

ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

Historical fiction by the winners of
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2020



THE FALL OF SAIGON

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11-15 category



Author's introduction

Recently, I've been reading a lot of diverse literature and poetry so I decided to write about Vietnam because of some books and spoken word poetry videos I had seen from Vietnamese-American people. Though I am not Vietnamese myself, it was a good opportunity to learn about a new culture that shares some similarities with my own and widen my horizons on what historical events people experienced around the world. When I was researching Saigon specifically, I found out about Operational Babylift during the Vietnam war in 1975 and I created the story around that event to delve into how it impacted people, especially children of war because they are so innocent, which makes the story all the more devastating.

THE FALL OF SAIGON

1975. The Vietnam War was still raging on with the utmost intensity even after 20 years had passed. Saigon summers, once bustling and bright had been colonised by smouldering smoke and soldiers patrolling the streets.

Cicadas chirped as Linh and I collected the plastic amongst the waste. We had to be extra careful to avoid the American soldiers strolling around like they owned this place, so we scurried around like mice.

“Bào, let’s go home now, I’m hungry,” my little sister whined.

My mother was making lunch for us at home so I also couldn’t wait to return.

“Come on, let’s go,” I agreed, hand outstretched to lead her home. Linh was still too young to work but I had to take her with me to keep her safe.

My mother had worked as a cleaner to provide for us ever since our father died from a crossfire incident last year. I know it’s hard for her, but she still envelopes us in warmth and smiles when we return for lunch, one of the only times we see her.

Her bones must have ached from labouring all day but she made sure to cook us a hot meal every day as her way of showing her love. It seemed as if one sip of her steaming hot phở bò was enough to comfort me every time I got upset. One day I hoped to give her a comfortable life, away from all the burdens and hardships of her life.

We were walking up the streets with trash bags and children’s clothes lining the pavements, a result of the displacement of families by bullets or bombs, when suddenly a booming crash ripped through the residential area, destroying everything that used to stand there, sending rubble flying outward and black fumes upwards. Roofs were completely blown off, windows were smashed in and everything went up in a flurry of flames.

Legs frozen in place with utter shock, my mind immediately went to my mother and her safety. Mustering every ounce of courage in my small body, I ran towards the flames, hoping to see her fleeing away from the furious fire.

But I couldn’t.

The neighbourhood men held me back in their firm grip as I tried to flail and wail my way out and I had to wonder if they could see the desperation pouring out of me like tar. Deep down, I knew she couldn’t have survived as the bomb fell right next to our home. However, my delusional mind still wished it wasn’t true. Though I can’t remember everything now, I remember the emptiness in my heart as I realized I would never see my mother again. I had the responsibility of looking after Linh now that we were orphans.

I somehow managed to escape the grip of the men and grabbed Linh to run away. We ran until I couldn’t see any more of the neighbourhood we once lived in, or our house that had been destroyed along with everything dear to us.

We rested on the curb of a street, pressed against the tin wall of a sweetshop. Linh eyed the sweets hungrily but I had no money to buy them to give her. I felt bad but could only hug her until we eventually fell asleep.

We were awoken by two soldiers shaking us awake. They held their guns in their hands and shouted what sounded like cuss words in a language unknown to me. Americans... I had never interacted with them before, but I couldn’t run. My body froze with fear as they towered above me threateningly. One tall blonde soldier grabbed Linh, who was quivering in the corner, by the arm. Adrenaline rushed through my veins as I scrambled to get his filthy hands off her.

Smack.

Out of nowhere, a rock came splitting through the air and hit the soldier in his face, drawing blood from his temple and giving me an opportunity to get Linh and myself far away from the situation.

I turned to see the girl who threw the stone cursing the soldiers for harassing us before she grabbed our arms and ran away from the scene to safety.

I recognised her, a girl from my neighbourhood called Mai. We used to play together in the evenings while my mother went shopping and her father went to work. But as the years passed and she got older, my mother had warned me to stay away from her. I heard from the whispers throughout the neighbourhood that she had been taken as a boom bar

girl. My mother told me about the shameless boom bar girls, how they sold their bodies to the soldiers and brought evil to our neighbourhood. However I couldn't imagine Mai having an ounce of treachery in her body after she saved us.

She led us to a dilapidated building hidden away behind broken buildings, an oasis for all kinds of victims of war's cruelty. Pregnant women clutching their round stomachs, old women with canes and unmoving fingers, malnourished soot-faced children, men injured from bullets and teen girls shaking with fear all gathered in this place of refuge. War does not discriminate and haunts everyone in its path, through bloodshot eyes or broken limbs, suffering had been inflicted on us all.

Looking at them sitting there covered by blankets, I could not ignore the way they shook, bodies trembling, eyes wide and wet with tears staining their cheeks. When they cried, I could hear the defeat in every sob.

Blankets and bandages were passed around while Mai handed me a bowl of hot soup. I scooped it up and blew on it for Linh and once she'd taken her fill I gulped the remainder down furiously, letting it burn every one of my taste buds before it could imitate any kind of warmth.

That night, we were to sleep in the cramped town hall with twenty other people in the same room. As soon as I confirmed Linh was asleep, I silently slipped outside to the cold night. The moment the icy air hit my pores, I broke down. The tears fell warm and heavy while my voice cracked into muffled cries, a broken and restrained noise escaping my body. In the span of one day, I had lost everything: my home, my childhood and my mother. The mere thought of letting her die before providing her with as much comfort and love as I had hoped to give, strangled my heart. Linh was all I had left now and her safety was my sole priority.

A woman came rushing in the next day with a flyer in her hand, rambling rapidly about something she'd heard on the streets coming home. Apparently the government were preparing planes to evacuate children from South Vietnam to the safety of foreign countries. 'Operation Babylift' - an opportunity we couldn't afford to miss.

Hope flickered through our eyes as we began truly to believe we could escape Saigon's suffering... but sometimes you fall the hardest just when you think you are climbing the highest.

We received news of the crashed baby flights that night.

The 1975 C-5 aircraft leaving Tân Sơn Nhứt had crashed and broken up over the South China Sea, killing many children and volunteer staff along the way. Of course some survived but the devastation was widespread and heartbreaking for Vietnamese citizens.

Huddled up in scrappy blankets under a leaking roof, we prayed to God throughout the night for an end to this war. The night was filled with muffled sobs from the old and the young for the lost lives of those innocent children. The only comforting thought was that 'at least they escaped this hell on earth'.

Following the failure of the first flight, doubts ran across my mind about whether we would be able to flee at all. Boarding the next plane out of Saigon posed the risk of crashing but staying in this place allowed the possibility of being shot or bombed.

Eventually, Mai came to me, sensing the turmoil inside my head.

"Go," she encouraged, "nothing good will come out of staying here but you have hope on that plane, no matter how little. You and Linh deserve the chance at a better life and they're giving you a chance. *Có chí làm quan có gan làm giàu* (Fortune favours the brave). You must be brave and go."

"What about you?" I whispered, terrified of what might happen after I left.

"I can look after myself, and when it's safe to stop hiding, I'll come and visit you," she promised, though I knew it was false hope.

I glanced over at Linh who was fast asleep and realised that I had to do what was best for her even if it was dangerous. *Bảo* means protection so I had to fulfil my duty of guarding Linh.

Knowing it was the last time I would be here again, I hugged Mai tightly and thanked her for all she had done for us. Maybe I pretended she was my mother and my gratitude spilled out like a broken vending machine releasing coins.

We left at dawn.

Carrying half-asleep Linh on my back, I boarded the train to the airport where we were rushed onto the plane heading for the United

States of America. Deep down, I resented allowing myself to receive help from the same people who killed my mother, but it was my only option.

Although no one spoke of it, I know we all prayed for safety under our breaths. Not once did I let go of Linh's hand, thinking she might just slip through my fingers if I let my guard down.

A sigh of relief escaped my mouth as the pilot confirmed we had landed in the airport. Cheers filled the plane as the restless atmosphere turned into a euphoric moment, the laughter of children allowing me too to cheer in happiness with Linh by my side in a new country.

Flight attendants offered us all an apple, so I ate it contentedly as I walked off the plane trying to fill the void in my stomach from days of hardly eating.

I threw the apple seeds on the American land and momentarily glanced over at the place across the ocean, filled with Bánh Bòt Lọc dumplings and night market mackerel, and I had to wonder if anything could ever take root in foreign soil.

Three years later, I was 16 and going to school in America where Linh and I were staying with a host family. Though I was happy here, I couldn't help but yearn for home as I heard the war was over now. I missed everything, the language, the familiar streets and the food. I had to retrain my tongue to speak in English without an accent but I was so ashamed of losing my culture, thinking my mother wouldn't recognise me anymore if I became too American.

It was one spring night, when I was awoken by a knock at the front door.

I opened it to find my mother standing there, on my doorstep, soaking wet as if she had swum across the entire Pacific Ocean to find me. Her apron still tied around her neck, her sleeves rolled up, she looked exactly as she was the last I saw her, a lifetime ago. To this day, I don't know if it was a hallucination or a gift from god but either way her presence reminded me of how everything used to be.

"Sorry it took so long, Bào," she said, still smiling as if nothing had happened these past years. "Lunch is ready."