
INCIDENT IN HUE / L. L. Rottmann

*I shouldn't have stopped.
I really shouldn't have.
After all, I was already running late,
and it wasn't any of my business.*

I often went out early in the day,
partly because the air was cool and the Perfume River was beautiful.
And also because I'm a morning person who just couldn't lie in bed,
especially not there. Not then.

*I saw him walking around for nearly a week,
and knew he'd been staying at the foreigner's hotel.
I thought he was another grim Russian
who'd complain about the food and scowl at the children.*

I enjoyed the sounds and smells of the slowly-awakening city
as the people got up, had breakfast,
and prepared for the long day's activities.
In the hustle and bustle of daybreak, I felt less conspicuous.

*I asked my neighbor Tuy—who works at the hotel—about him,
and she said he was an American teacher
who was visiting the university.
She also told me he'd been a soldier here twenty years ago.*

I didn't take my camera or note pad on my sunrise strolls
because I didn't want to look like a tourist.
I'd buy warm French bread and fresh mangos at the open-air market,
and just let the flow of the crowds carry me along.

*I didn't plan to stop,
but my feet wouldn't let me continue.
I stood nearby, watching,
as he joked with the children.*

I usually ended up in a schoolyard,
surrounded by a crowd of happy kids.
We'd play soccer, cards, or cat's cradle
as I'd crack them up with my awkward Vietnamese.

*I guess I resented his smile
because I remembered my dead mother's advice
that even the kindest of them
were sometimes terribly cruel.*

I saw her that clear, calm morning
at the far edge of an excited group of second-graders,
an angular teenager
with a look in her eyes I couldn't begin to comprehend.

*I still don't remember picking up the rock
or throwing it.
And although he obviously saw it coming,
he didn't even try to duck.*

I saw her suddenly bend over, and then in a single fluid motion,
hurl a small stone in my direction.
It floated in slow motion across the heads of the kids
but I refused to believe it was aimed at me.

*I watched, horrified, as the rock hit the American on the forehead,
just above the right eye.
He didn't flinch,
or even wipe away the trickle of blood that appeared.*

I felt the sharp impact, and the spurt of blood
from my second head wound suffered in Vietnam.
The first injury very nearly killed me.
This one hurt worse.

*I was summoned before The Central Committee that afternoon.
They told me he was a good man,
and a friend of our country.
They expected me to say I was sorry.*

I attended a dinner sponsored by The Central Committee that night.
When my hosts asked about the band-aid,
I told them it wasn't anything
important.