

Return to the unknown

By Analee Matthews

Ph: 0411 314 503

E-mail: analeemathews@ozemail.com.au

I'm sitting in seat 56C on flight TG992, on my way to Vietnam. The country where I was born. A country I know nothing about. I can't believe I'm finally returning, for the first time since I left at 10 months of age, to experience the culture, see the country and visit the orphanage where I first began.

I feel like I could sleep for a decade. Understandably, of course, considering it's taken me almost thirty years to board this plane. Here I sit. Finally at ease that I can allow my eyelids to relax. It sounds odd, I know, but for some thirty years I've felt the need to keep my eyes propped wide open. After all, I couldn't have anyone assuming I'm Asian, could I? That would never sit comfortably with me. Well, until now that is... which begins my tale....

Looking around at all the beautiful Asian flight attendants, I finally begin to gain a sense of pride in having similar features. Well, maybe not 'pride' at this point in time, perhaps it's more accurate to say 'less shame'.

I've always harboured a sense of embarrassment, bordering on shame, about looking Asian. Being raised in a country town in Victoria, I grew up with a distinct sense of isolation and a constant niggling of loneliness. I didn't have any other Asian faces around me; I don't even think there was a Chinese - let alone Vietnamese - restaurant in the town I lived, so I never had anyone around who I looked like or that I could relate to. And in turn, I never had the opportunity to develop a sense of pride in looking the way I do.

When we moved to Melbourne, in time for me to attend secondary school, I was fortunate enough to attend a private school where there were many Asian faces around. Although none of them were adopted and I wasn't actually introduced to any Asian cultures, it did make me feel less isolated having similar looking people around me. Still, it wasn't enough motivation for me to lay claim to my birth origins. I still lived in denial that I was actually Asian. If anyone ever asked where I was from my standard response would always be 'I was born in Vietnam, but I'm adopted'. Every time, I felt compelled to add 'but I'm adopted'. Because to me, that translated into, 'So I'm not really Vietnamese.' Even through early adulthood, I was so repelled from my birth origins I couldn't even admit I had a Vietnamese name, let alone volunteer what it was to anyone.

But here I am. On the cusp of turning 30 and the sense of ownership I am developing for my birth country are like nothing I've ever experienced. I really do feel like I can be Asian and not have to explain my adoption or make excuses for not knowing anything about the country or the culture... after all, that's exactly why I'm here; to find out all about those things and hopefully come home with a real sense of pride and a thorough understanding about the place where I was born.

My parents never introduced me to anything Asian while I was growing up. They did the right thing by not trying, because I know I would have rejected whatever they offered. I wasn't ready then. It's only now, almost three decades since I arrived in Australia, that I have been willing to embrace my birth culture. And thanks to my understanding and patient parents, that curiosity has

emerged naturally, in my own time, obviously leading me to where I am today. In the plane, preparing for my journey back to a homeland of which I have no conception.

I first moved to Sydney, from Melbourne, after meeting a group of other Vietnam-born adoptees and I've been here for four years now. The compilation of my story which is depicted in the Federation Press book called *The Colour of Difference*, was the catalyst for my own exploration into my adoption and its affects on me. At the time of writing my submission for that book, I held no interest in exploring my origins, no pride in my birth culture and racist feelings towards Asian people. I am not proud that I felt those things, but today I am proud I can recognise how they developed and that I have been able to deal with them.

I used to think my repulsion from Asians stemmed from those primary school days, where the other children teased me for being the only Asian-looking child in the playground. I used to think it was their taunting that caused me to feel that being Asian was bad; that being Asian meant being a lesser person. And maybe in part it was, but I think it's more likely that my fear of embracing an Asian birth culture was what really caused my racist feelings.

It is not uncommon for intercountry adoptees to experience a conflict between their extrinsic and the intrinsic sense of self. For me, I grew up in a beachside town, feeling like a blonde haired, white surfer chick and yet I obviously don't look like that. And it being human nature for people to judge and treat others based on how they look, you can imagine how frustrating and confusing it can be when you look one way but feel a completely different way. Even up until this trip, I still struggled to believe I look so different to how I feel on the inside.

Being adopted from one culture into another is like having registration plates on your car that are from another state. Let me explain: imagine how you would feel, as a Sydney-sider, if your car went into the mechanic's and the courtesy car you were supplied with had Queensland registration plates. Of course, people on the road who don't know you automatically assume you are a Queenslander. How does that make you feel? For the first few days you might enjoy the novelty; having people think you're something you're absolutely not. But then after a week of having people assume you're from interstate you may grow a bit tired of it, and you might even feel compelled to explain or justify to people why you look like a Queenslander. How then, would you feel if the mechanic phoned and told you your car couldn't be returned to you but you could keep the courtesy car? Road laws aside, do you think you might be tempted to change the registration plates over? Or could you cope with having Queensland registration plates, even though they convey something externally that doesn't quite assimilate with how you feel internally? Being adopted from a different country is similar to living with someone else's registration plates.

I want to cry. I'm sitting on this plane and I feel like at any moment I could burst into tears.

I have no idea what to expect when I get off the plane but I do know one thing. I feel sad. It's a sadness that stems from a sense of not knowing; that loss of identity. How can I visit this country and not look at these people and wonder – are you my biological family? To see older women with sadness behind their gaze – how can I not help but wonder if such women could be my real, birth mother? I can't help but look at the Vietnamese people on this plane and ponder - are you my brother? My sister? My uncle? My cousin? Are you my mother? And if you are my mother, why did you give me up? Why did you leave me all those years ago? When I needed you most? I was just a baby. Have you missed me? Thought about me? Have you ever wanted me back?

In my life I have always appreciated my good fortune in receiving the life I have; and I have always focussed on the positives of the situation. Yet deep down, I do hold a sense of hope that this trip will fill a gap that has been noticeable to me for the past few years. I do secretly hope that this journey will provide me with a sense of peace, at knowing and learning about the place I was born and the culture I have missed out on growing up with. The goals I have for this trip are:

- To gain an understanding and appreciation of my birth country and culture
- To be proud of my origins
- To visit the orphanage where I spent the first ten months of my life
- To want to return again

And here we go. The plane hits the runway and my tears fall like rain. I am in my birth country. This is the actual country that I was born in. For some reason all I want to do is cry. I can't understand why I am so overwhelmed at being here, but I am. I really am. And I am really here. I can barely believe it.

Tuesday

Here I am. In Hanoi, lying underneath a silk sheet listening to the noises of Vietnam, which seem so familiar, yet were never known to me a mere 12 hours ago.

It's only 6.50am so I'm surprised when the phone rings. It's Tom - my friend who, for the past twelve months has been organising his side of this trip. He volunteered to be my pillar of strength over here. Being adopted himself, he is all too aware of the necessity of unconditional support during what is bound to be an emotional journey. I was happy to hear from him. He was due to arrive here in Hanoi in just four days. I couldn't wait. I didn't want to be alone in this country. It felt strange. Foreign. Almost scary.

Before he can speak, I answer the phone with 'I can't wait for you to get here.' There is silence at the other end of the line, and then he speaks. He tells me there has been a hiccup to our plans. The 'hiccup' turns out to be that his wife, Deb, thinks the trip is selfish. They were apparently up all night talking about it and the bottom line is that he is no longer coming over.

The rest of Tuesday is spent crying. I phone my travel agent in Sydney and shuffle things around so that I can leave Vietnam early. I don't want to be here on my own. I don't even want to be here at all now. How could he do this? How could he abandon me like that? On this trip - of all occasions, how could he abandon me?

People who are adopted tend to carry around an ingrained fear of abandonment, which stems from being abandoned at birth. There's something in my psyche, and in the subconscious of many other adoptees, that says, 'I must have been a bad person for my mum to not want me / discard me / abandon me / leave me'. Now obviously there are no such things as 'bad' babies, but many adoptees feel that because their parent(s) abandoned them at birth, they must be unworthy of truly being cared for. And often, we carry that into our adult lives.

As a child, in order to ensure that people would not leave me, I grew up demonstrating behaviours that I thought they wanted me to elicit. I grew up as a people pleaser; frequently going out of my way to accommodate someone else, even if it was completely inconvenient. I always feared showing my imperfections or encouraging conflict, for fear that it would turn people away.

I grew up with the steadfast belief that anyone and everyone I love will eventually choose to leave me. This belief compelled me to prematurely sabotage more than one relationship in my

time; the 'I should get in before they do' theory was a large part of my intimate relationships up until about three years ago. All I can say is I'm glad I figured THAT one out, even if it did take me a while!

These days, my ingrained fear of being abandoned still affects my relationship with my parents. My adoptive parents love me more than anyone could ever hope for their parents to love them. But to be honest, they do not know WHO I am. They don't know the real me, my thoughts, my dreams, my wishes, my fears because I can't bring myself to show them all those things. And the reasons for this are twofold. 1) I have never showed them who I am in case they didn't like what they saw and wanted to discard me. So what I tried to be the 'ideal' daughter; rarely troublesome, challenging or difficult. It was my way to ensure they would be proud and therefore have no reason to abandon me. And our relationship is still predominantly like this. Slowly, I am trusting them more with the 'real' me, but I still do feel more comfortable keeping them at arms length.

And 2) I think deep, deep down, I can't bring myself to get close to them because one day they will leave; my subconscious tries to protect me by preventing me from getting too close because eventually, one day, they will die and I will lose my parents. Again. For the second time in this life.

I do believe these are the reasons why I shy away from being emotionally open and close with my parents. I am most comfortable confiding in them via e-mail or telephone. In person, I clam up. For me, there is a definite sense of security in non-face-to-face communication with them. Why? I'm not sure.

Interestingly, my friendships are also very similar. I am a very hard person to get to know because I don't reveal much. I tend to encourage people to talk about themselves, so I don't have to expose much about me; the rationale is, that if they don't know me, then they can't make a judgement of whether they do or don't like me and therefore, they have they can't have a reason to leave me. And I have to admit, that I am also extremely uncomfortable sharing my friends. One of my biggest fears, even as an almost 30 year old, is introducing my friends to each other because when they meet and find out how great they all are, then I get insecure that they will have no reason to be friends with me. It's really bizarre behaviour, I know, but welcome to my life!

Wednesday

Well today came more inspiration in the shape of one Marco from Holland. He is travelling on his own too and reminded me what it's all about. He reminded me that I'm supposed to be out there soaking it all up, seeing the sights and getting out and amongst it. Sadly though, all I'm doing is spending my currency in internet cafes and racking up the biggest phone bill in the history of telecommunications, by phoning home in a poor attempt to avoid feeling like I'm alone.

I think that's my problem. I didn't want to feel alone during this trip. And that's all I feel. Not only abandoned by Tom but so lonely. And that is precisely why I didn't want to undertake this trip on my own. To face what I'm here to face is challenging enough without the added dimension of feeling isolated and ostracised.

My strongest emotion right now, is to go home. Not once so far have I had that feeling of 'I am so glad to be here'. Not once. And that's worrying me. It's a battle to not grab a flight and just head home. I have so much hope placed in the likelihood that Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) will provide me with a greater connection than Hanoi has. I do not like being here in Hanoi much at all. The locals look at me funny. Marco couldn't stop telling me how they all stare at me as I walk by.

One Vietnamese waiter told me yesterday that he thought I was Malaysian. What the...? I don't fit in here. I don't fit in at home. Now I know this is only day three, but what's that about?

I really don't know what I'm doing here. Supposedly seeing the country I was born in. That I am doing. Enjoying it? Not in the slightest! Today I had a slight pang of 'that could have been me' but I really don't feel any connection with this region of Vietnam, considering my paperwork says I'm from the southern region of Vietnam.

I write this with tears streaming down my cheeks. Why am I so sad? I feel compelled to get to HCMC to see if there is any connection there for me. If there turns out not to be... well, at least I've tried.

I feel like all the positive things I used to pride myself at being, have gone. I feel so stripped of my courage, my inner strength, my intuition, my radiance. I feel completely bare and foreign to my own self. I don't know this person who lies here bawling uncontrollably. How did this person emerge? Where did she come from? Will she ever leave and let the old Analee shine through? I am so scared that the good traits may have disappeared for good. I am ashamed at this cowardly version of me. I used to be so strong and courageous and all I can do here is cry my eyes out because I'm so scared and insecure.

I think I was relying on Tom to look after me and now I don't have that support coming I feel... vulnerable. Totally and completely vulnerable. And as an adult, I have never felt like that before. It shames me to admit to other single travellers that I don't like doing this on my own. How wussy! I guess what they don't know is that for the bulk of my life I've felt unable to relate to anyone – until I met other adoptees of course! So I suppose I am harbouring some hope that I'll be accepted or recognised in this country as one of them. I suppose I am, so maybe part of this excruciating anxiety is the realisation that if I don't fit in here – where I was born – then I really don't fit in anywhere. And if that's the case, where do I go to from here?

This pain is so intense and I can't even figure out why or where it's come from; let alone how to combat it. I didn't want to feel like I couldn't relate to anyone while doing this trip – and I do. So intensely. But obviously the universe thinks I need this push to better myself and get the most from this journey. And I will trust in that higher power. Fate doesn't speak in obvious terminology and I do know that when this concludes I will look back on it and proud I did it this way. I just hope it gets easier. This is so incredibly painful that I can't even describe it accurately. It really does feel like the loneliest thing I've ever done. I know I have to NOT fight these emotions in order to deal with them and for that reason alone being here with no one else is probably the best thing.

Martin just messaged me from Australia. The amount of communication we have had during this trip has been ridiculously excessive, and I'm sure financially devastating when I return. But, as always, I don't care about that sort of thing, because the bottom line is that I wouldn't be coping over here without him. How alone I would be feeling without his constant support.

I met Martin a month before I left for Vietnam. It was instant attraction from the very first phone call; before we even met in person. Funnily enough, he answered an advertisement to move into a spare bedroom in our house. Our attraction grew instantly from the moment we met, and I am certain that when I get back we will commence a very special and long lasting relationship.

Martin's SMS reads: 'You must call me as soon as you want to speak. I can help just by listening and comforting you. I cannot understand how you are feeling but I do understand sadness and this

is how I can help. You don't have to do this alone. Many people who love and care for you are with you. I am one of them. Don't believe you must do everything on your own. Good friends always help, even sharing your sadness. We all need help sometimes.'

Wow. He really is my very own guardian angel. And he is right. I am not alone. I must discard this sense that I am. I have the best of both worlds here, after all. Support – unconditional and always available – without the stresses of a full time travel buddy who can, all too easily irritate and distract you from your tasks at hand.

I know this journey has to be about attitude. Take the right attitude and it changes experiences. That said though, I have to feel all this sadness in order to grow as a person and have this challenge shape me into the person I need to become. I honestly do believe this is just part of the process that I am required to go through during this journey.

I received an SMS from Tom and Deb. Something along the lines of 'This hollow feeling inside; we have let you down; let this be your journey'. How about 'Get f*cked!?' for a reply to that? Of course I didn't say that. If only they knew how severely this has affected me. Or maybe this breakdown was due to happen anyway and I was just holding it in until he arrived? Who will ever know?

I feel angry as well as sad. But right now, mostly, all I can feel is pure exhaustion.

Thursday

I am feeling so so much better today. So much closer to peace after last night's emotional exorcism. Deep down I am still angry with Tom, but I do know this is how it is supposed to be. And that I will be okay.

I've always enjoyed and opted for my own company and now is the time to revel in that strength.

Friday

Well today's trip to Halong Bay was worthwhile, despite not being entirely enjoyable. I still had the urge and desire to pack up and head home but I think that's because I am still waiting for some sort of connection. Tonight I did have one small victory however. I ate noodle soup (pho) with the locals in the street!

I walked the street and saw a girl eating noodle soup and as soon as I'd stopped to attempt to ask the lady stirring the pot if I could buy some, she'd motioned me to sit, a tiny plastic stool was thrust underneath me and chopsticks were shoved in my paws. It was sensational! Definitely the highlight of Hanoi. Everyone else was so fast to eat their bowls, but me with my idiotic laughable chopstick skills saw people come and go in the time that it took for me to finish my steaming hot bowl. What a great experience. Of course, I still didn't fit in – quite the opposite – I stood out like a neon sign with my shorts, hiking boots and singlet top, but I didn't care. I felt Vietnamese in a street packed full of Vietnamese and it was a real thrill!

Today's low point was receiving an SMS from Tom that read something like 'I feel sick and anxious and sad and worried wondering if you're having a tough time. You know I'd give anything to be there with you. I really didn't see Deb's firm stance coming. I think she thought we might get it on under the circumstances. I don't want to lose the friendship. Please let me know how you're doing.' Or something to that affect. So I wrote back that I'd been to hell and back dealing with his decision and that in the long run the friendship will probably be fine but I

would tell him about the trip after it's over. I will spend the next 30 hours on the train to HCMC – among other things – writing him a letter; if for no other reason than my own therapy.

Saturday

I finally got it! That 'I'm so glad to be here' feeling! I am so happy!

As I watched the countryside roll past last night on the train journey from Hanoi to HCMC (36 hours!), I began to fall in love with it's beauty. Today I feel excited and calm all at the same time. I feel safe here and relaxed. The train was definitely a great decision. The scenery is so picturesque. I absolutely love it and am so proud to have come from this countryside.

The little bloke next to me on the other top bunk is funny. He speaks no English at all and is travelling with his mum and dad. He looks like a tiny pixie. And he has that terrible acne skin that so many young boys here seem to have. I made friends with him. He's 19 and his name is Dhat. We communicate through grins and nods. So far we've shared food, sweets, photos and music. He feels like my mischievous little brother. It's fun.

At around 7.30pm I loaned my CD Discman to the little guy on the other bunk. He asked if he could while I was putting on my shoes to go to the toilet and brush my teeth. And now that I'm back in the room and on my bunk bed, it seems my chances of retrieval in the immediate future are zilch. Great. Nothing to do but stare at my own reflection in the window, because Mr Own-the-Room over there has the light on so he can read the Vietnamese newspaper – as he listens to my CD player!

I wonder why I get so possessive over my stuff. I always have, come to think of it. I've never been the best at sharing. I can hear my favourite track playing through the earphones. I hope he's not the type to over-produce earwax-type. Ugh.

Thursday

I visited an orphanage in Hoi An today. It made me cry. And I didn't even go inside; I just sat in the playgrounds. A teenage boy sat down with me. He said they had about 55 people living there. I saw some kids, so severely disabled, from the Agent Orange affect I presume. The others seemed relatively happy. The boy I spoke with told me he attends school and spoke very good English. But it was sad. At least they receive some care in there, I guess.

Many people today recognised me as Vietnamese. And I told anyone who asked of my age, that it is my birthday tomorrow. They all disbelieved that I was turning 30! Nice!

After recognising me as Vietnamese-born, the jewellery store lady asked me my Vietnamese name. I told her it was Vo Thi Thanh Thuy (pronounced 'Vo Tee Tarn Twee'). She screamed with surprise, and explained that she had the same first name – Thanh Thuy (pronounced 'Tarn Twee'). Her surname was Nguyen but her first names were the same as mine! And so that's what she called me for the rest of the day. And it felt fantastic!

Friday

Happy 30th to me!

What an incredible day. After today I have decided that when I return to Sydney I want to spend time helping at a local orphanage. I realised all that children deserve love and touch. But I'm ahead of myself here... back to this morning.

Today I am returning to the orphanage where I spent the first ten months of my life. From the research I conducted prior to leaving Australia I know that the orphanage still exists and that the nun who signed my adoption paperwork is still alive somewhere near there. I just don't know exactly where it is or where she is. But I have the name of the orphanage and a district where it should be.

So 9.30am strikes and 'uncle' is there to at the hotel, ready to act as my chauffeur and interpreter. 'Uncle' is the uncle of the lady who manages the hotel where I am staying. He is lovely. So gentle and caring, but the problem is, he doesn't speak much English.

When uncle appeared I was chatting to two English men who were leaving Saigon today. They were very interested to hear about my story. One of them said, after uncle sat down with us, 'you seem really nervous now – are you?' I was and I said I was. They wished me luck. And suddenly I felt like I might need it.

I hopped aboard uncle's motorbike. By Aussie standards it was more of a scooter than a motorbike. It took a few times to start. Visions of being stranded in the middle of nowhere ran through my head. Great! Third time lucky and we were off. Into the traffic we merged, abiding by Vietnam's stringent road rules – the largest vehicle has right of way; there is no requirement to stay on any one side of the road regardless of the direction you are travelling in; and you may load any number of people, livestock or products (or any combination of said items) to your bike – even if it triples you're your normal width or length of vehicle.

So we merge into the organised chaos and off we go. I am filled with excitement, anxiety and anticipation. Here I am, placing my entire experience in the hands of a man who drives a scooter very well, but whose name I don't even know and who speaks very limited English. I am hoping 'give me all your money, I'm leaving you stranded here' is not an English phrase that he does know!

We ride in the blazing sun for about an hour. Unlike Aussie men, uncle is not afraid to ask for directions, which he does numerous times throughout our 60 minute crusade, often resulting in some crafty, u-turn action. As always, heads turn when we drive by. Men stare at me – an obvious foreigner on the back of this old guy's hog! I got the feeling uncle's reputation upped a few notches after today!

With every answer to uncle's directional queries I grew a little more anxious. What was going to happen? I couldn't believe that finally – after 30 years – I was going to see, to be in the place I actually began in. The overwhelming emotions caused me to be on the brink of tears for the majority of the journey. I was so compelled to cry. I felt like I could do so for the rest of my life, they wanted to flow so badly! I don't know why, but I felt it all the way to my toes.

When we eventually reached the Thu Duc district (my district), my stomach filled with butterflies. Oh my god – we were so close. Further instructions from passer by's revealed we weren't as close as we thought, but we were definitely in the right area. I continued to fight back the tears.

I couldn't understand any part of the conversations that uncle had with any of the pedestrians he spoke with, but it was clear by their body language and hand gestures if we were hot or cold.

I thought we passed a couple of orphanages along the way, but it turned out that I can't read a word of Vietnamese and those pictures of happy families on the signs we passed were actually other child-related facilities. I decided it best if I leave the navigation up to uncle.

We travelled terrain of all sorts. Bumping up and down over bitumen, sealed, unsealed, rain puddles – we ventured over and through it all. And then we arrived. To my dismay, I felt no connection with this place. I suppose I was expecting too much. There were massive security gates at the front and a small booth for visitors to report to.

I felt bizarre. So this was it? This was where my beginnings began? I felt... empty. I handed my adoption paperwork to the security guard. Luckily it was both the English and Vietnamese versions. He read it and exchanged words with uncle. What the hell were they saying? I rued the decision not to take Vietnamese language classes at that moment in time! There was much head nodding going on. Until, it stopped. The security guard ceased reading and looked at me. What?

Without warning, the head nodding turned to head shaking. Why was there no nodding anymore? I looked to uncle for explanation but he was engrossed in the head nodding conversation. The guard began gesturing with his hands to uncle. They were directing him elsewhere. This was not the right orphanage.

From the amount of hand gestures I assumed uncle had clear directions for our actual destination. We mounted his bike again and retraced our path. Again, uncle didn't hesitate to ask for directions. I loved this man! What a specimen! If only he knew how much a hit he'd be with the ladies down under, asking for directions so freely like that!

As we drove and drove, I could feel us getting closer. The anxiety was building within but I had a distinct sense that we were near. And then, after 40 minutes of too-ing and fro-ing, we arrived.

The giant sign on the security gates that read 'Tam Binh' confirmed that we were in the right place. Those were the words contained on my adoption paperwork. With a sense of de ja vu I handed over my paperwork to this security guard. He read it, like the other one had done, while I stood wide-eyed and hopeful, but half expecting the hand gestures to commence again. But they didn't. He looked solemnly at me and said 'you wait here.' I'd taken 30 years to get here, what was a few more minutes? I wasn't going anywhere.

The security guard took my papers and shared their contents with other employees. I watched them laugh among themselves at my attached baby photo. The guard walked over to the security gate and began to unlock it. We were going in. Or so I thought, until an old Vietnamese woman wheeled her scooter out the open gate. Doh! The guard locked it after her and went back to his congregation of employees to giggle some more at the baby version of me.

After what seemed like a decade he came back to us. He unlocked the gate and invited us in. Oh my God – this was it. We were going in!

I didn't feel a connection with the buildings – they were all very modern having been renovated and refurbished in recent years. But I still felt like we had actually arrived at some place of significance.

The guard asked us to wait for one minute, so uncle and I sat. one minute slowly turned into more while uncle and I watched all the employees go into the kitchen and sit down for a group lunch. Okay. After 25 minutes of pondering, one of the young employees – Minh – made a phone call. I found out later that Minh was an orphan too, in the same facility as me and at the same time I was there. Imagine that. He was like... like my older brother! My head spun with that news. Minh turned out to be phoning a lady by the name of Sister Tan. Sister Tan was the name that was plastered all over my adoption paperwork. She had been the one to confirm and process my adoption. She was the director of the Sweetwater Orphanage (name changed after 1975) and the closest thing to a biological mother that I'd ever had! My heart was pounding. I was really going to meet this woman.

I felt excited and nervous. Why was it taking so long? I had heard she was still around and that she was a bit sickly. I hoped she wasn't going to turn me a way or that she was too unwell for visitors. I kept an eye on the balcony area above us. People kept coming down from up there so I assumed that must be where she is. I hoped to catch a glimpse of her before she did me, but it never happened.

After what felt like a year, Minh came back to us and said he would take us to Sister Tan. Fuck! We were then informed that this meant another ride with uncle. Sister Tan was at another nearby location. So I hopped behind uncle again and Minh led us out the gates and down the dusty road. As luck would have it, a truck pulled out in front of us, separating us from Minh temporarily. After it cleared, uncle sped up to catch and continue following Minh. When we reached a fork in the road, we took the road to the right. Uncle applied the gas and eventually we caught up to Minh. Only, it wasn't Minh at all but some other young Vietnamese boy on a bike with the same shirt! We'd lost him.

Poor uncle! He executed another perfect u-turn and we promptly made our way back to the facility we'd just come from. The guard there replied to uncle's questions with more hand gestures and off we set again. Not too far down the road we found Minh. We were supposed to take the left fork, not the right. Oops! Uncle stayed on Minh's tail from then on. We pulled up to a similar security gate with the same 'Tam Binh' writing on it as the one we'd just left behind. This must be Sister Tan's home. Uncle gestured to me to dismount and said the only two words of English that I didn't have to ask him to repeat. He said, 'your mummy'. He was telling me that I was about to meet the first woman that I ever knew as my mother.

We walked into a typical Vietnamese building. Open plan, old décor and a lot of concrete. A nun/religious sister, who's name was Hai, greeted me with a giant beaming grin. She grabbed my arm, said 'hello' and asked me my name. I said 'Analee' and she shouted 'It is Analee' to a moving shape in the background. That moving shape was none other than Sister Tan. At 81 years old, Sister Tan still lives and breathes childcare. She was so fragile looking but had a definite resilience about her.

She too greeted me with a giant smile and warm hug. I was told by Sister Hai that Sister Tan spoke excellent French in addition to Vietnamese. I told Sister Hai that I didn't speak earlier. Sister Hai was unofficially named interpreter for the day.

Sister Hai asked me what my Vietnamese name was and I responded by handing her my paperwork. Like two teenage schoolgirls the two sisters giggled in delight and pointed to the appearance of Sister Tan's name and signature throughout the papers. I was definitely in the right place.

We sat on small plastic stools as the sisters continued to leaf through my papers, when all of a sudden Sister Hai let out a scream of delight. 'It's your birthday!' she exclaimed. I answered 'yes' and beamed at her with appreciation for noticing that based on my fictitious birth certificate I was 30 years old today.

I couldn't directly converse with Sister Tan, but I could tell by her constant touching and smiling and nodding that she was very happy I was there. Sister Hai confirmed this throughout the afternoon by translating such sentiments.

Sister Hai explained how they lived in and operated the place we were in. It was called the house of love and was a refuge for poor children where they attended to eat, sleep and pray between morning and afternoon school sessions.

Sister Hai took me by the arm and led me up the stairs to show me around their house of love. We watched the young girls and boys partake in their prayer sessions before they had their afternoon nap.

We arrived back downstairs to be greeted by a set table with stools and lunch waiting for us. The sisters had eaten and knew we had not, so they arranged lunch for both uncle and I. Uncle immediately took charge, knowing full well that I was unfamiliar with Vietnamese dining customs and the correct way to put this cuisine together, so he began adding the appropriate condiments (coriander, sprouts, chilli, etc) to my beef noodle soup. I really did love this man!

While we were eating, all the while with Sister Tan and Sister Hai touching me and smiling their genuine smiles, they brought out a bouquet of plastic roses and placed them in the centre of the table. The group then proceeded to sing a Vietnamese-ish chorus of 'happy birthday' to me. They were so sweet! It turned out that it had been Sister Hai's birthday the day before and so they immediately bought out the remaining half of her cake, which we all tucked into with delight. After lunch I mentioned to Sister Hai that I would like to make a donation to the orphanage. She advised me that I could give such money to Sister Tan. I couldn't help but notice, the word 'poor' seemed to arise in future conversations a lot more after I had mentioned this idea. Vietnam is still a third world country so I completely understand their need for money and the strategies used in attempts to extract it from Westerners who are, by comparison, disgustingly wealthy. So I had no qualms with Sister Hai's attempts to educate me as to the woeful financial status of her facility and the people she cared for. It was just interesting to notice this item of conversation pop up so often.

After the table had been cleared, Sister Hai confirmed that my orphanage still existed and she placed a phone call seeking permission for us to visit. Bloody hell, could this day get any better? After a short while, the phone rang. Permission had been granted. A car came by to collect the sisters and I. The air conditioning in this vehicle came in the form of four windows that needed to be rolled down. I thought it odd, that these two women would not be travelling in comfort. I didn't expect luxury, but it seemed odd that they would not have proper air conditioning – all cars I'd come across in Vietnam were equipped with air conditioning; in Ho Chi Minh City it was as essential as brakes and a steering wheel. Uncle was to follow on his bike. Dear God, I prayed, please do not let him lose his way this time!

It took us some ten minutes to travel what seemed only a few metres around the block until we pulled up at another set of security gates. This was the very place where I began my life.

The buildings were dull and concreted dominated the landscape. Everyone knew the sisters and they were met with smiles and constant head nodding. I had the sense of being in the presence of royalty. I guess in childcare circles, I was.

We walked up a driveway. Sister Tan used me for support, holding my arm at all times. After a few short steps we were all stopped by a vibrant, energetic young girl whose smile was infectious. As she climbed a few stairs to greet us, I found myself doing a double take in her direction. My heart sunk she was a victim of the atrocious Agent Orange herbicide.

Her name was Tham and she looked like she was only ten years old. Tham was a resident at the orphanage, having been abandoned at birth like me. Unlike me however, Tham's biological father was one of the Vietnamese soldiers exposed to the Agent Orange herbicide spray during wartime.

The effects of the chemical spray have been seen more than ten years after the event. Not only do the veterans themselves suffer physical consequences, such as blindness, but their children and even their grandchildren have been known to be affected. The developmental deformities that have occurred in Agent Orange victims are so horrific even the deepest imaginations cannot come up with such results. Generally, victims of Agent Orange do not develop physically as they are supposed to. Deformities include limbs that are significantly uneven in length, extra extremities (e.g., fingers, toes), facial droops, closed eye sockets and bulging skulls, just to name a few.

Tham has an enlarged skull, resulting in a very protruding forehead. Her eyes are completely crossed and she has an extra finger sprouting from just above her thumb on her right hand. Instead of Tham's legs developing in a straight line, her lower limbs are stunted to the length of a hand and have grown in a V shape from her knee joint; so they actually point back up towards her head instead of straight and downward facing. Tham therefore, walks on her knees when she moves, while her lower leg limbs point back up towards her chin. Impressively, she travels quite fast! Tham has no actual feet to speak of. Her lower limbs end in stumps with a couple of separations on the ends that could be assumed to have been intended to develop into toes.

But despite Tham's severe physical deformities, the most overwhelming characteristic about Tham is her bubbly and enthusiastic personality. She climbed the stairs to meet us, her entire face speckled with tiny black dragonfruit seeds. She clutched a piece of dragonfruit in her hands and proudly offered some to Sister Tan. Sister Tan declined the offer but stopped to talk to Tham and stroke her head. Tham's smile radiated from one ear to the other in response to Sister Tan's touch. We continued on our way and when I looked behind us only seconds afterwards, Tham had gone – that speedy little thing!

Sister Hai led me around the grounds of my orphanage. It was old and sterile. The garden had a dirty muddy pond in the centre of it, but it succeeded in providing a welcome change from the concrete based environment.

As we moved closer to one building the sound of crying babies grew louder and louder. Panic rose within me as realisation hit. Oh God, this was where they kept the babies. I wasn't prepared for what I saw.

We slipped our shoes off at the entrance to the building and walked through the doors. I couldn't believe the sight. A room full, wall to wall, with stainless steel baby cots. And inside every cot was at least one baby less than 12 months old. This is what had happened to me. This is where I had been. This was my existence once before. I, too, had been the same as all these poor, helpless, abandoned babies. Only I was luckier than this lot. I promptly burst into tears.

The tears fell at a rapid rate. I couldn't stop them. Luckily I was armed with tissues; I had suspected this may happen so came prepared. What was I doing here? I wasn't quite expecting to feel so overwhelmed with empathy and sadness for these children.

I drew deep breaths and composed myself and really looked around. There were ladies everywhere. Ladies to care for these babies and give them love and affection. And there were quite a few of them. There were many more babies than ladies, but there were lots of ladies. And they were attentive. Sister Tan and Sister Hai had wandered off to pick up and cuddle any distressed or crying infants. The other ladies in the room were doing the same and before long, the sound of crying had stopped. All that was left was the joyful tone of a giggling child. One of the ladies - apparently also a former orphan at this orphanage around my time - was jiggling a baby up and down and making her giggle.

We left that ward and walked over to another. I felt completely spaced out. Vacuous. Numb. I thought I would next see older children but I was wrong. How many orphaned babies can there be? More of the same and my heart felt heavier. I wondered if these children were destined for families or whether they would simply spend the rest of their lives in this place. I was later advised it was most likely to be the latter.

We moved across to another ward. More babies. Only these babies, I was told, all suffered from some type of hepatitis. The first infant I saw was dressed in a tiny yellow singlet. He stared blankly at me. I smiled and began to cry again. Staring back at me was an almost exact replica of my own baby picture. He looked exactly like I looked at that age. We had the same giant, hopeful, black eyes. The telltale Asian nose and big pouty lips. Influenced by the others in the ward, his blank gaze slowly turned into a tearful cry. A heartfelt wail escaped from him and my heart snapped in two. I knelt down to comfort him by placing my warm hand firmly on his little back and I squeezed him gently. His crying stopped. And with it came my own realisation that these babies need love and physical affection to survive. And that's what these ladies knew and therefore provided. They may grow up in this facility, but at least they would grow up with love around them. It was a small, but significant consolation. I knew right then and there that I wanted to give some of my time and love to the orphans in Australia when I got back. It was my destiny to help support these abandoned children like I was once helped.

In the last ward we visited Sister Hai told one of the ladies in there that I was Thanh Thuy and she all too quickly for my convincing, exclaimed 'Thanh Thuy? I remember Thanh Thuy!' and then she continued to gesture to me she once looked after me like the baby she had in her arms right then. I thanked her and feigned belief, but I wasn't really convinced that she was telling me the entire truth. I got the feeling that that it was a bit of a scam to extract money. I could have been wrong, but it was what my gut instinct was telling me.

When we arrived back to the security gates uncle was there, ready and waiting for me. It was almost 3pm - I'd taken up 5 ½ hours of his time! I gave Sister Hai a hug and thanked her for her time and love. She called me her daughter for the hundredth time that day and said she was so fantastic that I was happy and healthy. She insisted I come back and spend a while day with her and Sister Tan. I agreed and told her my next visit would be with my parents. I turned to Sister Tan and gave her a hug. I handed her one million dong (approximately 100 AUD) and also thanked her for her care and time. They both got into their car, which I noticed now had the windows up and internal air conditioning turned on. I couldn't help but feel that once the money had been exchanged, it was time to part ways. I'd had that feeling numerous times during my trip,

so wasn't too surprised, morseso slightly disappointed. I had this sensation when the two sisters waved goodbye to the staff rather than to uncle and I as they drove off and out the security gates.

Despite this, my visit had been perfect. In fact, better than I had dared imagine. I gave uncle one million dong also, which he was overwhelmingly grateful. I got the distinct impression that for him the day hadn't been about money. Although we never exchanged words, I really did feel that uncle understood how important and special our adventure had been and the money confirmed the importance of his role in the day.

This milestone birthday was undoubtedly and unequivocally one of the greatest in the history of birthdays. And this trip was undoubtedly, one of the most amazing, most rewarding and most memorable journeys I could ever hope to experience.

My goals were all achieved; I did learn about and truly experience my birth country and culture; I will definitely leave with a sense of pride at being Vietnamese; and I absolutely have a yearning to return with my folks and Marty. And as a bonus, I returned home with a sense of inner peace that I have never felt before; nor did I expect to ever feel.

Despite the trauma and the emotional rollercoaster, I know that everything happened as it was meant to. The trip eventuated exactly as it was supposed to, in order for me to go back home with my entire goal list ticked.

Despite the disappointment and trauma that Tom's decision caused, I know in my heart, that it was meant to happen that way. I don't think our friendship will ever recover from the incident but I do wish them happiness for their future together. Last I heard, Deb was pregnant, expecting their second child.

I understand that this journey really was something I had to do on my own. I am yet to sit down and consider exactly how this trip will impact on me in the long term. I definitely have a sense of peace and calm that I didn't have earlier. And I am so proud of the growth I've experienced since first writing my submission for *The Colour of Difference*. It really is true; time brings about change. I look forward to the next chapter of this adoption journey.