

I am the child of the inner-city. Like so much in my strange life, I have been carried there by the beckoning of its tender cry. Fairy tales only work in attempt to emulate it. Ink scratched on paper try so hard to capture it. But the fact of the matter is that the world will never understand my story.

My name is Paul Tran. I live in a two bedroom apartment in the City Heights neighborhood of San Diego. There are drug dealers on my corners, prostitutes walking my streets, and gang members are a regular sight. I am the child who is not supposed to succeed in life because I am poor. I am not supposed to go to college. I see it in my community and am told so by my family.

Life, for me, isn't easy. In fact, it is incredibly difficult. But it is nothing compared to my struggles to become a New American.

My story begins in 1954.

Momma was born in the small *An Cuu* Village of Hue, Vietnam. She was a child of War. In fact, her very name, *Tran Thi Chien*, means “War”. Hue, the *Forbidden Purple City*, was the center of the budding Vietnamese renaissance. It was also the home to the Nguyen Dynasty that had ruled over Vietnam for hundreds of years. Today, Hue is nothing more than a tomb to the past. However, Momma still considers it her forbidden world; a world supported by its mysteries, secrets, and bloodshed.

Momma grew up in a less-than-perfect family. Grandfather, a carpenter, worked all day in order to provide for his family. Grandmother, uneducated, gave him the bitter joy of seven children. As the oldest, my mother had to support her family at an early age. She was forced to sell noodles on the side of the street in order to help pay the monthly bills. At times, Grandmother sent her off to sell fake lottery tickets just to make ends meet. Momma learned to be independent and self-reliant, the same values she hopes to instill in me.

Everyday, Momma would get up early to go to school. Like me, she had to walk there. Today, the blisters on her calloused feet still tell the story of her difficult commute. Grandfather,

adamant about education, had high expectations for his children. As a result, each one excelled in academics. Momma was mediocre. I mean, what can you expect? Not only did she have to focus on her studies, but she had to support her entire family. Her brothers and sisters never knew the pain of having such responsibilities. It wasn't fair.

Destiny fell from the sky in 1968. The 26 day Battle of Hue, or *Tet* Offensive, was a series of operational offensives lead by the Vietcong to capture the Imperial Palace. Each night, Momma told me, she lay awake in bed attentively listening for the sit of the Vietcong. Fear, like a diseased child, crawled through the streets screaming out the names of those no longer longed for this world. The Vietcong, who had withdrawn from the brawl, left Hue in ruins.

In the fall on 1969, Momma passed the University Entrance Exam and was admitted into *Van Hang* University, the most distinguished institute of learning at the time. But things were not all as well at home. Grandfather had become very ill and needed urgent medical attention. As always, Momma was held responsible for taking care of him. Frustrated, Momma left. She became a monk and lived in a Buddhist monastery. While continuing her college education, she became a devout Buddhist disciple. Studying under the mentorship of prominent Buddhist icons, Momma was given a life away from the world; away from the War.

But in 1979, the War arrived again on her doorsteps.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam failed to resist the Vietcong and was conquered. With an oppressive hand, the Vietcong punished those who had once defiantly rejected them. The old Republic of Vietnam, just a mere memory, no longer remained. When the Vietcong knocked on the monastery doors in that year, they gave Momma an ultimatum: either she shave off her hair and permanently became a part of the monastery or return to her family. She chose to go home. She chose to return to a family that had refused to acknowledge her.

For the past ten years, the world had continued on without her. Her brothers and sisters, older now, told the story of the War in the deep wrinkles on their faces. It was evident. Grandmother, who did not want Momma back, was rude and acted selfishly towards my mother. Regardless,

Momma stayed. She continued to go to college. Although she finished her education, the Vietcong felt that her degree was invalid. They did not agree with the practices of the system of public instruction. As a result, Momma was not able to get her diploma and all those years went to waste.

That winter, Grandfather died. Unable to handle the conditions at home, my uncle, *Tran Viet Tam*, attempted to escape to the United States. He made his way down to Saigon and, from there, went to Thailand where US Military rescued him and took him to the United States. Because of his success, Momma decided to escape too.

In 1985, Momma went to Saigon to escape with her friends by boat. However, only two miles from the shore, they were attacked by the Vietcong. Captured, my mother was thrown into the *My Tho* Concentration Camp. There, she was assigned to weave cloth to make bedding for the Vietcong soldiers. Each day, her fingers bled from the tedious work she performed at the loom. Eventually, the Vietcong made her a slave. After thirteen months, she was finally released. Although disheartened, she was not discouraged. She could not go home and face the humiliation of her family, of her own mother. She had to try again.

Two years later, Momma fled to Cambodia. Embarking on the dangerous *Nonphenh* Route, she was caught by the Cambodian government. Thrown into jail, Momma longed to see the light of day. She was tortured, abused, and enslaved by the Cambodian soldiers. Once, a soldier dragged her out to see and held her at gunpoint. He ripped off her clothes and raped her. He left her to lie helplessly on the sand. Not yet defeated, Momma tried to escape again. After being released from jail, she made her way to Thailand, where rumor had it that the US Military was helping rescue Vietnamese refugees. When she got there, she soon realized that it was all a lie plotted by the Vietcong to lure wandering victims.

It wasn't until 1988 that Momma was able to successfully escape to Malaysia by boat. Arriving on the *Bedong* Port, the Malaysian government and US Military placed her in a reeducation camp that was designed to teach her, not only the English language, but the customs and traditions of the United States. Although it tested her resilience, Momma was able to finish her

term. In 1989, the Malaysian government and US Military sent her to the Philippines where she was flown to the United States. Momma remembers standing amidst the uproar of Lindberg Field Airport in San Diego. She was as excited as she was confused. Although she knew very little of the way of the life of this foreign country, she did understand one thing: she was finally free.

For a few years, Momma lived with Uncle Tam and his wife, Auntie Lien, in Rancho Bernardo. While they went to work as engineers developing intravenous technology for Alaris Medical Systems, Momma took care of their children. After a while, Uncle Tam thought that she should find work. *You can't just stay at home all day*, he explained. So, with a lot of help, he found her work as a seamstress for Ursula's Custom Tailoring in the Kensington area, a floating Spanish village nested in the Normal Heights neighborhood. Each day, Momma woke up at 5/AM in order to get to work on time. She had to walk 2 miles to the nearest transit station. Everyday, Momma took Bus 20 to Downtown where she took Bus 11 to Adams Avenue where she had to walk to work. After just one year, the Ursula, the manager of the shop, decided to relocate. Before leaving, Ursula asked her if she wanted to buy the business. *Her own business?* She could not imagine it. With a loan from my uncle, Momma bought the store from Ursula for \$2000.00. She renamed the store: M&C Tailoring. It was a small tailoring and alterations shop, but at least it was hers. She took great pride in knowing that, at the end of the day, she had something to call her own, something that finally made her happy and content regardless of her struggles.

As tensions between Momma and Auntie Lien rose, Momma decided to move out. She did not want anything to do with, as she would put it, that vixen. She shared rooms with a friend closer to work to make her commute easier. It was around this time that she met *Tran Duy My*, my father. With a rush of passion, she engaged in a wedding-less marriage. In this incomplete matrimony, she conceived a child; me. When my father found out that Momma was pregnant he left her. He did not want to have anything to do with her. As we later on found out, he was womanizer who had two wives and five children back in Vietnam. This entire time her had been deceiving my mother and taking her money to support his family back home. Eventually, Momma refused to let him see me. To this day, I have no idea where he is or even if he is still alive. To be frank, I really don't care. I have my mother. I don't really need anyone else.

My mother became an American citizen in 1996. I remember everything as though it was branded into my mind. Momma, dressed in her only good suit, stood in front of the government official taking her US Naturalization Test. I was really excited for her. So excited, that I forgot to remind her that I needed to use the restroom! I recall accidentally pooping in my pants and making a big fuss! Regardless, it was on that day that Momma received documentation that made her an official citizen of the United States. It was also on this day that Momma changed her name. She did not want to be *Tran Thi Chien* anymore. She did not want to be a child of war. Instead, she wanted to be *Paula Tran*. In retrospect, I cannot begin to fathom how one single, solitary piece of paper replaced the past 44 years of her life.

And so began the next chapter of our lives.

In the fall of 1997, Momma enrolled me at Franklin Elementary. I was afraid to be away from her comfort for the first time. As one of the only Vietnamese students in my class, I was the victim of prejudice and discrimination. I saw the horrible ways by which my classmates looked at me. Even though they were immigrants themselves, it was as though they had never seen a child with thick black hair and dark brown eyes before. I remember the days where I sat in the restroom crying; the days where I crawled under my wooden desk just to seek solace away from the world. I guess I was lucky. Being born and raised in the United States, I never faced any language or cultural barriers. I just could not understand why my classmates couldn't treat me with respect.

At some point in my life, I finally understood the bigotry that exists in my society. My community thinks that kids like me, kids who come from poor families where no one has gone to college, are worthless. That is ridiculous. For the past 14 years of my life, I have strived to challenge the biases that my society attaches to children of low socioeconomic status.

After graduating from Franklin Elementary at the top of my class, I was admitted into the Preuss School at the University of California, San Diego. The Preuss School was a 6-12 grade charter school for low income, first-generation university bound students. Everyday, I commute three

hours from my home in City Heights to school in La Jolla. It is a difficult journey, but I understand that I have to in order to rise above society's expectations. Because of the Preuss School, I will be the first in my family to go to college; I will be the first to make a difference.

As a New American, I know that I can become just about anything that I aspire to be. The opportunities and values that are present in the United States enable me to be educated, be cared for, and live a life that should be endowed to all individuals; things that I sometimes take for granted. I have, however, gained a deeper appreciation for the freedoms that are now available to me, opportunities that are not offered in my home country. I still remember that all of this would not have been made possible if it hadn't been for the struggles of my mother.

However, as a New American, I feel responsible for helping other kids in my community have access to these same opportunities. I have started local and national peer mentorship support programs to aid disadvantaged youth in San Diego and throughout the United States. Spending 15 hours a week tutoring and mentoring students after school at the Preuss School, at Saturday Enrichment Academy, San Diego Public Libraries, and local Boys and Girls Clubs, I have helped hundreds of students, many of them immigrants like me, on their way to college. I have guided them along the path of succeed to where they stand today; to where I stand today. I have even reached out to kids living in areas of marginal importance in Indonesia and Kenya and gave them an opportunity access an education. Through monthly fundraises, I engage my peers at school in sponsoring classrooms of 60 kids in each country in interactive education in English, Math, Science, Computer Literacy, and Leadership. I want them to grow up to be leaders of their own country; leaders, so they can reform the state of devastation that their community is in. I want them to change the culture of their society, as I have changed mine.

To me, being a New American means being a diverse individual. I am not just Vietnamese. I am not just American. I am proud to be both cultures. I am proud to be a Vietnamese-American. I am proud to be a child of the inner-city.

This is my story. This is my journey.