

# *Stories about home*

by **Leonie Simmons**

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Leonie Simmons was born in Vietnam and adopted to an Australian family. Five years ago she returned to the place of her birth. This thoughtful and carefully written paper describes her journey and her efforts to deconstruct taken-for-granted ideas about culture, identity, family and home. It will be of relevance to anyone interested in ways of making home and making family as well as to those connected to the issue of intercountry adoption.

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This is a story about my life. It is a story about identity, culture, belonging and families. To me, for the most part it is a story about Home. Making one, finding more, leaving many and taking them with you when you go.

I was born in Vietnam, during a time of war, and then adopted to an Australian family. Five years ago, I returned to the place of my birth. It has taken until now to be able to find the words, write them down and and speak of the experience.

In the intervening years, I decided to hide away the events of my visit to my birth place. I wanted them kept safe from analytical tinkering, uninvited interference, wacky conclusions or undisciplined thoughts. Let the past be done with, I declared. I concluded that there were more important things to attend to, to think and speak about. And I was right.

But during this time, when I was keeping the stories of Vietnam at a distance, I was also experiencing a disconnection in relating with other people. I would have the occasional meetings and I was competent, I thought, at listening, but I could not answer questions. Simple, easy, demographic questions regarding my life began to take a very long time to answer and when I did manage to reply, I stuttered and mumbled incoherently. Questions like: What is your name? Where do you come from? Where do you live? Where is your home? Where were you born? Embedded within these enquiries is a request to disclose what nationality you are, what country is your country, what language do you speak. Other questions would inevitably follow: Who are you parents? How many brothers and sisters do you have? What is your profession? Are you single, married, divorced? These seemingly simple questions are routinely asked in conversation or on forms with little boxes to indicate which simple category you belong within. Those little spaces imply that the answers to those questions are to be easy and brief. But that is not possible for all of us. Anticipating the inevitable sense of awkwardness that would accompany these sorts of questions led me to avoid talking to people as much as possible.

This period of separation from others meant that the tired, fraught details of my life story no longer needed to be spoken about and this brought sweet relief. I had grown weary of repeating the same

details and wished to be free of them. I didn't want to have to give them space everytime I met somebody a new.

But then, as circumstances rolled on, changed and changed again, I began to engage in conversations. I became intrigued by the different ways of talking my self into being that seemed to be emerging. Those 'difficult questions' and uneasy situations were lessening, and new answers arose. While it had been necessary for a time to put aside the tales of when I went to Vietnam, of when I met my biological family, of when my life turned upside down ... it became more and more evident that now was the time to revisit them.

## NAMING NAMES

Eight years ago, I attended a seminar with Kiwi Tamasese and Flora Tuhaka, two generous and intelligent women from the New Zealand Just Therapy Team, who invited me and others to explore the stories and meanings associated with the names we have been given and are called by. Since then, I have enjoyed considering the various stories associated with the different names my life has been composed of, and the many people who have contributed to their meanings.

The name recorded on my birth certificate is Lai Luu. While my adoption papers, Australian citizenship certificate, and my passport, states the name Leonie Simmons. And in between, for a while I went by the name written on my marriage certificate: Leonie Simmons Thomas.

I was named 'Leonie' due to a cherished childhood friendship between my Australian mother Lyn, and a little girl named Leonie. I have always liked this name, and as my mother speaks of few childhood friends, the story of how I came to be Leonie further endears me to my name, as well as to my namesake. The surname Simmons was bestowed upon my dad at the time of his own adoption. That, however, is an epic tale in itself.

And then there is Leonie Simmons Thomas, the name I received the day I married and then later relinquished upon separation and then divorce. This is a name laden with memories and meanings which I anticipate will continue to teach me, to bring nameless silences and to grant quiet gratitude.

As long as I can remember, I have known of my

Vietnamese birth name. It was always a cherished secret name, connoting a secret identity: a maybe, a what if. For the most part of my life it was considered a never-to-be-expanded-upon identity.

Most recently, I discovered that Lai translated into English means Jasmine, after the highly fragrant white petalled flower. Upon learning this, I wondered what my Vietnamese family had intended or thought about when choosing this name for me. Feeling that I had been granted a name representative of a particular meaning, image or metaphor, evoked a soft appreciation for the people responsible and a new sense of substance began to surround my anonymous biological parentage. It was around the time I learnt the meaning of my Vietnamese name, that I began a journey on which I would meet the 'I' that I may have been, an 'I' whom I definitely was not, and more importantly the 'I' that I could possibly become.

## WHY VIETNAM?

In 2002, I traveled to Vietnam to visit my country of birth and to see Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, where my life began. I had always presumed that when the time was right, I would one day return. There were times in my life when I did not think much about going back to Vietnam. I had phases when I assumed a revisit would be an exciting adventure to pursue. And then, sometimes exploring the unknown felt a little daunting. For the most part though, there were simply other concerns, projects and life happenings to be focusing on. It was only a matter of when the 'right time' would arise, Vietnam wasn't going anywhere.

There were many reasons why 2002 became the right time to go. My marriage had ended, I was overwhelmed and disillusioned by my shortcomings and my confusions. What had up until then made sense, all of sudden didn't.

I went to Vietnam to discover what the experience of returning would be like. Questions of identity, nationhood, culture and family accompanied my collection of guide books and Vietnamese language tapes. What was the relationship between my birth country and my identity? And more poignantly, what forces would dictate the shape, form and experience of this relationship? What part would be played by the

deep-rooted sociocultural assumption, that who we are and subsequently who we are related to, is inherently dependent upon the ethnicity with which we are born? This commonly held belief has provided frustration, annoyance as well as occasional insight to my experiences, to my life.

What if I journeyed to Vietnam and felt no affiliation? Was my connection with Vietnam the country, only an affiliation by biological design? I was not sure what feared or excited me more, the consideration that travelling to Vietnam would 'complete me' – thus inadvertently debunking my prior claims of Australian nationality and familial belonging; or the possibility of experiencing Vietnam as a country merely to be a tourist in, to visit, appreciate, compare and contrast, and then exit merely with cherished, albeit impersonal memories.

How would it physically feel like to be in Vietnam? How would Vietnamese people regard me and respond to me? How would this affect the already tenuous albeit well considered sense of identity I was accustomed to living with?

There was also the question of my Vietnamese family, whom I had come to refer to as my birth or biological family – the invisible denominator of my familial equation. My Australian parents and I had been given the information at the time of my adoption that any documents were unreliable due to the chaotic and controversial circumstances of the war in Vietnam. The identity I came with from Vietnam was potentially suspect. Perhaps I was not born Lai Luu after all. And yet, the birth documents that accompanied me as a small baby were considered good enough by my parents, and more than sufficient by me.

I was raised with the story that my birth mother took me to the orphanage because the circumstances of war meant she was unable to look after me. This was, I grew up accepting, an act of love. My parents clearly articulated that it was them who were the 'lucky ones', and communicated a feeling of immense gratitude towards my birth family. My mother would tell me that she felt entrusted with the role of parenting me, one that she considered an important responsibility. My parents gave to me the best of themselves and words here could never do justice to articulating the love I have for them. I believe that the care my parents took to formulate a story of love surrounding my early life has enabled

me to discern and then disregard the less enhancing stories that we who have been adopted can sometimes identify with. Most importantly, I know that any act of thoughtfulness or gesture of generosity I extend, can be directly traced back in time to them. There is no question as to whom my parents of origin are.

From a poststructuralist perspective, many aspects of life contribute to how we know and experience ourselves, as well as those in our lives. It seems important to mention some of the socio-political influences that shape the stories of my life. I was born and then adopted from Vietnam during a time of war and contentious conflict. Being born of that time, in that place, my identity will in some ways always be entangled and imbedded within that war.

There was a supposition that my 'birth father' was not Vietnamese, that he had 'probably' been a soldier in the war from a country outside Vietnam. A loosely hypothesised caricature of my birth mother was that she was young and economically poor. These assumptions I held in reference to my parentage, now seem examples of cultural and political impressionism. In hindsight, it would seem that the unknown details of my early life were sketched in through the lens of a romanticised North American block buster epic saga. Growing up, this story appealed quite nicely to my imaginations of grandeur. Together with the stipulation that was given to my parents upon my adoption that I was never to return to Vietnam, I remember as a child feeling quite clandestinely exotic. I had been banished!

I also remember feeling sickingly stricken if I had to witness any dramatised scenes of war, or

actual footage of war. I still find this to be totally unbearable, as I am sure many other people do. But how was I to make sense of these experiences? And what would this all mean when I returned to my birth country?

Before leaving Australia, I tried to anticipate how I would think of my biological family whilst in Vietnam. It was supposed by others that I would possibly perceive all passer-byes as potential relatives. I had, however, never done this before and randomly hypothesising genetic connection with every person I saw sounded a little manic! I did imagine that in Vietnam I would engage in a new way of reflecting about my birth family. Although what form that was to take, I had no idea.

I did not go with an intention of locating any familial ties or familial history. Instead, despite the forewarned suspectability of my documents, I was excited by the thought of visiting the hospital that was named on my birth certificate and the orphanage I had been taken to as an infant. Before leaving Australia, the realms of discovery I intended to seek out were these physical landmarks of my history.

Having been born in Vietnam, then adopted and raised in Australia, has been a defining aspect of who I am in the world. And it is with stubborn pride that I have felt continuously compelled to circumvent the presumptions that I *must* want to know about my birth family, that I *should* want to go to Vietnam.

Now, though, I had decided to re-visit Vietnam, and I supposed that somewhere along the way the 'I' I was acquainted with, was going to be changed, tumbled and transformed. And how, I asked myself, amidst all this existential wrangling, could I avoid

### 13TH SEPTEMBER 20,000 FT ABOVE THE INDIAN OCEAN

*The steward takes my empty plastic cup and places it on his tray.*

*'So, he asks 'You are going home, yes?'*

*I hesitate in habitual defence of self disclosure, then reconsider and think better of it.*

*'Yes', I reply. 'I'm going home'.*

*And it felt nice. It wasn't important to be explicitly accurate, nor did I feel inwardly compromised. Merely a novel experience whereby an assumption has fit. I was about to learn how unchallenged taken-for-granted could be energetically economical. These were unchartered waters and I decided to try to avoid pre-planning my strategies. I was ready. As the plane flew closer, my excitement grew, for finally I would be able to live out this culturally inevitable story.*

being too damned precious about it all?! With, I guessed; an open heart, an open mind and the idea that possibly this was not only all about me. That maybe this was also about my multiple families and about a collective journey of enquiry regarding what it is that we know about culture, race, family, belonging and identity.

## NEW GROUND

I loved being in Vietnam, unwrapping it slowly one peep at a time. I journeyed up from the south to the north and back again – Hanoi, Hue, Nhatrang, Nui dat, Dalat, Saigon. My vantage point would shift, sometimes traveller sometimes local dweller. I would move in and out of each role, as if I was wearing character camouflage, that is, as long as I didn't open my mouth to speak! There were times when people would pass by and I would merely smile and the assumption would be that I belonged. It was a totalistic, conventional, look-like-everybody, inherited family features way of belonging. Of course, this version of experience with the outside world was entirely in my head as the passers-by were a great deal more focused upon their own lives. Regardless, I richly appreciated this novel experience.

In some respects it was like reaching my promised land. I was enchanted by Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, the place of my birth. I felt totally indulged, as each moment overflowed with activities to witness. The constant streams of traffic, the cooking aromas of sidewalk stalls and the Vietnamese people, whose gene pool – whether I felt it or not – I was connected to. For those first few days, I would sit staring out of my hotel window while slowly sipping bowls of soup. This floor-to-ceiling glass peep-hole was giving me access to a whole new world: a world that I had grown up hearing about, talking about and hypothesising over.

I was mesmerised by the passers-by, older people, children, adolescents, babies and the women. The Vietnamese women with long flowing aoe-ais, the traditional dress of long pants and mandarin collared neck-to-thigh shirts. I was fascinated by her many guises: long hair, short hair, walking with children, riding motorbikes, cycling through literally hundreds of bicycles. I was fascinated with her elegance, her life, her

everydayness, her humour, her strength, her language and her contradictions. This infatuation with the Vietnamese woman alluded to so many imaginative wonderings – of what may have been, of whom I may have been – if what did happen hadn't happened. Possibly somewhat narcissistic, I transposed a possible 'my life' upon snippets of others.

It felt experimental to taste a sense of sameness based on ethnicity. It is such a persuasive commonality. I know well the experience of feeling defined by elements of difference, of being designated to a realm of 'other'. And in this experience I have known both freedom and frustration. To blend in anonymously, on the other hand, was totally new. For me, being the same as others around me was exotic. Being amongst people of the same ethnic background brought a unique flavor of liberation.

There is a well researched popularised notion, borne from western psychology, of the advantages of growing up around those to whom one is similar. According to it, an esteemed proviso to healthy adulthood is to be provided with well positioned footsteps to seamlessly fill. But this view of identity formation has its flipside. Where the criteria of sameness is unavailable, presumptions of detrimental consequences are cast. Where life circumstances do not contain 'same as' parenting and prescribed normative environments, deductive identity conclusions can be fertilised and upheld for those of us for whom there are no obvious footsteps. And anyway, does being a part of a majority consensus only provide a healthy degree of self acceptance? Or can it also diminish possibilities of reinvention and lead to underestimating unique idiosyncracies? What becomes possible to see and to contribute when your identity is formed outside the mainstream?

## DON'T GET LIPSTICK ON ME

*My little five year old toes curl tightly around the rim of the top of the bath. My fingertips only just reach the edge of the hand basin to hold my balance, preventing me from toppling onto the hard tiles in front of me or worse, falling bottom first into the empty hard surface of the bath behind me. Standing at this level I am able to see mummy's*

*reflection as well as my own – from the nose up that is. I love watching her make-up ritual. She makes funny faces for lipstick, and I laugh out loud when she closes one eye at a time for eye colour. I think this make-up wearing takes lots of practice. My toes hurt from gripping the bath top, but it's the only way I can see and anyway, it's worth it. When she's done she always gives me a big kiss with her lipstick on, just so I can get some too. I reckon my mum's really beautiful.*

When I was a young girl growing up, I looked at those around me, and perhaps there was not the likeness in physicality, but never-the-less I had much to model life on.

### **DELIGHTS TO REPLACE DILEMMAS**

An unanticipated surprise which amused and delighted me was just how much I enjoyed telling people in Vietnam about my Vietnamese origins. The details of my history and my ancestral background seemed to inspire a socially mediated entitlement, an assumed authentic claim to national membership. This was in clear contrast to how my claims to being Australian have so often been disputed, questioned or problematic.

My declaration of Vietnamese ancestry, and origin of birth, awarded me a social acceptance on a basis of physicality and citizenship that I was unaccustomed to receiving. While my inability to understand and speak Vietnamese sometimes brought my credibility into question, the responses I received when I explained why this was so, in account of my adopted family home, endeared me most to the Vietnamese community. Their responses also tenderly applied a healing balm to some of my longest held grazes and scrapes.

Over the years in Australia, when disclosing my adopted-from-Vietnam status, I have received mixed reactions. I believe that these reactions have reflected the socio-culturally available assumptions and paradigms within Australian culture rather than the particular individual's disposition. Regarding issues of nationality and family, I have been a recipient of comments and reactions of thoughtfulness, kindness and acceptance, as well as those of pity, ignorance and condescension. I know that people have not intended to smite or hurt or confuse.

What was startling, however, was that the responses I received in Vietnam were so different than those I receive in Australia. While it may seem unkind to highlight inter-relational comparisons between cultures, the contrast has been unexpected and revealing.

Vietnamese people whom I met were very gentle and kind to me, displaying a sincere and non-imposing curiosity in regards to where I had come from and why I was there. In hearing of my history, rather than expressions of pity, people conveyed a measured compassion, and rather than being considered 'lucky' (which those in Australia often said), Vietnamese people expressed feeling pleased for me that I was able to return to Vietnam and were respectful of the layers of meaning this could hold. I was heartened to be a part of relational exchanges in which seemingly mutually exclusive considerations could be evenly conveyed.

The circumstances surrounding my origins of life have brought great fortune to me in many ways worthy of celebration. They have also contained unnamed losses - undoubtedly compensated, but worthy of lament none-the-less. Somehow, in sharing the stories of my life with those in Vietnam, all these nuances could be honoured. This unique experience of social acceptance which was offered to me seemed grounded somehow in Vietnamese social, historical and cultural ways of making meaning of complex circumstances. I am appreciative of witnessing such a richly intricate expression of culture and I will always feel indebted to those who responded to me and my stories in such reverent and thoughtful ways.

### **KITCHEN KINSWOMEN**

*I am sitting in a kitchen, bathing in the surrounds of my 'native tongue'. Fantastic women, energetically busy, working, laughing and teasing. I grin conspiringly, comprehending non-linguistics only. I feel like a young inconspicuous child, sneaking in on the grown up conversation. In Vietnam, I regress to learning by mimicking. In this way, I acquire new ways of eating, of grooming and of caring for one another.*

*Like a baby kitten, a bowl is placed in front of me. An elder, with a youthful spine and a brisk manner expertly spoons mounds of rice and green*

*vegetable into my bowl. I obediently eat, not leaving to waste even one lowly grain.*

*'Ga', a young woman says to me, pointing to the fish. 'Ga', I repeat in scholarly parrot fashion. They nod their approval of my rudimentary grasp of an obvious and basic term. And then laugh with bellies dancing, or giggle behind shyly positioned hands and lightfilled eyes. I decide to take my turn to serve another, and who knows, most probably deface a particularly exulted tradition at the same time. They kindly excuse my ignorance with yet another round of toothy grins and emphatically indicate to me a position at their table, for any time, reserved for me. This gesture of inclusive generosity breaks my heart. I am at loss for words that I am incapable of saying.*

Vietnamese people I spoke with tended to underestimate the challenge I would have in learning the language or preparing finicky culinary garnishes. It was as if they believed the genetic stain would quickly bleed through to influence and inform my eating habits, linguistic acquisition and scooter riding ability. It didn't, by the way, all attempts resulted in monumental room for improvement.

'I think', they would say with conviction, 'It will be easy for you.' During my time in Vietnam, there were things that were easy, and there were things that weren't.

In leaving Adelaide, I had decided to experience Vietnam in solitude. The physical absence of family and friends to authenticate familiar and practiced ideas of who I was, as well as who I once used to be, felt liberating and enlightening. Being separate from the grounding force of loved ones and known landscapes, it was left to me to discover or invent practices and processes to uphold a sense of stability. At times this left me strained and unsure.

Unsurprisingly, when I felt physically exhausted, far from familiar comforts, occasionally I found myself in a fraught, fragile state. Oh how I well remember these moments, not merely for their 'woe betide' value, but also because in any and all of those times of bleak airlessness; a thought, a person or an event would somehow arise to transform and transcend the situation. This occurred time and again in such unpredictable and wayward fashion that even at my most imaginative

moments, I couldn't possibly have made them up.

It was during one of those murky mooded grey mornings that I found myself sitting downstairs in the foyer entrance of the guesthouse, slurping away at a bowl of noodle soup. I felt truly miserable, when grace flew in on a Boeing 747 from Newcastle, Australia, in the form of Charlie and Rosemary and their sons Lawson and Eddie. Their down-to-earth generosity and accents heavily laden with Australiana euphemisms wrapped me up in a national familiarity and scooted me into the back of a taxi. Apparently this was not the time for self piteous moping, not for an Australian far from home. On the last weekend of September, there was only one place to be, amongst other Australians far from home watching the Australian Football League grandfinal.

## **HEARING AUSTRALIA CALLING**

*Standing up in a crowded bar, in front of a huge screen telecasting the Melbourne match, I am actually singing the parts I remember of the Australian anthem. What'smore, I am still recovering from having tearfully completed a rousing rendition of Waltzing Matilda. This, I admit, is an occurrence I would have felt self-conscious, or possibly unmoved to join with on Australian soil.*

*Amidst the schooners of ale and the bantering of Aussie tones, I feel a fond nostalgic sentimentality for the home of my childhood. If the overly emphasised 'Mates' and 'G'days' are anything to go on I sense I am not alone in this.*

*Good natured cheers and slights lob to and fro amongst newly acquainted off shore compatriots as they barrack for their respective teams.*

*These are such familiar characters to me, big bellied men with raucous well worn retorts and warm smiling women, all upholding a cherished tradition for the love of the game.*

*In relation to previous years, however, this particular display of sporting ritual carries a notable difference. Whilst those of us inside mark an event happening thousands of miles away, outside, men with thin shirts and dirty trousers ride their cycle rickshaws and elderly women wearing conical hats, shuffle past, bent over under the weight of huge steel pots balancing on either side of a bamboo pole that sits heavily on slender but strong shoulders.*

*Handholding children in crisply starched uniforms carry out their own Saturday ritual.*

*At half time, there are thoughtful pauses in the dialogue over beers. Burlly men who minutes ago had flown rapturously over the cultural divide with loin summoned hollers and colourful accusations of 'holding the ball' and 'out of bounds' are now sharing stories with me of their return to Saigon. They call themselves and each other 'expats', men who were born in Australia, men who were once soldiers, who have chosen to revisit or live permanently in Saigon. They speak of many shades of experience, unfolding and unravelling as they seek out insight of the paths they crossed, for who they are and where they feel they belong. Flickers of unspoken torments, as well as recently discovered delights, reveal themselves in tearful eyes, averted gazes and wistful smiles. I am slightly overwhelmed by their candid sharing, but mostly moved by the knowledge that there are many to whom Vietnam is a place of personal discovery and resolve.*

## **NEW CONSIDERATIONS**

*I bow my head in respect. 'Mama', a round faced, heavy-set woman links my arm and pulls me closer to her. The grave site is situated at the back of a Buddhist temple. A temple housing ornate, large carvings of remarkably life-like deities. The smoke from the incense sticks we had minutes ago burnt is still finding its way to the headstone that we had come to pay our respects to.*

*'Here she is', Mama speaks as large tears spill to her cheeks. 'My girls'. I don't say anything, intending for my silence to convey the humility I feel for being included in this ritual of sacred remembrance. Mama's husband, a thin, long-legged man, almost transparent in his unassuming gentle manner, stands behind us quietly. Mama owns the guesthouse I am living in, she is a busy woman who always seems to be in four places at once, speaking with five people at a time, with an uncanny ability of knowing everyone's name and everyone's business. For reasons only she would know, Mama had decided I needed the benefits of a dirt tasting medicine. This herbal remedy acquisition involved a round trip expedition that included being taken out for a gigantic bucket of soup, as well as to accompany her and her husband to pay respects to*

*her deceased children. She wanted me to meet them.*

*Similar to many stories I would hear in Vietnam, Mama's life story was marked with heartwrenching losses and dark times. Times which had since been superceded by remarkable acts of resilience, committed work and determination. In the car on the way to the cemetery, Mama had interrogated me with maternal hand patting and comforting head nods. 'You must find your mummy', she says resolutely, ' I will help you'.*

*I am appreciative of her concern, but doubtful of accepting her offer. On this issue, I had already decided upon the cause of action, and it was to be no action.*

*Although Mama's daughters had been gone for some time, their presence and importance in Mama's life would always be upheld. She lays down the bouquet of flowers she has been carrying and tells my why she is there,*

*'A mothers heart is large, it does not forget, it is universal for mothers everywhere'.*

As I mentioned earlier, I did not go to Vietnam to look for family, nor was this something I considered possible. Upon my arrival and subsequent conversations with local people, however, anecdotes of family being sought out and reuniting after years of separation were reported as common day occurrences and possible feats. In light of this, I contemplated whether this was something I wished to do proactively. I decided it wasn't. It felt like an emotional risk and an ethical dilemma. If I was to open that journey what responsibilities would I have? And was I ready for them?

I was concerned that my values and lens of living would clash with another, that I would disappoint and hurt other people, and that I could be hurt and disappointed. A mother and/or a father of thirty years ago, if still living, may not have the space for my re-introduction to their lives. I was wary of such a potentially destructive course.

I had also just said goodbye in Adelaide to my family who loved me very much, but who were saddened by my departure and unsettled by the direction my life had taken. More poignantly I had just said goodbye to my former partner, as well as to his family whom I had embraced as my own. I knew only too well the degree to which one person's

actions and omissions can influence and affect those around them.

In addition, the idea of finding another mum and dad when you already have a mum and dad, felt unnerving to me. I remember concluding that if a re-union transpired then I would embrace it, however, at that time I chose not to pursue it.

## FINDING FAMILY

Two days before I planned to leave Vietnam I met my Vietnamese family. Through uncanny and unpredictable happenings the people to whom I was connected to genetically re-entered my life, as I did theirs.

The most commonly asked question regarding this is: What was it like to meet your mother?

My Vietnamese mother has always had an entity. Her absence and my existence formed the perimeters of our relationship. She has always existed in my awareness. She was the woman whose body my life was born from. Our physical meeting did not begin our relationship, rather it merely altered it.

And then again the question is asked: What was it like to meet your mother?

My recollections do not stay with me in chronological order. Perhaps this event is more like a three dimensional mosaic of moments, impressions, thoughts and emotions. These modes are vivid and blurred, erratic and surreal.

## ONE MOMENT

*Saigon, somewhere. Riding on the back of a motorbike. So many bikes, so much pollution and noise. Across bridges and around residential, industrial and retail occupied corners being driven at tumultuous speed. I have no locational knowledge of where I am or where I am going to.*

*Although I do know. An address retrieved under three decades of records, a serendipitous recovery.*

*Motor cars travel close enough to touch me, bikes whip past in a hazardous flow. Seated behind the driver, there is not alot of space on the back of the bike. My only safety from falling off is gained by gripping onto the steel bar behind me. Hang on ... just hang on.*

*I am merely a passenger, not only on the bike but in the events unfolding. My breathing is*

*shallow, my pulse disturbingly detectable. This is dreamlike. Two distinct perspectives transpire simultaneously. I am both participant and witness.*

## AN IMPRESSION

*Where I stand, unfamiliar housing surrounds me. It is hot, humid and the stain of motor pollution and exhaust is gritty and palpable. The man who had chauffeured me to this moment I had only met the day before. A good man, with a love of colourful shirts. A motorbike taxi driver by profession, excitable and well meaning – but a stranger.*

*My clothes and my stance comment clearly that I am are not from these parts.*

*I hear the taxi driver's voice calling out ahead of me. He is calling out a name. The name which is written on my birth certificate under the title mother's name.*

*I can sense something of significance is approaching. A feeling of knowing, as if on a sunfilled day you know in a short, rationally impossible moment, that rain will be coming. Not a cerebral knowledge based on facts, figures and evidential proof. This knowledge arrives to consciousness via the body. I have found this knowing to be incontestable ... as was the case here.*

## A REPEATING RELENTLESS RECOLLECTION

*Voices speaking in Vietnamese, rising, falling, questioning, responding. A door opens. My internal dialogue cranks up to manic proportion.*

*This is like a movie, this is just a scene. You're okay. You can handle this. You're alright. I can't do this. I can't take this. Too bad. Too much. This is so surreal. Is this it? This is it. It's too much now. It's too much. Shut up, focus. This is bloody unbelievable.*

*A woman walks out.*

*Oh my God, I'm gonna throw up.*

*A nausea fills my stomach. I have a sense of being hit in my midriff, I double over slightly and half stumble and half step backwards. I turn away, my focus clouds over, and I feel dizzy. But there is nothing behind me. I have turned away from where I stood but there is nowhere and nothing to turn towards. She is there. Standing in front of me.*

*A voice again. And although I comprehend the language, the question is beyond my understanding.*

*'Well aren't you gonna say hello to your mama?'*

I cannot succinctly tell you how I felt then, just as it is impossible to say with clarity how I feel about all of this now. What was that injury on impact? I was terrified, unprepared and overwhelmed. Terrified of what? The impossible had happened. The proverbial needle in a haystack found. I was not immaculately conceived after all. I was not this little person from nowhere, with no history. In fact, now it was readily apparent that this was not the case. I came from here. And in that initial moment, there was only shock, disillusionment and disturbance.

It is disconcerting for me to attempt to interpret or even recollect my mother's reaction and to tell of what her experience was. I do not trust my interpretation of her expression, how she appeared to me, or what I was concluding in that moment. With the graciousness of retrospect, I have considered both of our responses to be an expression of many things. Clearly my presence evoked a wash of insurmountable considerations and memories for my mother. She and I had stepped abruptly into a moment of overwhelming complexity.

## **ALL THE ANSWERS TO ALL THE QUESTIONS**

*Seated in small plastic chairs around a lopsided plastic table are an unusual, interesting collection of people. In relationship to me there is a man I had met the day before who rode a taxi bike for a living. And there is another man I had met fifteen minutes earlier whom had stopped whilst driving by and I can only assume had knowledge of where these people lived. He has taken up a role as co-translator with the taxi driver. Then there is my mother, my sister and three young children, my nieces and my nephew.*

*I sit opposite a woman, petite in physique and timid in expression. The mood is sombre, cautious, the voices hushed, low, and the heat of the day is continuing to build. The conversation is interspersed with inconspicuous glances. Respectfully weighed silences blend in with the din of the nearby traffic.*

*Mercifully, beyond my personal state of overwhelmingness arises a sense of something I can*

*respond to. Sitting opposite me is a woman, clearly distressed. I feel sorry that my arrival had been unannounced, for I cannot imagine how it is to have a knock on the door and to have this person from the past return. Maybe one day I will get the opportunity to ask. However I have the impression that such reflective musings will be of minor consequences to other more pressing issues.*

*Regardless of the who, whats, whens and hows, I am in the company of a woman whom I feel moved to try and comfort. This woman who is most probably my mother, who possibly beholds answers to questions and curiosities which have walked with me since I can remember. I feel a pressing desire to assure her that I can disappear as quickly as I had arrived. With the limited English available and my non-existent Vietnamese, this is not possible to convey. Non verbals have to suffice. Perhaps in instances like these it is preferable.*

*We exchange shy and cautious glances and I try my best to communicate in the warmest smile I can muster that everything is alright – a sentiment which is most probably for my benefit as much as for anybody else's. I change seats and move closer to hers.*

*And then I ask questions: questions which are translated into Vietnamese, and then answered and interpreted with long side looks. There is no outwardly expressive display of emotions, although there is an air of respect that this is a moment of significance.*

*I have a sense of time having stopped and of life having substantially transformed. In some ways it has. But in some ways it hasn't. The cacophony of horns sounding from the main road continue and the half naked chubby toddler reaches for his mum, evoking appreciative smiles from us all.*

During this event, there was an accompanying monologue running in my mind. 'Ahh', it remarks, 'So this is what it's like.' The reunion with biological mother scene. The movie or 'life as a play' metaphor lent itself to assist me to digest what was unfolding.

My sensations and emotions were elevated to a hyperaroused state not previously known. A quiet mantra hummed throughout the day, which I am ridiculously certain kept me from spontaneously combusting. With even tones of humour and calm it

repeated: 'This is just a story ... it's all merely stories.'

I think of my two sisters. My soft speaking, beautiful sisters and I do wish to know them better and have them as part of my life, somehow, sometime. I met them once more after our initial meeting and the second time I was able to ask, with the help of an interpreter, if it was alright that I was there. They looked at each other and shyly smiled, nodding, 'Yes.' I grinned back and we chuckled in slight relief. Everything was alright.

## FAREWELL FAMILY

I never got to meet my biological father, he had died three years before I journeyed to Vietnam. I know he refurbished and sold antique furniture. My surname on my birth certificate is the same as my birth mother's last name. Under the title of 'Father' is written 'unknown' which I suppose contributed to some of the assumptions made surrounding my paternal background.

It was explained to me that sometimes in Vietnamese families, children are given the mother's last name as well as their father's. In my situation, however, I found that my father's name was omitted from records in order for him to escape being enlisted into the armed forces. My birth father was a Buddhist devotee and in accordance to his faith, and possibly his family circumstance, it appears he was a conscientious objector. I would have liked to have met him.

After being in Vietnam, I thought that no other event could ever compare in intensity and influence upon my world. I was mistaken. A month after meeting my Vietnamese family, my father, Poppy, died. His death stripped away perspectives and modes of living that were no longer of use. It has been a challenging process to learn to live life without his earthly presence. I feel immensely proud and grateful to have been his daughter and I plan to always draw upon the fairylike toolkit of recollections he left behind.

## MONDAY TO FRIDAY FROM YEARS ONE TILL FIVE

*On the way to pick my Dad up from work, my Mum takes me to feed the kangaroos. Strange really that there are kangaroos near the factory site, but*

*there they are anyway. We feed the kangaroos and avoid the intimidating stare of the emu up until knock off time. I know that 3.30pm is 'knock off' time. We stand at the gates waiting. These moments before the signal, are almost too much to bear in anticipation.*

*The siren blares.*

*Time to concentrate.*

*I fix my eyes on the exit door of the huge silver coloured building approximately two minutes running time away. Men start to come out, they're blurry in shape and colour but I know I'll recognise him as soon as I see him.*

*I don't know this at the time, but I am focusing harder than I ever will again. Sometimes there are quite a few workers that walk out before the one I am looking for. But not for one second do I take my eyes from the doorway of that building.*

*And then, finally, there is that thrilling moment of recognition.*

*'It's him'. And I start running, really fast, my arms swinging quickly to help me reach him sooner. The space between us disappears and there he is. My Dad – and like he did yesterday and the day before, and the day before that, he lifts me up, gives me a big kiss and carries me all the way back to the car.*

## AFTER VIETNAM

At first, I found integrating the new developments of my story difficult. I felt clumsy in the designated script of where it was I came from, who it was I belonged to and to whom and how I would share my stories. It was strange to me to have my family of origin in Australia enquire after my family in Vietnam, asking me 'tell us about *your* family'. At the time I was suspicious that these phrasings implied a level of distance, perhaps it was something that had always been there and I just hadn't previously been aware. Did, in fact, my adoptive family consider me to be like an overseas student, and they were my host family of thirty years? Had my insistence of us being considered a 'real and authentic' family been ill informed? It was a confusing time. People asked after my mother, when my mother was in the room. My mother asked me about my mother. It possibly exacerbated the situation to be negotiating family connections in the

wake of Poppy's funeral. It was a time when sensitivities were heightened and foundations were cracked.

Looking back, I can appreciate how bumpy it was always going to be to find a good fit for the new additions to my identity construct. Despite early suspicions, meeting my birth family has not altered my relationship to my adoptive family. We still continue to frustrate, support and amuse each other. Our relationships change continually, and are always in flux, a true determinant of a 'real family'.

There are many people with unconventional family arrangements who would probably appreciate the wobbly process involved in mediating loyalties, misunderstandings and relational ambiguities. No doubt people find creative ways to reconcile and celebrate unprecedented family transformations every day of the week. I am struck by the ingenuity of this. I hope to discover more ways of constantly re-making family, in order to complicate it less and reverse the process more.

It has been my experience that when your family life differs from an actual or imagined notion of what is considered normal or average, then these norms can influence who you understand yourself to be and what your life and family means. Biological familial ties are commonly granted normative, esteemed status and therefore all other sorts of families may be viewed as less than. This is not the case in all communities and subcultures, where children are raised by many people, and where responsibility is shared. Nor is it the case in instances where different relational ties are privileged and celebrated as much as blood ties. It has been helpful for me to explore the assumptions different cultures make about various familial arrangements. Somehow it lessens the pressure of normative judgment.

Still, I feel protective of how I regard my families. In regards to my family in Vietnam, I think of them in various ways – sometimes with detached curiosity and soft fondness as to their well being. Sometimes with lament, and wonderings as to when, if, or how, I will meet them again. No doubt, the ways in which I think of them, and the ways in which they think of me, will continue to change.

One clear positive effect that my journey to Vietnam provided has been in providing me with a more congruent social script. I can say that I grew

up in Australia and yes, I have been to Vietnam. I can respond to enquiry saying that yes I have family in Vietnam and yes also in Australia. And a valuable lesson I have learnt has been to embrace an entitlement to choose just how much, or just how little, I speak of such things.

## WHAT NOW

Returning to Vietnam, and meeting my Vietnamese family has altered how I experience life in both subtle and distinct ways. Who we know ourselves to be is negotiated and constructed by so many thoughts, people, times and contexts. Some of the changes can have you fall at your knees.

I turned twenty-nine in northern India. It was the first year I celebrated the occasion of my birth with knowledge and familiarity of the people to whom I had been borne to. I had new knowledge of the site where I was born and the country in which I began my life. I knew that I was born at 7.50 am, weighing in at 4 pounds and apparently I was a good baby. For the first time I knew my birth story.

It was also the first year I celebrated the occasion of my birth without Poppy's cheerful birthday greetings either in person or over the phone. There was no beautifully mum-made card, with lovingly written messages of well-wishes, undersigned 'Love Mum and Dad'. I could not expect my annual birthday hug, a shake of his head in disbelief of the passing years and a 'Happy Birthday Sweetheart'. Not this year, not again. I felt a yearning, that day, for all things lost and gone. I missed my father very much.

During the years following my time in Vietnam, my finest frustration was my inability to be able to hold and articulate many things at the same time. I felt a yearning to share my adventures with those I cared about, but the challenge of expressing paradoxical sentiments, combined with a want to be understood, felt too great and left me silent.

I so wanted to be able to communicate the positive aspect of an event, *and* to express an element of doubt or aversion in the same instance. I so wanted to find meaningful and constructive ways to learn from grief, pain and injustice – despite how frightening and unattractive they could be. Perhaps an engagement with paradoxical sentiments is required in order to reveal the sort of

strength which can be sustaining in the long term. I don't yet know how to do this but undoubtedly there is time to learn.

I have pondered many things! How can I honour my relationship with my mother in Australia *and* my birth mother? How can I celebrate the anniversary of my union with family at Sydney airport *as well as* my birthday? How do I ever say goodbye to family – family of marriage or family of choice? How do I respect unmourned grievances surrounding what I never knew, or the grievances of ambiguous loyalties of family members who never knew me? And how does one bury a cherished marriage and make meaning of a sad divorce?

Fortunately, as these questions wash through me, Poppy's voice can be heard. He always speaks louder as my wonderings get trickier and trickier, 'Perhaps a good place to start is to do so carefully, slowly, one day at a time, and not alone'.

Thankfully I have come to appreciate that there are always dishes to be done, food to be prepared or people to help. And what's more, these activities drop me out of my head and back onto my feet again.

## ALWAYS ASSISTED

It has taken over five years to feel able to write these stories. At times I have wondered if it could have happened sooner had I consulted with a thoughtful guide, be it a therapist or friend or both. Why I didn't seek out direct assistance in juggling these experiences can only be guessed at. Perhaps I sensed that the journey I have been taking is in territory not well known to others.

Even though I did not turn to others for conversation, over the last few years there have been many wise people whom I have conjured to mind, to borrow their wisdom and their belief when I was finding none of my own. I am thankful so very much to all those whose voices accompanied me along the way. These evocations reminded me that whatever I was 'trudging through' would one day bring new understanding; that although I may now be disconnected from resolve that in time it would return; and that one day I might be able to share my experiences of all of this in a way that could make some contribution to the lives of others.

## THE WORDS PICTURES SPEAK

There was a moment in my reunion that haunted me for some time, a moment where my world came unstuck.

*The sister with whom I share a familial resemblance is searching around in cluttered drawers. This sister holds a stance with legs folded under her, a life long physical affliction which resulted in her remaining in Vietnam rather than be adopted into another life. The one she has made appears to be full, there are four children and a handsome friendly natured husband at her side.*

*My sister begins to show me photographs. She appears emotional when she does this. I cannot guess as to why, nor is it for me to do so. She motions for me to see what she has, there seems to be an importance to what she wishes to share with me. She hands me a collection of photographs.*

*These are family pictures taken over the years, celebrations, holidays, funerals. They tell stories of happier affluent times, as well as of profoundly impoverished, sad ones. This family looking back at me, is a family I am part of. A family that I had originated from, experiencing a lifetime – a family that carried on without me. And here in my hands I hold the evidence. This tangible token of reality feels cold to me, as I look at them, I have a moment of feeling 'shot out of my body'.*

*Each picture carries the pulse of uncountable events, momentous and mundane. They reflect decades of conversations, forgotten misgivings, inconsequential laughter, unspoken grudges and shared, cherished learnings mediated and transcended until what emerges is a chrysalis type organism of silk spun ties and impenetrable familial connections.*

*I was once a part of this. I once stood in the doorway to whatever world this family was co-creating. However for the most part, it is a world I will never really know. In respect to the sense of loss I felt – there are no words.*

*However despite this experience of experience, I have come to believe that no one incident is accompanied by a singular, lone standing response. And perhaps what jarred me into an indescribable place was not only the realisation of what had never been, but also of what – without my conscious knowing had existed – somehow, in a strange way*

*I was in those pictures. Up until then I may not have consciously known of these relations, but they had known about me. It was surreal.*

*As I looked at each photograph, my sister seems to relax, as if to be satisfied that I would now understand.*

*Here, this is our story ... and here this is your story too.*

*It was sad and beautiful and perfect.*

It was as if in one instance I had gained so much, but that at the same time had as much taken away. It took a while to sift through all that was occurring in this moment. It felt like past, present and future caved in at once. I felt positioned at the centre of an intersection where countless people had crossed and intertwined. I had a sense of feeling engulfed by the enormity of how connected people can be, unknowingly strung together, even if they had never met, even if they lived in totally different worlds. The reverberations from that moment are continuing. I felt miniscule, formless and yet connected, all at once.

## HOME

There are many themes which have weaved through these writings. An over arching theme is one of Home. Making one, leaving many, discovering some and taking them with you when you go. What is home? Perhaps it is a metaphor to communicate a relationship of belonging, often associated to people and places. It is not only tangible, but also linked to physical, emotional and sensory states. Home is timeless and transient, transportive and stubborn in its resistance to being narrowly defined.

There are some homes that arise from undisputed circumstances, and others, like Vietnam is for me, that may take a lifetime to know. Australia is the home I grew up in as a child. Vietnam, my birth place, is a home I grew up in as an adult. I need not be on either soil to sense their protection and their influence. At times, it takes being locationally absent for places of home to set. More often than not it has been in lands far from the southern cross which have showed me the way back to some of the places I belong. It does not take anything too monumental to rouse my national heart. For me, a few lyrics of the band Crowded

House, which provided the soundtrack of my adolescence will suffice, a particular colour of green brings to mind the Adelaide Hills, and the smell of sea air, always takes me instantly to Australia. Since leaving Vietnam – for a second time – the slightest things: a dragon fly, rice paddy green, a bunch of potent coriander, conical hats, all highlight a homeward direction. Some places, like some people, are best loved from a distance.

Geographically, there are places I have journeyed to that have felt like home the moment my feet have met the ground, and there are others in which I have lived for quite some time before being able to feel gratitude towards them. These days, home takes the form of where I find myself staying. I am enjoying a passage of transience and impermanence. I suspect this will change one day, but until that time, I am learning to value and find continuity and groundedness in interesting places.

A sense of ambiguity about where one comes from, where one calls home, where one belongs, is becoming an increasingly common experience. By choice and for many reasons, people now move across states, they uproot themselves and start new lives in other countries.

I have a sister somewhere in the world. We were in the orphanage at the same time. I wonder about her, of how her life has panned out. How has she made sense of her life after Vietnam? I think of her and my thoughts expand out to consider other children, hundreds and thousands of children in orphanages everywhere.

Reportedly over twenty million people around the globe are displaced at this minute, as a result of war, natural catastrophes, civil conflict and systematic oppression. It is not a new phenomenon, this migration of peoples traversing across oceans to places where a new language and culture awaits them. Perhaps what is unique about these times is the hope many of us hold for the welfare of those who are creating home in new strange landscapes. Despite the overtones of the current political climate, many of us do genuinely care about where they have come from, we stand for their right to be heard, no matter what language they speak, and we long to understand their stories to better assist all of us to find a place to peacefully reside.

In all our communities and in all our services, I believe we need to find ways to acknowledge that

for many of us, home rests in a multiplicity of places.

An Australian passport is designated to a citizen of that country. I grew up in Australia, it is a culture I identify with and the country my family of origin reside in. This would be considered home. It is and it's not.

In conventional understandings, Vietnam is 'my country'. I took my first breath in Vietnam, I have Vietnamese family, this would seem to fulfill the criteria of an assumed definition for home. It is, and it is not.

A tourist is a visitor to another country, who has, at least a superficial interest, and at most a long held passionate affiliation, with somewhere other than their home country. I was a tourist in Vietnam, and I was not.

I have recently come across the term 'Australian diaspora', a term referring to the recorded eight hundred thousand Australians who live overseas, for various reasons foregoing wide sandy beaches, flattened vowels and all things ending in Y – Barby and Chrissy to name a couple. In my experience, one of the ways of being known has been in identifying as an Australian Abroad, which has brought an interesting perspective for me and perhaps contributes towards developing an increasingly eclectic and inclusive Australian national identity.

The widely experienced phenomena of the Vietnamese diaspora over the last thirty years has created a Vietnamese term called Vietkeow. Translated, this refers to a community of 'overseas Vietnamese', which for me seems to impart an acceptance and a tolerance I feel privileged to have experienced.

I am now getting ready to pack up my bags and move again to another state. A new adventure beckons and consequently so too does a new home. One day it might be nice to witness a few seasons in the same abode, but until then, I am revelling in the distant call of 'somewhere'. It is enlivening to me to travel, it being such an opportunity and privilege. For me, it is a way to jump into the unknown, to see just who and what I can learn from and contribute to. In this, no doubt I am in good company. So many people, far from their original

homes, are walking the earth, disrupting conventions, playing their part in forming new communities and subsequently creating a new world.

## SO MANY GOODBYES

*Today I leave Vietnam for the second time in my lifetime. I stand at the manmade demarcation between two countries, Vietnam and Cambodia. I feel fatigued and my arms and legs are aching from sitting in one place for many hours. My mind, however, is not still. It remains overly occupied with sorting and contemplating all it has dealt with in the past few days.*

*I feel gratitude for the incomparable journey I have had along the enrichly inhabited Mekong river. The lush trees and luminous green rice paddies divide the river from the clouded blue sky. It is a storybook sunny day. A stunning natural scene of beauty to accompany my memory of this departure.*

*The children of the Mother Mekong jump into the muddy waters, legs flaying and arms waving wildly about as they shout out from the other side of the riverbank to me – this vietkow, a locally born visiting traveller. I cannot help but smile back. I knew in that moment that it would not matter when or even if I returned. The decision will be mine, as it always has been. But if I do decide to come back, I know my return will bring with it a sense that I never left. And that, for me, is what experiences of home feel like.*

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