

Three sheets to the wind

My family's story is interlaced with war. Between love and hate, it is hard to declare the winner. Our war played itself out in a backyard swimming pool. It led me to a village in Vietnam.

Stepping out into a Hanoi street, the open sewer drains, mingled with exhaust fumes and spices, assail my nostrils. Although it's my first time here, I have a strong sense of homecoming. As a young child I slept in the arms of a Vietnamese woman who left her imprint on me. Kim was exotic and fragrant, she was Saigon cinnamon and lemongrass, orchids and jasmine. I was her white rice. She was one of many Colombo Plan students who passed through our Wellington home, learning English, learning democracy, learning the ache of suburban loneliness that crept in between rough wool blankets. Children did not sleep with their exhausted parents. Instead, it was Kim's heart that beat an ancient rhythm of love against my cheek as the blue gum tree shushed the bedroom window on freezing winter nights.

The Colombo Plan sought to create a future generation of Southeast Asian leaders in our image. With colonial rulers and war-time invaders thrown out after World War II, the West feared the red threat of communism would seep like a blood stain over the region. Never mind that French and Japanese exploitation had led to a famine in 1945 that starved nearly two million north Vietnamese to death. Kim returned to Saigon in 1963, once her university year with us was over. In the chaos of an escalating war, we lost contact with her.

The bus that takes me to Hai Duong charges through busy villages at top speed. Our driver bears over a cascade of mopeds, honking at their riders who chat imperviously on mobile phones while navigating busy streets. One bike wobbles under the weight of a double-doored refrigerator, another has used TV screens strapped to it, and a third hoists a family of pigs. Not far away, small fires burn in the fields, adding to the dense pollution of industrial progress.

I take particular note of the houses because I'm here on an aid-agency project to build new ones. The three-storey, concrete block constructions are extremely narrow, a style established when property taxes were levied solely on street frontage, and when it was forbidden to build houses taller than the king's palace. Homeowners still keep to the old building dimensions, choosing to express their upward mobility through eye-catching exteriors that borrow from the inventions and pretensions of the colonial era. Ornate balconies are painted sky blues, all shades of orange, yellow, green – some with bougainvillea trailing through their balustrades. Most houses in the villages we race through have small businesses operating at street level, selling everything from furniture to car parts.

Global capitalism and large dollops of corruption have made Vietnam the latest hotspot for cheap, non-unionised labour. We think house prices are unaffordable back home, but while the average monthly wage in Vietnam is only three hundred dollars, a new apartment on the outskirts of Hanoi can cost \$100,000 and rent for shop fronts is \$3,000 a month. Small wonder so many people are homeless.

The volunteers on this project are flying in from many countries. Some of us are staying at a 25-storey hotel on the outskirts of the city, left partially complete when the global economic recession hit and multinational companies pulled out. Its convention-style facilities are marooned amongst fields of bananas and pineapples.

In preparation for the long work days ahead, I grab a massage. Vietnamese women are small-framed, graceful pencils in long silk tunics. These bodyworkers are less traditionally clad as they walk up and down your back, digging their toes and heels into knotty areas. Wen tells me she has left her home town and her baby to come here and work for low pay. She gives me a Vietnamese language lesson in body parts. "Sau," she says, pointing at one of my breasts. Lulled for a brief moment into tactile relaxation and cultural exchange, I am unprepared for what comes next. Giggling at the western enormity of my sau, Wen loses control and tweaks my nipple. When the massage ends I am again jolted back into Asia, into the complexities of power: she hits me up for a big tip and I realise Wen has used the story about her baby as a leverage tool. This is a transactional relationship. She is not Kim.

At 6.30am the next morning, we pile into buses outside the hotel's gilded reception area and drive about thirty minutes to the small fishing village of Dong Xa where we'll be in-filling new homes. The village's surrounding fields were left criss-crossed with landmines. Many families still live on river boats and while this way of life might sound idyllic the kids can't attend school because they have no street address. During the monsoon season, the boats flood and their awnings leak. There's no running water or toilets so human waste goes into the same river water from which fish is caught, in which people swim and wash clothes. Fish stocks in the river are dwindling and many of the men have taken up rice farming instead, travelling long distances to this seasonal work that separates families.

On the first day a chill north wind whips in from the fields, pushing us to hurry and get the back wall of the house up fast. Ten volunteers are assigned to each house, which measures about 30 square metres and is single storey. The infrastructure is already in place, septic tanks built to replace the open drains, concrete foundations laid. Our task is to build and paint the walls, put the roof up and fit basic plumbing.

Mostly, our team is made up of Christian men from the rural Kiwi heartland. They are so competent and capable, I feel proud of them and a little surplus to requirement. Conditions are primitive. There's no power or running water to the house sites so all the concrete blocks that need cutting to size have to be carried by hand to central cutting stations. The mortar is collected from there in one shallow wheelbarrow with short handles better suited to a child. That becomes my task, and the sloppy river-water mix threatens to spill over the sides as I navigate with bandy knees the rutted village road.

The older men put the rest of us to shame with their energy and expertise. A 76-year-old apple orchardist from Napier puts the roof trusses in place, scrambling up ladders with consummate ease. In the cutting yard, I meet Robbie who is cutting all the roofing iron to spec. He was an engineer on the Alaska pipeline who took up volunteer house building when he retired. He's now 82.

The Vietnamese who work alongside us are more proficient in laying straight lines of concrete blocks than we are. If we had time to build a second house this week, we would surely do it better and faster. If they had more time, energy and resources, they could do the job themselves. Nguyen and her three-year-old son will be living in this one. Her husband is a long way from home, working with their two teenage sons, but he drops in one afternoon and throws up a few blocks in lightning time, with great precision. He will live here only part-time unless the industrial zone expands and more jobs open up. To help make ends meet, Nguyen is going to start a small sewing business in their new home.

On my big OE, straight out of university, I wanted to come to Vietnam and find Kim. She shared an anglicised name with one of the war's most famous casualties - a nine-year-old girl photographed with burning arms, running naked and screaming from her napalm-bombed village. Her fear and horror were reproduced in newspapers all around the world, including our *Dominion*. Dad snatched the paper away from me but it was too late; I'd seen it. The photo was a catalyst for bringing the war to an end. That was 1973, ten years after our Kim had left us. I remembered her in fragments. She was a family story, often repeated, and way too old to be the Kim in the photo. Yet I had nightmares for months afterwards, waking with red hot skin that my mother puzzled over and plastered in steroid cream.

The desire to find my Kim was thwarted; Vietnam remained closed to tourists. My OE took me in other directions, but years later, back in New Zealand, I married a veteran of the war. He'd been a medical officer, not a soldier. Mike told me he volunteered to go to prove something to his father, who had fought in the Italian campaign. A shadow of family war heroes hung over him. Mike came home with scars; he eventually had to give up a career as an X-ray technician because hospital environments re-awoke his post-traumatic stress.

"We were the unwilling, led by the unqualified, doing the unnecessary for the ungrateful," was his mantra on angry, bitter days.

One of Mike's first jobs had been to stitch up a child's stomach. Her whole family had been hung from trees in a raid on a village, their stomachs slit and left to die. This six-year-old was the only one to survive, so my husband's claim to being unnecessary was also untrue. But I know what he meant. We should never have been there, in what was essentially a centuries-old war for independence.

Mike had a problem with alcohol, which at first I didn't see because everybody drinks too much. The whole country has a problem. As a couple, we created our own domestic war. "Get over it!" I screamed at him one day as he moped around the house, bitching about life. "Everybody else does. Stop living in the past!" It was one of those times when there was no perspective and little love in sight, when the frustration of his emotional distance from me boiled over and I heard myself using words like always and never.

"What would you know?" said Mike caustically, and walked out the door.

The closer I tried to get to him, the more I seemed to lose myself. Our domestic war escalated into a bitter divorce, then remobilised in an acrimonious custody battle over our two children. Peace was slow to return. Then, six months before this building project, Mike was at home alone, drinking. He must have tripped and hit his head on the side of the pool, because he drowned in the water.

Our work is being closely scrutinised by police in their communist green and red trim uniforms, and by beves of local government officials. It's a one-party state where no outright criticism is tolerated. We're also being watched more shyly by the village's pre-school kids. Their parents have mobile phones and buy their kids clothes that feature the ubiquitous Dora the Explorer and SpongeBob SquarePants, but the kids still play inventive games with simple toys – a bamboo pole, a hammer. One boy plonks a yellow hard hat on his head, its plastic strap bisecting his face in a wide smile, and starts banging on the wheelbarrow with his hammer. I give him the thumbs up. Not to be outdone, two girls in spotlessly clean pink stripes and red polka dots decide there's bravery in numbers. With a little encouragement, they each take one of my hands and accompany me to the tool shed in search of paint. Delighted to be important, they laugh and call out to friends along the way.

One in four Vietnamese is under 25. This is not surprising given that a million of its population was killed in what they call the American War. At the end of the day I quiz our young bus driver about the lack of bitterness shown towards westerners.

"We look forward," he says. "The past is not our future. If you constantly occupy your mind with thoughts of either good or bad then you can't be free of the past. Don't grab hold of what travels along the river of memory. This is true freedom; you will never be occupied."

These people have had a long history in which to learn that lesson of liberation. His words play over and over in my mind as I grapple with laying block walls in a straight line and painting them. *The past is not our future, the past is not our future.* My body is struggling with inadequate tools and my mind is awash in swimming pools, agent orange and the criss-crossing currents of war and peace. How can they let go so easily? Why couldn't Mike?

In the yard the next day, I stop to chat with Robbie, whose evident goodness seems freed of motive. He married a Swedish air hostess in the early days of passenger flights. They're still together, an impossibly romantic story that tickles me.

"You seem deeply at peace with yourself," I say. "What's the secret?"

"I'm a lucky man, still in love after 40 years."

I also think he has the consolation of religion and service to others, but I don't say this because talking religion and politics is out of bounds this week. It keeps the build clean.

"You know," he adds, "I've seen quite a few vets come over here, looking for a way to swallow their guilt, or make amends for the war," he says. "It can go one of two ways. Some drink themselves into oblivion in bars with cheap beer and local women, others devote themselves to setting up foundations that care for kids maimed by leftover land mines, getting them prosthetic limbs and so on. You've got to make that decision inside yourself every day. Do you go to war with yourself or make peace? There's endless opportunities for both. Take a look around this building site."

Many Vietnamese volunteers have dropped in and out of Dong Xa this week to lend a hand with the house builds. A professor of English at Hanoi University has found himself building a house alongside an American vet. The professor was a Viet Cong soldier so the two men discover they had been fighting one another. Now, all they are fighting is poverty.

Our language is riddled with war idioms: we bite the bullet, close ranks, drop bombshells, are shot down in flames and fight an uphill battle... I tell Robbie about a foundation set up back home to promote peace that became intensely conflict-ridden.

"Yes, the irony," he says. "People confuse the idea of peace with the real thing. They go searching for new political and social patterns using the same mind that created the problems they want to solve. Using limited ideas conditioned by the past to control unlimited complexity just generates more conflict. It won't work. You can only experience real peace with another person when the confusion of ideas you make ceases."

"Or when they die," I add.

"Oh, really?" he says quizzically.

I've learned from years of aid agency work that too many ideas get in the way of what's best thing to do in that moment, and anything taken to extremes carries the seed of its opposite. Extreme do-gooders become destructive. "I know your motives are good, they always are," says the cynical

journalist in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, speaking to a young American sent to promote democracy in Vietnam. "I wish sometimes you had a few bad motives, you might understand a little more about human beings. And that applies to your country too, Pyle."

On one of the last days, as the paint is drying, the star sponsors of the project arrive. Something small but significant takes place as Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter get up on the small stage in the village's central yard to give a speech to the assembled 100-strong volunteers. The two war veterans take hold of each other's hands and raise them into the air. In the euphoria of the moment, we all cheer. The infuriating manipulation of complex truth by power reduces us to an amoeba of emotion.

Lying awake that night in a hotel room larger than the house we've just built, I begin to wonder if I'm here to atone for being a westerner, for failing to bring peace to my husband's ongoing war with himself. For failing to find Kim. And yet the moments of sweet intimacy I shared with Mike were seeded in my early experience of being cuddled by a woman whose culture adores babies. I instinctively knew how to hold Mike, and to let myself be held by a deeply caring man. This was Kim's gift to me. I am white rice with chilli paste.

Then I catch myself, making endless judgements about motives, always wanting to know why and grabbing hold of the river of memory. I can choose to stop identifying with my mind. This is a revelation.

There is one last story that floats away. It's my mother, dutifully stripping the sheets off Kim's bed each week to wash them. Vietnamese didn't use sheets so Kim hadn't understood their purpose. Instead, she and I had snuggled between the wool blankets. I see those white sheets now, hoisted on a washing line and flapping in the Wellington wind. They are a flag of surrender.