

A Bus Ride in Vietnam

by Emma Wasend '20

I sit on a bus trying to sleep. I get carsick and as far as I can tell the bus is making sharp left turn after sharp right turn, but I can't check to see out the window because if I do, I know I will vomit. Every seat in the bus is taken, some filled with locals on their way into the mountains, and others with tourists, like us. I sit next to my sister who is writing fast in a little journal. She's determined to take note of every single thing that happens to us, she wants this adventure to be absolutely worth it, thinks it will reshape the way she sees the world, or at least that's what I heard her telling her boyfriend on the phone before we left. My parents are behind, listening to the bus driver Chi talk about the economic devastation that the War waged on their world and how it is still present today. I am not happy to be there. I was supposed to go to California with my best friend, but my parents didn't think I was old enough to go with a family they didn't know. I can't wait to go home. The only foods we've had since we landed in Ho Chi Minh City are curries and noodle dishes. By this time, six days into the trip, all I can think about are Nature Valley Granola Bars, though right now the thought of any food at all makes me want to turn over the back of the seat and release this horrible heavy sloshing in my stomach.

We are driving to Sa Pa where we will hike through the mountains and across rice patties, our bus driver leading us because he's also the tour guide. He is old, at least it seems like he is to me and loves to stop as we hike to tell local legends. I will think unkindly that people who have to stop to talk shouldn't be tour guides. I don't like him because he asked who was older, me or my sister. I'm eleven and she's nineteen but I'm a little heavier, almost as tall, and the acne that spreads across my face never seemed to take any interest in her skin, so she looks much younger than she is. The water in the air makes the pimples bigger and relentless. They pop up on my forehead and across my cheeks, making me hate the warmth and humidity of the places we go. In two years, after my family has subscribed me to an acne care medication, I will have clear skin and regret for letting pimples control my emotions. But for now, I dislike Chi for pointing out the bumps and try not to listen to him talk about the history of different sections of the country as we pass them in the bus.

On one of our hikes in Sa Pa, Chi will lead us through a village all the way up to a lonely cottage on a mountainside. Outside, he will introduce us to a farmer. He will speak in Vietnamese to the man, the man will nod, then Chi will tell us that he has a treat for us all. A tour through a real Vietnamese house, a chance to see a real Vietnamese family, and the opportunity to drink real Vietnamese tea. I will not know who to look at when he leads us into their house. It is one room with a kitchen, and though the family will smile at us and gesture for us to sit, clearly talking about us to each other and laughing at our clothes and shoes, I will not like being here. My family will sidestep the other three people who will come on the hike with us, and sneak outside to wait. My father will pass Chi money to give the family but he will not re-enter the house. I will think angrily about why Chi did that to us, to the family, and to himself. I will think how awkward this is and how much I want to leave. When we finally do, I will be hungry and glower at the ground, refusing to show that I am listening to him talk about how many of these families depend on tourism to keep their families fed. I will not let myself consider the weighted balance between the tourist – us who go places to gawk at people and their history, and those who have been made, after disaster, war and genocide, to depend upon the very people who inflicted those horrors. I will not think about this cycle until many years have passed, and

when I do, I will still not have the answers about what I should have done, what I should do now, or what is right, but I will think about it, talk about it, and begin to make changes. Now though, I am still on the bus, the air growing warmer and warmer despite our rising elevation. The bus is overheating and all I can do is take tiny sips from my water bottle, hoping I will not throw up.

In the next couple days, we will take tours of three different war museums. In each one, Chi will be our guide. In the first, he will lead us through the jungle where American soldiers were lured into traps. The place is interactive so as we walk along the path – made of glass so that we can see underneath it – we can peer down at long sticks that were sharpened to impale Americans unfamiliar with the forest. It won't be until we reach the middle of the tour, until we lower ourselves into a Vietnamese foxhole and look through little cut outs carved into the walls to spy for incoming soldiers, that Chi will actually use the word "Americans" instead of "soldiers" and I will begin to think of myself, the American, walking through the trees, stepping softly to avoid pits only to trigger a wire that sends a poisonous dart into my neck, or to hear the click that marks a mine about to blow.

Chi will smile as he talks to us to keep us comfortable with the experiences, an attempt to use his pleasant demeanor to barricade against the flood of bone shifting discomfort that comes with a truth that has been veiled by vague history lessons. Suddenly it will be right in front of us, with nothing to shimmer attractively between us and the truth, nothing but Chi's smile. My favorite book at the time is *Night* by Elie Wiesel and my favorite movie is *The Sound of Music*. I am familiar with war, intrigued by it, but only made comfortable by the knowledge of righteousness when it comes to the history of the nation in which I was born. It will be there, standing on top of a soldier's gravesite, a soldier who fought not for, but against that nation, where I will begin to see "American" for what it really is to so many. I will not be comfortable, but later I will know that it is better, sometimes, not to be comfortable.

For now, on the bus, I sigh, and force down the vomit in my throat, refusing to let it take control of my body. I block out any of the sounds on the bus, a baby gurgling and a woman humming, thinking only of how much I want to go home, how much I hate the blue mountains and deep green valleys that I know slide past the window but cannot look at. I will think only how much I dislike the smell of human bodies, all sweating together in this cramped bus, and promise myself that when this is all over, I will never think of it again.

The next war museum will be inside a cold building, dark and blue like nighttime, and the only lights will be to illuminate images on the walls. I will see pictures of children burned, men decapitated and piled on each other in a ditch, with a white American man smiling next to it, and bodies, so many dead, dying people. There will be pictures of guns and fire, and men from my country doing things that will make me think, why should these people become immortal in this image? Shouldn't we forget that they ever existed? And only later will I realize that many people do not even know these things happened, that my own country should know that they existed, these rapes and murders should be remembered, and the men who did them seen, that my country should be shown exactly who Americans were, and not let to go on thinking, innocently and delusionally, that America was ever something better, because only then I think, maybe we will have the chance to learn to try to be the better that we thought we were. I will think later how these photos, framed by shame and horror forever on the halls of my memory, are never hung so starkly in the museums of our own towns, and that if they were, maybe something would be different.

There will be one picture that will appear in my dreams for the rest of the trip. A man, his medal pinned to his chest proudly, holds a gun in one hand, and a body held in his other hand, it looks empty of bones, and all I can see are the feet. It is the lack of compassion, the way he holds a life taken, the way he stands in self-assertion, belief in his actions, it is this that will reshape my belief in my country. And it is in this moment that I will finally throw up. I will barely make it to the bathroom, and when I come out, Chi will be there outside the door. He will not say anything, but he will place his hand on my shoulder, and we will look at each other. We will look at each other in this dark room for a small moment, and then he will squeeze my shoulder, then walk away, down the stairs until the dim building seems to take him into it, and make him part of its shadows. I will watch and suddenly I will think how my dislike of him, which faded as we stood with each other, was not because he made me all too aware of my awkward puberty-stricken face, but because he brings out these truths and gives them to me, places them in my lap, takes my hand and smears it across my skin. I will not be old enough to know what to do with these truths, and maybe I never will. But soon, in only a few days, I will have them, and they will be my responsibility.