

For Better Or For Worse

By Lawrence Tân JJR 69

I believe everything in life is relative. Everything including what we term as the good and the bad, the joys and the sufferings, the pretty and the ugly things and obviously even our own existence are relative to time and space. Sometimes, the good can be found in the bad, beauty can be found in the ugly and vice versa. We would fail miserably in the long run if we judge and handle everything in life by the principle of just black and white. Even in the digital world, there is something called fuzzy logic. I learn that time will heal all, if it does not, then the subject will eventually expire, therefore the sufferings will dissipate, hence time will definitely heal. The scopes of things around us depend very much on our perspective. Again, this perspective can shift as we move to another environment or as time goes by. Thus the magnitude and the significance of everything that happens around us vary depending on where we are at in relation to time and space. The more focused the perspective, the more intensified the feelings will be. On the contrary, in a wider perspective, all things seem to be less serious. A life is so insignificant in the universe where distance is measured in terms of light years and time in millions of years.

Once again, when my family left Trà Vinh (Vinh Binh), we left behind all we had. In some way, this time was not as drastic as when we left our ancestral home in Haiphong, but it was no less pain. We left a lot of friends, acquaintances, and a way of life behind. I left my friends and my dear town where I grew up each summer in the most significant years of my life. It was there that I experienced the change in me, from a boy to an adolescent and into a young man. It was there that I felt joy and happiness. It was there that I hung my dreams on every summer. It was there that I felt true love and attentions from my grandmother who always worried for my well-being. After all, I am her first grandson of her eldest boy; this ranking bears some important significance in traditional Chinese family. Sometimes I told her that she worried too much, but deep down inside, I felt pampered, I felt loved and warmth. And I realized that the attention I got would only last through the summer until I had to return to Saigon.



As each summer concluded, part of me was excited thinking about going back to my high school(JJR) and starting a whole new school year, but of course my heart was heavy on the morning when I had to board the 6:00AM bus and leaving my grandparents, my uncle and my kid brother behind for another year. While I was always excited during the first nights in Vinh Binh at the beginning of the summer, I spent my first nights back in Saigon reminiscing my summer and the good time I had, often with tears on the pillow. However, I always looked forward to the day when I could go and pick up the books at school for the new school year. Like every year, the line was never too bad; we had to show a slip of paper (perhaps showing that the tuition is paid?) to a school official behind a window of an office, he then handed out a pile of books. We rarely got any new books, most of them were used. The first thing when I got home was to find a cozy corner to settle myself in and then enjoyed flipping through the books to see what would I be learning in the next coming school year.

After the New Year (1968, Tet Mau Than), we were once again uprooted and displaced. The life adjustment up in Saigon was hard. We had nothing left. People no longer greeted and treated us warmly as when we migrated from the North bringing along some wealth with us. When we got back to Saigon, I went back to my relatives' home where I stayed at the time, off the Cao Thang street in Saigon. My grandparents, my uncle and my brother temporary

settled on the top floor of my granduncle (my grandmother's brother) house on Nguyen Trai Street in Cholon. The top floor was really a terrace with a tin roof; there wasn't really any rooms per say. So basically they camped there until we figured out the next move. While they stayed there, my granduncle got sick and passed away. After he was no longer there, we started to hear unpleasant comments from the relatives. Sometimes those words even came from my grandma's friends, those who used to be part of her entourage in the old days. Now they hung around our relatives instead. Since they stayed on top of the second floor, it was most difficult for my grandfather to walk those flights of stairs everyday because of his limp. On the rainy days, they used those large plastic sheets to deflect the rain from all the open sides of the terrace. Every time I thought about the general situation of our family, I felt deeply saddened. From a long and well-established family in the North, now we were reduced to almost homeless and subjected to all kinds of humiliations! My father lived in a flat closed to the Hoa Binh marketplace but it could not accommodate our whole family. I came and visited them mostly on the weekends. I believe I went and visited my Mom in NhaTrang that summer.

Eventually, my uncle found a job working as a foreman for a company called Amtraco, across the river in Khanh Hoi. It was a favor from a long time friend, Gia'. He was then some kind of a big wig there. He had his own office and a chauffeur. He used to hang around with my uncle during the first years in Saigon when we were still relatively well-off. My uncle foolishly burnt a lot of money in parties and with friends. I remembered him well; back then, like a number of others, he used to call my uncle 'Anh Cuong', a form of respect, all the time. My uncle got me a summer job at Amtraco. At times, I heard Gia yelling "Cuong! Where the heck are you?", and my uncle would say "Yes Sir, I am right here!" I was so enraged, but that was life, wasn't it? Seeing that I was upset, my uncle consoled me "Don't you worry about it. After all, that's life! All you have to do is work and study hard". My uncle used to be a proud and carefree person; he now accepted the realities of life and took its beatings with stride. For that, I loved him more. As a young man with plenty of pride, my heart bled for him... Before this job, I was tutoring for pocket money. It was not so bad, but the job in Amtraco got me twice the money for working on the weekends only. I still remember the lunches in a humble food stand in the neighborhood across from our workplace. I loved the pickled mustard and the sliced pork in jelly and being with my uncle. I felt he was even closer to me than my father. At this time of his life, his kids, a daughter and a son, lived with their Mom. They were brainwashed and forbidden to come and visit him. As I grew older and became a father myself, I then realized how deeply that had hurt him. One good thing in Amtraco was that there was an old American manager, Mr. Tallyho. I got to practice my English with him and eventually I tutored him and a friend of his, a black man, elementary French! Of course I charged each one of them twice as much as the kids I used to tutor before. That was pretty good money on top of my salary in Amtraco as part time jobs. It was there that I read my very first English book ever, *The World of Suzy Wong*, at lunch and break times.



During this time we had moved out of our relatives' house and to the Chi Lang district. We rented a flat in a back alley. The owner is a retired Major in the Vietnamese Army. His house faced the Chi Lang street. The back of his house was facing us across a narrow alley. My father and I then moved back there with them. It was the first time in many years we were reunited and lived together again as a family. The flat was tiny; we all lived in one room. My grandma and my brother on one bed, my grandfather in his favorite plastic chair, my uncle took the sofa, my father and I took the rest of the room on the floor. There were two more floors above us; each occupied by a bargirl. There was no other access except going through our floor. Each night each one of them brought in with them a different GI. Next to the door, there was a tiny desk against a window. I hung a light bulb there and spent a lot of nights studying for my TuTai II (equivalent to SAT). The older I got the more I felt the untold pains and the humiliations of my grandparents. Sometimes I saw my grandfather going through his check stubs of the transactions from his better days when we had our business, servants, chauffeur and almost a permanent entourage of friends who hang around our family for fun. I started to develop a pretty bitter attitude towards life. I refused to participate in any large gatherings that involve the relatives. I felt their hypocrisy and did not feel that I belong to those crowds no more.

At the time, I studied in Thuong Hien and my brother was in some school close to the movie theater Khai Hoan. I had a Honda. I dropped him there in the morning and picked him up after school. My grandmother managed

to have some friends about her age to help her to cook meals in a makeshift kitchen in the open for us every day. I had a hard time adjusting to that level of poverty. That was the time when I saw some of my friends started having girl friends, but I realized that as far as for me, under the circumstances, that was really out of the question. I did not want to know anybody, I was afraid that she would know where I live. At the time, the only JJR friend I still visited sometimes but also fairly infrequently was Be Duc Viet who lived with his mom and his sister on a small street close to the Truong Minh Giang bridge.

Eventually my father got a job offer from the family of Mr. Lam Cat to work in Cam Ranh, a town in the Southern tip of VietNam. Mrs. Cat was a good friend of my grand-mother, they know each other since the early days in Saigon. Mr. Cat and his sons were very successful entrepreneurs getting lucrative construction contracts from the Americans. I believe Lam Quang, his youngest son, now is the owner of the well-known restaurant Vien Dong in Southern California.

One morning in the summer of 1969, my grandfather suffered an aneurysm and fell in the bathroom. He called out for my brother who was close by; he panicked and in turn called me. I ran back from the front of the house and both of us carried him onto a chair. While my uncle ran out and tried to call an ambulance, I talked to him. His speech started to slur, I quietly tried to pinch his right arm and realized that he no longer could feel any pain. He told my grandmother that he wanted some congee and asked me to change him in his best suit. I was scared but my brother and I helped him to put on his jacket and his pair of pants. He asked me to help him to comb his hair and I respectfully did. By the time the ambulance arrived he drifted into unconsciousness. When I got to the hospital on my Honda, a young doctor came out of the emergency room and said "He had left". I took it rather calmly at first, but within a few minutes I burst in tears realizing that I had lost him. He was just there this morning! I slumped down from where I stood, holding my head against my knees, his images of the different times in my life started to parade through my mind. His last image was sitting in front of our place in Chi Lang, holding a bunch of check stubs, he'd got that distant look of a beaten and defeated man reminiscing the old times. At that image, a thought came to my mind that was may be it was time for him to stop suffering. May be he had paid off his debts; I should let him go. My brother helped me to clean his body for the very last time with a piece of cloth and some warm water. The next morning when I woke up, seeing his old beaten yellow plastic chair, I started to cry like a baby. I missed him so much! I remembered grandma put her hand on my head comforting me. My father flew back in time from Cam Ranh for his funeral.



During grandpa's funeral, I took away the incense sticks from some of the old family friends while they were paying respect to my grandfather for the last time, and I asked them to leave! The turncoats that now preoccupied themselves to badmouth our family because we were no longer what we used to be. My uncle stopped me but he did not apologize to those people. Since our place was so tiny, his images were everywhere in our minds. We decided to move.

From Chi Lang we rent and moved into a larger and more decent flat on the Tran Hoang Quan Street in Cholon, pretty close to the Tiger Beer and the soccer stadium Cong Hoa. I believe that was in an 'Officers' Quarter', owned by a major in the VN Air Force, a family friend. As time went by, we started to adjust to the new place. My uncle's job was getting better and one day, he brought home a small refrigerator. Then a few months later he brought home a black and white TV. Even though the place was much better than Chi Lang, it was still very small for our family. However, it started to feel like a home.

The year was 1970. Luu Thai, my closest friend from Vinh Binh caught up with me. We corresponded every now and then after my family moved to Saigon. He invited us to go back to Vinh Binh to attend his wedding. His family had chartered a plane with all his and his bride's relatives from Saigon/Cholon. At the thought of going back there, I was so happy. I just could not wait. My uncle and I accepted the invitation. By this time, I started my first year of study in Van Hanh University. My uncle flew with me down to Vinh Binh. My mind was totally preoccupied with the excitements and the expectations to see the old friends and the old place.

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