

HOW THE TIGER GOT ITS STRIPES

For Le Ly

We were driving back from San Diego, through one of those spectacular Pacific sunsets where the emblazoned clouds streak above the highway. Like a fire to end the world so beautiful that you might be happy to be consumed by such gilded flames.

“You not need to write this down?”

Kim Cuc had just started telling me something about a water buffalo toiling in a rice paddy.

“I remember what I need.”

She took her eyes off the highway. “Don't you forget.”

“Kim Cuc,” I shouted, pointing through the windshield. She was two inches from rear ending a silver Lexus.

A young farmer stopped to take a rest from ploughing his rice paddy. He grazed his water buffalo along the banks of the field and sat down in the shade of a banana tree to eat his lunch. The water buffalo was quietly chewing grass and chasing away flies with powerful swings of its huge head, when a tiger sprang out from behind the bushes. The water buffalo jumped back and lowered its horns, ready to fight for its life.

I'd left my notebook in a barn perched above Escondido. This was where I slept and wrote, hired by Kim Cuc to transcribe the ancient fables of Vietnam from a desk on a Californian hilltop.

I was housesitting in Manhattan when I saw the wanted ad for 'A hard working writer with interest in folk tales and Vietnam.' Recently back from researching a Tokyo tour guide, I was hoping for something more permanent, a staff job with a travel magazine, or even a press junket writing up a Caribbean cruise, so I put off the call for a day.

When thick snow wafted from the sky, and the city dropped a fine through the letterbox because I hadn't cleared my patch of sidewalk, I dialled the California number.

"This Kim Cuc," she answered, waiting for my pitch once I said I'd seen the ad. "So what make you qualified?"

I introduced myself as a travel writer with experience in south east Asia, that I'd been to Vietnam a few years back. She listened as I told her about my love for folk tales. Before I had chance to ask any questions she told me that she'd fought in the war but wanted to tell stories from a time, "long before the Americans got there."

I wasn't sure I was the man for the job, but I had four hundred dollars left to live my American dream, and the offer of a flight to LA, food and board, along with the prospective cut on any advance from a publisher, put me on that plane.

"Wait," cried the tiger, "I'm not here to attack you, I just want to ask you a question." The water buffalo stood its ground, and the tiger said again, "I just want to have something explained. I watch you toil in the fields for that man every day, that same man who has neither great strength nor sharp vision, nor even a keen sense of smell. You're stronger, ten times heavier than he and hardened to heavy labour, yet he keeps you in chains for his profit and rules you. Please tell me, what is the secret of his magic power?"

Curled under a wool blanket on a fold-out sofa bed, the first night on the hill was frightening. Not because of the yipping coyotes, or the rattlers, scorpions, tarantulas and mountain lions rumoured to pad through the yard. I was terrified of the silence, the time and space that had so suddenly opened up and shrunk me. The day I flew to LA I'd woken in the West Village, then caught a ride to JFK with a Mexican friend who was sitting out a dead marriage for a Green Card.

"I'm jealous, bro. Freezing my ass off while you get to catch some rays."

I reminded him I was working.

"Tapping a keyboard." He laughed, said something in Spanish. "Come with me and dig that frozen mud."

"I've done my time on building sites."

"In snow like this? We'll be hearing about polar bears on Fifth Avenue."

If I looked up from my computer in the barn I could see the ocean. North, and the faint outline of Mount Baldy hovered on the distance. South, I guessed there was a paragliding club because toy figures dangled in the thermals, the silk chutes rising like flakes of ash. Apart from Kim Cuc, these flying stick men would be the only people I saw before noon. But this was one reason the word count was in the thousands. And as I was being fed and housed to write for someone else, bread and shelter was good motivation. Not that I needed it with Kim Cuc rapping on my door every morning.

"I awake half the night."

Her English was pretty choppy, and that was why I had a the job. But she never failed to

communicate.

“My grandmother ghost come to my dream. She tell me another story.”

Her dead relatives woke her daily. If it was light enough she'd hoe the dusty soil outside her little house, planting vegetables and pruning, gardening until the sun came up.

“This should be the man job, but you writing, and my boys, they gone.”

Her two sons were married off, living in cities that she complained she had to fly to when she wanted to see them.

“In Vietnam, the daughter in-law, she come and take care of the mother. But who do that for me?”

Pictures lined the walls of her living room. Photos of her sons in high school football teams, graduating from college, then getting married to golden haired American women. Both the boys had grown into handsome young men, a mix of the almost feline, high cheekbones of their mother, and the square jaw and strong nose of a Caucasian father I couldn't find on the crowded walls.

But beneath these framed snapshots I did see the cracked and faded portraits of her parents, black and white photos of her late mother and father, crumpled and precious pictures she would honour with burning incense.

“To be honest,” said the buffalo, “I don’t know anything about a magic power, only that I shall never be free because of something he has called ‘Wisdom.’”

I'd watched the weather change from the plane window, swirls of cloud above the mid-west, to

scars of desert road and dusty peaks, a landscape more atlas than earth, the breadth of America.

I half expected to see the state borders drawn in, names of towns and rivers.

Then I touched down in LA and met a woman who once stole guns and set booby traps for the Viet Cong.

“Wisdom?” said the tiger. “I must ask him about that. If I could get this wisdom I would have even greater power over the other animals. Instead of having to hide and spring on them to get my dinner, I could simply order them to keep still.” The tiger thought about this for a moment then smiled. “I could choose the most delicious animal any time I wanted.”

My only real experience of Vietnam was two humid days in Da Nang. I'd arrived by ship, floating up an iridescent green channel between humps of iridescent green hills. And all the stereotypes were represented. The fishermen in conical reed hats, rice paddies and water buffalo. Even the pretty girls in silk dresses riding sputtering rickshaws. Usually I'd walk a city and undo the guidebook portraits, but I was still sweating out some fever I'd picked up in Shanghai, and took a motorbike taxi out to the Ho Chi Minh Museum where each exhibit is dedicated to a different massacre at the hands of the Americans.

So a motorbike taxi, A Short History of US War Crimes, shots of velvety coffee sweetened and creamed with condensed milk, a marketplace where I bought nuggets of dried banana and pirate DVDs, along with a drunken night out at a beach bar turning down marijuana and prostitutes was all the experience I had against the weight of newsreels, *Platoon*, *Deerhunter*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Good Morning Vietnam* and *Apocalypse Now*.

“All dreams,” Kim Cuc had snapped when I'd asked her what she thought of Hollywood's take on the war. “You can't smell a dead body at the cinema.”

Between the fables, river dragons with golden axes, men turned to lizards, the warring lords of the mountains and the sea who fought for the hand of a beautiful princess, and who still fight now, bringing lightning, rain and floods to Vietnam every summer, Kim Cuc talked about soldiers razing villages.

“Just you try and imagine, these giant men come through your house with the flame thrower.”

But on a California hilltop, the aromas of sage and buckwheat blowing through the screen windows, the horrors of a war I knew from TV screens and film sets was as grounded as one of her miraculous folk tales.

“Well!” replied the startled buffalo. “Why don't you ask the farmer about his wisdom?”

“I might just do that,” answered the tiger, already walking over to the young farmer to ask his question.

Kim Cuc would come down the hill with her notepad, stepping around the rabbits that had gotten so used to her footsteps on the dusty path that they'd nonchalantly carry on chewing grass.

“Morning, rabbits.” They'd twitch their noses, then she'd bang open the barn door and shout up the stairs to where I slept on the lumpy sofa-bed, laid out between her assortment of Buddha statues. “You awake? I got another one.”

Before the sun burned off the ocean fog, the barn would float as if some wooden boat adrift on a sea of mist. Driving back from the Vietnamese store in town, the trunk filled with green leaf vegetables, baby bok choy, lemon grass, mint, cilantro and French coffee, a stray bank of fog sloped across the road.

“He look for the ocean.” Kim Cuc had seen it too.

It had appeared like the ghost of a whale, swimming down the hillside back to the Pacific.

Maybe it was all that thinking about fables and dead ancestors, but she saw the supernatural in almost everything. “You see a rattler, you leave him alone.”

This was her warning about any snakes I might disturb on my morning runs.

“The snake, he like a god. This farmer in my village famous for killing the snake. My grandmother warn him, say to him, 'They come back and get you!'"

The story finishes with a snake dropping from the branch of tree and biting the farmer's neck.

“And this no fairy tale, this true.”

How much she believed from this mythical world I was never sure. But who was I to challenge a woman who'd already lived through such tragedies that a normal life's trials and tribulations looked like a pantomime. From brothers lost in clouds of napalm, to a father tortured by boys from his own village.

“Excuse me Sir,” the tiger politely began, “although I am big, strong and quick, and can eat any animal I wish, I have heard you have something called wisdom that allows you to rule over the animals. If I had this

thing called wisdom, it would make my daily hunt for food much easier. Could you give me some of this wisdom?"

When she'd picked me up from the airport, we'd driven back to Escondido with a chanting Buddhist monk in the cassette player.

"Close your eyes and listen." She veered a couple of lanes trying to find the volume dial. "This a traditional Vietnamese prayer."

I understood and respected the worship of her parents, her mother and father, those perished brothers. Though I found it hard to see the animal kingdom around the barn populated with the reincarnated. Was I to believe the dead villagers of the Vietnam War had been killed by Americans then punished by rebirth in the form of a scrawny coyote?

And then there was the psychic. We drove out to a gated community in Del Mar where each house looked like a showroom. Spotlights in sprinkled lawns, an artificial lake. I was introduced to a man married to a Japanese woman. He was a professional 'reader.' I creased out a smile and sat on a faux leather sofa while he took a pencil and shaded over her name written on a pad. He closed his eyes and sketched. When he opened them he looked at his scribble and foretold that, "a change was coming."

"That the book we gonna sell," Kim Cuc chirped.

Though I soon found out that her 'agent' was more of a friend and had yet to even hear about the fables, let alone commission the idea.

“Unfortunately,” replied the farmer, “I left my wisdom at home today. But if you like I can go and fetch it for you.”

The tiger was delighted with his answer, and couldn’t wait for the farmer’s return. “May I accompany you to your house, so we can get the wisdom together?”

“No,” the farmer quickly replied. “If the villagers see you with me they’ll get scared and kill you. Wait here until I come back.”

When we got the verdict that a collection of Vietnamese folk stories wouldn't sell, and that even if it was packaged as a gift book the advance would be no more than pin money, Kim Cuc first cursed America for our failure.

“She want me to write book about cooking. How to make spring roll.”

We were on the highway, as you often are when things happen in California, and the angrier she got, the faster she drove. “Maybe I should write guidebook on how fat American man get pretty little Asian wife.”

We were touching a hundred.

“Oh, you bet publisher like that.”

I saw owl faced passengers watch us with gaping mouths as we blasted along the inside lane.

“Kim Cuc,” I pleaded. “Slow down.”

But she was tutting, clicking her lips. “How old America? Few hundred years? A baby.

Vietnam is thousands of years old. We the wise man in the village. Americans need *The Wisdom of the Dragon*. If they know so much then why they so unhappy?”

I was watching the speedo, and the road.

“I got friends who eat Valium like candy.”

The farmer only took a few steps towards his house before stopping and turning around to speak with the tiger again.

“I’m sure you’re an honest tiger, but I’m a little worried that you may get hungry while I’m gone and eat my water buffalo. I have great need of it in my daily work, and can’t afford to have it eaten by a hungry tiger. If you agree, I’ll tie you to a tree, so I won’t have to worry about my water buffalo becoming a snack.”

“You took the wrong exit, Kim Cuc.”

She'd swung us off the highway, and barely slowed down on the exit ramp.

“I know where I go. Don't you worry.”

I wasn't so sure. Coming back from LA she'd scrambled the Camp Pendleton sentries by accelerating up the entranceway.

“We are going back to Escondido?”

“You think I forget where I live?” she snapped. “That I some crazy old lady who lose her mind.”

The meeting with her agent had changed things between us. I'd felt like family at one point. The second week in the barn I'd gotten flu, and Kim Cuc had ferried spicy broths from her house to my bed, puffed up my pillow and touched my forehead with the back of her hand as if I were a third son.

Not now. She'd been hoping for an advance, that we'd walk into her agent's office with a

book and waltz back out with a cheque to cash. She was hoping that the psychic's prediction of 'a change' was a mortgage repayment, an instalment to keep the repo man from her door.

The tiger badly wanted this mysterious wisdom, and was willing to agree to almost anything, allowing the farmer to pass ropes around his body and tie him to the trunk of the big tree.

A short way from the exit ramp was a used car lot. Next to this was a junk yard filled with towers of flattened wrecks piled in teetering stacks. You could imagine the older models in the dealership collecting dust and trying not to notice the hydraulic crusher just over the fence.

Suddenly Kim Cuc swung a left and cut down a road between the auto orphanage and auto graveyard.

We bumped along a potholed gravel track, bouncing through oily black puddles even though I hadn't seen a drop of rain in a month. When the road ran out in a scruffy stand of bushes she stopped and cut the engine.

The farmer was no fool either, and went home and gathered a bundle of dry straw to bring back to the tiger. When he got back to the big tree he placed the straw under the tiger and set it on fire.

She stared through the windshield. The arcs of the wipers had cleared two semi-circles from the spatter of dead bugs. Even though she'd parked some way back from the freeway, the eighteen wheel rigs trembled the car as they juddered past.

“Kim Cuc,” I began. Then she started talking in Vietnamese. Apart from how to say thank you,

I didn't know another word.

“*Kim Cuc.*”

She stopped, tutted again, and asked, “Why just here?” She loosely pointed at the shattered cars in the yard, the dealership forecourt rippling with multi-coloured bunting strung from the razor wire fencing.

“Such an ugly, lonely place.”

Before she explained, I knew who she was talking about. I'd been sorting through some of her old books and magazines, National Geographic features on Vietnamese river deltas, snippets of war reportage cut from yellowing newspapers, when some bleached polaroids fell from the pages of GI novelist Tim O'Brien's collection, *The Things They Carried*.

The first couple I picked up were snapshots of a man in a park, boys on his shoulders. It was obvious they were his sons. Her sons.

“Behold my wisdom!” he shouted as the flames engulfed the tiger and burned him fiercely.

The final photo was a picture of him asleep. His calm face glowing, serene. And in this photo you could see the face of his youngest son, the man he would grow into.

When I went to slip them back between the pages they'd fallen from, I realised he wasn't asleep.

Behind his head I could make out that kind of quilting they line coffins with.

The tiger roared so loud that the other trees trembled with the sound of his cries.

He'd driven down this track, parked, run a hose from the exhaust, then wound up the window and waited for the fumes to fill the car.

Finally, the fire burned through the ropes and he bounded away into the forest, howling with pain.

Kim Cuc stared through the bug-smeared windshield, onto the freeway glowing with headlights, tail lights.

“He see so much.” She took a bunched tissue from her sleeve and wiped her nose. “So much.”

I knew that her husband had been a pilot, that he may well have torched fields and trees where her very own brothers had been hiding.

“But he so romantic. Such a gentleman.”

They'd met in Da Nang, married, and got on a airliner to California. Much more than this I didn't know.

“And he would've loved the book about old Vietnam stories.” She was sniffing, shaking her head, almost angry. “When he wake up in night, sweating, shouting, crazy things, he say to me like a little boy, he say, 'Tell me a story, Kim Cuc. Tell me about the dragon. Or the tiger.’”

On the freeway below, traffic pulsed, the red and white lights flowing in opposite directions.

“The tiger story,' he say to me. 'Tell me how the tiger get his stripes.’”

In time his wounds healed, but he was forever scarred with the long black stripes of the burning ropes that had scorched his skin.

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