

★ **If I Had Two Lives**

**Abbigail N. Rosewood**

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Abbigail N. Rosewood's compelling *If I Had Two Lives* begins in 1990s Vietnam as a young girl is brought to a military camp. The girl's mother—an ambitious reformer who is thwarted by the corrupt Vietnamese power structure—has been exiled to the camp for her own protection. Bordered by an electric fence, this isolated, decaying French colonial compound becomes the backdrop for the girl's childhood.

The girl, who remains nameless throughout the novel, finds companionship in a soldier assigned to watch over her and her mother. She also befriends another child whose father works in the compound kitchen. The soldier is truly caring, but the child is psychologically troubled, having experienced sexual abuse and abandonment. The twin-like girls form an intense bond, playing in empty prison cells, sharing secrets, and “giving funerals to dead bugs.”

At age thirteen, the narrator leaves the camp for the United States, where she lives with a series of relatives. Her mother promises to join her daughter soon, but new causes and more political entanglements keep her in Vietnam. The girl begins college, but her formative experiences—which also include sexual abuse—cause her to remain detached and wary, even of herself.

Ultimately, the constrictions of the past give way to the present. When the narrator becomes involved with Lilah, a woman who resembles her friend from the camp, a curious *ménage à trois* of eroticism and fertility develops. When she sees a man on the subway who reminds her of the camp soldier, the compulsion to follow him home leads to a healing, meaningful relationship.

Haunting and harrowing, *If I Had Two Lives* is told with beautiful perception and detail, offering a unique view of late twentieth-century Vietnam and memories that continue to resonate, even in a new world.

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