

The Family  
by  
Nick Fieldhouse.

It is raining. Heavy tropical rain in buckets at the start of the rainy season. Diem looks out at the rooves of Ho Chi Minh City, dripping and shining in the heavy grey light. The leaking corrugated iron and tile rooves of the suburbs. The smell of his mother's cooking fills the small flat, rice and dried fish, with morning glory herb. Twelve million Vietnamese are sharing the heavy drip of this storm in greater Saigon. It is a relief. The hot and humid day is relieved of its tension. The paddy fields need the rain, Diem thinks. It was time to plant the second rice crop down on the Mekong Delta. The rice basket of Vietnam. He was a boy from the big city but the shortage of food after the war had left its mark. Everyone thought of food production in Vietnam. D himself was lucky. His mother was a doctor and had managed to get milk during the shortages when he and his siblings were younger. But he remembered the hunger. The rice batter and water. The one meal a day. His parents going short.

That had been in the eighties when he was young. Now the Communist Party had done a deal with the World Bank, the Americans and the IMF. After the fall of the Berlin wall the support from the USSR had failed and even China seemed to distance herself from Vietnam. Now we had taken the capitalist shilling. Up front in the news we were getting 154 million dollars from the U.S. but in the background we had to pay for the cost of the American war, more than 2 billion dollars of debt, and a regime from the IMF. 2 Billion dollars for the death of 3.5 million of his own people. Children were dying of Malaria without treatment in the Mekong, healthcare and education were no longer free. Suddenly D had to drop school. His father could not afford to pay for him anymore. At seventeen D had to find work.

D loved his little sister, and his older brother, but the two child policy had hit him hard. Dad was denied a promotion and his career was dead in the water. This was the silent punishment for the incontinence of his parents. They had always wanted a boy and a girl but the Yin/Yan factor had taken a third child. The result is no more money for school. D has been offered work on the floor of a factory making shoes for Nike, but the pay is poor and the work hard and manual. D is the son of a teacher and a doctor. He didn't think it would come to this. D has always wanted to be a tour guide. His English language and history skills have always been good and he is sure that the future of the country lies in tourism.

D's namesake, uncle Diem, is an old pilot from the Southern army. He is D's hero. After three years in a re-education camp he was invited to go to the U.S. but he would not leave Vietnam. No-one dared employ him, but his old comrades sent him money from America to live on. He is a proud man. Finally he has found work in an aviation company in the city. Slowly Vietnam is reclaiming its people. D's phone pings and he opens the email. Uncle D wants him to come round and see him after supper. He wants to talk business with his nephew.

D and his family sit on the balcony after the rain. His little sister is full of the stories of her friends at school. A boy has taken a shine to her and is trying to sit near to her in class. She is very serious about it, but D laughs. She is only ten years old, after all. D feels he is a man now. The hard work of the factory and his adolescent frame have pushed him into a man. He rides a scooter to the Industrial estate and smokes with the men on their breaks. The girls on the production line laugh and blush in a gaggle when he looks at them. They fancy his slim frame and dark eyes. He fancies the girl in the blue dress who blushes and looks away when he lets his eyes wander. D is ready to move on, but he knows in his heart that he has to do better in life. Factory work is not for him. He is middle class and educated. Sure, the communist re-unification has made his family poor, but he

©nick fieldhouse 2017. None of the events in this story bears any relation to any real person or event nor is intended to do so.

The Family  
by  
Nick Fieldhouse.

knows he can do better. He just needs a chance that is all. D excuses himself politely and leaves the table. The rain has gone and lights are coming on across the city. It is a long ride to his uncle's house, but D owes him respect. In the traditions of Confucius he is the most senior member of the family. He is more senior than D's father. When such a man, and a war hero, calls, his nephew responds. Anyway, he loves his uncle and wants to see him. The flat is small and any excuse to get out and about is welcome. D's mother kisses him and tells him to watch the traffic.

D's uncle lives in old Saigon just north of the old district, near the West Lake. He parks up in front of the apartment block on the pavement and rings the entry-phone. He races up the stairs. Uncle D greets him like a young man in the family and bids him sit. He is a widower and lives alone. They drink rice wine and eat nuts.

"I want a serious talk with you my nephew." Uncle says, with a twinkle in his eye. "The airline I work with is in the travel business also and is looking to boost the tour industry. I know you want to be a guide. The government has started a tour guide course in Saigon for young men like you. It will take six months. The travel company will offer a bursary of the tuition fees and I will pay you to live while you study. If you pass out well there is a job at the end of it. What do you say?"

D is overwhelmed. He hugs his uncle with tears in his eyes. Suddenly the future seems bright.

"I am so grateful" he says.

"Don't be" says uncle D. "Confucius says this is what the family is for, and anyway I love my nephew."