

The Secret of the Hidden Army

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Eleven-year old Lily Qin gazed out the window of the car, her sparkling brown eyes searching for a sign; the sign, to be exact. Lily and her family were going to see the Terracotta Army in Xi'an, China. It was spring break at her school in America, and Lily's family had decided to go on a fourteen-day trip to China. They were going to go to four cities: Beijing, Xi'an, Hangzhou, and Shanghai. Currently, they were in Xi'an.

"Yes!" Lily exclaimed. She had found what she had been looking for: a large sign that read, "Bing Ma Yong, The Terracotta Army". We are finally here! Lily thought excitedly.

She reached into her bag, took out her camera, and snapped a picture. After learning about the hidden army when she was eight, it had been Lily's dream to visit the Terracotta Warriors. It was amazing to think that all that had been built to be just a single emperor's tomb! Finally, her dream had come true! Lily's six-year old brother Matthew was overjoyed as well. Lily was his idol, so if Lily liked something, then he did too.

As soon as her dad parked the car, Lily and her family got out of the vehicle. Well, Lily's parents got out of the car. Both Lily and her brother leapt out of the car. The family headed to the ticket booth. Their father bought the tickets and handed one to each family member.

"Why don't I get a ticket?" Matthew complained.

"Because," their father replied, "you get to go with me!" He hoisted Matthew up onto his shoulders.

"Yaay!" Matthew grinned and punched the air with his fist. Everyone headed over to the entrance of the Terracotta Warriors Museum. "Do you guys want to walk or take the trolley?" Lily's dad asked.

"How long does to take to walk?" Their mother inquired.

"About twenty minutes," Lily's dad replied.

"And by trolley?"

"About five to ten minutes."

Lily's mom glanced at the huge crowd behind them. "Let's take the trolley," she said.

Everyone agreed. The faster they got there, the better!

The ride on the trolley was quick and fun. The family got to the museum in no time! "So, where do you want to go first?" Lily's father asked.

"How about Pit One?" Lily suggested.

There were four pits, Pit One being the biggest.

"Okay, sure!" Matthew exclaimed.

“Sounds good to me!” Lily's mom agreed.
The four walked into the building labeled ‘Pit One’.

“Whoa...” Lily gasped.

There was a humongous pit in the center of the room. It was bigger than a football stadium!
What was in the pit was even more spectacular.

Thousands of terracotta warriors stood prepared for battle. “ I can’t believe that this is only part of more than eight-thousand more soldiers!” Lily said.

“That sure is amazing,” her mother agreed.
Lily used her camera to take more photographs. Matthew did the same.

“Why don’t we take a family photo?” their dad suggested.

“Okay!”

“Sure!”

“That sounds great!”

Lily’s father got someone to take a picture for them. After the picture, they looked around a little more, then went to Pit Two. Pit Two was the second largest pit. It contained many horses and charioteers. Lily explained to her family that the horses were actually Mongolian ponies, which were small but strong. Their manes had been cut short so they would not get tangled up with the reins. She had read about it in her books.

“That’s cool, but I’m hungry!” Matthew said.
Their dad looked at his watch. “Wow! It’s already noon! Okay, let’s go get something to eat.”

“We can eat at one of the small restaurants on the museum grounds,” their mother suggested. Everyone agreed to this idea. They headed to a restaurant that served hand-pulled noodles and all had a delicious lunch.

Then they headed to Pit Three. “This is the last pit, because Pit Four is empty,” their father informed them.

Pit Three was the smallest pit, and most of the warriors in there were broken or missing parts. There were also four horses and a few charioteers in the center of the U-shaped pit. In the vast room, there was also a few terracotta warriors in glass cases for visitors to see.

“I’m going to see these other warriors,” Lily said. Then she went to go look at them. But when she came back after seeing the warriors, her family was gone!

Suddenly, people started rushing about, and a wave of people headed for the exit. What happened? Lily wondered. Then the door of the building banged shut. That’s why, Lily thought. The building was closed. She walked down the stairs leading to Pit Two. Suddenly,

she thought she heard a murmur of voices. She whirled around. "Who said that?!" She whispered. There was no answer. Cautiously, she backed down the stairs and walked to Pit Two. Right then, the door to that pit slammed shut as well. Great, just my luck, Lily thought. She hurried to the tunnel that led to Pit One. But as she sprinted down the stairs to Pit One, she thought she heard a shout and the crack of a whip. Frightened, she hurried to Pit One.

Right then and there, the door to Pit One closed as well. Oh no! Lily thought. What should I do? Just then, an arrow narrowly missed her hand. Lily opened her mouth to say something, but then another arrow shot past her. Then another, and another and another, until Lily was pressed against the wall in fear, with many arrows stuck to the walls on either side of her. Lily carefully inched herself out of the mess. She went to the railing that overlooked the terracotta warriors to see who had been shooting arrows at her. She leaned forward and accidentally toppled into the pit before her. She landed on the hard ground and fainted.

When she came to, she thought she saw four warriors standing over her. Oh, it must be just a silly hallucination, Lily thought. Then she came to her senses. Aaaah! They're real! Lily had never felt more scared in her life. "Don't do anything to me!" she cried. In Chinese, the soldiers spoke to each other for a moment, then suddenly, Lily found herself pinned to the wall by some rope.

A tall, dignified general walked up to Lily. "Who are you, and why are you here?" the general asked. "Are you meant to be here? What is your name? Are you," the general frowned, "an intruder?!" He put his face close to Lily's face and raised his eyebrows. As the general went back to his spot in the middle of a line of soldiers, Lily began to answer the questions. She cleared her throat. "I am Lily MeiLan Qin," she began. Then, a murmur of voices went through the line that stood before her. "Did she say 'Qin'?"

"'Qin' as in 'Qin Shi Huang', the emperor whose tomb we guard so faithfully??"

"Impossible!"

"No way!"

"Bu ke neng de!"

Finally, the general put his hands up to silence the warriors. He then walked up to Lily and asked her, "Are you a descendant of the Qin Dynasty? Or even," he paused. "A descendant of Qin Shi Huang?" As he said this, for the first time since Lily had met the general, his face turned into a look of amazement and shock. But he quickly regained his dignified manner.

As the terracotta figures waited for an answer, Lily thought hard. Qin Shi Huang was the first emperor of China, and since the time he took control of China, thousands of workers were painstakingly building and digging his massive tomb. Then she thought about her ancestry. No, I'm not a descendant of Qin Shi Huang, she thought. She told this to the warriors. "But I'm not an intruder either," she added quickly. "I got lost, and I accidentally fell into your pit," Lily explained.

The warriors seemed satisfied with her replies, so Lily decided to ask them a question. "How and why are you guys.....alive?" Lily asked.

“The emperor believed that after we were buried, we would magically come alive. So here we are,” the general replied.

“But we’ve kept it a secret for quite a while,” an archer piped up.

He adjusted his bun. Lily realized that every warrior in the entire Museum was different. They were very detailed as well. The terracotta army is almost exactly like a real army! Lily thought. The general’s voice interrupted Lily’s thoughts. “Well, if you’re not an intruder, then we might as well show you around,” he said.

First they walked around the first pit. Lily noticed that the more important-looking members of the army were taller and wore fancier clothing. They even had more armor and elaborate hairdos. Then, the general carefully removed a large clump of dirt, revealing a secret tunnel.

They both entered the tunnel and came out on the other side: Pit Two. Lily was fascinated by the terracotta horses, who were snorting and gently pawing the ground with their hooves. When Lily and the general came closer, the horses around them began to tug on their reins; they wanted to get into battle. The charioteer simply sighed and shook his head. “No, Jing. Not now.....Or ever,” the terracotta figure muttered under his breath.

Some warriors practiced battle moves, some sharpened their weapons, and others talked about battle plans. As the general led Lily through the pit, many warriors greeted the general, but readied their weapons at the sight of Lily. The general decided that this wasn’t good. He went over to a chest and took out an extra general’s outfit. “Here, put this on,” he handed the outfit to Lily. Lily went into the tunnel and slipped on the general’s outfit. Then, the general and Lily went to see Pit Three by going through another hidden tunnel. In that pit, some warriors debated on battle plans. When they saw the general, they promptly saluted. “Kindly tell me what time it is?” The general asked a young officer in Chinese.

The officer reached into the pocket of his tunic and took out a watch that the warriors had found on the museum floor. “It is six forty-five in the morning sir,” the officer replied, also in Chinese.

“Thank you,” the general nodded. He turned to Lily, “It’s time to take you back to Pit One,” he said. They took to walking through the tunnels back to Pit One.

When they finally got back to Pit One, Lily got ready to take off the general outfit; the general stopped her. “It is yours to keep now.” Then, for the first time ever, the general smiled. He indicated to the arrows still stuck on the wall above them. “You can keep some of those arrows too,” he told her. “But we better get you out of here first.” Like a young boy, the general grinned at Lily mischievously. Then, he whistled to the army. Fifteen men came to the general and saluted. “Stand on each other’s shoulders,” he ordered. The soldiers looked surprised, but they obeyed the command. Finally, the general climbed up to the very top. “You come too,” the general told Lily. As shocked as the soldiers had been, Lily climbed to the top of the living tower. Then she reluctantly jumped onto the platform where she had been

before she toppled into the pit. "Zai jian MeiLan, goodbye Lily. I hope to see you again," the general said.

"Yes, I hope to see you again as well. Zai jian," Lily said.

"By the way, my name is Zhou Tai Heng,"

"Okay, thank you so much for everything,"

"Zai jian, MeiLan,"

"Zai jian, Zhou Tai Heng,"

After the museum opened in the morning, Lily found her parents and the family rejoiced. They went back to their hotel, and Lily went to bed.

Fifteen years later....

Lily Qin walked through the doors of the Terracotta Army Museum for work. She worked as an archeologist for the museum. She checked her watch, it was six forty-five P.M. Just in time, Lily thought. She had offered to lock the museum doors that day. First, she locked the doors that led to Pits Two and Three. Then, she quietly slipped into Pit One and locked the door behind her. She reached into her bag and pulled out her terracotta general outfit and slipped it on. It still fit! Then, clutching the metal arrows from fifteen years ago, she jumped into the pit. She landed on the hard ground and fainted.

When she came to, she thought she saw four warriors standing over her. But this time, she knew that it was not a hallucination. Instead, she got up and looked for the familiar face of the general she had met so long ago. Then, she saw him. "Tai Heng?"

"Lily? Is that really you?"

"Yes, it is. I haven't seen you in so long!" She exclaimed. Then, she turned to the archers. "I think some of these belong to you," She told them.

Reaching into her bag, she gave them some of the arrows. Pleased, the archers murmured words of thanks and hurried off to sharpen the arrow heads. Then Lily turned to the general. "So, do you mind showing me around?" She asked.

The general smiled. "I don't mind at all," he replied.

A Trip to Remember

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An endless amount of stars engulfed the dark night sky as I stepped out of the foul-smelling vehicle. At first, the haziness of the airport made me question the quality of my eyesight, and made the the large establishment look as though an enormous gray cloud sat on the ground before us. As my eyes adjusted, I saw it in all of its grandeur. We stumbled out of the rental car and approached the crystal clear automatic doorways. The sudden sounds of the revving of the shuttle buses and the vibrations of the escalating planes startled me. Mesmerized by the hum of frantic first-time travelers and the repetitive announcements over the speakers echoing in different languages, we strolled into BWIA. My family and I squinted at the sight of the bright lights for the first time in several hours. Although we were going halfway across the globe for a month, I think it's safe to say that we over packed. The process that we had to go through in order to get to our gate was long and thorough. The security check was meticulous, and the length of the lines we had to wait in were appalling. After a long and tedious process throughout the airport, we finally made it to our gate and collapsed in some uncomfortable chairs, desperate for sleep. Finally, after three hours of waiting for our flight, our boarding groups were called, and I had to say goodbye to my country for a month. Pondering how I was going to adjust to the land of my ancestors, I approached the gateway, luggage in hand.

Several months earlier...

"We're going to Vietnam for the summer for your grandmother's birthday," my dad had blurted out as we were contently enjoying our dinner.

"Wait, what?" my brother mumbled through a mouthful of rice. Sometimes I wonder how I am related to such an incompetent creature such as himself.

"V-Vietnam?" I stuttered, "Isn't there war there or something?" I asked, suddenly regretting what I said, realizing the utter stupidity of my question.

"No," my father protested calmly, "There's just something wrong with their government, that's all."

"It's a one-party communist state," my brother explained slowly, as if I didn't know the first thing about Vietnam.

Knowing that they were withholding information due to the fact that I was only nine years old, I simply sat there, accepting the little information I was told. I knew that if they had told me the truth about Vietnam, I wouldn't have understood it anyway, so I remained content with the fact that my family was conveniently leaving me out of the "complicated" conversation.

When we got on the airplane, we passed sleeping men and women, musically-mesmerized teenagers, and four wailing babies before we reached our seats. I recall looking out the window, contemplating what this trip was going to be like. I was in the middle of daydreaming about the new culture and traditions, hoping that Vietnam wasn't as unsanitary as my brother made it out to be, when my dad tapped my brother and I on the shoulder, prepared to explain our long chain of flights.

The next few flights were just as tedious as the first. It seemed as though each flight was longer than the one before. The hum of the plane and the sobbing of the nearby infants interrupting the peaceful silence every five minutes was sheer torture. By the time we finally got to the Vietnam airport in Saigon, my sleep schedule had been more complex than ever. The time difference between the United States and Vietnam was about twelve hours, so whenever it was 4:00pm in the US, it was 4:00am in Vietnam. We got off the plane, relieved that the jetlag was over. After we got through baggage claim, we left the airport in the evening.

I peered through the crowds and looked for a familiar face, which I soon realized was hopeless, given the fact that I hadn't seen any of my relatives in several years. Although I had initially given up, I recall looking at a group of clustered people, waving at us endearingly. I wondered who they were, or if we knew them. That was when I saw an old woman who was with them, looking directly into my eyes. She looked awfully familiar. That's when it clicked. I would recognize that caring and loving appearance anywhere. That old woman was my grandma, those kids were my cousins, and that was my family.

The car ride from the airport to my grandmother's house was nothing short of confusing. Don't get me wrong, I can speak fluent Vietnamese, but you can't blame me for putting in English words to fill in the gaps every now and then. I was worried that my grandma or one of my cousins would ask me a question that I didn't understand. The constant back and forth conversation going on between everyone in the car was mind-boggling; my Vietnamese was not that strong to keep up. Although the car ride was awkward, I felt even worse for my brother. We were a big family, so we had to take two cars. Me, my dad, my mom, a few of my cousins, and my grandmother were stuffed into one taxi, whereas my uncles, aunts, and the remainder of my cousins were cramped into another taxi, along with my brother, hopeless and desperate for a translator.

The families on both my mom and dad's sides are immense. My mom's mom gave birth to five kids, who are now my uncles and aunts. They consisted of 4 girls, and one boy-my Uncle Thi. Uncle Thi currently lives separately from us in America, and I couldn't really blame him. If I had grown up the only girl with four brothers, I would want to get as far away from them as quickly as I could, too. My mom and my aunts stayed together, agreeing to stay in Maryland. Coming to America, my mom and her family of seven only came to the US with a very small amount of money. They had to stay in a church at first before they could get back up on their feet. Five adults in their mid-20s were forced to cram into one room. They couldn't afford beds, so they all had to sleep on the floor. My grandparents then got in touch with some old friends who were staying in Binghamton, New York at the time. The family agreed to let them stay with them for a while. Finally, my mom, my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles had enough money to rent one house. Eventually, each sister married and had two kids each. That's how I got blessed with all of my cousins on my mother's side. Each family bought their own houses, leaving the old house where we all stayed to my family.

When it comes to my dad's side of the family, I don't know as much. All I know is that they are a family that is a lot bigger than my mom's, and in some way, they have all managed to live in one house! I have more uncles and aunts on my dad's side than I can count, let alone remember the names of. Vietnam is small, with a big population, so there isn't much room to build nice houses. Each house was clustered with the next and since space was an issue, the "brilliant" architects of Vietnam resorted to height to make up for the scarce space. This was a big mistake. I don't think I had ever been to a house with that many stairs. We had to push through five flights of stairs, just to get from the door to our room, not to mention the additional seven flights of stairs we had to take to get to the balcony. I'm assuming that's why I lost some weight over that trip.

When we arrived at the house, I stepped out of the suffocating taxi and breathed in the smoky and rainy smell that I remembered from several years ago. The taxi driver and my dad unloaded the luggage as we waited for the second taxi to arrive. I gazed up in wonder at the sheer height of my grandmother's house. When I realized that I would have to lug my packed and hefty

luggage up at least half of those stairs, I instantaneously dreaded the upcoming workout. The second taxi arrived and my grandma retrieved her keys and unlocked the chains to the sliding doors. All of the chains and restraints on the doors of the houses around us as well really made me start to question my safety for the first time.

As soon as my grandmother unlocked the massive lock that was chained to the door, the family came flooding out. I was overwhelmed by the amount of people who could fit on one floor of a house as skinny as this one. There was kissing, hugging, and a whole lot of cheek-pinching. I made out a few words of what they were saying. Most exclaimed of how tall my brother and I were. The others gushed and offered us foods and drinks I had never heard of, when what I really wanted was to rid myself of the putrid airport smell that we all reeked of and go to bed. When the blur of people started clearing up, I saw some familiar faces; it was remarkable how much everyone had changed in just three years. It made me feel slightly disconnected from my Vietnamese family.

We were led up the stairs as my brother and I gazed around the cramped kitchen, recognizing things one by one. Finally, we made it to our room where I collapsed on the mattress. I scanned the room, seeing ants crawl up and down the walls and floor. The scent of decayed Vietnamese fruits filled the room. The heat was paralyzing. I thought of just how we were going to adjust to this new lifestyle for two months and wondered, how in the world did we go through this before? My cousin took us on a tour, which depleted all the energy that I had left. Finally, we reached the top floor. I saw an altar with several pictures on it. I couldn't recognize any of the people except one. A picture of my grandfather was placed on top and stood out from all of the others. It was the same picture on the altar that we had back home. The picture alone reminded me of why I was here. Life was too short. Suddenly all of my worries flourished away, and all I could think of was my grandfather, and how he would want me to know my Vietnamese family and reconnect with my Vietnamese roots.

The next morning, my cousin suggested that she take me out to see the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. My parents agreed, and reluctantly, so did I. It was hard leaving our air-conditioned room, but I knew that I would have to leave the house at some time. My spirits lifted at the sight of a motorcycle. The majority of Vietnam's population owned motorcycles, while very lucky and selective few owned cars. Fortunately, my grandmother was not one of those people. We got on the motorcycle and I suddenly remembered riding the same one years before, when we last visited Vietnam. We took off and I realized that the wind in my hair and the rush of the blood through my veins was exactly what I needed. We stopped by a few markets and I bought a few Vietnamese "delicacies" that I had never heard of, nor had any interest in trying. I bought them out of common courtesy for the poor people who were shoving their food in my face to buy. Little did I know that if others saw me purchasing other people's products, that they would realize that I am a tourist and just get more aggressive. It seemed like everywhere we went, people were trying to sell us something. Being the overly sympathetic person that I am, I was lucky to have my cousin Bo with me, otherwise I would've bought just about everything each poor vendor was shoving in my face. There's something about Vietnamese people's eyes that you just can't help but feel sorry for. I bet they use that to their advantage, especially when they see a confused tourist like me.

We visited some of my grandmother's friends. I saw the unfortunate way they lived. I understood most of what people were saying to me, but Bo was there anyway to translate. Hearing about what some people had to go through brought tears to my eyes. We visited this one woman, living all by herself. She said that her daughter died of a horrible disease, and her husband had left her. She used to live with her her parents as well, but her mom was taken from her during the war, and her father died fighting for his country. The sorrow that I had felt for her was none that I had ever felt before. We visited others, whose stories were just as heartbreaking. As we left the last house, I saw an old man, begging for spare change. I probably gave more than I should've, but I couldn't help myself. Later, we passed a little boy selling bread. Bo told me that he always sold bread on Tuesdays.

"Where does he get the bread?" I had asked her.

"He steals it from the bakery around the corner," Bo mumbled quietly.

I wanted to buy some. I wanted to buy all of the bread that that boy had and give him all of the money in my wallet. I tried, but Bo stopped me.

"He steals," she whispered sympathetically, looking over at the poor kid.

I suddenly realized that I had on my watch, purse, necklace, and bracelet, all of which I would rather not have to replace. For some unknown reason, I suddenly convinced myself to try the delicacy that we had bought. I stared at the oddly shaped fruit a little bit longer than I should've before I had taken a bite. It turned out to be delicious. I was convinced that I was being unreasonable and that I should be open to this new culture that, in hindsight, is my culture. Walking down the river, I saw how polluted and contaminated the water was. I looked past the beach and saw children bathing in the filthy water. Some women were washing and drying their clothes on rocks, and some were getting drinking water or catching fish for their families. Gee, I thought, how do people live like this?

When we arrived back at my grandmother's house, I came to the realization that I had gained a whole new perspective on this country. With my new and thriving interest, I came to my mom and asked her if she would tell me the story she had promised to tell me about how they came to America. We walked up to our room, sat on the mattress, and she began her story.

My grandfather fought in the Vietnam war. Their side lost, resulting in his captivity. They let him out after several years for good behavior. He made the decision that he and the family were to come to America because he felt that that was where his children needed to be in order to become successful. My mother, my grandparents, my aunts, and my uncle knew very little English. In order to immigrate, they had to sell everything they could in order to cover the costs, including their home. In addition, they had to get a loan from a church that was sponsoring them in the US. They stayed with some distant relatives in Saigon so that they could have a place to stay while they went on an interview that they had to pass in order to get through immigration. My mom couldn't get into, let alone afford, college. They had to go from Thailand, to Japan, to San Francisco, to Washington D.C., and lastly, to Binghamton, New York. They also wanted to travel to the US because my grandfather was once a prisoner of the Vietnam war and there was a program in the United States called the HO which admitted Vietnamese refugees like my grandfather.

My father had to immigrate separately from my mother. He traveled by water and was held captive by marauders, but escaped when they weren't paying attention. He had suffered starvation, beatings, and torture. The amount of struggles that my parents and their families had to go through to get to where they are now are endless. Fortunately, my parents are both successful to this day. They both graduated from college and now have full-time jobs. They went through so much to ensure that my brother and I have stable and successful lives, superior to theirs. They made sure that we didn't have to live the way they did, while still connecting us with our cultures and traditions. Family is an important aspect of Vietnamese culture, which is something that I am truly grateful for. Before my mom could finish wrapping up her story, I closed my eyes, reflected on what my life would've been like had my parents not chosen to immigrate, and fell asleep.

The diversity of my Vietnamese culture is one of the many reasons why I have such great pride in it. The traditions that we participate in inspire most of my ambitions today. For example, we celebrate Vietnamese new year. One of the traditions that we do on such a celebratory holiday is that the adults give each child a portion of money and grants them an exceptional new year.

We have a large family gathering in which each guest is expected to bring food of their choice to add to the meal. We participate in games, listen to traditional Vietnamese music, and just enjoy the overall company of each other. My culture plays a big part in my academic success. Not only that, but I most likely wouldn't mentally be the person that I am to this day. My culture shapes my identity, and who I really am as a person.

The next two months went by in a blur. Grandma's birthday was lively, yet a bit overwhelming. I couldn't tell whether or not the vast number of people who attended her banquet were even invited. I completely underestimated the number of acquaintances my grandmother had. Apparently, I was related to several of the guests; I just didn't know it at the time. Just when I thought my family couldn't have gotten any bigger, we visited more relatives in Saigon, Hue, and other places I can't remember how to pronounce, let alone spell. I was fascinated by the culture and individuality of Vietnam. I saw the way people lived and listened to what they had been through. Some lost their homes, some lost their families, and some had lost both. Spending time with my cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandmother had been one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. My brother and I were sitting in our room playing a Vietnamese card game with our cousins, when my dad walked into the room and said the five words that I had been dreading for the past two months.

"It's time to go home," he admitted dejectedly. I unwillingly accepted the fact that it was time to say goodbye to this beautiful country. I found it oddly ironic that I forethought that the hardest part of this trip would be settling in, when in reality, the hardest part were the goodbyes.

In retrospect, I now perceive that I shouldn't have judged Vietnam based on irrational and unfounded rumors with such haste. I realize that my pessimistic assumptions of the beautiful, inspiring, and tranquil country that is Vietnam were illogical and got the best of me. Traveling to that breathtaking country helped me to better appreciate the fortunate lifestyle that I lead. I was endowed with a roof over my head, food on my table, and a loving family. That trip taught me to never take things for granted. This avaricious generation should realize that there are many people in third world countries who aren't as fortunate. Those who are asking for expensive commodities should learn to grasp the fact that, unfortunately, there are people who can't even afford to have the education needed to understand how to use those luxurious, and frankly unnecessary, items. The trivial adolescent dilemmas that my peers and I encounter and complain about everyday are nothing compared to the struggles that people in countries like Vietnam constantly experience. Hearing those unfortunate stories from those inconsolable people made me realize the importance of family. We should learn to better appreciate what we have, for there are many who have gone through and suffered much worse. I am eternally in debt to my parents for blessing me with this incredible life. Visiting Vietnam, I never would've expected for the people to have inspired me the way that they had with such courage, strength, and love. Vietnam may seem like a penniless and unkempt country to some, but not so deeply under the surface is a country that has suffered countless tragedies, and yet still has a heart of gold.

The Long Arduous Mountain Path

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We walked along the narrow mountain path as we hiked up the mountain. The name was told to me a multitude of times, but I never bothered remembering the long wordy Chinese name that undoubtedly came with some long wordy Chinese story of which the moral would always lead to another long wordy lecture about obedience and gratitude from my mother or father. Chinese names were like that. My mother and my 17 year old cousin/brother (curses be upon his easily entertained mind) were gazing upon the mountain scene of which they insisted was beautiful, but I, with my higher standards of entertainment, would not be so easily amused. Thus, it became that I walked along the haphazard mountain road with the wicked mountain winds biting into my skin and the sadistic mountain sun scorching my head and neck, with nothing but my own bitter thoughts, my loaded backpack, and my empty water bottle for company. All the while, my parents and my cousin/brother (curses be upon his easily manipulated spirit), tried to cajole me into enjoying the mountain, and when I tried to plead my case, they simply labeled me a weak-willed cynic. The ridiculousness of the situation did not escape me, although it seems to have avoided my fellow hikers quite easily.

Eventually, after a period of time that seemed so long it could have been no less than an aeon, my cousin/brother (curses be upon his tongue of silver) managed to beguile my mother and father into resting at one of the designated resting areas, the last two of which, much to my displeasure, we skipped. He then (curses be upon his almost military water rationing ability) took out his water, of which I had none, and drank it. My hatred of him would have grown ten-fold in that single moment, had I had the ability to hold that much hatred in my heart. He then offered me some water, but I, a proud, dignified, stately man, would not so easily fall to the clever ploys of my companion. Instead, I declined, as any respectable man would have done. He shrugged. "Okay, I just thought you were thirsty." He jibed at me smugly. He then drank again, and I would have nobly knocked the water out of his hands with dignity and pride... had my parents not been a few feet away.

After my second greatest enemy, The Sun, sank beneath the horizon, I was confronted by a new nemesis: Darkness. My staunchest ally in these times, The Moon, could do no more than allow me to see the ghost of an outline of the path. Eventually even my hardened father, who was a mathematician, but fancied himself as a hunter, engineer, technician, farmer, hiker, and really just whatever suits him at any given moment, decided that we needed to stop soon. He consulted his map, and decided to guide us away from the so-dubbed scenic (and painful) route to the main route, where we would stay at the inn that roughly translated to "The Great Mountain Inn," a creative name if I ever saw one. The trip was supposedly easy, and my overconfident father began to guide us on a trip that he insisted would only require a measly 20 minutes.

An hour later, we could still be seen with flashlights in our hands, trying in vain to determine even our own position, much less that of the inn. I myself asked many times why we were even moving in the first place. Surely it would be easier to locate a stationary object

rather than a moving one. The argument of finding landmarks was spoken, but when my counterargument about how there were no landmarks anywhere near the inn was retorted and considered, that rational was quickly dismissed. My latter remarks were ignored with extreme prejudice, until I could take no more of this aimless wandering. "Why," I questioned, shivering from the cold of the mountain air, "are we still wandering aimlessly while looking for ourselves?"

"Not aimlessly," My father replied with completely unjustified confidence, "I am certain that we are moving towards the inn!"

"No." My mother protested, annoyance almost seeming to emanate off of her, "The inn is most definitely that way!"

"Ridiculous." My cousin/brother squawked, his naturally shrill voice being made even more so by the wind, "I know for a fact that we passed that intersection 10 minutes ago. Therefore, the inn should be there."

"Ha," My father barked, "that is not true. We passed this intersection 10 minutes ago. We are here on the map, meaning that the inn is there."

"Enough! For a long time we have been arguing! We need to make a decision!" I shouted, trying to make some order of the chaos that is my family.

"How dare you raise your voice?" My father snapped the tension that had so long been cooped up suddenly being levied unjustly at me. "When I was a child, I always respected my father's experience in navigating the mountains and forests." I rubbed my eyes to hide the eye roll.

"I trusted in his experience and he got us through just fine." I struggled to not mention all the times he's criticized his dad for being abusive to justify own actions.

"Never mind that I was raised on a farm, because all people are the same." I rubbed my eyes again.

"Your attitude is just a symbol of your disrespect towards your mother and me. There was only once when I doubted him, and that was when..." I eventually tuned out. My father had gone again on one of his infamous tangents. I knew that he would run out of anger by the time he finished. It seems that attempts to bring order can also lead to long wordy lectures about obedience and gratitude from my mother or father. Go figure.

Eventually, we came upon an inn. Nowhere near "The Great Mountain Inn", we instead stumbled upon "The Gorgeous Scenic Mountain Inn", which was far less comfortable than our originally intended location, but equally cliché nonetheless. At that point, tensions were high, and we finally snapped in the hotel rooms. "I can't believe you!" I rightly shouted, "You lead us on a trail to this inn 2 kilometers away from the inn that was our goal!"

"I got us to a safe hotel eventually, didn't I?" My father challenged, seemingly proud of his mistakes.

"Our son is right." My mother affirmed, "We could have been lost."

My father bit his lip, his annoyance showing. "We're safe." He stressed, "What else do you want from me?"

"We might not have been safe!" My mother answered, biting her own lip.

The argument progressed into a 3 way shouting match with it ending the way our arguments usually do. With my parents ganging up and blaming everything on me. Somehow, amidst all the shouting, they managed to agree that I for some reason should not have yelling. Eventually my mother, red-faced and enraged, stood up. Abandoning all sense of justification, if it existed in the first place, my mother started shouting "LEAVE!" repeated, somehow managing to get louder with every repeat. Deciding not to bother with the usual sarcastic "Where?" I instead took it literally and stormed out. The man in the room next to us levied a glare before returning to his own room, most likely afraid that I would yell at him too. I walked down to the public showers, only to meet my cousin/brother coming back. He took one glance at my face, and told me to come have a talk. I resisted at first, but found that option more appealing than taking a shower with no shampoo or body wash.

He took me down to the commons room/bar and sat down at one of the tables. In order to appease the guard-like manager, we both bought some food, although didn't eat it, as this place had a bad reputation of causing bad stomachaches. My mind briefly touched upon the fact that The Great Mountain Inn supposedly had excellent food before turning my attention to my cousin/brother. I was too tired from the argument to curse him mentally.

"So what happened with you and your parents?" My cousin/brother asked bluntly, something that I could appreciate.

"They have no an ounce of respect for my own formed opinions." I stated quite factually, "My mom and dad do not listen to what my opinions are." To prevent the obvious denial that was swiftly working it's way up my cousin/brother's slimy throat, I recounted my 'conversation' that I had not 5 minutes ago. My cousin/brother stared for a moment before bursting into a laughter that seemed far too close to my own.

"Perhaps, but better that than no conversation at all." My cousin/brother told me with a serious but still smiling expression that I hadn't seen before on his normally dull face. "After all, that's how I was raised." He looked at me intently with what seemed to be pity mixed with amusement. "Your parents usually say they do what they do out of love, correct?" I nodded, listening intently. "I have never believed that in the middle of an argument, when they are red-faced and huffing, that love ever crosses their mind." A smile grazed my lips at that statement. "But," He started, "I honestly believe that they at least came into the argument with good intentions. That's at least something. My parents never had good intentions." He chuckled, standing up. "Treat your parents just a little better. You don't want to be like me now do you? After all, I am a horrible person." He raised his arms to the sides, grinning while looking shockingly somber still. I pondered his words for a minute, admiring the humility that was far too rare, before asking for his showering supplies, and walking into the showers to think some more. Those few words I remembered with the most clarity, even after I all but forgot the rigors of climbing this mountain. In the showers, I smiled, before cursing my cousin/brothers snake-like persuasiveness and returning with him to my now sleeping parents.

In the morning we packed up and left at 7:50, finding out almost too late that the devious hotel owners charge for a new day at 8:00 A.M. We scaled down the mountain, with my mother decreeing that the top was far too dangerous with too little to see. My cousin/brother and I readily agreed, before my distraught father realized he was outnumbered and decided to go down himself... which had nothing to do with our opinions, of course.

We decided to take the gondola lift back down to the ground, which was built just for that purpose. The view from above, as my mother had so enthusiastically claimed before, was somewhat beautiful, although still not as amusing as simply daydreaming. The ride had 7 stops, and took all of 2 hours before we got to the faster transport, which took us most of the way down. The rest of the afternoon was spent eating the local food and drinking the local tea, which, even to my heavily critical mind, was delicious. Who knew tea could have edible flakes instead of leaves in it, and that it would be so sweet. We immediately bought 3 canisters to drink and 2 more to give as presents before spending the rest of the day having some simple, good fun with my cousin/brother, finally departing and heading back to Shanghai. My cousin/brother's long wordy name was the only one I still knew when I finally came back to America, being the only one who I truly remembered, and the only one worth remembering.