

The Other Door



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Optimist **b**

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To Arka...

The Other Door

Year 2002

Destiny brought me to this socialist country. And destiny herself led me into this tiny room. The room was part of a small house. The house had no living room. No gate.

My room had direct access to the bathroom, although I wasn't the only one using it. Since last week, this house welcomed an additional tenant. Someone whose face I have yet to see, whose voice I have yet to hear.

The bathroom could be opened from both sides. To make sure no one was there, I always knocked, and so did he.

I knew he was a 'he' from the sound of his cough. And from the obvious leaving-the-toilet-seat-up routine. His cough is heavy and thick, and based on it I deduced that he would be around 50 years of age.

I could hear him shower, brush his teeth, and perform other regular activities a man usually does in the privacy of a bathroom.

As I mentioned before, destiny brought me here. To this foreign country whose language I do not speak. I was stranded on this land.

I once was a happy enthusiastic person. But one incident changed my whole life. I burned down my family house. The fire spread so fast, until it burned down the entire block. All due to a single cigarette bud. Mine.

My parents were scared that the people would kill me. Before anyone could pinpoint the source of the fire, my family sent me to Vietnam. An old friend of Bapak* lived there. This man has a Vietnamese citizenship. To avoid complicating the visa process, I married Bapak's friend to gain his citizenship.

Even though it seemed like such a drastic move, in truth we were really short of options. That uncle promised Bapak, that we would only be married for status. He would never touch me and Bapak trusted him.

Everything happened so quickly, I hardly remembered the process. The one thing that remained on my mind was Bapak's last message: *do good things, even in your hardest days, and the world will take care of you.* Time just flew so fast. Now I have been in Vietnam for almost two years.

I no longer lived with Bapak's friend. Maybe you are wondering why? Well, how can I

explain it? I no longer live with him, because he wanted my eyes. Yes, my precious pair of eyes!

That uncle was Bapak's childhood friend. During the Vietnamese war he migrated to Vietnam. Bapak told me that, that uncle was a very sensitive person, and he always wanted to become a pacifying part of war. He always talked about peace. He sought it in every corner of his life. He would always fight for it. That's why Bapak entrusted me to him.

Uncle and I lived in Ben Tre, a small town that stretched along the Mekong Delta, about 1,5 half hours bus ride from the city. There was nothing much to do there. In the first few months of living with him, he constantly talked about how human have to give up everything in order to achieve real peace.

Well, he could say anything he liked. I didn't care as long as he kept his promise of not touching me. Moreover he talked about the five human senses, mentioned they were the source of greediness. Greediness was the source of unhappiness. Among those five, eyes were the biggest source and ears were the second.

By seeing, we always want something we don't need. By hearing, we always want to hear compliments, thus, we will try to do everything to cope with other's expectations and standard. On and on he talked about the same thing.

To be honest, I did see the virtue behind his words. If I couldn't see, I wouldn't want my hair to look in certain way, nor would I want a pair of beautiful purple shoes like the ones Sani, my rich cousin, has.

If I couldn't hear, my heart wouldn't be jealous when Tomi, my crush, gave compliment to Ratna, my best friend. Nor would I be infuriated by my parents because they couldn't afford to buy me a plane ticket to Singapore, as everyone said it was a modern and loving country. I wouldn't dare to light up my first cigarette if I didn't let my ears turn red when my friends called me a coward. Those senses caused me to do many things I didn't actually need to do.

That uncle lived in a modest house with no wife (before I came) or children. He worked as a carpenter and handy man. He didn't care how much money he would get; he just did what he did.

The first day I arrived in Ben Tre, Uncle cooked me a rich delicious dinner. The dinner was composed of deep fried prawn, a lot of steamed vegetables, a bowl of beef soup, spicy shredded chicken, and fried tofu. He also served me a glass of hot soya milk. I felt content.

After I finished my meal, that uncle asked me, about the taste, whether I liked them or not, and of course I said, "the dinner was marvelous,"

he smiled at me, and told me that everything I just ate was made of vegetable. "I am a vegetarian," he said. I never knew before that vegetarian food could be so delicious and the taste could be so similar to the real meats.

That uncle grew his own meals in his small backyard. When I lived with him, I had no choice besides being a vegetarian as well. He taught me how to cook delicious vegetarian meals, the skill he learned from the Buddhist monks. He also taught me some useful Vietnamese words.

He made me wake up very early in the morning, right when the first sunray hits the earth. We would only go to bed after the sun sets in the West. Well, I actually never saw him sleeping. No telephone, no TV, no gossip tabloids. It was like living in a monastery where everything was kept orderly and modestly. It was a tough life for a girl who used to live in a bustling big city. That uncle caught me crying several times.

After a few months, I started to enjoy my quiet life, although I still cried missing my home sometimes. Until one day, he started to blindfold his eyes. I asked why. At first he said I made him suffer. I asked how? He didn't answer, but he said it was a practice before he got his eyes blinded. At that time I didn't understand what he meant. He started to walk with a cane, did everything in the dark. His bizarre behavior scared me, moreover

because eventually he asked me to do the same thing. He even handed me a blindfold.

He assured me that by doing so, I won't shed another tears missing my life back then. Furthermore, the act would help free me from mundane temptations. I took the blindfold, but never wore it, though.

At one dawn, I heard him scream. I sneaked out to see what was going on. I witnessed such horror. I can't even bear to tell you the details. There was fire, and there was an iron bar. You should get the picture.

At that point I decided to run away. Far, far away from him. I only had little money, some clothes, and what my parents had given me; a wrist watch with golden chains, which was the only precious thing they had.

I rode on a vegetable truck to Ho Chi Minh City. After I arrived there, I tried to find a job as a cleaner. Equipped with my limited Vietnamese, I knocked on every door and said I'd do anything for a place to sleep and some food to survive on. I slept in Le Van Tam Park for days.

Despite of everything that had happened to me, I still considered myself lucky. In my Javanese root we are always taught to find the bright side of every dark side. For example, although I had to sleep in the park, I was lucky for not being harassed as a woman. And when my family lost

everything in fire, Bapak said thank God we still had each other.

Le Van Tam was a beautiful and lively park. I saw many lives there. In the morning, many people came for a morning work-out sessions. In the evening, old people came to dance with their partners. I also saw many young lovers, kissing and hugging-sometimes even further-under the tree's shadows. There were also some homeless people who needed a place to stay for a night or two. Just like me.

But Le Van Tam was not always the safest place for the homeless. One night, while I was sleeping, somebody shook my shoulder hardly. She told me to run, because there was a police night patrol. Everyone was all over the place, trying to escape. They climbed the fences, and so did I. The unlucky ones had to spend their night in the cell.

It was four in the morning, and I had no idea where to go. I just walked, walked and walked, and I suddenly heard a soft voice of adzan. I tried to follow the voice, even though I thought it was only my hallucination. It was probably the most beautiful adzan I had ever heard. The adzan voice came from a narrow alley. I kept on following the alley, and there, I saw a mosque.

“Nak sembahyang subuhkah?” I was surprised by an old lady. She spoke to me in a familiar language; she asked if I want to do the morning pray. Later I knew that the lady was actually speaking in Malay. The Malaysian government gives many scholarships to Vietnamese Muslim. Therefore, it’s a common thing to find a Vietnamese Muslim speaks fluent Malay language.

Bapak told me that Vietnam is a communist country, because, Communist party is the only party they have. Meanwhile in Indonesia, communist is a forbidden word, mostly since the assassination of the eight generals in September 30th, 1965. The tragedy was known as G30S PKI. The Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) was blamed for the assassination by the New Order Regime. It was one of the darkest tragedies in our revolution history.

Thus, every year before the fall of Soeharto in 1998, the propaganda movie about the PKI’s atrocity and how the Indonesian army defeated them was a staple every September the 30th, to commemorate the massacre.

The New Order Regime banned communism. Every literature, even fiction, if contained a little piece of communism would be demolished, and the writers would be put in prison for life.

The New Order government under Soeharto, then declared that they carried the ideology of democracy. But I hardly saw the difference between democracy and communism in Soeharto's era. Both of them prohibited the freedom of speech. All mass media and reading materials were screened by the government. Those who dare to criticize the government would be silenced.

Moreover, we are taught, that communism is a no God ideology, no religion, demonic. Communists are heinous. They kill everyone, and they don't believe in God.

Hence, I was surprised to find a mosque in the city centre. And later on I noticed that there were churches spreading all over the city, and countless temples, also a few more mosques. I took the ablution water, and the lady lent me a set of praying attire (mukena). There, I was praying deep for the first time in my life.

Afterwards, the old lady who ran a food stall inside the Ar- Rahim mosque, offered me a bowl of steamed rice and ayam bakar (grilled chicken) with delicious sambal. When I put the steamed rice inside my mouth my tears were dribbling down to my cheek. It was the finest food I had ever tasted after for so long.

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“Wake up Kid, wake up.” Apparently I fell asleep in the mosque for about 5 hours. Another woman woke me up. She told me that I can’t sleep in the mosque. So I raised and went out to thank the old lady, but she was nowhere to be found. Therefore, I continued my walk, looking for a job.

After I was done with my daily job hunting around the city, I returned to Le Van Tam. I sat on my usual bench, watching the birds chirp. I thought how lucky they were to have wings so they can fly everywhere they wished. Nothing could hold them back, and they didn’t need to think of a place to sleep every night.

Suddenly, a string of traffic accident appeared before me. Just in front of Le Van Tam, a motorbike stopped abruptly, he was trying to avoid a falling branch.

There was a car behind the motorbike. And behind the motorbike, there was another car, another motorbike, and another motorbike. It was horrible! It happened within one second. I stood up from my seat, ran to see the scene closer. The man from the first motorbike was wounded badly; his face was covered with blood and he was half conscious. People blamed him for the accident.

Finally the paramedic team arrived, but they were hesitant to help the guy since he had no id card. They were afraid no one would pay for his medical bills.

“Please just help him Sir, please,” I begged. “Please take this, this should be enough to pay the hospital!” There, I gave up my precious watch, my last resort of money. However, I was proud of myself, since I practiced what Bapak had told me, *always do good things, even when you are in your hardest days, and the world will take care of you.*

Maybe Bapak’s wisdom was right. One day after the incident, I got a job in a small vegetarian restaurant. They admitted me because I told them I was a vegetarian. Actually, I was only occasionally a vegetarian, but they did not need to know the fine print. I worked as hard as I could, from cleaning the restroom, washing the vegetables and scrubbing the bathroom.

The lady of the restaurant didn’t pay me a single cent, but she let me sleep in her kitchen with her dog after the restaurant closed for the day. She even let me eat the left-over food.

There was no shower room in the restaurant, so I had to use the sink to wash myself every day. It was a hard life. I couldn’t complain, and I never thought of anything else, I could only think as far as the day after today, never the future.

One ordinary afternoon, a Western man entered our restaurant. He was our first foreign guest. He tried to place an order with my colleague, but both of them were completely lost

in translation. Even my lady boss couldn't help. While I held my broom, I pulled all my courage and approached the man.

"Sir, is there anything I can do for you?" I asked. Thank God, English was my favorite subject back then at school. The man smiled, evidently relieved at having found an English-speaking person. My lady boss and colleagues stared at me impressively.

After that day, the guy became our regular customer. He brought along his friends, more and more customers. I was no longer scrubbing the bathroom or mopping the floor.

The lady boss trusted me to serve them, and asked me to teach my colleagues some basic English. I started receiving a regular salary. I even got to keep the customers' tips. I saved every penny I earned.

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My boss was satisfied with my job. She raised my salary and made me the restaurant's supervisor. When my income became stable, I finally could move out from her kitchen, and rented a decent room.

I began to wonder about visiting my parents in Jakarta. If they were still worried about my safety, I could send money for their flight tickets. I began to calculate how much money I should save

every month to buy them tickets. It would probably take one year to buy one ticket, but maybe I could take another side job to earn more money. I had many plans for my future.

One morning, as I was just a few steps away from the restaurant, Quyen, my colleague and friend, suddenly approached me and warned me not to come to the restaurant.

She told me to hide. She quickly told me that the money box was empty. One staff accused me of stealing the money. At first my boss didn't believe her, but then two or three other staffs started saying the same thing. They were all accusing me.

"Ayu, I will try to explain to our boss that you are innocent. Everything is a scheme planned to kick you out of the restaurant. It was all Linh's idea. Don't come back to your house, they will try to find you there. Go to my house, now!" Quyen said. From the distance I could see how mad my colleagues and my boss are. So I ran.

Quyen hid me at her place for a couple of days, and brought my stuff from my rented room. She knew that I was innocent, because she knew everything had been planned before. Almost everyone in the restaurant was jealous of me, and they didn't like me because I was a foreigner.

Unfortunately, I couldn't stay longer in her house, as she lived with her family. So, she found

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