

1.

My name is Gordon Crowe and I was one of the last American soldiers to leave Saigon on April 30, 1975. You're probably familiar with the images-South Vietnamese citizens at the Embassy gate trying to obtain passage, the helicopters taking off from the top of the building and the USS Okinawa leaving the South China sea with the those fortunate enough to have been rescued.

I was on the Okinawa that day watching the shoreline of Vietnam vanish behind the horizon. I knew that I would make it back to the United States but my euphoria was tainted because I had left my best friend in that frantic crowd outside the Embassy. His name was Pham Van Hai and he worked for us at The Embassy as a translator. For two years, his family had opened the door of their house to this American G.I. stranger from Port Arthur, Texas and made me feel like I was one of their own.

But try as I might, we had run out of time and couldn't get his family processed before the North Vietnamese tanks overran the Embassy. The last thing I told him as I evacuated was get his family out of Saigon in any way he could. Get the hell out of the Saigon and get out of the country. I quickly scribbled the address and phone number of my parents house on the back of a folder and told him to come find me if he could ever make it to The States.

We embraced one last time then I ran to the helicopter that took me to the Okinawa.

2.

Three months later I was back in Texas , a civilian once again. I was back in my childhood room. It felt odd and distant. It had been five years since I had slept in that bed and I felt no connection with the boy who used to live there.

So I decided to take a few months off and get my head together. A few months turned into a year. All the while, I spent my days and nights at The Rancho Grande Bar and Grill drinking beer, throwing darts , playing pool and trying to put the past the behind me. But the more I tried to put the past behind me, the more I seemed to dwell in it.

One drunken year turned into two. My parents nagged me to use my GI Bill funds to enroll in college. I told them I'd get around to it but I never seemed to get around to it, though.

Two years turned into three years. My parents eventually shrugged their shoulders and gave up on me. My seat was always waiting for me down at The Rancho Grande Bar and Grill. That's all that mattered to me.

And then, one day in May of 1980, I received a telephone call. It was Pham calling from Los Angeles.

He'd finally made it out of Vietnam and was actually moving to Port Arthur to work for a distant cousin on a fishing boat. He asked if I could pick him and his family up at the airport in Houston to drive them there.

I did my best to clean the dirt and growth of five years off myself and made the drive to Houston. I arrived at the airport gate and there was Pham, getting off a Continental 727. We trotted towards each other, shook hands and tightly embraced.

"Gordo, my man. Looking good brother!" he said smiling at me.

I politely greeted his wife, Lien, as he introduced me to his baby daughter, Thuy. I smiled at Pham, hugged him once again and accompanied them out to the car.

We headed East on the interstate away from Houston. Pham sat in the back with his family. I talked to him in the rear view mirror.

"Your parents?" I asked.

Pham blinked and slightly shook his head, "Accused of collaborating with the Americans and executed within hours of The Fall. "

My heart sank and my body became tense. I had no words to express the sorrow I felt.

Pham continued talking, "The NVA took our house. Lien and I were moved to a re-education camp."

I nodded and said, "I've heard about those. Not pretty."

"Horrible," said Pham. "Nothing but Marxist brainwash philosophy and revisionist history.

"And where did they send you after your....re-education?"

"They drafted me, Gordo, can you believe that shit? They were about to send my ass to the Cambodian killing fields so I figured it was time for us to get the hell out. I paid a smuggler to get us on a boat to Indonesia. Stayed there in a refugee camp for a year waiting for American sponsorship. That's where little Thuy here was born." He looked at his little daughter and smiled. Thuy giggled at him.

"And who finally sponsored you?"

3.

“The Catholic Church”

“Really?” I questioned. “But you’re Buddhist.”

“Don’t care if it was The Pope himself as long as they were willing to get us out of that hell hole refugee camp.”

We drove for another half hour and pulled into the boat docks. His relatives were there to greet him with open arms and tears of joy.

After he had greeted his family, Pham walked back over to me as I leaned into the car and watched, “Well, Pham, “ I said, “How does it feel?”

Pham spun around. He looked at the boats, he peered up into the sky, he smiled and said, “Feels like home Gordo, feels like home.”

“Call me when you get settled in, “ I said, “If there’s anything you need, I’m less than twenty minutes away.”

“Will do, Gordo, will do. You will come visit us soon too?”

I smiled and said, “I look forward to it Pham.”

We shook hands and embraced one another.

He shuffled back to his family. I got in the car and left.

On the way home, I pulled into the parking lot of the Rancho Grande Bar And Grill. I was thirsty and was dreaming about that first cold beer of the day. I turned off the car and took the keys out of the ignition. And just as I was about to get out and make the daily pilgrimage to my personal barstool, I saw the countless red, orange and purple shades of the sun setting in my rearview mirror. Something inside of me snapped. I re-started the car, turned it around and put it in drive.

I left the parking lot of The Rancho Grande Bar and Grill and have never returned.