

Matriarch

written by Guest Contributor | December 2, 2021



When I was in fifth grade, my grandma signed me up to dance at the Mid-Autumn Festival celebration at our Vietnamese Catholic church, Trung Tam, which means center, but has since been renamed “Chapel of the Vietnamese Martyrs.” Long jealous of the lovely white girls in my elementary school whose parents took them to tap and ballet, I happily attended the one day a week practice at Trung Tam with a group of other Vietnamese girls my age for about a month. On the day that we tried on our costumes, all the girls stood in different corners of the church’s large hall and took off their clothes. When I removed my puff painted t-shirt, my grandma began laughing hysterically at the sight of my bare, pre-pubescent breasts. Whereas my mom was so stubbornly oblivious to the changes in her daughters’ bodies that she neglected to buy us bras or tell us about periods, my grandma was gleefully alert and beside herself at this first sign of womanhood, even calling the other women in the room to come over and see.

I credit the lack of embarrassment with which my Catholic grandma regarded the female body to Lady Trieu, who is something like the Vietnamese analog to Mulan, if you take away the cross-dressing and add a pair of breasts that measured a yard in length. A lifelong bachelorette who stood nine feet tall and fought perched aloft an elephant’s head, Lady Trieu proclaimed, “I’d like to ride storms, kill orcas in the open sea, drive out the aggressors, reconquer the country, undo the ties of serfdom, and never bend my back to be the concubine of whatever man.” Though my dad explained to me that the story of Lady Trieu is “full of imagination” and part of the mythology that asserts that Vietnam was originally a matriarchal society, those large, swinging breasts must have left an impression on my grandma when she was just a young girl hearing these stories for the first time. She learned from Lady Trieu what I learned from her, which is that Vietnamese womanhood was both inescapable and somewhat grotesque, but that it was up to me to decide if I wanted to avert my eyes from it, or boldly display it for my own amusement and the amusement of others. As I had done in regards to matters of faith, I followed my grandma’s lead.

I saw my grandma topless on countless occasions. While my mom had her own ensuite bathroom, the rest of us shared the one in the hallway on the second

story of our house. Never one to need or respect privacy, my grandma would leave the door ajar when she bathed, in case someone needed to come in and use the toilet. She always took baths, never showers, and would efficiently combine the washing of her body with the washing of her clothes. Even though there was a laundry hamper available for everyone's use, she collected her dirty clothes in a round red plastic bin under the sink. Once a week, she sat aloft in the tub on a squat wooden bench, which was also used for gardening, scrubbing both her toes and socks. Her freshly washed skin smelled unmistakably of Tide, Downy, and Suave Balsam and Protein shampoo. The only time she took a shower was when she became so sick and feeble that my dad had to bathe her using the showerhead. I remember feeling like this was the most humiliating thing—not the son bathing the mother, but having to shower when one prefers a bath.

My grandma's life, as I knew it, was circumscribed by the fact that she was always living in her son's house, at his grace, and needing constantly to negotiate the boundaries of the domestic space with my mom, who apparently was told she would be cohabitating with her mother-in-law for, at most, a year. And yet, hers was a life that I would still describe as remarkably willful and independent. According to my dad, the reason he had to quit his job as a Driver's License Examiner at the DMV in the late seventies was because my grandma insisted that he give her a license. My dad had already been coerced by many other recent Vietnamese immigrant "friends" and relatives to give them an easy pass, but when his own mother asked, he knew the only way out was to quit.

Because my dad had squashed her dream of driving, she learned how to master San Jose's complex bus system. With no ability to read or speak English, this was an incredible feat. She took the bus everywhere she wanted to go, and with the senior citizen rate, it was at one point only ten cents a ride. Most of her trips were to Trung Tam for daily mass, but sometimes she went to other surprising places that we could only puzzle out based on the things she would bring back with her. There was a period where she must have been visiting the county food bank as she brought home government butter and cheese, so much less tasty and harder to use than the Country Crock and Kraft Singles we were accustomed to at this point. I remember when she discovered a thrift store, not realizing the items were used, and regaled us with the mismatched drinking glasses she found for mere pocket change. If she came home with oranges or still warm banh cam (sweet deep-fried sesame balls) in her purse, it meant she had stopped at the Asian market and had thought about us.

Like my sisters, I took the bus with my grandma many times. She showed me how to jaywalk across Monterey Road safely, despite the cars going fifty-five miles per hour, to shave four minutes off the walk that would be lost by going all the way to the crosswalk. She showed me how to pee, if you really had to go and the bus was nowhere to be seen, behind a tree near the railroad tracks. She showed me how to slowly inch closer to the front of the bus, in between stops and stoplights, so that when one's actual stop arrived, it would be easy to exit the vehicle without needing to feel rushed.

My favorite bus memory with my grandma involves taking it with her to see

Tony Bui's *Three Seasons*, the first major motion picture released in the US spoken entirely in Vietnamese and subtitled in English. I read a review of the film (three stars) in the San Jose Mercury News' "The Eye" section on the Friday it was released and used my broken Vietnamese to convince her that we needed to go see this movie. This might be the only time in her life that she would visit the movie theater, an utterly American experience that I wanted to facilitate for her before I left home for college the next year. A moody drama, co-starring Harvey Keitel, about the westernization of Vietnam, *Three Seasons* was not exactly her usual cup of tea. She preferred horror movies, like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, that she could take pleasure in without having to understand a word. But she agreed, and without even needing to look at a map or a schedule, brought us to the independent movie theater I had described to her as being downtown near 1st St and San Carlos.

Three Seasons tells three stories that overlap with one another as they narrate the past, present and future of Vietnam. Harvey Keitel plays James Hager, the American GI who returns to Vietnam to find the half-Vietnamese lovechild he bore and abandoned during the war. Nguyen Ngo Hiep plays Kien An, a virginal lotus flower vendor who develops a bond through poetry and song to her employer, the disfigured Teacher Dao. And finally, Don Duong plays Hai, the down to earth cyclo driver who falls in love with Zoe Bui's Lan, a prostitute with a heart of gold whose clients are wealthy white westerners.

The love story between Hai and Lan is clearly the lifeblood of the film as Hai represents the bridge between Vietnam's past and its future. His ability to tame Lan's socioeconomic ambition, expressed through her willingness to have sex with white men, is the kernel of hope that the film offers viewers who may feel guilt or anxiety about the effects of the war, and now globalization, on this otherwise idyllic Southeast Asian nation where men apparently still could make a living driving cyclos, and poetry still mattered. Knowing so little about how my grandma's vision of Vietnam compared to the one that was being represented on the big screen, what she thought about the war itself (she never talked about it), or how she felt about romanticized portraits of Vietnamese prostitutes, I turned to observe her face throughout the film for clues.

The movie wasn't funny, so she never laughed. It wasn't a weepy drama either, so her eyes never filled with tears. Given her age and the slow pace of the film, I was relieved that she didn't fall asleep, but was mortified when I heard her reach into her purse and unwrap a bag of Vietnamese rice crackers that she proceeded to crunch through loudly for the next several minutes. At the end of the movie, we walked back to the bus stop arm in arm and I asked her if she liked the film. She nodded, laughed a little, and said yes. That was it. Given that the film was made by a twenty-six-year-old viet kieu, the derogatory name real Vietnamese use for their overseas brethren, it was impossible for a fellow outsider like me to know if Tony Bui's vision of Vietnam was real, nostalgia, or, as my dad would say, full of imagination. I wish I could have asked my grandma more—like, is that what Vietnam is really like, or do you ever miss home—but my limited Vietnamese made it impossible.

Because my grandma never learned English (she passed her citizenship exam by

paying someone to complete the written portion for her in the bathroom), the only way to communicate with her was in Vietnamese. Growing up, I didn't know anyone whose parents didn't require their kids to speak Vietnamese, but my parents made an active choice not to teach us so that there would be nothing to impede the movement between our thoughts and expression, and as it goes, our dreams and their realization. Since I grew up surrounded by the language, and had to learn, out of necessity, to speak some of it in order to communicate with my grandma, I was competent in what is often called "kitchen Vietnamese." I could understand most of what my parents and relatives were saying when they spoke to me in Vietnamese in the context of the household, but I didn't feel comfortable speaking it back to them, and I certainly didn't have the vocabulary to have a critical discussion of a film like *Three Seasons*.

I know I liked the film and felt it was narratively and visually satisfying, but the pleasure I took in it is certainly tied to the fact that I watched it with my grandma, and that I was only sixteen at the time. As I re-watch the film on my own more than twenty years later, having now studied Vietnamese, visited Vietnam myself, and experienced my own Vietnamese marriage, I have different questions. With the help of my Larousse dictionary, I could now ask my grandma, what do you think happened to Lan after she married the cyclo driver, Hai, now that cyclos have become nearly extinct? Do you think becoming his Vietnamese wife saved or destroyed her?

Now that my grandma is gone and I can't ask her the many questions I still have for her, I dream of how wonderful it would be if our life was like the film we watched together where she could listen to the dialogue, and I could read the subtitles. But, because I couldn't ask her the questions I had about where she came from, who she was, and how she felt about it all, I learned how to observe her very closely—just like I did that day in the theater—and to conjecture for myself. By stringing together the things I know through witness and experience, the things others have told me, and the things I wish to be true, I tell the story of my Vietnamese grandma's past, present and future, which is inextricable from my own.

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According to her immigration records, Ngoc Thi Tran was born on January 1, 1922. Even this information is a conjecture, hastily made up for the immigration clerks, since no birth certificate for my grandma exists and no one in her family could remember, or cared to remember, the precise day she entered the world. I know nothing about her education or what her childhood was like, except, as my sister Vivan told me, that she remembers being proud and excited when she developed breasts and enjoyed discussing it with her friends. When Vivan asked her, for the purposes of a middle school interview project, how she met her husband, she said one day someone just brought him to her house and said she was going to marry him.

For the entirety of my grandma's life, I never really knew why she came to America while her husband remained behind. I did know that her husband eventually remarried, which my mom said made him a "bad man," and that my dad had a half-brother we were stuck sending bi-monthly wire transfers to as a result. It was only upon getting my marriage annulled that I realized my grandpa was a polygamist, and that my grandma may have chosen to stay married to him because of her religious or cultural convictions. She married him and she would stay married to him until the day she died. That was the Catholic way and the Vietnamese way. My grandma preserved the marriage, at least from what I observed, by wearing her gold wedding ring everyday of her life, and forcing her grandchildren to write polite letters to their grandfather occasionally. If she ever bad mouthed him, I didn't know it and I likely wouldn't have understood what she was saying anyway. Her final gesture of returning to her husband's house to live out the last six months of her life was either a grand romantic gambit, tinged by her senility, or as I like to think of it now, a brutal act of vengeance worthy of Lady Trieu. As I said, my grandma was willful, if nothing else. What could be better or worse than forcing your wayward, cheating, lying Vietnamese husband to deal with your 79-year-old body-feeding you, washing you, turning you-until it finally broke down and became a corpse that he would have to bury, and then a spirit that could haunt his house until his own eventual demise? She, too, would be no man's concubine.

In a now famous quotation, John Greene writes that you fall in love that way you fall asleep, "slowly, and then all at once." My grandma's physical and mental decline, which precipitated her reunion with her husband, happened exactly like that. Just a couple of months after our bus trip to see *Three Seasons*, I was taking the SAT exam while my grandma was being taken to the hospital in an ambulance. She had been on one of her bus trips and had fallen on the sidewalk, badly scraping her head and bruising her body. I still don't understand how this single fall ended my grandma's life as I had known it, but it did. Her long hair, which she always wore in a bun at her nape, was shorn by the nurses who had treated her headwound. There were no more laundry washing baths because she could no longer even bathe herself. For the first time, I put her clothes in the laundry machine. Bus adventures were completely out of the question as getting up the stairs to get to her bedroom was already nearly impossible.

That was just her body, but her mind changed in startling ways, too. Near the end, she relentlessly accused me of stealing \$2000.00 from her, all while she doted excessively on my younger sister, Vi An. I still feel bad knowing that one of her last memories of me was as a thief. And most tellingly, she forgot to respect our family's unspoken agreement to not address my father's apostasy. The elaborate ruse that my dad was actually going to church, when he was just reading newspapers in the church's parking lot for one hour every week, was over at this point. One afternoon, she burst into his bedroom while he was watching television and pleaded with him, through unrestrained tears, to return to church and ask for God's forgiveness. He responded by dragging her out of his room, by her feet, and telling her she could leave if she didn't approve of the way he lived. And then less than a year later, she did.

According to my dad, my grandma didn't want to marry my grandpa. This wasn't news to me because I had assumed the marriage was arranged or she would have had little choice in the matter anyway. Something that always surprised me, though, was that my dad was an only child since being happily married was not a prerequisite for fecundity. She was Catholic after all. Why didn't she have more children? My mom was one of eight children. I was one of six. My dad, who came with no aunts or uncles or real cousins for us seemed like a freak. But the revelations that my dad shared with me, almost twenty years after my grandma's death, seemed to explain everything. My grandpa was a serial philanderer who had affairs with women in the countryside, where his work would take him. I used to wonder perversely if I had an illegitimate brother out there, the son my dad wished for and never received, but now I wonder about my unknown aunts, uncles or cousins.

My grandma only had one son because shortly after she married my grandpa, they stopped talking to one another and lived separate lives in their shared household. Given that my sisters and I had nicknamed her "nag-a-rama grandma" for the relentless and annoying ways in which she managed to exert her will and force over any situation, I was surprised to learn about how powerlessness she was to control her husband. In America, she was treated as a true matriarch by all of the Vietnamese people in her orbit. You had to think thrice before you excluded her from a Vietnamese wedding invitation list, no matter how removed or absent from the bloodline the bride and groom may have been from her. Every year, thirty or forty visitors would come to pay their respects to her during the lunar new year, and her grandchildren profited from their fealty as it is traditional for all adults to give red envelopes full of crisp dollar bills to the children of the household. Because of her long reach and appeal, we used to host a big party every year where we had blood pudding delivered to our front door and my dad would set off an enormous and loud Chinese firecracker to mark the occasion. The firecracker would sprinkle bits of red paper all over the steps of our house that would remain there for weeks, reminding us of the festivities, until the wind eventually blew them all away. There were late night card games where the Vietnamese women cooked but would eventually tire and go home to sleep, while the Vietnamese men stayed behind, smoking, drinking and gambling till dawn. I only truly grasped how imperious my grandma was when she left for Vietnam and the wedding invitations, visits and parties mostly ceased.

The last time I saw my grandma was spring break of my sophomore year in college. Shortly after I returned to my dorm at UCLA, my grandma returned to Vietnam for the first time since she had escaped with my dad in a fishing boat in 1975. I was no longer living at home and no longer had a real say in the matter, but my three younger sisters who, despite witnessing the toll that her illness had taken on her and my dad, still begged her to stay. They had never known life without her, but I had tasted independence now and knew that if it was her will to return, then no one was going to stop her. She was still so stubbornly Vietnamese, even after twenty-six years in America, that I was sure she would readjust easily. Whereas I struggled through the humidity during the trip I took to Vietnam nearly ten years after her death, I could see her wearing the same black nylon pants and long sleeve blouses that she had always worn, hardly breaking a sweat.

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My trip to Vietnam in 2012 did not transpire out of my personal desire to visit my ancestral homeland or my grandma's gravesite, but was part of an NYU travel seminar that I was asked to come on because they needed another chaperone for the students. My parents were both shocked when I told them I would be going to Vietnam, assuming that I, like my other sisters, would never step foot in the country that we should all be happy they chose to leave behind. My mom, who hadn't gone back since 1992, tried to discourage me by telling me about the toilets, which unlike western ones, forced you to squat over a hole on the ground. "After you reach down to wipe your bottom," she cackled, "you bring your arm back up and see it is covered with flies."

I wasn't going to give up a free trip to Vietnam because of the toilets, and as it turned out, I didn't have to squat to relieve myself even once. Because this was a trip for NYU students, we only stayed in nice, elevator hotels, and only visited popular sites that had already had their facilities modernized for foreign tourists. I even got to ride in a cyclo in Ho Chi Minh City, the only place where I believe they still exist. In America, I was considered thin, but in Vietnam, I felt like a giant, my body so recognizably viet kieu because of its height and heft. I will never forget the look of despair on the cyclo driver's face as I got into his carriage before he took me to the War Remnants Museum, and I promised myself that I would lose weight when I got back to New York.

My kitchen Vietnamese, improved through the Vietnamese language course I had taken one summer during grad school, made it obvious to me that we were getting ripped off left and right by all the vendors, who would shamelessly collude with one another on how to increase the prices right in front of our faces. I wasn't in the market for a traditional Vietnamese rice paddy hat or handmade incense, so it didn't really bother me to see my affluent NYU students help these vendors make their living. However, my grandma, who had worn a rice paddy hat unironically to protect herself from the blistering inland California sun, would've shamed these vendors into giving her the hat at cost, if not for free. She would know who their grandmas, parents, aunts, uncles and cousins were, and these vendors would feel the wrath that comes from upending the order of things by showing a Vietnamese woman like herself such disrespect.

Even though I must have only been a few miles away at various moments during my tour of Ho Chi Minh City, I never saw my grandpa's house or my grandma's gravesite because my dad wouldn't tell me where they were. I think he was afraid for me, not knowing if I could navigate the streets of Ho Chi Minh City on my own, and I know he was terrified of his half-brother and his wife getting their claws into me or any of my sisters. "Don't answer any emails you receive from Vietnamese people," he warned, "especially if they ask for money." I wasn't one to fall for phishing scams, but I could tell my dad was thinking about his half-brother who had recently asked for our contact

information, which he also refused to share.

My dad's fear of his past meant that I never saw the exact place where my grandma had wreaked her revenge, but just being in its vicinity allowed me finally to answer some of those questions I had wanted to ask her long ago. Is that what Vietnam is like? Do you ever miss home? In the emails I sent to friends and family during my first few days there, I repeatedly reported that Ho Chi Minh City looked astonishingly like San Jose. The stucco buildings were painted that same salmon hue, and the fonts on the signage were just as loud and demonstrative. Yes, this is where you buy ELECTRONICS. Here are BAKERY items. The women's bodies, not really in shape but not out of shape either, were just as compact and purposeful as the ones that filled the streets of my hometown. Those bodies could walk for miles, in terrible heat, balancing children and household goods. The loud complaints they occasionally uttered were meant to be heard for purely histrionic effect. I had spied the men's dried cracked feet poking out through plastic sandals, always paired with casual gray or brown polyester trousers, at San Jose's pho restaurants on countless occasions, too. I didn't know if the Viets in San Jose had brought Vietnam with them, or if some sort of elegant symbiosis was at work where Ho Chi Minh City and San Jose were simultaneously rebuilding and building themselves in each other's image. Either way, my grandma should have been able to recognize home whether she found herself in California or Vietnam. My fears that she, in an uncharacteristic moment of weakness, may have regretted her decision during that painful sixteen-hour flight from SFO to Ho Chi Minh City, were now put to rest.

It would be years after my flight to Ho Chi Minh City before I could ask and answer the questions about the fate of the cyclo driver's wife, Lan, and whether Vietnamese wifedom had saved or destroyed her. At the time of my trip to Vietnam, I had just gotten engaged to a Vietnamese American man, a poet, after a seven-year courtship, and was looking forward to the beginning of my own Vietnamese marriage. At the time of writing this, I have now been divorced for four years. Because Hai and Lan are purely fictional characters, I can only use my skills of conjecture, informed by my own experience, to tell you what I think happened to them.

I imagine that marrying a Vietnamese cyclo driver is like marrying a poet, romantic in theory but terrible in practice. One of my husband's constant gripes about working in academia was that it often felt so far removed from the life of the mind that it ostensibly aimed to cultivate. There was nothing inspiring or poetic about harsh student evaluations, curriculum committees, or being forced to teach freshman composition. Like Don Duong's Hai, a man propelling a vehicle with just his legs, my husband longed for something more analog, except his version looked more like opting for the print, as opposed to digital, versions of *The Paris Review* and *N+1*. My husband, whose most successful poems always looked backwards towards the storied Vietnam of his parents' past, had a hard time looking at the present, let alone the future, in both his poetry and his marriage. Like the Hai from the movie, he pedaled at a leisurely pace towards a more preferable bygone era, like there would be time for that, because for him and so many other men, Vietnamese or not, there is.

The vision of Vietnamese life Tony Bui had presented in *Three Seasons* was full of imagination. I know that now. Cyclos still have managed to survive as a relic for tourists, but it's a lot easier to find a prostitute than it is a cyclo driver. I know because an NYU professor and I were approached by one, unsolicited, at a café in Hanoi. If Lan had a Vietnamese grandmother and mother like I did, then Vietnamese wifedom was not something she accepted without reservation, despite the veneer of dignity and comfort of familiarity it offered her. Her grandmother and mother showed her through how they lived, or through the things they told her directly, that she should try to make a life for herself that was different than theirs. And yet the admiration that she had for these women gave her the courage to take a leap of faith anyway, to get into the Vietnamese man's cyclo and to see where it might take her. She gave him, and only him, her body, and he, despite his best intentions, broke it.

One of the aftermaths of my divorce was being forced to confront one of my worst fears, that it might be too late, due to how long and drawn out my relationship with my ambivalent husband had been, for me to become a mother, and then a grandmother, myself. While many people are able to start families in their mid thirties, this has not proved to be the case for me. Though we share the same large, freckled face, as round and flat as a silver dollar, the reality that I may never bear a child suggests that there are critical ways in which I will never resemble my grandma. Sometimes I feel like my body is betraying me, and so I invoke the powers of western medicine to try to bend it towards the future I so desperately want for myself. Other times I think my body is doing exactly what it is supposed to be doing at this time in its life, and I can glimpse, with slightly less terror, the future where my body and I are marching forward together in lockstep, having found our purpose and our peace.

After my husband's departure, it didn't take long for me to realize that I wasn't cut out to be a lifelong bachelorette, like Lady Trieu, or the steadfast, celibate spouse in a one-sided Josephite marriage, like my grandma. As a storyteller who cannot resist the urge to conjecture, my divorce and subsequent infertility make acute my fear that my life will be small if I don't have children and grandchildren to fill my house with laughter, and then to tell stories about me once I am gone. And yet, as I narrate my grandma's life here, it becomes clearer to me that it was not the son, the grandchildren, nor the husband—certainly not the husband—who made her life big or grand. It was just her—her personality and unconquerable will—all along. Even in death, she seems to be giving me competent directions, completely by rote, to help me get to the places I need to go next.

In her submission to *Smith Magazine's* call for six-word memoirs, Joyce Carol Oates writes, "Revenge is living well, without you." I see no future where I will return to my Vietnamese husband's house, like my grandma, to wreak my revenge on him through the sheer presence of my broken body. And yet my body, through what it has experienced, witnessed, heard and imagined, has built this monument to my grandma, which is also a monument to myself. Here lie two scorned Vietnamese wives! I lost my grandma twice—once to illness and once to

Vietnam—but it is in these paragraphs that I seem to have finally found her again.

In the final months of her life, I believe that my grandma resumed her rightful role as matriarch and finally took control of the household and husband that had eluded her for decades. Without the mandates of the American healthcare system that threatened to jail my father for elder abuse because my grandma, a long time diabetic, couldn't give up rice to keep her blood sugar at a manageable level, she was now eating as much rice as she wanted and was not putting her only son at risk by doing so. This son, who took her on that fishing boat with him, allowing her to escape Vietnam and her terrible Vietnamese husband, had given her a chance to fully realize her powers, minus the driving, in America. Now she would protect him from the pain, insanity, regret and sorrow that her two-year decline and need for full-time care had wrought upon him. It was time for her Vietnamese husband to make amends.



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