

Napalm in the Morning

Dang Nguyen

Prologue

He was angry at the world. Working 9-5 at a dead end job. Little education and too old to get one. All he could do was grind it out. Work 9-5 followed by coming home for dinner and sleep just to do it all again. The world had robbed him of his life. The world he knew would not suffice. He must start anew. And to do that he must face countless perils that littered the road.

The land knows not who owns it.
The air knows not who breathes it.
Freedom knows not who chases it.

I

Nations laid claim to whatever they could. The rise and fall of nations became obscured by the nations with power. No new nation could rise without the blood of its people being shed. The small nation of Vietnam rose only to fall to those north of them. They rose up and won freedom only for it to be short lived. The Chinese quelled them again and ruled for the next thousand years. For a millennium the small nation lay dormant until it could rise again. Countless lives were lost to break free from the shackles of the Chinese. But still, Vietnam saw nothing but bloodshed. Long after the nation of Vietnam rose again, they still did not taste freedom. All they did was survive long enough until someone else took over. Freed from one oppressor, they faced another.

The French who were on the other side of the hemisphere laid claim to the land. Over 125, 000 sq. miles of land, they only saw plantations. Natives of the land were only viewed as cheap labor. The French had long abused a nation that has great pride. For nearly a hundred years the French clasped their hands around the throat of Vietnam until the second war of wars swept the world. Many nations sent young men to fight battles on foreign soil in the war of the world. Millions of lives lost to stop the Axis of Evil from gaining supremacy. Throughout all of this, the small nation was worked to the bone for a cause not its own. With France fighting a fierce battle on the other side of the hemisphere, the French's grasp on Vietnam weakened.

They stood and watched the French withdraw only to see themselves passed on along to the Japanese who came in and mistreated them too. Vietnam would not taste the sweet nectar called freedom. Instead of planting crops and raising cattle, the nation was turned into a war factory for Japan. Bombs, ammunition and weapons of destruction came from a land of such beauty and nature. The war dragged on and the death toll climbed higher. The war did not end until the Americans did something inconceivable. The Japanese, men of great honor, pride, and sacrifice held out. Many lives were lost in the Pacific and many more followed them after the dropping of the bombs. With Japan crippled, it was the most opportune time. And to taste freedom the Vietnamese must fight once again. Men of grand schemes rose and stood. Men of great pride stood and broke free from their shackles. From the Chinese to the French to the Japanese, this nation knows only to fight and survive.

The Japanese were withdrawing to recover from the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And the French were itching to come back in and take control. Vietnam could no longer stand under the feet of the French and Japanese. This nation could no longer take the abuse. Men who longed for freedom stood and rebelled. The Viet Minh stood and fought. Ho Chi Minh stood and fought. Ho declared, "The last time the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go." These men did not fight for fame or glory. They bled for life. They bled for pride. They bled for freedom.

II

Born into a land that knows nothing but pain, he survived. He lived a peaceful life in the south but at a cost. The lives of his countrymen were being lost up north and the only life he knew was on the farm. At an early age he saw countless hardships. Even at a young age he was laboring. Farming was the standard way of living for those in the countryside. Waking at dawn only to work till nine at night was the life of a country kid. At the age of five he was in the fields dropping seeds into burrows. To be efficient you had to move quickly. While walking in the freshly plowed burrows, you had to drop seeds as you went moving fast enough so by the time the next lane is made it covers the previous lane. The feet ached and crusted over with calluses while the heels burned raw. Walking long distances was no longer a problem.

Six year olds should be out monkeying around not actually being a monkey scaling trees for coconuts and bananas. One does not directly scale the tree. The best way to climb a tree was to wrap towels around the hands and feet. Then one would shimmy up and down the tree like a caterpillar. And if you manage to slip? The only safety device was two belts linked together strapping you to the tree. After a dozen times, the fear of heights left you. At the ripe old age of seven he was milling rice and grinding coconuts. Milling rice was tedious labor.

The muscles pulled taut as the arms became rubber from the hours of smashing rice kernels. Kernels of rice were placed into a heavy wooden bowl and smashed till the outer layers peeled off revealing edible white rice.

At the age of nine the labors seemed endless as he took control of the fields. The miles on the toned and chiseled legs continue to add up as he plowed the field. Every step taken to push and shove the plow forward rippled through the foot, jolted its way up the calf, vibrated into the knee and was absorbed into the thigh. Those strong-toned legs continued to push forward even with the responsibility of watching the younger ones working in the field placed on his slender shoulders.

Just over ten years old and he learned to use an axe to chop coconuts. Chopping coconuts can be dangerous work. An axe that had seen too many years of work and abuse in the hands of a careless person could result in fatal injuries. An axe head held in place by flimsy wire could come loose at any moment. Gripping the handle with blistered and calloused hands was not ideal. Strike too softly and the coconut won't split, then you'll need to do twice the work. Strike too hard and the shell shatters sending shrapnel all over the place.

III

At thirteen years old, he finally tasted some freedom. Being put in control of the potbellied pigs was not much of an upgrade but it was better than the mindless chopping of coconuts and plowing the fields. The half-mile trek to the butcher was not fun by any means. The potbellied pigs prodded each other and trotted down the road while their two-hundred-pound weight shifted back and forth. Great care must be taken when walking on the road, as the weather-beaten mud path could give out at any moment. The slow long trek was a needed breather. Listening to the oinks and squeals, he got lost in his thoughts. Mindlessly following the pigs he dreamed about grand things. A good high-paying job, an easy life in the city and a good wife to take care of the house. The rumbling of a motorcycle woke him from his daze. The pigs were forced to the side of the road. He watched the bike speed by and wished he had one. Continuing the march, he followed the pigs hoping to keep them in line and on track. Whipping the pigs would only cause them to freak and scatter. And if you don't think keeping pigs in line is hard, then try catching five skittish pigs weighing twice as much as you.

At age fifteen he got his first taste of city life. With the younger kids old enough to take care of themselves, he earned the freedom from the countryside. Loading the coconuts and bananas onto the back of the motorbike, he hopped on. It was rickety at best. The family bought it second-hand just the previous year. The bike had seen better days, probably it had two or three owners before it got to his family. Popping the clutch and firing the throttle—the bike started up like a rusty chainsaw. The rumbling shook him uncontrollably. Clutching the bike tightly only made it worse. The shock just rippled up the thigh, snaked its way along the spine and released into his hands gripping the handlebars. The coconuts

and bananas must be tightly packed so they don't crack or bruise. They had to be packed in a rectangle or pyramid for balance on the bike. After years of selling the harvest in the city, he grew accustomed to the ways of city life.

IV

Freedom came at a cost. Freed from the responsibilities of the farm, he got lost in the fast-paced life of the city. The westernized north was far from the life he knew in the south. He marveled at how one nation could be two separate worlds. Living in the countryside and farming gave way to living on his own and enjoying city life. Every so often he would travel back to the farm and check on his parents. The five years traveling back and forth between the country and city only served the disconnect faster. In the city he had access to everything he needed. Food, clothing—shops lined the streets. Beautiful women walking up and down the road. Soon the little boy farming in the countryside was lost inside the smooth-talking city slicker. He wowed and wooed many. One day a beautiful young lady came across his sights, a daughter of a physician. And as expected she came along and got wooed too. Who wouldn't fall for a handsome young man like him? He impressed her with gifts and sweet talk. She was showered with promises of a good life and riches.

But soon she would find out that life with him was not perfect. She worked hard every day of her life taking care of her siblings. She was diligent in the tasks set for her. He tried to find the easy way out of everything he did. He was a free-spirited partyer, out drinking and having fun all night. When they married, his father-in-law gave him a job as a fisherman and transporter. That only served to be destructive to this young couple. He gained more freedom with this new job. He would spend days out at sea away from home. And she did what every wife did and that was tending to her husband's family. Life in the city is not much different from the country for those who are not wealthy. Her days started early and ended late. At dawn she would be up feeding the animals. By 8 she would have had to draw water from the well for the day's usage. As 10 o'clock rolled by she would have breakfast laid out on the table. Near noon she was at the back of the house washing the laundry in the pond. Soon after she would be collecting wood to light the stove for lunch. The day half over, yet there was still no rest in sight. After clearing the table and washing the dishes, she set out to feed the animals once again. Nearing the end of her day, she was out back collecting the laundry. Before it got too dark, she once again scurried down the path to the well to draw water to fill the container for the shower. Lost in thought as she stared into the dancing fire that was cooking dinner she knew it was almost over. Her day only came to an end when she was watching the water in the pond ripple as she washed the dishes. Life for her was not much different before and after getting married. All her life, all she did was take care of family.

V (excerpt)

Since his first breath of life, his nation had done nothing but shed blood. For the first seven years of his life, he witnessed war. No one should ever have to witness war, let alone children. He saw the French try to lay claim to land on the other side of the continent. He saw his fellow countrymen fighting each other for freedom. And in the end, France lost, Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh won, Vietnam stood free and over a million lives lost. Freedom did not come freely. And peace would not follow so easily. Peace never comes so easily. There was only one year of peace before another war broke out. Even after years of fighting, Vietnam was free, but it was not free from war. Soon it battled itself. The north ruled by Ho Chi Minh turned on the south that was backed by the Americans. And once again Vietnam was at war.

VI (excerpt)

Just as he was starting the journey of life with his wife and two newborns it came to a screeching halt. In 1955 men with lots of money and power couldn't leave well enough alone. And for that he was angry at the world. In that instant the world changed and he became forever angry. He believed he could wait the war out. Once these guys played their little game out things would be normal again, he thought.

He was wrong. War was not a little game, it was a cancer. It lay dormant for years before it reared up and showed its ugly ways. It spread and attacked all around it. The young, the old, the weak, even the strong succumbed to its vile ways.

As the war spread like wildfire, he decided to flee his homeland. Leaving all that he knew, he packed up his family and left. Leaving everything he couldn't take with him, he started his journey across his war-torn homeland. His wife scraped and scrounged whatever she could from the family to earn the two gold bars which amounted to \$2000 U.S. for the fare. With the promise of paying the money back she said her farewells. Leaving behind her brothers, sisters, and elderly parents, she had to go. She had to go for her children. She buried two children in this land and she was not going to bury another two.

VII (excerpt)

The cross-country trek was perilous. With border patrols and enemy scouts roaming, the jungle was no place for a man, his wife, and two small children. A one-and-a-half-year old son was crying for something to silence his stomach. A six-month old daughter who could barely sit up sucked on an empty bottle. The jungle was no place for children, let alone infants. Endless endangerments lurked

in the forest. Silence was a must, closely followed by careful vigilance. Countless patrols roved through the forest making it hard enough, and a crying baby does not help the situation. How does a mother silence a hungry baby when there is no food? How does the mother keep her own stomach from grumbling? The husband's reproach snapped his wife out of her daze. "Keep the boy quiet or we'll all get caught," he snapped.

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