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### Year of the Snake

Annie Hoang Nguyen

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YEAR OF THE SNAKE

By

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B.A. Political Communication, George Washington University, Washington, DC 2000

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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Year of the Snake

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Year of the Snake is a travel narrative and family memoir that details a year of the author's life as a Fulbright scholar in Vietnam.

Twenty-six years after her parents have fled Vietnam as war refugees, the author returns to her parents' homeland. The author spends 2001 exploring and examining this forsaken homeland. She has three distinct experiences, as a student living with her uncle as his adopted daughter, as a backpacker exhilarated by the culture and land, and as a privileged ex-patriate working among locals. Through these varied experiences, she begins to see how Vietnam is trying to put resolution on the past while opening borders to a future of tourism and capitalistic enterprises. She also begins to understand the trials her family has endured and the connection between the relatives in the U.S. and those left behind. She learns for herself what it means to have a Vietnamese heart.

This work is dedicated to my family on both sides of the Pacific.

A special acknowledgement to the Institute for International Education and the U.S. Fulbright Program, whose mission to “increase mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States and other countries” made this project possible.

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE WEIGHT OF MEMORIES

The December afternoon felt dry as I found my way past the main littered streets of Ho Chi Minh City to return to a narrow, forgotten alley behind a high school. I watched the city pass by the windows of the chauffeured station wagon, and noticed how different the city seemed when it was viewed behind glass. It almost seemed livable. The unusual dryness that day made the city's average 100-degree temperatures gentler, but it also made the dust more brittle. I could feel it cracking in my lungs.

The dust sickened me. Outside, I choked on dust-filled fumes and continually fought off bouts of coughing. The city breathed in dust, and now, so did I. Every time I'd ridden my moped around town in the last year, I donned sunglasses, a doctor's facemask, a baseball cap, and rayon gloves that pulled up to my shoulders. Dust still seeped through the pores of the mask and around the edges of the sunglasses, my baseball cap was often swept off and onto a driver behind me, and the gloves slid down and gathered around my wrists or otherwise, stuck damp with sweat to the tops of my arms. The gloves in their varying stages of being pulled up or slouched down earned them the nickname of arm socks among the expatriates. All in all, it was pretty ineffective armor. I was ready to leave the dust and return to a home where I wouldn't have to shake dust and debris out of my hair and wouldn't have to wash dust from my exposed forearms, cheeks, and collars. I was ready to feel clean again.

The alley we turned into felt smaller than it did a year ago when I first traveled down its pockmarked asphalt. Then, I had been squeezed into the middle seat of a van flanked on both sides by aunts and uncles I'd just met, and now I was in the backseat of a station wagon with the chauffeur in front paid to ignore me. Then, the alley with its noises and scents was as foreign to me as everything else in Vietnam, and now its width and length, its idiosyncrasies and temperament was a presence as comforting as a friend's. Without looking, I could discern where the graffiti started on the white-washed fence of the school, I knew the sound of the plastic triangle-shaped streamers before I saw them flapping in front of the café. The alley was now a comfort of senses.

I came back with gifts, or at least things I could pass off as gifts – items I couldn't fit into the luggage going home with me in a couple of days to the States. Clothes that were thinned from too many hand-washes and wringings, a water purification pitcher, a

bike lock, a flashlight. My uncle and aunt could possibly use the flashlight during the power outages, and maybe the water pitcher would keep them from having to boil their drinking water every day. I doubted that. More likely, they would store the gifts on the kitchen shelves that never seemed short of space even though they buckled with clutter. The gifts would be novelties, their proof of my existence. When I had lived with them, I sensed my aunt and uncle gazing at my finely-stitched luggage and synthetic sneakers the way people must have looked at World Fair exhibits. There was a little bit of wonder but mostly, there was recognition that they would never use or need what caught their eye. My aunt and uncle's resistance to change in such a burgeoning city was admirable, almost to the point of folly.

Vietnam at the end of 2001 teemed with foreign investment, and Ho Chi Minh City was the heart of the gold rush. Construction sites for new hotels and office buildings designed to Western standards dotted the city faster than the older buildings, in the Communist style of stacked even shoeboxes, could be torn down. English language schools piled themselves among the construction sites, and neon billboards advertising Western products and brands filled the city sky. Fashion was dictated by American and British popstars, and previously uncommon amenities like flushing toilets and remote-controlled air conditioners were coveted. The fascination with Western lifestyles was disarming, especially for a young American who had grown up with easy access to these things. It made me feel that I had taken them for granted.

The upcoming generation of ambitious, young Vietnamese were not just adapting to the changes but chasing down the promises and tackling them. A new middle class crowded coffee shops and karaoke bars. My year of research, travel, and work gave me the sense that everything was conspiring towards this emerging pseudo-capitalism. But Vietnam was Communist, and no one could define exactly what this new era would look and feel like. The country felt schizophrenic, with one side hustling for money and the other, working for country and community, one side touting modernity and another side clamoring for traditions and lessons learned. I struggled to make sense of it.

My driver parked the station wagon in front of the low-set turquoise shack at the end of the alley. I told him I wouldn't be long and opened the door to greet my uncle and aunt outside their push-cart on the sidewalk. "*Chao Bac, chao Bac Gai.*"

*“Con be!”* my aunt said. *“Con be ve lai!”*

I smiled, embarrassed by her term of endearment.

My uncle ducked out of the house and welcomed me with a squeeze of both shoulders. He repeated my aunt’s words: The little one is back home.

My aunt grabbed a bottled Coke from an ice chest by the push-cart and flicked off the cap. She stuck a straw in it, and I traded her for my bag of gifts.

I sipped my Coke as I watched my aunt and uncle pull out item after item, their eyes smiling as they recognized one thing then the next.

“The water pitcher,” my uncle nodded. He pulled the lid off and inspected the replaceable plastic tube of carbon that took out chlorine and lead. It was the more advanced model that was supposed to take out the microbes that caused giardia, though I never had the faith to test it. I only drank bottled water.

“You have to replace the filter every three months,” I explained and gave them a package of additional filters.

“And where are we supposed to buy extra filters when these run out?” my uncle asked.

I hadn’t thought of that. If they really started to use the pitchers, was it fair for me to make them go back to boiling water when the filters stopped working? I rubbed my forehead.

“I’ll mail you extras from the States when you need them,” I said.

I held up a blouse to my aunt.

My uncle looked over her shoulder as she held the shirt up to the sunlight. “But these clothes are too big for us,” my uncle said.

“Give them to someone who can wear them, then.” I tried to smile. I noticed the hole in the shirt he was wearing, and recognizing it as one of his good shirts, I pushed more clothes into my uncle and aunt’s open arms. They folded the articles softly in their hands, considering them like curios. I watched as my uncle held up a pair of my pants to his hipbones. We were probably the same size, now that I had lost weight. I noted the skin sagging around his joints like folds of leather, and self-consciously grabbed at the waistband of the jeans hanging low on my own sunken hips. I wanted to check the mirror



to see if my skin, too, had begun to leather and fold, and was unsettled by the two fingers-width of space between my waist and jeans. I let the waistband fall to my hips.

The rest of the gifts began to feel useless. All the clothes were too big, and the flashlight would need batteries they couldn't afford. The bike lock implied that someone might actually take one of their creaky, one-speed bikes when all around them, most households had mopeds. I felt better thinking at least the moped I had bought and used the past year would wind up in their hands.

"Follow me," my aunt said when the bag was empty. Inside the house, I watched as she opened the doors of a rusting, turquoise wardrobe. Whenever I pulled on those doors, I had to brace against the frame of the wardrobe to keep it from toppling onto me. My aunt didn't seem to have this problem. The doors gave with ease, and I watched her tanned sinewy hands disappear beneath her four sets of good rayon clothes, reappearing with a wooden chest the length of a business size envelope.

My aunt had pulled out the chest once or twice before, and I knew it protected such important items as letters from family members, government documents, and a silver and gold watch she had been given in 1974. She set aside these very few protected possessions and drew a 24-karat gold chain that she held like thread in her fingers. Her mother had given it to her, she explained, and then cupped her hand over mine.

I uncurled fingers to find a charm with two scalloped rows portraying ocean waves along the bottom, a sailboat rocking in the center, and a thin rim of gold – the sun setting on the horizon – making up the background. I ran a thumb over to feel the textured relief of the sail, then squeezed my fingers to sense its weight. Twenty-four karats and too weak for the story I wanted it to hold. Even the background sun did nothing but serve as a reminder of the day and night separating my family on either side of the Pacific.

"But, Aunt, I never wear gold," I said and pushed the necklace back towards her. She had already given me too much. After welcoming me on her chicken-feathered paveway, she and my uncle had fed me and given me a place to stay for five months; they had loved me as their own daughter from the moment we'd met. I didn't want anything else from her, and I knew the necklace was worth more than anything else they owned. Certainly, her gift was not an equal trade for the unwanted things that had not made the

cut from my possessions. Besides, it was true I never wore gold; for the last year, my only jewelry was a necklace of green glass I had bought in the beach town of Nha Trang.

My aunt shook her head. In the dry heat, with her hands clasped over mine, my aunt flashed me an ear-to-ear grin that always seemed more appropriate on a jack-o-lantern than on her withered 68-pound frame. She had greeted me with that grin each morning I lived with her, and it had become as much a part of my wake-up as the clucking chickens outside the house. After I'd moved out on my own, I came to visit to find her grin assuring me that home was really with her and my uncle. Both almost 60, she and my uncle were childless, and there was little hope another niece would materialize from a war-filled past to be the daughter in their lives. She and my uncle were more likely to end their days alone in a city that seemed to be leaving them in dust as well. The smile pulled her chin up and compressed her weathered face into two halves. She patted the charm closed into my hands. "*Cho tinh cam.*"

*Tinh cam* was the hardest word for me to understand when I was learning Vietnamese. In the bare classroom of the Ho Chi Minh University of Arts and Humanities, I had learned that by English translation, it most closely means "affection," "concern," "sincerity," or "love," depending on the context. However, from what I gleaned from the dense and smog-filled streets of Saigon, in the salty air of Nha Trang, and on the marshy rice fields of Qui Nhon, *tinh cam* had many more connotations. It was the devotion children celebrated when worshipping the death anniversaries of their parents, the kinship that connected families separated by wars and continents. It was what Southern Vietnamese felt separated them from their Northern brethren. In turn, Northerners seemed to believe that the separation was more like ignorance and slothfulness.

"*Tinh cam,*" the whisper slipped past her lips. I felt her breath waft in the humidity between us, drawing us closer and making the moment too personal. I looked to the door, to the chauffeured station wagon waiting to take me back to the French colonial villa where I lived with two expatriates. Where well-off foreigners pervaded and not this older, native generation of poverty and sentimentality. I was part of the new face of Vietnam, the globalization that would erase the country's tear-filled history.

“*Tinh cam*,” she said again, and I abandoned her standing in her doorframe, dust settling on the concrete floor. I watched my aunt and my uncle wave farewell to me through the rearview glass. They followed the car a few steps before stopping in its wake of dust to let me out of sight.

As I watched them becoming smaller and smaller, I noticed something peculiar in their smiles, something I had misread at first. Their slightly pursed lips were filled not with loss but, instead, hope. My hand relaxed around the necklace as I began to understand the meaning of the gesture. She wanted to make me feel better about leaving her in Vietnam to return to the States. But it was more than just that. With the necklace in my possession, my uncle and aunt had sealed their lives in my memories forever. When they one day passed from this world, I would be the one to celebrate the anniversary of their deaths.

It took me years to realize that this story is like my aunt’s parting gift to me: even though I don’t think of it often, I cannot separate myself from it. It rests in the back of my mind, waiting quietly until ready to be told. My aunt’s gift helped me to understand that my story is neither a war story nor a story of redemption. It does not try to pass as an authority on Vietnamese culture nor is it a commentary on America’s. It is comparing a year of self-discovery with a lifetime of experience, dissecting the individual bizarre and discolored parts that together, form a living and breathing whole, and then offering up the findings so others may learn from it as well. This is my last ghost.

“*Tinh cam*,” for me, means memory. My other past.

My story weighs like a feather compared to my parents’. Growing up, I often felt their weight as a heavier presence in my life than my own. Their words loomed over my every action: “Be smart, be fearless, be true.” An adolescence shaped by war had made my parents all of these things. They shook their heads when I pulled all-nighters cramming after weeks of procrastination or begged to go out with friends on a Friday night instead of staying home to do something productive with my life. They saw me as a weak shadow cast from their light.

My parents evacuated Vietnam on April 30, 1975, the day that Saigon fell and was renamed Ho Chi Minh City, after the leader who had led North Vietnam to victory.

Days earlier, President Gerald Ford declared the end of all U.S. aid to South Vietnam. South Vietnam's President Duong Van Minh, who had been in office just three days, ended decades of violence and destruction by pleading to the Communist forces: "We are here to hand over to you the power in order to avoid bloodshed." Eloquent words with good intentions, but they did little to inspire hope in the remaining South Vietnamese military, in my officer father.

My father became more hopeless as American troops, his friends, fled the country while North Vietnamese troops, the Viet Cong, marched into the American Embassy on Le Duan Street and toppled the capital building of South Vietnam with their tanks and victorious smiles. Stores were looted and armed boys laughed from their perches in the military tanks rolling along the streets. There was so much chaos in those final days that even humanitarian efforts like Operation Babylift, an attempt to rescue orphans by bringing them to America, were subverted. Mothers were throwing their babies to the soldiers aboard the planes in hopes of giving their children a better life. The idea of orphans being rescued had somehow become confused with rescuing any child in general.

At 30 years old, my father was captain of his own ship. Changed from his officer whites into civilian's clothes so as not to attract attention, he maneuvered my mother's immediate family by moonlight from the war-torn streets of Saigon to the coast, where his crew awaited their escape. My father's side, his twelve older siblings and parents, were too far inland and could not be reached in time. They were left behind.

Before I lived that year in Vietnam, I knew nothing of their evacuation, or even of their assimilation. What I knew about that time in my family's history, I learned from my own academic research in college, the evidence I found in their rooms, and from the pieced accounts of my mother's younger siblings whose stories were unreliable at best. My aunt, who was seven in 1975, told me she remembered losing a sandal on the beach as she ran to a helicopter. My father said this was impossible because there was no helicopter.

My parents and family, part of a lucky, low percentage who had an escape route, ran without looking back at the war-ravaged lands or the bombed out buildings of their homeland. The U.S. government had placed ships off the coast to help evacuees who

made it out of Communist-controlled cities and ports of what was once South Vietnam. The overwhelming numbers of refugees boarding the ships necessitated a restriction of only two pieces of luggage per family. In our two suitcases, my mother had packed her most precious belongings: five traditional costumes, my father's military regalia, a Vietnamese-English dictionary, and two photo albums. Tucked securely in those albums were photos and letters that my father had sent from his military base in Nha Trang and my mother from her hometown classroom in Qui Nhon in the three years they courted before marrying.

My family and a host of other refugees spent three weeks bobbing along the South China Sea and then settled in a refugee camp in the Philippines to await word from the U.S. on the status of immigrants. On the thirteenth day of June, 1975, my parents received news that America was allowing an unprecedented number of refugees to immigrate into the country. My family was sponsored to Fort Chafee, Arkansas, by the Sullivans, a military family who knew of our family's struggle. The Sullivans coached my family in understanding American culture through dinners and holiday celebrations when they would invite my parents off the base. Meanwhile, my parents had gone from a Naval captain and elementary school teacher to both working as chicken sexers. My mother cried walking from the farm back to their house, covered in grim and blood from breaking the necks of chicks that would grow up to be roosters. There had to be something better.

My parents were lured out of Arkansas by a friend of my father's who had served with him in the military and had moved to Mobile, Alabama, only months before.

"Mobile is full of opportunities," the friend assured my dad. There was a port, a university, and a climate similar to the home they'd left behind. The navy was also an option, should my father choose to re-enlist with the Americans. My dad's friend had a successful job as a ship mechanic.

My father, always too trusting but up for anything other than the chicken farms, saved enough for money for the eleven-hour trek, packed a used orange Camaro with my mother, brother and sister and their original two suitcases, and headed to the sleepy Southern coast of Alabama.

In the late seventies, Mobile was still reeling from the aftermath of the civil rights movement. Though often not openly discussed, race was an issue that was at the front of nearly everyone's consciousness and caused a tension that could only be detected in the fine lines of a pained smile and the deterrent action of pulling a purse in closer. The city resisted strangers, particularly strangers whose color was not white or black and whose faces resembled the images from the *Mobile Register* of a war the city would rather forget.

If my parents ever realized that the streets of Mobile were lined by resentment and racism instead of opportunity, I never knew it as a child. I grew up reminded daily of my parents' struggles to get me to this safe place and of the opportunities I had to take advantage of. In America, anything was possible as long as you worked hard to make it happen. I was left to fight my own battles, living with casual glances that became self-entitled staring, racial census counts all through elementary school where I was categorized as an "other," and the creative taunts and jeers of the kind that rhymed "Japanese" with "dirty knees."

One of my few childhood escapes were Sundays when my parents would drive the mile from our house to my grandparents' home. My grandmother would barbecue ribs in an outdoor grill my grandfather had fashioned from an old oil drum and a grate he had picked up from a neighbor's trash. She would cut up slabs of ribs and throw them onto the open flame, and I would pull the succulent ribs off once they were ready, burning fingertips and tongue as I popped them in my mouth.

"Guess how many pieces this is!" I chanted, while my sister, uncles and aunts rolled their eyes in aggravation. My face dripping with the fatty pork juices, I ran in and out of my grandparents' home until my grandmother caught me in mid-lap and pulled me into her bosom. She swayed back and forth, her K&B drugstore perfume blending deliciously with the scent of pork and charcoal, and sang into my hair, "I love you!" I never doubted she loved me, although this and "thank you" were the only English words she ever learned in the 26-years she lived in the States. There was no telling how often she said either phrase when pressed.

From these Sundays with my grandmother, I developed a sense of the importance of family and heritage. I spent a childhood trailing her through the kitchen, engrossed in

her fantastic tales about our home country, of the riches and prestige we left behind. “Your father was so important,” she said, waving a finger pruned from washing dishes in the sink, “that our family had body guards. Yes, it’s true! Your mother had three guards who would take her to the market and another three servants who helped her take care of your sister and brother.” Her stories teased my imagination into wondering how different my own life might have been, *if only*. If only the U.S. had not lost the Vietnam War. If only my father had been a naval captain for North Vietnam instead of South Vietnam. If only all of my relatives were able to evacuate, as opposed to the mere dozen on my mother’s side.

But, as I became older, my heritage began to embarrass me. While other little girls were taking dance lessons or learning to ride horses, I was barefoot searching for clams in the muddy silt of other people’s private waterfront properties, and my parents were getting notices from the city government to get rid of our chickens. The crowing roosters were disturbing the neighbors. While other girls might have helped their mothers with the flowerbeds in the front yard, I was watering my mother’s collection of Vietnamese vegetables in our garden. The backyard, overgrown with the jungle plants that my mother loved to cook, was an eyesore and a regular source of mortification and over-explanation whenever my friends came over for a party or to spend the night. There was the five-foot by five-foot concrete basin my mom had made to grow *rau muong*, or water spinach, which turned out to be a regular breeding ground for mosquitoes, and the home-made canopies my mom designed by nailing together two-by-fours that nearly broke from the *kho qua*, or bitter melon, that hung from its boughs. “The bitter melon is really good in soups,” I’d tell my friends whenever they peered into the backyard from the living room windows. “Really, you could try some,” I offered, secretly praying they wouldn’t since I could barely stomach the melon myself.

I spent most of my adolescent life trying to be as American, or what I thought was American, as I could be. In the presence of my friends, I ate fried chicken with a fork and knife because I thought it was improper to use my hands like my parents did. I learned my accent from television and much to my father’s dismay, spent more time studying grammar and literature than math and science. I was surrounded by stereotypes of Asians being good at math, but writers were always white, at least the ones I read growing up in

Alabama were. The math books my father bought me each summer to prepare for the next academic year soon became piles of undisturbed dust, as I immersed myself in Faulkner and Hemingway, and Southern writers like Carson McCullers and Harper Lee. I looked up the words I didn't know and knew more words by sight and definition than I did by sound. Most of the long words I learned I later mispronounced when I tried to use them. When people asked me to "just say one thing in Vietnamese," I'd shrug and say I didn't know what to say. It was too complicated. The fact was I had spent so much time focusing on English and forsaking Vietnamese that my vocabulary couldn't make up a full sentence, even if I tried. My parents spoke to me in English.

As if language wasn't enough, I did not associate with any other Vietnamese. There were no other Vietnamese in my class until I reached high school, and by that time, I was ostracized. I walked past groups of them in the hallways of Murphy High, the girls carping on how I believed I was better than them, the boys jeering how I was not one of them. They had little reason to believe that I could understand them, and I didn't really, besides the few derogatory comments I had learned from overhearing my parents arguing sometimes. I wasn't friends with any other first-generation Americans and in a city that touted its long-standing Southern roots, I dreamt of marrying a guy whose name ended with a III or a IV; I'd maybe consider settling for a junior. In my 15-year-old mind, I could find belonging if I could just tie myself to a "Patterson" or "Edwards" or any of those other Mayflower-sounding names that seemed to fill the Mobile phonebook.

My parents made up for my lack of interest in Mobile's Vietnamese community by trying to serve as the community's role models. During Vietnamese Catholic masses, while my sister and I nodded off or whispered until someone shushed us, my mother would be sure to sing louder and say "amen" faster than anyone else in the congregation. We always sat in the first two pews from the altar, as if being closer to the altar would bring us that much closer to the salvation we were sabotaging by being so disrespectful in church, a disrespect probably caused because we couldn't understand what was said. Going to our car one day after service, I was approached by the choir director to participate in the Christmas play. My long hair, still black as opposed to streaked with blonde and red highlights that seemed popular among the other girls, was perfect for the performance. The director was very concerned with tradition and uniformity. In response



to the invitation, my mother scoffed. “She doesn’t understand enough about tradition to make it worthwhile for you, director,” she said before shutting the door of our Oldsmobile nearly on the director’s nose.

It wasn’t until I prepared to leave home for college that I started to wonder what kind of home my parents had left to come to the States. On our road trip to Washington, D.C. the August before my freshman year of college, I had more time alone with my dad than I ever had in my life. My dad insisted on driving drive within three miles of the speed limit and stopping at a rest area or gas station every three hours for thirty minutes in order to let the car rest, which meant it would take at least 18 hours to cover the 970 miles.

The time gave me the chance to construct and deconstruct the question a dozen times in my mind. Finally, “Dad, what was the war like?” I asked him. It sounded silly and flat. I still held out hope he’d relay an interesting war story that would kill some of the time and perhaps, some of the distance between us. Maybe he’d even tell me how he felt. If he ever felt not smart, not true, maybe even a little scared.

“You shouldn’t worry about such things,” he said. He didn’t raise his voice or look away from the interstate unfolding like a well-worn dream before us. The words sank me into my seat. After years of reading his silences, I knew I had asked him an inappropriate question. I equated my father recalling the tragedy of the war with him pulling down the sun – both tasks, if even possible, would raze him. He was not a man who believed in regret. He had encouraged my sister and me to stand by every decision we made, whether it was to get a new pet or to take on another extracurricular activity. We had to understand there were consequences to our actions and instead of back-pedaling, we would have to deal with the outcomes. As I rested my head against the window of our car, I saw that my question was a sign of weakness. I was about to start college, embarking on the sea of opportunities he and my mother had struggled to provide, and I needed to look forward. Dwelling on the past would somehow eclipse my future.

At last, my chance to truly understand our family history came when I graduated from the George Washington University and was awarded a year-long Fulbright fellowship to travel and study in Vietnam. Suddenly, instead of my childhood daydreams

of being a princess forsaken in a foreign land, I was motivated by dreams of discovering my family roots and the country left behind through first-hand experience and the study of literature. I wanted to know how veterans left in the country had fared since the War and how communist society functioned. I had spent a year researching the War for my senior thesis, and the harsh realities left no room for fantasies or fairy tales about the glory of military service and a land of endless rice paddies and year-long tropical weather. There was torture, burnings, bombings, massacres. Re-education after the War. Poverty. Isolation. There was no telling what remained of the beautiful country of my parents' hearts. I suspected not much more than phantoms from bloody battlefields and ruins from napalm bombings.

"One day, I go back," my mom always said when she was tired with America or angry at the selection of fruits in the grocery store. Sometimes, "one day" was "two years" or even "next year." My sister and I shook our heads at each other at the familiar, weightless words. No one in my family had been back since the escape, and there were really never plans.

I knew a year in Vietnam would give me the opportunity to find the truth, to give me a better sense of who I was and, from there, where I needed to go in my writing and future plans. I knew so little then, and that little bit, returning to a country that would have killed my father had my family stayed, kept me awake at night with anxiety. I wondered how much of my grandmother's claims regarding my family's importance was true and if the communist government could find out who my father was and if it still mattered. Vietnam had only recently opened its doors to Americans. How safe was it for any American there? When I relayed my concerns to my college friends, one girl told me her father had been abducted in South America on a business trip. Her family had spent months negotiating payments with his captors. He was scarred but safe now, and I thought of my own fate. Were there such things as kidnappings and hostages in Asia? Would being the daughter of a former South Vietnamese military officer make me a prime candidate?

The solitary aspect of my year abroad worried me further. Throughout college, I preferred being with someone I could hardly stand rather than being alone. I talked to strangers who sat beside me on trains and airplanes, and over the four years I spent in

D.C., I often considered leaving notes on the windshields of cars with Alabama license tags. The note would say, “Hi, I’m a fellow Alabamian. Do you want to be friends?” Pathetic, perhaps, but at the time, I longed for the comfort of familiar things.

As my mother had pointed out when I first broke the news that I won the Fulbright, I had never had any Vietnamese friends. “You don’t like Vietnamese people in America, Annie. Why you think you like Vietnamese people in Vietnam?”

She was right. In the weeks before my departure, the entire Vietnamese community whispered among themselves about my trip “home.”

“She was born here, in America!”

“Have you heard her try to speak Vietnamese?”

“And look at how she dresses!” they sneered.

I didn’t even know what was considered Vietnamese style. I had never worn a proper traditional dress, cringed at the whining squawks that passed as music from my parents’ CDs, and had never had a perm or dyed my hair – which seemed to be the ultimate fashion statement then. There was no way I would be savvy enough to survive a year alone.

But the professor performing my language evaluation for the Fulbright application had obviously thought otherwise. He questioned my newfound interest in my heritage, and only slightly believed me when I said that I became enthralled after finishing my thesis.

“Why you not care about the war before? It was long time ago,” he said, reviewing the test he had designed to gauge my proficiency.

I was glad he wasn’t looking at me because I didn’t have an answer. Instead, I discussed how reconnecting to one’s heritage was essential to becoming a successful writer. He seemed a little more receptive to this idea and walked out of the room so that I could take the written portion of the test. I left it blank.

The oral part was not much better. After embarrassing myself by trying to use English pronunciation on the words of the excerpt he had given me, I sat dumb and quiet while he reviewed the testing procedures. His job was to test my ability to read, write, speak, and understand the language. He would be the one held responsible if I went abroad without enough comprehension to get by on a daily basis. The instructions could

not have been clearer, but he looked doubtful. He asked if I needed to know the language to receive the fellowship. When I nodded, he sighed at me as he checked off “fluent.”

“Now,” he said, clicking his tongue and returning the paper to me, “least you learn.”

## CHAPTER II: MORE THAN NEEDED

The January afternoon before I left Alabama for Vietnam, my mother and I sat on the carpet of my parents' study and sifted through my mother's photo albums, the ones she had rescued and then protected the last 25 years. I turned yellowed pages and admired the greenery captured in shades of black and white in every picture. Petals bloomed larger than my open hand on top of stalks as thick as magic bean poles; groomed bonsai sat on mosaic-tiled tabletops in a courtyard and seemed ever more delicate – almost superfluous – in front of trees drooping under jungle vines; and in the distances, cliffs dropped into the oceans or sometimes rose higher into cloud-covered mountains.

“Who's this?” I asked my mom.

“She your great-aunt number 6. See, she my age?”

In the picture, my mom is a schoolgirl dressed in an *ao dai*, which literally translates to “long shirt.” A traditional Vietnamese dress, it has a fitted top that extends in two tee-length flaps in the front and back. The flaps are separated by slits that run up the sides to the waist. The top is made of silk, and the wide-legged white pants beneath flare from under her, giving the illusion of a skirt. Vietnamese women know that viewed from the side, as one walks and kicks the front flap forward and momentum pushes the back flap backwards, a triangle of waist is exposed above the top of the pants. Played correctly, it is one of the most alluring sights of this part of the world. You can often hear elders lamenting the slow demise of delicate *ao dai*'s as common dress as proper Western suits and skirts now tuck and cover without allowing any mystery.

I admire the black and white shades of my mom's *ao dai*, and in the grays, I imagine the color of her top is some light pastel, a pink or perhaps a yellow, to show her youthfulness. A conical hat is strapped onto her head with a sash that ties smartly beneath her chin. Her hand is on the arm of another girl, and in what looks like a botanical garden surrounding them, they are both laughing. They appear to share a joke that only they understand.

The next photo has my father at attention in his senior portrait at the naval academy. His jaw is firmly set and his hair is manicured to fall just to the left of a razor-straight part. The photo is also black and white, and the shadows behind him contrast with the gleaming purity of his white face.

The photo slid behind the clear plastic album page, the original glue holding it in place now crumbling with age. I reached behind the clear sheet to pull out the photo. The plastic hazed over the edges of my father's face, and I wanted to look a little deeper and examine this version of my father at my age.

My mother turned the pages of another album as I studied the face of a man who is more serious than the father I know and much wiser than I about the ways of the world and the suffering of war. I imagined what his thoughts must have been when he posed for this photo, how he was planning a future with his children and his new wife, how he longed for the war to end. How different was the man in the photo, whose face and focused eyes are so proud and strong, compared to the older man with the hunched shoulders whom I knew as my father? How different did my life look compared to his at 22? I start to put the photo back when I notice his handwriting on the back.

“Mom, what does this say?”

“What? What does what say?” she asked as she snatched the photo from my hand. Her eyes scanned the words and a glimmer in them told me she was no longer sitting beside me in the study but sitting on the veranda of her childhood home, tearing open the envelope with its Nha Trang postmark. She is ripping out carefully written pages to read how my father answered her letter and see the senior class photo he promised her. My mother read the words written on the back once and then again, as I imagined she must have done when my father had first sent it. She blushed.

“You not need to know everything,” she said and put the photo away.

My mother's words resonated in my ears days later as clouds heavy with humidity buffeted my plane to Saigon. I watched the lush landscape unfold beneath me and tried to put friendly markers of recognition on the emerging buildings or rivers. I'd seen pictures of Vietnam's landscape before, but I'd never seen any from above, so anything I thought I recognized would have just been my imagination. Still, as I stared into the thick of jungles that looked like they wanted to swallow the plane whole, I wondered if it was possible that my surroundings would trigger something inherent in my being, like a welcome-to-your-native-country homing device. Did immigrants and first-generation

descendents feel some sort of pull when a sight, scent or sound triggered home? Was this home?

I pulled my eyes off the scenery and looked at the book of colloquial Vietnamese open on my lap. My greatest fear stared back at me. Through my earphones, my CD player repeated the second language lesson of the book: *How to Introduce Yourself to a Client*. I mouthed the words I thought I heard and looked at the transcript of the dialogue in my book. Absolute nonsense. This wasn't getting me anywhere, not to mention there were a dozen more lessons. I turned the CD off, and slid my earphones down so I could hear the landing sounds of the plane.

While my comprehension of spoken Vietnamese could get me as far as figuring out where the bathroom was, no reasonable Vietnamese-speaking person could understand the pidgin version I spoke. I tried to block out memories of traveling to Spain the year before and worming my way through Madrid on a handful of phrases that were met only with blank stares, or, more embarrassingly, a chuckle or laugh. That was a week, and I was miserable having to rely on a Spanish-speaking friend to hail cabs and order my food. "How do you say 'how much' again?" I'd asked her, and when I tried to repeat what she'd said in the accent I thought I'd heard, I found a blank merchant face telling me I hadn't succeeded.

I could think of few greater torments than being mute, and now I was facing a full year of silence, not to mention the humiliation I knew would come whenever someone asked whether I was raised in a Vietnamese household. I tried to imagine what it would be like speaking to someone other than the family members I had in Alabama. My parents had the benefit of tuning their ears to my peculiar pronunciations as they witnessed my firm grasp of the language become more of a faint brush over the years. Even so, sometimes they couldn't understand when I was saying something as simple as, "When's dinner?" The only consolation I had was my faith that the language professor who helped me get here was not pulling some cruel joke. Sure, I'd survive a year studying literature in a language I didn't know. Of course I would.

I realized how stupid that was as I thought it, but faith was all I had now that I couldn't turn back.

The flight attendant's voice came over the plane's speakers, and I wondered what important information about customs and landing procedures I was missing. I tried to think happy thoughts, but instead recalled the vision of my mother crying in the Mobile airport as she said goodbye. I had only seen her cry two other times – at my brother's funeral when I was three and in the hospital waiting room when the doctors said my grandmother was going to die. My mother believed my going to Vietnam would end in disaster. She had dissuaded me from starting my trip in September when most of the other Fulbrighters began their year of study because she would still be 51, and according to Vietnamese custom, ages ending in a 1 or 3 were unlucky. By January, when I left, she would be 52. It wasn't much assurance, but it was something.

The day before I left the States, she hovered over my packing. Yes, I had remembered to pack cold medicine and, yes, I remembered shampoo. I had also packed laundry detergent and dryer sheets, but on these things my mom had laughed. "Can you use Bounce by hand, you think?" she asked. I shooed her away, but not before she managed to take a haughty puff the way she did before saying, "I told you so." This time, she said, "If you ask me, I not let you go," and left me alone to pack.

My father's silence also haunted me. He never voiced his feelings of fear and guilt because doing so would breathe life and reality into them. Instead, he brushed them aside and let them lie buried as the remains of someone else's life. Growing up, my father often spoke of the family we'd left behind and how little they had compared to our cable television and new clothes, freedom and lives without fear. I remembered as a child riding my bike around the neighborhood, feeling guilty for having a bike, and wondering if I should give it away. My father made my sister and me put our allowances in a savings account that he tapped to wire money to Vietnam when letters from the relatives talked about crops failing and textbook costs rising. But as the years passed, the letters became more frequent and the tragedies more and more severe. Eventually, our savings accounts ran dry, and my father spoke nothing more of the freedoms we took for granted.

Even in the final days before I began my journey to this homeland on the other side of the world, my father could not voice his fears for me. The night before I left, he studied me from my bedroom door as I packed and unpacked blouses, not sure which would bore me least over a year of wear, and as I tried to decide which of my family and



friends' photographs were more meaningful. The one with my family gathered around the Christmas tree or the one at my graduation where the happiness feels less contrived? The one at graduation had a view of the Washington Monument in the background so I could use it for show-and-tell when people asked where I went to school, but the Christmas tree was a tradition I could talk up. Who knew if they decorated trees for Christmas in Vietnam? So many things to decide.

My father sensed a break in my concentration and ambled over. He held my guidebook open in front of me. He tapped a line he had found:

**Do not photograph bridges, border crossings, power stations, or military or government structures.**

The bolded line stood out against the newsprint. I traced the words with my finger and kept reading to see why, but no reason or penalty followed.

“Be safe. Do not talk so much. Do not write home anything. What you see, keep here,” he said in his college-learned English and pointed to his head, then turned to leave me alone packing.

My mother had folded three five-dollar bills neatly into my passport: one for the customs agent, one for the exit security guard, and one, just in case.

“When you get there, hand passport just like this to the customs officer,” she demonstrated, the edges of the folded bill peeking out beyond the closed passport. She had heard too many stories of Viet-Kieu – people of Vietnamese descent living outside of Vietnam – being detained and harassed at security checkpoints and interrogation rooms. The customs officers would make up excuses ranging from the visitors' personal safety to national security while VCRs, CD players, video cameras and the like were removed from their luggage. Friends of our family with traveling experience and know-how insisted that with a little bribe, all of that could be avoided.

“That is how the country is now, after the war,” our family friends said.

My mother and relatives at home had implored me to bribe the security guard. It was more than just a precaution to secure my own personal safety and comfort, and five dollars was so insignificant when you considered *what could happen*. They further told me to not wear any jewelry on my fingers for fear the rings would be ripped off my hands

on the streets of Saigon and would not let me pack my nicer clothes because I would be inviting attacks for looking wealthy. Again and again, I heard it: the country is poor. The country is devastated from years of war and isolation. The country is communist and no one will help you. “Vietnam is not America,” my mom repeated for months. “Do not act so American.” She paused to look me over. “At least try.”

Sweating in line to the customs booth, I tried to make out what the signs above the booths read. My eyes scanned the words with symbols transcribed above and below the letters denoting pronunciation, definition, and purpose. Luckily, French influence in Vietnam resulted in a conversion of the language from its previous character-based form to one using the Roman alphabet. That, however, was where the similarities between Romance and Germanic languages and Vietnamese ended. Standing in line, I couldn’t think of one Vietnamese word adopted into English. Villa? Gyro? Deja vu? Kindergarten? It seemed English took on shapes and forms from every other language, except the one I needed to know now.

From the language book I had perused on the 23-hour trek from Mobile to Hong Kong, I had learned that the monosyllabic, tonal language of Vietnamese was spelled using inflection indicators to differentiate words. The letters *ma* could mean “mother” if inflected with a rising sound, “ghost” if inflected with a falling sound, and “but” if not inflected at all. There were six different tones in Vietnamese, six possible meanings from the same arrangements of letters. Whereas a bad accent in French could still be comprehensible, a bad accent in Vietnamese could result in a completely offensive phrase. The tones easily overlapped in my untrained ears, the difference between a dipping-rising tone and a breaking-rising tone, no real difference at all. No wonder I had stopped trying to pronounce the language long ago.

But, knowing this much did not help me read the language the first day; not a word on the customs signs made sense to me.

I started to glance at other foreigners, to look at their passports and see whether I could make out folded deutschmarks, yen, or francs folded beneath the covers. I thought I could see a bill folded in one tourist’s passport, or was that his visa?

As the line of foreigners inched its way towards the customs gate, I kept my eyes on the row of uniformed agents, their hunter green, pointed military caps standing up

from their identical haircuts in an imposing line, like a horizon of receding mountain peaks. Not one smile broke their collective concentration. I imagined what it feel like to have one of these guys coolly drag me from the airport in a quarter-nelson for a bribery attempt. I'd be that girl in that movie where the young American did something stupid and rotted away her twenties in a foreign jail cell. Certainly, getting charged and arrested for bribing a communist security guard would be more severe than losing a few hundred dollars' worth of possessions, right? On the other hand, if my belongings were confiscated, how much would I be able to replace? What was critical?

I was not one to break rules. Well, that's a lie. I was scared to break rules because I was the one who always got caught. It didn't matter what the offense was, whether I had gotten out of my desk to sharpen a pencil while the teacher stepped out of the classroom in elementary school or whether I was sneaking back into my dorm room after breaking curfew at boarding school, I was always found out. Those times, I had been reprimanded with a few threats, a mere slap on the wrist compared to being imprisoned for bribery. At a customs gate, I was sure attempted bribery had to violate at least one, if not a dozen, international laws. It wasn't worth testing my usual bad luck. Besides, if I was going to bribe someone, five dollars did not seem much of a bribe. The agent would probably laugh at me, take the money, and then turn me over to the authorities. My turn came up. Quickly, I pulled the bills out and stashed them in the money belt tucked behind the waistband of my jeans.

"Ten?" the customs officer asked me.

"Nguyen Hoang Annie," I answered. I'd repeated to myself that last names always go first in Vietnamese just so I'd remember at a time like this.

The agent was not impressed. He lifted his eyes from the passport without raising his face to glare at me. "*Viet-Kieu*," I saw his eyes say. He looked back down.

"*Em di dau?*"

Please, I hope he speaks English, I thought to myself. "*Xin loi, be khong hui*," I said, which I later learned translated to, "Sorry, the baby doesn't understand." I had learned to refer to myself in my family as *be* because I was the youngest member, but in Vietnamese, *be* was a term of endearment used to about the age of four.

He shook his head. In abrupt English, he asked, "Where you go?"

“Oh, oh,” I said, pulling papers out of my carry-on. I knew this one! My father had written my relatives’ addresses down for me somewhere. I handed him a stack.

He took the papers, harrumphing, and I felt my palms sweating with worry that the money should have stayed where it was. After flipping through the papers then scrutinizing my visa and fanning the pages of the passport (undoubtedly for money to fall out), the officer made a bold stamp and handed back my passport through the hole in the plexi-glass separating us.

I didn’t even realize I’d been holding my breath until I felt the welcome air of relief fill my lungs. I had passed my first test and stepped into the bustle of Tan Son Nhat airport.

Before I left the States, my parents had contacted the remaining relatives I had in Vietnam, and had instructed these forgotten uncles, aunts, and cousins to watch over me for the year. I was to live with an aunt outside Saigon who had sons near my age, and would be escorted daily to study at the university that had sponsored my student visa. Though I’d never seen pictures of these relatives, I imagined some sort of blood linkage would make them easy to identify when I came out of the airport doors. My parents did not think to specify what I would be wearing, nor did they request that my relatives wear a certain color to identify themselves.

The sweltering waves of the Saigon heat washed over me as I walked out of the airport and into a crowd divided down the middle like the Red Sea. Barrier gates held people back to give the debarking passengers an unobstructed path about three feet wide and thirty feet long to the parking lot. Uncertainly, I walked onto the path and felt my clothes melt onto my skin. That morning, after a 2-day layover, I had put on jeans and a long-sleeve shirt for the drizzling 60-degree weather of Hong Kong. Saigon had to be near 100. I pulled up my sleeves and felt sweat gather on my arms.

The throngs of Vietnamese before me staggered me further. I had never seen so many of them together: friends calling and screaming out names and greetings that sounded alien to me, security guards laughing among themselves and not guarding anyone, several generations of families anxiously sitting on the fence barrier with arms and legs coming through the space between the security bars, persistent travel agents heckling the foreign tourists. I could hear cab drivers hawking their costs to drive

downtown in English amidst inflected Vietnamese words, felt others bump past me with their taped-up rice sacks for luggage, and wondered if it was too late to turn back to the airport.

That's when I saw a cardboard sign with my name spelled out in red marker. The letters were written with deliberation and care, perfect lines and right angles. I glanced past the cardboard and paused. There seemed to be seven of them, and in the wavering heat, I thought I was becoming delusional. I pushed my cart of luggage towards them without taking my eyes off of my uncle: he could have passed as my father's twin, just more wizened and maybe fifteen pounds lighter. He was taller and though he looked older, his hair was jet-black. My father's hair was peppered with gray. I was wary until, coming closer, I noticed the same genuine smile in his eyes that played in my father's on the happiest occasions. In the airport chaos, I felt comfort.

"An-nee?" my cousins asked. I had never heard my name pronounced with a hard accent on the second syllable and hesitated for a moment. But then I looked at the reassuring visage of my uncle. How could I doubt this was my family when this man so clearly resembled my dad? I nodded, and the eruption of claps and smiles began.

They commented on how I looked like my father or mother had looked at my age (somehow I looked just like both of them), how tall and fat I was (apparently compliments), how they were so afraid they wouldn't be able to find me, how my luggage was so big. The youngest cousin, who was tasked with pushing my cart behind me, made exaggerated groaning sounds, smiling at his own wittiness. One of the older cousins who had studied English told me she had practiced for weeks for the meeting at the airport that day. "How was your fly?" she asked me in careful English.

"Good. Okay. Long time," I answered her, trying to articulate and say the words slowly. My friends in the States who had studied abroad warned that I would have to speak slowly if I expected anyone to understand me, and I could still feel my boyfriend Michael pinching me as a reminder to announce around his foreign friends. Hearing my response, her eyes beamed. I understood then that she had not remembered any other English.

An uncle asked in Vietnamese how old I was, and when I responded in Vietnamese, the relatives smiled at each other, nodding. "Your mother said you couldn't

say a word!” another aunt gushed as she slapped my back. In my mind, counting was not that impressive a feat, but my shoulders relaxed thinking that perhaps this foreign language thing wouldn’t be that hard.

Relatives from both my mother and father’s side guided me to a van specially rented for the occasion. On the first bench of the van, they gave me the center seat that faced the air conditioning and piled in on either side of me. Inside, they showed me that there had actually been two signs, both inscribed with Annie Hoang Nguyen. A cousin told me that first she had written only “Annie” but then she saw another sign amongst the crowd with “Annie” on it. Afraid that Annie was a common foreign name, the cousin added my middle name and last name. She held it up defiantly, so my aunt took a second look at the name of the person she, too, was told to find at the airport. Neither side knew that the other would be there waiting to escort me home as well, and I figured it was my parents’ own way of ensuring that at least one person would show up and find me. This precaution on my parents’ part reunited their families again after 26 years. As I listened to their smiling accounts of the coincidental meeting, it seemed my homecoming was a way to forget whatever long-standing, ill feelings might have followed the war. My parents could evacuate only one side of the family and only a certain number of those relatives. The choice of whom to take and whom to leave had separated my mother’s and father’s side over the decades.

The lights of Saigon stretched before me as the voices chatted, using words and language I had trouble following. Words started to become mere background sounds. Motorcycles swerved in and out of the road in front of us to a cacophony of horns that drowned out the humming of the van engine. I clutched the bench seat each time the van managed to avoid yet another motorcycle and looked for the seatbelt. The passing outside lights that flickered into the van made it difficult to see anything, so reluctantly I gave up. A seatbelt wasn’t likely to save me if we collided with the half-dozen motorcycles weaving around us anyway.

I tried to focus on the sights beyond the traffic. Flashing neon signs rained pink and blue and green light onto the buildings running alongside us. The bright lights made the crippled beggars who slept on the trash-covered sidewalks seem even more unreal. Gas stations, stores specializing in building materials or phones or appliances, and the

endless streams of motorcycles passed by as a whizzing welcome, and it dawned on me, I was here. This was Vietnam. No picture I had seen yet looked anything like what was just beyond the car windows. My heart quickened. I wanted to stop the van, run outside and spin around, inhaling a large gulp of the exhaust-filled air. I wanted to stop someone and ask, “Where am I?” and have her respond, “Why, you’re in Saigon, of course,” but instead, I was in the middle of the first bench seat, squeezed in on either side by people I didn’t know but who were misty-eyed with voices cracking at the sight of me. I wasn’t sure what part of all of this disarmed me more.

The van turned from the main road and ambled down an unlit alley towards my uncle’s house. He lived closest to the airport, and it was decided that the two sides of the family could discuss my trip and ask more about my parents when we were settled there.

The van stopped before the end of the alley. My uncle pulled my luggage past a metal gate into another smaller but also unlit alley full of concrete homes. I walked in and looked ahead to a two-story house with what looked like a metal fire escape covered in vines and ferns. A bird called from its hanging cage on the landing. At the far end, a house with metal bars over the windows and an immaculate glass door stood dark and quiet. To either side of me, lights flickered from inside concrete hiding places. Eyes peered at me from the shadows.

My uncle’s house was the first one inside the gated community. It looked more like a cave than a house, with a small opening that led to a bleak interior. Opposite the doorway stood wire chicken cages stacked on sheets of plywood and cinder blocks. The piles that built up to the shabby tin roof and pressed along the outside wall of his house rivaled my grandfather’s piles of junk back in Mobile. Within the mishmash beside his door, I could discern a table, some buckets and cardboard, maybe bricks and wondered how the objects were stacked so as not to come tumbling into the alley. The sight alarmed me, but my mother’s relatives did not flinch. It was the first time they had visited my uncle, but they took their shoes off at the door and walked in as if they knew exactly where my uncle and his wife would entertain us. Nothing about the tottering pile or the chicken cages or the cave-like dwelling seemed the least out of the ordinary. I tried to retain my composure as I was led through a low doorway and into the weakly lit living

room. My uncle pulled extra chairs out of the heap of possessions for my cousins to sit. They refused the seats and took to the floor instead.

My aunt quickly ducked into a second room and returned with several small dishes of food and sauces that she set out on the floor. I stared at the translucent ribbons, the purplish paste dotted with yellow pepper seeds. I was comforted by the only food I recognized – *banh tet*, a New Year's rice dessert. On countless nights, I'd helped my mother dye the rice and wrap the mix of green rice and yellow mung beans in banana leaves. I reached for this instead of the ribbons, thankfully, since I later found out the ribbons were pickled pig ears.

I scanned my surroundings. A television was propped in the corner of the main room, and, against the back wall, a wooden chest served as the base of what looked like a shrine. Dishes of meats and whole fruits I didn't recognize sat before a Buddha statue, and in one small dish in the center, several sticks of burning red incense stood up in uncooked rice. I wondered if this was a common offering or if it was special for the Asian New Year. A calendar, illustrated with a snake, was tacked to the wall with a pushpin. The Year of the Snake had just begun.

I was re-introduced to each cousin, uncle, and aunt. Knowing each relative's position in the family tree and in relation to mine was critical in determining how we addressed each other. Titles are given according to whether relatives were on my mother's side or father's side and whether they were older or younger than the speaker. My grandmother on my mother's side was *ba ngoai*, while my grandmother on my father's was *ba noi*; an older male cousin or sibling was *anh*, older female *chi*, while a younger male or female cousin or sibling was *em*.

As a sign of respect, older relatives were also referred to by the order in which they were born. In the States, my family had let many of the honorific titles slip. I called my uncles and aunts by their given names instead of by their birth order. Instead of Yi Six, I called my aunt Nga, Nga. I never even prefaced her name with "aunt." In Vietnam, I was expected to call my aunt *Ba Sau*, Great Aunt Number Six, and her husband, *Ong Sau*, Great Uncle Number Six. I never learned her given name. My father had been the youngest of eleven children, thereby getting the title of *Ut*, or youngest. As for my



father's brother closest in age, the tenth child, he had adopted the title *Du*, or "one more than needed."

"You don't need more than ten children. And your father got a special title of his own so I needed a special title, too." He winked at me, and I liked him even more. His wife was *Bac Gai*, which literally could translate to "female uncle," but I think it was meant to show her place in relation to the blood relatives I had. I couldn't keep anyone's name or number straight, but it was clear after a few introductions that I was the youngest of the family here as well.

The families laughed and nodded at each other. They touched each other's arms and fed each other bites from the bowls of food my aunt had set out. I could only imagine that they spoke about past meetings and the time that had lapsed between them. I was asked questions that at first, I didn't know the words to answer, but then later, I could not understand to begin with. At these moments, my relatives would smile, shake their heads, and say, "Oh, so she doesn't really speak Vietnamese." For the next half hour, I wanted nothing more than to be left alone to process the events and the situation. My family in the States spoke very little, and all this conversation overwhelmed me.

Something in my face must have translated. Ong Sau said something about how I must be tired, launching a debate about what to do with me. Would it be better for me to be in the city or on the outskirts? It was conversation they probably assumed I wouldn't be able to understand.

"Her mother wanted her to live with me," my great aunt said. "My sons were to take her to the university."

"But, you live in the country, and if she is here to study our culture, she should be in the city," my uncle countered.

"A city is no place for a young lady. She could get hurt here, and besides, you and your wife are too old to be bothered watching her," my great-aunt responded, in a kind voice that was firm in its determination to keep me.

"Yes, but you are already busy with two sons of your own," my uncle persisted.

"She is here to study," Ong Sau said, effectually concluding the discussion. He asked me if I had the university's address.

I handed him the address my father had scribbled.

“Dinh Tien Hoang Street,” they all read.

“Why, that’s only ten minutes from here,” Bac Du said victoriously. He patted my great uncle and aunt on their backs, as if winning a bet at the racetrack or maybe more appropriately, having a baby successfully delivered. My great uncle and aunt nodded and bade me farewell, before shepherding the other cousins back into the van that had been waiting all along outside the metal cul-de-sac gates. They tumbled back down the alley and out of sight.

And so it was decided, contrary to my mother’s wishes or to my knowing any better, that I would stay where I was with Uncle One-More-Than-Needed and his wife.

### CHAPTER III: THE REGISTRATION OF FOREIGNERS

Bac Du's house hid in the alley behind a high school, the first house behind a gate that was bike-locked each night to keep vagrants away from the two rows of homes. The row residents varied in age and income. While my uncle's house was a flat, one level home, the neighbor two doors down reached two stories, and the neighbor five houses away at the end loomed mighty and big at four stories. My uncle was one of the poorest in the cul-de-sac, which said a lot considering the dilapidated conditions of the other homes.

My uncle's house couldn't have been more than 400 square feet and was partitioned by cardboard and plywood into three rooms comparable to the size of most walk-in closets I'd seen. Lime-colored concrete made up the main structural walls that cracked and chipped off in pieces, leaving patches of crumbly white in a sea of green. Decaying wooden rafters lifted the roof of corrugated tin about six inches from the walls – to let in air during the stifling heat of the monsoon season, I was told.

Including me, five of us lived in the house. My uncle, my aunt's mother, and my 17-year-old cousin all slept on bamboo mats on the floor in the living room, while I was eventually given the honor of the foam-core mattress in the bedroom to myself. Making my aunt's 90-year-old mother sleep on the floor while I enjoyed the only piece of comfort in the house seemed rude if not just a bit absurd to me, but when I offered to join them on the floor, my uncle and aunt almost knocked dinner over with their emphatic gesturing. "No, no," my aunt insisted. "The floor is firm and good for her back." It was clear that declining their generosity was more offensive than taking over their bedroom. As for my aunt's mother, she never said anything intelligible to me, so I never knew for sure if she agreed the floor was good for her back.

I had gone from the youngest child no one deemed capable of caring for herself to the honored guest at my uncle and aunt's, and I tried hard not to break all the eggshells under my feet. I didn't ask questions. I ate what was handed me. I nodded even when I didn't understand anything being said.

Those first few days couldn't have been better for my uncle and aunt. They did everything they could to make me feel comfortable. They offered me sodas they sold from their push-cart and let me sleep as late as I wanted. They talked to me for hours,

even when my face didn't register the faintest indication of understanding. Each morning, my aunt prepared a cup of coffee sweetened with condensed milk and brought it to me for breakfast, and in the evenings, my uncle pulled a bottle of some moonshine-like concoction from under the kitchen counter and offered me a shot. I didn't know the words to tell them the effort was unnecessary, and certainly didn't have the heart to tell them that despite their efforts, I wasn't anywhere near feeling at home.

The house lacked a sink, stove, shower, and hot water, not to mention luxuries like an air conditioner, a refrigerator, or a phone. I was told that because of my uncle's former assistance to the South Vietnamese army, an assistance I could never clarify beyond his connection to my naval officer-father, the government would not allow him to have a phone now. They feared he would relay information to his relatives abroad.

"We've tried to get a phone so many times, but you have to pay them," my aunt whispered when I asked to call home to my parents. I took "them" to mean the government officials who established the phone lines and who could possibly be listening as she told me this. I eyed the tin roof skeptically, ran bare toes along the concrete flooring and pushed on the cardboard-covered walls to test their sturdiness. I had to accept my fate: I was severed from the world I'd left.

I remembered growing up on coupons and thrift store clothes, the embarrassment of lacking namebrands. My mother waitressed full-time to provide for my sister, brother and me and nannied on the side to put my father through an American university education. We had shared many dinners of potted meat and ramen noodles and had suffered through unadvisedly picked wild mushrooms and reduced-for-quick-sale produce. But that was a poverty managed with hope. We were never really hungry or without some sort of clothing. We threw things away when we no longer needed them, and even if we waited a couple of days, we still spilt out milk after it expired. I remembered indulgences like cake and ice-cream birthday parties and my parents splurging one night to cover one of the two take-out pizzas my friends and I ordered to celebrate the end of eighth grade.

Bac Du's household toiled to provide comfort with its many features of unwantedness. The furniture had been discarded from other, more affluent relatives and neighbors. A black television stand sported sliding glass doors sealed away a VCR my

uncle and aunt didn't own, and the green metal desk idled without a chair that fit. The house was so small and so full of unwanted remains from other people's houses that to make more room, we'd pile furniture over and on top of each other. A storage area made by lofting a piece of plywood over the kitchen spigot held another two dozen folding chairs, white and blue resin chairs and red plastic sitting stools, all piled on top and against each other. I marveled that nothing ever seemed to fall. Free calendars and glossy magazine advertisements lapstraked the walls, and in a drawer of an old bureau, my aunt saved inkless pens as if they could one day be used to write notes on the used envelopes she also saved. There was no chance of accidentally throwing anything away since there was no garbage can in the house; the little refuse that couldn't be reincarnated into something usable was burned. It made for a wisp of smoke once a week.

The squalor of my uncle's house overwhelmed me when I first arrived, but I resigned myself to staying with him at least through the weekend. I reasoned that once the workweek resumed, I'd have a chance to go to the embassy and check in with the university. A few days at my uncle's couldn't be that bad. It could even give us a chance to get to know each other, despite the fact he spoke no English and only smiled and nodded the few times I had tried my Vietnamese. It was a nod I recognized because my father often gave it when he didn't understand an American speaking English.

But that Monday, before I had the chance to see if the embassy had any recommendations or inquire about university housing, my relatives had caught wind of the neighborhood whisperings: Viet-Kieu, because of their beginnings or lineage as rebels against the state, were monitored more scrupulously than other foreigners. I needed to be registered, not just for the safety of my uncle but for the safety of the neighborhood as well. The government upheld strict policies on where foreigners were allowed to stay. A local who wanted to house a foreigner had to first seek approval from local authorities.

My uncle had never had to file paperwork on foreigners so he enlisted the assistance of my aunt's brother-in-law, a respected member of the city and editor of a popular newsweekly, *Tre Gio*, or *News for the Young*.

Chu Bao laughed too easily, moved too deftly, and smoked his cigarettes too politely. He blew the smoke up instead of at the person in his company and never let too much ash dangle on the end of the cigarette, a constant flicker. His round waist was

testament to his success as a businessman, and his modest-sized family – a wife and two teenage daughters – was how he saw himself “following in the successful model of American families.”

“A person has too many children, then has no money to support them.” I fixated on the cracks in the walls and was sure the house would collapse on us. “Here in Vietnam, everyone has too many children, but you see your Uncle Bao and his wife are smart, like Americans,” Chu Bao said to me in smooth English the day we met. I was sure Chu Bao was the kind of man my mother had warned me to avoid.

“Don’t trust anyone,” she had said when I first called to tell her I had arrived safely at my uncle’s. Because they had no phone, my uncle had taken me to the public phone booths run by the city post office. Glass phone booths lined one wall, and each phone was monitored through a main switchboard. I keyed in my parents’ number and had the operator at the front desk patch through the call. The first question my mother asked me was where I was. When I answered, “The post office,” she spoke in English, convinced the phone was tapped.

“Don’t trust anyone,” she repeated.

I asked why, and instead of an answer, my mother said, “Only trust your uncle.”

I stepped out of the glass booth, paid for my call, and went outside where my uncle was waiting. “Your mother healthy?” he asked. I could barely nod. I sat down on the back of his one-speed bicycle, tottering as I tried to balance myself on the wire above the back tire used as a seat. While he negotiated his way across the slew of oncoming traffic to the alley outside his house, I kept my eyes on the bright beams of the motorcycles that seemed headed straight for me. How would I manage the year not trusting anyone?

At my uncle’s, Chu Bao bellowed in a way that shook the little house. He fed us his educated theories about family and households and told my uncle that I should live with him. I was studying writing and culture, and what better place would I learn that than in the home of a newspaper editor? “And my two daughters are near her age. You have no children; you don’t understand how to raise girls. She would be much happier with me.”

The idea of anyone raising me when I was already 22 bothered me, almost as much as it bothered me that he was pointing out that my uncle and aunt had no children. Not having children in Vietnamese society was a kind of disgrace, and my uncle and aunt would probably have been able to have children if it weren't for their exposure to Agent Orange during the War. In my undergraduate thesis research on the War, I had read that herbicide released to defoliate trees that provided cover for the Viet Cong was now being linked to deformed fetuses and infertility. Current international research was inconclusive, but it was widely agreed upon that the effects of Agent Orange – dropped at record levels – were debilitating not only to the plants it sought to destroy but also to the humans who lived near those plants. My uncle and aunt had long lived in a hamlet where the air raids of Agent Orange planes took place. I was sure Chu Bao knew this, and I was offended he would flaunt his fatherhood to further his own superiority.

As an aside to me, he said in English, “You can practice speaking Vietnamese with my oldest daughter Thi who is studying English.”

“I can give your daughter English lessons here,” I said. He ignored me as he continued to tell my uncle that the house was not suitable for me. I was surely used to having a nicer home, one with air conditioning and rooms separated by real walls, not by the plywood trash my uncle used. There was an extra bedroom at Chu Bao's where I could stay for the year.

I saw defeat in my uncle's eyes, but I assured them both I was comfortable living where I was, even if I really wasn't.

“You'll change your mind,” Chu Bao said to me, and then switching to Vietnamese, he told my uncle how to register me with the officials and offered to help. His moped spewed dust over my aunt's freshly swept pavement as he sped back down the alley. I eyed my uncle for a response, not knowing what to say in the new silence that Chu Bao had left, but his face was blank. Moments later, Chu Bao returned with a thin man dressed in military attire.

We sat down at the wooden table my uncle and aunt set up each morning at five, after they had pushed their cart of shredded squid and shrimp chips, watermelon candies and soda from inside the main room of their concrete shanty to the sidewalk. The table provided their push-cart patrons a place to eat and drink, but I didn't know how they sat

there comfortably. The white plastic patio chairs were set so close to the table that sitting down, my knees would rise above my waist. With some effort, I pushed the heavy wooden table out a little to lay my legs out straight, and cringed at the harsh sound of wood scraping against concrete. The military man sat across from me. His eyes, barely discernable in the shadows of his face, watched me from underneath a hunter green, pointed cap.

Chu Bao asked my aunt to serve tea and for some cigarettes. Obediently, my aunt set out a chipped white teapot and four glass teacups the size of shot glasses. From a drawer in the pushcart, she pulled out four 555s, the national cigarette brand. She laid out the four on an ashtray and left. I considered myself a social smoker, the excuse that allowed me to smoke when I chose and bum cigarettes because I didn't want to buy them. Now was as good a time as any to light up. I eyed the ashtray, but in the moments before I decided to pick one up, flies started landing on and crawling over them. I thought of the dirtiness and the heat, and the burning sensation of smoke in my lungs became revolting. It was a good decision since I later surmised that none of those cigarettes were intended for me. It was unladylike to smoke. My aunt had laid out four because it was dishonorable not to have an extra one leftover after the men had each had one.

For the next twenty minutes, Chu Bao proceeded to discuss my homecoming and how significant it was that I had come from the United States at such a propitious time as when the two countries were discussing open trade relations. He mentioned President Bill Clinton's name often. It was 2001 and Clinton was no longer in office, I wanted to say, but I knew that doing so would be offensive. I held my tongue as he continued to extol my homecoming, a Viet-Kieu who had the sense to return home. The way he said Viet-Kieu made it sound like a disease.

He introduced the man sitting across from me, saying that they had known each other for more than thirty-five years and that now the man needed my passport. "Don't worry, it's for the good of the people." He winked.

My passport, with its one stamp from Vietnam and another from Spain the year before, was secure inside the money belt I had tucked behind my waistband. The money belt held everything I thought could get me out of a pinch – a credit card, an ATM card, my driver's license, back-up photos for visas and lost passports, and enough cash and



travelers' cheques for a last-minute, one-way ticket back to the States. I wasn't pulling my money belt out in front of anyone, not even my uncle. I told him I would have to get my passport from my luggage later.

The man across from me said nothing.

Chu Bao repeated that there was nothing to worry about; the man was an ex-cop. I found it strange that an ex-cop would be wearing military attire, but I kept the thought to myself. Then Chu Bao laughed and slapped the man on his back. His eyes beamed as he said to me in English, "This man kills Americans."

I tried to hold in my panic as I sipped my tea.

The man spoke for the first time. "I was the first one to destroy the Vietnam-American Association building." He exhaled, the cigarette smoke dancing between us until it was swallowed by the damp air. His lips curved into a smile. He had been the one who maneuvered the tank through the South Vietnamese hall of government. It was a photo of defeat I had seen countless times in journals and books during my thesis research. He explained further that he had been a spy for the Viet Cong, and laughed as he discussed how he had befriended American soldiers, pretending to fight for South Vietnam, and was only too happy when he later killed them. I imagined how those soldiers must have looked, their stunned, horrified expressions when they realized they had been betrayed.

Suddenly, images of exploding grenades and burning thatched roofs filled my mind and overrode the conversation, and I wanted to scream at this snake, "You're the reason my family was exiled and could have been killed." I thought of my father, the same age that I was now, leading troops to battle, risking his life every day for the sovereignty of South Vietnam while spies like this man across from me were sabotaging his command and trying to kill him. I thought of the American troops, also my age or even younger, who sacrificed their lives for a cause they couldn't quite understand, and in that moment, I became fully aware of where my allegiance lay. The thought of trusting G.I.s losing their lives to this man and his blatant arrogance, the thought of men like my father suffering at his hands, incited a disgust in me that made me want to slap the teapot at him. I looked at the teapot, at the table, at the men.

And just that easily, my anger subsided.

Things I had not noticed before started to pop at me: my uncle's reticence, Chu Bao's frequent laughter, the military man's brooding, my own naivete. I was a young female drinking in a group of much older men. A primal fear rose from my gut to my throat. I didn't belong in the country, much less at this table. I choked on my tea and tried to hide my trembling as I set the cup down.

Chu Bao shot me a curious glance and set his own teacup down. He asked again for my passport. I turned to my uncle for help, but he only nodded, not making eye contact. No one in the States had told me before I left that I needed to be registered with the police, and no one had prepared me for what to do if my passport went missing. But as I looked around the table, I didn't see any option but to do as Chu Bao said. I went inside the house to retrieve my passport in privacy and held onto it a second too long after Chu Bao had reached for it. He attempted a trusting smile, but it only upset me more as I let go of the only identification I had. I still had not informed the embassy that I had arrived. I watched as he tucked my passport into the chest pocket of his shirt, folding over it money my uncle had slipped him. It was 50,000 Vietnamese dong, which was only about three U.S. dollars but still more than the cost of three packs of cigarettes. My uncle and aunt rarely sold a full pack of cigarettes; they usually only managed to sell one or two piecemeal. I eyed the money, and Chu Bao told me with another wink, "It is for the passport's safe-keeping."

"We'll be back," he said, and disappeared down the street with the spy.

My uncle stared after them and then looked down to study the cracks of the table. He looked fragile, and I felt powerless to comfort him. Then, as if suddenly remembering that I was taking my cues from him, he snapped his gaze up and said, "Nothing to worry about. There are no more sides. He is just another government official now."

My uncle slid the palms of his hands across each other a few times, as if washing himself of the act of registering. In the next moment, he was smiling again and reached for a toothpick from his cart, and I was startled at his ability to erase memories of the injustice and wrongs. I focused on the barbed wire topping the fence that separated the alley from the high school, the jagged points rusting in the sunlight.

Being born in America, I had been brought up on dreams. One of my strongest memories is of a balmy Tuesday in November when my father pulled our Oldsmobile into the parking lot outside the VFW and took me with him to vote the first time.

“What’s going on?” I’d asked.

“Inside,” he replied. My dad was not one to clue me into his thoughts often, but even so, my ten-year-old mind found the situation suspicious as he locked the car doors behind us and led me to the low-set, brown and unremarkable building.

We passed the VFW every day, on the way to the cemetery, my school, the library, the church, the mall. I had never been inside its doors and the words behind the acronym scared me: Veterans of Foreign Wars. Veterans from Vietnam. It was not a place that seemed to be too welcoming to someone like myself.

My father and I were at once greeted by smiling white-haired women in floral dresses and tan gabardine pants. “Are you registered?” one woman asked, her thick Southern drawl dripping with honey.

“Yes, ma’am” my father said, smiling and nodding without hesitation. It was customary for my father to respond a little too eagerly when asked a question by any white person. I rolled my eyes.

“Just step into that booth,” the woman instructed after checking my father’s name off a register. She smiled at me. “Your daddy will be right back; you can have a seat.”

I didn’t want to sit down. I was nervous about my father being sealed into a little booth, and the way the women stared at me with their beaming white smiles from their beaming white faces was unsettling. I fidgeted by the glass doors, eyeing our car sitting as an escape just steps beyond.

A few minutes later, my father pulled aside the curtain and turned in his ballot. The woman pressed an “I voted!” sticker onto his sweater. He smiled, not out of appeasement but of genuine pride. We walked back out into the sunshine.

“This is why we bring you to America, Annie,” he said.

I looked at his white sticker with its checked off ballot box graphic.

“You not forget.”

I never forget that tenet of a free and equal democracy, and 13 years later, when my passport was safely returned to me after I was registered as a foreigner in Vietnam, I

wondered what it would be like without rights in a society with little celebrated individuality. I mulled over my situation. I had not suffered a lifetime of fighting one war or surviving another battle, nor did I know how to fight in a world where I didn't understand the rules. As much as I had tried to be confident about my independence, deep down I was as naïve as my parents feared. My uncle continued to chew on his toothpick, staring with me at the fence with its barbs.

I had my uncle take me to the embassy to see if there were more answers there and was insistent that the Embassy was expecting me. I had missed the Fulbright orientation in the fall, but I was certain that the Fulbright director would catch me up to speed once I met him at the Embassy, introducing me to the other eight scholars and giving me advice on where to go for a good cup of coffee or a hamburger and fries. Surely, he would tell me *something*.

My uncle paid for an attendant to take his bicycle, and we made our way from the busy street of Le Duan toward the friendly, yellow building of the American Embassy. I saw the line for the main entrance and was excited to see that there was no one at the U.S. citizens' entrance. Not even two steps from the door, I was grabbed by Vietnamese guards wielding batons and pistol holsters.

"I'm American," I shouted, waving the only weapon I had – my blue passport. The guards stepped back doubtfully. They whispered a few things between themselves and then chuckled and shrugged. One of the guards gave a disingenuous bow before pushing open the American citizen's door to let me inside.

"Thank you," I said in the clearest annunciated English I could manage. Inside the embassy, I was comforted by what seemed like any normal office. Signs I could read, people walking around in suits, air-conditioning. I let out a breath of relief and made my way to the receptionist's desk where I asked to speak to Tran Xuan Thao.

The receptionist shook her head. She had never heard of the name.

"Are you sure? Is there someone else here who might know this man?" I asked. I pulled out my Fulbright welcome letter, and looked over the country director's contact information. It was clearly typed out so I thought perhaps I had mispronounced his name.

I pushed it towards her and pointed at Tran Xuan Thao. She sighed and scanned a typed out directory of office numbers and names.

“No one here by that name.” She shook her head again; her little black curls bounced against her rouge-colored cheeks.

Seeing my distress, my uncle intervened. He explained that his niece was very important and was in Ho Chi Minh City because of this man at the embassy. He pulled out his spectacles to read the name himself and asked if she could kindly check her records again. The woman called another co-worker over. She smiled at me while frustration must have twitched across my face.

“I’m sorry, this man in Hanoi, not here,” the woman finally said.

“No, no, there has to be a mistake,” I said. “I’m being sponsored by the embassy. I need to speak with him.”

She seemed to pity me or at least recognize the desperation I knew was in my voice. “I call him for you. Wait one minute,” she said.

My uncle asked me to explain in Vietnamese what was going on, and I said things were working out just fine. I waited for the phone to pick up in an office somewhere that was expecting me, and for everything to fall into the correct place.

She handed me the phone and nodded.

“Yes, this is Tran Xuan Thao. Is this Annie?”

“Yes, it is!” I felt like a little girl who just heard her parents’ voice over a loudspeaker after getting lost in a department store. I knew it! I knew I’d find someone who’d tell me what was going on.

Tran Xuan Thao definitely told me what was going on, but it wasn’t the news I had wanted to hear. Aside from registering with the U.S. Consulate’s Office to provide an address where I could be reached in case of some international political fallout or war, I was beholden to no one. There was no prescribed curriculum, no logistical support provided, no place to check in regularly nor anyone to check in on me. The program was relatively young in Vietnam, and there wasn’t any infrastructure in place. Instead, I had the autonomy to pursue my objectives, and now it was up to me to find my own truths.

I was silent for a moment too long as I processed what he was saying.

“Welcome to Vietnam, Annie. Maybe we meet next time I’m in Ho Chi Minh City,” Tran Xuan Thao said. “If you need anything else, about being an American in Vietnam, you can meet the U.S. cultural affairs officer upstairs.”

I hung up, and not knowing what else to do, I went upstairs to meet Scott, a friendly man whose family had long been in the Foreign Service. He greeted me with the ebullience I expected from a legacy of Foreign Service. “Well, welcome. You’re doing a great thing, this Fulbright.” He smiled. “I’ve met the others. How come you’re late?”

I explained the miscommunication between the Institute of International Education and me, how I’d then been delayed on a visa.

Scott fired away questions. How was my flight? Where was I staying? Was this my first time in Vietnam?

As we filled his office with chitchat, I sank further into his chair. It’d been over a week since I’d had such a long conversation in English, and even though it was just polite small talk, strangely it felt good. A photograph of the National Mall in D.C. hung on the wall behind him, and everything about his office – the real wood desk, the elevator music set to soft, the bookshelves with books I recognized – made me feel like I’d awakened from a bad dream. I wasn’t really living in a house without a toilet; I really had showered this morning.

Scott asked more questions about my studies and hobbies (we found we both played soccer), but it was clear he didn’t really understand why I was there and what he was supposed to do with me. As we fumbled past polite conversation into awkward silences, I began to wonder what I had expected the embassy to do for me anyway. The institution sponsoring me had little to do with the actual workings of the embassy.

When Scott didn’t know what else to say to me, he invited me to play soccer with him and his friends after they got off work the following Wednesday. I agreed to meet him, thinking that it would be in my best interest to spend as much time with Foreign Service officers as possible.

My uncle dropped me off the day of the scrimmage. He hesitated about leaving me alone.

“It’s the embassy,” I told my uncle, and buzzed the compound for access into the courtyard. My uncle waited to see me go inside and asked when I wanted him to come

back. I shrugged. I'd take a cab home, I said. I tried to hurry him off, embarrassed that the guys on the team could hear and see what was going on. I was sure none of them had been dropped off by their uncles.

The team met in the courtyard beside the embassy, closed off from the rest of Saigon by a six-foot orange concrete fence. We stretched out on the grass under banyan trees. Besides saying their names, they didn't tell me why they were there or much about themselves. I took it that they all knew each other fairly well and were a little suspicious of me as an addition. We had eight players, and the field was short, but even so, the Saigon humidity made every minute expand. My shirt dripped with sweat, and my shorts slid up and down my thighs. Luckily, the guys on the field were in their 30s, and even though their foot skills far surpassed mine, I kept up with them in speed. At the end of the game, the guys told me I was welcome to come any time, they played every Wednesday, and Scott gave me that pat on the shoulder reserved for players you might actually want on your team.

I walked outside the embassy and hailed a *xe-om*, an unofficial motorcycle taxi whose Vietnamese name, literally translated, is something like "motorcycle hug." Passengers get on the back of the motorcycle and "hug" the driver. In truth, *xe-om* drivers were just guys looking to make a fast buck. They had no special public transportation license and no real experience with shuttling people around. In the couple of weeks I'd been in Vietnam, I'd avoided the barrage of men calling out, "xe-om," "xe-om," "xe-om" as I walked down the street. This time, I shrugged. Why the hell not? And away I was whisked to my uncle's, riding on the seat behind a 20-something year-old whose name I never bothered to learn.

I got home and my uncle was mortified. He paid double what the driver had asked, and thanked him profusely for taking his niece home safely instead of taking advantage of me.

"Don't ever do that again," my uncle said. "Do you know what happened to a girl once who took a xe-om? She was driven out of the city and killed. That's what. You're on the back of a motorcycle. What would you do if he drove you someplace else?"

"I'd jump off," I said.

"You'd jump off," he scoffed.

Up and down the row of homes, my uncle chattered with his neighbors, “Can you believe her nerve?”

Nerve? I wasn’t sure I had that. Come the following Wednesday, when game time rolled around, I stayed at home to play cards with a cousin and watch a game of pick-up between a group of barefoot high school boys. My aunt set out a pitcher of iced tea for them, and a host of smaller boys assembled on the sidewalk sidelines to watch them play. They were using a deflated orange plastic ball, and had set up their flip-flops on either end as goal post markers. Their enthusiasm was infectious, and as the alley filled with their grunts and laughter, the hour slipped by.

I wound up playing soccer with the embassy guys only once. It had nothing to do with playing with older, more skilled men. I’d been on co-ed teams since I started playing soccer in seventh grade and was tempted to join the street game I was watching whose players worked the deflated ball in ways I couldn’t dream. Instead, as I sipped my aunt’s iced tea and watched the pick-up game of street soccer, I realized I didn’t want to play in the backyard of the embassy. It wasn’t because I was the only girl. It was that for the first time, it bothered me to be the only Vietnamese.



## CHAPTER IV: THE VALUE OF A DOLLAR

When I had arrived in January, I spent my first few weeks buying new clothes since my relatives decided the clothes I had brought were useless.

“See the material?” my aunt announced to the family. The relatives had all gathered at my uncle and aunt’s to meet the lost American and were now fixating on my clothes while we sat in circle on the concrete floor. There were not enough resin chairs in the house, and the bamboo floor mat was intended for only special occasions.

My aunt pinched the dark denim of my favorite jeans between her skeletal fingers. Most of the clothes I’d packed were designed to make it through a windy Washington, D.C. winter.

“Too thick and warm. American fabric. See the quality. Vietnam doesn’t make this kind of quality,” my aunt said. I wanted to point out the minor detail that my Levis had not been made in America. In fact, they’d been made in Hong Kong, but I couldn’t figure out how to discuss globalization with her. I didn’t even know the word for politics then, and could barely pronounce the word for money without raising eyebrows.

Even though my choice in clothes was chalked up to my seemingly endless naïveté, I hadn’t come fully unprepared for the elements and conditions of a tropical climate. It was just that the only thing I’d brought beside jeans were shorts. My mother had assured me when I was packing that wearing shorts was socially acceptable. “Do you think it not hot there, Annie?” she’d asked.

My mother always found a way to make me feel ridiculous – of course it was hot – but one day after arriving on the streets of Saigon and I found she was wrong. No one besides tourists wore shorts, and my relatives were embarrassed by the flesh I flashed when I wore them. Skirts were also inappropriate, too short, too dressy. I needed something casual, something lighter. Most of the women I saw wore cotton jumpsuits or lightweight pajamas around the city, and while I could suffer a little more for fashion than that, I did need to find *something*.

Enter my fashionable, younger cousin Thi – Chu Bao’s daughter – who was appointed to take me shopping. Based off of Chu Bao’s description, Thi was exactly as I imagined she would be. A high school senior applying for admission to a university in Singapore, Thi exhibited intelligence, obedience, domesticity, not to mention, she was

popular among her friends. If she had grown up in the States, I imagined she would have been the kid in high school I hated, who dodged subterfuges she knew I had schemed against her and would later still want to be friends. Thi had a cheerleader's bounce and a valedictorian's penchant for knowing everything and humorously pretending not to. But she also had Chu Bao's bulbous nose, and when she laughed, I couldn't help thinking she looked like a cartoon character. I made fun of her to myself because I knew in the first minutes I met her, without her or anyone else saying a word, that she had the upper hand on me. In her country, playing by her rules, I was the anomaly. A 22-year-old orphan abandoned in a country my parents wanted to forget. Thi agreed to take me shopping as a form of charity. It was one of many acts of charity I would become accustomed to.

"Thi's a great driver," Chu Bao told me as she pulled her moped out of their house and hopped on without a helmet. I was sure she was. She slid forward on the solitary seat cushion and flicked her head to the four inches of padding left. I understood I was supposed to somehow fit on the space behind her.

"Put your hands here," she said in English. She pointed to a metal bar behind the seat, and I held on as instructed, annoyed that even her English was pretty good. To her father, she said, "*Thua cha, con di*," or "respectfully, Father, I'm going," and just like that, she whisked us off to strips of trendy teenage stores it seemed she alone in the family had the privilege of knowing.

"And this store, it's expensive but all the smart girls buy here," she smiled over her shoulder as I clutched the back of her moped, as she veered this way and that, still talking to me and smiling over her shoulder. I feared for my life. Traffic was a game to her, one that I didn't want to watch. Horns blared and occasionally, what looked like a teenaged boy would shoot what I took to be a come-on and Thi would flirt back coolly while weaving us past other mopeds.

When we finally skidded over the sidewalk to a stop, she grabbed a cardboard numbered slip from the parking attendant, then turned to usher me into one hot spot after another. I tried on clothes to the beat of Michael Jackson's *Bad* album or sometimes, if I was lucky, to Celine Dion's *My Heart Will Go On*. Teenagers giggled and teased each other around the clothing racks and bins, the bright halogen lighting blanching everyone

into emaciated ghosts. The stores made me feel both dead and old, so Thi drove us to several of the city's indoor markets.

I'd never been in an outdoor market, with its varicolored offerings and crowds of buyers and sellers, and the competing scents and sounds smothered me. Thi shook her head at the way I staggered behind her, too stimulated by all the commotion to keep up with her brisk steps. I couldn't snake through the straits as well as she could, and she didn't have the patience to wait for me to figure it out. She grabbed my hand and pulled me into other people and past kiosk after kiosk of housewares and fruits and souvenirs until we finally reached the alleys of clothing.

Thi was adept even at bargaining. "How much?" she'd ask, and before the vendor had the chance to respond, she was already screwing up her face and throwing the pants back to the vendors who cowered at her ability of knowing exactly what she wanted and how much to pay for it. She bullied for better materials and cheaper prices, until we found vendors willing to spar with her instead of shrink behind the towers of goods stacked on the tables or hanging in layers on the standing screens. We bounced between these vendors like a pinball, searching for the right fit. Thi would toss me her find and shove me into the fitting area created by a flimsy curtain pulled across a corner of the vendor's stall.

I stood uncertain in the awkwardly small space. Sounds of complaining customers and smells of pickled fruits and salted seafood pushed me further into the corner. I couldn't pull the pants up without flashing a calf or thigh beyond the curtain's edge. I was nervous about my sweat-soaked money belt exposed around my naked waist, and even when I sucked in my stomach with the little air I could manage, I could never button the top. "Thi, is there anything larger?" I'd call over the curtain.

"You can say it in English," she'd respond, annoyed. She couldn't understand my Vietnamese because of my terrible pronunciation. "Your Vietnamese is too hard," she'd say over and over. "You sound Chinese." But after so many fittings, she already knew my complaint. The vendor would throw me the largest size he or she offered, and still, it was a miracle if I could get my thighs through the jeans. I couldn't understand. In the States, it was hard to find clothes small enough to fit my size zero frame, and now, it was just as hard to find clothes big enough. Even perfect Thi became flustered. By the third day,

when we drove up to her house defeated, she told her father I was difficult. “She’s just too fat.”

The idea I was fat seemed as foreign as the country at the time. I wanted to protest: I’m not fat. I’d spent my whole life on athletic teams. I used to be chided for looking anorexic.

My diet and eating habits changed. For months, I woke and ate my breakfast of pho beef noodles, which before living in Vietnam, I had always thought was a dinner meal. The noodles were usually ordered from a little boy who tapped a metal rod against a small metal pipe he held in his hands. The ring echoed through the neighborhood like the chime of an ice cream truck, ready for orders. My aunt would sometimes call him over and order a bowl of pho or two that he obediently brought back in plastic bags that were rubberbanded sealed. He also brought along a tray with bowls, chopsticks, spoons, and similarly bagged condiments, herbs, and bean sprouts. The baggies would be opened and poured into the bowls, and we were left with the condiments and herbs to season the noodles as we pleased. He usually came back for the tray within the hour, making door-to-door pho order and cleanup possibly the best delivery service I have ever used.

Sometimes for variety, my aunt biked down to a restaurant a couple of blocks away and ordered me eggs scrambled in fish sauce. She would bike back after ordering, and these, too, were delivered on a tray that was later collected by a restaurant employee, most likely a sibling or cousin of the owner. We never went out to eat because the local service allowed us to enjoy our meals from home. Eventually, though, I started to wake up past 8am, and since the rest of the city was up well before that, it was too late to be served breakfast. My aunt accommodated by making me coffee with condensed milk.

My aunt never made more than one serving of food for each person, and the rare leftover was often fed to the dog or stashed in a cabinet to be eaten with the next day’s meal. I never asked for more food, because for one, I couldn’t think of a worst way to show disrespect. Then on a practical level, the little I did eat didn’t sit with me. I spent a solid month, almost two, sitting in the bathroom after meals. I had to tailor new drawstring clothes. I found myself cinching more and more each month. It was such a natural weight loss that I didn’t notice it until I stepped off the plane returning me to

Alabama a year later. My mother screamed, “What happen to you?” In less than a year, my 5’3 frame went from 114 pounds to 86.

In my mother’s household, only two career paths mattered: medicine and law. My sister, with her constant doctor visits and reams of medical bills, was designated as the med school candidate. My mother reasoned that as a doctor, Trang could one day find the cure to diabetes among a host of other illnesses and could get discounts on things like blood tests and insulin. That alone would save my sister thousands. Intending my sister for med school left me, the one with a natural penchant for words, for law school.

“You want to be happy?” my mother would say whenever I asked her to see my debut in the school play or race in a cross-country meet. “Then you not do these things. You study. You be lawyer. You make money, then you be happy.”

My mother was not the kind of mom who believed in being well-rounded, well-liked, or even well-adjusted. She wanted well-positioned, and I couldn’t blame her.

She had agreed to be the sole breadwinner once my father decided he needed a degree from an American university to secure a decent job. There weren’t many options for a middle school teacher trained in the Vietnamese education system so my mom took a waiting job at a historic, higher-end restaurant downtown. The Casbah’s ornate décor and pressed linens introduced my mother to Mobile’s old society, whose prerequisites included country club membership and a fine taste in art and whose members seemed to only include lawyers and doctors and stay-at-home wives. My mother’s chattering about all our family financial troubles somehow made her a favorite among many of the customers. I’m not sure if she was as foreign to them as the troubles.

My mother got extra jobs babysitting some of the regular customer’s children. Their exquisite possessions and immense homes nestled in the hillsides of distant, nicer neighborhoods warped my mother’s sense of money. Having money meant never having to cook at home or buy meat on sale. It meant taking vacations to exotic places like Disney World or Colorado on first-class seats and purchasing new jewelry or clothes from fancy department stores with each new season. It meant the husband providing and the wife raising the children. It meant everything my family didn’t have.

Trang and I were raised on strict curfews and stricter budgets. We earned our keep by cleaning the house and working at the restaurant my mother opened after the Casbah closed. Once I turned 14, I spent my summer mornings earning ten dollars a day for hauling food and ice from the cellar and tending the salad buffet in the main dining room. It was a rite of passage, a task that my sister, aunt and uncles had done before I was of legal age to work. It took nearly half an hour to set up the buffet and then another half to break it down. In the long hours between, I plowed through my summer reading lists, rising to seat the occasional lunch customer. My mother never trusted me to take an order on my own – even if the order was just a buffet and a glass of sweet tea – but I could refill empty water glasses.

My mother's restaurant – Mai's – had done well in its first three years of operation, but when I began working there in its sixth year, the restaurant had moved to a larger, more expensive location. The Casbah customers who had followed my mom to her first restaurant became too busy to eat at the newer one, and the business was in a steady decline. On slower days, Mom paced the restaurant and stared out of the large picture windows at Airport Boulevard, where cars passed steadily but rarely turned in. She wondered aloud why no one was stopping to have a quick lunch and opened the front and side doors to see if the neon open sign had been turned on.

Watching her troubled me. On bookmarks, I tallied the number of customers, counted how many \$5.95 all-you-can-eat buffets were sold, and figured out the maximum amount of profit from each guest. I squirmed at the end of my lunch shift, when Mom handed me cash from her battered brown leather purse. I was supposed to squirrel away the money to purchase my own clothes, school supplies, and whatever else I wanted over the next year. It should have added to \$400 dollars by the end of summer, but sometimes, when my mother wasn't watching, I tucked the money back in her wallet.

It never occurred to me in those long hours at the restaurant that my mother might have imagined a different life for herself. She had been in the service business for as long as I could remember – waitressing, hostessing, eventually managing our family as restaurant employees in her own business. I had never known that she was a schoolteacher in a former life, from a respectable family that had owned a fair amount of land in Vietnam and had the honor of many sons to work the land and provide for the

family. I only knew that there was no way my mother's business made enough to recover her costs, pay me, and pay her brother, who worked as the cook.

After the restaurant closed its doors for good and I headed to college, I did as my mother wanted. I took political science courses and declared a major in English, the penultimate step in becoming pre-law. A series of part-time jobs helped me pay tuition and rent.

Between studying and working in Washington, D.C., I started to form my own sense of money. GW attracted many students whose families could afford its private-school fees, but even on a presidential scholarship, I couldn't. I was lost among my label-conscious friends, and completely ignorant of second homes and time-shares. But as opposed to my mother who was enamored by and driven to find access to such a world, I found myself disillusioned. The opulent life my mother had painted for me as a child lost its luster day by day, as I cut out coupons and found myself preferring a good deal on a sale item to the latest new fad.

I started interning for an environmental non-profit, after quitting a better-paid job as a recruiting clerk for a top-rate law firm. When I could still make ends meet after depositing my first piddly stipend check, I realized money meant little to me, and what was more, I didn't want to go to law school. Other jobs seemed more important, and almost anything sounded more appealing than taking the LSAT and studying for a bar exam.

My mom didn't take the news well when I told her that I was going to be a writer. "How much you make?" she asked.

To this day, I think she is still holding out hope.

I can't say I was surprised to find my mother's insistence that I go to law school following me across continents, with my uncle being the prime spokesman.

"You see that man?" Bac Du said to me over the heat of Saigon. "He just got back from America."

My ears perked up. "Really? Another Viet-Kieu? Where?"

My uncle nodded over to the man walking into the house next door. Without my glasses on, I could only make out the crisp polo shirt and slacks that had to be the Viet-

Kieu's. The house next door was the nicest one on the block – a Spanish tiled roof, four floors with balconies extending from the top three, and in the front living room, a large screen television that took up almost the entire wall of the room. It faced the street so anyone walking by could see it.

“He just got home,” my uncle said, whittling down a bamboo skewer to make a toothpick.

My attention returned to the wooden table before us. “Where did he go?” I said.

“To America.”

It was early, before my usual 8am wake-up, and I was annoyed. My uncle had a way of repeating information he had already told me. He must have thought I didn't understand him the first time. I was too tired to explain that I was looking for the name of a city or state.

“He goes and comes every year,” my uncle continued.

I sipped my tea in the mid-morning heat. I knew what was coming next.

My uncle tested out his new-made toothpick. “He's very successful, that man. His two sons are lawyers. No, doctors. Well, one's a doctor, and the other one, he fixes these.” My uncle tapped his own tar-browned teeth with the toothpick. I wasn't sure if he didn't know the word for dentist or if he thought I didn't.

I nodded, trying hard to look bored. Of course, they were doctors. What was a Viet-Kieu after all if he wasn't a doctor? I had heard similar stories ten times over from every Vietnamese person I'd known and marveled that even here, I was haunted by the fact I hadn't pursued the guaranteed success route my mother had all but begged me to take.

My uncle and aunt were push-cart vendors, and I spent those first few days sitting at a table beside their vending cart, watching the school children come in and out of the white-washed concrete fence that separated the alley from their campus. The boys wore uniforms of navy blue pants and white shirts that looked like sailor tops, while the girls wore fluttering, white *ao dais*. *Ao dais* were no longer common dress, but reserved as uniforms and special occasion wear. The rumor of a Viet-Kieu living with my uncle and aunt passed through the alley quickly and leaked into the high school. Before long, students were coming to my uncle and aunt's stall before classes, during lunch, and after



school to sit at the table a few seats away from me. They smoked cigarettes or sipped the jasmine tea that my aunt sold. They chatted or played cards, while watching me from the corners of their eyes.

My aunt laughed as the boys and girls collected their books, hopped on their bicycles, and pedaled away. “You’re good for business,” she told me.

I was always careful not to discuss money with Bac Du and his wife. I had come to understand that my father stopped writing his brother when he could no longer handle their persistent requests for money. For Bac Du, like many locals I met, immigrating to the U.S. translated to immediate success. And success meant money. It had not taken me more than a few days to realize my father had not been able to swallow his pride and tell my uncle and aunt the truth – we weren’t millionaires living on the gold-paved streets of America. He never directly lied, but instead of correcting their preconceived notions, he stopped communicating with them. I was disappointed he let them believe we were swimming in greenbacks, but I was in no place to correct this myth.

Though my uncle had not been actively engaged in the military during the War, he was among the thousands who suffered the repercussions. He lost his home and his land in Qui Nhon as part of the post-war, communist-motivated redistribution policy, and then afterwards, when the government decided to start rebuilding bombed out city buildings, my uncle trained to be a construction worker. The hours were long, and the work was dangerous. There were no government regulations or codes on building materials or construction site safety, and my uncle relayed stories of men who plunged to their deaths or lost limbs handling the equipment. Despite my aunt’s protests that they needed whatever little income he could bring in, my uncle eventually quit.

“There is something called honor,” he told me. “The way they treat you and pay you, like an animal, that is not honor.”

He had built the house we lived in himself, mixing the concrete for the walls and melting the tar that sealed in the roof of corrugated tin with his own bony arms and hands. The rooms were small, and the bathroom stall was equipped with a red bucket that caught the dribble from the spigot in the corner. I showered by scooping up pails of cold water and pouring them over my lathered head. Water would slosh into the hole used as a toilet beside me, and creaking, moist wood rafters loomed above me. I could hardly turn

around without bumping the bucket on one side or stepping into the hole on the other. Propping my leg up on the exposed metal pipe to shave was a deadly balancing act.

The dark and gloomy critters that watched me bathe compounded my discomfort. Spiders and mosquitoes flitted and crawled in the corners and along the chipping walls, and for the first few days, I was afraid to undress for fear of getting bitten. I never got used to the roaches. I was always sure to check the stall before slipping out of my clothes, and if I saw a roach that stretched longer than my thumb, I'd run out and ask my uncle to kill it or shoo it away.

"It's just a roach," he'd say. And to my relatives, he would laugh. "She can get in a plane and fly around the world, but she's scared of a bug she can kill with her foot."

I was ridiculed for wearing flip-flops in the shower, a practice I had picked up from sharing shower stalls in dorm rooms and at camp. The flip-flops in those tiled showers were supposed to protect us from athlete's foot, but I could only imagine what my roommates and fellow camp counselors would say if I told them I was trying to avoid directly stepping on something slimy and moving. That seemed much worse than bacteria I couldn't see.

In trying to normalize my life, I stuck by my previous daily routine, showering and brushing my teeth each morning. My uncle thought I had lost my senses. "It's not even hot before 11am," he'd shake his head. Showers were for cooling off, and it was a wasteful luxury to use them in the mornings. Didn't I feel dirty covered by the Saigon dust by midday? My uncle suggested I shower twice a day.

I shrugged. Coming home in the middle of the day to shower seemed irrational. As for the dust, sure it bothered me, but the bathroom stall bothered me more, and preferred not taking twice as much time in there. As the months passed, I affectionately came to call the shower stall my Chinese water torture chamber, and nicknamed myself the Mosquito-Killing Maverick as I counted the mosquitoes I slapped between my hands.

*Ten, an egg must have hatched somewhere*, I thought one day, and washed the bloody remains from my palms with my shampoo.

My aunt insisted on washing my clothes with her daily wash, but imagining how her bony back must have ached as she stood doubled-over the hand-washing, I took my laundry back. She told me it was harder than it looked.

“I’ve been doing my own laundry since I was six,” I assured her and tossed the clothes into a growing pile in the bedroom. Once a week, I boiled water over a kerosene burner and collected enough water for doing laundry in four metal thermoses. Combining this with colder water and tabs of laundry soap I had brought with me from the States, I then stomped on my clothes like grapes in a metal basin. My relatives laughed as I hiked my jeans up around my knees and placed my palms against the concrete walls to avoid losing balance on the slippery balls of clothing.

“Too much to wash at one time,” my aunt chided. “You wash every day like your aunt, and then you will not have to wash your clothes with your feet. You can use just your hands.”

But it was much more efficient to wash once a week, I said, and wrung out the clothes before hanging them on a wire nailed along the outside of the house. The neighbors gawked at my laundry, bras and underwear on full display, and looked at me with suspicion. I stopped wearing a few of the more risqué items.

My aunt later showed me that to remove the increasing sweat stains on my clothes, I needed to spit on the fabric and then rub it between my fingers before stomping it clean. I was skeptical at first, but a few stain-free shirts later and I was spitting all morning on laundry day.

My uncle and aunt got a phone line a few months after I arrived, when the wealthy neighbor took pity on us, and a long telephone cord was purchased to run the phone from his house into ours. “You cannot tell anyone I let you use this phone,” the neighbor told my uncle. “Do not make any suspicious phone calls, and no calls abroad. Only receive calls.” They tried to hide the cord by tying it with other electric cords that ran into the house. I understood that the government could see phone bills detailing call histories, but I didn’t believe that such a government would stop there. Why not tap phone calls coming into the country? The new line provided me little relief, not to mention how much it cost to call the States, so I quickly learned to rely on email to communicate with my friends and boyfriend at home. I wrote page-long emails every few weeks to let them know I was alive and to feel a little more connected to things I could identify.

We ate sitting cross-legged or crouching on our haunches on the floor of the living room each evening, a pot of rice and some bowls of pickled cabbage, a selection of meat, and fish sauce in front of us. Eating on the floor was a common practice, and even when I went to visit relatives who had dining tables and chairs, they often spread out a bamboo mat and had us eating in a circle on the ground.

Everyone had a palm-sized china bowl filled with rice that we held about six inches from our chins in one hand while chopsticks occupied the other. We grabbed at food from the plates in the center and placed it in our bowls. My aunt often pinched a piece of meat with a pair of chopsticks from her dish that she found particularly appetizing and placed it into my bowl to eat. It was a sign of affection to share food that way, and my cousins and uncle were also quick to pick out the best food from the central dishes to put in my bowl before choosing bits to eat themselves. I learned to bring the rice bowl to my face each time I took a bite.

During meals, my uncle and aunt would ask about my classes and then get caught up in discussing family affairs and local news. I learned my uncle's favorite stories often started with, "Did you know..." or "Can you believe..." while my aunt's with, "Did you see that person..." or "Did you hear that this neighbor..." I nodded as they retold stories that stretched beyond truth through the power of their imaginations and the rumors that spread through the clustered buildings of their neighborhood. My favorite story was the one of the man whose brain was operated in one hospital while his body in a different one.

When given something to drink, I eyed the thawing ice suspiciously, wondering if the water for that ice had been sterilized and nervous that I would contract giardia. My uncle had scoffed at my water purification pitcher – "see what these Americans will come up with next!" – and preferred boiling water to make sure it was germ-free. Since ice came from the ice delivery truck, I had no way of knowing what the condition of the water was before, but it was just too hot to drink a beer or have tea without ice.

At first, my aunt tried a different main meat dish each night, testing out what she thought I would enjoy. We started with pig ears, moved into boiled chicken, and attempted sautéed pork. A little after each meal, I found myself running to my Chinese water torture chamber and sitting above the hole of a toilet while my stomach roiled. My

aunt and uncle would try to make light of my diminishing appetite by saying that my stomach was in shock from the lack of hamburgers. One night, Bac Gai told me she had a trick to ease my stomach pains. She took a quarter she had received as a souvenir and told me to lift up my shirt. Apprehensive of what she expected to do with the quarter, I lifted enough of my shirt to expose my stomach and lay down. Holding the quarter flat between her fingers, she used the ridges to scratch my stomach, “to let the gas out,” she said.

I don’t know if the stomach pains or the quarter scratches hurt more. The pink lines across my stomach lasted two days, and afterwards, I stopped complaining about stomach pains and took my Pepto Bismal in peace. I later found out that stomach scratching was a common housewife’s treatment for gas. Another popular treatment that intrigued me was the use of heated teacups to alleviate colds and sore muscles. The heated teacups seared round circles into the flesh of the affected area – generally placed on the back for respiratory colds – and left permanent scars in some cases. But after the quarters, I resisted trying other household remedies. I was thankful my parents had treated my illnesses with an assortment of over-the-counter medicines, though I figured out that my sister’s often-told story of having her stomach cut open because she had complained about dinner must have been her getting her stomach scratched.

In the constant quest to get me to eat, one night, Bac Gai brought out the kerosene stove, pineapple chunks, beef slices, and orange soda. I never drank orange soda so I thought it was odd she was serving it with dinner, but then I watched as she poured it into the bowl above the flame. As the carbonated foam began to bubble in the center of the living room floor, I was sure she had gone mad.

“Aunt, why do you want to drink warm soda when it’s so hot outside?”

She laughed. “No, orange soda makes the meat sweet and soft.” She added the beef slices to the simmering soda, now foaming with the fat of the meat. I watched, mesmerized, and asked if I could take some pictures.

“Why waste your film?” she said, unable to understand how I could find something so common to be picture worthy.

We had the beef with rice that night, and after a hesitant bite, I began to gush with compliments. It was the best meal we’d had yet; the beef was so sweet! I kept repeating how wonderful the food was, rubbing my hand over my stomach to pantomime good

food, probably trying to make up for all the other times I had left dinner to go straight to the bathroom. And with that, I sealed my fate. From that day forward, the leftover dinner was stored in a cabinet to be served for the next day's lunch, and I ate pineapple beef twice a day for four months.

For dessert, they offered me treats from their push-cart, but never took any money for them. I insisted, but they told me I was a guest in their house, and my money was worthless. After thanking them for the dried prune or stick of gum, I'd wait until they were in the kitchen storing leftovers or washing dishes before I'd place a few bills of Vietnamese dong inside their money drawer. I usually didn't have small bills on me and the amount I gave them was often much more than they ever paid for the treats. I was sure they would become suspicious, and eventually just told them I didn't like to snack.

My aunt slept with me under a mosquito net on their full-sized bed for the first couple of weeks. Hanging the mosquito net was a task that involved us standing on the bed and hooking the lines of the net over the nails driven into the plywood five feet above us, then tucking the edges in under the bed. The bed became an encased safe area, and my aunt explained that mosquitoes could find any gap or nick in the net. I had malaria pills with me that I had been told I wouldn't need in Saigon because the area was treated for disease, but even so, my aunt and uncle also assured me that the mesh of the mosquito net was fine enough to protect us from the pests at the night. I once woke to a loud screeching in the rafters above us and screamed for my uncle, who laughed and told me it was just a bat that had gotten caught in the net. The thrashing bat managed to pull off one side of the net and tangled itself so badly that its radar had been thrown off. We watched it fly out of the house when we untangled it in the morning.

My aunt wedged a body pillow between us to separate my side from hers, until the night she and my uncle asked me to describe my home in the States. How many rooms are there? they wanted to know. I wondered how much I should tell them. On the one hand, I didn't want to lie, but on the other, I felt bad disclosing that in my parents' new house, my sister, parents, and I each had our own bedroom. The new house was twice the size of the one where I grew up, and while it wasn't massive, there was a guest bedroom and a formal dining room, on top of all the usual rooms for a middle-class

house. I decided to only say that we had enough space for a family of four, and that growing up, my sister and I used to fight over the bathroom.

From the little I told them, they were still able to figure out that I wasn't used to sharing a bed with anyone, much less an aunt, and that night, they moved the body pillow out to the main room, where my aunt, my uncle, my aunt's mother, and my 17-year-old cousin slept on bamboo mats that they would roll out on the floor each night. Cousin Minh, who taught me card games and helped me with my language classes, was sent back to a farm in central Vietnam for the summer. My aunt's mother sat in a corner of the house during the days and turned towards the direction of our voices. A severe case of glaucoma impaired her vision, and she spoke to me only once, when no one else was around to hear her. While I couldn't understand the words she used, the intention was unmistakable. I gave her seat a wide berth whenever I passed, avoiding her thin, slumping frame and the unnatural blueness of her infected eyes. Before she asked to live the remainder of her days with a different daughter, she muttered something else to me. I learned from my aunt that something about me made her uncomfortable.

One afternoon, I found Cousin Gai's son fishing around the wardrobe in my room.

"Are you looking for something?" I asked.

He shook his head, and I smiled.

"Let's go outside," I said, and held out my hand to lead him.

I had spent a lot of time working with children in the States, and thought I was good at communicating and playing with them. When I met him my second day in the country, I gave him a wand that lit up, a small toy I had intended to use to connect with a child. His eyes twinkled with the flashing wand-light, and I was pleased with myself at his amusement. I thought it was the first step in us becoming friends.

But he never said anything to me, even when I asked him direct questions. He averted my eyes and dug at the ground with his toe. His mother later complained to my uncle about the cost of batteries, and I wondered what I had gotten myself into. So when I later refolded clothes he had shifted and noticed that 100,000 dong, or about \$7, that I had hidden in my clothes was missing, I wasn't sure what to do. I could tell my uncle, but it didn't make sense to rat out my cousin's son over \$7 dollars. Not to mention, he had

never asked for the toy, and maybe it was my fault that I didn't recognize he couldn't afford the batteries. I reasoned the \$7 would make him a lot happier than it would have made me and locked up my cash after that.



## CHAPTER V: MOVING FORWARD

I awoke sweating at nearly four in the afternoon. *Just a dream*, I told myself, and lied in bed listening for the sounds of the house. The humidity had impressed the shape of my body against the foam core mattress, creating a mold that resisted every shift of weight I now made. Still tired, I noticed my aunt had drawn closed the rayon bed sheet that hung as a divider from the bedroom ceiling. I studied the sheet sheltering me from the noise and heat outside as it billowed in and out, pushed by fluctuating waves of air from the table fan behind it.

That table fan. I couldn't see it but I now knew well its whirl and whiz. Closing my eyes, I wished that I could click my heels together to be back in the air-conditioned apartment I had left behind in D.C. I had never thought of breathing as a comfort before, but in Saigon, the 115-degree temperature and added humidity made breathing an exercise.

During the afternoons of the pre-monsoon season, I could do nothing but sleep. Southern Vietnam had only slight temperature changes between seasons. Instead, the year was divided into a rainy and dry season, and until the clouds broke we were in 115-degree weather with no air-conditioning. When I first arrived at my uncle and aunt's three weeks before, I had tried to walk a block to the market, navigating through the waves of humidity with legs that tired with each step. The neighborhood streets lay restless, the corner food stalls shut down. Cyclo drivers slept curled in the comfort of their buggies, the bicycle stop pulled so that the pedal-operated cyclo stayed in place. When I at last made it to the market, I couldn't remember why I was there. I began spending the peak hours of the afternoon heat sleeping, breathing with the porous concrete house – deep and slow. *Ngu trua*, my relatives called it, the afternoon sleep.

Before I had come to Vietnam, I had spent a frenzied four years working two to three jobs at once, and trying to keep up with two different majors, sorority obligations, and newspaper and yearbook staff duties. I measured my life in tasks and accomplishments. A final report submitted. Rushing a new pledge class. I didn't know how to not be busy, so when I arrived in Vietnam, I didn't know what to do with myself. Most of my first few weeks were whiled away sleeping or sitting or watching. Sleeping in the afternoon, when I wasn't tired but instead drugged from the weighted air, made me

dream vividly. I dreamt of spiders biting me, of my teeth falling out, of losing my voice. If I were a dream analyst, I would guess all of the scenes were metaphors for some sense of change, of self or maybe of place. I thought of writing a friend from home who could tell me, but that seemed like effort I couldn't afford to expend. I let myself sink deeper into the foam core mattress, and contemplated what would happen if I spent the rest of my days sleeping in my uncle's house and accomplishing nothing. No one cared what I was doing and counting the days until my return to the States seemed the easiest thing to do. I wasn't getting tested and I didn't have to turn in a final project. I could just sleep away the entire year.

I turned off the table fan and stepped into the midday sun, passing the clucking chickens as I rounded the corner of the house to the sidewalk. I'd discovered that of the four chickens we kept, only one laid eggs. It bothered me that the scrawny others still clucked for noodle scraps.

My uncle was leaning back against the concrete that made up one wall of his house. His plastic-sandaed feet were propped up on his push-cart, and an ill-tasting 555 cigarette hung from his gaunt lips. The careless nature of it flouted my uncle's defiance to my aunt's appeals that he not smoke. She was the one who had to ride her bike fifteen minutes each week to the cigarette wholesaler, where she bought a carton or two of 555s and then parsed them out to sell one by one. The half a pack my uncle smoked each day undoubtedly ate any profit they made from the dozen or two cigarettes they might have sold.

"The baby awakes!" my uncle said, clapping his hands together and smiling with a kind of glee that so often made him seem childlike. He motioned for me to sit in the plastic chair beside him.

I faked a smile as I pushed the table out a couple of inches to have room for my legs, the harsh sound of wood scraping against concrete now familiar as well.

My aunt paused from her sweeping to turn and smile at me. I had not yet figured out why my aunt insisted on sweeping the sidewalk when the dust just returned any time one of the hundreds of passing motorcycles went by. She returned to hunch over the bamboo of the broom and push around the dust.

According to the city residents, the dirt and dust was brought in from the vagrant workers from the countryside. These workers, who drove into the city each morning before dawn to work in the factories and the kitchens of Ho Chi Minh City, pulled their motorcycles through the dirt of their front yards and the mud of unpaved country roads. Sometimes, they brought goods ranging from multi-colored cloth to live chickens to sell in the populous markets. There were enough of these commuters that the residents believed they were the cause of the dust that collected in clouds above the city, but a little of my own research revealed that the dirt and dust was more the result of exposed sewer systems and evaporating sewage that blew into the streets. We were inhaling sewage.

“Does the baby want anything to drink?” she asked. My uncle had been offering me beer with every meal once he found out I liked beer, and he felt my presence alone was reason to celebrate. But a couple of weeks of this lavishness, and my aunt put a stop to it.

“Look at this silly old man,” she would say to the neighbors. “Giving away beer he can’t afford to buy.” She was content to serve me Coke.

Before I had the chance to answer that I didn’t want a drink now, she lifted the lid of an igloo chest and pulled out a slab of ice, which was sold every morning from an ice truck that drove to all the push-cart vendors in the neighborhood. With one move, my aunt removed a rusted butcher’s knife that was tied with yarn to the side of the cart and hooked on a rusted iron nail, and hacked off a chunk of ice. She dropped it into a Mason jar set in front of me. As if on cue, the house mongrel Be-be growled from beneath the wobbling wooden table. He bared his fangs at me at least twice a day.

“Be quiet, Be-be,” my aunt said in a voice that was more, “you are wonderful,” than “you are being reprimanded,” and poured a bottle of Coke into my glass. To me, she said, “You should drink your Coke before the flies do,” and turned to continue sweeping the dirt.

I brushed the flies off the top of the glass and drank as I was told.

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Almost a year before, I had toasted with a circle of my six closest girlfriends over a few pitchers of Foggy Bottom brew at our favorite college dive bar. “Here’s to making the next-to-last cut!” they cheered, and we all took swigs from our pint glasses.

“What exactly does next-to-last mean?” one friend asked. She’d been my roommate for the first two years of undergrad and was in a selection process of her own to teach English abroad. I hadn’t seen her since her return from Seattle, where she had presented her self-designed language lesson plan. She was still waiting to hear if she would be in Asia.

“Not much,” I answered under the noise of the bar. “It just means I’m a runner-up. If there’s more funding, I get to go to Vietnam.” I sipped on my glass, eyeing the rim for chips. “Unlikely.”

“Or in other words, good... but not good enough,” one of my sorority sisters joked. Her high-pitched laugh reverberated off the wooden walls, and she pushed me into the table.

“Or, perhaps maybe that you’ll have to keep studying or get a real job like the rest of us,” another sister teased. Andrea had just taken the GMATs herself and was accepting an offer at Ernst and Young after weeks of schmoozing at recruiting dinners on campus. She had a concrete world of sign-on bonuses and funded master’s programs, and somehow it seemed to me a much more responsible feat than applying for fellowships and two-year teaching stints.

“Oh, get a real job, and then we can save some money and just go to Vietnam on our own!” her roommate Lisa said. “You know, I loved it when I was there. It was my favorite country on Semester-at-Sea. Have you seen the pictures in my room?”

“Yes, we’ve all seen your pictures.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, Annie cares.”

“Yeah, I care,” I said – and I did. Three days on a boat off the coast of Vietnam was still closer than I had ever been. I had only been out of the country once, on a weeklong Spring Break trip, where I’d been ignored by locals for not speaking Spanish and chased out of the Prado when my camera flashed in a light-restricted area. Lisa had tried to show me the cultural nuances of her birthplace while Andrea had used her Spanish to steer us around Madrid. In the end, I still didn’t like the country much, and my passport had since been used only to get me into bars when my driver’s license went missing.

We ordered more pitchers and spent the next two hours chatting about our futures and our upcoming graduation, what finals were coming up and our plans for that weekend. As music and smoke filled the space around us, I felt relieved to be staying in D.C. After four years in the company of my friends, I could predict what was being said without even having to hear it and could do anything, surrounded by a safety net of good friends. I could stand on the table and try traditional Irish dancing, kicking off pint glasses in every direction if I wanted (not that I did), and the next day, rather than feel remorse or embarrassment, I would simply recount the night with my friends and laugh at how incredibly ridiculous we had been. It was hard to believe I wanted anything else.

I had studied Asian American literature and had found a link between writers reconnecting with their heritage and finding their voice. Finding the elusive voice challenged most aspiring writers, and it seemed an easy fix to travel to another country to find it. Additionally, I'd gotten more familiar with hyphenated Americans – Irish-Americans, Jewish-Americans – in D.C., and I'd begun to wonder more about the hyphen of my own label. These premises prompted me to apply for the Fulbright. It seemed like a great opportunity. A stipend, a university affiliation, a program to guide my steps. A college boyfriend had applied for one a couple of years before me, and his runner-up status told me anything was possible.

I started the application process a week before it was due and didn't think I had much of a chance. The person before me came out of the room like a Kennedy candidate out of a debate – all handshakes and smiles. I, on the other hand, had had a late night before closing the BBQ restaurant where I worked and had squeezed in the interview on a break from my university job. I was wearing the only thing that could pass as a suit, a little black number in crepe I picked up my junior year of high school. It was too short in some places and too long in others. I fiddled uncomfortably with the loose hem as I sat opposite the five professors interviewing me, a long expanse of mahogany conference table between us.

The questions were simple enough: why, why and why. Why Vietnam? Why the Fulbright? And most importantly, why me?

I walked out of the room fifteen minutes later, disoriented by the lights, the stares, the shuffling papers as the board had sifted their way into different questionable aspects of my proposal. I felt betrayed by my own words.

With graduation on the horizon, the Fulbright symbolized a larger purpose, giving me an opportunity after college that was more than accrued holiday time and retirement investments. In that delusional way that one believes that his or her life will be bigger and more beautiful than any life before, I wanted to pursue some undefined largeness that was not being offered by any entry-level job. I was running from everything ordinary about my life. When I found I was wait-listed, I recognized that as the evaluation committee's kind way of saying no, there was nothing else; I would have to head out to the real world. Instead, two months later in June, I received an embarrassed phone call from the Institute of International Education explaining they had mailed the wrong letter.

"Congratulations," the acceptance letter now read, "we are pleased to inform you that you have been selected to represent the United States in Vietnam as a Fulbright scholar for 2000-2001." I read and reread that first line, half-believing the words would disappear if I took my eyes off of them. My real world was fading in my fingertips; I was heading to Vietnam.

The Fulbright required that I spend ten months in Vietnam, offering the possibility for an extension should my proposal need more time for completion. I could not think of any situation where I would need an extension, but knowing that it was a possibility was comforting because I was sure that with that much time, I could find what I was seeking, if in fact, I figured out what exactly I was seeking.

My first task was obtaining a year-long student visa, or getting affiliation, which meant finding a host university willing to sponsor my research. A tourist visa for Americans lasted only one month, and it appeared that approval each week beyond that month involved at least a day of paperwork, misunderstanding, and frustration. The ordeal took up much of my pre-departure preparations, particularly because the formal aspect of my proposal was to study Vietnamese language and literature, and no university offered Vietnamese literature in translation. I sought the advice of past Fulbrighters for the names of the universities they had attended, but none of them had done a project in literature and creative writing. Eventually, I selected a university that was listed in a

catalog in GW's library because "social sciences" was in its name. Several faxed requests and phone calls from my father to the dean later, I was approved for a visa.

I was also left to choose my own health and travel insurance (I chose none), take the required shots and vaccinations (I took none), and secure flights, room and board. No one bothered to find out if any of these recommended actions were carried out, and I later learned that the involvement of the commission varied according to U.S. relations with each individual country and the tenure and infrastructure of international educational exchange programs within that country. The Fulbright had only been in existence in Vietnam for two years, established once Americans had been allowed to enter and leave the country freely. I was based in Saigon and informed that other Fulbrighters were stationed in the other major cities of Ha Noi, Hue, and Nha Trang.

Because I'd missed the orientation, I didn't get to meet any of the other Fulbrighters until Scott, the cultural affairs officer, invited me to a dinner once. One woman was studying Economics at the World Bank and the impact of *doi moi*, the new economic policy that was shaping Vietnam as she was considering opening her borders to more international trade. Another man was studying the impacts of the American War (as most Vietnamese now referenced it) and the interpretation of America in Vietnamese history over the last thirty years.

My proposal was to study the literature and write, I explained, and my research materials had included a self-selected canon of literature, some pads of paper, and different colored pens, just in case I got bored of one color. When asked to elaborate on my proposal by my much senior, esteemed colleagues over that embassy dinner, I responded, "I'm writing about my experiences."

"So, what do you do *every day*?" the graceful Economics woman asked me, her black layers of hair shaping a perfectly polished face.

I threw my own disheveled locks from my shoulders. "Um, I wake up and eat breakfast with my uncle and aunt and go to class, well, some days I don't because there isn't class," I stumbled, as I looked back at the blank stares on me. Feeling that they were waiting for a better climax than what I was about to deliver, I said, "And, then I write." I dipped an egg roll I had just sliced into fish sauce and took a bite as the other Fulbrighters

exchanged knowing looks. Surely, they must have thought to themselves, the competition that year was not so difficult.

My days at my uncle's passed with ever more useless activities like watching my aunt sweep or teasing the chickens with bean sprouts. I felt pressed to get out. I asked to live in one of the university dorm rooms. It had to be the house and the constant supervision keeping me from experiencing the culture. My uncle hid his hurt and agreed to accompany me to the main office, where the university foreign student liaison personally showed me the historic rooms with their French décor and appointments. The plaster molding had indeed retained its intricate colonial designs, I noticed as she pointed it out, but more simply than that, there was air-conditioning and two beds with real mattresses of cotton and springs. The mini-fridge in the corner looked simply heavenly.

Bac Du eyed the extra bed and reasoned that he could come nightly after dinner to sleep beside me. He looked at the rooms with their freshly painted walls and studied the doors and the locks. He fretted over the location and how the streets surrounding the university were unsafe.

"Yes, but the foreigners are okay," the university administrator said. "Many of them stay here."

That was all I needed to hear. I was ready to sign a lease and hand over a month's deposit when the \$200 a month for rent made my uncle balk in indignation. For that amount of money, my uncle could renovate his entire home, he told me. "Just give me the money and I can seal the walls and add air-conditioning for you. We can buy one of those toilets that flush."

I explained that I was used to living on my own. That in the States, my parents in Mobile were at least a sixteen-hour drive from my apartment in DC and that I only saw them on major holidays, maybe twice a year. The debate lasted into dinner that evening. My relatives listened to me discuss my years of independence and shook their heads.

"That is so sad," Cousin Gai said. "Alone in a city."

My uncle asked me to stay for just another week, and his insistence on making me happy quickly turned the week into a month and then eventually into another five. His



home with its crumbling walls and bats and roaches became mine. I became the daughter he'd never had.

Each day passed much like the one before it. I got to and from the university riding on the back of my uncle's one-speed bicycle. While my uncle pedaled, I sat on the slender rack above the back wheel – the kind you see in old photographs with kids tying books to them. My legs dangled on either side of the back tire, with my feet sometimes on the hub. I spent the time before and after class either sleeping or aggressively learning Vietnamese. I wrote down phrases I heard that I didn't understand so that I could look them up later using the English-Vietnamese dictionary that my father had used to learn English. I found that as ironic as sad: we might have both needed to learn a foreign language to survive, but compared to my dad's heroic need for language, mine was a result of previous disregard.

My older cousins were convinced that I should never be alone and were more than willing to escort me if I wanted to see anything around the city. I wasn't allowed anywhere alone. I started to become intolerant of being asked where I was going, what I was doing, when I was eating or sleeping or showering or studying. Whatever I wanted to do or whenever I wanted to do it, there was a suggestion for a better way or a better time, and definitely, nothing was worse than being alone. Aggravated one day, I pulled out my dictionary and looked up, "independent." I pointed at the word and shoved the dictionary under my uncle and cousins' noses.

My later-favorite cousin Ngom looked at me sympathetically and smiled the way he always did, in that way that told me I was being ridiculous. "You don't have to be independent here," he said. "You have family."

Relatives were always visiting. They'd come in the morning to have tea or coffee with my uncle and aunt; they came during the day on their way between errands. They brought gifts or took food from my aunt, donated items or helped my uncle move things around in his junk piles. There was nothing I could do to get away from the barrage of them. A cousin always flanked my side or came to the house wanting to take me *some place*, show me *something*. I blamed my Americanism for making me such a novelty. They wouldn't stop smiling at me or patting my shoulder or squeezing the fat on my arm. ("She's so healthy, isn't she?" they'd say to each other.) Any attempt I made to speak

Vietnamese was met with laughter and then off I was tugged in the direction of something else I had to see.

One of my going away presents was a *Let's Go! Guidebook to Southeast Asia*, and while I mused over what the must-see sites of the Cu Chi Tunnels and the War Crimes Museum were like, I was actually led to places like the local Buddhist church, the teenage karaoke bar, and any number of shopping malls. Cousin Gai showed me the large generic store that sold all varieties of household wares and clothing, laughing at the lingerie she said had just become popular but that she could not understand how anyone wore. As we came upon the escalator, she clutched my arm with fear.

“Do you have this in America?” she asked, stepping onto the first moving step with a kind of nervous anticipation. She giggled and seemed so pleased that I didn't have the heart to tell her how common escalators were. I shook my head and timidly took a step with her onto the escalator.

## CHAPTER VI: A TASTE OF FREEDOM

But it was thanks to my cousins that I learned the proper way to cross the street. Sure, I had learned how to cross a street when I was five: looking both ways before heading into traffic and stepping into the crosswalk when the light was green. But what do you do when there are no crosswalks and red lights are mere suggestions? The first time I tried to cross one of the major streets that fed into the Ben Thanh Circle, I waited for ten minutes to eye a break in traffic. Then, I noticed the group of cyclo drivers beside me getting out of their cabs and starting to pull their carts across the intersection. I jumped at the opportunity to cross with them since I noticed that no one had ever hit a hand-pulled cyclo; the traffic just broke to either side around the two-wheeled buggies. I walked in the safety of the cylcos to the other side of the road.

“Aren’t you even going to thank us?” the drivers asked as I passed them, safe on the other side.

I smiled, not understanding, and they turned to cross back. It was only a few blocks later, wondering why they wanted my thanks, that I realized that they had been watching me and had crossed the street in order to give me protection. For the rest of the year, that action remained one of the most altruistic acts extended to me by a stranger.

Cousin Gai showed me that if I crossed the street slowly, the oncoming trucks, motorcycles and cyclos would have enough time to part to either side. Crossing the street involved a great deal of faith.

“All you have to do is walk slowly and consistently,” Chi Gai explained as she guided me across Hai Ba Truong Street. With one arm on mine and the other waving toward the oncoming traffic, she led me across six unmarked lanes of traffic.

“As long as the drivers can see where you’re going,” Chi Gai continued, “they can decide whether they should swing their moped to the left or right of you.”

Sudden movements or an irregular step could cause an accident or worse, a death. I crossed the street many times to the sound of motorcycles sliding out from under their drivers or cars screeching to a halt and still marveled whenever I made it intact to the other side.

Once I felt comfortable walking across traffic, I started to think about navigating it. At home, getting a car had been my first taste of real freedom, and I had fond

memories of cruising around Mobile with no real place to go, the windows down and my stereo blasting. Here, getting dropped off at the university on my uncle's bicycle brought back all the embarrassing days of my sister dropping me off in high school when all my other friends had cars. The more I eyed the kids riding around on their own bicycles and mopeds, the more I longed for my own independence and freedom.

After a couple of weekends, I begged to borrow my aunt's bicycle on a Friday night, asserting that if I could live for four years on my own in a city as big and important as Washington, D.C., I would be quite capable of getting around Saigon on a bike that didn't even switch gears. With their reluctant permission and a map of Saigon torn out of my guidebook and stuffed in my back pocket, I set out determined to meet friends. It had been so long since I had made friends that I had forgotten how. During my years in college, friends always seemed to be popping up, whether they came from my sorority or my housemates or my classes. I had long forgotten how the conversations were initiated, what I said first to make people like me, what it was about others that I liked. But I was sure I just had to put myself in a setting where someone else would notice me and that that someone would make the next step. There had to be some coffee shop or bar I could go where I could order a drink and have a conversation with someone, local or not. There just *had to be*.

But ten minutes meandering on the bicycle was enough to convince me that I would die if kept riding the one-speed around town. It simply wasn't fast or strong enough to get me where I wanted safely. A bicycle couldn't speed away from the trucks that turned too widely nor did it have the power to maneuver in and out of the streams of passing motorcycles. At night, without a headlight in the onslaught of motorized vehicles and without the aid of street lamps, it was borderline suicidal. I returned home and sulked.

I was convinced if I could go a little faster, I would be safer. I told my uncle my idea to buy a moped. I had come up with a list of reasons why I needed one, but I found he didn't need to be persuaded. It later occurred to me that though he couldn't afford one himself, he knew the moped I purchased would most likely end in his keep when I left.

My uncle consented to my request on the condition was that I had to learn how to drive and to become familiar with the roads in Saigon with my cousin Dinh who was the

most credible instructor in our family because he not only had a motorcycle license but a license to drive a car as well. With the assistance of Cousin Ngom, who knew a few motorcycle dealerships, I purchased a Korean-make moped, similar, I was told, to the popular Honda Daelim's that all young Vietnamese drove.

"Hondas are Japanese, and therefore are more expensive," the dealership owner explained as he showed me pictures of the motorcycle with beautiful women in traditional Vietnamese outfits riding them. The details of the engine power and maximum speed were discussed with Cousin Ngom. Safety features were not mentioned as part of the sell. In fact, the mechanics asked me if I wanted to leave the side mirrors as they were pointing out to show the traffic behind me or if I would rather have them reverse the mirrors (installing the right arm where the left arm should be and vice versa) as everyone else did and point the mirrors in.

"I don't understand. What's the point of turning the mirrors in? You can only see yourself that way," I said.

That was the point, my cousin told me. So I could see myself.

I shook my head and instructed the mechanic to leave the mirrors as they were.

"Everyone will know you're a foreigner, then," my cousin warned. "You don't need to see traffic behind you, only what not to hit in front of you. And then you have your horn."

They left the mirrors alone, and the dealer shook hands with Cousin Ngom who turned to me for the \$930 U.S. dollars that the bike cost. I handed him my Visa charge card.

"What is this?" the dealer asked.

He and my cousin's laughter soon caught the attention of the other salesmen and mechanics in the store.

"I think she wants to pay with this!" the dealer shared with his co-workers. They asked what it was and when they saw only a plastic card, they all began chuckling. One of them had heard of such a card from one of their Viet-Kieu cousins. Meanwhile, I had never heard of purchasing a vehicle without a credit card, credit rating, loan, or monthly payment plan.

Ngom's eyes twinkled at me as he said, "You have real cash at home, right?"

I didn't have enough, so Bac Du excused us from the living room to rifle around for two crisp hundred-dollar bills clearly saved for an emergency. I bought the moped and had my parents wire over money to pay my uncle back the next day.

Cousin Ngom drove my moped home with me on the back. Already, I loved the slick black enamel, the way the seat popped up to provide a little storage space. I felt the moped like an extension of myself, gliding across traffic with ease. She was a girl, I was sure, and I named her Locust because I thought it looked like a bug with its mirrors that still pointed in the right direction.

Cousin Dinh was already waiting for us at the house. He looked like a teacher, with his round, rimmed glasses and 70s-styled haircut, long on top but trim around the nape. He was thin, and his bony frame looked like it could thwack a ruler against an unsuspecting desk or arm. Cousin Dinh started coming by my uncle's house every Tuesday and Thursday evening to teach me to drive after our dinner of pineapple beef. Outside my uncle and aunt's house, he instructed me to get on the bike. He would share my seat, riding behind me.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the road, of course," he answered.

"What about the parking lot?"

"The what lot?"

There were no empty parking lots for test-driving. Unlike the high school down the street from my parents' house – where my father made me clock in 1,000 miles doing laps going 20 miles per hour around the tennis courts before he thought I was qualified to take my driving test – I was going to learn to drive a moped in the chaos that was Saigon streets. The roads were congested with one-speed bicycles, 16-wheel trucks, multi-passenger cyclos, and motorcycles carrying up to a family of seven or crates of livestock and bushels of food to be sold at the market. This mish-mash of vehicles was bound by one traffic law: *he who hath the loudest horn had the right of way.*

"Your horn tells someone you're coming, so that they know to move over and let you pass," Cousin Dinh told me. I didn't understand how that was very effective when horns were constantly blasting, and most drivers seemed to fully ignore them.

I had also discovered earlier at the U.S. Consulate's Office that Vietnam had the highest number of head injuries outside of a war zone because no one liked to wear motorcycle helmets in the heat. That was the official embassy line; the Vietnamese I met would say they didn't like the way helmets looked and definitely didn't like what their hair looked like after wearing one. At a stoplight once, I counted that of the fifty-two mopeds surrounding me, only one rider had a helmet.

When we met at the embassy, Scott had entreated me to stick with cabs the way other Americans representing the U.S. did. Legally foreigners were not supposed to drive a motorcycle or moped at all; they weren't allowed to take the driving test then. But I reasoned that any country where red lights were just suggestions and seating capacity translated to whatever a person was capable of holding up on their motorcycle, I probably wouldn't ever be fined. Cousin Dinh assured me no one ever checked his licenses.

But none of these things worried me once I'd gotten the moped up and running. The thrill of driving a moped was even better than owning one or riding on the back. The wind in my face was freedom itself and felt so much fresher on a moped than it had been coming through the windows of my car in the States.

After the first night on one of the less crowded streets, attempting to keep my balance while shifting gears, Cousin Dinh explained that I needed to maintain a certain speed in order to make turns without the bike slipping out from under me. I practiced a series of figure eights in the alley in front of my uncle's house, and when I finally achieved holding the bike upright the entire eight, my cousin directed me into a busier neighborhood. We drove close to the sidewalk and away from the oncoming lights and horns.

"Good," Cousin Dinh said. "Now, turn left at the next street."

I checked the rearview mirrors and moved my bike to the center of the road. A truck was bumbling towards me so I paused to wait for it to pass. Horns began blaring from the mopeds behind me.

"What are you waiting for? Just turn left!" he shrieked. "That truck probably won't hit you."

My cousin was crazy, I thought. There was no way in hell I was going to play chicken with drivers who could more easily hit me than avoid me. He goaded me until I

started to sing Abba's "I Will Survive" and took a deep breath. I plunged the moped left and felt my right foot jump off the brake.

A horn or two bellowed, and when I opened my eyes, we were back in the midst of traffic.

"What are you doing!" Cousin Dinh screamed again, this time digging his bony fingers into my hips. I regained balance and the bike jerked forward as usual.

"I made the turn," I answered.

"You made the turn? Two seconds more and the motorcycle would have been laid out with us flat beneath it." I had taken the turn too fast, he reprimanded. The other drivers had to swerve to avoid us.

A few weeks of driving solo, I found that both my Cousin Gai and Dinh were right about traffic, though as a driver, I didn't quite figure out how to react when other people were crossing the street or when other drivers were turning left until I'd knocked two people off their mopeds and nearly wiped out a schoolgirl crossing the road.

"You almost ruined that girl's chances for marriage forever!" my uncle had exclaimed from behind me one of the first times he rode with me. When I pulled in front of the house, he leapt off the seat as if his life was shortened just by sitting on it. I had a terrible time not just with driving but with parking, too. I could never guide Locust into the little slot left open by the other mopeds in a parking lot, and started to get off way before the spot in order to walk the moped into place. The parking attendants at the university also kept a lookout for me when I came to school, after I went careening down the ramp to the underground parking lot and hit a brick wall. Luckily no one else was injured and just the skin on the top of my hand was taken off, but I was always saved a parking spot above ground after that.



## CHAPTER VII: FAMILY ROLES

Bac Du was what I always imagined an uncle should be. He told me folk stories intended to impart some gem of wisdom, and led me around proudly as his niece. “She got a scholarship to come here to study,” he’d say. “Didn’t speak any Vietnamese when she arrived and listen to her now!”

Bac Du felt it was important that I understood the role of family and went through pains to bring me to every relative I had who lived in or passed through Saigon. Each week, he would say, “Are you ready to meet relative number x?” or “Would you like to visit cousin blank?” Outside of the original relatives who greeted me at the airport or the ones who regularly came by to visit or take me out, the remaining relatives stayed a sort of mystery to me. Most of them, I didn’t meet enough times to remember their names, much less understand how they were related to me.

What was particularly difficult was meeting my father’s other siblings. My father had cut off communications with all of them out of guilt. He couldn’t save them when Saigon fell in ’75 and he continued to be powerless to save them from reeducation and losing all of their lands in the aftermath of the War. When I had first arrived at Bac Du’s house, he asked me if I knew how often my father spoke with him. I shook my head; I couldn’t begin to guess how often they communicated. Bac Du pulled out a wooden box and thumbed through a stack of letters inside that I assumed were from my father. Bac Du separated three envelopes and laid them before me.

I recognized my father’s scrawl, the all capital, non-cursive letters he used when he wrote. I handled the letters with care, thinking that they must have detailed the significant events my parents had undergone after making it to the States. That must have been the reason Bac Du had singled out these three.

“That is all your father wrote. Twenty seven years, and three letters.”

I looked at the letters and became confused. It wasn’t possible. As a child, I remembered having set aside money for my father to send home. Had he not sent money back for the first twelve years of my life? No, I didn’t doubt that he sent the money overseas, but I started to wonder if he had ever written a letter to accompany it. It would be just like my father to send money and think that it was official business, not needing any personal commentary. Personal commentary was like small talk, and I couldn’t

remember any occasion in my life where he made small talk about the weather or the importance of some event on television. He often stood silent at the back of school orientation meetings at my elementary and middle school, and when I was in high school, he dropped me off at cross-country meets or at soccer games and drove around the parking lot, waiting for me to finish. He never bothered to actually see my race or watch my game, and I had assumed that it was out of disinterest.

I finally realized, he didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to cheer me on or how to talk with the other parents about the performance of their children in the competition. He drove in circles not to avoid watching me but to avoid being in an uncomfortable situation where he would have to speak to someone. Even as I sat in my uncle's house and began to realize the depth of the quiet and brooding nature of my father, I still couldn't stomach the surprise that he would have nothing to say to his closest brother. I imagined my own sister and our relationship. Even when I was in college and she was still living in Alabama, we spoke every couple of weeks. I cried when I first heard her voice from the university's office phone in Saigon. My uncle and father hadn't heard each other's voice in nearly thirty years, and letters did not fill the silence.

The first letter, I was told, announced my birth in 1978.

The second relayed my brother's death in 1981.

And the last letter, postmarked in 2001, told my uncle to pick me up at the airport.

Dismayed, I returned the letters to my uncle. I couldn't look him in the eyes, but he never put any pressure on me to do so. Instead, he took the letters back gingerly and pursed his lips as he reread the address on each envelope. Maybe he was checking the scrawl to see if there were changes between one decade of my father's penmanship to another. Maybe he was admiring the different stamps that adorned each corner. Or maybe he was scrutinizing the fading ink of the postmarks. I didn't ask, but I was sure he knew the details of each envelope as clearly as I knew the details of my own cherished possessions.

My father never talked about his siblings growing up. For a long time, I had assumed he was an only child. When he spoke of the family left in Vietnam that my sister and I had to support with our meager allowances, I thought he was referring to some

ghost relatives who could somehow trace themselves to my father without having a direct connection, people more like family friends. Compared to the way my mother spoke of “going home” one day, of finally being reunited with her aunts, uncles, and cousins, my father’s way of silence made it seem that the relatives were not as important to him. They seemed to be just post-scripts or items that were mentioned in passing.

I started to understand that as the youngest son in his family, my father owed money to several of his older siblings who had helped fund his education. His parents were poor, and the more successful older siblings had been responsible for providing for the family. My father had written in his third letter that my visit was to be a secret. He named the cousins whom he had favored and whom he thought I should meet, but under no circumstances, the letter warned, should I meet the older siblings. Bac Du told me all of this in a disheartened tone. To not meet my other uncles and aunts seemed ludicrous to him, despite whatever guilt or ill-feeling my father had. After a few weeks, Bac Du decided that he knew best and that my father had underestimated the strength of family and the importance of my homecoming. “We won’t tell your father right away,” he said. I could see he was plotting out his defiance of my father’s wishes. “Your other uncles will be so happy to see you. Your father will see – he’ll appreciate this.”

My uncle decided to take baby steps. He first introduced me to some of my dad’s nieces and nephews, telling them not to tell their parents about me. One nephew was the owner of an athletic wear sweatshop. I had walked up his spiral metal staircase to find myself surrounded by tables of sewing machines and women diligently stitching up zippers and appliqué logos. Piles of fabric and jackets in different stages of completion lined the walls. I picked up a finished ski jacket – a piece of apparel clearly never needed in this heat – and ran my thumb over the inside label.

“How much do you think that sells for in the States, little sister?” my cousin asked.

I shrugged and said I had never purchased a jacket like it before so I didn’t know how much it cost. That was mostly true; I didn’t own a ski jacket, but from the name brand and the material, I could guess it was well over \$150.

“I make so much off those Americans! For example, I tell them the zipper costs 10,000 dong each, when I can get them at the market for 7,000. And they pay it! Can you believe?”

The women were paid by each jacket they completed, which took about an hour. My cousin let the women make their own hours. “If someone needs to make more money one week – maybe a birthday or before Tet – she works longer hours. She can stay all night.” I asked him how much he sold each completed jacket, and had to hide my reaction when he told me between \$7-10.

My cousin and his employees were being swindled. The 3,000 dong – less than a quarter – was not much of a difference when the athletic apparel company was profiting at least ten times what they paid for labor. I looked at the women crouched over their sewing machines, each with her own table and lamp and photographs that made the work station resemble common office cubicles. They didn’t look disgruntled or overworked or in dire health; it seemed that they were satisfied to just have the job. Maybe I needed to separate myself from my own negative, preconceived notions of sweatshops and assess the situation for what it was. These women were employed and according to my cousin, making a livable wage. The conditions they worked in seemed much more comfortable than those of others I’d seen toiling in the tropical sun.

I laid the jacket down and congratulated my cousin on his success.

After meeting other cousins who seemed to appreciate my visit, I was ready for the uncles and aunts. The reconnections started with Uncle Number Seven. His house was cluttered with possessions, and Bac Du informed me that before the reappportioning, Bac Seven had been an extremely wealthy landowner. Many of his most valuable possessions were confiscated, but Bac Seven had been wise enough to hide and store some of them in places where the victorious Viet Cong soldiers could not take them.

“Allo!” Bac Du called out as we entered the house. “Brother, are you home?”

“What are you fussing about?” Bac Seven asked. A low, stooped man came down the stairway. His wrinkled face looked nothing like my father’s.

According to Uncle Number Seven, my father still owed him a couple of hundred dollars for books and uniforms. The first time I met him, over thirty years since the debt had been incurred, Bac Seven asked whether I had brought him the money my father

owed. “Your father is off in America, successful and rich. He forgets that the reason he is so successful is because his sister and I slaved to provide for him. And what kind of gratitude is this that he sends his daughter here without the money he owes us?”

I shifted and tried to shrink against the piles of knick-knacks Bac Du seemed to think were valuable. The shelves were toppling under countless Buddha sculptures and crystal figurines, and on the walls were wooden hangings inlaid with mother-of-pearl. I’d seen a number of the collectibles and decorations in stores around the city, and even though I personally thought gathering hundreds of them together was anything but decorative, I also knew that to have so many of them indicated a certain level of wealth and status. In light of all this evident wealth, I couldn’t understand why my father was still being held accountable for such a small amount of money, borrowed years before I was even born.

I didn’t know the words to respond, and considered giving Bac Seven money then to pay off my father’s debt.

We left the house shortly after arriving, Bac Du shrugging off the less-than-warm welcome. “He’s old and bitter,” he told me.

As we drove back to Bac Du’s smaller and less crowded house, I started to become angry that my father had never told me why he only communicated with Bac Du in all these years, and even then, how slight that communication was. I realized, then, that my father had never owed Bac Du anything. My presence started to feel like some sort of apology – I’m sorry my father stopped speaking to you; I’m sorry we haven’t sent more money; I’m sorry you’ve been left behind. When Bac Du decided it was time to meet another uncle, I balked.

“But we’ve met one already, and my father said he wanted no one to know I was here.”

“That was months ago,” Bac Du said. “If I could speak to him now, I know he would say otherwise.”

Bac Nine was a poet. He lived in a multi-storied townhouse in one of the more affluent districts in Saigon. Saigon was divided into ten numbered districts in the central part of the city and had four other named districts in the outlying parts. District One was considered the center of town, where the monolithic buildings of the new Sofitel and

Caravelle hotels were located and where the American embassy was. Le Loi, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, and Hai Ba Trung Streets served as District One's main roadways, and I later learned that these names were used in every city in Vietnam. They were the names of past rulers and heroes of the country, and they often designated the roads of most importance in the city.

Bac Nine was dying from stomach cancer when we met. Bac Du explained his understanding of the sickness as he led me into the glistening tiled entryways of the house. He stopped to point out the collection of classic cars and motorcycles in the ground floor garage. "He doesn't need the cars, can you imagine?" Bac Du said. "He just has extras so that his guests can travel in style."

We took off our sandals by the door and made our way up the stairs. The third floor opened into a rooftop garden that was accented with concrete cherubs and dragons that were decorated in broken ceramic plates and teacups. The patterns from the ceramic pottery could still be seen as the varicolored pieces filled in the blue and green scales, the red mouth, the yellow eyes. I walked into the garden and noticed butterflies for the first time in the city. Outside Bac Du's house, there was only dust floating between the potted plants, and here, above the dust, butterflies flitted between blooming orchids.

We came into his bedroom on the fourth floor, and the hypnotic sounds of Vietnamese music furthered the smell of sickness filling the room.

Bac Nine was resting on a hammock that was strung up in a metal arc stand. I could barely see the edges of his thin body beyond the upper part of the hammock.

"Brother, are you okay?" Bac Du asked.

The response came out as a mere whisper, the withering last breaths of a person's life. I'd been around death enough as a child to recognize it, and without understanding a word, I knew Bac Nine didn't have much longer to live.

"This is your niece, remember An? Our youngest brother in America? This is his youngest daughter Annie," Bac Du introduced me. He pushed me gently towards the hammock.

I leaned in and bowed my head. "Hello, Uncle Nine. I am pleased to meet you."

Bac Nine rolled in his hammock so that he could see me better. The little amount of physical effort clearly strained him by the expression I saw on his face. “An’s daughter?” he asked. “An, the youngest?”

Bac Du explained that I was a writer as well and that I had come to study the great literary masters of Vietnam. “You see, that is why I brought her to you,” he said to his brother. “It’s important for her to at least meet you.”

Bac Nine nodded. A writer, yes, he had written quite a lot in his own life. He called for a servant who brought out a collection of his poems. “You can have one of these,” he said. “Read it to remember me.”

I took that the two brothers didn’t see each other often, but after Bac Du saw for himself the state of his brother’s health, we made visits to Bac Nine’s house a regular excursion. Bac Du would bring him water and sit on the edge of his hammock, straightening out the hair that was matted to Bac Nine’s face in sweat. Bac Nine would ask me polite questions about what I thought about Vietnamese literature and how I was portraying the homeland in my writing. Had I found what it meant to have a Vietnamese heart yet?

The visits made me uncomfortable. I wanted to know more about Bac Nine and speak to him about his writing, but the effort it took him to speak sapped the energy he needed to survive. Instead, I spent our visits sitting in his fading glory. His children and wife doted on him, while the servants aired the house each day. His gardens were tended and fresh-cut flowers brought to his bedside table. Each time we came, the flowers had been changed and another relative was sitting beside his hammock, reading a passage from a favorite book or simply holding his hand.

Not even a month after we had met, Bac Nine was moved to a hospital, and our visits took place there. The walls and floor were a dull brown seemed to reaffirm sickness rather than the blank expression of hospital white in the States. Bac Nine no longer spoke, his moments of lucidity infrequent between the shots of morphine.

One of his sons called to let us know Bac Nine had passed. Bac Du called my father to let him know, and asked if he could fly to Vietnam for the service. It wasn’t possible, my father said. There wasn’t time. I doubted either brother thought the visit was ever a possibility.

Bac Du told me that because Bac Nine was rich, his funeral would be more magnificent than the one Bac Du was sure to get. Funerals were big business in Vietnam, and the fanfare would rival any production I'd seen yet, he was sure. Bac Du explained how I would at least experience the grandeur of a proper service.

"You'll see," my aunt said when Bac Du left the room to get dressed. "All of the flowers and food the other relatives provide at the service will be for show. The greater the showing of grief, the greater the money or inheritance will be that his widow shares. She won't need everything he has left her. She's old herself, and her children are already grown. Everyone in the family knows that."

I nodded and wondered if Bac Du would receive any gifts after the funeral. It often seemed that his nephews regarded him suspiciously when we came by the house, but I never thought it was because they doubted his intentions. My uncle was too simple to be that scheming, and from the little I saw of their interactions, I knew my uncle loved his brother deeply.

The first night was the introduction of the coffin before the family altar. Four Buddhist monks dressed in yellow robes chanted prayers before the family altar at Bac Nine's house. This was not a common component of the ritual, I was told. In poorer funerals, a cassette recording of prayers often replaced the presence of real monks. The leader was keeping time by tapping a dowel against a wooden bowl, and every few beats, he banged on a bronze gong that indicated when the family members and guests should bow. I had not been brought up Buddhist and did not know how to properly bow so a relative grabbed my arm and led me to another room where she showed me how to put my hands together in the form of prayer beneath my chin and bow from my waist. Midway through the bow, I was to kneel and then touch my forehead to the floor with my hands palm-down on either side of my face.

Each relative presented the coffin with a mourning cloth that was a strip of black or white material that stretched about three feet. Its width was folded to about an inch, and after the cloth was presented to the coffin, the material was tied around the temples of the mourner. White material indicated that you were younger than the deceased while black material indicated you were older. Immediate family members were supposed to



wear the mourning cloth for three years, and extended family, one. This mourning period was supposed to be devoid of all happy celebrations and unions – in particular, marriages.

I tied the cloth around my forehead and took my place in the back of the area facing the coffin. The monks sat the closest to the coffin, chanting and keeping rhythm during the prayers. Behind them were Bac Nine's widow, his children, and then his grandchildren. Other cousins, siblings, nieces, and nephews filed into place behind them. I bowed when I saw the other relatives bowing, and kept my gaze down and mournful, but all of this was performed out of respect. I hadn't known Bac Nine long enough to feel sadness at his passing. I could only think that he had to be more comfortable now that he had moved beyond his suffering in this life.

The next night, Bac Du and I drove around town looking for a proper floral arrangement. Honoring the dead was a significant industry in Vietnam. Funeral flowers were accompanied with banners, flashing lights, flags, and places to hold and burn incense. When I had made a journey to the Cao Lai pagoda with my Cousin Nga and several other relatives, I learned that the flowers offered at the holy shrines were retrieved every hour or so by the police who then sold them back to the florist vendors. It was a cycle of buying and selling that took advantage of the faithful. In many ways, I felt that the funeral flowers were the same. The more elaborate arrangements were costly, but it was obvious that the flashier ones cost more and it seemed the cost of the arrangement equated the amount of mourning by the purchaser. After perusing flower selections in a handful of different stores, Bac Du and I chose the fanciest one he could afford. A Communist symbol was the central focal point in a wreath of white flowers.

We arrived to a house brimming with relatives and guests. I wasn't sure if his wealth had somehow also won him political favors, but the road outside Bac Nine's house was closed off to accommodate all of the mourners. The garage door had been opened and the cars and mopeds moved out. In their place were tables covered with vinyl tablecloths and plates of sweets and delicacies that tumbled beyond the garage doors and into the street. The remorse of the previous day's services seemed to dissipate in the noise and chatter that now filled the house.

Bac Du explained that each of Bac Nine's siblings would have the opportunity to present the coffin with a pronouncement of mourning. All of my father's sisters and

brothers were accompanied by their children to the funeral, and the children would walk up to the coffin with their parents. I was supposed to represent my father since he was unable to come himself. When my father's name was called, I was to go before the coffin, present a gift, and bow. All of the pomp and ceremony would be videotaped.

I didn't want to go up alone, and besides, we only had one wreath. We spoke to the widow, and it was decided that I could accompany Bac Du since he had no children, and I would still represent my father and our immediate family. Another cousin was enlisted to hold the wreath as Bac Du and I would walk on either side up the long aisle that led to the coffin.

Bac Du looked nervous. He fidgeted with the inside pocket of his short-sleeved suit. It was the only dress outfit he owned, and the edges were fraying with age. His unease made me nervous. I had never been to a funeral that was videotaped. Most funerals seemed to be events that mourners chose to forget instead of commemorating and reliving the occasion.

Since my father and Bac Du were the two youngest siblings, their names were the last called to present mourning gifts. I took my place in the center aisle on one side of the wreath and mimicked my uncle's slow step up towards the coffin.

At the front of the room before the altar and the dozens of mourners gathered on each side of the aisle, Bac Du pulled out a slip of paper from his suit. He'd written a poem to commemorate his brother's life, and in the bright lights of the video camera, he shook as he read the words. When he finished, tears slid down his face. He folded the poem inside the wreath before it was positioned behind the casket with the flashier acknowledgements from my other uncles and aunts.

"I thought it was a good way to pay tribute to a poet. But you're the writer. Did you like it?" he asked, and I nodded. Cousins and other uncles and aunts patted his shoulder and arm as we walked past them back to our place alongside the aisle. It was that moment I started to realize that Bac Du's love for his family was something more than I would ever understand, and that his love for me was genuine.

## CHAPTER VIII: ANIMAL ATTRACTION

My parents seemed to believe that growing up with pets would teach me something about responsibility and loyalty. I spent countless hours feeding and cleaning the living areas of dogs, roosters, chickens, homing pigeons, and a pet crawfish that was kept in a plastic margarine tub and was labeled as imitation crab. Unfortunately, the crawfish was forgotten on the kitchen counter the Sunday we decided to fumigate the house for mice, and when we returned from church, she was lifeless at the bottom of the tub while bits of raw shrimp that I had torn for food floated around her. The roosters were sold after our neighbors complained about early morning noise violations and the city health department slapped us with a citation for raising livestock within the city limits. My grandparents ate the chickens.

The pigeons fared better. They cooed for two years in a multi-apartment aviary my father had constructed out of chicken wire. One day, I became inspired to test whether the birds truly loved me; I wanted to see if they'd return after I freed them. They were homing pigeons, after all. I persuaded my family to let me release the birds, and for two more springs, the birds flew away during the day and returned at night for the guaranteed corn feed and safety of the coop. One of the older birds, a fat brown one with a circle of white feathers around his neck, eventually stopped flying out and stayed nestled in the warmth of the chicken coop while the other birds flitted away to their hearts' content, sometimes for days at a time. We stopped locking the coop up at night and left the door open so his companions could return whenever they choose. Then one morning, I came out to find feathers scattered along the bottom of the cage, the neighbor's cat sitting on a tree branch overhead. We tore down the coop after that.

We lived on a service road and had a total of 17 dogs from the time I was three until I left for college. I can't name them all now, but I remember counting each one that came and went. We had dogs that were kidnapped from our front yard, were poisoned by getting into a neighbor's trash, were run over by the cars that sped along our street, and otherwise just went missing. Scruffy, my favorite and my first, was shot by neighbors when I was ten.

It must have been three a.m. when I ran to my parents' room and asked if they had heard the noise. They assured me that they had heard nothing, that my overactive imagination had created the loud pop that scared me into their room.

"Go to sleep, we have church tomorrow," my dad instructed.

I found Scruffy in the morning when he didn't respond to my call. His body was stretched on the front lawn of our house, dried blood on his coat already attracting flies. The neighbors had dragged him from their yard to leave him outside of our fence.

They had wanted us to keep Scruffy in our yard because he had impregnated their dog once already, and they didn't want him sniffing around when their dog was in heat. They were both mutts, and at the time, the idea of spaying or neutering either dog never crossed our minds. Instead, my dad heeded the threats and reinforced our fence, refilling the holes that Scruffy had dug to get out. Dad even poured cement into the corners to deter new holes from being dug. When that didn't work, and the neighbors were still yelling at us to get our dog out of their yard, my dad bought a chain to tie him to the back fence. Scruffy was chained up all the hours that we were away from home or sleeping in our beds, and somehow, he still managed to get out.

My parents never pressed charges. They never even confronted our neighbors. As a child learning about justice and democracy in the U.S., I asked why we didn't at least call the police. My father hushed me.

"Stop crying. There are worse things the neighbors could shoot besides our dog," he said to me in the back pew of mass that Sunday. It was the first time we had ever sat at the back of church, but more alarmingly, it was the first time I had ever seen my father afraid. It took me years to understand what he'd meant.

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Three scars from Vietnam mark me still; two from my own recklessness around a motorcycle. The other one across the top knuckle of my right index finger is shaped like the profile of a thin man and round woman dancing. It stands like a tribute to the couple who helped give me the scar, if through no other action than denial.

My uncle and aunt bathed their dog Be-be every afternoon because they worried he would otherwise overheat. A short-haired, thick-chested mutt, Be-be looked like a cross between a pit bull and a German shepherd and was at least the combination of my

uncle and aunt's weights. Be-be spent his days loafing by their pushcart. A little after midday, they would pull him into the little cell of a toilet and lavish him in soap and cold water, and each night before bed, my aunt would pull a t-shirt over his head. Be-be's front paws were drawn through the armholes of the shirt and the extra material tied into a knot at his column of a waist. She insisted he couldn't sleep without a nightshirt.

Be-be then scrambled his fat body beneath my bed to sleep. My aunt would laugh about how he had gotten into the habit as a puppy, and, despite his growth, he always managed to find a way underneath the bed. He'd growl at me when I came into the bedroom, and on the numerous occasions when I would try to befriend him, the growling would increase.

I said something about the growling to my uncle.

"He's a smart dog. He needs to be tough or otherwise someone might steal him."

*Who would ever take such an ugly mongrel?* I wanted to say, but I knew what my uncle was referring to were the people who considered dog-meat a delicacy. I'd heard stories about dogs being kidnapped and later served as food.

To my aunt, it was a much simpler answer. "He only loves us," she swooned. She often said this while feeding him bits of pineapple beef from her rice bowl.

I couldn't believe the way Be-be was pampered, how he was coddled and loved. It bothered me that Bac Du would laugh when Be-be bared his fangs at me or that my aunt always seemed to feed him only the best selections from their dinner. Other dogs in the neighborhood were fed scraps or had to scrounge trash piles for food, even if they had owners. You could see the individual ribs of their chest cavities, and it was disturbing to see the pregnant ones with their teats sagging as much as their flesh. None of the neighbors bothered to wash their dogs at all, much less on a daily basis.

"He's just a dog!" I found myself saying over and over, but I caught myself from becoming too critical since it was clear that for the last eleven years, Be-be had been like their child. It was his world, and I was the newcomer.

The evening I came home with my hand cut up from the brick wall I hit at the university after losing control of my moped, Be-be took a snap. The flash of his teeth lasted only a second before my hand was covered in blood, the skin and scab on my index finger torn completely off.

I didn't scream. Instead, I watched the blood pool and drip onto the concrete floor.

I wanted to be rational. Soaking up the blood with cotton balls pulled from the pushcart, I tried to explain rabies to my uncle and what it caused, thumbing fervently through my English-Vietnamese dictionary. He responded by pulling out a clipboard of important papers and turning over each sheet before finding the records of Be-be's shots. I couldn't discern the illegible scrawl, not that it mattered since I didn't know what the word for rabies vaccination was anyway. When a procession of red bumps started to emerge on my forearm minutes later, my rationale slipped to panic. I suddenly felt trapped by my circumstances, a place where I would always be an outsider, where even the animals hated me. I ran out of the house and pushed past the metal gates to the cul-de-sac. I cried in the dark alley in front of my uncle's house, under a full-moon sky with no stars. There was not a stir from any of the houses around us, and I imagined the neighbors whispering that the Viet-Kieu was having a breakdown. I didn't care.

I thought about the vaccinations I had been warned to take but didn't, not even sure there was a vaccination against rabies, and letting my imagination get the better of me, I considered how unfair it would be to die so far away from home.

"Come inside the house," my uncle said, placing a hand on my shoulder and nudging me back towards the gate. He had followed me into the street.

I shrugged his hand off. "Do you ever hit that dog?" I asked.

He laughed. "I never hit the dog."

"Not even when it bites someone?"

He didn't respond.

"Go away," I said in English.

In the moonlight, my uncle looked smaller than I perceived him in the daytime. His face, dark and wrinkled from working too many hours in the sun, seemed to swallow itself in the hills and valleys of lines. His shoulders slumped a little lower when he heard my English, and he started to sway his arms in front and behind him. The words of a neighbor's son trying to describe my uncle's character came to mind: *your uncle's not a child, but he certainly doesn't act like an adult.*

There were so many times he seemed to act like a child around me. I'd sit in the bedroom reading and he'd come to the entrance of the room and stand watching me. I would want to ask, "what do you want?" or "is something wrong?" or even "can you see I'm busy reading?" but I knew the insolence of such words. Beyond that, I realized they were harsh and to a soul as broken as my uncle's, I often became ashamed of my own irritation and would roll to my other side and continue reading. He often walked away from the door without me ever knowing what it was he wanted to say.

Now, I pitied him, standing in the moonlight and shadows, and in that moment, I wanted to say everything was fine, but I was exhausted. Every day since I had arrived was a struggle to make sense of my surroundings. I'd been happy where I was, as I was, and I was scared of what was to come next.

Bac Du left me alone.

I cried until my breath was catching in my lungs, and let my back slide down the concrete wall until I was sitting on my heels. I cried for all the things I missed, all the things I didn't understand about living here, all those thoughts and feelings about being lost, excluded, hurt and confused that went beyond what I could name concretely.

From the shadows of the neighboring houses, a man came padding towards me, silhouetted by his lit cigarette.

"Why are you out here? It's late," the man said, his white flip flops halting a couple of feet away from me. His dog had awoken him, barking at the stranger in the street. "Why don't you go inside? The mosquitoes are terrible at night."

I hadn't even noticed my legs and arms getting bitten up, but I figured everything wanted to have a piece of me so why bother stopping the insects? "I want to be outside," I said.

"And cry by yourself? You are Bac Xuan's niece, from America. What problems could you have that makes you cry?"

I considered his words. What problems did I have? I wasn't starving, I wasn't homeless, I had family who cared about me. I was being selfish, and I knew it, even then. "I want to go home."

He stood there and smoked his cigarette, thinking about my situation, I guessed. He silenced his dog to give me quiet.

“How old is your dog?” I asked.

“Almost a year.”

“Still little.”

“Still little.” He stamped out the cigarette, his face still shadowed in moonlight. I wondered if I’d ever seen him before, and even so, I wondered how he knew who I was. I’d stopped crying.

“The mosquitoes will eat you alive. You should go inside.”

My uncle joined us, and the man told him it was a beautiful night out. Bac Du thanked him, and waited until he left before begging me to come inside. Afraid of losing more face than he already had, he finally agreed to take me to the emergency room of the expatriate hospital that was listed in my guidebook.

It was one a.m. when we reached the air-conditioned, linoleum floored hospital with its doors that automatically opened and halogen lights so bright that the interior could be seen for blocks. I was surprised that when I stepped inside the sliding doors, I was excited by the scent of antiseptic cleaner. I wanted to dance in the lobby, and devour all the English-language magazines that covered the tables of the waiting area. I read the list of doctors displayed at the receptionist’s desk and felt relieved to see English and French names I could pronounce.

But, it was a young Vietnamese doctor on-call that evening, and when he looked at my hand and the papers that my uncle had brought, he shook his head. His bloodshot eyes indicated either not enough sleep or a coming hangover – I couldn’t smell him to be sure – but either way, he seemed miserable and annoyed that he had been called in for such a case. He didn’t even bother to take me to an examination room.

“Your uncle has the right papers; you’re fine,” he said.

“But the bumps,” I said, and showed him my arm. A couple of dozen bumps the size of chicken pox went from the bite to my elbow.

“Dogs have dirty mouths. The bumps are probably some allergic reaction to the bacteria in his mouth. Bumps are not a sign of rabies. It won’t kill you.”

He must have seen the skepticism in my face. He shrugged and wrote up a prescription for a series of six rabies shots that was handed to the receptionist for billing. Because I didn’t have any health care, I’d have to pay the fees in their entirety. I grabbed



the invoice for his diagnosis before my uncle could see the bottom line, a cost more than my uncle and aunt's profits for a year. I flashed a credit card, and my uncle never knew how much I paid.

I slept late the next morning, hearing the voices of relatives beyond the door, but seeing no purpose in getting up to greet them. Cousin Ngom, looking particularly bright and cheerful that morning, poked into my mosquito net. He had the best demeanor of my cousins by far, a jovial shaped guy with a barber-styled haircut and bright teeth that seemed to always be flashing at me. Whether it was trying to use a credit card or getting bitten by a dog, something I did seemed to always make him laugh. "Get up, little sister. It's time to go to the hospital."

I rolled to my side. I didn't want to get up or go to another hospital. I didn't want to do anything except stay exactly where I was and pretend I was really at home.

"Annie," Ngom persisted.

None of my relatives ever called me by name, so I moaned and crawled out of my canopy to see my aunt had brought in noodles and made coffee for my breakfast. Other relatives had gathered to discuss the incident and the cost of getting the rabies shots at the ex-pat hospital. Chu Bao couldn't stop laughing at me, while his wife, a doctor, examined my hand and told me to go through with the series of shots. Cousin Ngom said foreigners paying those ex-pat prices were fools. There was a perfectly good Vietnamese hospital on Pasteur Street. "It's named for a French doctor, little sister," he said to me, as if that made it more reputable. I agreed to check out the local hospital but slipped a new wrapped syringe into my pocket on the way out the door. I had brought several syringes with me after reading about how HIV/AIDS was rampant in Southeast Asia. Poor medical facilities had been reported reusing syringes, so my sister made sure I had enough of my own to bring to the hospital if necessary. Then there was also the worry that a good percentage of deaths that occurred in the hospitals of developing countries were a result of illnesses, such as staph infections, picked up from other patients or from the hospital itself. There was little I could think of to make me feel better about this situation.

Talking over his shoulder as he maneuvered us through traffic, Ngom told me he had been bitten by a dog when he was 10. "Everyone here gets bitten by a dog. Consider it the first step in you becoming Vietnamese."

I don't know if Ngom really believed that, but there was some truth to it. As I waited in the hospital on Pasteur Street and saw the crowded waiting room full of expectant mothers and crippled elderly, I started to see that the waiting room wasn't much different from any other hospital waiting room. The needle used to give me my first rabies shot was pulled out of a new plastic sheath, and the nurse rubbed my arm with alcohol before injecting the shot. The needle was immediately discarded afterwards – none of those re-used needles that I had been warned about. I kept the wrapped needle I had brought in my pocket. I didn't want Ngom to think I hadn't trusted him.

The doctors put me on a two-week vaccination period, during which I couldn't drink any alcohol. Ngom smiled when he saw the distress in my face at the news.

“Don't worry, little sister. You can just drink tea, practically the same thing as beer. They're both yellow and served with ice.”

In the days that followed, when relatives passed in and out of my uncle's home, my uncle and aunt claimed I had provoked the dog. I learned to keep my distance.

I began spending afternoons away from the still growling Be-be and my uncle and aunt's sheltered existence.

“But, what do you do after you finish class?” my uncle prodded.

“I've made some friends,” I'd lie.

One of the ways I busied myself was hanging out at the university café where the students hung out after class and where I met some of the other foreign exchange students. Then, one of the administrators thought it would be charming to have foreigners perform a traditional dance, or *mua*, during the school's anniversary celebration. I'd missed my chance as a kid to perform in the Vietnamese Christmas play, but now, in one of the university studios, I spent afternoons learning to dance in a purple *ao-dai* and clack teacups together to the music of a harpsichord. We had originally tried to learn a dance involving round silver trays, but the seven simultaneous crashes that went through the dance hall when we were instructed to flip our trays made our choreographer decide there was no chance we could learn to balance, spin, and flip trays in time. Teacups were more likely to stay on our fingers.

The little ceramic teacups without handles stacked together easily. We balanced the bottom of one on our thumbs and held a second one between our index and ring fingers; the middle finger held to the lip of the cup in order to pull the cup in and out of the cup on our thumb. Done correctly, the sound and motion resembled castanets.

We spent hours practicing. Even though the studio was air-conditioned, the sweat from our fingers would have the teacups sliding around as we clacked them together and moved our arms and bodies this way and that. When enough teacups had slipped off enough fingers, practice would end for the day. Aside from filling my days with some entertainment, the language and dance classes introduced me to others my age: two other Vietnamese Americans named Mai and Thuan, a Turkish guy named Selman who was learning Vietnamese via his Turkish-English then English-Vietnamese dictionary, and a local named Loan whom my uncle didn't trust because his family was North Vietnamese.

Mai was my only real friend in Vietnam. Her first name was Michelle, but in Vietnam, she went by her Asian middle name, Mai. Mai bubbled with this West Coast attitude of *why sweat it? Everything's gonna be alright*. A 26-year-old from San Jose, California, she was half-American, half-Vietnamese, or a *con lai*. So many American servicemen had impregnated Vietnamese women that a special term had been coined to label their children. Mai's Vietnamese mother and American GI father had separated after the war, so Mai grew up with her mother observing Vietnamese traditions. She'd come to the country with the specific intent of connecting with her heritage. Mai often told me that being here made her feel like she had really come home and that the life she led in California was a lie. Meanwhile, being friends with her made me feel like the fraud. Raised by two Vietnamese parents, I struggled to identify anything about the land or culture as home. She was even a better dancer than I.

This lack of connection led me to think that I would never relate to Vietnamese nationals. They always recognized me as a foreigner, but how? I could wear the exact outfit as a cousin, but without fail, someone would point and ask why I looked funny. Could it be mannerisms? When I looked at other women walking or interacting with others, I didn't see how I was different. I tried to take smaller steps and kept my face down, but still, I was often mistaken as a *con lai* myself. This happened especially when I went out with Mai, even though my hair was jet-black and straight black compared to her

brown-black waves. As far as I knew, my nose was practically bridgeless and my eyes had the same almond-shape as my cousin's.

Once Bac Du took me to a construction site near the university where a multi-storied house was being built. We sat and had tea with the owners, who my uncle had hoped would let me stay with them in exchange for me teaching their children English. It was part of my uncle's attempt to accommodate my insistence on moving out. Even though this man was a stranger, my uncle trusted him more than the university housing.

The man looked at me and asked if both my parents were Vietnamese. When I nodded, he shook his head incredulously. He called out his wife and children to come and look at me.

"Why, there must be something in the water that makes her look like that," the man said.

My uncle replied, "Her mother had a blood transfusion during delivery."

"That explains it then. She has American blood."

My relatives regarded me as the long-lost cousin returned from the gold-paved streets of America – and aside from Cousin Ngom and his wife, I didn't feel like I could confide in any of them. Ngom spoke slowly and without condescension, careful to phrase ideas in ways I could understand. The first morning Cousin Ngom and I met, I was taking pictures of my uncle and aunt's chickens, thinking back to the ones I'd raised myself. I was amused by them climbing into the pushcart or peeping their heads through the door of the house, and they eventually learned to eat the bean sprouts that came with my breakfast noodles out of my hand.

"See, older brother, if I hold it like this," I said, putting the sprout in front of Henrietta's beak, "she can't see it because she can only see," I pointed at her sides. I didn't know the word.

"Yes, side-to-side, that's right," Ngon said, lighting a cigarette and offering me one. I'd liked him ever since.

As for Loan, the guy known to befriend all of the American students at the university, I ended up questioning his intentions. We managed to convince my aunt and uncle to let him take me out for International Women's Day, a holiday that mixed Mother's Day and Valentine's Day. I had gotten flowers and candies from some of my

other guy classmates, and Loan wanted to help me overcome my homesickness by taking me out to nachos and my first taste of *bia hoi*, which all of my relatives raved about and I discovered was something like microbrews. For the nachos, we had to traipse into the backpacker's district, an area of town where the young, drunk backers, or *tay ba los*, frequented English-speaking, cheap tourist stores and travel agencies. The Pham Ngu Lao district in 2001 bustled with the *tay ba los* from 11am onwards, and the Western-style eateries and cafes accommodated them with an assortment of banana pancakes, nachos, and spaghetti marinara. For all the effort of melting cheese and finding olives, the nachos tasted stale and rubber-like. we'd find ourselves there eating at the Bodhi Tree or shopping in any of the The Mexican was imaginative, at best, but at least the CDs played properly. In all the times we hung out there, we had not befriended any backpackers. They were often in Saigon for only a handful of days before heading North to the beach town of Nha Trang or the mountains of Da Lat. They were too transient to be reliable.

After that, Loan often came by my house to take me out for dinner or drinks, and each time, he would compliment my aunt's cooking or decorating abilities or make some other clumsy, brown-nosing comment while my uncle sized him up like a bug he wanted to squash. My uncle and aunt asked repeatedly about his family, where they lived in Northern Vietnam and why he was now here in the South. The first time I came home from a night out with Loan, my uncle said he had a hunch that Loan was a Communist spy.

"A spy? Why would he spy on me?" I asked.

"You have relations to the American embassy. Remember that. You should watch what you say and who you hang out with," my uncle warned.

I laughed. Any connection I had to the embassy was slight, I told him. It was only years later that I learned none of my relatives understood the diplomatic, cultural exchange mission of a Fulbright. Instead, they had constructed an entirely different identity for me. Why would the government pay to send an educated young woman back to Vietnam? Clearly, I was a CIA operative stationed to spy and observe as much as they believed I was being spied on and observed. Surely, that construct must have been why Bac Du was so paranoid, but after his warnings about Communist monitoring, I never really trusted Loan. In fact, I found myself questioning why any local wanted to befriend

me. Whenever I met someone in my uncle's neighborhood or another university student interested in my life story, I answered their polite questions of how many brothers or sisters I had, what my parents' hometown was, when I had graduated and what I had studied. It seemed there were certain customary questions relating to family and education that were always asked. But as I answered their questions, I prepared myself for the inevitable moment the conversation would turn and they would either hit on me or beseech me for advice on how to pass the U.S. embassy interrogation for visas or to otherwise find a passage to America. Sadly, one of the two always seemed to happen.

My uncle and aunt believed I couldn't make local friends because I didn't know how to behave like a lady. I played soccer, I liked beer, and I occasionally smoked, all very unbecoming qualities for a female. My uncle was convinced the collapse of America would somehow be related to women smoking. On top of all of this, I was just too stubborn.

"You are so hardheaded sometimes, you make the guys angry and the girls are scared of you," my uncle would chide. He was only too enthusiastic when the son of one of my father's military friends took an interest in me.

When I first arrived, my father wrote another letter to Bac Du, with a whole paragraph in English for me. It discussed Think's family, the Hieu's, who had owned a drugstore when my father and Think's father were growing up. My dad and Think's were school friends who shared books and meals, and had grown up to serve in the army together where they then shared dreams of peace and the opportunity to live simple lives with the families they had both just started.

And then, history played itself out, and my father was in America and the dream of the simple life both he and Think's father had wanted had disappeared.

Think's father passed away two months before I arrived. Think asked me if I wanted to see him once, before I knew he had passed away, and I had agreed, only to be surprised when Think turned into a graveyard.

"Are you scared, little sister?" he asked.

I shook my head. I'd known death my whole life. I watched him and his mother burn incense to the memory of his father, and felt touched by the devotion he had for his family. Think was the same size as I was, and I never thought to be intimidated by him.

He reminded me of middle school boys at church, with a button-down shirt that was always tucked in and a short, unattractive cut incapable of styling. His small face with its crooked, yellow teeth had probably never spoken a lie.

Obliging to Vietnamese custom and etiquette to honor her deceased husband's memory, the widow Hieu and Think came to check on my well-being every other day for the first two weeks I was in country. Co Hieu eventually visited only every few weeks, but Think and I developed a routine of going out together on Friday nights. Since there was no phone, he never announced his arrival, but I could count on him to arrive at my uncle and aunt's a quarter after seven, just as we were finishing dinner. Then he and I would cruise around Saigon to find something to do. Most of the time, this involved us going to an over-priced bar with fancy-named cocktail drinks aimed at foreigners, like The Pearl Harbor. I realized early on that he wasn't trying to impress me with money, but was taking me to places where he thought I would be comfortable.

Think took my uncle to the university to see my dance performance. He exited our house each time with "*thua Bac, con di,*" or, "respectfully, [uncle] I leave." They laughed together, and Think had a respectable job and education. Bac Du bubbled the news to my father that Think and I were friends. "Oh yes," he'd say boastfully into the phone, "they really like each other," as if he had some hand in our friendship.

For his birthday, I went to pick up the check, but he shot me a quizzical look and shoved cash inside the guest check folder before I could even see how much it was.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "It's your birthday."

"Yes," he agreed. "My birthday."

"So, since it's your birthday," I said, thinking he didn't know what he had just said himself, "I pay."

"No, you are out because of me, so I pay."

"What type of stupid nonsense are you saying?"

"Vietnamese custom," he said. He always seemed to be hiding behind this answer as the way to tell me I was wrong.

"But you're with an American."

“An American – in Vietnam,” he said. Then he held the door to the bar open for me since, a few weeks before, I had told him that it was an American custom to open doors for women.

Thinh gave me hope. It was easier to practice my language skills with someone my own age, and there was something comforting about knowing his father and my father had been war comrades. I imagined that if the war had never happened, Thinh and I would have grown up together as friends. Spending time with him made me feel like maybe I would find the connection Mai flaunted. Thinh and I went to coffee shops and ice cream parlors, smoky pool halls where I tried to ignore that I was the only female not a prostitute under the low-hanging halogen lights, and shoebox-sized noodle stands where he would pay for my meal and I'd feel bad because I knew my fellowship stipend was much greater than any salary he was earning as an airport employee.

His mother invited me to stay over at their house at least every few weeks, which I sometimes took her up on to get away from Bac Du's house. Thinh's mother owned a successful lingerie store, and like many houses in Vietnam, hers was situated behind and above the store. When Thinh first led me through the store to his house, I was a little uncomfortable pushing away racks of underwear and bras. It seemed surreal to me that he had never lived away from home. Even though Thinh was 27, he still lived with his mother because he was single, a custom observed by many of the respectable Vietnamese families. He told me that he had never even kissed a girl, and I imagined how awkward it would be to date here. Where would they go for privacy? There were numerous cafes made of lightless, closed off cubicles for couples to make out – I'd been led to a few of those by local guys who just wanted “to talk” and were disappointed when I said I couldn't talk in the dark – but how seriously could a relationship develop under those circumstances?

Then during the long Liberation Day holiday weekend at the end of April, Thinh asked my uncle's permission to take me to Vung Tao, a beach town a hundred miles away. The vacation sounded perfect. I had grown up on the beaches of Gulf Shores and Dauphin Island in Alabama, and felt that lying on the sand with clear ocean waves lapping up to me was exactly what I needed after the months of weaving in and out of traffic and developing chronic conjunctivitis from the dust and motorcycle exhaust.



We arrived in Vung Tao just before sunset, after spending more than two hours on Think's moped. I wiped the dust from my sunglasses and looked out a little disappointed at the water. Motels crowded along the roads, and the beach was littered with trash. The water itself was brown. I had an uneasy feeling, and Think told me he knew how to make it better. He drove us along the coastal line to a pullout on a nearby cliff overlooking the ocean, and from a distance, the pollution was less noticeable. Was I better? he asked, and when I nodded, he professed his love.

I shook my head. "Think, you know I have a boyfriend at home," I said. It seemed the easiest way to let him know I didn't share his feelings. I didn't want to hurt him, but being together on that cliff, seeing the waves crashing below us, I felt vulnerable. The impulse to be direct failed me.

"I am just asking for a chance," he responded. "I love you."

I started shaking in the 90-degree heat. I felt dizzy – the neon lights and motorcycle horns of Vung Tao spinning around us – and was short on breath. Think didn't know what to make of my sudden illness, and neither did I. I hadn't eaten anything strange, and shaking wasn't a normal reaction to the heat or the exhaustion. It had to be his profession of love, but I couldn't ever remember having such a visceral response to any news. Think drove me back to the hotel room. He had dealt with the hotel manager while I waited outside because foreigners were not allowed to stay with locals, and many hotels did not have the proper paperwork to accept foreigners at all. Think registered both of us under his name, and said I was his sister.

Inside, I saw that we were sharing a room and a bed, even though I had requested two separate rooms or at the least, a room with two beds. But I was dependent on him to get home. I had trusted him too much and had not done any of my due diligence: I didn't know where Vung Tao was in relation to Saigon or if there was any public transportation back. I could try to ask the hotel manager for assistance, but I had accidentally left my passport at home and foreigners were fined – at the time, even threatened to be imprisoned – if they traveled without a passport.

I look back on my dizziness and shaking as my first stages of panic. Stranded without other options, in the hotel room, my body went numb as he moved his hand under my dress and over my stomach. I shook my head and pleaded that I was sick, but

he pulled me closer and said it would be all right. I shut my eyes and kept shaking, never quite catching my breath that night.

On the actual Liberation Day, named that for the day the Communist party liberated South Vietnam from oppressive American forces, I was sitting outside the former capitol with Mai and Thuan. We were sharing milk straight from green, young coconuts. Coconut milk vendors just chopped off the ends and stuck a straw into the oozy center.

“Happy Liberation Day,” I toasted as we sipped on our milk.

“That’s right. Thank God the U.S. lost,” Thuan said.

“Or else we might have always lived here,” I added.

I never had the heart to tell my father about Think. In the weeks that followed, when he came by on Friday nights, I made sure that Mai was there, too, helping me sign tax forms I had to mail back to America or playing two-person only card games with me. I did miss hanging out with Think eventually, but I knew he never thought what he did was wrong. My family had approved of him, and his family, me. It seemed silly to think that I would object to family wishes, despite the boyfriend I had at home, despite the fact I didn’t love Think, despite the fact I said no. My uncle assumed my avoidance of Think was part of my fickle behavior, and gave up any hope that I would end up with a decent Vietnamese boy and live with him in Vietnam forever.