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VIETNAM: NARROW STROKES

With no further ado: I am halfway across the world, sitting in an internet cafe called "Crazy Online Games". Besides me in the room are only young school-age Vietnamese boys yelling Vietnamese to each other about their computer games. The atmosphere is inspiring.

I landed here after a two-day travel (Baltimore-New York-Frankfurt-Singapore-Hanoi) on a Saturday. On Sunday, after an in-depth brainstorm with the president of NGO Crossing Borders, I decided what my documentary is going to be about, or at least, how I am going to go about it. In summary, it will be composed of vignettes. We decide on the first subject: a restaurant which specializes in training disadvantaged youths mired in poverty to upscale restaurant-catering. Within two hours, I'm sitting down with a girl name Nga. Within another hour, I am at her house which has basically no roof, and is the size of 25 sq/m. By dusk, her mother is crying in front of my videocamera upon the first question of the interview about how they have arrived here. This is my first vignette, yet it could be my entire documentary. I woke up at 4.30am today, and have been shooting her until 3pm (a 10-hour work day, and it's only 4.30pm).

Narrow Strokes:

I have a bad burn on my leg from touching a motorcycle fuel exhaust when I was getting off. The bubble of Vietnamese tones have already become natural to my ears, yet I can understand absolutely nothing. Vietnam has so much French infusion, I couldn't think of a better Asian culture for me to get to know. I am stared at unabashedly every single place I go, no matter how I try to dress like they do. I've learned to deal with it by smiling so warmly that the stare focuses on me the human being, and not me the foreigner (and some smile back, surprised). The food is unimaginable to Westerners. I have not seen a single person that is even slightly overweight. To consider me "tall" is inappropriate. I am a giant here.

A DREAM OF CERTAIN PROPORTIONS

The depth of the mountains here are as wide horizontally as they are vertically. Any way you look is an impossible distance. Clouds are at eye-level, reaching in and around you as if to make you part of the landscape if only for a moment's blindness of solid white.

Then, it passes, the horizon of mountain blues coming through again, and the sun shines. Whether you decide to melt into your own shadow and live in what Sa Pa offers is up to you.

I walked through a semi-dangerous current to get under a waterfall. This time I melted into the hollow wall and watched with suspense the water which blurred my view of the deep valley. As I stepped out into the fall, the water hit me hard, along with the realization that this wasn't mine. But at least I could get this one glorious moment, alone, underneath beauty which we would all die for, but as in the other province has caused such hardship for the H'mong.

The H'mong: an ethnic minority located in the Northern mountains of Vietnam. Large hoops dangle from the women's ears, and heaps of red turbans are wrapped around their long hair. Their traditional garb consists of dark blue fine hemp clothes with hand-made embroidery of all colors. It is striking. Here they do not offer their prayers through their hats, but through their feet, scaling miles from destination to destination up and down the hillside.

They are a resilient peoples, pushed onto this mountainous marginal farming land many years ago from China. The government does not pay them much mind, or if it does, encroaches on their land. They have been forgotten to exist during the French and American invasions. Today a booming tourist economy is eroding their community and introducing the spirit of profit and free enterprise. The H'mong live in Sa Pa, a village which was only recently, as Lonely Planet describes, "rediscovered".

As I said, they walk everywhere, motorbike rides a rare luxury. As I roared past them on my own two wheels up the mountain I felt like I was entering an alternate universe: climbing endlessly with basket backpacks and beautiful faces full of a sun I knew nothing of, the H'mong are made of a life and energy I find rare in Westerners.

Later, as I walked down into their village Tan Van I came across a little girl who called herself Mimilou. Mimilou spoke a very good English she learned from tourists and served as my unofficial translator to her three H'mong aunts for me (whom do not speak Vietnamese, but H'mong). But before Mimilou took my hand and pranced down the hillside to take me to the waterfall I had come to see, she asked me casually, "So - are you married?" I smiled and said, "No, not quite. What about you?" She laughed and cried, "Me? Too young. You just right. But take your time!" Her aunts came up behind us then; reaching out, they first touched my hair gently, curls foreign to their knobby working fingers. The connection was undeniable. I poured myself into their smiles and disappeared for the third time this day.

One hour later, they are singing a H'mong song for me in front of my camera. I cannot believe this is happening. They laugh and ask me to play it back for them - it's enough for them to invite me to spend the night in their home, made out of bamboo and stones. They say, "Come on - yu com bak tomorrow, i hef dinnah fo yu and meet family and sleep hear" their hospitality is unimaginable.

But I had to leave - the sacrifice of a tight schedule. Mimiou gave me a bracelet to remember her by. She, at 12 years old, has never gone to school, nor will she since there is not one around for more than 100 kilometers. When she laid down to listen to her aunts sing, a yellow butterfly the size of my palm landed on her lips, still, before her warm breath lit it aflight again. I closed my eyes to imprint what I could before they flew open again to take in some more.

The scenery is married to itself here: water, earth, sky, are all hand in hand, a perfect union morning, noon and night. People are its wrinkles, wind its laughter.

Hen Gap Lai Isabelle

DIGGING DEEPER

He tells me, "You know, I don't have a religion. Many people in Viet Nam do not have a religion. But I think... the people are my religion. I am nothing. But for the people I help, for them, I am everything"

His face holds years in its folds, laughter a permanent feature. With a storyteller's gait, he pauses for a long time in between his statements, to let them simmer with the juice of patience.

"You know, every time I come down to this commune-" he waves his cigarette over the view of the rice paddies "-I try to do everything they do. Work in the fields, ride a bicycle, play Chinese chess, smoke, drink, and eat. When I show that I am no better than them, then they are starting to listen to me"

Really, I thought, what you show them is that they are full-fledged human beings, as worthy of their experience in life as you are. This man has been the head of the malnutrition program in Vietnam for decades. With charismatic wisdom of an infinite reserve, he tries to teach farmers how to cut down on malnutrition in their commune. His job is hard. But he gets it. The results are undeniable: in 1996 60% of the population here were malnourished. Now, 10 years later, it is 30%.

The past two days has been an entire semester's class study of theory ripped apart, put back together, applied, failed, reapplied, badly digested, and finally maybe taking root. International grassroots development, such as malnutrition programs like the one I visited, isn't as simple as I had first understood it. Many things are not like you read, and practical experience is unforgettable.

Out in the countryside, the rice paddies look like a still sea of grass, sectioned off into shapes. Graves dot the fields, where dear family members are buried on the family farm. I have found this the most telling sign: they could not be further from mechanized agriculture. That kind of thing can only exist with farmwork done by hand.

Pointed domes on their heads, back bent over, water up to their knees: perhaps the most stereotypical image of Vietnam to date. Small wonder as this is everywhere. Their domes are practical unisex sun-hats; it gives such a line to the body, ending in an assembled arrow to the sky. I imagine it must send their thoughts and small prayers up.

The family I visited yesterday at the commune earns \$350 a year. The mother farms. The daughter is a servant to a rich family in the city. But their house faces a scene most Westerners in the suburbs would die for. There is no noise of traffic, only cows and children. The sinewy blue mountains weave in and out of each other for most of the horizon, before the rice fields take over. Yet, she cooks over a black firepit. She has one lightbulb in her house/hut. Her teeth are black from absolutely no dental care. Is she a happy person? I don't know.

In Viet Nam, no one says "goodbye". Only "I'll see you again":

Hen Gap Lai
Isabelle

ONWARD AND INWARD

Karaoke. First Time. My thoughts went something like this: What a degeneration of musical entertainment - yet I am having a good time?!? It's like some sort of weird adult videogame where the TV tells you what to say in subtitles to MIDI (digitally-made) music files that don't even follow the actual song patterns. As a societal analysis, kareoke is potentially fascinating if deranging.

NGO Conference. Sat through a long "inauguration" of NGOs which will work in this particular province in the south in the future, including potentially Crossing Borders (the NGO I am traveling for). I have my reservations about the way the conference was conducted, but over all it is this type of important social lubricant that allows for relationships to be made between provinces, Vietnam, and international NGOs. It is a chance to meet people in your field of work, if not your interest, and make some loose connections which can be revisited easily at another time.

Phu Quoc Island. It reminds me of "Wonderland" on the coast of Maine. It is a Vietnamese resort island, currently undeveloped. It is quiet, peaceful, the thunder of the sea incessant in its presence. The rocks are hues of a sunset: vermilion, deep mauve, okra orange. The sea as always wraps around the sky, blues graceful in their movement with each other. I find the sea is the only thing which imitates the end of the earth: infinity represented in the thin line between sky and its reflection, the chasm of our knowledge.

From the Car. I saw a man struggling to get up on his crutches from the road. He looked about 50, perhaps. As he reached again to pull himself up, I noticed his feet. They were inverted, the soles pointing up towards the sky. He was trying to get up, on his ankles, wobbly like a drunk. I have never seen something more pathetic, pity-full, sad,

incongruous. I say "pathetic" not in condescension but in pity and admiration. No-one was helping him. How did he ever walk on ankles made out of jelly? As the car pulled away, I looked back to see if his last attempt was successful. From his full height, he wobbled for a distinctive moment and then he fell violently on the pavement again, knees hitting the ground, his feet facing his eyes with ease. I am now meeting with an NGO which deals with Agent Orange victims tomorrow morning. I am sure there is much worse that I will see.

AGENT ORANGE & AIDS/HIV

The floor is your sideways horizon, your body resting on a sea of glossy mosaic tiles of different colors. It is pretty, yet it is only one more sign of how poor your family is, having asked for extras from door-to-door to make a complete floor. Your body has always spanned about 2 of these foot-long tiles. Feet often clutter your view when you are not in the mood to look up, eyes straining to the ceiling. Feet in fact become symbols of impossible -forbidden- freedom, yet you have the most intimate knowledge of their habits, shapes, smells. When you do look around you are limited to the globe of sight we all have, but you can't turn your head. Your arms jerk from one place to another, elbows acting more like a flexible wrist in the way they look and move. This is what strangers always look at when they see you, after trying to put your age and size together. 17 years old, and 2 feet long.

I imagine you must think this: They ask all sorts of things, these white skins with their soft narrow feet, unwrinkled from the protection of shoes. I can't answer them sometimes. Neither can my 2 sisters and my brother. My hopes and dreams are contained only for other people, such as my parents. I only hope one day they will get the rest they deserve. As for me? What my hopes are? They dared to ask. "Look at me," I said, "I have no hope". Neither does my other sister who lives with my same horizon. When I answer this response, their feet get nervous, getting ready to leave. The usual five government officials are watching our every word, ready to pounce if one of us strays off the script. It was my mother in the end that boiled the tension over, burning us all. The girl, the 2 boys, and the 5 officials and their 16 feet packed up, along with their "hope", and money. What difference did it make that I could read and write when I cannot grow or sit up? What is the point of their visits? To ogle, or to help?

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Perhaps this internal monologue was present in the girl I'm talking about, perhaps not. The second Agent Orange family that we visited that day was different: this time, it was 2 mentally handicapped boys where the dullness of their eyes was their salvation from certain suffering. I cannot imagine what it is like to live without hope. Luckily I would guess their hope lies with the arms of their kind parents, and with the heavens when the time comes. In this version of agent orange hell, this second family lived in better conditions because of a higher education (they, had matching tiles). Yet their kids were unable to read or write, unlike the first family. One of their boys, lying belly-up in the middle of the floor, had a slow gracefulness that almost-atrophied limbs can give you.

His spindly legs danced our renewed tension in the air, between white people, government officials, a family affected by this terrible chemical put on spectacle. This time, we were not allowed to interview this family because of the last narrowly averted catastrophe. I kept my questions in my fingers, taking pictures instead.

The next day we (David, Jeremy, and I; the current makeup of Crossing Borders before the rest of the team arrives) visited a second extremely sensitive issue: AIDS/HIV families. Currently there is no program, government or NGO, which exists to address this problem. In fact, according to the government, HIV/AIDS "did not exist" in Viet Nam 5 years ago. The experience was equally as confusing as the first, on so many layers. One, the governmental censorship and bureaucracy. Two, the sights, sounds, smells, laughter, children, infections. The small army of officials who escorted us acted as both an armor for the government, as well as a needed precautions against ignorant Westerners. I'm amazed I was even allowed to visit these families, much less take pictures and VIDEO. So there must be a lot of trust, even if it does contain censorship.

The children which surrounded me in the home and gathered outside the door like a pool of jumping frogs were mostly all infected with HIV/AIDS, or will imminently be. The mother wasn't at home (the father was dead) because she was "collecting glass" or "selling lottery tickets". I devise that she could very well be doing the sad job which landed her with HIV/AIDS in the first place. Again, what is the hope in this family? In these children? They are laden with a virus which kills not only your immunity system but also your future. I had a hard time imagining the shy girl hanging in the doorway looking at my camera with such innocence would one day be a prostitute. Or, that she already had AIDS.

What the hell am I doing here. I ask myself this on these days. Shaping my future? Or shaping other people's future? Stealing hope? Or creating hope?

THE TYPHOON EFFECT

Ha Long Bay is another one of those places on earth when you wonder what you've been doing with your life thus far. Although heavily visited, a good boat ride out and a day later, you are almost out of reach of those People that Look Like You. This retreat was supposed to be the last of these puddles of luxury I've been splashing across in Viet Nam: it is a Crossing Borders team-building event. I forgot that teams needed building. Getting-to-know-you is more complicated, more discerning, more calculated. It is, above all, extremely important. Perhaps this seems a trivial observation, but I assure you it is not. Ha Long Bay was a Plan A.

What does this UNESCO World Heritage Site look like exactly? Ha Long Bay, in the Gulf of Tonkin, includes some 1,600-4,000 islands and islets (pending on who you ask), forming a "spectacular seascape of limestone pillars. Because of their precipitous nature, most of the islands are uninhabited and unaffected by a human presence" writes UNESCO. I imagine it a little differently: it looks more like an ancient giant stomped across the ocean and his tremendous wake froze mid-air to stone and tropical trees. I wrote this in some of my letters and I will again: the sheer cliff-side drop these islets have

creates an awe that only small things have for big things.

Plan A however was aborted because of a typhoon. This is monsoon season, after all. So we have all gone back to Hanoi, which I have now completely fallen in love with, and I have had an extended taste of this unique city. Team building isn't going quite according to plan, but building a team can happen in other ways too. Time will cure it, if not the place.

I am going to Phu Tho (FOO TAH) Province, our target project site, tomorrow. I will be filming a day in the life of a rice paddy farmer. The team is joining me a day later, and then starts then Phase 3 Begins. In the province I have to be aware of cultural details such as these:

1. When shaking hands with elders, shake with BOTH hands clasping, a required sign of respect
2. When listening to an elder, do not look them in the eye (which in the US is disrespectful, but it is the opposite here)
3. When handing out my business card, or receiving a business card, use BOTH hands with thumbs next to each other. Using only one hand casually is disrespectful.
4. Before entering any abode, home or office, take off shoes. Consequently, don't wear shoes that are hard to take off and put on, such as, Chacos.
5. Communal eating is the custom, so there are 5 or 6 big plates, and then everyone eats out of small bowls with chopsticks. When at dinner, eat slowly, because if you are finished early while they are still eating, they will keep putting food in your plate without asking your opinion on your appetite. However, vegetarianism is well-accepted, so I am not forced to eat meat.
6. Do not feel insulted if they hand you a spoon when you are eating with the chopsticks. They are most likely telling you that they would use a spoon too in your case. I have not yet achieved my own advise on this point, since every time they do this I feel totally deflated, having just done what I thought was a good job eating oily rice grains with thin chopsticks.

BUDDHIST NUNS

When I first saw Dalat, at 5.30am in the morning fresh off the overnight bus from Saigon, I felt like I had come to a home I once knew: Liege, Belgium. I left behind the sappy romantic Vietnamese bus music, consisting of a singing as sugary as the synthesized background band, meant to put you to sleep. The streets were lined with houses and storefronts winding up and down steep hills. Dalat has been called a mini-Paris of sorts – an old French resort town in the mountains, famous for its cool weather in this tropical country, continual fruit harvests, and mini-replica of the Eiffel tower. Folded memories came back to me of Europe, while infused with a new flavor: Vietnamese mungbean pastries, Dalat fresh strawberries, sticky rice in delicious sesame buns making the first impressions (food always does).

Dalat also has a high concentration of Buddhism. We met with an (English-speaking) monk named Vien Nhu. He smiles before he smiles, his eyes alive, ready to

laugh. His fat lips, shaved head, and slightly puffy cheeks make him look like Buddha himself. I suppose that wisdom is his trade, enlightenment his spontaneity. Still commanding all the due respect from us, he won me over with his readiness to give his energy to me. When I asked him why he became a monk (at 10 years old) he says "You know many people ask me this. I tell them... so when you were 10 years old, maybe you liked chocolate bars, yes? Do you know why you liked chocolate when you were 10?" implying that his decision to become a monk might have been totally frivolous (but now it is not). He gave himself away with a generous laugh and a slap on the table (maybe monks aren't so serene and serious as I once thought). I then asked him, "So what have been some of the teachings of the Buddha that you've struggled with?" He does not fully understand my meaning I think, but he answers that he thinks Buddhism should never be a static practice –but rather always adapting to the times, "Including now," he adds, "with such a rise in consumerism". He had said earlier that Buddhism was just a form of deep thought – that you thought about the teachings of the Buddha when you could, idle time served well. As an example he told me that there is a saying that "one can find sound in silence". He tells me the metaphor is deep, a layered answer required to properly package the explanation. He wants to tell me that layers are only found with time, and many accidents. He found the answer to this one when sitting at a loud bus-station, smoking a cigarette, when he was young.

Some days later I visited a Buddhist nunnery – did you know there were Buddhist nuns? Neither did I. I interviewed many of them on their thoughts about how Buddhism represents Viet Nam. As they spoke their Vietnamese answers to David, I stared at their shaved heads, so shocking to me in a country where long hair is a ubiquitous, required, feminine attribute. Shoulder-length hair is a "Western cut". There is something in being able to see the shape of a head so cleanly. It is exquisitely honest. Their faces carried it all, their personality and attitude. I've always been adverse to uniformity; it recalls images of the army, bootcamp, robots, prisoners, jail. But I think there is a simplicity which I have overlooked. Where my image is a "burden" to me everyday, reducing personal care to only hygiene must be refreshing, downright liberating. On another note, the full Crossing Borders team arrived a week ago, in all their splendor, some first-timers and as fascinated by everything as I was. Therefore, my documentary focusing solely on the team has also begun. Many days, I feel like I am doing a Real-Life TV Documentary, style high-drama.

MERGING REALITIES

It begins with the silence. Then, the small sounds. The buzzing, the humming, the creaking bicycle. A water buffalo groan. Low shouts across fields of rice. The distant fading whine of a motorbike.

The mountains, such a stoic presence in their pale remoteness, provide a blue relief for these bright green fields. They fill up space in the sky like an old painting on a high wall. All I can do is stare, however. It's so hot I can't really think. My constellation of bug bites make me itch my feet every once in a while.

This morning I was surrounded at the market by loud laughing women slapping my butt, my thighs, grabbing my arms, my skin, my muscle. Running fingers through my hair, stealing my hat, making jokes. Ngoc explains to me what they want to know: How old am I? How long am I staying? Do I have a husband? Is my hair naturally curly? Can they buy my hair to make a wig? Can they keep my hat for a memory?

I am Fresh Meat. I let them take my hat, I let down my hair, I let them grab me whichever way they want, I feel like I'm drowning in a pool of hands touching me, in the middle of a live snake pit. Except . . . they mean well.

When I can stop sweating for half a second, I begin to focus on The Moment. That ubiquitous, elusive feeling that Things are Happening (I'm going home so soon) and the need to realize that before it passes unnoticed. Which, in essence, ruins any moment you could have had in the first place. But in this case, what I was trying to do is make a laundry list of everything that I had ever taken for granted in my life which I did not have here.

Everything you ever thought was normal becomes a luxury. The boundaries of my "comfort zone" were not, as I discovered, the hard wooden bed, or the lack of a shower, or lack of flushing toilets, or the bugs, or the lack of privacy, or eating on the floor, or the lack of vegetarian-friendly food... It was the lack of a cold, drink. A cold drink - to cool me down in 110 degree heat. If it has some kind of sugar in it, all the better.

Humans however were made to adapt, and that is one of the reasons why you cannot relate to what I'm saying right now. I'm writing this blog some days after this experience, and even I can no longer relate with my deep longing, craving, obsession for a cold, perhaps iced, drink. We adapt immediately to our surroundings to varying degrees of success, and it is hard to empathize with people who are not in the situation we are in. If you watch a movie about someone dying of thirst, a deformity, or a gunshot wound, you're not really empathizing if you can reach to your night stand and finish your bowl of ice cream with perhaps a self-congratulatory burp in the process.

And that is the whole point. Doing it. Doing it so you can Get It. Going through this, "living with the people", so that you can truly empathize with their situation, their lives, their problems. Doing it so that it becomes real to you, and is no longer just a movie, an idea, a story, a theoretical application. It is yet another reality in this world which comes alive for you. And this is indelible on the soul.

Experiencing a different reality from yours is a challenge few people can or want to face. If you can accept a new reality, it is a feat. If you can embrace it, it is even a greater feat. And this is what Crossing Borders has to face this summer.