New Fiction from Mike McLaughlin: “For the Truth is Always Awake”

Krieger’s father left Salzburg late in life. He had never married and had no close family to speak of. After thirty years a banker, he yearned for something else. A friend in the Austrian foreign ministry proposed that he try Siam. The consulate in Bangkok could use a man with his keen mind, he said, to help smooth out difficulties they often encountered in Southeast Asia finance. The elder Krieger leapt at the chance.

Within a month of his arrival, in addition to taking well to the work, he struck up a quite reasonable arrangement with a young Siamese stenographer. Things went very well indeed. So well that two months later the young woman informed him he would become a father the following spring. To the astonishment of his peers, Krieger was elated. He and the girl were married at once. From the start the man felt neither distress nor regret. His pleasure and pride in this new life was boundless.

And for the child, Lukas Udom Dumarradee Krieger, the boy’s delight was the equal of his parents. His life was a happy one. To him the disparity in ages was no more unusual than night following day. And if he had ever been troubled by the thought of a father nearly too old to catch a ball by the time the boy was able throw one, he had never been heard to say it.

After completing his education at the Lutheran missionary school in Sukhimvit, young Krieger entered the ministry. Principally from deference to his father, but also for his yearning to be of service to others. To do so not only with faith, but from the orderliness his family and his education

had instilled in him. And while his intentions were true and his efforts genuine, he never quite felt settled in it, and so he left the Lutheran monastery for the Buddhist one.

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A child of two faiths, Krieger had spent countless hours in the library of his home. Studying and reflecting upon the works devoted to the ideals of his mother and that of his father.

There was an ornate glass cabinet with all the volumes of the Pali Canon, the vast compendium of Siddhartha Gautama's teachings. They were the foundation upon which Theravada Buddhism was built. A wedding gift to his parents, it awed him as boy. A living wall of wisdom, to guide and inspire.

On an ornate bookstand his father kept a New Testament printed in German. A heavy tome indeed, it had been in the family for generations. The cover was of hard black leather and etched with gold leaf. The pages were thick, their texture smooth, with large print and beautifully wrought images depicting the teachings of Jesus.

And beside that was a volume of similar dimension, this one in Latin. A reprint of the *Versio Vulgata*, translated from the Greek edition centuries before. And next to that was the King James edition, in – as the saying went – the King's own English.

And adjacent to it all, naturally, was Martin Luther's *Disputatio pro declaration virutis indulgentiarum.* The epochal list of ninety-five theses through which he outlined the faults, the hypocrisy underlying the system through which sinners could bribe their way out of Purgatory for their sins, or for those of deceased relations. In contrast were Luther's assertions that prayer, penance, acts of selflessness and generosity were the path to salvation.

Salvation he declared, was not to be purchased, but to be earned.

What intrigued the boy, what drew his attention and held it, was the principle of a faith forever seeking to define itself. A natural conclusion to draw, given the vast body of works his predecessors had written across the ages. As true for Buddhism as for Christianity, he reasoned, even though the first preceded the second by centuries. Every teaching, every tale an instruction on the necessity for virtue in work and in thought. Each being another step along the path.

With no small irony, due more to the latter than the former, young Lukas embraced the tenets of Buddhism. These being, in essence, the freeing of oneself from the distractions of the world. The temptations. The burdens. The suffering. To surrender the transient. To surrender even the self. Embracing samsara, the ever turning wheel of life. The ongoing, seemingly endless cycle of birth to death to rebirth. Turning, changing, turning again.

The acolyte’s task was to reflect and see beyond these machinations.

To transcend.

To achieve supreme enlightenment, beyond the body and the physical world.

To achieve nirvana.

Yet as it was with all faiths, there were varying schools of thought on how this was to be accomplished.

One counseled that nirvana was accessible to those who helped those around them. Choosing to address the present, with its attendant suffering and chaos, and helping those in need.

Another advocated a more detached approach. To turn one’s mind inward. Away from the strife and the fleeting pleasures of the

world. To read and meditate in a realm of pure silence and peace.

Thus, a monk in a town or a city would observe that living among a great populace was ideal – while a monk in a rural monastery would perhaps disagree. Reasoning that such undisciplined places undermined true spiritual work. And a monk living in utter isolation, alone in the deepest forest or atop the highest mountain might very well dismiss them all.

Reflecting on the disparity between the three, Krieger began imagining himself a fourth monk, sitting placidly on the surface of the moon. Gazing down upon them all – and believing that all three were correct. To the puzzlement of his peers, he enjoyed the conundrum.

And with all that said, as his Lutheran father was fond of saying, “Uncle Martin is just around the corner.” Affirming that one needed only the scripture to guide him – or, in the boy’s case, more than one. At the center of all, he reasoned, Buddha’s teachings and those of Jesus were in harmony.

A disciple of truth is always awake.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Let the disciple always be awake and let his mind always delight in compassion.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Let your light shine before others, and so let them see your good deeds.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Overcome anger by love.

Overcome evil by good.

Clear enough.

Reasonable enough.

And certainly, neither required an industry to help him in his work.

And so the young Krieger vowed to do what he felt was right. The right thoughts. The right acts. The right goals. To follow the Noble Eightfold Path as well as the Beatitudes. Unconcerned which side of the argument he was on. Certain that the question was meaningless. Content to live virtuously. Never knowing if he was successful, merely doing the best he could. Hoping, if he was lucky, to compare notes in the end with those most blessed. Those most redeemed. Those most enlightened.

*

From floor to ceiling, every shelf in the monastery library was filled with books. Many were handwritten, bound in covers decades or centuries old. Every one of them was testament to a faith that arose millennia before the boy was born.

Early in life he learned that the wisdom every book sought to impart could not be absorbed directly. Often it was not their literal meaning of the words that mattered, but what they implied. Creating a context which the reader was invited to perceive, not by what the words said, but what they did not.

From the beginning he found this maddeningly vague. After a full and frustrating week, he felt himself no better informed than he was at the start. He would shift in his seat and sigh, turning a page so loudly that the novices beside him – each required not to utter a word – would look up with concern.

That said, here and there were morsels that caught his eye. Each time he found one, he would spend hours, sometime days pondering it as jeweler would consider a single facet of a gem. Marveling at the quality that made each unique in the tapestry of life, as a singular grain of sand would be among

its fellows on a beach. And in each, he found value – a fresh sense of worth every time.

And yet…

And yet with every volume he completed, he would study the thousands more throughout the hall, and he would blink. His blinks became sighs, which soon became groans. He strained to stifle them but with every book he returned to its place and every new one he brought down, his groans became more frequent. More heartfelt.

How many pages, he wondered, were truly needed to expound on the transcendent? To what length must one strive to explain the inexplicable to another seeking to make the ascent himself? How many different ways did one need to expound upon a life well lived?

The principles were plain enough to him. To be modest and kind. To live simply. To always practice kindness and compassion. To do good purely for the sake of doing so, even if these acts went unwitnessed. Fundamental principles all, which in essence explained themselves. To do otherwise, he knew without hesitation, was wrong – and certainly nothing in the any of the texts, from the short to the winding and windy – which were most of them – declared otherwise.

Again and again he would hear his father's kind voice turning hard, as it always did when his vast patience had been exhausted.

"Was ist das verdammte endergibniss??"

What is the damned bottom line??

*

On a bright morning in spring, Krieger and a fellow acolyte had been tending to the flowering plants in the circular garden. It was in the southwest corner of the monastery, so

arranged as to receive the most sunlight.

The garden was an ornate set of concentric rings, each a series of curving teak boxes, four feet in height. Together the boxes formed the rings, with gaps in each wide enough for the visitor to pass through. These gaps were set at irregular intervals, permitting the visitor to enter, walk the length of the perimeter, turn inward to the next row, and continue. To ponder and reflect among the lotuses and orchids, the tulips and frangipanis. Together they formed arcs of harmony, with a reflecting pool at the center.

It was amidst this spectacle of elegance that the two of them had been working. Carefully watering the plants, giving more or less as each required. Trimming away dying petals. Removing weeds that appeared daily, seeming to sprout faster than they could be removed. The work itself as much a turning wheel as the cycle of the flowers themselves.

Young Krieger was all of twenty, the other a few years younger. They had been in earnest discussion, reviewing and pondering the teachings of their masters. Krieger had been about to make further comment, but he fell silent instead.

The other boy frowned.

“Are you not well?” he asked.

Krieger looked down, shaking his head.

“What is it?” the boy persisted.

Krieger gritted his teeth, his eyes shifting this way and that, seeking to grasp an idea, yet it kept eluding him.

“Well,” he began carefully. “It has just occurred to me that a life devoted purely to reflection upon selflessness could…”

The boy studied him, waiting for the rest.

“It could, in essence, be…”

The silence stretched, until resolve asserted itself.

“…a selfish act.”

Frowning, the boy replied, “You cannot mean that.”

“I do,” Krieger replied, sighing.

“But how could that make sense?” the other persisted.

“Well…”

He hesitated again, thoughtfully scratching his shaven head.

“Well, consider this. Here we meditate. We reflect. We lead simple lives.”

“Yes, certainly.”

“We dedicate ourselves to taking the higher path.”

“Yes?”

“And, therefore, you and I dedicate ourselves to ourselves.”

“Well…” the boy answered, cautiously.

“And by so doing,” Krieger persisted, “We free ourselves. We shed every element of self we can conceive of, and in so doing, we are to achieve true enlightenment, correct?”

“Of course,” the other answered, his good cheer gone now.

“Well – to me, it would seem that this in itself is selfish. Committing so utterly to the path at the dismissal of all else. I am not certain how better to express it, but often – too often – that is how it seems to me.”

The boy’s frown deepened.

“But…what you are saying – the two cannot be reconciled.”

The son of the Austrian banker and Thai stenographer stood straight, studying the sky.

“’Der glaube ohne werke ist tot.’”

The boy blinked.

“From the Book of James,” Krieger went on.

The boy shrugged.

Krieger sighed.

“In the Christian Bible.”

The boy shrugged further.

“’Faith without works is dead.’”

“But,” the boy replied, ever more confused, “Here we do both.”

Krieger sighed and bent back to the flowers.

“The doors of the monastery are open to all,” the other persisted.

“Yes, they are.”

“We tend to the poor.”

“I know.”

“We tend to all.”

“I know.”

“In spirit and in body.”

“Yes. Perhaps you are right.”

“And yet you believe that a life of pure selflessness is wrong.”

“Of course,” Krieger admitted, his voice low, his eyes distant.

“But – that is madness.”

Krieger nodded, yet he smiled and looked up.

“And that is beauty of it, do you not think?”

The other boy had been about to reply when he realized they were not alone. The eldest of the monks had appeared from behind them. A short slender man with eyes a striking blend of green and copper. Of all the elders, he was known to listen the most and say the least.

Krieger swallowed.

He had not heard the monk approach. It was as though the man had materialized from the air.

Clearing his throat, he said cautiously, “Would you not agree, Master?”

As if unaware of their presence, the man examined the stone wall behind them. The worn prayer wheels mounted before it. The brass cylinders a faded red, the symbols a faded gold. The yellow and the orange banners on the wall above them, stirring gently in the breeze.

He cleared his throat and spoke slowly, his voice coarse as gravel.

“That is for you to decide.”

He studied Krieger a moment.

“Often, when one must ask the question, one already sees the answer.”

Turning away, he added a parting thought.

“Where do you think you shall find it?”

*

The elders took notice of his distress, but they said nothing. Saying little as a rule, they could go days, even weeks without speaking – yet they saw all.

One morning as Krieger began his reading, he was startled by a touch on his shoulder. He turned to see the old monk smiling down at him, beckoning wordlessly for him to follow.

On the far side of the temple was a sunlit room, and at the center was a table with a small rug on the floor before it. On the table sat a fishbowl, and when the monk told him to kneel, Krieger found himself at eye level with the lone goldfish within.

photo by Britta Hansen

“Find yourself there,” the monk whispered gently.

Puzzled, the boy remained, embracing a challenge even greater than the thousands, perhaps millions of words placed before him every day. The man departed, leaving the fish to study the newcomer, until it lost interest and ignored him.

The minutes grew to hours as Krieger studied the fish and the glass between them. It was perfectly transparent and smoother than any he had ever seen. So clear it mirrored him with exceptional clarity. Back and forth, his focus shifted from his reflection to the fish to himself again. Yet as the day wore on he found himself nodding off, fatigued from the task. The task of doing, in essence, nothing.

When the supper gong sounded, he was startled. His mind had drifted so far into this silent narrow world, peopled only by

himself and the swimming creature, that he had lost all track of time. Only now did he realize it was dusk, and the room alive with the crimson of a perfect sunset. Resolve surrendering to hunger, and devotion to exasperation, he gave up.

A full day was gone…and he had learned nothing new.

He began to rise, preparing his apology for having failed.

Then he froze.

As he had moved to stand, he observed movement behind the glass. Not from the fish but a muted shift between light and dark along the far side of the bowl. Not the curved surface closest to him, in which he had interminably studied his reflection, but on the one beyond. Another reflection. A ghostly image of himself, parallel to the first. Distorted in ways captivating and haunting. The colors were muted, the shadows devoid of detail, and his reflection not only spectral but inverted.

As he had begun to rise, his distorted twin lowered itself, head first. Seeming to vanish into the pebbles at the bottom of the bowl. As he reached his full height, all that remained of his other was the reflected orange of his robe.

Stunned, he quickly sat again, haunted yet pleased as his reverse image rejoined him.

Mesmerized, they studied each other until the light was gone.

He had found what he sought – only when he ceased looking.

He left the monastery the following day.

*

He traveled widely, devoting his energies to, of course, works and prayer. Stopping countless times to help where help was

welcome. With the families and individuals he encountered, he planted and harvested. He helped mend old homes and build new ones. Giving such comfort as he could to the sick, and especially the dying. Offering his blessings at a wedding here, the birth of a child there.

He began in the south and soon was on his way, far to the northwest. Venturing up through communities along the banks of the Mae Nam Ping. Going even further, well into Burma, up along the Salween River. Turning east again, he traveled ever deeper into the interior. Drawn by the remoteness of it all. Savoring it. He had spent his childhood in Bangkok, often within sight of the gulf. The increasing isolation of the north pleased him no end.

He took immense pleasure in traveling among the peoples across the Khorat Plateau, well to the east of Siam's fertile river valleys. The mountainous landscapes awed him, and the clear air and breezes refreshed him.

His travels fell into a pattern. He would stay a while in one place or another, a guest in homes or out in the open, and push on. One morning as he left a Laotian monastery, the amused abbot told him that this was a legacy of his father – the sense that wherever he stood, he hadn't gone far enough.

*

By the start of the war, he was fifty-four years old and healthy indeed. A monk both inspired and patient. Benevolent yet firm when the occasion required. Humble yet brave. Forgiving yet determined. Kind yet strong. Imbuing in all his thoughts and his deeds the tenets of the Eightfold Path.

Of the Eight Virtues comprising the path through the ceaseless wheel of life and beyond, he was most devoted to Right Livelihood and Right Effort. He spoke six languages by now and had broadened and sharpened his skills to be of exceptional help to all. To help those he met not merely survive but to

lead healthy and prosperous lives.

He was the very essence of a hale and strong phra sñgḳhʻ.

*

When Japan unleashed its flood of terror across the east, Siam – now become Thailand at the stroke of a pen – seemed to be spared the worst. The Thai government, willingly or not, was guided by the Chomphon Por, their inspired albeit fascist-leaning prime minister. With his acquiescence – and the theoretical endorsement of their young King Mahidol, still at school in Switzerland – the Japanese occupation of Thailand was more formality than conquest.

After an opening battle that lasted only hours, an uneasy peace was declared. Yet the principal goal of their conquerors was to flay the British in Burma and on to India – the crown jewel. Relations between the nations warmed considerably when the Japanese pledged to help the Thai regain territories long lost to the Burmese.

Asia was still Asia.

On a perfect dawn, three months after Thailand's one-day war, Krieger sat cross-legged on the Bangkok waterfront, enjoying a cup of tea and savoring his return to the capital.

He visited his father's grave at the Lutheran cemetery, not far from his childhood home, and spent several days with his ailing mother. She could have remarried after his father's death, but had chosen not to. Embracing her son, she declared that her greatest joy in life had been giving her love to two men only. She did not require a third.

Meditating now, his back against a warehouse on the Phunkatta piers, refreshed by the sun and breeze off the sea, he was distracted by the sound of approaching Japanese soldiers.

It was a patrol – of sorts. Four bored privates followed a

sergeant who looked disappointed the war had fled from him. Their noses wrinkled and their heads were half-turned from the stench of fish left too long in the sun. Disinterested in the yelling and sweating fishermen as they unloaded their morning catch. The soldiers drifted by, as though the breeze were the only incentive they had.

The last one stopped and looked down at the monk. Krieger nodded respectfully, his offering bowl sitting empty before him. The private paused to dig from his pocket a satang coin and drop it in the bowl. Krieger pressed his hands together, fingertips aimed to the heavens, and bowed in gratitude. The private began to do the same when the sergeant clamped a hand on his shoulder and with a snarl shoved him to the front of the line. After scowling at the monk, the man moved on.

The preceding night had been cool and, having slept in an untended patch of grass beneath the stars, the monk welcomed the dawn. He savored the sunlight as it warmed his face and drove the chill from his bones.

And so it was at that moment, as he sat meditating on the pier, that he saw the bearded and starving American stagger up the ramp from the rusting tug that had just barely made it to dock. The boat’s barge was redolent with a stench that exceeded all others combined. It sat so low in the water it appeared to remain afloat through faith alone. The ascent to the dock was steep indeed, and the man climbing it was so fatigued the monk saw he was close to collapse.

The patrol would return in minutes, Krieger knew. He finished his tea and stood, realizing for once, that the wretched of the earth had come to him.

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?”

“C□m ơn dì,” Dolan replied, trying not to stammer. *“Bạn – Bạn t□t với tôi.”*

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

 Her smile broadened.

“C□m 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, di.”

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 trưng Mỹ Henry Kissinger da dua ra mot tuyen đã 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. *“C□m ơn ban!”*

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 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.

C□m ơn dì.

To wish them both good night.

Chúc ng□ 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.