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A sense of belonging

Daniel, born (1974) in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) was placed in an orphanage until April 1975 (around the fall of Saigon) when he was airlifted out of Vietnam with other orphans bound for Australian families. Daniel does not have any information about his birth parents, but presumes they are Vietnamese. He was adopted into a “white” Australian family. Daniel and his family lived in Sydney until 1986 when they moved to Hobart. Having finished his honours degree, Daniel is based in Sydney as a Senior Consultant for a leading global online research company. In November 1998 Daniel travelled to Vietnam. It had been 24 years since Daniel had left Saigon as an orphan.

As I am waiting in the departure lounge en route to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s capital, I look around at other passengers, expecting to see Vietnamese people that have similar physical features to me. “I was born in Vietnam”, I thought. “So were they. There should be obvious physical similarities.” In a wide glance I am still searching. “Why did the other Asian-looking people seem so different?”

I board the Vietnam Airlines A320 and as the plane roars down the runway I am confronted with mixed emotions. Rationally I am playing down the thought of finding my natural family, knowing that I’m only armed with an address of my birthplace and my mother’s name, which I’m told will be of little help. Irrationally, I am considering scenarios in which I do come face to face with my natural family.

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Descending closer to Ho Chi Minh City, lush, deep-green foliage and neatly carved rice paddies are gradually replaced by urban sprawl. Now, close to the airport, I can see giant corrugated concrete hangers, designed to protect aircraft during the war, some of which are partially collapsed. Also visible on the tarmac are numerous planes and helicopters that appear so riddled with rust they collectively resemble something between an aeroplane graveyard and war museum (it was later that I realised some of these aircraft are still being flown).

A puff of smoke goes up as the plane's tyres connect with the visibly worn airstrip – touchdown in Vietnam 24 years after being airlifted out as a four-month-old infant oblivious to the surrounding turmoil of war.

What had been an ongoing issue throughout my life was now being addressed head-on. That issue, put simply, is a desire to realise my heritage. This desire is a combination of inherent curiosity about my natural family and developed curiosity from looking different to the "Australian" benchmark.

Beyond the pale suburban buildings is a culture of colour and life. Based on my glimpse of Vietnam through the window of the people with whom I met, I gained a sense of their inner strength, entrepreneurial nature and future-oriented thinking. But then again, maybe I'm biased.

284 Cong Quynh Street is the address where I was apparently born. Time to consult the Lonely Planet guide which has a rudimentary street map of the city. I needn't have worried, no sooner had I emerged from the Oscar Hotel lobby, then I was surrounded by an army of street vendors, selling among other things, detailed maps (I did say they were entrepreneurial). "I must lose the lost tourist look," I thought, "after all I was born here – somewhere?"

It turns out Cong Quynh Street is in walking distance from the hotel. What lies ahead is more than just an address but possibly, hopefully, a vital piece of the jigsaw I'm trying to complete.

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Walking out into the chaotic city streets the constant stream of push-bikes, motorbikes and cyclos flows around me. As I walked further away from the hotel and the city centre, the streets become narrow and the humidity is more intense and stifling, as cleansing gusts of fresh air become less frequent. There are fewer tourists.

Counting the street numbers as I move forward, I'm thinking, "What are the chances of a reunion after all these years? What might my mother be like? Do I have 'natural' brothers and sisters?"

Eventually I'm standing outside. Of course – it makes sense now, but not quite how I'd hoped. The realisation and frustration that this hospital is the address reflects a naivete that I guess I've carried for some time now – that I was kidding myself to think that I could just walk up to some porch and be reunited with my natural Vietnamese relations. Reality bites.

Now inside the hospital grounds, I look for someone who I can question. I must have looked fairly lost for it was seconds before I had people asking me in English if they could help. I hastily show my birth certificate as I blurt out an abbreviated version of my agenda. They cotton on to what I'm struggling to say – "born here ... mother ... find ..."

I'm taken up a flight of stairs to the maternity ward. There I'm introduced to a nurse who listens patiently while I explain my request to find out about my natural relations. It's not long before I'm surrounded by a number of nurses, but no matter how helpful they are, my frustration and disappointment is soon evident.

I receive an impression of sincere empathy, but also an understanding that the nurses and other hospital staff have seen the likes of me many times before. I am another adopted soul that has travelled back to their birthplace in search of a more complete sense of belonging.

I listen intently as they explain reasons why it is verging on impossible to locate natural family with just the

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name of my birth mother. First, any records dating back during the war are far from comprehensive – they are unable to provide any further information than what I already have. Due to adverse circumstances, very little demographic information may have been provided by mothers to the hospitals. This may have been because they were carrying a child born out of wedlock or knew they were too poverty stricken to have been able to provide a life for their child. Secondly, to go public with a search could end up with numerous women claiming to be my mother. It would be flattering but, according to the nurses, may be financially motivated. I reluctantly turn my eyes away, for the time being. Now my attention is on locating the orphanage from where I had been adopted. This search involved a side trip to a war museum and the help of many locals.

I guess there are many factors contributing to me ending up in Australia, away from my birthplace, the Vietnam war being clearly the most obvious. Situated near the heart of Ho Chi Minh City is a war remnants museum that details the catastrophic events surrounding an indisputably inhumane period in history.

A trip to the war museum therefore constitutes a requisite component in explaining the context (albeit one-sided) of my adoption. The route there takes me past City Hall, where love is in the air for many couples who are having their marriage photos taken in the grounds outside – this is a hallmark of the end of the torrential rain of the monsoon season and beginning of the dry season.

The next landmark en route to the war museum is the Reunification Palace. It is preserved almost as it was on the 30 April 1975 when Communist tanks came crashing through the palace's wrought iron gates and the Republic of Vietnam ceased to exist. It is the Republic that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and American soldiers died trying to save.

Not far from the Reunification Palace I meet Nguyen Van Phu, who I become friends with during my brief stay in

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Vietnam. Stopping for a fresh coconut offered to me from a street vendor, I'm immediately surrounded by a horde of locals selling the usual variety of post cards, maps and books. Phu is among them, but is offering a guided tour of the city. He is very articulate and genuine, asking where I'm from and where I'm going. I explain that I'm on the way to the war museum. He insists on showing me other sites around the city on his motorbike and also mentions that I've been extremely ripped-off for the price I had paid for the fresh coconut. I'm taken by his sincerity and reply that I'd like to see more of the city but am initially on a different agenda to most tourists and sightseeing is not a priority. In the same breath, I ask if he can help me find where my orphanage used to be located. I leave him waiting outside the war museum as I walk through the gates.

The tragedy and shame of war is portrayed by the confronting images and remnants throughout the museum. With the apocalyptic devastation of lives and families it is no wonder that years of intensive war managed to tear well over one million children from their mothers, isolating them as orphans.

The Santa Maria orphanage was one of 133 orphanages around Vietnam that overflowed with the orphan children. This is where I was apparently adopted from. However, I know that it has not been called Santa Maria since reunification in 1975 and as such is no longer an orphanage. Finding the former orphanage is not going to be easy. The building remains though, or so I was told before I left Sydney to travel over here. I hope Phu can help me locate this important part of my history and early circumstance. As I walk out of the museum grounds, Phu is waiting just outside.

I'm constantly carrying around my birth certificate and adoption documentation as if they are a set of keys that may open some corridors to the past. I show these sheets of creased paper to Phu who studies them. They are in Vietnamese, but have also been translated into "Australian". He takes one of

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the sheets of paper to a few others around the street asking them questions. Phu returns and to my initial disappointment says that neither he nor the others have heard of this place. But, although there is not a specific address listed on the documentation, it does provide a general district or municipality where the orphanage should be. This district is called Quan Binh Thanh.

We decided the best plan to find this “needle in a haystack” was to head to the Quan Binh Thanh district and ask the more elderly people if they’d heard of the former orphanage and if so where it is located. The logic being that those people with a clearer memory of the early to mid-1970s would be more able to assist my endeavours. It was still a long shot.

Phu must have been thinking, “this could take a while”, since on our way to the district we pulled in to get a full tank of petrol. Now on our way we are part of the traffic that constantly flows along the city streets taking up every available inch of bitumen and more. Looking around me at surrounding drivers, passengers and locals lining the streets I feel comfortable with my presence here. Yet, it is confronting to imagine how things would have been growing up in this city area.

Now in the district where the orphanage was, we begin asking the older people for directions. Phu does most of the talking since many of the elderly do not understand my “Australian” – this is a time in my life that I’ve sincerely regretted not being able to communicate in Vietnamese. Forging deeper into dense suburbia we think we’re solving more pieces of this puzzle. The people we stop and talk to are very helpful, but as Phu expected it’s a long process.

Finally someone thinks they know where the building is located. After some complicated directions we head off, weaving our way across busy streets and through alleyways. As we turn off the main street and slow down on approach to a building that appears to be in relatively good condition, my

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pulse rate increases. "Could this be it?" I think, "but it seems fairly new?"

After talking with a woman inside it is soon obvious this is a false alarm. The place I'm at is a current orphanage and as such it is not the Santa Maria. After showing the people there my documents one of them says she knows where to go to find the Santa Maria and will get someone to show us – it is not far. Back onto the motorbike we are now travelling in convoy behind two "guides".

Santa Maria is hidden up a narrow side-street nestled well below neighbouring buildings that reach over four storeys in height. As its name indicates, the Santa Maria (Saint Mary) maintains a visible chapel. Like much of the surrounding architecture, the white paint has washed away in streaks revealing grey concrete underneath. The fence and gate around the building is rusting.

A racing pulse betrays my calm actions as I open the gate and walk through, returning to what was once my home before being adopted. Standing in the concrete courtyard I see children who look no older than five years playing hide and seek amongst the chapel pews, giggling and laughing freely with each other.

I head towards an open door. Inside I meet a woman by the name of Duong Cong Buu who helps look after the people living on the premises. She tells me that while funding ceased in 1975, the building still provides housing for homeless people and as such it does remain somewhat of an orphanage. I explain the purpose of my visit here. She is pleased that I have returned, but tells me that most records of orphans do not provide even a starting point to search for natural relatives. I press on, showing her my birth certificate with my birth mother's name. This is apparently more information than usual and I ask her to check this against any orphanage records. Duong says it is worth trying, but very unlikely there will be any outcome. I have to return tomorrow because the records are in the care of the owner of the

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property and he is not around until evening. I am invited to have a look around the orphanage.

The corridors and rooms are dark and the still air magnifies the heat and humidity. I am introduced to a woman who, like me, is also an orphan, except she has lived at the Santa Maria all her life. She was not adopted out. This brings home the realisation of just how much my life was destined to change from April 1975 when I was deemed healthy enough to survive the flight out of Saigon to Australia. I can't help but think what a completely different path my future would have tracked had I not been well at the time.

The flip-side to this is the personal and social significance of bringing a baby or infant into Australia from a foreign country (foreign in terms of both culture and physical appearance). To put this another way, inter-country adoption invariably involves moving a baby or infant out of a culture typical of his or her racial appearance into one that is different. But adoption is more than just a balance between what life would be without intervention and what life may be with intervention. It is about an unconditional and unwavering commitment to parent and love a child who is not related by blood.

I leave the orphanage with countless thoughts pounding through my mind. I am also hopeful of further resolution in the search for natural relatives. This is short lived, for when I return the next day Dhong confirms that whilst there is a record that I am a Santa Maria orphan, unfortunately they can find no more information than what I already have. There are no further details about my natural family or any other addresses that I could try. Frustration runs deep. However, just knowing this reality enables me to draw some completion from the situation.

As the nose of the plane lifts gradually into the sky, I reflect on the whirlwind week spent in a country that under different circumstances could have been my place of residence. Somehow, regardless of how the beginning begins

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there are issues and obstacles that we all face individually and no matter how we choose to face them we must ultimately move forward. This is not to say neglect the past but rather to commemorate where you have been and look with open arms toward the future. The search for my birthplace, orphanage and my natural relatives is as much a metaphor for a search for my physical heritage as my emotional sense of belonging. I can say with the benefit of hindsight that returning to my birthplace, Vietnam, was an important part of realising, confirming and resolving these issues.