

Of Eternity

A STORY BY MỘNG-LAN



Christian Blaza

There is one person at home watching the house when no one is there. One very important person," anh Tú says.

Anh Tú takes me to her. "Bà Sư," the lady monk from Sơn Tây, my maternal grandfather's younger sister, seventy-six years old. Extremely collected, strong, and focused, yet gentle and thin, she wears a brown monk's garb. Already in the other world, she meditates most of the day. Nothing fleeting, flitting, or breezy about her, she's at once heavy and light, of the present and indeed of eternity, a woman who has reduced her life to little or no desire, to little that was

material. With teeth dyed the brown of her monk's dress, she has clear eyes and thin limbs made to serve and explore the other world. She merely looks at me, not saying a word. After a few seconds, she goes back to her meditation, eyes closed. I walk away, but not without getting a sense of her lightness of being, the sheer gravity of her being.

Anh Tú's level of enthusiasm for learning English is insatiable; he's a fire-eating dragon. He insists on speaking to me in his halting English constantly. It isn't simply annoying but also trying. Here I have traveled seven thousand miles to study Vietnamese, and here he insists that I speak English

with him. Feeling used, I try to console myself, telling myself that he probably needs it for his work, research and design for the railways. His wife thankfully not at all interested in learning English, speaks Vietnamese sweetly with a lilting voice. Chj Cam cooks and washes the dishes always smiling, always cheerful and content, it seems. She sits on the little stool in front of her hot pot and peels vegetables into it, and talks to me kindly, sweetly.

"We'll have dinner soon. Do you like to watch television?"
"Sometimes."

"We watch it a lot during dinner. The news, or Chinese films. It'll help you with your Vietnamese, I'm sure."

From then on we spend many nights watching Vietnamese TV—the news, and then the soaps. Many of the soaps come from China, with Vietnamese dubbed in the Northern accent. It's as if the Chinese conquest was not over, and they've stayed to saturate the society in the form of shows, soap operas, kung fu movies with high flying monks and ninjas.

On Being Vietnamese

Even though I was born in Vietnam, and thought I was essentially Vietnamese before coming to Vietnam, feeling that I was deep down Vietnamese as my parents had inculcated in me and had brought me up to think and tried their best to educate me in this old fashion, I was made quickly to understand otherwise.

"Người nước ngoài." "A foreigner," they spit out these words, always on their lips, like a dirty word, said with great conviction. As if saying, "traitor."

The words fired at me, "You are from somewhere else. You are not one of us." The wound deepened, the scabs taken off before healing.

Why is it that the Chinese claim the Chinese diaspora everywhere in the world as their own kin, but the staunch Vietnamese Nationals do not claim the Vietnamese diaspora as their own? Why is it for so many Vietnamese, the hatred runs so deep against one another? The war, really a civil war, pitted brother against brother, sister against sister, cousins against each other, had divided the Vietnamese within the country, and after the war, the Vietnamese with those of Vietnamese blood overseas. Yet my family and many other Vietnamese families overseas, despite divisions, always sent money back home to our families. Money has no nationality.

Looking Vietnamese

If I can't be essentially Vietnamese, and if I don't look Vietnamese, at least I look Asian, part of the Asian world, that other half, even if I wear jeans, thick tire-like sandals, and boys' shirts. My conception of a third-world country is that of poverty, and the poverty I had known really and truly is only in the US.

I want to blend in and so brought mediocre looking clothes, ordinary pants and shirts that would bring no attention to myself in the U.S. I bring nothing flashy or anything with sexual innuendos, no tight tank tops nor cutoff shorts. But, surprisingly, the Western clothes I do indeed bring attention to myself in its ordinariness. Shabby and tomboyish compared to what the Vietnamese women in my "family" wear in Hà Nội wear.

"Do all Americans dress like you? Your clothes are unsightly," jeered cousin Huệ.

I see women in Hà Nội wearing tailored clothes which show off their elegant lines, svelte bodies. The áo dài, often made of silk, the elegant traditional Vietnamese dress, epitome of tasteful sensuality, outlines their supple bodies and accentuates their large sensual breasts.

My baggy jeans and shabby clothes make me look worse than I already do. Perhaps my independent swaggering walk, cultivated from reading too much Thoreau and Whitman, my childhood heroes, makes me look foreign.

I love to go on daily walks in these shabby clothes. Especially when after my parents leave Việt Nam, and I'm here by myself, I have plenty of time.

"Why don't you wear high heels when you go on your walks?" chị Huệ asks.

"I wouldn't be able to walk far. I have flat feet and I can't wear high heels and walk long distances," I retort. "How is it possible to walk on high heels?" I don't ask her if she's crazy. I already know it.

"Oh," she thinks out loud. On her face is the look, why does she need to go on a walk at all?

It's obvious to me that my relatives do not walk for pleasure. They only walk out of necessity. If they have the 50 Honda or 100 Dream Machine motorcycle, they would prefer to scoot about on this mechanical horse. Or they ride their bikes. Only the destitute, the vendors or the completely mad walk, to walk off their madness in relentless circles. And, of course, my relatives have Honda motorcycles or bicycles to scoot about in.

Despite all of this walking, I still appear to be a fat American in their eyes.

"Americans are so overweight. Do they all dress like you?" chị Huệ asks smacking her lips. She sneers.

The height of all put-downs. I want to hit her, but clasp my hands behind my back to protect myself and proceed to foam at the mouth, inside barking nonsense words.

Seeing me visibly upset, my mother asks me, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Mẹ, just suffering from a blow. Didn't you hear it?"

Conversations, snippets:

—Nóng quá! Sao mà chịu được? The heat is just unbearable. How long will Cô Chủ (Aunt & Uncle) stay? How long will Phương stay?

—Cô Chủ will stay a few weeks. Phương, they say, one year.

—Will she last one year?

—Who knows.

—How can she bear to live the way we do? She's an American. *Mỹ con*. Like us, she'll have to wash her clothes by hand.

—Phương doesn't speak much.

—No, she doesn't. She's a quiet sort. Keeps to herself—she's alone in that room for hours and hours at a time.

—She's an artist. What do you expect?

—She walks around a lot on the streets. No one but vendors or crazy people walk on the streets.

—Yeah, she walks like a crazy woman.

—Yes, she walks everyday. I don't know where she goes. Someone should follow her.

—I saw her once passing by. She sits by *Hồ Hoàn Kiếm*. Sometimes talks to the beggars, the little kids when they come to her. I think she also draws, sketches. They flock to her to watch her sketch.

—*Cô Chú* surprisingly are still Vietnamese. They haven't changed much, just seem like they're from *Sài Gòn*.

—Phương can sure adapt. I didn't think Americans could live like us. She washes her own clothes by hand, learns Vietnamese everyday. Watches the news on TV.

—Some boy from America calls her. I think you should tell her that the wires are tapped.

—Yes, I told her, "Be careful of what you say on the phone and don't speak too long. It will draw too much attention. And, don't forget that the wires are tapped."

—What does she eat? She doesn't eat raw vegetables?

—No, *Cô Chú* said because her stomach isn't used to our water.

—She only eats cooked vegetables. Cooked foods. And no meat.

—How strange. Maybe she's deep down a nun?

—She walks around like a monkey. Eats and sleeps. Wakes up late like a lazy animal.

—Yes, but she's studying. She studies all day long.

Milling about *Hà Nội*, Ba my dad, thinks out loud, "We could never return to *Việt Nam* again. We thought about it, for after retirement, but, really could never return. The way of life is so different. We're not used to the standard of living."

"Yes," *Mẹ* agrees. She agrees with everything Ba says most times. "I agree, we can't live here anymore. Our lives are so different now."

We visit the *Bạch Mai* hospital . . . Patients in their white outfits mill about in the courtyard, slowly without energy. Listless as if in *slo-mo*. A grainy golden light bathes the patients, yet they cannot move, cannot be moved. Like a place for the mentally insane. As if sickness in the body begins in the mind.

Ba speaks with a doctor, asks to show us around. "I'm visiting, I used to work here many years ago. Can you show me around?"

The doctor accommodates him and shows us around. The doctor looks at me and asks, "Can she teach English? Can she teach the doctors English?"

My parents nod at the doctors.

Ba remarks, "I'm very sad about the *Bạch Mai* Hospital. The state of everything is dilapidated. It's not clean. Everything's run down. The medical equipment is not up to par. People walk about dazed. We could never live here again."

Mẹ says, "Yes." She agrees with everything he says, at least outwardly.

A taxi driver in *Hà Nội* speaks on the radio: "I'm taking *Sài Gòn* clients to *Lý Thường Kiệt St.*" He listens to my parents' accents and makes assumptions.

Bác Hùng says to me at dinner, and more than once, "If you try and eat more you might hopefully get as fat as *Cô Hiến*." I want to hit him.

Cô Hiến is his older sister, heavy and one might say obese. No one dares make fat comments to her. She commands respect with her bulges, all two hundred pounds of it. Director of her company, she makes more money than anyone around, about \$200 to \$300 a month, a fortune for the Vietnamese. If I were to find a job in *Việt Nam* that makes about that much, people would stop jabbing at my fatness.

At first I am mostly silent in *Hà Nội*, like a cardboard cutout, like when I came to the US as a child. I listen to the accent, to the rhythms, intonations reflecting their certainties about life. The northern accent sounds strange to me, like a thick shrimp paste. My parents speak a more diluted form of the Northern accent, mixed with the sweet sesame years, living in *Sài Gòn* about twenty years.

Hanoians enjoy the language tripping on their tongues, indulgently delighting in each word, as if it were a sweet, wild fruit. They love to roll the words around in their mouth then spit it out sweetly and quickly.

"The Northern accent among the youths have changed," *Mẹ* says. "It now sounds a mixture with the *Huế* accent."

"Well, a lot of teachers from *Huế* came up to teach, so the young people have absorbed this," my aunt remarks.

"Ah," *Mẹ* says. "It's a strange evolution, but of course, language changes whatever it touches."

One's accent tells where one's from—the North, the South, the middle region, or somewhere in between, or a mixture of people and places. The way you speak marks and describes you—are you rich or poor, from the North or the South? Or from the Central Region, *Huế*? The insular and homogenous Vietnamese are very sensitive to speech and how one sounds. Anything you say will mark you. If you sound off or strange at all, they will quickly mark you as a foreigner. Someone to be on guard with. □