

“Before the British came, people lived in the caves, but they did not go in very far. The Vietnamese people are deeply superstitious, even here in Quảng Bình, which is mostly Catholic. They tell stories about ghosts waiting in the caves to catch you.”

As we came out of a narrow passage, the cave opened up into a dome. There was a clearing of boulders and sand. The two porters who had been helping us travel created a beautiful spread of the bananas, water, and Oreos they’d carried for us. We ate and drank, doused our faces with water, and took selfies.

Then one porter started to sing. “*Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ*,” The porter’s lone voice bellowed around us. He signaled for us to gather our things and continue. “*Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ*,” his singing turned into a familiar wail I had often heard when I was a child. “*Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ-Ơ*,” cried the porter. I didn’t know the song, but his round call stirred deep memories of Vietnamese country songs, like the ones my grandmother would play, loud, from VHS recordings brought over from Vietnam.

The lyrics of these songs often feature the same iconic elements: a bird, a fish, a river, a lover, a longing for a past time. Their melodies are melancholic, each long note slurring into the next with never a bright interval. They almost always end in a fadeout. Wherever I hear these songs—when I would watch *Paris by Night* with my parents and David Van, or today, in any Vietnamese coffee shop with a TV—I can feel the structure of the melody sculpt itself into the physical world. Each word ricochets off whatever surface it can find—a living room couch, a rock, a chair, a leaf—and molds its sadness to the shape of my surroundings.

“These must have been the same songs that were sung in the war,” I thought to myself. We were not just walking through geological wonder; these caves were part of the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. I asked Đông where exactly the trail was.

“It was everywhere,” he said, his hands gesturing all around him. “If not for the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, our Brothers and Sisters, North and South, would not have united.”

“Ồ-Ồ-Ồ-Ồ-Ồ-Ồ-Ồ-Ồ,” Đông joined the porters’ song. “Try to follow my

voice, okay? ୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦.” I could see that we were approaching a narrow passageway. The cave walls tapered above our heads like the ceilings of old gothic cathedrals. We were submerged up to our chests in water, and the path onward was about two feet wide. “Turn off your lights. Just follow my voice,” instructed Đông. “୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦!”

Below me, the cave floor continued to protrude: sharp cones, bumpy boulders, round mounds. I braced my hands against the cave walls to help me navigate through the tight waterway. I dragged my legs through the murky cave sediment, brushing across smooth, submerged boulders. My eyes were so wide open, I could feel the muscles around my eye sockets strain. The more I tried to widen my eyes to catch the light, the darker it became.

“୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦,” Đông continued to call us forward. As we carried on deeper into the cave, the rocks above and below us seemed to be opening up to water. “୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦-୦,” roared the water, the sound coming from a place nearby we could not see.

“Go,” said the porter. One by one, we passed through another opening. Though we could not see, we felt the air change. We had entered another hollow, its bowl filled with the water that would carry us into the next region of the karst. One by one, we started to swim, following Đông’s guiding call.



One year, David Van and my mom decided that we would all go to Kauai. This was typical; they shared an obsession with health and a fear of dying, coupled with a fixation on wealth, that compelled them to plan frequent excursions “for our health”—always in aspirational, exotic locales. My family did not skimp on accommodations when we traveled. On this trip, we stayed at a Gold Crown resort that was part of a timeshare my parents and David Van owned. The beachfront suite was large enough to sleep all seven of us: my mom, my dad, my sister, David Van, his two kids, and me.

It was a cloudy, muggy day when the Jeep, decked out with *Jurassic Park* decals, pulled up to our resort. We had learned that Kauai was where much of the film had been shot, and we’d booked an action-packed, mountain-road adventure to take us on a tour of the locations. That day, I remember David Van hanging onto one of the Jeep’s straps, his eagle tattoo throbbing with his muscles as he laughed. We splashed through pool after pool of mud, and brown water flicked onto our faces and clothes as my cousins and I giggled in delight. Seven hours flew by.

The rest of our vacation was filled with beach play and long drives all over the island to visit new properties. On these vacations, David Van and my parents enjoyed pretending to be real estate investors. They would seek out a local agent and inquire about a new development with such commitment that I wasn't always sure if they were pretending. David Van would drive all seven of us in a rented minivan, sometimes for hours, until we reached a mostly vacant lot of land, the site of some new development that wouldn't be finished for another five to ten years. There was always one model unit that was furnished and decorated as a sales pitch. There was nothing special about the development in Kauai. The walls were white; the unit was air-conditioned; there was a place to grill, a place to park, and a bathtub off of the master bedroom. You had options: studio, one-bedroom, two-bedroom, three-bedroom.

After visiting one of these empty model homes, the agent would take us out to lunch: salad, burger or steak, fruit, maybe ice cream. In the car ride back, my

parents and David Van would debrief, my uncle taking most of the airtime with his passionate exclamations. For emphasis, he might gather his fists and pound them on the steering wheel. They would run the numbers on how much you'd need to rent the unit to make a profit, how much property taxes were, and, bottom line, how much better off they were with the properties they had already bought in the Bay Area. After the long day, my cousins and I were always rewarded with more beach or pool play and a lavish dinner at an all-you-can-eat buffet, where my dad never failed to caution me, in front of everyone, to be careful with my teeth.

This sequence repeated over the next several years: thrill-seeking entertainment, real estate tourism, then pool or beach and an all-you-can-eat buffet. The same conversations and talking points arose wherever we were. In Florida, we went to all of the theme parks of Disney World and drove all over Orlando looking for new houses to not buy. In Vegas, we went through all of the water amusements and then forayed into the desert looking for smart investments. In

my years with braces, I only had to be careful at the buffets. But after I received my prosthetics, there were times when I had to take them out at dinner. I was constantly anxious that my false teeth would break off in the middle of one of these vacations, and I would be toothless in a situation where we needed to look wealthy and educated.







