

New Fiction from Mike McLaughlin: “What Could They Take from Him?”

After four months of not getting shot, not stepping on a mine, not taking a fragment to the neck or through the eye, Pat Dolan didn't think about his remaining time in country. At the firebase, men talked about it constantly, as if would improve their odds. He never bothered. He had arrived on a day in July, 1971. On another in July, 1972, he would leave. Until then, every moment he survived was the only one that mattered.

Then, miraculously, the Army dusted off his change of MOS request and kicked him down to Saigon. As shake-ups went, it was a good one. It got better on realizing he had a remarkably fair boss. For a chief warrant officer on his second war, Pulaski was a hard-ass editor only when necessary. Otherwise, he assigned work to his men, then stepped aside and let them do it.

Four weeks slipped away as Dolan learned his role as the Army's newest journalist. Learning the maps. Learning the cities and provinces. Learning the names, places and policies that defined the war – and, hardest of all, the language.

His crash course in Vietnamese was paying off, though, thanks to one ARVN lieutenant born in San Francisco. Likewise for three civilian journalists who'd covered Southeast Asia for decades. In a massive notebook he added words, phrases and phonetics, along with musical notes to help say them properly in a language where tones were everything.

After a month of intrepid news reporting, his latest piece was three hundred gripping words about an American vitamin pill now in use by ARVN troops. Easy to write, palatable for the taxpayers, boring as hell.

There would be harder work, of course, in harder places – eventually. Already weary at the thought, Dolan crossed the newsroom and dropped his article in the box by Pulaski’s door.

“I’m leaving,” he announced.

“Tôi đang rời đi.”

No one looked up. Half the men in the room, military and civilian, were on deadlines. Hammering away on typewriters, talking on phones, gathering around radios and televisions. To them he was invisible.

At the door he stopped.

“‘Stairs,’” he declared.

“‘C□u thang.’”

“‘I am going down the stairs.’”

“Tôi đang đi . . .”

He frowned.

“Tôi đang đi . . .”

The rest of it slipped away.

“Shit,” he concluded, then started down.

“Phân.”

* * *

On Tu Do street he stopped to buy Newsweek and The Saigon Register. At work he had access to all the news he wanted, but rarely followed it unless his assignments required it. The irony was rich.

The sun was low now, the air cooler. Looking for a place to sit, he chose a tea shop with a raised terrace. He went

through a set of green French doors and up seven steps into a vibrant yellow room filled with shelves and tables. Every surface was covered with jars of tea.

An older woman in a blue silk gown appeared, then gestured around the room and invited him to choose. Awed, Dolan could not.

“Is surprise, yes?” she laughed. “Very good! I will make bring to you – yes?”

“*Cảm ơn dì,*” Dolan replied, trying not to stammer. “*Bạn – Bạn tốt với tôi.*”

Thank you, aunt. You – You are kind to me.

Her smile broadened.

“*Cảm ơn cháu tra! Không có chi!*”

Thank you, nephew! You are welcome!

Dolan nodded, feeling foolish yet pleased.

From behind him another woman arrived, younger than the hostess and dressed more formally. With her pink blouse and tan skirt, she could have just come from a bank or a law office. One of thousands of professional women, done for the day.

Dolan bowed.

“*Xin chào, dì.*”

Hello, aunt.

To his surprise, the woman was delighted.

“*Xin chào, cháu trai!*”

Hello, nephew!

Encouraged, he continued.

“Qu□ là một – ”

He hesitated, then tried again.

“Qu□ là một ngày đẹp trời.”

It is a lovely day.

“Vâng, đúng vậy!” she replied.

Yes, it is!

As the women laughed, Dolan bowed again and went through the door to the terrace. Their voices followed him, cheerful indeed, as if from meeting again after a long time.

The terrace had a slapdash charm. The stonework was cracked, and the wrought iron fence was bent here and there, with rust showing through the peeling white paint. Above it all was a wooden canopy, thick with vines, providing shade so deep Dolan first thought he was entering a cave.

At a table overlooking the street, he had barely sat down when the hostess arrived with a wooden tray. On it were a cup, saucer and teapot made of jade green porcelain. In bowls of cut crystal were milk and sugar. A folded green napkin and silver spoon completed the display.

“I choose for you!” she declared. *“So – you try! You enjoy, yes?”*

Then she poured for him, filling the cup with a liquid the brightest orange he had ever seen.



“Please! You try now! You like, yes?”

Carefully he raised the cup to his lips. Hot but not scalding, the tea was excellent, tasting of oranges and nutmeg.

“Is *trà cam*,” she said proudly. “You have back home?”

“*Tôi – sẽ gặp?*” he replied. *I – will see?*

“Is yes! You enjoy! You want more, you ask!”

She left to sit with her visitor inside the open door. Together they laughed again, as if for an excellent jest, then began to speak earnestly. The walls inside the shop reflected their voices. The women sounded as if they were just behind him.

He set his cup down and studied the Saigon paper. The huge Chữ Hán characters dominated the page, while the accompanying Roman alphabet text struggled to be seen.

“English in Vietnamese,” someone once told him, as if sharing

wisdom hard earned.

Groaning, Dolan opened his notebook and set to work.

“Tại Paris hôm thứ Hai, ngoại trưởng Mỹ Henry Kissinger đã đưa ra một tuyên bố đưa – “

In Paris on Monday, America’s foreign minister Henry Kissinger stated –

That much he understood. No longer secret now, the peace talks were continuing at a snail’s pace. The stunning was becoming the ordinary.

Almost.

On the street the activity continued unabated. The talking, the yelling, the laughing. The vendors and shop owners smoking and haggling. The adults on their bicycles weaving between cars and trucks and grinning teens on Vespas.

Then he heard singing. Looking down, he saw a young nun in bright blue approaching, followed by a dozen girls. No older than ten, each wore a white blouse, blue skirt and scarf. On their feet, to Dolan’s amazement, were penny loafers. Standard-issue footwear for Catholic girls worldwide.

They were singing about a dancing puppy, or so he thought. As they marched past they looked up at him and waved. A grin spreading across his face, he waved back.

“Xin chào!” he called out. *“Cảm ơn bạn!”*

Hello! Thank you!

Their singing became greetings.

“Chào ngài! Chào ngài!”

Hello, mister! Hello, mister!

Dolan didn't need the book for this.

"*Chúa phù hộ bạn!*" he added. "*Chúa phù hộ bạn!*"

God bless you! God bless you!

Merrily the nun and the girls blessed him back.

He turned to see if the women were watching, too, but as he did they quickly looked away.

Unsettled, Dolan watched the chorus until they vanished.

Behind him the conversation resumed.

In French.

"He must not hear," the younger woman said.

"No," the hostess agreed. "Perhaps he is smarter than he appears."

"True. His accent is appalling, but that may be his purpose. To deceive."

"Foolish boy. He has everything."

"As do they all."

"So typical. *Expecting* everything. Believing they are *worthy* of it all."

Dolan caught every word. His high school French had been good. At sixteen he met a college girl from Montreal who made him better. Getting him up to speed as she tore off his clothes.

After a moment, the younger woman continued.

"The heart of the village was gone."

"But not all?"

"No," she said flatly. "But then they dropped their demonic

fuel. Their fire like liquid.”

“Yes. Such an evil thing.”

“It crushes me to think of it.”

“And this was before the wedding of your niece?”

“Oh, thank the heavens, no. By then she and her husband had moved to Hoi An. They were expecting their first child.”

“A girl?”

“A boy. Recently we celebrated his birthday. Now he is three. A most happy boy, with the eyes of his mother. We are blessed.”

“Every child is a blessing.”

Then they were quiet again.

Slowly, Dolan opened the Newsweek.

President Nixon last week signed into law the Twenty-Sixth –

The words were difficult to follow. He shook his head then tried again.

“The cadre had fled by then,” she went on. “There were a dozen of them. No more.”

“And you knew them?”

“Some, but not all. Two were little more than boys. The youngest was fourteen. They had often been with us. So sad. They missed their mothers terribly.”

“Yes,” said the older woman quietly. “It wounds the heart.”

“Another man was familiar. He would stay the night with our neighbor. Perhaps the others were comrades of those who visited in the past.”

“Perhaps.”

“Most were in black, as is the custom. Two were in green. The eldest of them was most senior, although this was not apparent at first. His accent suggested he had lived in China. Perhaps he was born there. He seemed a decent man. He was in authority, yet he was possessed of – of a gentleness, one might say. He was scholarly, yet deferential, as if he were a teacher, pleased with his students.”

“And, that day, they simply appeared among you?”

“Yes. I think they came from the west but who can say. It was as if they sprang from the air. They demanded entrance to our homes. They said the Americans were coming, and it was their duty to protect us – and ours to help them.”

“Yes,” the hostess sighed.

“*Protect*. How absurd. I remember my mother laughed. Laughed! Others begged the men to flee. Saying they could do nothing for us now. That their presence would only enrage the imperialists. Instead, they shouted curses at us. They shook their fingers at us and called us weak. Faithless. Then they were in our homes, placing themselves at our windows and doors, looking to the west.”

The woman paused, reflecting as she stirred her tea, the spoon clinking against the rim.

Dolan winced at the sound.

This week marks a year since the completion of Egypt's Aswan High Dam, an epic –

“Then they began firing toward the fields. Most of the Americans were keeping themselves low, but not all. One of them fell. I remember another hurried to help him, then that one fell, too.”

Dolan shut his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"And then they were began shooting at us. I could hear their bullets striking our homes, passing through walls, shattering glass. Then the cadre fled, and as they ran they pledged to return."

She stopped again, then took out a cigarette and lit it.

Controversy continues over the death of Jim Morrison in –

"'Return,'" she snarled. "These who declared themselves men. *Liberators*. Some we had known for years. Now they were abandoning us. Running away down the path to the east."

Dolan kept going. He hated The Doors.

"By then the Americans were using heavier weapons. Machine guns greater than those the soldiers carried. More bullets were striking our homes. Our animal pens. Our pigs, our oxen. They screamed as they fell."

Dolan swallowed hard, seeing it all.

"But you did not," said the elder.

"No. Often I wonder why this was so. I knew of such things, of course."

"Yes."

"Now they were happening to *us*."

"Yes."

"Then we ran, too. We simply lifted our children, and then we ran. In that moment I felt I was floating. Bounding in huge leaps, as if flying. I had never known anything like it."

In New York, United Nations Secretary-General U Thant announced –

“Then we heard their planes. They were low. I remember that. Approaching with a roar that shook the earth.”

The silence deepened.

Dolan watched the pastel-clad people on the street. The ice cone vendor and the eager children waiting their turns. The optimistic grandfather shuffling along, leaning on his cane, balancing a television on his shoulder.

He flipped the magazine over. On the back was a gorgeous couple, leaning against a Mustang convertible, gazing into a Malibu sunset.

“Our shrine was so lovely. It was old when my grandmother was a child. Her own grandfather had fashioned it with folding panels. He painted them a shade of gold that glowed. On clear days it was as though the sun had entered our home. Between them were two shelves. On the first were the copper bowls for flowers, and between them were the candle holders.”

She paused again.

“And on the second?” prodded the other gently.

“Many boxes. Some were the size of a sewing basket. Others were small enough to fit in one’s palm. My grandmother had built them from mahogany. She was most skilled.”

“The women in our family have always had such talents.”

“I remember how bright they were,” the younger woman sighed. “With a brush she would apply a lacquer to make each surface a mirror. Together in the candlelight, they shone with wondrous harmony.”

“And what did you keep in them?”

“Our treasures.”

“Yes.”

"Our memories."

"Yes."

"In one were petals of a flower. My mother picked them when she was a girl. She cherished them so. In another was a lock of my father's hair, kept from the day of his birth."

In the cooling shade, Dolan wiped sweat from his forehead.

"The lid of another was glass, with a photograph beneath. A portrait of my grand aunt and uncle for their wedding day. They had travelled to a studio in Phuy Tan to sit for it."

"To sit, as one would for a painting?"

"Oh, yes. It was much the same. Cameras were quite different then. One had to sit quietly, patiently. One could not move or the image would be unclear. My grand-aunt told me they sat still as statues."

The woman laughed dryly.

"She smiled throughout, yet her husband appeared very serious. She would tease him about this, as he was truly lighthearted. Often it was *she* who was formal in manner. That each bore the look of the other greatly amused our family."

Dolan felt lightheaded.

"So many memories. So much life."

The printed words were nothing.

"It grieves me so, to know that it is gone."

The sun had set.

Mechanically, Dolan took a piastre from his wallet and dropped it on the table, then two more.

"They took everything," she said, her voice nearly a whisper.

Dolan froze, feeling their gaze on his back.

“Look at him,” said the hostess coldly. “This man. This boy.”

The money was more than enough.

“So healthy,” the other said bitterly.

It was too much.

“So prosperous. I wonder – what does *he* have to lose? What could they take from *him*?”

Dolan stood up.

He meant to feign ignorance.

To fold his papers then return the tray to the hostess.

To thank her.

Cám ơn dì.

To wish them both good night.

Chúc ngủ ngon.

He climbed over the railing instead.

And then he jumped to the street.

And then he walked away.

It was the only way out.