left outside the entrance. She walked down the long staircase whose banister unfurled in the form of a snake, running her hand along its painted scales. When she got back to town, she stopped in a café, asking the waiter, who recognized her, to read her the fortune.

"Whatever you have lost will be returned to you," he said.  
But he had no idea what she'd lost.