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Vose: Vietnam Visits Uncle Bill

VIETNAM VISITS UNCLE BILL

Asha Vose

Uncle Bill never tells the truth exactly, but he does tell a story. The story pushes out of his tin-roofed, almost-house. It opens the broken screen door that bangs like a shotgun twice every time you close it, no matter how carefully you do it, even if your fingers are softer than moth's wings.

Inside his house in Nowhere, Mississippi we are sitting around an oak table, eating instant mashed potatoes and pork chops because Uncle Bill, an old-school bachelor, can't freeze an ice cube. We are heavy from the funeral. The bottoms of our Sunday black pants and skirts are stained mud red. We are relieved to hear a story that doesn't start, "Norma was a good woman." We carry the funeral in our pockets.

Uncle Bill leans over the table. His shadow stretches over the wood as he says, "In Saigon the lights bleed arterial indigos and varicose violets over the streets, and the stench of rotting fish pulses the sky first baby pink, then cement, and finally thrombosis blue. You cover your nose and mouth with your shirtsleeve, but nothing can protect you from that stench. It's a smell as though every dead thing on earth sat up and said, 'Ahh'." Over the dingy school-globe in my mind the story settles in Saigon, Vietnam. I picture thin letters over a pink, cardboard world.

Uncle Bill rests a moment and lights a cigarette. Years of hand-rolled tobacco have left him with a voice like smoky gravel. As a gentleman, he knows when to pause in his story, and how to let the smoke drift over him lazily and hang above his head. He clenches the cigarette tightly between his index and middle fingers. He turns the cherry toward himself and glances at the glowing ember eye.

"It's not like you see in the pictures," he says. "Don't believe those pixilated smiles. The women don't always wear straw hats and not everyone grows rice."

“At night we went out to let off steam. I had a knot in my stomach then, watching the night-women sell their precious dark, and wondering which girl might be the last I ever touched. We were out there all alone. We had that in common. We were the lost children of a shadow city.” Uncle Bill leans back in his chair and looks out the window at the murky sky. “I am not afraid of the shadow city,” he whispers.

As the words leave his lips and pass through the smoke they blacken and twist into the long curving outline of her. First the indentation of her waist is a column of smoke at the back of his head, her proud ribcage giving way to immature breasts and thin arms. The curling dark outline of her widow’s feet appear after her torso, tomb-bodied, and long-fingered she steps from the smoke. Her long, night-colored hair spills over his shoulders. She leans in until they are cheek to cheek. She places a single translucent finger over his lips and whispers to me, “*my story.*”

Mylai the beauty, I know this is her story. I fear her massacre eye. I fear her mother’s kiss. I fear the tall embrace of her.

Uncle Bill trembles slightly as her finger caresses his lips. He can’t see or hear her, but he feels something is wrong. He takes a long drag and pulls himself up straight in his seat.

“I was eighteen. After six weeks of basic training they sent me. The morning I flew in, the sky was the color of scrambled eggs. I’ll never forget it. They made me a gunner for a Medevac. They wanted me to shoot the people that shot people who were wounded. Everything in the jungle seemed like a bad dream. The life expectancy of my job, Huey Medevac gunner, was two weeks,” he said.

My brother Lua was seventeen. He was tall for his age and clumsy. He could fish better than all the other boys, but they still teased him. They always teased him because of his teeth. They used to call him, ‘river rat’, Mylai said.

“I had an M-16. It jammed constantly. When I picked it up, I thought the last thing I’d hear in my life would be click—click,” said Uncle Bill. Mylai’s smile turns down at the corners as she rests her head on his shoulder.

Then Viet Cong took him. There were no more fish. I went down to the river in the morning with my little wooden hooks and sat on the bank. In the slippery light every boy had a split-toothed smile, and every silver line lead back to my brother.

“I didn’t see him until the Medevac had been shot down. Six of the guys weren’t moving, stone dead. The pilot was out with a head wound; he was heavy on my shoulders as I was stumbling into the green, and I heard shots like hot thunder all around. I could feel the pilot’s blood glue each hair to the back of my neck, tight to the skin. Up in a tree, I saw the sniper, a blink of black in the leaves,” he said.

There is something the sniper doesn’t know about Uncle Bill. Actually, there are several things: he doesn’t know the taste of the crunchy pecan ice cream Bill will eat, or the satisfaction Bill will feel lying in bed in the hot afternoon as the breeze twitches the sheets. He will never feel the fur of the soft, soft dog Bill will keep tucked in his coat pocket in forty years. But the most important thing he doesn’t know about Bill is that boys from Nowhere, Mississippi shoot like the devil.

“I pulled the pilot behind a rock and propped up my M-16. The whip-crack sounds echoed in the jungle for a long time. I had never killed a man before—sure foxes, squirrels, deer, but never a person. I carry that sound with me like a weight on my index finger,” said Uncle Bill. “I didn’t see his face. They sent me a letter. I was supposed to get a bronze star. I don’t even know his name.”

Mylai digs her nails into his cheeks and pulls her head off his shoulder. She releases his face, crossing her arms as she turns her back to him. For a moment, she looks as though she will just walk off. Her hair twitches angrily, as she turns and walks around to face him. She kneels in front of his chair and puts her hand on his.

His name is Lua, my little river rat, she hisses, and he has our father’s eyes. Mylai’s eyes are solid black as she turns to me.

They never gave you your star. They don’t even pay you enough for coffee, old man! The bills fall like bombs on your table. No more

Agent Orange and no more money for orange juice, she sneers.

"We woke up one morning on the wrong side of a war," Uncle Bill says, as if he heard her. His story has etched the lines in his skin a little deeper and bleached the white in his hair whiter. It has deepened his gravelly voice to a croak and given his eyes a milky sheen. If it keeps up this way he will be blind before he finishes telling it.

They crawled into my home on their elbows and bellies, stabbing the yellow dirt then smoothing it back again. Her eyes are normal as she stands. She has released Uncle Bill's face, but the half-moon bruises where her nails were remain on his cheek. She brushes dirt off his shoulder, almost lovingly.

They took everything, she said.

He begins to say, "They said when we came home. . . ." but she looks at him brightly, dementedly, now all smiles as she cuts him off.

What if I could give back what they took away? she asks.

". . . We'd be heroes," he finishes.

Mylai the Beauty, closes her eyes, places the very tips of her long fingers on his forehead, and breathes out a long exhalation of smoke over Bill.

Uncle Bill's wrinkles peel off in curls and glowing peach-soft skin grows in, his ears move up and shrink back. Wispy hairs thicken and grow black over his head, jaws move up and cheekbones re-emerge, but his smiling white-blue eyes are the same. He is twenty again. My uncle is handsome. I have seen the pictures, and I believe the smiles.

Mylai opens her eyes. She is translucent now, and when she turns I see the glimmer of moving smoke in her fingers held over his hand. She moves her lips next to his ear. Even though he can't hear her, she whispers softly, fervently to him as though every word were an incantation.

You met me on the bank of the river. You saw something flash in the water, and you followed the silver line to me. You gave me something dark; it melted in my mouth and tasted like love. The sky was the color of scrambled eggs. I'll never forget it.

You took me to the States to get married in your family chapel in Hattiesburg. I wore your sister's wedding dress pinned close to my waist and arms. We moved to Tupelo, Phoenix, and Charlotte. I was pregnant before the spring and our children bloomed as fast as rain: first Anne Marie and Camille, then Edward our little king, the little ones painted pictures with their fingertips. On Fridays you took out the trash, and on Mondays I brought in the milk, she said. She smiles as she cries, a dreamy smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. Her lips brush his ear as she whispers.

You never lived alone in this almost-house. You didn't marry Sandy the gold-digger that took your barbershop. You never watch children on the swings a little longer than other men. You didn't skid your car into a telephone pole that night, bursting it open in a ball of flames and glass.

She points down at his ankle. *Your bone wasn't charred black past mid-marrow, and the patchwork veins never healed over like blue cracks in your whitewash-tinted skin,* she said. She slumps in front of him on the floor, overcome by the years of what might have been.

"Heroes," Uncle Bill mutters still thinking of the war. "I don't even think they know what heroes are." He stretches his legs as older men sometimes do, as though they might meet resistance. He stubs out his cigarette. There is only the faintest limp in his right leg as he stands and moves to the window. The clouds have cleared and the sun shines faintly on his shoulders.

We are stuffed as the ducks Uncle Bill keeps on his mantle. Mother has served the black coffee that keeps us awake, but our eyes are closing. We are pointedly ignoring the dishes. Some of us are thinking of Norma's bathtub merlot and the twinkle-splash it made against the white tub wall as she stirred it. Some of us are regretfully remembering Uncle Bill's mattresses as too soft or quite hard. We are not fussing over Uncle Bill, telling him he should sit down or save his strength. We are tired of massacre eyes and cardboard worlds. We are ready for bed.

It seems as though his story is floating along in midair, drifting like a cloud. It wants to dip and dive or soar up into the

sky, instead condemned, it hangs. We wait in the silence, each of us listening to the sound of our own heartbeats. Uncle Bill, silhouetted against the streaming light of the sun, dust motes gleaming around his shoulders; the echo of blood sloshing during ventricular contraction, rapidly turning red-blue; Mylai spread like a fan on the dirty floor, shoulders heaving; the flow as the valve opens and blood rushes into the oxygen, turning bright red. It seems in this sunlight as though nothing will happen, as though nothing has ever happened. We can hear our blood turning blue.

Uncle Bill's story, the pulse-less thing, cannot manage to flat line and refuses to die. It sits around the room looking back and forth. It thinks, "What was that noise? What's happening over there? Is Uncle Bill OK? What's going on?" The heat has made it jumpy.

I am not sure how I know we are waiting for an ambush, but I can feel the tingle of adrenaline like needles in my fingertips. I want to yell, " Stop it! I can't go back to Vietnam. I'm half-asleep!"

But Uncle Bill has no choice. Vietnam, home of the bomb-children, isn't a place he goes. It is a place that creeps in on him, as he gets older, casually taking a few minutes in the supermarket when a display falls over with a crash.

Bamboo stalks explode up through the floor, ten feet tall, full-grown and yellow-skinned. Their leaves unfurl and twist over Uncle Bill's shoulders. He stands immobile as vines snake through the floor, scale his legs, and cinch in his waist. Undisturbed he gazes out the window and lights a fresh cigarette.

A bamboo pole smashes into my elbow and shoots past my head at an angle on its way. The bamboo is growing, denser and thicker, until the crimson light of Uncle Bill's cigarette is the only part of his outline I can see. I hold my throbbing arm to my side. The roof blows off of the house as though it were made of cloth, wrinkling as it flies away. The sun shines blinding white. Uncle Bill is speaking again. I try to hold onto his voice but he's muffled by bamboo. Tripwire criss-crosses the room like a spider

web. Each of the walls, one after the other, falls flat with a boom. Mylai is moving through the bamboo like a shadow. I strain to hear the soft growl of Uncle Bill's voice in the jungle. I want to get up and search for him, but I'm afraid of tripwire.

"There never was a shadow city," he says. From his voice I know he has found something he lost, and lost something he never knew he had. My eyes search for him in the bamboo; so uniform it makes me dizzy, yellow and black and green and yellow and black. The sun, the insufferable sun, has mutated into an interrogator determined to illuminate every crevice. I catch myself before I wipe the sweat from my forehead, the silver tripwire above my forearm winks up at me.

"I called it 'the shadow city' because I couldn't call it what it was. The other men called them Charlie for 'C', but I did it to have one name for those men, women, and children. I didn't want to see their faces. There were many of us, but one Charlie," he said. "I had pushed away all memory of that place and her."

Mylai steps from the bamboo and stands between Uncle Bill and me. Here in Vietnam he can see her. He turns his head and looks at her for the second time in forty years. "On the last day I saw you, you were running on the mainland away from the village and your hair flew behind you like a flag," he said.

The first time I saw you, I wanted to kill you, and take from you what your people had taken from me. But you had the rifle, she said.

"I could see you weren't afraid of me, but you didn't stop. You put her fingers together like a pistol and laughed a high laugh. 'Bang! Bang! Joe!' You said, as you ran into the bush. I knew we had taken something from you by the sound of your laugh that hung like a familiar weight on my index finger." His hand doesn't shake as he holds it out to Mylai. In an instant he is an old man again, but his white-blue eyes are the same.

"I could have believed your smile. I would have grown rice," he said.

You couldn't marry me now if you wanted to. You would be

trying to love all Vietnam in one skinny girl, she said. She turned and walked through the bamboo, fading with each step until she was another shadow.

Mylai's words echo in the room. We are back in Uncle Bill's house, heavy in our seats watching him look out the window. Vietnam left as quickly as it came. The bamboo fell through the floor and the floorboards filled themselves in. The walls righted and joined with the roof as it straightened. The dying light outlines Uncle Bill and his cigarette.

My uncle's story plummets to the ground shrieking. In its death throes it unravels long, brightly colored ribbons as it falls: fuschia, canary yellow, forest green, periwinkle. I catch a scarlet one as it spins out of control. As it slides between my fingers, I have a vision of where the story ends. It ends in Norma's house with her husband, Grandpa Vinson, a few months after their son had returned from Vietnam.

Granddad, his leathery hide silver in the moonlight, pulls his body out of bed at two in the morning. He grasps his shotgun with hands that do not tremble, not even during WWII when he had slept in a ten-foot deep grave. His knobby knees protrude from his large white shorts. He looks at his son waiting for him, silhouetted in the doorway. Bill is also knobby kneed and in his shorts, but sweaty, unable to sleep. Granddad knows there is nothing living in the darkness outside. He looks at his son. He cannot tell where the shadow ends and his son begins.

"I'm ready for Charlie now. You just show me where you heard them," he says in a soft voice. They walk out the front door and into the flowerbed circling the house, searching for something they will not find in Grandmother's irises.