

The Life You Take Is Never Alone

Duke Stewart

To Ho karma was fictive. But when he learned his grandson was missing, he remembered the day he'd killed the soldier. Rain flooded the underground warren, the transmitter crackling, shooting sparks, petrol from the napalm scalding the air, drawing oxygen from his lungs, the collapsing ceiling dancing with fleeing bats.

The bombing preceded a ground assault. The field hospital had to hurry. Ho jerked down the IV tubes, bundled up the trusses and splints, wrapping the transfusion and blood bottles in protective pads of surgical gauze. He shouted at the vacillating orderlies who contemplated crawling to the surface, ignoring the injured. When he caught their bubonic terror, panic branched down his spine until grounded by duty. He lifted his gun. "I order you..."

The ambulatory patients marshaled forward, the orderlies pairing off ferrying the others—the burned, the fractured, and shrapnel amputees. For the head and spinal injuries, and a moaning gut wound needing a mesenteric bypass—triage, a graceless task, but not for Ho. Dr. Tran ordered the overdoses, a waste of gilded thiopental, but it was the only humane thing they could do. Ho led his section through the portal into the roaring hell, shirt drenched in the curdling sauna, the moist detritus masking the rancid infections. The explosion had filled their ears with a puttied silence. The smoldering jungle rendered deaf and mute.

Ho grasped the litter, took two steps and sank, the mud sucking the rubber off his sandals, arms scratched by branches covered with weaver ants. Ho avoided the craters filling with leeches. His patient screamed, tethered to a jostling bed, emitted an oozing fetor of dysenteric diarrhea. Ho gagged, dabbed menthol onto a handkerchief and tied it around his neck.

The soldier continued to curse him, his black cauterized stump jolted into phantom agony by the bursting raindrops. They double-timed over the rice pads, staring at an opaque sky, praying the fog would hold, grounding the next wave of fighters whose bellies held more gelled fire.

Ho shivered, wiped his brow, the steel of the firearm against his belly. He'd trained four months—political indoctrination. Before the revolution who did you serve? A: The rich. Q: But now? A: Workers and farmers. And then an abridged course of internal medicine, crude-colored ink body charts to haul into combat.

When drafted, he had not asked his abbot to intervene. He didn't want to risk his superior's precipitous life, but he had stood firm on one vow: he would not kill—therefore he was deployed to a surgical unit.

Tracers trilled inches from his head; he dove to the ground. One of those random intersections in warfare that usually got someone killed. Two patrols on a single vector, blinded by the storm, fatigue, fright. Ngoc deserted, dropped the rear end of Ho's stretcher, and ran perpendicular to the trail into the foliage. Ho smelled the musty vegetation, the sickly sweet reek of flesh-eating bacteria. His toes numbed, the scaly fungus dissolving his skin, each step stabbed with pain. Shouts, a banshee scream—a bullet eviscerating, the hot iron of ordnance. Ho, crazed by the blast, buried himself into his patient, bullets plunking the body, burlap litters piled high, the wounded as parapet. In a lull, Ho glanced up and was shocked to see a cairn of discarded canteens, syringes, bandages, a pith helmet, a refuse trail from the fleeing.

To his left, fighters in fifteen-foot rolls shot from their hips, flanking fire for the retreating unit, becoming sporadic, distancing, swallowed by jungle. Ho, too, considered running, hiding until nightfall, but he could not bring himself to leave his charge, so he hunkered for the counterattack, trapped between lines, holding the pistol in his shaking hand, water beading off the nozzle. His heartbeat cascaded between his ears, between the expiring gasps and gurgling blood and punctured lungs and the soiled stench of feces, his own. He could have feigned death, plenty of gore to deck himself, a logical enough plan, but then the soldier edged up the trail, his M-16 pointed, his glasses steaming. Ho hated the Yankees who had invaded his land and massacred his unit. His anger stifled any chance for mercy, the grim stare of the GI, desperate, separated from his platoon, slipping through the corpses, the mocking swish of boots, his eyes and mouth wide with terror as the dead raised. Ho aimed above the flak jacket—one of the few combat instructions he remembered—the ease of the trigger contrasting the jumping nozzle, pouring shots into the infantryman who jiggled as each round hit, before falling to his knees, then face-planting into the mud.

Ho was surprised to receive Thich's call about his grandson. Thich had not bothered to inform him when Mark was born, Ho learning of the birth by accident, a pink bill from the hospital to Thich's old address. When he confronted Thich, he had assured Ho he was going to be told. "So, you not call Florence about baby either?" he asked. Yes, his mother was told. She had always been Thich's favorite.

While growing up in America, Thich gravitated toward baseball and pizza and the highest-rated Consumer Reports products, a Visa-carrying capitalist whose only relationship to Asia had been from the goods he purchased, his grandparents, and his name, which shamefully, at the age of twenty-one, he changed to Thomas.

There were other rejections: dyeing his hair blonde after being called chink; quitting the flute when accused of being queer; joining the Boy

Scouts and blindly reciting their oaths; erecting a seven-foot Christmas tree with a crèche on the lawn between the marble bird feeder and ailanthus hedge; proudly displaying an American flag on holidays and after attending a summer camp dedicating his soul to Jesus, dunking beneath chlorinated waters, buying a four-inch wooden cross that covered his sternum. Thich's conversion to Christianity was the final straw for Ho who renounced his parentage.

Ho offered no explanation to his astounded family for not returning to the monastery. Born on the anniversary of Thich Don Hau's birth and always the one to pay homage, the bags of fruit and flowers heavy on his shoulders as he trekked up the mountain to the temple, he seemed destined for a religious vocation. But after the war he drifted south, worked as a carpenter in Ho Chi Minh City. He told his bosses nothing of the sacrifice he'd made for killing the soldier, trading refuge in Buddha for secular slavery. When he learned his name was up for interrogation (tipped off by a surgeon who knew the circumstances of his desertion and how he had stood by his patients) he fled to Burma.

Thich lived in California. Ho paid for the coach section. The continental flight took a sinus wave north where he changed planes in Minneapolis, a spider-web hub with moving walkways long as a football pitch. He hustled to make the connection, passing tourists gabbing into palm-sized cell phones, serious, eyes downcast, mouths contorted, legs pumping, lives and flight no longer taken for granted, terrorism piercing the heart of complacency, flying vulnerable like other mainstays—marriage, career, health.

Impermanence was Ho's least favorite Dharma teaching. When he meditated, sitting cross-legged on the floor of his apartment, chanting after the struck bell—ten-second om, four-second recovery breath—he thought how a bullet between the fourth and fifth ribs or a nicked artery or the bad luck of arriving on time on the seventy-second floor cemented your fate as graphically as the ARVN troops astride his sister.

Unlike Americans who'd never had their homes bombed, when Ho saw on TV the Syrian carnage from a wayward missile the tragedy dragged him back into the pit of battle—the jagged screams, the way phosphorus glowed in wounds like septic moonlight. How some sights demanded you remember them and extorted their payments in nightmares.

At the airport he passed kiosks of chowder, french fries and cinnamon, raucous pilgrims, defiant children, helpless mothers rolling suitcases so large to swallow most of his possessions. In one week a stall made more money than his village in a lifetime, such was the power of capitalism, the master to which ultimately he, too, had succumbed: a color television, laptop, washer, dryer, refrigerator, air-conditioned efficiency apartment.

On the plane a buxom stewardess reviewed the safety procedures, her streaked cheeks pressurized by urgency, fingers pulling the yellow mask over her nose, following the orders of the mechanized recording like some

deus ex machina. He read her mind. “Our airliner is safe with all precautions taken, but should we fall from the sky, you must trust the procedures,” yielding life and limb, following orders as the hijacked, even to the point when the towers loomed port side, or when the American descended the path, the outcome all but assured.

Ho flew over crabapple orchards, badlands, gouged pits of copper and basalt, a desert that had killed many a Mormon gambling on their water supply, until the clouds parted and he saw the coast of California and the shimmering, golden sun paneling off the rugged peaks of the Palisades, the blue Pacific.

His son met him in the terminal. Thich, (he refused to call him Thomas) had absorbed the milieu, a redwood, three inches taller than Ho, movie-star looks, his royal nose perched above a gibbous chin, marked by coastal California grace and tenure at the Polytechnical Institute. Thick glasses aided his myopic eyes, impaired from perusing the minutia of his specialty, applied physics, reddened by lack of sleep, the sorrow of a thousand shattered hopes. Thich was brilliant, undergraduate at sixteen, Stanford PhD at twenty-one, consultant to computer and IT industries that paid him hundreds of thousands to use nanotechnology to build memory chips smaller than a pin point, although his dissertation had been on string theory: earth, heavens, the cosmos created from vibrations by a transcendent Yo Yo Ma, Ho so proud he had a son capable of ferreting such designs. But genius was no protection against misfortune.

“What’s the latest?” Ho asked.

“Nothing. The police can’t find him. Even with a helicopter.”

“And he just disappeared from the backyard?”

“One minute he was swinging, the next gone.”

Toward the end of his studies, Ho had argued with his teachers. It did not seem fair to see someone lame, riddled with sores, dying in shit-filled gutters and blame it on karma. But he didn’t accept his son’s explanation either: a random universe, distorted, chaotic, neutral and therefore, by default, cruel.

They eased into traffic, traversing interstate veins, harrying speeds, but to decelerate meant being rear-ended, spinal cord fractures, a neck brace. Ho admired the couture of the Lexus. Just to live in America was to taste a harbinger of the Pure Land.

Ho’s first year in the States was difficult: attending the ESL classes at Vo-Tech, parsing the Tar Hill fricatives and rubbery labials, the multisyllables and silent vowels; deciphering the ridiculous traffic patterns of Charlotte and exploring the gargantuan variety of the stores: liquid, paste, honey, mesquite, tart, tangy, wheat, rye, white, enriched, one, two, or no percent. He got hired as an orderly at an inner-city hospital where to just ride the bus to work in the decrepit, drug-infested neighborhood was to risk assault. He always carried \$30 just in case—nothing worse than a disappointed mugger. During his breaks he stitched dolls with 3-0 silk, tied the knots and sutures that had saved lives, now used to fix Raggedy Anns

and hand-me-downs, a home business he'd started to augment his bare-bones salary. During breaks he counted his pulse until he could control it and named all the bones of the body, a model employee only to be fired for insubordination, angering the chief resident when he'd correctly diagnosed early sepsis for a patient she'd assumed was feverish with unseasonable flu.

Turning into the driveway, seeing the japonica and bougainvillea, the shiny aluminum garbage cans of the postcard-perfect neighborhood, waxed autos in every drive, contracted landscaping and hidden sprinklers, Ho resigned himself: even if found, his grandson was already lost.

Cars parked bumper to bumper around the block, the handlers fanning out, their hounds eager to please, wagging their tails, straining the leashes. Inside, on the mantle he saw pictures of his grandson who resembled Ho's father: the solemn eyes and coarse chestnut mane, not the blonde hair nor sophisticated blue eyes of his daughter-in-law. Sometimes souls skipped generations waiting to be released from the bardo.

He helped carry in bags of food for the searchers, men in corduroy jeans tucked into rawhide boots, their Carhartt jackets stained with grime and sweat from previous pursuits. The phone rang with regularity, and each time agents in coats and ties put headphones to their ears to record the promises of telemarketers. Ho chased the high-strung poodle into the backyard pen, nipping, banished from indoors, pedigreed unlike the mutts that roamed his countryside with emaciated ribs and blotched fur, scrofulous, stinking, covered by hordes of flies laying eggs in open wounds, nuisance dogs that tried to eat your babies but also an emergency meal if it came to that, and for many during the war it had.

On the kitchen refrigerator his son and daughter-in-law had created a shrine of digital snapshots: Mark's recent birthday party, the children, classmates from Mark's private academy, handing over their professionally wrapped presents, decked from top to bottom in Tommy Hilfiger, one red-headed child spraying cheese dip into the curls of the girl beside her, the mothers in the background hanging around until satisfied the kids weren't going to show up on some dark web torrent, sneaking away after making calls to secret lovers. Among the Gameboys, Hummer, PlayStation, and remote-controlled fire-and-rescue vehicles, Ho realized the foolishness of the prayer wheel he'd mailed.

"You should eat." Penelope handed him a piece of creamy sponge cake. Americans ate under any occasion, especially births or deaths. The sugary overkill designed to satiate a spiritual longing, a hole in life, filling with pastries and tortes starving souls, hungry ghosts who didn't understand their plight, bellies spreading like bowling pins, XXXL asses wide as tabletops, double, triple chins. Ho maintained a regimen of rice and vegetables, a tablespoon of salt and butter, splurging once a month for pork, fish, or chicken, turkey on holidays but never steak, succumbing to the allure of the packing companies, the commercial engine that kept the consumer mystified, the products wrapped in sanitized cellophane, a far cry

from the sentient sacrificed animal with a nervous system more human than not.

Ho offered to participate. The agent in charge took one look at Ho's consumptive frame and decreed, "The canyons are treacherous. We don't need another calamity." So Ho waited until the officers had left, until the helicopter with its thermal imaging descended over the far ridge, then slipped over the fence and with monastic intent tried to think like a six-year-old.

The mountains rose, Ho cautious, holding onto dry brush, his feet slipping, the chaparral loose and unstable where to fall into the ravine promised a splintering death. He could not imagine a second-grader, even a precocious one, lasting long in such wilderness. And there were coyotes and pumas in the hills. From the blue shade, he saw the mansard of Thich's house. The wavy air telescoped the distance, buttressed by canyon, appearing within a stone's throw, yet he had walked nearly a mile.

Over and through the scrub, the sun lazy, sawed in half by a wisp of smog, the thermals delivering the pungent, greasy aroma of charcoal, a miscreant camper chancing it. Some animal screamed, turned a rabbit to stone, and then the hare hopped haphazardly avoiding lupine scat. Ho's knees ached. It had been several days since doing yoga, his cramped vertebrae abraded by gravity, arthritic ossification, letting his arms float, his mind a miner's headlamp cutting through the pitch. He regretted not teaching Thich the nature of suffering, cause and effect, lessons forever lost, his son taken from him, his ex-wife's lawyer working the system, the absurd accusations of abuse, but the judge could not chance it, and Ho, recently fired, could produce no character witnesses against the remonstrations of his ex-wife and her smarmy advocate. During the hearing he sat quietly without representation, answered the questions as best he could. When he got the ruling in the mail, he read it a dozen times, his ex-wife granted full custody, limiting his visitation to a weekend a month under DFCS supervision, and an address for the monthly check he was required to send.

The sun entered the graveyard of the Pacific, the lights on the hillsides winked, street lamps blossomed. Ho wove to the top, shins and palms cut by bristles, the inexplicable sounds of rap on a stereo, sporadic fireworks, and the teasing wind humid and cooling, offerings from the ocean. At the summit he leaned against a rock, chased a striped skink from a cleft, stared up into the murky sky. The first flare, a splendid red arc lasered overhead, the black mystery of time, fireballs streaming, canisters reaching zenith, falling into detonation. It was the Fourth of July, Independence Day. Far below, the road curved leading into his son's subdivision, the house easy to find, fire truck and police lights rotating. More searchers began to fan out holding flashlights that zigzagged up the slopes. Tracking dogs bayed, better trained than the handlers who paused to watch the spectacle. *We are all kids at heart*, thought Ho. The dark chastened him. It was pointless to continue. In his haste to help, Ho had not grabbed a flashlight. He sat on a rock; fireworks blazed, then fizzled into the sea.

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Tired, Ho soon fell asleep and dreamed: the face weary and, if not for the rifle, quite comely, but much too young, about Thich's age now, eyes harrowing the ground, fearing trip wires, punji sticks, not knowing the area had been designated an aid zone. If the GI had looked up, he would have seen Ho standing, the shaking pistol, rain dripping off his index finger, his mind blackened by fear and reeking bowels and the bloody guts of his patients, bolstered by the much too quiet jungle and the moans of the dying.

But Ho did not pull the trigger. Instead, he let the ghost pass and eased behind him, the specter leading him up the path, and surely as karma ruled the universe, to many lives soon to be filled with regret.