New Nonfiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: The Quiet Season

PHỐ HÀNG BẠC
SINCE 1994
LOAN THỦY
BOOKING OFFICE
MONEY EXCHANGE
SIM CARD 4G
SPA
MASSAGE
RESTAURANT & DRINKS
TOUR BOOKING
MONEY EXCHA
HA LONG BAY
NINH BINH

Part I

1

David E. sits at a picnic table across from me at a restaurant/hostel outside of Da Nang. The owner, Hoa Nguyen, a slim, sixty-one-year-old Vietnamese, slouches beside me, his elbows on the table, eyes darting to the street. When he notices surfers sauntering to a beach, he jumps up and waves a hand.

Hey, cold beer right here, man, Hoa shouts.

The surfers pause, check out a sign, *Hoa’s Place: Cold Beer Makes You Happy*, and a few sit down. Hoa hurries to a refrigerator for their drinks. David E. tracks him with his eyes, a smile playing across his broad face.

That Hoa … , he says.

David E.’s full name is David E. Clark. He grew up in Akron, Ohio, and later lived in southern Illinois and the Tampa Bay area of Florida. A recovering alcoholic, everyone knew him as Dave, sometimes as Crazy Dave, in his drinking days. He hasn’t touched booze for more than twenty years and goes by David E. now, he tells me, because no one would have liked him as Dave. I take him at his word, and imagine I would not have wanted to mess with him in those days. He’s a big man, seventy-one, a former Marine. His bare head, shaved by a barber, trickles with sweat. When he speaks, his deep voice sounds as if it’s being raked over coals. However, when we met two days earlier, he shook my hand with a relaxed yet firm grip and I judged him to be a gentle man who’d left his difficult days behind.

In 2011, on his second trip to Vietnam—before he moved here for good in 2013—David E. stayed in hotel up the road from where we’re sitting. He stopped here to eat and met Hoa. Over time, he told Hoa he’d served in Vietnam and was stationed close by at the Marble Mountain Aviation Facility. I can see the mountain in the distance, a tourist attraction now where visitors can trek through underground tunnels once used by the Viet Cong (VC).

When he learned David E. was a Marine, Hoa felt an instant connection. When he was a kid, maybe eight or nine years old, the Marines established a hearts and minds program known as the Combined Action Program (CAP) in Hoa’s village. He ran errands for them:

Hey, Hoa, I need a fucking Coke.

Hey, Hoa, I need a fucking beer.

Hey, Hoa, where the fuck are you?

and he learned, among other things, to cuss like a Marine.

Can you imagine being raised by a bunch of goddamn Marines? David E. asks me and laughs.

After Hoa gets the surfers their beers, he returns to our table.

I was telling Malcolm about the CAP unit, David E. tells him. At that time one bottle of Coke cost twenty Vietnamese dong, remember?

I fucking remember, man.

Less than a penny.

Fucking cheap.

David E. pushes back from the table and reaches for a bamboo water pipe sticking out of a bucket. An etching of a dragon writhes from one end of the pipe to the other. Removing tobacco from his shirt pocket, he fills the bowl, lights it and inhales, and I hear a small storm of water churn within the pipe. David E. raises his head, exhales a plume of white smoke and coughs.

I got to quit this shit, he tells me.

Are you a Marine? Hoa asks me.

He’s a writer, David E. says.

Malkin?

Malcolm.

Weird fucking name, man.

David E. takes another hit off the pipe. When he finishes coughing, he turns to Hoa.

I came here to talk to you about two guys coming to Da Nang, he says, his voice hoarse with smoke. They’re veterans. They want to see Hill 65. They say there was a battle there in ’69. Twenty-third of February. Fifty years ago. They want to commemorate two fallen comrades.

Okay, Hoa says.

I want you to go with me. You know the area.

Fuck, I’m there for you, you know that. I miss the CAP unit, man. Even now. It’s always in my fucking mind.

David E. clears his throat. He doesn’t miss the war. He ducked at the slightest sound his first three months in-country. Next six months, he thought, Fuck it. His last three months, when he knew he was going home, he started ducking again. He returned to the States in 1969, landing at LAX, found the gate for his connecting flight to Ohio, sat in a bar and looked at girls in miniskirts. He was twenty-one. Another guy, maybe thirty, sat near him. He wore a suit and said he worked for a pharmaceutical company. He considered David E., eyeballing his uniform.

Just getting back from Vietnam? he asked.

Yes, David E. said.

How many kids did you kill?

David E. stared at him. If he’d had civilian clothes with him, he would have stripped out of his uniform and blended in among all the other suits waiting for flights. But he didn’t have civilian clothes. What could he say? In combat, he fired his weapon and had no idea who he killed. He had not hesitated to point his M16 in the face of any man, woman, or child. Anyone over the age of eight could be Viet Cong. He never knew. If they feared him, he thought his chances of going home were much better. That’s all he wanted. To go home.

He left the bar. He had been back just three hours after thirteen months in combat.

2

I grew up during the Vietnam War. When I was old enough to be drafted, the war ended, but it was my war was as much as World War II was my parents’ war. I can still see newscasters giving body counts and announcing the draft lottery numbers.

After 9/11, I embedded as a reporter with the 82nd Airborne Division in Kandahar, Afghanistan. In April 2003, I flew to Kandahar for my third embed just one day after the press information officer, Army Cpl. Keith Klue, had lost six Air Force friends. They had flown out of the Kandahar base on a Sunday night to help two children with head and eye injuries in a village near Mazar-e Sarif. Their helicopter crashed close to Ghazni, about 80 miles south of Kabul. Mechanical failure.

Keith had introduced me to many of his friends on base on previous embeds. I tried to recall if I had met anyone from the Air Force but couldn’t. They had a memorial service at Bagram Air Base outside of Kabul for the six just before I arrived. I wrote it up, no more than a brief, a few lines for the wires. Had they died in combat, I would have been allowed to make a story out of it. But they didn’t.

I’d just finished a barbecue and playing volleyball with them, Keith recalled after I put my backpack, vest, and helmet in a corner. I didn’t respond, Keith was a young man, much younger than I, in uniform in a place neither of us had any reason to be. I had more than forty years of living behind me. He had just turned twenty-five. If he died like his buddies, what impressions would he leave? How would he be remembered? For serving his country? For how long would that memory linger and be appreciated?

I didn’t know what to say as he tried to articulate his sadness. To lose someone in a war to mechanical failure raises the bar on incomprehension to stratospheric heights of absurdity that I think left him mute with outrage.

My guess is he wished he had been near Ghazni. Had been there to help his friends no matter how hopeless the situation. Going through the wreckage, gripping their hands in his. Something. Instead he was left alone with his laundry and his loss and me.

3

I tell David E. about my embeds as we stand in his house one morning preparing to leave for Hoa’s Place. The house is at the end of an alley where a sign, Ushi’s House, after David E.’s Vietnamese wife, points the way. They met in April 2013 in a restaurant she owns in Hue. When he first saw her, she was wearing a chartreuse dress, long earrings and a matching watch, and large glasses. They later danced in the street to the Beatles’ “Eight Days a Week,” Ushi’s favorite song.

A year later, they married in a Catholic ceremony while wearing traditional Vietnamese wedding clothes. After renting an apartment, they bought a house near the beach in Da Nang and remodeled it to add some Western comforts. David E. enlarged the kitchen and installed shelves, some of which can be raised and lowered to make them easily accessible. A water filter for the kitchen sink allows them to drink straight from the faucet.

You know, I came here as a young man to die for my country, he said as he mounted a motorcycle that would carry us to Hoa’s place. Now I’ll die here on my own terms.

In 2007, David E. got together with a buddy, a guy named Tommy in Naples, Florida, he’d met thirty years before when David E. was a telephone contractor and had installed Tommy’s phone. Tommy, an Air Force veteran, had deployed to Vietnam in the mid-1960s and wanted to go back. David E. thought, Why not? There were places he’d like to see again, but he didn’t have the scratch to fly halfway around the world. Tommy said he’d cover the cost.

They flew into Ho Chi Minh City—still commonly referred to as Saigon—went through immigration, rounded a corner and walked down a long corridor. David E. felt fine, a little jet-lagged but fine, until he saw Vietnamese in straw hats. Then the humidity hit him and the smell of food and diesel fumes and the noise of people talking, and for a long moment he felt transported back and a fear returned that he’d not experienced in decades. He turned around thinking, I can’t do this.

The moment passed about as soon as it began. Tommy led him outside and they caught a ride to a Hyatt Regency hotel. From their fifteenth-floor room, David E. looked out a window and saw a Kentucky Fried Chicken. You got to be shitting me, he thought. After Saigon, they visited Da Nang and Hills 55 and 65, forward operating bases for the Marines and places where David E. had, at times, been stationed.

He and Tommy returned home after three weeks. In 2011, David E. returned to Vietnam for a year. He climbed Marble Mountain and watched the sunrise. No flares, no artillery, no gunships.

He came back in 2013 to stay. He found peace here. In the U.S., the war tormented him every day and every night, but in Vietnam he saw that the Vietnam he had known was gone; the war was over. With dozens of beachfront hotels, condos, and restaurants, Da Nang had become a mini-Dubai. A bridge in the shape of a yellow dragon crosses the Han River at the Le Dinh Duong/Bach Dang traffic circle. Every Saturday and Sunday night at nine o'clock, the "dragon" breathes fire and water.

David E. had turned twenty-one in Vietnam and vowed not to celebrate one more birthday in a country he called the asshole of the world. Back home, he drank, worked a job four or five years, quit. Something or someone would annoy him and he'd go off. He didn't get fired, just pissed off. He had a stick-it-up-your-ass attitude toward anyone who crossed him. Classic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but he didn't know it then.

What're you going to do? he'd snap. Shave my head and send me to Vietnam? I've already been there.

Now look, I've shaved my head and I'm living in Vietnam.

The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi does not track the number of American veterans living in Vietnam. Some estimates made by the veterans themselves suggest about fifty.

I first heard of American veterans moving to Vietnam from a colleague: reporter and photographer Drew Brown. A veteran of the Gulf War, Drew had lived in Vietnam for three years. He gave me David E.’s name and I reached him through Facebook.

I arrived in Hanoi a little before midnight on February 6, 2019. My hotel stood on a narrow street in the Old Quarter where mildewed colonial buildings erected by the French have been converted into apartments. Laundry hung off balconies and shutters peeling paint. On the street below, the sidewalks teemed with meat and vegetable vendors, and rats scrambled across the pavement before diving into cracks. Motorbikes and bicycles clogged the roads. I saw women in straw hats hauling discarded plastic, and their hats reminded me of the news footage I’d seen as a boy during the war and I thought, I’m in Vietnam. But it was no longer grainy black-and-white film of carnage but a bustling, colorful city that had nothing in common with my memories. The war, called “the American War,” by the Vietnamese, is studied in school, one twenty-year-old staffer at my hotel told me, but no one talks about it. He said he might have had an uncle who fought in the war. He wasn’t sure.

Before I left for Da Nang, I had coffee with Vietnam veteran Paul J. Mooney. Paul, now sixty-nine, served in the Army’s 199th Light Infantry Brigade. A slight man with an eager manner and glasses sliding to the tip of his nose, Paul reminded me of a retired professor. He was, however, an award-winning journalist. Since 1985, he has reported from Burma, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. A year earlier, he moved to Vietnam with his Chinese wife to study the language. He also teaches English to the blind three times a week for two hours for the opportunity to give back to men and women he once fought. He enjoys living in Vietnam, but unlike David E. he doubts he’ll ever feel at peace.

Paul enlisted in the Army in 1968, gung-ho about the war. He prayed for it not to end before he reached Vietnam. His mother lit candles for him every day at the Church of Our Lady of Mercy around the corner from their house in the Bronx.

A trailer library on the 199th’s base held, among other volumes, about fifty books on Vietnam. Paul found those accounts offered a depiction of the war unlike anything he’d heard during basic training. One in particular, David Halberstam’s *The Making of a Quagmire*, offered a blistering examination of American policy in Vietnam. He read it by candlelight.

I read the truth, he said, and it opened my eyes.

However, the Army expected Paul to be a soldier, no matter his changing opinions about the war. He directed artillery and wonders sometimes who he killed. Kids? He saw soldiers put blasting caps in C rations and give them to dogs to blow their mouths off for no reason other than they thought it was funny. At a fire support base, a child picked up an M79 grenade. It blew off his arm. The kid was about six or seven years old maybe.

That was our doing, Paul told me.

He recalled being rocketed in December 1968. He prayed, Dear blessed mother save me I’ll never do a bad thing again, as he crawled for cover.

When he returned home, Paul experienced nightmares. In one dream, the Viet Cong attacked his position and as Paul fired his M16, it melted in his hands. In other dreams, the bullets he fired fell to the ground. He assumes the dreams illustrated his fear of getting killed or maybe a kind of impotency in the face of danger. He’ll leave it to someone else to figure out. Medication for PTSD has prevented further nightmares.

Paul held a number of menial jobs before he chose a journalism career. With the support of Newsweek, he earned a master’s degree in international affairs from Columbia University and a certificate in East Asian studies from the university’s Weatherhead East Asian Institute. He moved to Taiwan and freelanced for Newsweek, Asiaweek, and The Washington Post among other publications.

He especially enjoyed working in China. He faced risks from state authorities who did not want him covering such issues as the AIDS crisis, government abuses in Tibet, and health threats that people faced from exposure to asbestos and heavy metals. Sources called and warned him when the police went looking for him. At those moments, he experienced the sensation he had when he returned from a military patrol. The adrenalin high of almost getting killed. Walking back to base through fields of banana trees ten feet tall. He had survived. He had escaped. As much as he hated the war, he misses that feeling.

In 2015, Paul returned to Vietnam and visited the remains of a fire support base north of Saigon. A row of shops had replaced it, although down a side road he did see an old concrete bunker. Everything looked so different. He experienced a sense of disappointment, as if none of what he and his unit had done mattered. Such a waste.

When he thinks of today’s veterans, he wonders: Who will think of them other than friends and family? Will any trace of them remain after their wars end? Will skyscrapers devour the battlefields where so many died?

He feels a tremendous sadness for the guys who lost their lives in Vietnam. He cries when a Vietnam veteran dies. He has visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial but not often. He looks at the names, thinks of their parents, and feels overwhelmed by sorrow. A soldier who grew up in the Bronx with Paul, Robert Murray, died in the war. His name is among the more than 58,000 etched on the memorial. Robert was a few years older than Paul. A Medal of Honor recipient. He smothered the blast of a grenade with his body, sacrificing his life to protect the soldiers around him. Paul was in Vietnam at the time but news of Robert’s death came in a roundabout way.

Did you hear about Robert? Paul’s mother asked him in a letter.

Paul thought she felt guilty over her relief that he was alive while another mother had lost a son.

He doesn’t share these and other stories of his military service with the Vietnamese. As a foreigner, he does not want to offend. However, sometimes, and without meaning to, he has revealed his veteran status.

He remembered one instance in particular: While he was snapping photos on a bridge with his iPhone in the city of Hoi An, he saw a Vietnamese man with one leg and they started talking.

Have you been here before? the man asked him.

Yes, Paul answered.

The man soon figured out he was a veteran and started yelling at him.

You owe me! he shouted as Paul hurried away, You owe me!

4

Hoa remembers the bleak years that followed the end of the war in 1975. Vietnamese who had befriended Americans burned photographs and destroyed all evidence of their support to avoid being ostracized and placed in reeducation camps. Hoa paid two dollars to leave by boat but the boat never came. He was fucking stuck in Vietnam. Now, he has his own business, a wife, and children. He’s okay living here, he says, but I hear a note of regret in his voice.

He prefers talking about the CAP unit and the Marines who befriended him. He’d get them cigarettes, clean their rifles, throw empty cans in the air for them to shoot. He helped medics by bandaging little cuts. He shows us a photograph of a Marine in tan shorts and a green T-shirt. Hoa stands beside him, a thin boy, bare-chested, ribs showing, grinning.

This guy, Doc Smith, came back in 2010, Hoa says. He wanted to go to the site where Sgt. Flynn was killed.

Hoa can’t think of Flynn’s first name. One afternoon, Hoa saw him staring at a boat floating past the CAP unit on a river near his village. Flynn, he recalls, looked pissed off, probably because he knew he’d have to check it out. Hoa watched Flynn jump in the water holding his rifle as he waded toward the boat. Then he heard a gunshot and saw Flynn drop. No one, it turned out, was in the boat. It had been a decoy to lure a Marine into the water. Nineteen sixty-six, or early 1967, Hoa can’t recall the date. Everyone cried when Flynn died, including Hoa. Flynn was very smart. He spoke Vietnamese. Twenty-something years old.

I had a dream about the war recently, Hoa says. A very bad dream. I can’t remember it now. I know Marines died in it.

A breeze blows in from the beach and a surfer complains about the quality of the waves. Two men on motorbikes pull up and Hoa stands to get them drinks. The bikers do not look at Hoa as the survivor of a war. He is the proprietor of a guesthouse: four single rooms and one dorm of bunk beds. He does not speak to guests about the war unless they ask. He talks to Marines. He has a Marine money clip and belt, a Zippo lighter, and a rusted M16 cartridge. He remembers shooting an M16 into a river. It was a game, acting like a Marine. Flynn’s death taught Hoa the game had consequences. He never fired a weapon in combat. He never killed anyone. He hung out, did what Marines told him, talked shit, played American football, and attended school. After school, he returned to the CAP unit. It was his home away from home. At night, Marines would visit his mother and eat cakes she had baked. Hoa thinks they were all fucking lucky. They could have been killed like Sgt. Flynn. One time, he jumped in a bunker when four Marines were firing .30-caliber machine guns at the VC. Hoa felt his energy surge, no sweat, keep it coming. He was young and happy. It was just another day in Vietnam.

5

The day after we met with Hoa, David E. takes me to Hill 55, where he was sometimes assigned. I sat behind him on his motorcycle and we weaved through traffic out of Da Nang and onto roads through small villages crowded with men and women picking through the wares of vendors. Then the villages vanished, we passed a cemetery and climbed uphill until David E. pulled to the side of the road. Around us, dense thickets of fir trees rose near a towering monument of a Vietnamese soldier with his left fist raised in the air.

In the First Indochina War, two battalions of French forces were wiped out here in 1954, David E. tells me. When the Marines were here, he adds with a note of pride, we didn’t leave until we were fucking ready.

I look at the trees and beyond them to farm fields and power lines and the hazy blur of mountains on the horizon. During the war, Hill 55 had been leveled of trees, brush, everything. I saw photographs online. It resembled a desert intersected by clay roads.

Nothing but a big mud patch when it rained and six inches of dust when it didn’t, David E. says.

He notices the outlines of a trench beneath weeds and points out how it zigzags so the VC would not have a direct shot if they got into the trench. He scours the ground, finds an M16 cartridge. Seconds later, he discovers a live round from an AK-47, a weapon used by the VC.

See this? he says. This was supposed to kill your sorry ass.

He points behind me at a patch of yellowed grass.

The LZ (helicopter landing zone) was here, he says.

He continues pacing the ground searching for souvenirs. He enjoys finding remnants of the war. The once lethal but now harmless objects remind him the war is over. He gets this warm feeling when he gives them away, pieces of himself from another time. A small gesture of kindness he hadn’t shown when he was a young Marine. In those days, all he cared about was having enough water and ammo to survive a mission.

I gift you this, David E. says as he hands me the M16 cartridge.

As he looks for more souvenirs, I consider a pagoda with the names of North Vietnamese soldiers who died fighting here. I read some of them:

Le van Bang

Le cam

Tran LY

Nguyen Mien

Pham Choi

Luong Nhat

Beneath the names, partially melted candles honor the dead. Cigarettes and glasses of wine, too, clutter the base of the memorial for the dead to take with them into the spirit world. I walk back to David E. A branch breaks underfoot and he wheels around sharply in a half-crouch. I stop. He sees me and relaxes and resumes his search for souvenirs.

That evening, David E. and I sit in his dining room killing time while we wait to pick up the two veterans flying into Da Nang: David Johannes and physician John “Jay” Magner. Both men enlisted as Navy medical specialists, commonly known as hospital corpsmen. Corpsmen provide medical support for sailors and Marines. Today, Jay practices family medicine in southern Illinois. Dave lives in Washington state. He had worked as an emergency medical technician and later as a schooner captain in Key West before he retired.

After David E.’s first visit to Vietnam, he told other veterans they ought to go back. Many of them responded with a look of panic. I’ll never go back, they’d tell him. Now he doesn’t bring it up. He doesn’t want to induce that fear he saw in their eyes. Many veterans, however, do return. They walk into the jungle and cry in a random spot that means nothing to anyone other than them. David E. remembers the tears he shed.

Years ago, he met a Navy guy, he can’t recall his name, who explained the mental anguish he had lived with for so many years like this: Our minds are like parking lots, he explained. The memory of the birth of your first child, there’s a parking space for that, a little place in your brain where that day can be stored and withdrawn whenever you want. The first time you made love, another parking spot. However, all that shit we did and saw in Vietnam, there’s no parking space for that. It’s too much, too big. It fills our head all the time, like a car going round and round looking for a space to park.

When he returned to Vietnam, David E. found the peace necessary to bury troubling thoughts. Not all the memories though have been entirely laid to rest. One time, when he and Ushi visited her aunt, David E. noticed a patch of bamboo and he was reminded of another clump of bamboo where an infantryman stepped on a booby-trapped grenade. David E. stopped, looked around and saw Ushi. Just a flashback, he told himself.

The grenade shredded the infantryman’s legs and shrapnel pierced David E.’s back. A corpsman bandaged him. A few stitches, that’s all. He received a Purple Heart but for a long time refused to wear it. He didn’t believe he’d earned it. He doesn’t think the infantryman made it and feels bad he doesn’t know his name. He can still hear him screaming, Help me! Now David E wears the Purple Heart to honor him.

Jay and Dave arrive close to midnight at Da Nang International Airport. It takes them a while to get through customs and wend their way past the luggage turnstiles and the glut of drivers for dozens of hotels holding signs with the names of guests to be picked up. David E. and I see Jay first. A tall, lean man with a few traces of gray in his hair, a floppy hat perched loosely on his head, he appears unfazed by the commotion and nearly twenty-hour flight from the States. Dave follows but hangs back. He looks older than Jay although they both are seventy-one. The remaining hair on his balding head has turned gray as has his beard. He walks stiffly, a dazed, hesitant look in his eyes. Holding the arm of his wife, Vickie, he manages a weak grin. I introduce myself and ask how he’s doing.

OK, he says in a voice as distant as the far-off look he gives me.

7

The next morning, David E. and I meet Jay and Dave at their beachfront hotel and drive to Hoa’s Place for lunch. David E. brings topographical maps and spreads them on a table and we all lean forward and David E. points out Hill 65. He’s unsure if he deployed there.

I was on so many missions, I didn’t know where I was, he says.

I was with CAP Charlie 224, Hoa says, pointing to a spot not far from Hill 65.

You remember a bridge here? Jay asks.

Yes.

I remember a little boy Marines shot in the neck, Jay comments, his voice shaking with indignation. They fired at him to scare him away from the bridge and hit him in the carotid artery. He died. I called for a medevac but the dispatcher could not spare a chopper for a gook. He said, “a gook.”

Jay had first been assigned to An Hoa Combat Base west of Hoi An in Quang Nam Province not far from Hill 65. One day, his artillery regiment came under a mortar attack from Viet Cong forces in a nearby village. The Marines warned the villagers they would be annihilated if the Viet Cong did not leave. The mortar fire, however, continued for several more days. F-4 Phantom jets flew in from the U.S. base in Da Nang and dropped bombs and napalm on the village. As huts burst into flames, villagers fled with their children and rice bags on their backs. Marines lined up along a berm started shooting. Jay shouted at a Lt. Zimmerman that the Marines were firing on unarmed civilians.

Doc, the lieutenant said, you don’t understand. They are Viet Cong suspects.

Jay later met a corpsman who told him he could no longer participate in search and destroy missions that arbitrarily razed villages. Jay advised him not to resist. Get through the war, go home, and then tell your story, he advised, but the corpsman was adamant. He could no longer do it. Later, Jay learned that the corpsman had been wounded.

I wonder what happened to him, Jay says. I feel guilty for not trying to find him.

His voice trails off into notes of helplessness. We stare at the map as if it will relieve the discomfort of his despair, but the only sound is David E. shifting it on the table.

I researched Hill 65 to find a reference to the February 23, 1969, battle that brought Jay and Dave back to Vietnam but I found nothing. An obscure little confrontation, Jay calls it. Early that morning, a North Vietnamese Army officer led the assault under the cover of night to assault our 155mm self-propelled howitzers that were in bunkers along this ridge. They destroyed two, he thinks, by throwing satchel charges onto the turrets and damaging the gears. They killed two Marines and injured about a dozen others. Medevac helicopters landed on the south side of the hill. Cpl. James Rice was blown out of his bunker. Dave dragged him up the hill. His chest was peppered with shrapnel.

We started CPR, David says.

I had epinephrine, Jay recalls.

I was pleased you had it. CPR wasn’t working.

James died on the hill. Another corporal, John Shoemaker, also died after he occupied a post abandoned by a soldier high on heroin. John’s M16 jammed and a VC threw a grenade into his bunker. Jay gave him two injections of morphine. He had multiple open fractures. His left foot had been blown off, no boot. That sticks in Jay’s mind. No boot.

Don’t let me die, Doc, John said.

We’re doing the best we can, Jay said. We won’t let you die.

Jay put him on a chopper but he died before he reached Da Nang. Jay doesn’t think more than thirty VC assaulted the hill. Ten were killed. He suspects many others were wounded but made it out. The encounter ended almost as soon as it began. Maybe one, two hours. Soldiers loaded the dead VC in a truck and took them to the bottom of the hill for locals to claim.

Do you want to kick dead gooks off the truck, Doc? a soldier asked Jay.

He walked away without answering.

I was twenty-one, he tells us.

Dried blood on your hands, David says. I remember the smell of dried blood.

I prayed that night we’d all get out alive, Jay recalls.

I don’t know if I had time to pray, Dave says. I pray all the time now. I remember a kid from Kansas. I wish I knew where he was.

Did he survive?

I don’t know. Part of the reason I don’t want to go to the wall. I don’t want to see who died.

Dave had seen men die before. In April 1968, he had been assigned bridge security on Highway 1. He was with seven guys on one bridge while the rest of the company, 120 soldiers, patrolled a larger bridge five miles away. The VC overran that bridge, killing all the soldiers. Dave heard the shouts and screams and gunfire over a radio and saw the flash of explosions on the horizon. He could do nothing about it. Dave and the six other soldiers survived.

That’s how it goes some days, he says. We stayed up all night to make sure we weren’t hit.

Did you go out the next day to retrieve the bodies? Jay asked.

A bus took us out but someone else had removed all the bodies. One hundred twenty died, seven lived. I was so new I didn’t know what was happening. I went from young man to a senior man instantly.

He smiles, the exhausted grin of someone wearied by memories. He takes pills for depression, pills for anxiety. In 2005, when he and Vickie moved from Key West, Florida, to Washington to be near their children, they bought a house next to a military base. The noise of .50-caliber gunfire and helicopters sent him into a depression. When he went out for a meal, he would sit in the back of restaurants for better field of vision and to watch the door. He was diagnosed with PTSD and now sees a therapist.

If I hear a chopper, it takes me back, Jay says.

When I was out on the beach and a chopper came in low over the tree line, Dave says, I about dove in a ditch.

He recalls jungle patrols when he slept with an arm tied to a tree so he would not roll downhill. He saw worms as big as his thumbs. He showered once a month. He smelled like earth and moss and mildew. When he left Vietnam after nine months and twenty days in-country he felt a great weight lifted off of him. He never thought he’d escape. Nothing in Da Nang now resembles what he remembers. He worries he’ll get emotional when we visit Hill 65 tomorrow. He wonders if grief will overwhelm him.

I shot my gun a lot in the war but I don’t know if I killed anyone, Dave says. I never knowingly killed anyone but I take medicine for nightmares.

I ask him if he still had nightmares.

Not when I take my meds. , he says.

Jay puts an arm around Dave and hugs him.

When I came back to Vietnam, I had dreams that VC were coming and I knew it but I couldn’t do anything about it, he says. I think my PTSD comes out in anger. I’m still angry about the war.

You felt helpless.

It’s still so fresh. You are who you are until something happens to you, Jay says.

And then you change, Dave adds.

8

I wake early on the morning of February 23rd and meet Jay and Dave in the lobby of their hotel. David E. arrives a short time later. After we drink coffee, we pile into a van and begin the hourlong drive to Hill 65, stopping briefly to pick up Hoa. We pass a vacant field where reinforced bunkers from the war still stand, where the paved roads turn past construction sites for more hotels, where motor scooters burst by us weaving in and out of traffic in an intuitive, chaotic choreography that should result in collisions but never does, and they lead us through a chorus of scrambling roosters as we drive through villages just waking to the heat of this humid morning, and in the dissolving haze of what lingers of the night we keep driving:

This road was nothing but dust, Jay recalls. A corporal I was riding with fell asleep one time and went off the side of the road. I lacerated my forehead.

We took locals to a hospital along here bouncing around and we laughed, no fucking sweat, man, Hoa tells him.

We heard rifle fire one time, Jay says. A sniper? Fuck. No, it was Marines shooting at dogs.

We eventually emerge from traffic into a vacant countryside and we keep driving until we pull off onto a stone and dirt road and park. Dense woods stand on either side of us. Birds call and the heat bears down.

Nothing here announces that we’ve reached Hill 65 but Jay and Dave recognize the area although nothing, they tell me, looks the same. Photographs from the war show it as a moonscape. Like Hill 55, Hill 65 had been stripped bare of any vegetation in 1969 for Marine operations. Now, it makes me think of a forest preserve.

How’re you doing? I ask Dave.

I was more stressed thinking about coming here. Not too bad now. It’s not like it was. I don’t have a bad feeling about it.

We follow a path uphill to a pagoda in the center of a cemetery memorializing dead North Vietnamese soldiers. We walk around the pagoda and the graves, carrying sticks of incense. David E. tells me the Vietnamese believe smoke provides a conduit to communicating with the dead. We place the incense at the head of each grave. When we finish, we move back to the pagoda. Jay and Dave move off to one side, their heads bowed. Insects buzz, the air crackling with their activity as Jay takes a deep breath and removes a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. In a determined but shaky voice, he begins reading:

We are here joined by our friends from Vietnam to honor and commemorate the men on both sides that includes National Liberation Front soldiers and United States Marines that engaged in battle on this hill fifty years ago today in the dark early morning hours. Dave Johannes and I will never forget our admiration and camaraderie for Cpl. John Stroud Shoemaker and Cpl. James Rice, Jr., U.S. Marine Corps, and forever will have remorse and sorrow and survivors’ guilt for not having been able to salvage them from their fatal wounds. Additionally, it is my hope that by remembering the inhumanity and immorality of war that future generations will protest orders to engage in endless military violent confrontations as solutions to maintain world order. May these comrades rest in peace.

God rest their souls, Dave adds, in a whisper.

Jay asks if anyone would like to speak.

I want to thank God for letting us be able to be here today, David E. says. For letting us remember our comrades in arms. And I am grateful to God for the peace I feel today in this place of total destruction. And I’m grateful we can share the peace we find on this hill.

He bows his head and a long silence follows. Birds fly overhead and leaves rustle beneath our shifting feet. The sticks of incense have burned to ash and as the bright light of the sun waxes across the graves, and wind stirs ash into the air. I watch it dissolve and think of what David E. had said one night about Afghanistan war veterans:

I pray they can go back in fifty years and find their peace. I hope that for all my brothers and sisters.

Jay puts the paper back in his pocket. In a brief ceremony that likely would have gone unnoticed by a passerby, profound in its simplicity and economy, Jay and Dave, standing among Vietnamese graves, have done what they came here to do; without tears, with only the raw honesty of their sorrow, they said goodbye.

We did it, Jay says, his voice catching.

We did it, Dave repeats in a whisper.

They embrace, burying their faces in each other shoulders, and

David E. and Hoa approach and Jay and Dave pull them into their hug and at that moment, fifty years on, their war ended.

Part II

1

Matt Keenan doesn’t know when he was exposed to Agent Orange, just that he has prostate cancer. He watches his health, takes his medications, and leaves his Da Nang home every three months to see his Veterans Affairs doctor in New York. It’s 2020 and his next VA appointment has been delayed because of the coronavirus. The last thing he needs is to get sick.

A Da Nang clinic will provide the medications he needs while he reschedules. He can talk to his doctor by phone if he has to. What more can he do? He’s on active surveillance, meaning his doctor monitors the progression of the cancer. The stress tugs at him. Sometimes he thinks, Take care of it, get rid of the prostate so you don’t have to think about it, you’re not getting any younger, but then he considers the consequences, the potential pitfalls. A lot of nerves in the area where a surgeon would be cutting. He could end up wearing diapers. He’s heard stories. It’s not easy to think about.

During the Vietnam War, Matt served on bases in Da Nang, his final military post, built directly on contaminated land, cleared by the Army. And the latrines. Think of it. Three toilet seats, the pan beneath each made from empty barrels of a chemical mix dubbed Agent Orange for the orange stripe around the 55-gallon drums. The barrels, containing a herbicide mix that contained the toxic byproduct dioxin, were handled with minimal precautions. Soldiers sometimes filled the empties with water for bathing, and even used them for barbecues. Instead of going to the mess hall, Matt and his buddies would sometimes have a little cookout. No harm in that, right? A break from the war. An empty barrel could also store fuel. Put the gas in a vehicle, rev that baby up, and the exhaust expelled dioxins that can cause cancer, lead to reproductive issues and birth defects, and compromise the immune system. Dioxins also can alter the makeup of DNA, passing health and developmental problems from one generation to the next, decades removed from the family member first exposed.

U.S, pilots sprayed more than thirteen million gallons of Agent Orange in Vietnam at concentrations up to fifty times what manufacturers recommended for killing plants. Protocols were followed. Planes needed to attain the exact altitude, not too close to the ground but not too far above it, either, and had to account for humidity, air currents, topography, and temperature. Too hot and the chemicals would evaporate. A strong wind would carry them from the targeted areas. Drift mist, it was called. Helicopters also were equipped to spray pesticides. Relatively small amounts of Agent Orange were applied with hand-held sprayers and from trucks. Matt served on three bases, each one identified as an Agent Orange hotspot after the war. So many ways he could have been exposed. He doesn’t dwell on it. Knowing where and how won’t change anything.

He lives with a Vietnamese woman, Lan, and wants to marry her. Another reason to make some decisions. Beautiful woman. Long, black hair and a smile that melts his heart. She is forty-six and has two children in Japan. He lived alone for decades and grown comfortable and was not planning to date anyone. It just happened. Met her through the wife of a mutual friend. He was as surprised as anyone that they clicked. At seventy, his sex drive isn’t that of a twenty-one-year-old but with Lan he’s happy to see it’s not entirely dead, either, yet the consequences of surgery might fully extinguish it. Lots to think about. But all that thinking won’t cure his cancer or bring back his best friend, Jimmy “Beevo” Thompson, or cure the mental and physical problems of the Vietnamese children he works with now. So much loss. He tries not to think about that either.

Just days before his death from spinal cancer in 2018, Matt had a final phone conversation with Beevo while in New York for a routine prostate exam. On the morning Matt left to return to Vietnam, Beevo called from his Florida home to wish him a good trip. Matt could hear the pain in his voice. Still he didn’t think he was about to die. Maybe he just didn’t want to talk. Less than twenty-four hours later, shortly after landing at Da Nang, Matt received a text from Beevo’s family—he was gone. Matt had to explain to Lan why he was crying and smiling; grieving his friend, yet joyful to be with her. It was a complex, poignant mixture that perfectly captured the emotional arc of his Vietnam experience.

He can’t remember how Jimmy got his nickname, but as far back as Matt can remember everyone called him Beevo. . Sometimes, when he looks through old photos he stops at pictures of Beevo. One photo shows him in his Army uniform holding a white dog. Beevo looks surprised, with strands of his brown, curly hair hanging over his forehead and the dog half asleep in his arms. He has a thick neck and wide chest. After the war, as he grew older, he gained weight; his hair thinning and turning gray but still flopping across his forehead, with a smile tugging at his mouth.

The weird thing about Beevo: he never recalled seeing Agent Orange. He knew it was stored at Da Nang Air Base, where he served as an intelligence communications specialist intercepting North Vietnamese messages. More than a little appropriate that Matt would learn of Beevo’s death in Da Nang. As if Beevo was saying, I’m still with you. Carry on.

In an odd way Matt’s encounter with Agent Orange, whenever and wherever it was, ratcheted up the odds of him developing prostate cancer, while opening up opportunities he never would have pursued otherwise. He doubts he’d be living in Da Nang. He first returned in May 2015—nearly four decades after he he’d left and a year after his cancer diagnosis. When his plane from Hanoi landed, he expected to see barbed wire. Instead, vacationing families roamed the sidewalks, and women exercised to music on cassette recorders. He had no agenda beyond nostalgia. He spent his time on the beach re-creating photos from his 1971 deployment using the old snapshots he’d packed as a guide.

The Vietnamese seemed to know he was a vet just by looking at him. You don’t hear boom, boom, boom anymore, they told him. Seeing the locals in Western denim and wide-collared shirts hit him with the gut-level realization that the war was over and had been for decades. A friend with Veterans for Peace, a global nonprofit dedicated to abolishing war, ending the arms race, and reducing militarism, suggested he visit the Da Nang Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin. Better known as DAVA, the school assists Vietnamese children with birth defects caused by the exposure of their parents, and in some cases grandparents, to Agent Orange.

A film crew happened to be there recording the students dancing, and Matt watched them sway and whirl. Some of them had obvious mental health problems, others were physically disabled, and he felt overwhelmed at how the war had hurt them and him, and yet they were laughing and enjoying themselves, oblivious of their limitations. Days later at the airport, as he prepared to return to his home in the Bronx, he stared at the mountains that were home to his old base, Camp Reasoner, and recalled how he had looked down from there at where he now stood, and he decided at that moment to come back. It just clicked. He wanted to spend his remaining time helping the

DAVA children and atoning for his role in a morally ambiguous war, one that had damaged them both.

As soon as he reached New York, he rushed to arrange another trip, as if every minute he spent outside of Vietnam was a minute wasted. Back in Da Dang three months later, he asked to volunteer at DAVA. Fine, no problem, an administrator told him. No application. No interview.

This is Matt Keenan, the administrator told the children. He works here now.

Matt knows he could move back to New York, hang out with friends and family and spare himself the long flights to see his doctor, but in no way would that life compare with the one he lives. The boys and girls at DAVA raise his spirits as he hopes he lifts theirs. Children can be so rough. Someone is always crying because one of them clobbered someone else. He wants to develop a skit about being kind. Something like role-playing being nice. Here’s a ball. Instead of taking it, you give it to another person and let them play with it. Put pictures in a bowl and have the kids make up a character with the one they select. Perform helping someone put on a shirt, or showing them how to brush their teeth, comb their hair, anything. End with everyone hugging. Make life fun while they—and he—can still enjoy it.

2

Matt leaves his studio apartment, mounts his motor scooter, dons a helmet, and drives to DAVA to meet Nguyễn Ngọc Phương, a dwarf, likely the result of a genetic mutation caused by Agent Orange. Since Vietnamese names place the given name last, Matt calls him Phương.

Turning into traffic, he drives across a bridge built in the shape of a golden dragon, and he emerges from the shoaling, nonstop flow of motorcycle traffic into a chaotic downtown neighborhood choking with merchants—cafes and department stores hemmed in by vendors hawking goods from bicycles amid a deafening symphony of shouts and beeps. Matt turns down a side street that dead-ends into a small DAVA compound consisting of three two-story, square, cinder-block buildings: Center One, which holds classrooms, and Center Two, which houses a medical clinic.

Another DAVA school, Center Three, about a two-hour drive from Da Nang in Tam Ky Village, has a small farm and incense shop. Matt first volunteered there. He participated with the children in activities that included arts and crafts, singing and dancing.

Phương smiles when he sees Matt parking his scooter and shuffles down a flight of stairs in Center One. He tells Matt he has growing concerns about the coronavirus. Vietnam has shut its border with China in an attempt to limit the virus's spread, but he remains worried. With DAVA closed, at least one parent must remain home to watch their children, and the families lose income. Should one of the children get sick . . .Phương stares at the ground, his voice trailing off. Both he and Matt know health issues plague all the boys and girls. Matt remembers the morning in 2017 when one boy died: Troung, maybe early teens, with a sweet and kind disposition. Thin as thin could be, he got around in a wheelchair and never appeared upset about his inability to walk. He enjoyed drawing and painting and attached himself to Matt for no particular reason that Matt knows of, but they always spent time together. Despite his frailty, Troung came to DAVA every weekday. Matt was eating breakfast with friends when he got the call that Troung had died. He drove to the boy's home and saw his body on a table in front of the high-rise where his family lived. A deep emptiness consumed him as if the humid air blew through his body without hinderance. Matt clung to the memory of Truong's infectious laughter, a sound that seemed to defy his physical limitations. As the peaks surrounding Camp Reasoner loomed in the distance, Matt could almost hear that same joy reverberating through the canyons

Matt follows Phương into a room used by the children to make incense sticks. Boxes stand unevenly in a corner and a black and yellow bird calls from a cage. Phươngong named the bird Chao May and he feeds it between the wires with his fingers, smiling as it bends toward his hand, trapped in its cage as much as Phươngong is trapped in his body. They can all do this job, Phươngong says of the students, except the most disabled, by filling an ungainly machine with brown incense powder and running thin wooden sticks through a slot. The sticks come out the other end coated with powder. Matt asks for a glass of water to take his prostate cancer medication. Phương reaches for a pitcher. He speaks in a high-pitched voice that cracks from time to time, and his thin, black hair falls against his forehead as he fills a glass. They sit at a table not much bigger than furniture in a daycare center—built for adults Phương's size.

Phương's father fought with the North Vietnamese Army in Quang Nam province south of Da Nang. He told his son how the leaves on trees turned yellow after the Americans saturated an area with Agent Orange. Three or four days later, the trees would be bare, their leaves covering the ground. Phương's father and his comrades had no idea toxic chemicals had killed the trees, and neither did other North Vietnamese soldiers. After the war people who had fled moved back to rebuild their homes and shops, equally oblivious.

During the war, his father hid in underground bunkers when American troops came through, or when airplanes and helicopters dropped bombs. If any had fallen on his shelter, he would not have survived. After air assaults rocked the ground and filled the air with acrid-smelling smoke, he was a witness to the splintered trees and destroyed houses. Once he was close enough to a mine when it was tripped that he was hit by shrapnel. After the war, he had nightmares, and during the day he would walk around his village as if he were marching. He continued to take these walks until he died at seventy-five. He never disparaged Americans. Americans were nice, he told Phương. They loved other people just like the Vietnamese, but they were told to come here and fight, and so they did.

When his parents realized he was not growing, they took Phương to a doctor, but the doctor could not determine the cause of his problems. Afterward his father spoke to soldiers with whom he had fought and they told him about Agent Orange. Don’t try to fix the problem, they said. There is nothing you can do. Just provide nutrition and nurture him as best as you can. They offered the same advice for Phương’s younger sister, Hieu, who stands no taller than he. Their five siblings, four brothers and a sister, have no health problems.

Why are you so short? children would ask Phương when he was a boy. He considered suicide but decided he would not do that to his parents. One evening, when he was eleven years old, he saw his mother rolling back and forth in bed. What’s wrong? he asked. I am worried about you and can’t sleep, she said. He wanted to ease her concern and contribute to the family so he started his own business: refilling disposable butane lighters. A customer who repaired clocks then offered him work in Ho Chi Minh City. Phương excelled at the job, developing a natural ability for repairing almost anything. Years later, he heard about DAVA and returned to Da Nang in 2010 to work for the school.

Now forty, Phương gets debilitating headaches accompanied by dizziness. His joints ache, especially when the weather changes, and sometimes his legs hurt so much he can’t move. His spine, instead of growing vertically, presses horizontally against his chest. He gets short of breath and his heart beats too fast. Doctors have trouble hearing his heart with their stethoscopes, and they refer him to a hospital for two or three days of rest and then release him. He thinks his heart worsens every year and hopes a team of foreign doctors will visit Da Nang with modern equipment and treat him.

Some people tell Phương he was destined by fate to suffer. Look on the bright side, they tell him, you’re in a better situation than some other people. Phương thinks this is nonsense. These people talk in clichés. Do they have his problems? No. They have wives and husbands and normal children, and Phương knows he never will. He won’t marry and have a family, fearful that his children and their children and generations after them would be born like him.

As Matt and Phương talk Hoàng Kim Uyên, one of Phương’s coworkers, arrives at Center One to practice with a sewing machine so she can teach the children embroidery when the school reopens. Matt offers to help to help her get it out of a closet. She thanks him but quietly declines. She started at DAVA as a volunteer with the help of her mother, who knew an administrator. A junior college student at the time, Uyên did her job without pay for two years before the director offered her a position in 2010. At first she taught basic life skills: how to feed and clean yourself and drink from a glass. Before the coronavirus struck, she helped with an art class and taught the children how to make flowers from tissue paper. Later in the year, she expects to teach a nutrition class.

Uyên’s parents worked as couriers for the Viet Cong and were exposed to Agent Orange near the Da Nang airport. Empty barrels were cleaned in a lake by a park on Dien Bien Phu Street near the city center. Her parents stayed in that area as they waited to receive and deliver messages. Until she was four, Uyên could not walk, and her skin turned dry, dark, and rough as tree bark. She had an irregular heartbeat, too, and severe asthma. At first her parents did not worry. They assumed she suffered from temporary conditions associated with young children, but in 1995, when she was five years old and her health had not improved, they took her to Hanoi where a team of American doctors examined her. Did you fight in the war? they asked her parents. One doctor took a blood and skin sample. A few days later, he said the test results showed Uyên had been exposed to dioxin. Another test indicated that her parents had as well. The doctors knew of no medicine that would improve her conditions.

For much of her childhood, Uyên felt depressed. Children did not want to play or study with her at school, and adults stared at her and hurried away. As she grew older, she met people who could not walk or talk or recognize their parents. Like her, their mothers and fathers had been exposed to Agent Orange, and she decided that compared to them she had been fortunate. Over time her skin improved. Today, light brown blotches cover her body, but her skin no longer feels leathery and its color has paled to a light tan. She works and then returns home to her parents. For a short time she worried about having children, knowing how bad she would feel if they were born looking like her, but she feels confident she will never have to confront that problem. Now thirty

Uyên does not expect to marry. If she does, she would be happy, but teaching makes her content and she suspects she should not hope for more.

She holds no bitterness toward her parents or any one else. No one could have anticipated her problems. At night, she dreams about DAVA children. They consume all of her time even when she sleeps. She had been scared of them when she first started because they were bigger and taller than she was and some of them looked aggressive, but as she got to know them, she found them to be gentle and eager for attention. They bring her candy and call her name, filling her days and nights, and she thinks that is how it should be. Why should she want more?

With no students to teach, Matt and Phương finds themselves with nothing to do, so Phương invites him and Uyên over for tea; Uyên demurs, opting to stay and finish her work on the sewing machines. Phương lives on a narrow, tidy street near Center One in a house he bought in 2015. The cramped road forces Matt to tuck his knees tightly against his motorbike so they do not hit the houses on either side.

At first Phương lived alone, but his solitude made him melancholy so he asked his mother and younger sister Hieu to join him. Her physical abnormalities are similar to Phương's, and she uses a crutch to help her walk.

Two stools, a chair that rises no higher than Phương's knees, and a bed about twelve inches off the floor and five feet long take up the front room. A table, the same height as the bed and stools, holds the TV. Hieu prepares dinner in the kitchen beside a sink that rises to her waist and cabinets half an arm's length above her head. With help from his brothers, Phương designed the kitchen and made the furniture. Someone had thrown away the table, and Phương cut the legs to suit his height. He learned to make furniture with his father and has always enjoyed tinkering. The previous week, he connected two chopsticks with a screw for Matt so he could better manipulate them. The front porch of his house holds a clutter of rice pots, stereo equipment, and odds and ends people want him to fix. Even now, home just a short time, a neighbor has brought him a damaged bicycle frame to mend.

While Phương examines it, Hieu washes a cutting board and knife and heats water for noodles. She moves quickly, no longer the girl who could not walk until she was ten and who began school four years later than the other children. Her classmates teased her. When she asked her parents why she was different, their answers varied. Sometimes they said they didn't know, or they told her that her mother had fallen while she was pregnant. Only later when American doctors visiting Da Nang examined her in 2000 did Hieu understand her misshapen body was the result of her father’s exposure to Agent Orange. She and Phương never spoke about their physical problems. Instead they discussed school, and as they got older, work. They could see they were different, shorter than everyone else and so much more. What point would be served talking about it? What would change? When Hieu felt dejected, Phương would say, What’s wrong? Do you have the flu? He would encourage her, and she did the same with him.

As Hieu got older, she realized she and Phương were not alone. Many other people had been affected by Agent Orange, and she knew then not to feel sorry for herself. She told herself to be happy. Don’t give up. She used to escape into dreams in which she saw herself with a normal body, but then she would wake up and realize such a thing was not real and never would be, so she stopped dreaming such fantasies and instead dreamed of finding a job and going to work, dreams she could realize.

These days Hieu sells newspapers and clothes for street vendors. Her customers joke with her in a fun, joyful way, unlike teenagers who say mean things. Even small children, ten years old and younger, can be cruel. They ask in sharp tones, Why do you need a stick to walk? Are you an old woman? Why is your motorbike so small? Why are you so short? Their jeers remind her of when she was a girl and ostracized by her classmates, and she pushes these thoughts aside and ignores the taunts until the children leave. Hieu appreciates living with Phương and her mother and has no plan to have a family. She can’t imagine who would marry her, and even if someone would, her children might be born with problems much like her own, and she would never want that. She knows couples with boys and girls who can’t talk, can’t clean themselves. They become a burden to the whole family, not just the parents, and she thinks of those families, now alone with their problems since DAVA has been closed. Why would she put her own family through that?

3

What’s crazy Matt from New York going to do today? Matt would ask the children before the coronavirus struck, his Bronx accent thick as syrup. They wanted to know why he talked funny. He grew up in Stratton Park in a neighborhood dominated by apartment buildings with iron fire escapes. His grandparents and two uncles lived nearby. The main drag was Archer Street. Meat market, dry cleaner, candy stores, cobbler, newspaper stands—Archer Street had it all. Where you from? Archer Street, people would reply, even though they didn’t live on Archer Street, but everyone knew the area. Most of the kids attended St. Anthony’s, a Catholic school. After school, Matt’s mother would ask, Where’re you going? and he’d answer, Out, which meant out on the street. Rough and tumble, kids scuffled but it wasn’t a dangerous neighborhood. He still has a pair of roller skates, steel, heavy metal wheels with clamps that hooked into his shoes. Other games included stickball and skully. Most of his friends came from families with four to six kids and many of them were Matt’s cousins.

In 1968, Matt graduated from high school, at the height of the Vietnam War. Some of his friends enlisted, while others entered college to avoid the draft. He studied political science at Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, New York, but he didn’t pass his classes and dropped out in 1970, about the time of the Kent State massacre. His draft number was 118. Worried he might be called up, he visited Canada, but then decided not to stay because he feared exile. He returned to the Bronx and took a summer job. One morning he couldn’t find his wallet and decided to stop by the Selective Service office for a duplicate draft card to use as an ID. A buddy, John Killen, accompanied him. A woman at the office told Matt she had just sent him his induction notice. You won’t need a duplicate card, she said. Matt stared at her, speechless. You’re not drafting me, he said finally, and left. What are you going to do? John asked. Matt had heard that someone who joined the Army voluntarily had a better chance of avoiding the battlefield than a draftee, so he drove to a recruitment center, enlisted, and became a personnel specialist, military jargon for pounding a typewriter and doing other administrative duties. Better that than carrying an M16.

He deployed to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in September 1970. He had not been there more than two weeks when a sergeant picked him and eight other guys to participate in a military funeral in a nearby farming community. He doesn’t remember the dead soldier’s name or the name of his hometown, only that he died in Vietnam. His casket rested on a table in a mobile home on a bare lot, and Matt and the other soldiers marched down a dirt road to a church to bury him. A rifle salute, Taps, the folding of the flag, full military honors. Matt thought his death probably touched everyone in that little town. It moved him. At twenty, he was about the same age as the man he helped bury. Matt could have been him.

Determined to remain stateside as long as possible, Matt volunteered for parachute jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, figuring that his transfer and airborne training would keep him out of Vietnam for at least another four weeks. When he arrived, a first sergeant pulled him aside. We don’t get many guys like you, he said. We get Special Forces guys, infantry, but not personnel specialists. Why don’t you just work here with us and if you really want to go to jump school we’ll arrange that? Sweet, Matt, thought. He expected to ride out the war pushing paper, bought a motorcycle, and considered taking some college courses, but about six months later, on a hot, humid day that seemed no different than the previous days, the war intruded. Matt received orders for Vietnam. He would deploy from Fort Lewis, Washington. Dazed, staring at his orders, Matt called his father. He might have been stuttering, he can’t recall. The Army gave him four weeks’ leave; he returned home overwhelmed by his luck. He knew people from his neighborhood who’d been killed in Vietnam, like Dennis Russo, a year ahead of him in school. Oh, you hear what happened to Dennis? people would say. Things like that traveled fast on Archer Street. Two weeks before Matt left for Fort Lewis, he saw George Harrison at Madison Square Garden on his Bangladesh concert tour. He sang, “My Sweet Lord” and “While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” and Bob Dylan rasped “Blowin’ in the Wind.” Not a bad sendoff, Matt thought.

As he prepared to be deployed to Vietnam, Matt discouraged his family and friends from throwing a party. It was not a time for celebration, just say goodbye and get it over with. An older brother, Tom, lived in Alaska and planned to meet him at Fort Lewis. His mother must have lit every candle in church, Matt exaggerated, sucking up all the oxygen. At LaGuardia Airport, everyone did their best not to cry. His parents remained at the gate when he boarded and from his window on the plane he saw his mother waving and flashing a peace sign. Are you Matthew Keenan? a flight attendant asked. We’re going to be delayed and we know your mother is out there. She would like to say goodbye to you one more time. Matt didn’t want to go through that again. Hell, it was hard enough the first time, but he got up and embraced his mother and father and then reboarded.

He remained three days in Fort Lewis and spent an evening with Tom. Dropping him off at the barracks, Tom took a ring off his finger and put it in Matt’s hands. Here, he said, I want you to have something from me. He teared up and Matt did too. The next day, he flew to Cam Ranh Bay in central Vietnam, an orientation stop for new arrivals. Drills and guard duty took up most of his time. At night, his mind imagined grim possibilities of Viet Cong slipping onto the beach in rafts and cutting his throat. He recalls the intense, humid heat, the tin roofs of the barracks weighted with sandbags and how he and other grunts carried sandbags up ladders, the sand blowing into their faces. Years later he would learn that Cam Ranh Bay was an Agent Orange hotspot, but if he saw anyone spraying, it didn’t register.

After two weeks, Matt flew to Chui Lai, another Agent Orange hotspot, although like Cam Ranh Bay, Matt did not know it at the time. He worked for the brass, preparing correspondence and performing other routine tasks. The officers and grunts played cards and football. In November 1971, four weeks after he arrived in Chui Lai, Matt flew to Da Nang, his last post. He remained a paper pusher and never experienced combat. Instead, he compiled statistics of how many guys were injured, how many were killed in action. He typed the numbers on square cards and tallied the totals. A higher-up would examine the cards and say, OK, we lost this many guys this day, this week, this month. Matt can’t be sure, but he thinks he recorded estimates of enemy dead too. During these moments, he thought of the soldier he helped bury outside of Fort Bragg. He’d once been a number on a card too.

By a happy coincidence, Beevo served on the Air Force base at Da Nang. He and Matt got together once a week, sometimes every two weeks, and hung out. The Air Force had reel-to-reel quadraphonic stereos and black lights. Like being in a New York club, Matt thought. Little did he and Beevo know that the airport held huge stockpiles of Agent Orange. After the war, Matt would hear veterans say, Oh, I was soaking wet with the stuff, but he never experienced that. Neither did Beevo, but they both got cancer.

Matt left Vietnam in May 1972. He had never felt such relief as he did when he flew out of Da Nang. Beyond exhilarating. A feeling like no other. He had survived and could resume his life. When he reached the Bronx, a sign across the front door of his parents’ home and decorated with paper doves, read: Welcome Home: Love, Peace, and Happiness. He and his mother stood beneath it and his father snapped a photo. Matt still has the sign and the doves.

He chilled out for several months, played softball, went to the beach. A half year later, he realized he had to do more with his life than hang out and watch “The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson,” so he volunteered with a legal aid society and worked with lawyers representing Rikers Island inmates. Six weeks later, his supervisor offered him a job that eventually led to a career with the legal division of the Department of Corrections. He enrolled in college, earned a bachelor’s degree in political science and sociology, got married, had children. In 1991, at the age of forty-one, he passed the state bar exam and became an attorney.

About eight years later, when he and his wife divorced, a medical exam indicated Matt had early signs of prostate cancer. Vietnam veterans experience prostate cancer in much higher numbers than the general public and it is considered an Agent Orange-related health problem, but Matt didn’t make the connection until he spoke to Beevo and other veterans. Beevo also was sick. For years, he had been in perfect health and participated in 100-mile bicycle races. Then one morning he woke up and just couldn’t get out of bed. Doctors told him he had spinal cancer. The cancer spread throughout his body and eventually his bones became so brittle he broke a leg just by standing and putting weight on it. Matt couldn’t count the number of medications Beevo took.

Matt, Beevo told him, you put in an application for Agent Orange benefits.

He did. The VA rated him 100 percent disabled and entitled to full health coverage. Matt accepted the diagnosis with equanimity. This is life, he told himself. Take care of it. He researched Agent Orange and how dioxins affect the body and over time decided to visit Vietnam to learn more about it and its impact there. It would be the best way to contribute and learn, he told himself. Don’t get angry. Do the best you can for yourself and others, and spread awareness.

He arranged to volunteer at Friendship Village. The Hanoi-based agency, founded by an American Vietnam veteran in 1992, assists Vietnamese sickened by Agent Orange, mostly children. After a few weeks, he would travel to Da Nang. Rocket City the GIs used to call it because of all the shelling. What would it look like decades after the war? As he organized his trip he had more immediate questions: How much cash should I bring? How will I be received? Do I need vaccinations? He bought pants with zippered pockets to secure his passport and money.

When he arrived in what he still thought of as North Vietnam, Matt felt anxious. He was in enemy territory, the headquarters of the North Vietnamese Army. I've got to be careful and cautious, he thought. Having known only the brutal realities of Vietnam, he still could not grasp the idea of peace. It wasn't real to him even as the plane taxied to a stop.

The Vietnamese, however, showed no hostility toward him in the bustling airport. On the contrary, casually dressed university students in blue jeans and T-shirts approached him eager to practice their English by asking him questions: Do you like Vietnamese food? I like the fried spring roll, he told them, but I have a problem I don't know how to use chop sticks. How do you eat? they asked. I struggle, he said. He told them stories of the war and his friendship with Beevo and his apprehension disappeared.

He stayed at a small boarding house with a large living room. He enjoyed sitting in the rooftop lounge four stories above the swarming avenues. In the mornings he bicycled to Friendship Village, about an hour away. He rode in sweltering heat and in torrential rain and he would lean into the storm, his wet T-shirt and shorts clinging to him, his aching legs pushing him forward. When the sun finally emerged he felt his body steaming. The rush of traffic and the erratic driving reminded him of the Bronx when he worked as a delivery boy for a meat market. About four miles from Friendship Village the roads became almost empty. Chickens flapped their wings to avoid him and vendors sat in stalls and waved.

At Friendship Village he parked his bicycle and walked beneath a hug arch and passed a monument with flags from countries around the world that helped fund the organization. The concrete path of the entrance led far back to a garden. Paths crisscrossed the grounds to classrooms, dormitories and a cafeteria.

On his first day he sat in on a class where one rambunctious boy climbed onto the desks and a teacher, Miss Ann, scolded him but in a gentle way without raising her voice. She showed the same patience with Matt steering him toward children who needed help with coloring books and puzzles.

Over time he told Miss Ann and the other teachers that he used to be a U.S. soldier in the war and they translated for the children. He had never known about Agent Orange then, Matt said, but he understood that whether he knew or not, he had contributed to making the children sick. He felt terrible about that and he was sick too. They had both been affected by the same chemicals. He told them he wished he had never been a soldier. Afterward he sat in a corner and cried and Miss Ann stood beside and spoke in a soft voice that he didn’t understand but that he found soothing.

He felt a growing bond with the children. He entertained them with songs like “The Hokey Pokey” and anything else he could think of. Despite having no idea why they were kept from regular school, they found as much joy as any other child even though they didn’t understand the words. Some of them could participate more than others depending on their mental and physical conditions but they all loved music and enjoyed the silly faces Matt made when he sang and they made faces back at him and laughed, and he laughed with them. He volunteered for about five weeks before he left. He hated to go but he wanted to see Da Nang.

4

When he finishes his tea Matt leaves Phương's house and drives to Camp Reasoner for no other reason than to occupy his mind. When he has nothing to do, the reality hits him: I have cancer. It's easy to forget when he's at Center One entertaining the kids, but the weight of it, when it comes, leaves him almost immobile, forced to make decisions about surgery. Better to do ride somewhere than to think.

Maneuvering through traffic, he first stops at the airport, wending his way near an employee parking lot behind the terminals where two marble markers commemorate the 2018 dioxin cleanup of seventy-four acres, a joint venture between the U.S. and Vietnam. He had put a photograph of Beevo beneath the markers to commemorate his service and the cause of his death. As he stares at the markers, it occurs to him he can't remember the flight from Chui Lai to Da Nang. Something he thinks he should remember. It wasn't long, he knows that. A sign, Welcome to Da Nang Air Base, greeted him, the airport then no more than a shack to process troops. Beevo's barracks would have been somewhere close by, but they've been torn down, of course. Visiting Beevo was the highlight of his time in Da Nang. To have somebody from home meant so much. The Air Force had good intel and knew before the Army when to expect rocket attacks, and Beevo would alert Matt when it was safe to come visit. Mail call was the biggest thing. Guys would get so down if they didn't receive a letter. Mail or no mail, Matt still had Beevo. He could look down from the hills at where he now stands and know he had a buddy waiting for him. They played ball and drank beer. Beevo served only in Da Nang, so where Matt is standing now, must be the place that killed him. What a travesty.

He gets back on his motorbike and turns onto a highway and follows it toward the mountains. As other drivers pass him, the noise of sputtering engines and the stink of exhaust fumes rise, mingling with the increasing midmorning heat. Outside, coffee shop tables fill with customers and shopkeepers sweep the sidewalks. Matt pulls over to buy a bottle of water. He wipes his forehead and looks at the back of his sunburned hands. Need to buy gloves, he mutters. He applies sunscreen and stares ahead. When he first visited Da Nang, it took him forever to find Camp Reasoner. By then the city was already more developed than it had been during the war, and the myriad roads and alleys and new high-rises and the traffic congestion confused him. Everywhere he turned, it seemed, he met a dead end. Then he saw some trucks turning onto a dirt road that led into the mountains and he noted a gas station at the intersection. You know what, let’s try it, Matt told himself. He followed the trucks and sure enough, two minutes later, he reached Camp Reasoner. A stone guardhouse, a retaining wall, and an entryway with the faded words “Camp Reasoner” remained, but nothing more. Matt can’t imagine why fifty years after the war these few things still stood. The Vietnamese usually removed anything reminiscent of the American presence, but for some reason they had not touched the remains of Camp Reasoner. The last time he visited, someone had put a fence around the guardhouse and the entrance sign. To protect them? Matt wondered. Whatever the purpose, the fence pleased him. Someone wanted to preserve them. They give the hill its significance, at least to Matt.

Finishing his water, Matt drives another few miles until he reaches the gas station and a rock-strewn mess of a road that leads him past hillsides ruined by backhoes and bulldozers, the red clay gouged with mammoth holes excavated for mining and construction projects. A truck ahead of him sprays water to tamp down dust. The wind snaps at his shirt and his thinning gray hair, and he notices more heavy machinery and Chinese sweet gum trees listing over trenches, gnarled roots exposed. Man, they are just digging this place up, Matt mutters. If a monsoon comes, those trees don’t stand a chance.

At the top of a hill, Matt sees the weedy entrance to Camp Reasoner, the guardhouse strangled with vines. He thinks it would be nice if someone put a sign: *U.S. military base. This is what’s left*. Something like that. He takes a path up a hill and looks out at where the mess hall and barber shop had been and the hooches of the upper brass. Six wooden staircases led to Col. James R. McDonough’s headquarters. Resembled a Quonset hut. Odd location, Matt always thought. On top of a hill, a more exposed position. Nothing here now. Those fragile structures never would have lasted fifty years.

Choppers swarming, zipping across the sky. Low. Matt could hear them approaching, four or five at a time, Hueys, all kinds, big and small, even tiny ones that looked like bugs. One- or two-man deals. Escorts. Buzzing around checking things out, surveilling. Some big choppers, too, tandem rotor jobs, Jolly Green Giants, Jesus, how they’d hover close to the ground, whirring toward the LZ, getting lower and lower almost to eye level. Now the LZ’s nothing but a ditch the size of a football field. Another hotel, maybe? Who knows. Da Nang has spread out so. Matt can hear the choppers landing over there by the ditch where it’s still flat. Eerie feeling, everyone running, hunched over, dust mushrooming as the birds lowered to the ground. To this day, Matt has an aversion to ceiling fans.

Nothing lay past the LZ but rice paddies, and in the distance the Lady Buddha at Linh Ung Pagoda on Son Tra Peninsula, the only thing that stands out in Matt’s war photos. Now, Christ, he can hardly see the Buddha for all the houses, hotels, and skyscrapers. He holds his hand over his eyes and squints. Phương’s house would be over there to his left in that pocket of streets, and a jog over should be Center One. He sees the bridge he’ll cross to reach Dien Bien Phu Street. That will take him to Dragon Bridge and then on to his apartment.

Blocked by buildings, he can’t make out the airport unless a plane takes off. The North Vietnamese used to shell the airport. Rockets arced over the hills, and Matt would hear them before he saw them and anticipate the explosion. We’re here, the North was telling the Americans. We’re not leaving.

B-52 bombers, wow, he remembers them. They were big, nothing like the fighter jets he’d see more often. A humongous bomber gliding in, amazing something that big could fly. Vietnamese men and women worked on the base doing general cleanup and laundry, and they’d pause and watch the bombers land. The Vietnamese lived god-knows-where. Buses dropped them off. During the day, guys in tanks rolled through. One guy shot himself in the foot with an M16 in a storage unit where the Army kept Claymore mines. Might have been an accident. Might have been loading and a bullet was already in the chamber and boom. It’s possible.

Matt assumes he got exposed to Agent Orange in Da Nang because he spent more time here than any other post. Cam Ranh Bay, Chui Lai, Da Nang. Was it here or here, or here? What does it matter where? Beevo would still be dead and he’d still have cancer.

He walked back to his motorbike, put on his helmet for the ride home. He feels anxious about the years he has left. At times he feels like he did during the war; he wonders, will I be here tomorrow? What will my health be next year? Will I maintain the stamina I have today?

5

On his way home from Camp Reasoner, Matt stops at the home of Linh, a DAVA pupil who meets him every morning at the start of school and carries his helmet. Her father, seventy-year-old Pham Phu Chi, and mother, Nguyen Thi Lien, meet him at the door and lead him to their kitchen table, where Linh brings a pitcher of water. The family lives at the end of an alley and neighbors watch, whispering among themselves in front of their homes as the sun pierces through what little shade remains. Linh begins to fuss and knocks over a flower vase and Matt encourages her to join him at a corner table where he entertains her with his watch until she gets quiet. Although she looks to be about twelve, she is twenty-eight. Linh has Down syndrome and a heart condition. In 2009, she had surgery to implant a pacemaker. The surgeon said her heart was shrinking.

As Matt keeps Linh occupied, her father, Chí, pours him a glass of water. He did not fight during the war but worked as a vendor selling food and other supplies to the Viet Cong. When he and Lien married in 1978, he was unaware he had been exposed to Agent Orange, but years later he experienced severe stomach aches and had two ulcer operations. His cousin, a doctor at Da Nang General Hospital, took blood samples and told him that the test results showed he had been exposed to dioxins.

Linh could not walk in the early years of her childhood. Lien took her to a hospital, but the doctors did nothing to help. A sister-in-law advised Lien to bury her in wet sand. Dig a hole near the water container at your house, she advised, but Lien thought it would be easier to take her to the beach. She doesn’t know why her sister-in-law recommended this treatment. Perhaps she heard about it from a friend, but whatever the reason, Lien tried it. Every morning at sunrise she drove Linh to the ocean and covered her with sand from the waist down. Back home, Linh gripped handrails and practiced walking. A year later, she walked a few steps without help. Ever so slowly she improved until she walked like other children.

Besides Linh, Liên and Chí have two more daughters. One is thirty-nine and has no health issues. The other daughter, now thirty-five, has difficulty talking and can’t concentrate; however, her three children appear normal. In Vietnam, a husband is expected to father a son. Even if he has ten daughters, they don’t count. Only a son can continue the family name. So he and Liên always hoped for a boy and were upset when they did not have sons, but at least they have children. Families without children have nothing. Although Lines condition saddens them, they accept it. What choice do they have? God decided to give them a sick child. What Linh likes to do, she does. She won’t listen. A DAVA teacher told them to teach her housekeeping, so Lien showed her how to wash dishes and put water in a pitcher. Of course she’ll never marry. Who will care for her when we die? Lien wonders. Maybe one of their daughters, but a parent’s love for a child far exceeds that of a sibling’s. When she comes home from Center One, Linh talks about her day making incense sticks. At those times, the house feels warm and cozy and ordinary, and for a moment Linh is like any other young woman. Lien and Chi have been fortunate. After much effort Linh learned to walk. They take comfort where they can. Still, they fret. Chi keeps his thoughts to himself, but at night Lien cries herself to sleep knowing she and Chi will die and Linh will be alone.

Leaving Linh’s house, Matt pulls over at a roadside stall to drink a cold Coke. He sits in the shade of a palm and worries about Phương. He sees how slowly he walks these days, how easily he gets out of breath. Someday Matt will get a call just as he did about Truong, and he will mourn but he will not be surprised. He wonders about the university students who practiced their English with him when he first returned. Like a welcoming thing. He was obviously not Vietnamese. They were so excited to meet him asking questions faster than he could answer. What happened to them? Do they remember him? He hopes they found professional fulfillment and personal happiness.

At seventy, a survivor of war and prostate cancer, Matt feels fortunate to be alive. He thanks God his two daughters and four grandchildren were not affected by his exposure to Agent

Orange. So far drugs have kept his cancer under control, but one day his doctor might call for something more drastic like chemo, removal of the prostate, who knows? Every option carries risks. Maybe he'll develop a skit for the kids about being afraid and how it's okay to be scared and how to get past it so you lead a fulfilling life.

He told Lan when he dies, he wants to be cremated and have his ashes interred at Center Three. He enjoys the quiet, the nearby farms seared brown from the sun, and the scarecrows swaying in the breeze.

A store owned by Mr. Tom, a veteran of the North Vietnamese Army, stands off the road nearby, its scattered tables catching the sun on an outdoor patio. He waves Matt over to the shade, where they settle in with cold drinks. Mr. Tom's grandchildren chase chickens and Matt joins them. Afterward, he sits with Mr. Tom. When they speak of the war, they often fall into a quiet, mutual contemplation of the horrors they wished they had never experienced.

Perhaps DAVA would put up a little plaque: *Here lies Matt Keenan. A Vietnam veteran and a friend of the Vietnamese people*. Something like that. Love, peace, and happiness. He'd want that in there too.

Afterword

David E. Clark continued his work to alleviate the consequences of war until his death in 2025.

John "Jay" Magner retired in 2024. He returned to Vietnam in 2025 and 2026 with Veterans For Peace.

Dave Johannes lives in Lacey, Washington with his five-year-old Yorkshire Terrier, "Puppy." He enjoys working on his 1982 Volvo station wagon.

Matt Keenan and Lana married in 2020. He underwent prostate surgery in November 2022 and completed hormone therapy in July 2025. He continues to volunteer at DAVA with Nguyễn Ngọc Phương