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Birthright

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Birthright

Grab a seat in a historic movie theatre --you know, the kind that shows screenings for older folks on a Tuesday night. Then watch pairs of them stroll their way through the aisles, while you sit silently avoiding conversation. You look at the time and sigh at the unpleasant fact that it will be ten more minutes until the show starts, so you practice the proverbial “social skills.” You make pleasant conversation with your professor and fellow classmates, who hope to score extra credit points watching a documentary about the Vietnam Wars. The lights dim, chat ceases and your introverted self is at ease.

You let yourself scale back for a few moments.

For twenty-one years, you were never able to answer follow-up questions about your parents’ lives prior to your birth. All you knew about them was what you saw—that was enough for you. Tell yourself that it’s not wholly your fault, your parents’ silence on anything concerning the Vietnam War has simplified your family’s history to the pieces others tell you: protests, fall of Saigon, communism, Ho Chi Minh, Kent State and President Johnson. You also borrow those vague notions of history when people ask. Unable to articulate your feelings then, feel uneasy that you are part of a generation that is under historical and cultural amnesia. Having lost their power to shock and horrify, the Vietnam War— the Holocaust, Hurricane Katrina, the Bosnian genocide, police brutality against blacks— have become lost in the cynicism and malaise of the modern consciousness. You grapple with the reality that stock phrases ranging from *c’est la vie* to *shit happens* impart the depressing truth of our society’s familiarity and apathy towards tragedy and loss.

But realize that this is not about a generation and its collective consciousness.

You like to talk about the ephemeral. You tell yourself--and others-- that you are proud of your identity as a Vietnamese woman, which will not be completely true because the things you

have not learned about your family's history make it difficult to feel good about their lives and sometimes yours. Feel honored when you tell others that your parents are immigrants. Strong yet meek people that they are, you make it your responsibility to tell the world about them. You tell people about the exhaustion from all the work they've done—squinting, bending over and standing on the farm and in a factory--and the years of work that still lay ahead. You want others to know that royalty runs through your parents' blood; that their genetic material is not of the conquered. That they are your king and queen, who built a kingdom for you to rest, play and learn in, while they were away fighting beasts that you couldn't see. That these boat refugees are a symbol of victory and determination in the face of great adversity. But you fail to fully understand the conditions and history that forced them to choose between swimming or sinking.

You try to extract any information from your parents about the Vietnam War, but get waylaid catering to the needs of your teenage self, in all of its self-absorbed normalcy. Promise yourself to do something about that. Three years into your college career you finally decide to come around, and register for a Vietnam Wars class. Your gut instinct says you won't gain much, except perhaps for some greater context to all the Sixties' political references. You need upper-division credits, anyways.

You are now back in that movie theater.

Even at your 5'3 height, you tower over your mother and often act as her protector, translator and navigator through both the invisible and discriminative dimensions of the immigrant experience. But seldom do you contextualize your parents' experiences within the larger narrative of the human condition and what violence can do to it; you settle on merely intellectualizing the pains of the lived experiences of refugees. Your everyday setting is then suddenly rendered volatile by video clips and images of people desperately climbing the American embassy walls to get to the helicopters; of people being left behind and families forced

to be separated; of the militarized state that South Vietnam becomes after communism took control; and of the thousands of individuals sailing on pernicious ocean conditions in tiny fishing boats. You do not see a hint of a thing resembling victory—not even escape. Because escaping does not mean surviving. You are forced into a private reconciling.

But realize that this is not about you.

Frustrated with habits that you saw as excessive materialism and prideful hang-ups, you distanced yourself from your oldest uncle and aunt. You soon understand that it is all they have to show for the war that stripped them of their everything and uprooted them from their home. Begin to have mixed sentiments about your country of residency being the same nation-state responsible for changing the course of your loved ones' lives. You call your mother one day after class to ask whether she would rather be back in Vietnam or remain in America. *Mom?* Listen to her silent response. Realize that dread has a taste.

Your mother tells you that she feels fortunate to live and raise her children in a non-communist country. She, too, prescribes to *it is what it is*, but never confuse it as acceptance to the unchangeable, by the fates that be, because your queen will always triumph over any hand of cards she is dealt. But your question still reminds her that the course of her life teetered, for over twenty years, between the domino theory and the ideology of revolution, eventually transporting her 8, 158 miles away from her home.

You ask your mother if you could accompany her to your uncle and aunt's house one day during winter break. Astonishment and questions quickly follow, but you eventually make your way there. You play your normal script of the polite guest, but stay removed from the conversation because you feel guilty for judging them before. Your mother continues to talk to them: dinner, work, latest family gossip, *Megan took a class on Vietnam this semester*. Your mouth goes dry, while you swear to yourself that there is such a thing as a mother's intuition.

Your aunt inquires about what you learned, and pressed into your static memory is the incarceration and torture of government and military personnel who were opposition to the communists. For the next hour, your body is at the service of an experience far bigger than yourself. You listen to your uncle detail the six years of his life in “reeducation camps,” suffering from intensive manual labor and torture, while your aunt narrates those same years raising five of your cousins on her own. You are quiet because, for all your empathy and sensitivity, you are unable to remain emotionally composed. For you those moments may have been about revelation but, for them, it was about recollection and recognition. Suddenly a mother’s intuition swoops in again, and she makes an excuse for a departure. You thank your aunt and uncle for their stories that begin to fill in the missing spaces to your history, and leave.

But realize that this is not about resolution. This is about the only birthright of our human condition: the right to be heard, so that no one else can tell your story for you.