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## Catfish and mandala book

Andrew Pham dodges the present by looking for a dimly remembered past. Because of Chi's suicide, his transsexual sister, plus a tumultuous family history and a disillusionment with the escalation of the American dream, he abandons his career, home and property and dives into an arduous, lonely quest for answers. Pam takes his bike and grinds across the cloudy landscape of his soul; Climbs mountains shrouded in doubt and falls repeatedly into the canal of self-discovery. Purged by the gruelling emails, Pam's inner demons finally make way for the natural beauty of his homeland and the symmetry of inner peace and acceptance. With the fall of Saigon in 1975, Andrew's family, while trying to flee the country, finds themselves intercepted by the 'K'cong. His father, Pam Van Thong, was arrested at Min Long Prison and Labor Camp. Months later, after Thong's release, the family bribed a small team of fishermen and became boat people. They're fleeing Vietnam only to find themselves detained again. With nowhere to go, they spend the next 18 months in an Indonesian refugee camp. Finally, in September 1977, under the auspices of the First Baptist Church of Shreveport, Louisiana, a young boy, Pam Swan An, whose name is Aviv Shalu, arrives in America. Andrew X. Pham's personal journey begins in the Mexican desert, carrying him along California's coast and following the length of Japan. Not until he gets to Vietnam though his real journey begins. But, he carries with him excess baggage in the form of guilt, anger, and unfamiliar self-loathing. All of which promises to slow him down. The margins he suffered as a refugee in America are expressed as outward contempt for all things Vietnamese. Starting even when his plane is being driven, he finds only dirt and opposite ways among the citizens of his homeland. The damage done to his bike by airport staff is just a preview and promise of the rough miles that extend between Andrew's questions and eventually getting answers. Not only do Andrew's eyes and mind reject what he sees in Vietnam, but also his body. It's all plotting to make him sick. A troubled belly constantly accompanies his troubled soul. He finds himself disgusted by poverty and disqualified by an atmosphere in which he perceives everything as a sale. He rejects Vietnamese stubbornness and talent for survival in the same way his body rejects local cuisine. He also suffers from rejection as Viet-kieu; Perceived as an outsider, a traitor, an object of contempt and even a target of violence. In Vietnam as in America, Andrew is isolated by his very appearance and betrayed by his accent speech. Still, he can't be someone else and he can't go on without food. He must continue or resign. Andrew's condescensions turn out to be multilayered memories. He filters out the remnants of a pre-American childhood that is constantly remembered while stealing clandestine flashes at his parents. History. He finds himself constantly confronting a reality that closes the memory. The structures he compares with a lost house have been destroyed or altered beyond recognition. He's a mystery to his relationship. His lack of economic success in America confuses them; Disproves their perceptions of a good Wyatt-Boy. Others he meets wonder why he came back at all. His reflections reveal lost opportunities and problems that remain unresolved. The beloved fruit-star tree of the magical childhood memory bowled and nothing more. That seems like a bad ome. The past doesn't behave the way it expects it to. It penetrates memories that were once uncovered are blunt, ruthless and demand attention. By Andrew X. Pham © Copyright 1999 Andrew X. Pham All rights reserved. ISBN: 978-1-4299-7992-4 Episode 1Exile – Pilgrim The first thing I notice about Tyle is that he can kneel on his third world - style, indefinitely. He's a giant, anachronistic Thor in drag rasta, bare-chested, barefoot, gold baked in the desert. A month of wandering in the Mexican wilderness stunned me to his lonely camp, where each were sponsored. As he emerges from the makeshift home located on the top of his initiation, he moves to meet me with an idle force that I envy. I see the wind carved skin lines across the cradles in his legend and right angles. In a dry, earthy voice, he asks me, looking for the hot spring? Yes, Agua Caliente. Am I even close? Sure. This is the place. A few hundred meters is amazing. I've got it! He smiles, suddenly very charismatic, and shakes the head of long matte blond hair. How we got here on this bike is amazing. I pedaled and wandered through the clumsy ground, wandering the off-shore on roads not falling and dirt tracks. When I was hungry or thirsty, I stopped at farms and farms and begged the owner for water from their wells and tried to buy tortillas, eggs, goat cheese and fruit. Everywhere gave me a need. Men and women picked grapefruit and mandarin from their family gardens, packed food out of their pantry, and didn't get a single peso in return. Why, I asked them. Señor, they explained in the patient tone reserved for those recovering, you ride a bike, so you're poor. You're not going anywhere in the desert, so you're crazy. Taking money from a poor, crazy man brings bad luck. All the extras, they said, were because I wasn't a gringo. A team of Mexican ranchers said they liked me because I was in Buenos Hermano - a good brother - Vietnam, and my little Vietnam was big in '75 in 2017. But I'm American, Vietnamese American, I yelled at them. They chuckled — C, C, Señor — and rescued me from a piece of beef. Style says, so, where are you from? Bay Area, California. Not. Where are you from? Originally, I always hated that question and was angry with him for asking. I hide my distaste because it's un-American. Maybe I'll lie. I often do when someone cornered me. Sometimes, my ready invention Out before I realize it: I'm Japanese — Korean — Chinese — Mixed — Asian Race. No, sir, I can't speak any language except good old-fashioned American English. Korea. Something about him makes me dance around the truth. I chucky, painfully aware that I am an American carrying little weight with him. Surely it resonates more correctly in his voice. The blond giant holds me in his green eyes, makes me feel small, crooked. So I say, we're all alike. But it's not enough. He looks at me again with a question, and by darkness on his face, I know I owe him. I'm from Vietnam. Flinched out of the corner of his eye. He growls, sound deep from his diaphragm. The verdict is up. He turns his back on me and snitches into the cactus forest. I'm standing, trespassing in his camp, hearing echoes -, slanted, Japanese, Charlie, go home, eyes paved- words that, I believe, will probably break through my sister Chi in dark alleyways, chased her in the cold after she ran home, a 16-year-old fugitive, an illegal alien without her green card. What vicious clicks did they make in her Vietnamese ears, brand new in English? And within their borders, what America did she find? A man once revealed something that bothered me too much to get a discount. He said, your sister died because she became too American. Later in the night, from the thickness of the brush, ghosts of style to the orange light of my campfire. He clasps at me and folds himself with crossed legs before the bubbling flames, opens a fresh bottle of tequila, takes a sip and makes it for me. We sit on the ground far enough apart that with arms outstretched we still have to lean in to move the bottle. I hold the warm sand between my toes and drop the tequila of the tart on my tongue. A heavy moon swinging on the treetops. Stars make the night go. We seem pleased with our unspoken truce. When the bottle is half empty, Style starts talking. At first, he talks about the maxi loneliness of the Mexican desert. Life here is simple, cheap food, plentiful spirits. He makes most of his money selling his handicrafts — bracelets, woven bands, beads, leather jewelry — to tourists. When times are tough, there are always some Mexicans who will employ him for English lessons or translations. And there's a limit isn't too far away if he has to work on a large chunk of cash. Among the routine details, his real life comes out indirectly. Travel has a wife and two sons. He was nine years away from them. I'm the first Vietnamese he's seen since he fled to Mexico seven years ago. When four fingers of tequila at the bottom of the bottle, he asks me, are you back in Vietnam? Not. But one day I'll be back... Visit. Many Vietnamese Americans have returned. For some of us, by returning as tourists we prove to ourselves that we are no longer Vietnamese but Vietnamese Americans. We return, with our hearts in their throats, to challenge the communist regime, to show through our material success that we, Once pitiful exiles, they are now the victors. No longer are the poverty-stricken refugees clinging to fishing boats, spilling out of cargo planes on American soil, a mess of open-mouthed terror, awe with their eyes open, hungry and resusncing for salvation. Time has worsened the days when America fished us out of the ocean like drowning cockroaches and fed us and dressed us - us, the onus of their tragedy. We go back, and in our own silence, we eye-rye to our occupier, who now look like disgusting monkeys cheating on trinkets, our luggage, that doesn't tell us much. Mostly, we come back because we killed ourselves. Style says, I was in Vietnam. I guessed so. Not knowing what to say, I'm berber. Veterans - acquaintances and strangers - have told me variations on this since I was a child and didn't know what or where Vietnam was. The contraction was lost on a boy struggling to learn English. But the note, the way these people said it, told me it was important, a place I needed to know. Over the years, this statement has taken on new meanings, each in the speaker's tone taste. There was bitterness, and there was astonishment. There was loss and rage and every tinge of emotion in between. I heard statements, accusations, bragging, demands, commitments, challenges and swearing in the four words: I was in Vietnam. No matter how they said it, pain flew at me until an urge to make some kind of compensation slipped my palms in sweat. What a gesture of reconciliation. Remorse. A word of apology. He must have seen me cringe because he was saying it again, more gently. In this, I'm doing something I've never done before. I bow to him like a respectable colleague. It's a arc of recognition, a spectrum of humility, the only way I can tell him I know about his loss, his suffering. When he looks into the fire, he says congratulations, forgive me. Forgive me for what I've done to your people. The night curves around me. What, style? I'm sorry, man. I'm really sorry, he's whispering. The blonde giant starts crying, weeping tired, crying, tears falling unharmed. My mouth creates the words, but I can't pronounce them. Not, No, style. How can I forgive you? What have you done to my people? But who are my people? I don't know them. Are you my people? How can you be my people? All my life I've looked at you aside, wondering if you wondered if my brothers had killed your brother in a war that made no sense other than the only act of sowing me here - my gain - in your bed, in this rich-poor, generous-cruel land. I pass through your world, a cautious, respectful and conscious critic, hoping but not believing on the day I become a native. I lack the roots, but still the beneficiary of all your suffering and all their suffering. Then why, from both of us, am I the savior, and you are the sinner? Please forgive me. I'm denying him my silence. His Viking face squirms, wriggling like a child just before the first bagel. It's not coming. Instead, words fold out, sentences tattooed, bubbling inconsistencies that during the initial rush like drunken astonishment. Nameless faces. Places. Murders. He bleeds it out, from airs it into the flames, pours it on me. And all I can do is gasp Oh, God's on him over and over again, knowing that I carry his secrets all my days. He asks for my forgiveness again, his open hand reaching out to me. This time the silence turns and I give him forgiveness that he's not mine to give. And in my deception, I know I got something bigger than me. When you go to Vietnam, he says, and declares it a fact, tell them about me. Tell them about my life, my life. Tell them about the family I lost. Tell them I'm sorry. I give travel the most honorable gift, the only gift we Vietnamese give best, the gift in which one can cast his entire grief like garbage into the abyss, only sometimes the abyss is within the giver. I'm giving him peace. Chapter 2Catfish-Don, I'm a Vietnamese-American man in boots at my job, I'm average height, of medium build, and not too terrible of a face. I like to go to the movies and read novels in coffee shops. If I had to pick one kitchen to eat for the rest of my life, I'd take an Italian without hesitation, even though I hide secret cravings for baby-back smoked ribs and Gumbo from New Orleans. And I like to buy cookbooks more than cooking. I've been enjoying tennis, basketball, baseball, football, and lately, yes, hockey -- from the bleachers or my Bella-Z-Boy. My choice to wear daily is a pair of five-year-old Levi's and a simulated turtleneck (I have a drawer, all the same size, same brand, different colors). I don't wear yellow, red, orange or anything bright; they complicate the washing process. No underwear with a thong. Socks, plain white or black only. My family came to America on September 17, 1977. I was ten years old. I didn't know much about the Vietnam War. I only remembered scenes and pictures. Too young to know about her politics until I answered entering American Middle School, Fifth grade, Mr. Jenkin's class, I got my voice up against a teacher for the first time. Eighteen months in America, so much English learned. He lectured on the history of the Vietnam War something he said must have set me on fire because I yelled at him, summoning the drunken words of adults I picked up to gaves: America left Vietnam America doesn't end a war. One more day of bombing, Hoyt Kong is dead. One more day! Not. America's going home! Chicken America! Mr. Jenkin painted, tomato blush rising from his buttoned collar to his hawky blond hair. I could tell he wanted to hit me, but I knew they didn't do it in America so I didn't say I was sorry. When he cut the air with his hand, he screamed, no! Not! Wrong! And five minutes of English I didn't understand. Much later, I realized with some guilt that maybe his brother died in the war, and if it had gone on, he could have lost another one. I wish I could tell him now that what I really meant was that my dad was in prison because of the war. I yelled at our imprisonment, the dark wet cells, The gunshots, the biting rats, and the dirty rice fists I ate. Those things I remember weren't twisted from the intervening years. Somehow very alive, irredeemable. I was there. After Saigon fell on April 30, 1975, our family fled deeper south, hoping to find a boat to carry us to Thailand. Outside Rach Gia, a port city, Huyt Kung set up a checkpoint and caught us along with about 300 people heading ashore to flee the country. Women and children were locked, 50 in a room, in a separate wing from the men. We took turns sleeping on wet concrete, side by side. A month later, the women and children were released with permission to return home. The men were executed or taken to the jungle to work. My mother and I regularly visited my father in Minh Long Prison and the workplace. We stayed with peasant families and stayed for weeks near the compound so she could watch him work in the field under guard. Hiding behind bushes, I watched him whenever I could find him. Like her, I felt that if I heard my eyes on him, stayed alert enough, bad things wouldn't happen. On some nights, she lay awake until dawn after hearing gunshots fired in the nearby woods, where they executed prisoners. Two decades of thunder since his incarceration. Although we rarely speak beyond the safe prology of current events, education, investment and work, he has often shared his stories about the Viet Cong re-education camp with me. The adventure stories he told me as a child on his knee were replaced by his judging camp saga. I believe it has something to do with me being his first son, with me being there in prison looking at him, down to what he thought were his death rituals. In the years of telling, they became almost as much my stories as his. And it was weird, because my father and I never shared much, we never did father-son stuff, no camping trips, no fishing trips; No ball games, no hot dogs in the park; No beers and a Super Bowl on TV. Still, the stories went back and forth between us even when I was growing up and moving. My father, Pam Van Thong, wore down his rarest pearls of wisdom, and cleared a sense of value for life. From his last days in the ahab camp, Thong remembers the silence most of all. It was a thick creature sitting on his chest and sticking his fists down his throat. In the White Kong prison cabin, he only heard his heart. Above, indigo trounced light into the room, painting the bold faces of his comrades overwhelmed on the dirt floor, 54 inmates awaiting a call for execution. It came twice every week to speakers. Sometimes days passed between calls, sometimes the calls went back-to-back. Every evening, just after they scraped the last rice and soup out of their bins, silence fell as crickets courted the coming night. The hut reeked of fear and the food in his stomach was undermined. Always, someone threw up. He's through his egg. As the end approached when The Anigo was deepest, there were two speakers left. Grief for his wife, his children. Remorse for a thousand things that weren't done, 1,000 unspoken things, 1,000 things taken for granted. His best friend in prison, Tuan, a helicopter pilot, approached him. Sitting on his pig's thigh, Tuan leaned over and whispered in his ear, thong, promise me. He pressed Tuan's shoulder. It was December 17, 1975. If they call his name tonight, Tuan will die and his promise will be worthless. Tuan believed the VC would release Thong in a few years. He carried Tuan's last words to his wife and son. Thong didn't tell Twan that he believed death was the only way out of Minh Long Prison. Promise me! It's Tuan. Your wife's uncle is Colonel VietCong, a war hero. The bribe didn't work. Tuan. We're broke. I borrowed and sold everything we had. No, she'll find a way. I'm smart. Tuan never met her. The gloom obscured his friend's face, but Thong could choose the hollow cheeks and the wild empty eyes. Before Vietnam fell, Tuan was a handsome young officer with all the promise of a good military career. He was only 28. He was married to his high school sweetheart and gave them a son. On nights when it was very cold and the prisoners huddled together for warmth, he would talk about her, the way she moved and intimate things. Things weren't meant for other people's ears, but in this place it was all he had. All this keep him going. Tuan's trembling voice was rife with self-deter. I shouldn't have said I was a pilot. I was scared. When they said the fine for lying about the confession was an execution, I lost my mind. I wrote it all down. I confessed everything. Everything I could remember. Thongs don't. Than said I was honest. That's why she loves me. I shouldn't have written about my service in the Air Force. He wanted to tell Twan they wouldn't call tonight, not come for him, not punish him. But he didn't. That would have been a lie. He wanted to hear Tuan's voice because that might be the last time they spoke. A dying man had the right to speak. Thong said, and everyone was dying. If the executioner didn't kill them tonight, jungle diseases would soon kill them. Then there were the minefields, the hundreds of mines they had to uncover and neutralize with strawlings. Death always comes around, one way or another. You'll be fine, Tuan said, calming his friend even through his fear. You're just a teacher. They don't punish teachers. Tuan didn't know his secret. No one in prison did it. They'll let you go soon. You're just violating martial law. (Continues...) Excerpt from Catfish and Mandia by Andrew X Pam. Human © 1999 Andrew X. Pam. Expressly by the permission of Fyador and Farrer, Strauss and Jiro. All reserved rights may not reproduce or reprint part of this section without written permission from the publisher. Excerpts provided by Inc. is solely for personal use of visitors to this site. Site.

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