

The heat was overwhelming. Sweat trickled down my forehead in steady, eye-stinging beads. I bent over to grab another bundle of rice seedlings, and suddenly the world went out in a white hot flash.

Strong arms caught me before I hit the mud. I dimly recognized my aunt's sunburned face, caught between a worried frown and a sympathetic smile. "Sun stroke," she whispered, "to the shade with you." Surging with undisguised relief, I half-crawled, half-stumbled into the refuge beneath a tree, and plucked off the conical straw hat that had failed to shield me from the assault of the July sun. I must have been quite a sight to behold to the knowing eye: a city girl sitting on the edge of a paddy field in northern Vietnam, up to the knees in drying mud, suffering from sunstroke on the first day of the planting season. Leaning against the cool surface of the tree bark, I tried in vain to avoid thinking about the reasons that had brought me there in the first place. My experiment with manual labor was supposed to keep at bay the reality that I was, in a sense, running away.

It didn't work. I found my mind being inexorably drawn back to my cool, mud-free house in Hanoi. In Hanoi, reminded my frustratingly one-track brain, there were also SATs, the advent of the final year of high school, and, looming darkly on the horizon, the US college application process. At this thought, the ringing in my head was replaced by sharp stabs of guilt as I searched myself for the source of my weakness. For years, I had painstakingly sketched out my post-school education plan with unceasing enthusiasm, but now when it came to the actual plunge, why did college intimidate me so? I had always considered myself flexible, open to changes, and reasonably sure of myself whenever there were challenges to

overcome. I had not been, for instance, paralyzed by the language and culture barriers that faced me when, at twelve years old, I had suddenly been whisked away to New York City. When English finally became a part of me, it was exhilarating but not surprising. Then before I knew it, I was back in my native Vietnam, and floundering for breath in the stifling, exam-frenzied classroom of the country's best-known –and most competitive- public high school. Somehow, I had found a way to cope with that as well. Big changes –cultural and otherwise- were not, therefore, a wholly new territory.

Why then? Possibly, it was because college would be like nothing I had faced. Even in New York, I had had my family by my side. Plus, high school was an environment whose challenges I knew well. In college, I would no longer be slogging through the same rote exams in pursuit of trivial grades. I would, for the first time in my life, be studying for myself, in preparation for what would come next –real life. I would not be able to blame the challenges I would undoubtedly confront in the future on circumstances beyond my control, for studying abroad had been entirely my choice. There was the crux of my problem: fear of taking risks. Applying to college had given me the first whiff of life as an adult, and I could not be certain I was entirely ready for that leap.

I was rudely shaken out of contemplation by the shrill trilling of cicadas in my ears, and the dull thuds of heavy hooves. Caught off-guard, I gazed in horror at the grinning face of my cousin, who perched atop a huge water buffalo, his family's cud-chewing tractor. The animal bellowed loudly at the same time my cousin spoke: "Want a ride?" The first time I had been offered a buffalo ride, I had been four, and visiting this place, my father's ancestral home,

for the first time. Unlike my country-born father, I had been out of my depth and had refused with tears. Maybe this time... Maybe not. I declined the offer quickly while the animal shook its fearsome horns in my direction, and seethed at my cousin's patronizing chuckle as his mammoth steed lumbered away. Picking at the flakes of mud on my calf, I pondered the different life circumstances that had bound me to books and modern appliances, and ordained my cousin the King of the Water Buffalo. Yet come September this country-savvy boy was going to attend the National Economics University in Hanoi. His parents were breaking their backs in the fields some ten paces to my left, and he was going to college in a city he hardly knew. My father had done the same, leaving the land his forbearers had tilled for a dozen generations, and gone to university. He had taken a risk, and had changed his life for the better.

As I looked around at the fields of red earth slowly growing green, I realized that my father and cousin were not the only ones changing. On the horizon, factories were springing up in former paddy fields. Tractors would soon be replacing the frightening water buffalo as the farmer's best friend. Vietnam was awakening after years of sleep under the conservative rule of its communist government, and was now realizing that the world had nearly left her behind. My country now sped to catch up, and was making good progress. A new wave was rising, a change that began within every Vietnamese, and it hinted of a bright future. I wanted to be part of that wave. If my cousin could leave his family and the life he had always known to pursue an education, then so could I. Somewhere beyond the borders of my country, there was a college waiting for me, promising a new start, knowledge, and most of all, change. My anxiety lingered, but was not so pungent and debilitating as before; I was finally beginning to see a way through. College, much like riding a buffalo, was an unknown,

and the only way to dispel the doubt was to meet it headfirst. I would embark upon this new journey equipped with all the understanding and experience that had helped me in earlier adventures, as well as a wish for more.

Tomorrow, I thought, I am going back to Hanoi. My Hanoi, ancient and elegant, bred a race of deep and quietly graceful people with a conservative streak. But even we Hanoians are willing to change in order to bring our country up-to-speed with the world. Sitting on the dyke beside my aunt's paddy field, I felt eager to confront the challenges that lay before me. There was, however, one thing I had to do first. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my cousin untying his buffalo, finishing for the day. He barely noticed me approaching, and jumped at my next words: "So, how about that ride?"