

MICHAEL VARGA

## The Crossing

HURTLING INTO THE COASTAL TOWN, the train shrieked to a halt in front of the yellow station buildings and delivered Terry Wilkes into the hands of the *cyclo*-taxi drivers. Running up, several gaunt but wiry men pulled the doors open and scrambled aboard. They pushed against the flow of passengers trying to alight, towards the single foreign occupant of the carriage. Still in torn fatigues and Viet Minh helmets a quarter century after their victory in the American War, they shouted at the sun-burnt face in front of them: “Where you go?—I take you my *cyclo*!—Mister, you go island!” As if he might fend the men off, Terry shook his head and sheltered behind his upheld palms. A headache was hammering away inside his skull. With one deep breath he lifted his backpack to his chest, brushed forward and pushed his way off the train. The mob followed him along the platform, insistent hands tugging at his arms and gap-toothed mouths shouting “Mister, you go ferry my *cyclo*.”

A month into Vietnam, he was wondering if it had been worth quitting the accounting job and selling the condo. Thousands of miles away from Vancouver, thoughts about Sarah still cropped up, haunted him. Their first meeting at the swimming club, their early days of love, the day she moved in and the day she left for good. Her added blow, when she yelled she had had the abortion because she wanted *nothing less* than to have a child with *him*.

Outside the recurrent torments of memory, the hoped-for freedom and adventure of travel had given over to predictability. The endless hounding by the locals made it clear he was nothing but an opportunity for making a buck. There was no winning this battle. He would give, and they would take.

At the station's exit gate, the pack scattered, and he found himself facing a battalion of parked *cyclos*. Resting on the bench seats of their vehicles, the drivers jumped up in readiness. “How much to the ferry docks?” Terry

asked the nearest one. “Three dollars.” Surely a rip-off, but he didn’t argue. He climbed into the passenger seat and told the driver to go.

Lined with giant banyan trees, the streets seemed sleepy at first. But packs of children emerged from the trees’ shady shelter at the appearance of Terry’s fair head. Dishevelled six-year-olds, sticks of Wrigley’s gum in their scabby fists stuck into his face, yelled, “You buy from me.” Terry stared ahead, hissing at the driver to go on.

Struggling against jostling bodies inside the wooden ticket booth, he bought his passage. The sun stood high in the sky and salt water trickled down his forehead and into his eyes as his feet crunched the dusty gravel leading towards the shoreline. Scrawny women stepped into his path, waving bottled water, sweets and fresh bread at him, yelling the habitual “you buy, very cheap!” Bellowing “No,” he brushed them aside.

The white paint of the ferry’s steel hull had flaked off in places, revealing blotches of grainy reds and browns, like pockmarks on a diseased body. Terry couldn’t see into the few dark windows as he stepped onto the wobbly plank and entered the vessel. Inside the creaking low-ceilinged cabin, crowds were busy arranging boxes, caged chickens and tattered baskets of rice and beans on the floor. Their voices roared above the scraping, the pushing and stashing of things. There wasn’t one available seat.

Terry felt his throat contract. His head was killing him. It had been a real bender—definitely too much whisky this time. He had stayed up most of the night with the couple from Seattle. They had started talking in the lobby of the guesthouse in Hanoi’s Old Quarter. They had pulled him out of a dark moment of memory’s visit, and then they had all gone across the street to the Funky Spunky bar.

Liz and Dan, like him in their early thirties, had turned their backs on jobs and comfortable lives and were travelling *open-ended* through Asia. They were scouring the globe in search of adventure and thrills “until the money runs out or we stumble across a new opportunity or we *find* ourselves,” Liz had laughed. They had been to lots of places and they had stories to tell. And somewhere into the second bottle of cheap whisky, when the remaining guards had fully fallen, they confided the coolest trip of all: heroin could be found, dead easily, on an island off the northern coast—leaning close, Liz whispered its name—and it was the greatest kick in the head they had tried. “Awesome stuff, man. Just smoking it, I swear I could see rainbow elephants floating off into the sky. And the peace you feel inside you, man, it’s like the best thing ever,” Dan had grinned. “When you get to the island, look for Pinky’s Karaoke bar, just left from the docking point. Can’t miss it.”

The ferry was now jittering out of its berth, arranging the human jumble into seats. Still standing, Terry retreated further into his thoughts, towards the lure of a new horizon, the frontier experience, perhaps oblivion, that was awaiting him. *The peace you feel inside you man.* The laughter of a little boy halfway down the aisle pulled him out of his reverie. The toddler was seated opposite his grandmother who was stowing a neatly tied bundle of sugarcane and a box of instant noodle packs under her seat. In one hand the boy held what looked like a thin bunch of wilted grass stalks, in the other a plastic bottle of pills. He was drumming the grass onto the lid of the bottle, when the bottle slipped from his hand and fell on the floor. The grandmother turned around, picked up the bottle and held it close to her chest, as if it were some precious treasure. She wagged her finger with exaggerated menace. When her grandson began to cry, she picked him up and hugged him against her heart. She was rocking him gently when her eyes discovered the foreign face. Terry turned away from her gaze, but then heard her call out “Hello Mister, have seat for you here.”

Over the heads of three fat sweating men sitting on sealed polystyrene boxes blocking the aisle, Terry’s tired eyes fixed on the old woman’s hand. It offered him the seat vacated by her grandson. As he stumbled forward, the men glared—rancid hand rolled cigarettes stuck in thin lips—but didn’t budge as he squeezed past them. Sitting down between an old man wrapped in a blanket and a teenage girl with big shy eyes, he nodded briefly at the old woman, pushed his bag under the seat and then closed his eyes to contain the throbbing in his head. Dry swallows scraped at the back of his throat. He didn’t notice the boy on the grandmother’s lap clapping his hands together and laughing into the alien face in front of him.

The craft moved into the open sea, rocking its cacophonous load into near quiet. The little boy was now asleep, and the old woman cautiously enquired. “You come from England?”

Terry lifted his eyelids and shook his head. “No, Canada.”

“Oh,” came her delighted reply, “Canada good country, very beautiful and rich and happy. No have problems in Canada!”

The pain in Terry’s head flashed into thoughts of his parents’ divorce, the monotony of accounting work, and his failed relationship with Sarah. “In Canada,” his lips pursed the correction, “we have problems, too.”

She brushed her frown off with her next question. “Why you go to island?”

Terry hesitated. Plucking his words from an earlier self, he found his answer. “I like the sea and I like swimming, I guess. Yes, I want to do some swimming. And I heard that the island is very beautiful.”

The old woman's glance dropped to the boy. "Not beautiful, too many problem."

Across the aisle two women, both holding open plastic bags in front of them, began to throw up. The other passengers seemed little bothered, as the smell of undigested soup and bile drifted across, invading Terry's nose and choking at his throat. He now longed for some water, and the headache wasn't getting any better. The woman stood up and placed the sleeping boy onto Terry's lap. Startled, his body gave in and let the imposed charge settle. He locked his arms around the toddler who, without waking, sank his soft temples into Terry's shoulder.

From below her seat, the woman pulled out two sticks of sugarcane and offered one to Terry. He didn't know how much he would have to pay. His free hand waved it off, and he shook his head.

"You try before? You don't like? Is good vitamin."

He looked at the fresh green of the stick. The promise of its juice outweighed the risk of being overcharged. "Yes, I will try some." It was hard as wood as he pushed his teeth into its pulp. Trickle of fragrant liquid sugar flowed into the drought of his mouth. The warm breath escaping the boy's nostrils fanned his forearm to the rhythm of the heaving boat and wrapped Terry in a peculiar contentedness.

The woman bit into her cane and then spoke: "Heroin. Almost every house on island have people use it. Some children, too. And have a lot of AIDS." Terry followed her eyes as they moved towards the men on the boxes. "Just pay police a little, pay ferryman and can bring heroin to island. No problem. But too many problem for people on island." She looked at the sleeping boy, anger now in her faltering voice. "His father die last year and his mother sick now, and he ..." She bit into her sugarcane. Terry felt the softly regular beat of the boy's heart in the palm of his hand. His own heart was like a stone. Heat flushed into his face.

The boat turned into the bay. Craggy cliffs of slate framed the pier in the distance, a pier crowded with the waiting. The woman took back the boy. "You no go hotel here. Too expensive. Not good. Go right side, go to beach behind mountain. Have good hotel. Only five dollar."

"And how much for the sugar cane?" She looked at him without comprehension. Terry pointed at the bundle below her seat. "How much do I owe you for the *good vitamin*?"

"Oh! No," she laughed, "I cannot sell you. I must take for selling in market tomorrow." Before he could thank her, she picked up her things and the boy, and they squeezed to the front of the stirring passengers. They were among the first to step on land. Terry watched them move through

the crowds and towards a thin young woman leaning on a rickety bicycle, who welcomed the happy boy back into her arms.

As he landed, he hardly heard the offers of “You stay my hotel. You want heroin,” nor his own calm responses of, “No, thank you.” Off the pier, an unexpected sight sent a chill down his back: in the sand by the road lay a discarded syringe. The throngs of arriving passengers dispersed, and Terry stood facing the few buildings along the waterfront. In front of him there was a small single-storey schoolhouse, its yard open to the street. Next to it, two floors high, stood Pinky’s Karaoke Bar. Chips of plaster had fallen off the sooty walls. The windows were shuttered against the declining sun but had washing hanging outside.

A window opened and a bony young woman, her face only half made-up in pink and orange, called down: “Hello Mister, bar open at seven. I see you later, my darling.” She pulled panties from the line and slammed the shutter. Disturbed by the noise, a shirtless man, lying on the floor outside the bar’s shut doors, stood up. Unsteady, with a nearly empty beer bottle in his hand, he teetered towards Terry, then stopped, and glared.

Terry lowered his eyes. A second needle lay near his foot. A wave washed up inside him. About a dozen kids, some not much older than the little boy he had had on his lap, and all of them barefoot, were chasing an old football through the street. Terry opened his backpack, found a plastic bag, carefully reached down for the needle and dropped it inside. He felt the man’s cold stare on him as his own eyes followed the playing boys. *What futures were their feet carrying them to?*

His upper lip quivering, Terry turned away. To the right. He walked slowly, stooping to remove another needle from the roadside. The path stretched ahead towards a lushly wooded mountain, its upper reaches speckled gold by the late sun. He would find the promised beach. The smell of salt carried in by the breeze turned his eyes to the sea. He fixed his gaze on the horizon, breathing in the rich blue. And with the smile that climbed into his face, there rose a certainty that he would go for a swim.

