

WAYNE SULLINS

## As Real As It Gets

Hyperbole's the word – exaggeration for effect. One of the few English words Thanh remembered from his high school days. A word he liked because he had always added a little punch to his own descriptions of things, or of how he felt. It wasn't ever a *green* hat, but a hat so green the jungle envied its color. And never did he feel *sad*, but as though his insides were a house of cards that had just collapsed.

This colorful language had earned him the nickname Poet; though he hated poetry and hadn't touched a book since he left school.

Then he'd heard that word again, hyperbole, spoken by a fat balding Westerner he'd seen drinking bia hoi one night with two young locals he knew to be shrewd and not altogether trustworthy. The Westerner had laughed a lot and kept shaking hands with his two companions, treating them both to round after round until, as Thanh would say, they could have pissed a river.

He had been sitting alone near the door slowly nursing a bia, watching the girls on motorbikes go by in their bright new spring outfits, when that word *hyperbole* caught his ear; and he'd turned to see the bald guy with those two crooks. The only other thing he had understood the guy say was that he wanted to see *the real Vietnam*.

Thanh hadn't known many foreigners, had no foreign friends, and often tried to imagine what these French, Australian and American tourists had come here to find, or to forget. Was it a genuine interest in his people and culture, or just another stop on the tour? Had they, perhaps, lost a friend, a relative

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in the American War and had come here to see for themselves this land where said friend or relative had, like so many of his people, been cut from the bush before ever having blossomed? No doubt some were good people, others self-centered and harboring disdain.

Now, here was a man wanting to see *the real Vietnam*. But *whose* real? *which* real, Thanh wondered, no longer watching the girls but these two drinking with the bald guy who'd obviously convinced him they could show him what he wanted to see. They'd taken his money because, it appeared, he was having trouble counting out the correct amount of đồng to pay his bill; but gave him back his wallet once that was settled, as all eyes were on them.

Thanh felt a spray of something on his back and turned to see that the youngest of the staff, who'd just opened a new keg, was filling a few mugs and some beer had splashed up onto Thanh. He good-naturedly asked the boy if he charged extra for the shower, then paid for the beers and followed the Westerner and his guides out to the motorbikes.

These guys were daredevils, twice almost running down pedestrians, and Thanh had to go a lot faster than usual to keep up. But he loved that feeling of wind caressing his hair, especially on spring nights like this when even the air itself, he'd say, was choking on the fragrance of flowers.

The bald guy, who must have had drunk a lot of bia hoi to be so drunk, took off his hat when they reached the Long Bien Bridge and waved it in the air, cowboy-style.

Until then, he hadn't ever really given this bridge a thought, although he'd been across it, on foot, even, a hundred times. He knew from a paper he had had to write in history class that it was built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, designed by the man responsible for both the Eiffel Tower and New York's Statue Of Liberty. Today awfully rusty and in dire need of paint, it's kind of cool, he decided, as bridges go. He'd often taken this ride to escape Hanoi's constant bustle. Sit outdoors and have a drink. Watch a boy shaving stalks of sugarcane with a white rabbit nibbling grass at his feet. Share cigarettes with an old guy whose face, Thanh would say, had been torched beyond belief but whose laugh was sweeter than that of ten boys.

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Once they'd reached Long Bien, the speed demons followed the curve that leads around the park and under the bridge, then almost immediately veered off to the left. Neither of their bikes had rearview mirrors and they hadn't looked back once, so Thanh felt confident they didn't know he was tailing them.

It wasn't long before they turned down a narrow alley and shut off their lights. To play it safe, Thanh parked his bike on the street before pursuing them on foot. They were easy to find, he just followed the sound of their voices. At first Thanh just stood at a distance, watching. They'd pushed the bald guy against a wall, near a dim light. One emptied his wallet while the other with a hare lip held a pocket knife to the guy's throat. All that beer in his system brought out the beast in him and he punched the one holding the knife in the ribs. But that just made harelip more beastly himself.

Is this real enough for you,' he asked in Vietnamese, driving the knife in below the guy's belt.

That's when Thanh rushed at them with a long pole he'd found in a doorway.

Not the least bit alarmed, harelip said, 'So, it's you, Poet. Come to join the party?'

Though he hardly knew him Thanh had never liked this guy, wearing his lip like a badge of ill repute threatening any who entertained even the slightest revulsion. So, with the end of the pole he jabbed him in the face and knocked harelip on his ass. The other, a sniveling fat-faced lackey, took to his heels.

Funny enough, the knife hadn't punctured the bald guys stomach, but his bladder; and Thanh couldn't help laugh along with him as they both stared, unbelieving, at, as Thanh would say, a glorious golden arc of beer jetting out of the man's gut.

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