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MY FAVOURITE BOOK

Spring 1970 – My Diary;
Countless days with fires and bombs from here on;
Happy and sad feelings linger in my heart

The black and white composition book is faded, and the corners are bent. It doesn't lie flat as many paper clips mark my favourite parts. Almost every sheet is covered with writing – some in bold handwriting hardly revised, others uncertainly jotted down. Flipping through the pages, I smile, remembering how this seemingly ordinary Diary of an uncle I never met has survived more than thirty years and come to define who I am today.

War, the simple word conjures up so many powerful images in our minds. So often, it strikes man with fear, anguish, hatred and grief. To us Vietnamese, war is always synonymous with hardship, loss and sacrifice.

Many young Vietnamese born after the Vietnam War can only vaguely see the contour of it as if looking through a veil of mist. They glance through articles on families of four generations still suffering from wartime losses and pain with a lack of sympathy. It was not because they did not care. They were not among the soldiers who walked on fields alongside dying famine victims, dismembered comrades and piled corpses. They live in a culture that likes to gloss over pain and suffering, mask it with confetti and other things, and always end the story in blissful ignorance. Wartime pain was not something they could feel in their flesh. I would have been like them had it not been for *The Diary*.

My wondrous journey with *The Diary* started ten years ago when I visited my father's hometown in central Vietnam. And there it was. The first thing that caught my attention when I set foot in my grandparents' house was an old green chair standing next to the newly furnished dining table. I was puzzled.

"Why would such an ugly thing be there?"

Stranger still, even when we started the meal, no one ever came to sit on it. I was curious and asked bluntly, never expecting where the story after the meal would lead me to.

"The chair was your uncle Hung's. He passed away some twenty years ago during the war".



I could not comprehend, at that time, the words my grandfather said. Who was he? What 'war'? What is war anyway?

Four years later, I came back to the house to find the same green chair waiting expectantly at the same corner. Older and wiser, I insisted on knowing about the uncle whom I never met. With a gentle smile on his face my grandfather handed me an old handbook and told me to "keep it well".

It was my uncle's Diary, which he wrote during his three years in the army. After he died at the age of twenty-one, some of his friends buried him near his last battlefield and brought the Diary back to my grandparents.

The Diary is a treasury of heartfelt images and trustful virtues. The memories of the calamitous war through the hand of my uncle became more real and thus, more painful. Through his words I could see pictures of familiar fields once luxuriously green with crops, now brought to desolation by the hand of war, trampled by the feet of men, studded with holes and craters made by bombs and mines, and stained with blood. I could see images of homeless people wandering aimlessly through deserted streets, and of neighbours and friends once gay and carefree now burdened with sorrows. I could feel the heat when fine houses and buildings were razed to the ground by fire and bombs. I could smell the smoke of the fires and taste the tears that were shed. More than anything, I could sense the unbearable pain of the Vietnamese people at war. Countless times, the words my uncle wrote brought me to tears.

I believe like exercise, reading can be, and should be, its own reward. The reader, like the runner, or the dancer, is rewarded by the process, by doing. Time passes, worry crystallizes into understanding of something new, something meaningful about life, and about living a life, and you leave feeling healed, cleansed, renewed and energized after hours reading a good book. That perhaps explains my fervent fascination with books. But never would I expect to chance upon a *great* book, one that does so much as change the way I view the world and dictate my course of actions from then on, in a rusty, obscure corner of a poor Vietnamese village. Compared to those books with solid gleaming covers on the shelves of libraries and bookstores, the Diary looks nondescript. But what it lacks in fanciful literary techniques, it more than makes up for in its abundance of powerful images and sincere feelings. Uncle Hung wrote down powerful images of war, then piled image onto image, in a glittering, endless torrent, till the reader is quite overwhelmed.

The Diary was the longest short book I have ever read. It is one that has stayed with me from the first page, and I have never been able to shake off the images brought forward, the misery and suffering, the existence of evil and brutality, the sadness and desolation. So I have read more than two hundred pages slowly, carefully, line by line. I tried to read it with a great deal of thought, with calmness to achieve a measure of peace, over and over again. Those were pages cast in



stone, beautiful and sad, with hundreds of lines standing mute, forcing me to think. Until the moment when I set my eyes on the first page of the Diary, "war" for me hasn't been much of a reality beyond history classes. That has changed. "War" is now a personal concept, with a name, a torrent of images, and blood attached to it. It was Uncle Hung's Diary, more than any book I had ever read, that taught me the most about the Vietnam War and its horrors. It awakened my sensibilities and never again will I turn from a helpless cry.

When I was younger I was told that time would heal any wound. The years will go by. The images of battlefields on fire and soulless corpses will fade into the mist. A generation will rise for whom wars will be just history. The society as a whole needs to, and will, move on, leaving the bad memories behind. Yet, I have grown up to find that the wounds will remain and tears will continue to be shed. For the paralyzed there will never be wives, dancing, or rolling in the grass with children. For those who lost their loved ones during the war, the memories will be the scabs of terrible, hidden wounds in their hearts and minds.

The Vietnam War was a tragedy of the gravest order, and the Diary serves as a constant reminder to me that I, as well as anyone else who were, and continue to be, witnesses of that tragedy, owe those who suffered and continue to suffer horribly from its consequences through no fault of their own, an unspeakable debt. It is the debt of our own humanity.

Through three years of volunteer work with the Vietnamese Red Cross and the Vietnamese Organization for Victims of Agent Orange¹, I have shared time with victims of the war. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of babies with twisted limbs, and terminally ill teenagers who would not live long enough to celebrate their next birthdays. I take it upon myself to care for the less fortunate and assure them of the precious good still left in their world. I would share with them the story about my uncle, whom I called my war hero, like I have known him my whole life. And every day I would recite to them the one line he repeated in every other page, secretly wishing that it would put a smile on their faces and instill a little more Hope in their hearts.

"I cannot be weak, cannot back down. Hang in there. And Victory shall come one day."

The Diary is, above all, a tale of Hope.

"No one wants to lead a sad life, but very few can escape a little sadness along the way. One may experience great losses, but no matter what one must always strive never to lose Hope. Never to lose that fire burning inside that urges you to move on. That is the most important thing."

¹ Most dangerous chemical toxin used in large amounts during the Vietnam War. It is known to result in deformities, cancer, and death.



I was ever a known pessimist. Under even the slightest unfortunate hindrances, I would need inner-strength – my armour to torment and agony. An optimistic view of my true purpose for existence and a willingness to push forward against the odds of the world would forge the self-belief to sledgehammer through the walls of negativity. But the Diary taught me never to lose Hope. Beams break and fuses blow at the most inconvenient of times. Some power outages seem too large to overcome and darken hope; some just flicker for a moment. Surrounded by destruction and death every day and undoubtedly scared by it, my uncle nonetheless never once lost faith that one day righteousness would prevail, the war would end and he would get to reunite with his family. In the circuitry of life, only by holding onto Hope and self-belief can I emerge the victor of the struggles.

“What is Happiness? I have spent years with this question, privately turning it over, searching for its nature, for the form of its answer. Only until now, while constantly walking the fine line between life and death, have I realized we should never look life’s most difficult questions like these up in textbooks, novels or poems. I will survive this battle, and the answer will become most obvious. Only by holding onto Hope ‘til the end can I ever find my true Happiness.”

Dostoevsky once said, “Great ideas are spawned in sufferings.” After a great loss comes experience and growth. To meditate on the Vietnam War, on the loss of our loved ones, is to meditate on how to live rightly in peace and friendship among ourselves and to be worthy of their sacrifices.

*“I must never lose my spirit.
A youth’s spirit, a soldier’s spirit, clear like crystals, hard like diamonds
Shines with Hope like the sun
I love and treasure Life but when the need arises I am most willing to sacrifice it for my
country and for my loved ones.”*