# I FOUGH FOR YOUR PEOPLE

(Trần Nghi Âu Cơ)

One time in college, I was sitting in a cafe at my school. This middle-aged white man whom I've seen around campus walks up to me and starts talking. He asks me what my nationality is and I say Vietnamese. He looks at me and says, "I fought for your people." He gave me this long huge speech and I just sat and smiled uncomfortably. (He ended it with, "You have very nice teeth. Very…even." So that was awkwardly nice of him.)

To this day, I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about that. The way he said it made me feel like I should be offended or at least a little indignant because he sounded so entitled and accusing. Like 1) I was one of those "gooks" that shot at him or 2) I should bow down to him and worship him. Another part of me says that I should be grateful. A lot of those guys were around my age when they were in the war. They had to go to a foreign country and fight for someone else's rights. That doesn't seem too pleasant or fair. (Q also pointed out that him saying that to me doesn't make sense because I'm American as well. You're all "my people.")

And whenever I talk to a non-Vietnamese person (who was born and raised in America) about my family's experiences during the war, they always seem to want to one-up my story with a story about a family member who fought in the war.

I don't mean to offend, but to me, the suffering of a civilian in a wartorn country and a serviceman in the same war are not the same. The serviceman experiences traumas I can't even begin to imagine. The blood and gore, the atrocities they must've had to commit. Things like that are not easily forgotten. But they trained and prepared for that. Even if what they actually experienced is nowhere near what they expected, they were prepared on some level.

Now take someone like my mom or my aunt who were in their teens. They were just girls. Sure, they expected tragedies in their lives, heartbreak, at most. But they were not prepared for war, for the deaths of their neighbors and their friends. For them, it's personal, seeing your country, the places you played in as a child be destroyed…that's a different kind of nightmare. There's a scene in Gone with the Wind that still haunts me. Scarlett is in Atlanta and she goes to look at the list of the dead soldiers and sees name after name of all the boys who pursued her when life was still good. Her brain crosses off name after name, probably reliving the memories she had with each of them. These are real people to her, not just a name on a piece of paper.

My aunt's writing a book about the four sisters (my mom and my three aunts) about their lives between the Paris Peace Treaty of 1973 to 1983, ten years. My aunt described them as being hopeful. Peace was within their reach; they dared to fall in love and dream of some semblance of happiness. In that timeframe, 1973-1983, there's going to be stories about life after the fall of Saigon. We'll get to see the rise and fall of hope and despair.

That's what the VN war was to my mom. It's different from what the war was to that man. I truly thank him for what he did, but I don't think what he

went through is comparable to what my family went through. That's not to say one experience is worse than the other; I'm just saying to compare the two would be like comparing a rhino and a pickle. They're not comparable. They arise from completely different backgrounds. Perhaps someone like that vet could sympathize with my mother because he's seen the same thing she's seen, but I don't think he can truly understand her, nor can she truly understand him because they suffered for different reasons.

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