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Homecoming
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Draft 4
Page 1

Homecoming

In 1967-68 I was a student at Long Beach City College. I had just moved to Long Beach with my parents, having been raised in Ventura, California. While at Buena High in Ventura I had many friends. Two of my good friends were Bud Allendar and Ricky Baca. I spent a lot of time with them doing teenager things like sneaking beer out of garage refrigerators, comparing dating stories, and going to see "guy flicks" starring Steve McQueen and Clint Eastwood.

Then something called Vietnam came along. My family watched the news every night and began viewing scenes of war. Then I heard about the "draft" and something called selective service. My dad explained that when you turn eighteen if you didn't go to college you went into the military. This meant going off to fight in a war. I remember thinking that this sounded very adventurous and manly. My friend Bud was a year older than me. He didn't go to college for some reason. One day when I was a senior Bud met me where I got off the bus after school in my housing tract. He said he had enlisted in the marines and was going to Vietnam. I thought it sounded cool. It sounded like something Steve McQueen would do. I actually remember being excited for him. As he walked away I jokingly said "Hey Bud. Bring me back a palm tree!" He shook his head and laughed. I never heard from him again. The next year while attending LBCC someone sent me an article saying that Bud was killed by a sniper in Vietnam.

Ricky Baca graduated with me. His parents were "pickers." They picked crops in and around Ventura. He didn't have the money to go to college. He enlisted in the army right after high school. I heard two years later he had also been killed in Vietnam. Ricky was a helicopter gunner and died when his helicopter crashed after taking heavy fire. When I heard that Ricky was dead too I was upset and angry. These feelings were deeper and more intense than I had ever felt those emotions before. I blamed Vietnam and the Vietnamese people for killing two of my closest friends.

A decade later it was the early 80's and I was a teacher at Wilson High in Long Beach. I had forgotten about Vietnam. I only felt my heart ache for my two friends again every Memorial Day. I had been teaching Drama for about 8 years. During that time I had a brother and sister come through my Drama Department. One day I was talking to the older brother. He told me his dad was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and had died when his helicopter crashed. I asked how did it crash. He said it had received heavy fire from the ground. I felt a chill go down my spine as I thought of Ricky. I told the now fatherless boy that's how my good friend died. I remember him asking if it might have been the same helicopter. As I shook my head from side to side I remember saying "who knows" as I felt a wave of grief and anger swallow me up momentarily. The boy told me his mom never got over it. Once more I thought about the families and friends of the deceased soldiers being part of the emotional and psychological victims of war. It took me weeks to emotionally work through this news.

Around 1984 a student named Tran entered my first year Drama class. Like most of my other Asian students she was diminutive, shy, and sweet. In response to her questionnaire Tran said she was from Vietnam. This news shook me to my core. Her people killed my friends. I hated her country. My mind dictated that therefore I should hate her. But Tran is intelligent, kind, respectful, with a delightful personality. How could I hate her? In wrestling with this moral and emotional challenge I realized one undeniable truth. Vietnam was knocking on my door with the brother and sister who lost their father years earlier. Vietnam had now entered my home in the form of my workplace. Tran was its representative. I know now in retrospect she was meant to be my teacher.

At the end of the first semester in Drama 1-2 everyone in class performs a scene from Tennessee Williams' classic play The Glass Menagerie for their semester final. Because Tran was shy I put her in a scene where she would play Laura Wingfield. Laura is a terribly shy character who has disappointed her mother by dropping out of a business college her mother enrolled her in. In the scene her mother, Amanda, scolds her and tells Laura how disappointed she is in finding this out. It's a very challenging and dramatic scene. Tran and her partner were excellent students and worked very hard on their scene. When their "show day" arrived they were naturally very nervous. Their final grade for the semester was riding on their performances. I lowered the lights and counted to five. When I brought the lights up I experienced one of the best scenes I had ever had the pleasure of watching in our playhouse. Their characterizations were superb. The scene was riveting. When it came to the part of the scene where Laura was

explaining to her mom where she went to everyday when she was ditching class Tran started to cry. As she went on tears were streaming down her face. She stayed in character though. At one point Tran was on the verge of sobbing as her emotions swelled up. But she was still able to deliver her dialogue clearly and in character. The other actress comforted her as a mother would do. They finished the scene and our first year Drama students applauded loudly. When the house lights came back up there wasn't a dry eye in the theater. As I dried off my face and cleared my throat I tried to find the words to begin the critique session. The actress who played Tran's mom in the scene jokingly said "She never cried like that in rehearsal!". We all laughed, grateful for the levity. Tran was actually apologetic to which I responded "No, it's okay Tran. It added another level of emotion to the scene." I also told them that the class and I were very touched by the scene because of their character depth and the reality of the scene. When I asked Tran what was she thinking during the emotional part of the scene she answered "How much I miss my mom." I naively asked "Is she still over in Vietnam?" Tran took a deep breath, paused and said "Can I explain?". I responded "Only if you want to." She took another long breath, paused once more, and started her story.

"My mom, my Aunt, my two younger brothers, and myself were boat people. My mom and Aunt paid men to take us by boat to Thailand during the war. It took us many days to get there. My mom and Aunt paid the men all the money they had. We only had a little food. One night", she paused, "My brothers and I saw", she paused again. Her voice quivering, "My mom

and auntwere beaten, raped, and pushed overboard." Tran paused once more. "They drowned." She took a long breath. "I miss my mom so much. That's why I cried in the scene." The class and I were stunned. The only sound in the theater was sniffing. All of us were wiping away tears again. We felt such profound sadness for Tran and her family. But I felt something else besides sadness. I felt overwhelming shame for hating Vietnamese people for killing my friends. I remember saying "I'm sorry Tran for what you had to endure to escape your homeland. I'm sorry for what you and your younger brothers had to witness that horrible night. I'm sorry for the tragic loss of your mother and your aunt." Looking back on it I was apologizing for my naïve, shallow, myopic view of the war. Besides the tragic loss of American lives the Vietnamese people experienced the equally tragic loss of civilian lives caught in the middle of widespread combat. Calling it "civilian fatalities" or "collateral damage" every night on the news dehumanizes it. These losses were thousands of family members. Unending pain and trauma for families and friends still being felt today on both sides.

After class I talked to Tran. I thanked her for her remarkable courage to share her story with us. In effect, Tran was our teacher that day. Her smile came back in my office when she said how happy she and her brothers were to live in America. She said they were living with her cousins. Tran went on to say that although she still misses her mom and aunt she is in a happy, loving home. She also said that her smile and her laughter had returned. Tran has a very bright future ahead of her.

In the months following that day I forgave myself for hating Vietnam and its people.

Tran became my new symbol of Viet Nam. Every time I saw her beautiful smile and heard her lyrical laugh in class my face lit up with joy and my soul danced. In my forty-six years of being an educator Tran was one of my greatest teachers of courage, recovery, and strength of character.

If turnabout is fair play, suffice it to say, Tran was one of my greatest teachers in high school.

She still inspires me today.