

Stealing Buddha's Dinner





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a memoir

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Stealing Buddha's Dinner

Pringles

WE ARRIVED IN GRAND RAPIDS WITH FIVE DOLLARS and a knapsack of clothes. Mr. Heidenga, our sponsor, set us up with a rental house, some groceries—boxed rice, egg noodles, cans of green beans—and gave us dresses his daughters had outgrown. He hired my father to work a filling machine at North American Feather. Mr. Heidenga wore wide sport coats and had yellow hair. My sister and I were taught to say his name in a hushed tone to show respect. But if he stopped by to check on us my grandmother would tell us to be silent because that was part of being good. *Hello, girls*, he would say, stooping to pat us on the head.

It was July 1975, but we were cold. Always cold, after Vietnam, and my uncle Chu Cuong rashly spent two family dollars on a jacket from the Salvation Army, earning my grandmother's scorn. For there were seven of us to feed in that gray house on Baldwin Street: my father, Grandmother Noi, Uncles Chu Cuong, Chu Anh, and Chu Dai (who wasn't really an uncle but Cuong's best friend), and my sister and me. Upstairs belonged to

the uncles, and downstairs my sister and I shared a room with Noi. My father did not know how to sleep through the night. He paced around the house, double-checking the lock on the front door; he glanced sideways out the taped-up windows, in case someone was watching from the street. When at last he settled down on the living room sofa, a tweedy green relic from Mr. Heidenga's basement, he kept one hand on the sword he had bought from a pawnshop with his second paycheck. My father had showed my sister and me the spiral carvings on the handle. He turned the sword slowly, its dull metal almost gleaming, and let us feel the weight of the blade.

On Baldwin Street all of the houses were porched and lopsided, missing slats and posts like teeth knocked out of a sad face. Great heaps of rusted cars lined the curbs, along with beer bottles that sparkled in any hint of sunlight. I spent a lot of time staring at the street, waiting for something to happen or someone to appear. Chu Anh got a job working second shift at a tool and die plant, and sometimes he and my father would meet each other on the street, coming and going from the bus stop.

My sister was also named Anh, but with an accent no one pronounces anymore. A year older than I, she was the ruler of all our toys. We amassed a closet full of them, thanks to the bins at our sponsor's church. We had so much, we became reckless. We threw Slinkies until they tangled and drowned paper dolls. Someone gave us tricycles and we traveled the house relentlessly, forgetting our uncles sleeping upstairs. We didn't know that they had to get up in the middle of the night, or that our father competed for pillows and comforters from the reject pile at work. We didn't know that we were among the lucky.

I remember bare feet on old wood floors; shivering after a bath. Noi knitted heavy sweaters from marled-colored rayon my father bought at Kmart. Puffs of steam rose from the kitchen stove where she cooked our daily rice. One blizzard morning, Noi let my sister and me run outside in our pajamas and fuzzy slippers. The snow fell on my face and for a moment I laughed and waved. Then a gust of wind sent me tumbling into a snowbank and I screamed so much, Noi thought the weather had turned into an attack. She snatched us up and ran inside.

We had been living on Baldwin Street for almost a year when Mr. Heidenga invited us to dinner at his family's massive, pillared house in East Grand Rapids. The Heidengas had a cook, like Alice on *The Brady Bunch*, and she must have fed us—me, my sister Anh, and the Heidenga daughters, all sequestered together in the kitchen. But I don't remember eating anything. I only remember staring, and silence, and Heather Heidenga—who might have been Marcia, with that oval face—opening a canister of Pringles. Anh and I were transfixed by the bright red cylinder and the mustachioed grin on Mr. Pringles's broad, pale face. The Heidenga girl pried off the top and crammed a handful of chips into her mouth. We watched the crumbs fall from her fingers to the floor.

Mrs. Heidenga swished into the kitchen to see how we were doing. Later, my father would swear that she served them raw hamburgers for dinner. Mrs. Heidenga was tall and blond, glamorous in a pastel pantsuit and clicking heels. When she touched her daughters' hair her bracelets clattered richly. Nicole Heidenga,

who was younger than her sister but older than mine, waited for her mother to go back to the dining room. She shoved her hand into the can of Pringles and said, "Where's your mom?"

Anh and I made no answer. We had none to give.

We had left Vietnam in the spring of 1975, when my sister was two and I was eight months old. By then, everyone in Saigon knew the war was lost, and to stay meant being sent to reeducation camps, or worse. The neighbors spoke of executions and what the Communists would do to their children; they talked of people vanished and tortured—a haunting reminder of what my grandfather had endured in the North. My father heard that some Americans were going to airlift children out of the country, and he wondered if he could get Anh and me on one of those planes. Operation Babylift it was called, and over the course of April would carry away two thousand children. But on April 4 the first flight crashed at the Tan Son Nhut air base, killing most on board. My father decided he had to find another way, though time was running out for Saigon. Americans were fleeing. Wealthy Vietnamese worked bribes to get any route out. Masses of would-be refugees mobbed the airport.

On the morning of April 29 the last helicopters rose from the roofs of the American Embassy. The North Vietnamese were closing in, firing rockets at the downtown neighborhoods, where looters were still smashing in windows. Tanks would be rolling into the presidential palace by the next day. Chu Cuong, who was based at the naval headquarters, called Chu Anh at the army communications center. Two dozen ships had been waiting at

the Saigon River for the past month, preparing for the end. Now it was time. *I'm getting on a ship*, Chu Cuong said. *You get the family on any one you can. Go now.*

He had been to the United States for training missions—there's a photograph of him confident and grinning in hip-slung bell-bottoms, his hair windblown while the Statue of Liberty rises up behind him—and he was certain that we would all be able to meet up there. *We'll find each other*, he said casually, as if America were a small town.

Chu Anh went straight home and sat down, dazed. He was known as the level-headed practical one, and he wasn't so prepared to abandon everything and throw our fate into an old Vietnamese warship. My father argued with him. *There's no other way*, he pointed out. *This is our last chance.*

We headed toward the Vietnamese naval headquarters, Chu Anh driving a motorbike while holding Anh in one arm, and my father on his own bike, with Noi on the back holding fast to me. They drove through the twenty-four-hour curfew and the thundering of shells. All around us people were running, dropping suitcases and clothes, trying to flag down cars.

At the Saigon River my father and uncle abandoned their once fiercely protected bikes only to see thousands of people already gathered at the headquarters gates, where guards patrolled with automatic rifles. They began searching for another way to the docks, pushing through the screaming crowd. A full panic had hit the city, the kind that sent people racing after airplanes on the runway, that made people offer their babies to departing American soldiers.

It was almost dusk—no lights came on—by the time my

father spied a passageway blocked by a roll of barbed wire. He motioned to Chu Anh, who still wore his soldier's boots, to step down on the wire so the rest of the family could get past it. How this happened—quickly, almost easily—my father doesn't understand. Had no one else seen the passage? Did no one see us go? Sometimes, he says, he dreams it didn't happen at all.

As we ran to the docks a guard grabbed my father and swung him around, pushing the barrel of an M-16 at his stomach. *What are you doing here? Go back*, he ordered.

My father just looked at him. Chu Anh and Noi were moving ahead with me and Anh. *Shoot me if you have to*, he said. *But my family is going*. He backed away, turning to run. The guard didn't shoot.

Most of the ships were already gone. The river was filling up with rowboats and dinghies, whatever means people could find. We climbed onto one of the last ships in line, using a ladder that someone pulled up the second my father touched the deck.

We left that night out of luck, drive, fear pushed into fearlessness. And by further luck the ship inched forward down the long river, everyone holding their breath for the gunfire they expected but which never came. As we reached the ocean the U.S. Seventh Fleet appeared in the distance to guide us toward the Philippines.

Those days on the ship, people jostled each other to keep the small space they had claimed among the thousand or so on board. There was not enough rice or fresh water, and all around us children screamed and wailed without stopping. My father says that my sister and I did not cry the entire trip, and I'd like to believe it. I'd like to think we gave them something—a little peace, maybe. My father, uncle, and grandmother didn't talk much,

worrying about Chu Cuong, if he had made it out safely, where he was at that moment. One morning, the word *apples* swept around the ship. My father hurried to collect our family's portion and brought back half an apple for Noi. She fed it to my sister and me, taking none for herself.

Then another word: *fire*. Somewhere belowdecks one had started in a room near the ammunitions hold. *This ship is going to blow up*, someone said. In the rising hysteria my father, grandmother, and uncle quietly sat down with Anh and me, preparing to accept whatever would happen. They waited. But the ship stayed on course. Below, workers had managed to extinguish the fire.

Late at night my father slipped away from the deck and made friends with the crewmen. He had always been a charmer, the popular kid surrounded by friends, the smooth talker who could dance any woman around the room. Now he worked his way into the kitchen and struck a deal with one of the cooks, listening to the guy's long stories of home and teaching him how to play poker in exchange for a little powdered milk for my sister and me.

At Subic Bay in the Philippines we transferred to a U.S. ship headed for Guam. There, at a refugee camp, we awaited entry papers into the United States. For the next month my father looked for anyone he might know from his neighborhood in Saigon. He joined groups of boys who dared each other to climb the skinny, arching coconut trees and knock down the fruit. It was a small risk for some flavor, a taste that would remind them of home.

One day, a couple of weeks into the waiting, my father got into the usual long line for rice and noticed a man, far ahead, wearing yellow pants. They were brighter than the day, tinged with chartreuse in a lava-lamp pattern, and the man was standing a little outside the line, his left leg askance as if striking a pose.

My father recognized those pants. They were his own, a favorite pair, ones he had often worn when he went out at night.

My father stepped out of the line and walked toward the man in the yellow pants, who turned around. It was Chu Cuong. He had been in the camp all this time, wondering if the family had been able to get on a ship. He had worn the pants every day, always making sure to stand a little apart from everyone else, just in case. He was glad, he said, that he wouldn't have to wear those pants all over America, looking for us.

From Guam we flew to Arkansas and the refugee camp at Fort Chaffee. We were in America at last, but there was little to tell from behind the barbed-wire, chain-link fence. There were no trees to climb, and not a coconut in sight. The days strung themselves into months of waiting: standing in meal lines; playing cards; hoping for sponsors; sitting around the tents and barracks talking about what they had heard America was like. The optimists said *easy money, fast cars, girls with blue eyes*; others said *cold, filled with crazy people*. My father and uncles traded English words for cigarettes. Chu Anh in particular knew more than most; he'd always excelled at school and had gotten in two years of college before he'd had to join the army.

My father made friends with one of the American soldiers guarding the camp and brought back a few bars of chocolate for Noi. She spent her time minding my sister and me and talking to women who spent their hours crying, longing to go back home. Later, a group of Vietnamese in the camp organized a campaign to get sent back to Saigon. They were fools, my father said, and

did they think they would return to a better life in Vietnam, greeted by the North Vietnamese? Even he, an impatient man, knew all he could do was wait to see which city we would be given. Only after we left Fort Chaffee did he realize how much time he had wasted in the camp. He had felt almost safe there among his fellow Vietnamese. He had forgotten to think ahead, imagine us living among white people who spoke only English and looked at us strangely. He had forgotten to prepare.

Every afternoon my father went to look at the names posted at the camp's central office. When at last our Nguyen appeared, buried in the list of Nguyens, my father brought back three options: sponsors in California, Wyoming, and Michigan. To make such a swift decision with little information to go on, my family relied on vague impressions volunteered by friends of friends in the camp; they relied on rumors. California: warm but had the most lunatics. Wyoming: cowboys. Michigan was the blank unknown. My father would have chosen California, where he heard many other Vietnamese were going. But my grandmother, the head of the family, hesitated. Back in Saigon, she had met a woman whose son had studied at the University of Michigan on a scholarship. Such a possibility had grown in her mind until it became near legend, too symbolic to refuse. And here it was right in front of her.

The night before we left for Grand Rapids my father and uncles pooled their money—thirty-five dollars—to throw a party for their friends who were still waiting for sponsors. They had only five dollars remaining after buying beer and cigarettes but figured, so be it. They wanted a proper farewell to the people who knew them, and to toast the lives they had foregone. *We are*

people without a country, someone in the camp said. Until we walk out of that gate, my father replied. And then we are American.

I came of age in the 1980s, before *diversity* and *multicultural awareness* trickled into western Michigan. Before ethnic was cool. Before Thai restaurants became staples in every town. When I think of Grand Rapids I remember city signs covered in images of rippling flags, proclaiming "An All-American City." A giant billboard looming over the downtown freeway boasted the slogan to all who drove the three-lane S-curve. As a kid, I couldn't figure out what "All-American" was supposed to mean. Was it a promise, a threat, a warning?

Of the two hundred thousand people who populate Grand Rapids, the majority are Dutch descendants, Christian Reformed, conservative. My family was among the several thousand Vietnamese refugees brought to the area, mostly through churches participating in the federal resettlement effort. My father and uncles and grandmother were grateful for a place to go—how could they be anything less?—and preferred to overlook how the welcoming smile of our sponsor gave way to a scowling face behind a drugstore cash register: *Don't you people know how to speak English? Why don't you go back to where you came from?*

Grand Rapids brings to mind Gerald Ford, office furniture, and Amway, created here in 1959 by Richard DeVos and Jay Van Andel. The company is now headquartered just east of the city in the town of Ada. My stepmother Rosa, whom my father married in 1979, would one day move us there in an effort to keep our family together. DeVos and Van Andel have poured millions of

dollars into Grand Rapids and the Republican Party. Their names are emblazoned everywhere on buildings and in the *Grand Rapids Press*, a reminder of what and whom the town represents, as if the sea of blond—so much I could swear I was dreaming in wheat—could let a foreigner forget. In school hallways blond heads glided, illuminated in the lockers creaking open and slamming shut, taunting me to be what I only wished I could be. That was the dilemma, the push and pull. The voice saying, *Come on in. Now transform. And if you cannot, then disappear.*

In 1983 the construction of the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel's glass tower marked the city's first skyscraper, reaching twenty-nine stories. I remember the breathless chronicle of the building in the newspaper, and the opening of restaurants too fancy to dare consider. It would be years before I stepped foot inside the velvet green lobby, years before my father and stepmother ate an anniversary dinner—the only one I ever knew them to celebrate—at the 1913 Restaurant, where they ate chocolate mousse that arrived in an edible shell that cracked open when they tapped it. When I drive Highway 131 skirting downtown, I can't help seeing pride and forlornness in the mirrored obelisk of the Grand Plaza jutting up from the landscape of brick buildings left over from the nineteenth century furniture boom. The Grand River cuts through the city on its way to Lake Michigan, a swath for salmon and waste, a gleaming opacity beneath the lit-up bridges at night.

My family ventured into downtown only a few times a year, for the Festival of the Arts (known simply as Festival), the Hispanic Festival where Rosa volunteered, Fourth of July fireworks, and the city's Celebration on the Grand. Crowds of families would

set up blankets and lawn chairs on the Indian mounds at Ah-Nab-Awen Park, waiting for fireworks to rain over the river. We'd hurry to join them, my father's mood darkening as he drove around for a parking space, circling the elephantine Calder sculpture that anchors the downtown business area. I had love-hate feelings for the Calder: it represented Grand Rapids, being part of the city's logo, yet it was also real art—something greater than the ordinary life I knew.

Throughout my childhood I wondered, so often it became a buzzing dullness, why we had ended up here, and why we couldn't leave. I would stare at a map of the United States and imagine us in New York or Boston or Los Angeles. I had no idea what such cities were like, but I was convinced people were happier out on the coasts, living in a nexus between so much land and water. Gazing at the crisscrossing lines of Manhattan or the blue vastness of the oceans, I would feel something I could only describe as missingness.

In the town of Holland, about half an hour's drive from Grand Rapids, the annual spring Tulip Time Festival brings all other activities to a halt. The citizenry work double-time to get their front-yard tulips in order. There are contests, prizes, prestige to be had. There's a parade. People line up early with their lawn chairs to wait for girls in braids and wooden clogs to come clapping down the streets.

Once, in second grade, a substitute teacher gave a geography lesson by asking students to name the places they wanted to visit. She had a large globe beside her, spinning it absently as she talked.

I was the first student she called on. Tongue-tied by shyness, I couldn't think of what to say. "Holland," I blurted out.

Brightly the teacher said, "Here or overseas?"

I must have stared at her dumbly, for she repeated the question, "This Holland or the one overseas?" Perhaps she thought I didn't understand. But I was amazed that of all the places in the world, she thought that I would choose the town of Holland. Wasn't it enough that I would choose the country?

"Not here," I said. "Not this one."

In 1975 we were new in America and two years away from the arrival of Rosa. Before she swept us up and out of Baldwin Street, we lived in a house of splintery wooden floors that slanted in different directions. We huddled close as if in a cave. Our Vietnamese mixed with the American voices rising from the Salvation Army television my father had brought back to life. Our cave had feather smells and rice smells, tricycles in the house, bare feet. My sister and I played all day in our pajamas, even going outside in them, though no farther than the curb so our grandmother could watch us from the porch. In the cave we ate spring rolls and drank 7UP, tore open packages of licorice and Wrigley's spearmint gum. My sister and I fell asleep with plastic phones and floppy dolls from the bins at Blessed Christian Reformed Church. We held on to oranges and plums, desserts from Noi, saved so long we forgot to eat them.

When Christmas rolled around we had a real tree with lights and a star. My sister and I had no idea what the word *Christmas* meant; to us it was, and remained for years, glitter and gifts. We

had to put together the pieces of America that came to us through television, song lyrics, Meijer Thrifty Acres, and our father, coming home from work each day with a new kind of candy in his pocket. We couldn't get enough Luden's wild-cherry-flavored cough drops, or Pringles stacked in their shiny red canister, a mille-feuille of promises. My father's mustache was nothing like Mr. Pringles's, which winged out jauntily and crowned a jolly smile. Mr. Pringles was like Santa Claus or Mr. Heidenga—a big white man, gentle of manner, whose face signaled a bounty of provisions.

So we hoarded our Pringles cans, rolling them on the floor, making them into piggy banks with pennies donated by our uncles. The Pringles glowed by window light, their fine curvatures nearly translucent. So delicate, breaking into salty shards on our tongues. These were blissful days, or so they seemed to me. I did not know we were poor, or different, or that we had been born in another hemisphere. I didn't know that a kind of apprehension gathered around my father each evening, making him check the corners of every room, the spaces behind open doors. I wonder what he thought about—he doesn't say, can't remember. Did he wake up gasping with shock, gripping the sword, forgetting where he was? Did he dream of Saigon? Did he think ahead to what he would have to tell my sister and me, one day, if we asked about our mother? How would he explain the choice he had had to make?

Back in the chill of the rental house that cost one hundred precious dollars a month, the only future he could see lay in work, in whirls of processed feathers. For the beauty of a Pringles could only go so far, and must be paid for. My uncles felt it, too. When they slept all day after working all night, or played the same melancholy Simon & Garfunkel song over and over, my grandmother

told me not to bother them with questions about what all the words meant.

Too much to ask, and too much to do. English to learn, streets to navigate, work to manage, food to buy, friends to find. And so my father and uncles and grandmother rose, always in darkness, toward this new life.