

Talismans
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Not far outside Saigon, the minibus veered around another curve, spitting rocks and gravel into the small shrubs and red rock beneath us. I pressed my fingers to the window, and imagined our bus skidding off the road and tumbling to the valley below. With each turn of the bus, the world outside would be like a vacation slideshow gone awry: a flash of mint-green rice paddies, then sharp stones, then broken glass, then the oval pond, deep and sparkling like an upside down sky. I would be the only survivor.

‘Jesus,’ the guy sitting beside Jenna said. He hugged his backpack, which had a large Canadian flag sewn on it. ‘I do not want to die here.’

I tucked my thumb into my shorts pocket and rubbed the half-photograph of my father. Jenna adjusted the knot on her red bandana, then touched the small silver hoop in her nostril. Tanned and tattooed from the full moon party a few weeks ago on Thailand’s Ko Phangan, she was full of enthusiasm for her life-changing experience, and like the recently converted was anxious to share it with anyone and everyone.

‘Could you please slow down,’ the Canadian pleaded in slow, measured words to our guide, Hai, who twisted to face us.

I rolled my eyes so that Hai would see that I wasn’t one of them. The kind who paid twenty bucks, meals not included, to travel with their own kind in a beat-up minivan. Westerners who believed they owned the world.

Hai, a slight man with steely, narrow eyes that squinted when he fake-smiled, untwisted and spoke in Vietnamese to the driver, whose neck was creased with rings of dirt like a cut-down tree. The driver nodded, then stepped on the gas. Chastened, the Canadian renewed his interest in Jenna’s story. I decided to ignore them the way in high school I’d learned to ignore the popular kids who think the world is about them. At twenty-six, I’d had lots of practice.

In the seat beside me was a Japanese man with close-cut hair and a smooth, boyish face. He wore a compass looped around his neck that he checked periodically during the ride. He held out his hand for me to shake.

‘My name is Kitano,’ he said in halting English. Even though his grip was weak, he shook my hand enthusiastically. He said he was a salaryman at a big Japanese company and was using his one-week vacation here in Vietnam as his last big adventure before he married one of the secretaries at the company in the fall. Kitano stretched his legs out and fingered the zipper above his knee. His nylon pants were the kind that zipped off into shorts, and the side pockets puckered and bulged with unseen items. ‘How long you travel?’ Like many Japanese, he pronounced his Ls like Rs.

‘Until the money runs out. A year if I’m lucky.’ My mother had died almost two years ago, and with the sale of her house, I’d stored my belongings and headed East.

‘Alone?’

I nodded.

‘Why you travel so long time?’

I took the photo out from my shorts pocket and placed it in Kitano's open palm. 'This is my father. He was in the war here.'

Kitano held the photo close to his eyes and squinted. 'He looks like hippie.'

'He was then, I guess,' I said. 'But he was a hero here.' The word 'hero' rolled off my tongue like it was true.

Kitano scrutinized the photo out of politeness, then handed it back to me with a slight nod. He made a scissor motion with his hand. 'Why cut in half?'

I ran my fingers along the cut edge. 'That's a secret.' I hadn't figured out how to tell that part of the story yet. The missing half of the photo, I assumed, was of my father's Thai wife. I wasn't sure if she cut herself out before she sent the letter and photo informing my mother of his death, or if my mother, out of spite or sorrow, had taken the scissors from her sewing table and cleanly excised the image, snipping away the other woman like a stray thread on a shirt.

'Have you ever seen *Apocalypse Now*?' I asked.

Kitano shook his head. 'No, sorry.'

'Well, my father looked like Martin Sheen in the movie – the main character.'

'Martin Sheen?'

'A famous actor. Never mind.' I was getting nowhere with him. I scanned the bus for someone I could tell my story to who would be appropriately impressed. The seats were packed with large-boned westerners, hung-over and red-eyed, wearing midribs, T-shirts, and cotton shorts, their bare legs pressed into the tiny seats. An early morning odour of sour milk – white-people sweat – hung in the air. More than anything, they probably wished they were back at their guesthouses, sleeping through their hangovers until late in the afternoon when they would start partying all over again.

In my few months of travelling in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, the scene was now familiar. Most of the backpackers I'd met were in their twenties on a post-college, pre-real job fling, ready for experience and the tales they came with them. With their slack necks and half-closed lids, the ones on this bus listened to Jenna with half-interest. They had heard her full moon story before, if not her exact story, then another one like it. Even more likely, they had lived the experience themselves and, for the moment, were bored from the telling and hearing of it. So an afternoon of tunnels with the promise of a river sunset would at least bring a new round of stories and shared experiences to the bar that evening, and that was why they had dragged themselves out of bed to subject themselves to the heat and Western body odour and tight places.

I told myself I could befriend them if I wanted. It wasn't high school anymore, when the Jennas of the world acknowledged me with benign smiles of superiority. I knew the rules now. I could tell them about the restaurant in Saigon that served snake's blood out of shot glasses. That would get them going. That was easy – being half-friends with them for a day. But the longer I travelled, the less I felt like them. *They* couldn't understand that I was on this bus not for some entertaining story that I would tell in front of boozy-eyed, sudden friends. What did they know about loss and suffering?

Hai turned to check on us. I saw for the first time that a scar, pale and smooth, sliced his cheek from ear to jaw. I scooted past Kitano and placed my shoulders between the driver and Hai.

'Are we doing okay with the time?'

'On schedule.' Something was wrong with the left corner of his lip, which didn't move when he talked, as if a nerve had been cut.

'So we'll make it to the Mekong before sunset?'

'Always do,' he said.

'Your English is really good.'

'I worked with the Americans in the war.'

'Do you like being a guide?'

'It's okay.' Hai sighed. He was tired of me. 'A government tour guide makes more money. But I can't get one of those jobs. Fought on the wrong side.'

No doubt it was true. But the guides had learned what truths to tell and which ones to keep silent about to get the best tips from tourists.

'Where did you fight?'

'All over.' Hai smiled slowly like it was painful. The left part of his lip didn't move, so his smile looked cocky, almost sneering. 'Now the government builds nice hotels so that you Americans will come and spend your money. We are all friends now. That's what we say.'

'Were you on a boat?'

'Boat?' Hai shook his head.

'My father was on a patrol boat here.'

'Really?' His voice went up and he half-smiled.

I looked around to make sure the others weren't listening, but I didn't need to worry. Jenna was holding centre stage. I leaned into Hai.

'One night, while they were sleeping their throats were slit. Vietcong, of course.' I tried to sound casual, like I wasn't trying to impress him.

Hai cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry about your father. It was a long time ago.'

'That's why I'm on this trip. To see the Mekong Delta. Where it happened.'

'I'm not sure if you'll see much more than what you can in a postcard. But good luck.' He faced the front of the van. I returned to my seat like a sullen school child who had just been dismissed by the teacher.

'That's what I'm learning about all this,' Jenna said in her seductive British accent. 'To just let go. To experience life. Not go so fast.' She touched the cloth of her bandana. She was the type who could take a scrap of material and wrap it in such a way that it looked funky and chic at the same time. Jenna was one of those girls I'd watched from afar: innocent enough to believe that one night with the right combination of people and drugs could bring on epiphanies that would last longer than a full moon.

I tried to ignore the chattering and returned to the scene outside my window, where a group of schoolgirls in the traditional *ao dai* were bicycling home from school. That was how I wanted my Vietnam to be: schoolgirls with white silk tunics and straight bangs, the sun reflecting off the metal of their one-speed bikes, the green-saturated rice paddies behind them. But if I remembered that only, it would be a lie. For every bicycle there were three scooters, and for every schoolgirl's dress there were ten Coca-Cola T-shirts, and for every rice paddy there were twenty apartment buildings. I decided to try again with Kitano.

'See those stalls out there?'

'Very cheap,' Kitano said, reaching for his backpack under his seat. 'I buy many things from them.'

'My father was in a boat here, just as small as those.' I pointed at the passing landscape through the thumb-stained glass. 'If you'd seen *Apocalypse Now*,' I couldn't help adding, 'you'd know the kind of boat I'm talking about.'

I could never get enough of Martin Sheen in that opening sequence, waking up in the city he was trapped in, his voice tight as a wire: *still in Saigon*. I wondered if my father had felt that way when he was here: *still on the boat*. Or after that back in the States, before he had gone native: *still at home*. 'Still on the bus,' I said.

'Still on the bus,' Kitano repeated absently. 'Look at what I buy.'

He took out a Zippo lighter from his front pocket, which he then examined from all angles. He pointed to the message on it. 'How do you say this?'

'Death is my business, and business has been good.'

He repeated the slogan, trying to imitate my intonation and accent. Then he showed me the postcards he had bought, fanning them like a deck of cards. On the back of each one, printed on the heavy cardboard, were the words 'Beautiful Scenes of Vietnam,' with the location of each picture written in Vietnamese, English, French, and Japanese. One card depicted a succession of lime-green and ochre rice paddies in front of dark rocks which jutted out like misshapen hills. Behind the hills mountains, brown and faded, extended to the edges of the postcard. The water in the rice paddies mirrored the soft sky, and the shrub trees in the foreground with the mountains were reverse-imagined as pale apparitions on green glass. Conspicuously marked by the absence of people, the scene's stillness was more eerie than calm.

The next card showed an emerald lake which spread into a V. Full, round hills a shade deeper than the water bordered the lake. The hills met at the tip of the V in the middle of the card, then were lost in clouds. Floating out of the hills' shadow on the lake toward the viewer were two small boats narrower than canoes. The Vietnamese sat with umbrellas to shade themselves from the sun, while a man stood at the back of each boat paddling to some destination past the postcard. The third postcard I took from Kitano.

'You want?'

'Can I?' I fingered the border.

'Sure. I don't need.' He tapped the disposable camera on his lap. 'Here is real photo of schoolgirls on bicycles. You can keep.' I put the postcard in my pocket where the photo of my father was. Kitano placed the remaining postcards in his backpack. He leaned across me and clicked a few pictures of the dirt road and shrubs with his tiny Japanese camera. After Velcroing the camera away in one of his pants pockets, he picked up his compass and held it level in his hand, orienting himself to the terrain. Once he'd exhausted his possibilities, he closed his eyes and was soon snoring lightly, his hand still gripping the Zippo lighter. He seemed at peace with the world.

We arrived at Cu Chi by mid-afternoon. After surviving the first barrage of hawkers selling lighters and pens made from bullets and 'I've Been to the Cu Chi Tunnels' T-shirts, we were herded to a dark, basement-smelling room where we watched a black and white video of B52s dropping bombs on women and children as they ran, hands over their heads, out of the movie's frame.

A voice, dark and heavy, rumbled from the speakers on the walls: 'Cu Chi, the land of many gardens, peaceful all year round under shady trees...Then mercilessly, American bombers ruthlessly decided to kill this gentle piece of countryside...Like a crazy bunch of devils, they fired into women and children...The Americans wanted to

turn Cu Chi into a dead land, but Cu Chi will never die.’ Before our eyes could adjust to the light, we were herded like slow-moving cows to the jungle paths, which had been thinned and cleared for tourists.

Hai showed us one of the original openings of the Cu Chi tunnels, a circle the size of a human head. The Vietnamese started building the long tunnel during the 1940s, Hai told us. By the end of the war, it was seventy-five meters long with an entire society living underground.

‘The Japanese, we could do this too,’ Kitano whispered. He grabbed the loose skin of his stomach and squeezed it. ‘But now too soft.’

‘Here,’ said Hai, gesturing to the whole group, ‘is the place for you. We made the tunnel larger so you can experience it.’

Kitano decided to wear one of the Cu Chi guerilla uniforms offered to the tourists for a more authentic tunnel experience. The uniform fit him perfectly.

‘You look like the enemy,’ the Canadian said.

‘I am the enemy,’ Kitano said, before laughing in short gasping breaths.

Led by Hai, we walked through the tunnel door down to the first level about ten feet below the surface. The room opened to a kitchen, bunkers, and a command room. Even though the tunnels had been enlarged and outfitted with electricity for the tourists, the strapping Dutch couple bowed out before we descended to the second level as the serpentine tunnels narrowed. We didn’t have to crawl so much as crouch. Except for the lack of windows, I was surprised by how livable the tunnels seemed.

Creeping hunchbacked through the rooms, I imagined living as they did, months at a time without seeing daylight. During the day, they went about the business of living, just as people all over the world did, except their lives were underground, secret and unseen, Hai told us. The Vietnamese would tend the rice paddies by the stars, until this life of darkness and bombs and night farming soon became a routine among the chaos.

‘And what else can you do when bombs are falling?’ Hai continued. ‘You go underground and go on with your life and you wait until the bombs have stopped. Then you emerge, assess what has been lost, collect what remains, and you continue. Go on or not. Those were the choices.’

Was that what it had been for my father – choosing to leave all that was dead to him in order to go on? The rooms were lit with bare bulbs wired along the dirt walls. Kitano took out a Maglite to examine the darker parts more carefully.

‘You’ve got a torch,’ Jenna whispered in an excited voice. ‘I think I found something. Would you be keen to check it out?’

We crept into the shadows of the room and waited until the others had left. The air was cool and thick, which I consumed in short, shallow breaths. Kitano wielded the flashlight like it was a weapon that he kept close and ready to use. He had left his other talismans with his clothes when he put on the VC uniform.

Jenna touched my elbow and led us a few feet farther back. ‘Shine the torch here.’

It was a tunnel, but one that had not been expanded for the tourists, not much larger than a rabbit’s hole. We crouched around and peered in the opening. Kitano waved the light above the hole like a magic wand. The tunnel remained narrow, but ended a few feet below.

‘There’s another level,’ Jenna exclaimed as she clapped her hands together. The sound echoed around us.

Kitano placed the flashlight in my palm. 'I'm going down. Give me the flashlight when I ask.'

'I don't think you should.' I smoothed my hand over the photo and postcard in my pocket. The world was dangerous without the protection of talismans, which Kitano had left back with his clothes.

He looked at Jenna. 'I will go.' Kitano, like me, wanted to impress Jenna, and in the manner of someone who was used to having people try to impress her, she was letting him.

'Be careful.' She touched the collar of his uniform.

Kitano was a small man. He held his arms up and folded his shoulders in. His head was level with the ground now. I shined the flashlight on what remained of him. He looked like a decapitated VC soldier. His eyes were closed and his face had a distant, serene expression. Jenna took off her bandana and knotted it around his forehead.

'Think of the Vietnamese who lived here. Go on. Or not,' I said.

Kitano disappeared down the hole.

'Brilliant,' Jenna called down.

'You okay?' I waved the flashlight around the empty floor below.

'Give me light!'

'When I count to three,' I said. 'One, two, three.' The flashlight thudded into the darkness. Time slowed with each breath. I felt as if I'd been born there.

The way I imagined it was this: while the others on his boat are getting their necks slit with wire, my father is passed out on a bag of rice in the storeroom below. He awakes with his mouth and eyes painfully dry. Outlines of rice bags, storage boxes, and bamboo baskets float around him. He grabs on to the silence, thick under the night jungle noises, sits with it, heavy and shapeless in his hands. The silence takes him to a place that is empty and permanently changing, a place without water or trees or sky.

'What do you see?' called Jenna.

'Oh my God!' Kitano's voice echoed beneath us.

'What?'

Kitano screamed and then yelled in Japanese. The light shone back up at us, but we couldn't see his face. He yelled more Japanese.

'English, English,' I yelled back.

'Help me. Up! Up!'

'Bloody hell.' Jenna stuck her hands and then her head in the hole. 'Grab my hands.' She was a big-boned girl and taller than Kitano. 'Hold on to me so I don't fall in,' she said in a take-charge voice. I grabbed her waist. If I let go, couldn't hold her tight enough, she would disappear with him. What would I do then, stay and try to save them, or run and get help? I wasn't sure. Kitano was speaking Japanese again in rapid, agonized bursts.

'I got him.' She pulled him up slowly, with effort, like a woman in reverse labor. When Kitano's head appeared, it was streaked with dirt and sweat. He collapsed on the ground like a forgotten child. The flashlight and bandana were gone. 'Hush now,' she whispered as she slowly stroked his head. His eyes were squeezed shut, and his lips murmured his native tongue.

‘What was it like down there?’ I tugged the sleeve of his rented uniform. ‘Tell me! What did you see?’ Kitano shook his head. I inched my face closer to his. His eyes were open now, shifting like moving targets. ‘I have to know,’ I said.

Kitano swallowed as Jenna dabbed his moist forehead with her fingertips. ‘My grandfather. He was hero too. Except we lost. He always tell me, “Some things you never talk about.” I think that is good advice.’ He was panting again and his eyes were still now, looking at me with a newly discovered hatred. Jenna wrapped her arm around him as if she were shielding him from me, the enemy.

‘You’re okay,’ she whispered. ‘That’s all that matters now. That’s all that matters.’

We arrived at the last part of our tour, the Mekong Delta, as the sun began to set. Hai led us down the embankment where the water reddened under the descending sun’s glow. On the edge of the river, the thick shrubs darkened until they softly blended into the sky. A wooden boat with fishing poles arced then lost themselves in the water. A tethered raft covered in netting bobbed next to the small shack that was someone’s home. The night insects were a symphony of chirps and hums that accompanied the painting in progress. I put my hand on my stomach. None of the movies or postcards were like this moment – this image so full and singing that I fell into empty quietness. Nothing had prepared me for the beauty of the place.

My own father must have missed it at first: that nostalgic beauty of home. I imagined him on the boat late in the afternoon talking with guys with names like Mack and Larry. Mack, he would have been from the backwoods of Mississippi, Larry from a place like Colorado. God’s country, Larry would call it. And then my father, he would talk about Virginia: the wild blackberries, the honeysuckles, and whippoorwills; the spring flowers, azaleas, crepe myrtles, magnolias, dogwoods, and the birds, cardinals, robins, and bluebirds, too, colorful reminiscences scented with the sweet pain of all that was lost. Then he got Virginia back, and all he could think about was the boiling sun sinking over the fishing lines that attached sky to water to land.

‘You won’t find it here,’ Hai whispered behind my shoulder. ‘Down the road, maybe. People there live the same as before the war, before the French even. You might want to go there. You won’t find what you are looking for, but you might find something else.’

The night hummed with the unfamiliar cries of exotic birds and insects. I followed a dirt path, dim and rocky in front of me. In the distance was a figure shimmering in white. We stopped a few feet from each other, like two wary animals, unsure if they have met friend or foe.

She was a young girl, like I had once been, although I hoped she had parents waiting for her inside one of those lit houses. Behind her was a small cluster of huts, calm and quiet. I stepped toward her. She didn’t move.

She wore white calf-length pants and a high-collared shirt like the schoolgirls on the bicycles. Her hair was pulled back and she was slight like the other Vietnamese. Her gaze was not unkind. She reached her hand out; it glowed under the darkening sky. I laced the small, delicate fingers with my own calloused hand.

She led me away from the river, away from the lights of the village, with only her dress to keep me from falling into that place that held all that we are told not to speak of. The girl pointed to the sky, and with her slim, graceful finger traced the circle of the sudden moon. The moon illuminated the others down on the

embankment, a million miles away. A fisherman waved, his hand a pale silhouette under his boat's kerosene lamp. I abandoned the girl's hand and retraced my steps to join them.

I fell into the group just as the fishermen paddled the boat to shore. Hai motioned for us to follow. We were boosted by the driver's laced hands on board. Up close, the men looked older with their missing teeth and creased faces. Their pants, rolled unevenly and splattered with mud, grazed their skinned knees. Once in the boat, wedged between Hai and Kitano I could smell salt and rotting wood along with the caught fish. The men passed around metal plates topped with grilled catfish, which we ate with our hands. One of the girls distributed sheets of moist towelettes she had stowed in her backpack for such occasions.

'Too many bones,' a Dutch girl whispered. I made a point of foregoing the towelettes and ate the fish like the men did, taking the half-chewed bones out of my mouth and throwing them into the water. One man, unshaven with matted hair, brought out a bottle of homemade Mekong whisky from his pocket.

'The real stuff,' said the Canadian.

'Brilliant,' Jenna said. She had taken off her bandana to tie her hair back in a loose ponytail. She clinked glasses with the Canadian and the Dutch couple sitting next to her.

After we'd cleaned the bones of the fish, the fishermen passed around smudged glasses brimmed with Mekong whisky. Soon the group would be restless, cramped on this small boat, the experience having run its course. Later, in the safety of the darkened, windowless bar and their own kind, they would tell their tales about drinking Mekong whisky on a villager's boat. I felt contempt for their pitiful adventures, and yet envied them, those whose lives seemed unimpeded by loss.

Kitano held up his compass. 'We are northwest of Saigon.' His face was red from drinking twice as fast as the rest of us. He had not spoken to me since the tunnels. 'This is like old way in Japan. Long ago we were same as here.'

Hai smiled thinly. I was sure that to him, the old Japanese colonialists were no different than the French or the Americans. His scar was hidden in the night but he looked tired, and his eyes were somewhere else.

I wanted to tell the story of my father to someone. Someone who would be impressed, someone still naïve, who believed in the magic of moons and mushrooms, someone who would believe me. Kitano was busy using his own talismans to exorcise whatever had happened in the hole. *Some things you never talk about.*

Then there was Hai. I was close enough to whisper everything in his ear. But he knew the truth – knew it better than I ever would. After a few shots of whisky, I shifted away from Hai and Kitano and squeezed in next to Jenna at the edge of the boat. I thought we might be friends now, after our time in the tunnel.

'I know a place where you can drink snake's blood,' I said.

'Had that last night.' She looked away, to show me how unimpressed she was.

'My father was on this river during the war,' I breathed into her ear.

'Really?' Even in the darkness I felt her scrutinizing me. This was my chance.

'One evening he gets high with some of the guys and goes down into the storage room and passes out on a bag of rice. When he wakes up it's night. Everything is quiet, too quiet. He slowly opens the door to the deck.'

Jenna set her glass down. Her shoulder touched mine. Her eyes were white and animal-like in the night. 'Then?'

'At first he only sees the shapes, outlines of forms. Then he makes out their necks and the blood from where the knives slit them. His voice cracks when he calls out their names: Mack, Larry, Harrison.'

'Really?' She sounded doubtful.

'It's true,' I said, my voice tight. And for the most part, it was.

She breathed warm whisky on my neck. 'Okay then. What next?'

'He comes back home. I'm born. But me and my mother, we're not enough. So he leaves us for Thailand.' That was not what I had planned to say.

'Big deal.' Jenna drained her whisky and set the empty glass beside me. She turned away, a ghost receding into shadow.

My stomach hurt. I pushed myself up.

'I have to go,' I said to the night air. One of the fishermen helped me onto shore. I was breathing heavily and my legs could not get a foothold on the embankment as I tried to climb up. I wanted to find the girl again. I wanted to show her the photo of my father, the postcard of the girls on bicycles. I wanted to tell her that her moon was more beautiful than mine. I wanted to grab her hand and tell her that it was a big fucking deal. The dirt loosened under my grip, and I slid back down to the bottom. Closing my eyes, I heard Jenna's voice then, far away, back with the others, beginning another story about the moon. I raised my hand for her to lift me up.

She was calling my name, I was sure of it.