

Craig Loomis

THE APOLOGY

Michael Andrews had been a soldier for two, almost three years. He had worn their uniform, talked their talk, carried their pistol, aimed their rifle. He had shot at the enemy. Twice he had even accepted their medals—colorful, finger-long strips of cloth. But then one July morning, nineteen years after being a soldier, he bolted straight up in bed, threw back the covers, and immediately understood that he had to go back.

He never tried explaining it to the kids.

“Just a business trip of sorts. Won’t be more than a week. Three or four days is more like it. Bring you back a surprise. Promise.” But he did try explaining it to her. “I don’t know. All I know is that I’ve got to go back one last time. I don’t know. Maybe there’s something I forgot to do. I don’t know—just something. Something.”

But she could only shake her head and cry, thinking all along that it was something else, someone else—another woman. He didn’t blame her. After all, even he could see his explanation was hollow and no good. When he got the Visa and passport, he hid them both in the attic, in an old brown suitcase.

Michael Andrews told his boss his mother was dying—cancer. The boss, a long, pale Texan, nodded, sighed, and looked to the ceiling. Of course he understood. He had to borrow money for the flight from his brother.

On the day he left, he forgot his razor, his toothbrush. In his frenzy to leave, he only took one pair of socks.

Day One

His room is cheap and clean, and when he pulls back the curtains—a faded red, worn white, frayed around the edges—he looks out over the rooftops of Saigon: a weather-beaten jigsaw of plaster walls, of sloping wires and slanting antennas. In the daylight, the many windows are empty, dark hollows, but at night he knows they will come alive with mothers scolding, children running, squealing, lovers leaning out to look at the stars. At night Michael Andrews knows, remembers, he can sit up in his room, at the window, and spy down on dozens of private lives. From his vantage point, he can get to know entire families, neighbors, their friends and their neighbors—at nighttime.

A deep blue sky hangs over the city. A tiny old woman leans over her railing to get a better look at the noise below. Over there, tufts of dry grass sprout from cracks on the roof. Beyond, on Nam Ky Khoi Nghi Boulevard, a plastic bag, pink, flutters from a tree. A high-rise crane works prehistoric-like in the distance. The curtains are pulled back as far as they can go, flooding the room with a forgotten light. All he knows for certain is that the Saigon River is that way, the Mekong Delta this way. Staring into a city of nineteen years ago, he thinks it is different, but the same.

He walks five floors to the restaurant below.

None of the three women knows he has walked in, has taken a seat, even though the chair squeals. Over the bar is a television, and they, backs to the tables, are watching it, laughing. Finally, between laughter, one turns and almost by accident sees him. When he raises his hand to let her know he is waiting, she turns back to the television—more laughter. The screech of his chair. The tallest of the three—high, sharp cheekbones—moves toward his table. She holds out a menu to him but when he doesn't take it she simply shrugs, turning to squint at the television.

“Toast and coffee, please.”

Menu at her breast, she hurries back to the bar, to her friends. The thin one who first found him out—glistening waist-black hair, something purple, tattoo-like on her hand—says something, and the tall one shakes her head as if she can't believe it.

Plastic yellow flowers are on his table, on every table. Water stains are etched into the ceiling. One wall is partially mirrored. If he wanted to he could watch himself eat. The room is almost perfectly square.

When he spreads the newspaper out to read, the lighting is too weak and lemony. He opens his eyes wider, pulling the paper closer, now at arm's length. Finally he moves to a table next to the window. Although it is still early, the sun is already strong, stretching across his back, cutting the table in half. As he bends to read, there is a rough clicking of plate against tabletop, and when he looks, the toast and coffee are in front of him. But even before he can begin to refold his paper, sip the too-thick coffee, spread the red jelly across the toast, there is a tapping at the window. It is then, like a sudden electrical jolt—the jelly sliding off his knife—that a forgotten piece of Saigon suddenly comes rushing back to him. He doesn't have to look to know what it is.

Shifting the newspaper from table to chair, spreading the jelly, not turning to look, and still the tapping continues. Shadows play upon the glass, ruining

the sunlight. The waitresses, elbows on bar, have never stopped laughing at their television. Tapping on the glass directly behind his head.

The tapper is selling picture postcards. He places the cards flat against the window. Ben Thanh Market, Ho Ky Hoa Park, Cu Chi Tunnels, Reunification Hall Sipping his coffee, Michael Andrews shakes his head no. But when he returns to his toast, the tapping starts again. The boy, stern, frowning, wags the postcards and begins to count them—one, two, three Another boy, bigger, leaning hard on the postcard seller's shoulder, holds up a toy airplane made of beer cans. Another boy just stands there pointing to himself—a dirty little finger pressing against his chest. Their hair is long, black and in their eyes; their T-shirts are stained, streaked with old food. Tapping all through his breakfast of toast and coffee, and all he can do is stare straight ahead, chewing, gulping as fast as he can.

Before he can push the chair back to leave, the tall waitress is there to collect his money. When he hurries out of the restaurant and into the lobby, the tangle of arms and faces slips from the glass.

Later, when the midday heat begins to give way, he goes to their war museum. This is the only part he has planned out. He must go there first. He knows it could be a big mistake, the biggest, but he is prepared. He has given it some thought, he knows what they will try to do, what they will show him, but it is the only part he has planned out and is ready for.

The museum is a stark shed of a building that has been divided into separate rooms. At the entrance of each room sits a young woman. Some of them are reading, some knitting. Some of them are sadly beautiful. There are no tickets to be taken, no cards to be punched. When he sees how the women watch but don't watch those who come and go, it makes him think of the Saigon of nineteen years ago.

It is the largest room in the building, and Michael Andrews is walking slowly. Others have to step around him because he is going so slow. He has been in this room far too long, and yet, when he finishes, he starts all over again.

It is a room filled with terrible photographs: severed heads lined up in the sand, a road littered with mutilated children, babies with arms and legs going the wrong way, napalmed red-black, bloated corpses, a tiny pile of ears. In each photograph there are American soldiers—in the background, cradling rifles, staring off into the jungle, laughing picnic-like with their buddies—American soldiers. Three rows of photographs covering each wall. He stops to stare at each photo, sometimes leaning to see better, to make doubly sure.

Time and time again he sees faces that look familiar, men he has known. Two smiling American soldiers, looking straight into the camera, a bundle of glistening intestines draped across the barrels of their rifles. The sweat racing down his flesh, Michael Andrews leans closer, almost touching the photograph, trying to get a good look at their unit, rank, their faces.

In the end, he is exhausted. If he sits down he is certain to fall asleep. Ceiling fans slowly move the hot air back and forth. He is ready to leave now, to get out into the open air. But it is not that easy, because at the door the young woman smiles, closes her book and speaks to him. For a moment he teeters like a drunk, and then, not knowing what else to do, says, "What?"

"I said, are you Russian?"

Blinking back the sweat, wiping his hands on his pants. "No."

"You look Russian. Do people tell you that?"

"No," starting to teeter again. "No, they don't."

She opens her book, and looking straight down at the pages in her lap, says, "You don't want to be Russian. Be certain to tell people you are not Russian."

"I'm an American."

"Yes, well that's good."

She goes back to her reading, as if there is nothing left to talk about, as if talking about nationalities is enough. Her fingers are long and delicate but strangely blackish around the nails.

A small breeze has slipped in, gently pushing at his back; it helps him stand straighter. "Can I ask you a question?"

She shuts the book and places it next to her chair; she does it slowly, deliberately, as if she is getting ready for a long, complicated answer. "Yes."

It is a simple question, but her excellent English has suddenly made it complex. Rubbing his palms on his pants, he says, "Do many Americans come here?"

She smiles an is-that-all smile. Her eyebrows are almost invisible, a soft echo of hair. "Yes, many Americans. Some return two, maybe three times."

"What do they say? What do they do?" Trying harder to get his palms dry, running them up and down his pants, he edges closer, wanting to make sure of her answer.

Surprised, her feathery eyebrows lifting, "Say? Do? What do you mean?"

Tasting the salt on his lips, the schoolboy thickness in his throat, all he can do is say it again. "I mean, what do they say, what do they do?"

Behind her, behind a row of broken machine guns and rusty mortars, hangs a large photo of a village ablaze. Torches in hand, stretching to reach the thatched roofs, American soldiers are burning the village. Old, black pyjama-clad women hold on tight to the children. Children are crying, screaming, their faces distorted, their mouths black and twisted. The old women holding the children tight.

“They say nothing. Do nothing. They just look,” she says, picking up her book again. “Sometimes they start to come in, but then quickly turn and walk out as if they had made a mistake.” She carefully removes the bookmark. “They stare. Almost everybody stares.”

Once outside, Michael Andrews leans against the gate. The wind is picking up. Plastic bags scurry by, an empty box cartwheels into a fence. It is then—shirt rippling, his hair slanting, cartoonish—that he sees the man selling souvenirs from a wooden cart. Old army helmets, a tangle of moldy belts and boots, a twinkling line of bullets. He is selling small Vietnamese flags stuck in chunks of wood. Somebody’s polished medals. Michael Andrews moves closer. The dust spins around him, leaves jumping at his legs. Squinting, he sees a handful of tarnished metal. He grabs hold of the cart. The man is selling GI dogtags.

He gently takes a handful, letting them trickle through his fingers. Some of them still have their chains.

“Where did you get these?” Clenching his teeth, fighting back an urge he thought he had lost long ago, he dares not look up. “I said where did you get these?”

“Two dollars.”

Michael Andrews takes one of the dogtags, dimpled and scratched, turning it this way and that in the sunlight, trying to read the name. APO S.F.

“Two dollars.”

He slips the dogtag back into the pile and looks to see what sort of man this seller is. And of course it isn’t a man at all, but a boy. Smoking a cigarette, wearing a T-shirt that proclaims good things about the environment, grinning.

“Only two dollars.”

Michael Andrews turns, fighting back the new heat that is rushing over his body. With one giant sweep of his arm he could clear the cart, strip it naked. He hurries away.

“Okay, how much you pay? Dollar and fifty? How much?”

Day Two

“Where’s your country?”

“America.”

“You American?”

“Yes.”

“True?”

“Yes.”

Reaching deep into his back pocket, he brings out something like a wallet, greasy and leathery; fumbling, picking through tiny layers of papers, cards, he finally hands him a worn, folded paper. It is from an American captain, Captain Jameson, 1971. The letter says he is a good man, a loyal, dedicated man; it says he is a hard worker, and, at the end, the United States government says thank you. Filthy, split at the folds, there is the shadow of an official seal at the bottom.

“Captain Jameson was a good man.” When he holds the letter out to Michael Andrews, the paper seems to re-fold, accordion-like, all by itself. “Maybe a great man.”

Ny Hue Boulevard stretches in front of them. It is thick with bicycles, motorbikes, cyclos, an occasional rush of cars. For a moment they say nothing, watching the swirl of traffic. Finally, the cyclo man taps the seat.

“Get in. I pedal you anywhere. Where you want to go? What you want to see?” Tapping the seat. “Sit here.”

Fingering the cyclo’s thin, worn tires, the street din at his back, he stares at the cyclo man’s legs: purple blotches cover his calves, one of his kneecaps. Michael Andrews is all set to say something, but then—the cyclo man pulling his baseball cap down tighter, using both hands to get it just-right tight—changes his mind.

The cyclo man is looking around and rubbing his shoulder; he looks up the street and rubs his arm. “See this?” He points to a low, gray building down the street, behind the trees. A high wall surrounds the building. Soldiers are milling about, under the trees, along the street. No guns, no rifles, just soldiers. “See this?”

“Yes, I see.”

“The communists put me in jail here. Two years.” A finger jabs the air. “Right here, two years. Two years because I work for America. What you think of that?”

And so they pedal into the loud dusk of Saigon, and farther, into Cholon. A blizzard of motorbikes, bicycles, cyclos engulfs them, a vortex of humanity pumping its legs, turning to stare full-faced at him. Trucks pinch their way down the street, horns blaring, engines whining. Old US Army trucks are everywhere—different colors, bits and pieces having been amputated, but the same chugging engines, the same sneering grills. Nighttime slowly drains into the city, and still there are no streetlights.

Lifting himself to pump better, bigger, the cyclo man motions with his head, his cap. “See this?”

Craning to look back, “What?”

“This.”

There is a wide, unbroken slab of sidewalk, followed by a blur of shops. The trees are thick and full.

“Yes.”

“Sorry, but five American soldiers killed here. I remember. I see. Five men. Sorry.”

Michael Andrews quickly turns to stare. But there is only the smooth cement and the tall, reaching trees, and . . . looking harder, leaning out of the cyclo, but there is only a line of dirty shops, naked children, a pile of rotten fruit.

“Are you sure? Here?”

A woman with a bonnet and white opera gloves scooters by. Two boys on bicycles catch up to them, smile at him, wave, and then slip back into the throng. Only a small patch of twilight remains.

“Yes. I saw. I remember.”

Lamplights flicker, a naked lightbulb shines too white, and as they continue he catches glimpses of coiling side streets, gloomy lanes; in the twitching half-light he cannot see anyone but knows they are there: families, sweat shops, unsleepy children. A mother grabs her child and aims him to see the white face go by. A group of young, shirtless boys is squatting in a circle, smoking cigarettes; next to them a thin, long-armed girl is bending over a bicycle tire, patching a hole while the man sits in a wooden chair and waits. The cyclo man pedals, not saying a word. A murk of faces, and every now and again a rant of neon. There are two noises: the first is small but devouring—of coughing engines and exhausts, of whirling motors and unimportant street screech; the second is bigger, looming but muffled, almost an afterthought—of many people shuffling back and forth in front of shops, of an army of unseen citizens just beyond the half-light.

They finish Cholon and head back to the bigger lights of Saigon. He can see the carnival lights of the Rex Hotel. All the while he has said very little, done almost nothing. Somebody's tiny daughter had waved to him, said "Hello," and he had waved back. But it didn't feel right. It was all wrong. Farther on there was some more waving, some giggling, but he pretended not to see.

The cyclo glides to a stop in front of his hotel. He gingerly steps out; his legs tingle. Because his left foot is asleep, he hangs on to the cyclo. When he looks at his watch he thinks there must be some mistake—two hours. The cyclo man is smoking a cigarette and pacing. Michael Andrews steps away from the cyclo, but his shoulders, the back of his legs continue to echo the bumpy Saigon streets.

A family is sitting outside their shop, their home. Under a winking neon, in a chair, sits the grandmother with granddaughter standing behind her. The girl is peering into the grandmother's head, moving the white hair first this way, then that, searching for lice. The mother spoons rice into two energetic toddlers; they scurry up and down the sidewalk bumping into legs, tripping over tips of cement. A shirtless father sits in the other chair and reads the newspaper by the same neon. Grandmother calls one of the toddlers, and before he can escape—twisting and turning—she grabs him. He giggles, rice falling from his cheeks. The granddaughter scolds her for moving.

The cyclo man has finished his cigarette and comes up to stand beside him. A family—two sons wedged in between mother and father—sputter by on a motorbike. Beyond that, at the very edge of the street, a boy is peeing into the gutter. His toes clench tight-white above the gray water. A plastic bag floats by and he pees on it as long as he can.

"Two hours," says Michael Andrews.

The cyclo man folds his arms and looks down.

"How much is two hours?"

Still looking down, he says, "Ten dollar. Ten US."

Michael Andrews has forgotten what the cyclo man looks like. He remembers the baseball cap and his tough legs, but after two hours he has forgotten his face. Hands in pockets, the cyclo man continues to look down. They both know ten dollars is too much.

"How old are you?"

And just like that the cyclo man looks up. He takes his hands out of his pockets and turns toward the glare of the hotel, and when he does, Michael Andrews remembers everything.

“Sixty-two.”

There is no grin, no grimace, no sorrow, just a worn face giving a number.

“Sixty-two.”

The cyclo man sighs and then steps closer, their hands accidentally touching.

“Maybe sixty-three, sixty-four, I not so sure. But I think something like sixty-two.”

Michael Andrews gives him a ten-dollar bill.

He starts for the hotel, when suddenly he changes his mind and turns to say one last important thing to the cyclo man. But he is not there. He has pushed his cyclo across the street to intercept two red-haired men, and in his hand he is holding up a piece of ragged paper.

Day Three

He is at a street corner, waiting for a break in the traffic. His money is almost gone and his clothing smells sour. He desperately needs a shave. The twenty-five-dollars-a-day hotel room is only for sleeping; he comes back late, pulls off his clothes and lies on top of the bed, dead-like until morning.

But he is standing there at the street corner, waiting, when a mother with daughter shuffles up to him. The mother, teeth missing, her right ear a tiny explosion of raw flesh, bends down and whispers to the daughter. The daughter holds out her hand.

“Money.”

The mother grins, giggles.

“Money.”

Michael Andrews hurriedly gives them something. Stuffing the money into a red plastic purse, she takes her mother by the hand and glides through the swarm of bicycles and motorbikes, to the other side of the street. He is still watching them when the tugging at his sleeve begins. Somebody’s younger, thinner daughter is holding out a cupped hand. “Money.” It does not come out sounding like a question, or a request. “Money.” A smudge of dirt slants across her cheek, her chin. She has a high, shiny forehead. Her voice is throaty. There is something about her that is not right. She stands very straight. There is an aura of intelligence, of pride, in the way she stands. She doesn’t belong on this street, at this corner, holding out her hand to him. He runs his hand over his unshaven face. Although he slips a hand into his pocket, he has no intention of giving her money—he can’t. Finally there is a lull in the traffic and he turns and aims for the other side. But a yanking at his waist stops him. She has wound her fingers around his belt loops. “Money.”

Head down, he walks long and hard. After Le Thanh Ton Street, he loses count of the streets. But head down, taking quick, purposeful strides.

When he does slow, look up, he sees the cathedral on his left, the post office on his right. He goes to an empty bench in front of the post office, facing the cathedral. Almost immediately two boys selling rice cakes march up to him. Before they have a chance to say anything, he frantically buys a cake from each of them. He hopes this will end it before it gets started, but it doesn't. They sit next to him on the bench, pressing their baskets of cakes against his shoulder, motioning to him to buy more, to buy one for the poor woman sitting on the post office steps behind him, to buy one slender rice cake for the shoeless man sprawled out in the grass, under the trees. One more.

"No."

In the end, they drift away from the bench, but continue to watch him, waiting for him to change his mind. The rice cakes are thick and greasy, and he can only eat one. The other he slips into his pocket. It is then—still wiping the grease off his hands on the bench—that she comes up to him. Without saying a word, she squats directly in front of him, reaches down and peels off a gum wrapper that has stuck to the bottom of his shoe. The silvery wrapper sticks to her fingertips, and like a comedy routine, when she tries to take it off it sticks to her other fingers. Long, matted hair, a ring of crusty brown around her ankles, scabs at her knees, she laughs. The rice cake boys look away.

Sitting there in front of the post office, with its big clock mooning overhead, Michael Andrews feels a surge in his chest. He doesn't know its name—anger, sorrow, disgust—just a wave of blank emotion: as if he has come all this way for this, this one broken woman kneeling in front of him, at the post office, in Saigon. Face in his hands, he cannot bear to look at her, at any of them.

Day Four

On the way to the airport, he keeps re-seeing that first day and the war museum: the small, almost-beautiful woman at the door, the rows of photographs, the boy selling dog tags. And although he is on his way back now, something is still unfinished. He had thought that just the getting here would be enough, but it has been four days now, four days and nothing.

The taxi driver looks into the mirror and asks him about Vinh Nghiem pagoda. "We go to pagoda?"

"No, I don't think so."

"It near airport. On the way."

“No.”

“No extra money.”

The driver has two moles on the back of his neck, just under the hairline; when he lifts his head to look into the mirror, the moles disappear into the hair. Michael Andrews watches the moles duck in and out of his hair.

“Take me to the airport.”

As he walked to the hotel last night, a man came up to him—one moment nothing but shop windows and then, in an instant, a man at his shoulder, matching him stride for stride.

“What you looking for?”

Michael Andrews continued to walk, even tried going faster.

“What you want?” Not looking at him but talking straight ahead. “Love? You want love? I can get you love. Tonight. Now. You want love?”

Because Michael Andrews didn’t want to talk, didn’t trust himself to talk, he began to walk even faster. This time the man didn’t try to keep up; instead, in a voice that no longer cared, he said, “No love.”

At the airport a lot of people are standing around. They don’t seem to be going anywhere, to be waiting for anyone, but just standing in the long coolness of the terminal building. He has his bag and is moving toward the open door when far off to the left, he sees an old man squatting in one of the deepest corners of the building. Knowing that there is a plane waiting to take him away, that his time is almost up, Michael Andrews slowly goes to the old man. The corner is brown and cool. The buttery-sweet stench of urine is everywhere. Swarming flies. He squats in front of him. Reptile-like skin, with long, white hairs dangling from his chin, the old man looks back at Michael Andrews through wide, liquid eyes. It is then that he reaches out, takes the old man’s slender hand, and says, “I’m sorry.”

He didn’t know that was what he was going to say, didn’t know that he had come halfway around the planet to say those words, but now, squatting there in front of the old man—a tiny crowd of children beginning to gather—it all seems to fall into place.

“Sorry.”

Holding the old man’s hand tighter, squeezing. And the man is staring at him, afraid, his lip beginning to quiver. Then one of the boys, ragged shorts, shoeless, says something and laughs, and then says it again, louder, faster. To this the old man nods, even smiles. Holding his one free hand straight out, just under Michael Andrews’s chin, and in a surprisingly clear voice, he says, “Money.”