

# WELL, WHY DON'T YOU GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY?

(Trần Nghi Âu Cơ)

In 2007, when my brother moved to VN, my mother and I saw him off at the airport. He struck up a conversation with a 60-something Italian-American at the check-in line. The guy was going to VN to marry a 23-year-old Vietnamese woman. He told us he was the owner of an adult store and that he was already making his future wife take English classes to prepare for her life in America because he wanted her to “speak English good.” (I’m not even gonna comment on the irony of that sentence.)

My brother asked him why he was bringing so many suitcases. (He had about twelve huge boxes plus two big suitcases.) The guy went on a tangent: “Everything in VN is terrible. There are no good pastries. The milk is disgusting. The toilet paper is flimsy. The whole country is so primitive.” He went on to criticize the agricultural system, saying how stupid it was that farmers were still watering their crops with hoses instead of installing sprinklers. “Vietnamese people are ignorant,” he said, his voice dripping in disgust.

I thought of ELB and his family and how proud they were of their one grass trimmer; I thought of Nice and how a whole day’s wage for him was less than the hourly minimum wage here; I thought of TPB and how Q told me that he had been putting aside money to take care of her in case she ever wanted to move to VN. I thought of all the lessons in compassion that I learned from the people I most respect and love, most of whom are in VN. I was nineteen years old at the time and even more of a coward than I am now. So I stood there, doing nothing but seething internally.

I’ve met quite a few people like that man. They’re the Eminem-looking guy who looked at me in disgust and said, “You people are all the same.” They’re the guy who stuck his head out from a car and screamed at my father to “go back to [his] country!” (My father dragged the driver out and beat him to a pulp. My father’s more of a react guy and less of a think guy.)

My brother, the ever networking entrepreneur, still keeps in touch with the Italian man. The funny thing about my brother is that when he should just shut the fuck up and listen, he gets defensive; yet when he should get defensive, he takes the abuse laying down. As a result, I’m occasionally reminded of this guy’s vile existence when my brother sends me emails asking me to edit something the guy wrote to submit to the immigration people for his wife. (Because he speaks English so good he needs a Vietnamese-American’s help editing it.) I usually half-ass it because my editing efforts could go into much more useful things. Unfortunately, his wife’s file was approved and now she’s living in California with him. I feel sorry for her; I hope America was worth having a life with a man like that.

He won’t remember me now. So I wish I bump into him in VN one day. He’ll see me as another ignorant chink who doesn’t know how to speak good English. He’ll prattle on and on about how disgusting my country is; he’ll

criticize to his heart's content. And I'll listen. I'll let the anger drip into my blood and flush onto my cheeks. Because on that day, I will be brave and when he's finished, I'll look him straight in the eye and say, "Well, why don't you go back to your fucking country?" in perfect English. In my mind, his eyes will widen and he'll stutter an apology. People will stare. Other foreigners will hear the exchange and smile because not all white people are that ignorant. And he'll drag his wife (if she's still with him) into a taxi, flustered and at a loss for words. And then I'll say, "AND DON'T YOU DARE SHOW YOUR FACE AROUND THESE PARTS EVER AGAIN."

That's what's gonna happen in my mind. But things rarely happen in real life the way they do in my mind. Still, though, it's nice to imagine.

[]