

## High Stakes Poker Scam

A few weeks ago I had the great pleasure of meeting up with an old friend from high school. We had always shared a love of books and ideas and I was excited to learn that he had recently become a [professor of rhetoric](#) (we actually wrote a short-lived blog together way back in 2001, a story for another day!).

I was delighted to hear about his first trip to South East Asia, including the crazy story of what had went down just a few hours before. He had me on the edge of my flimsy fold-out chair for 30 minutes. After he finished I said "you need to share that story!"

So why not? I love travel stories like this. I hope you like it too, and be sure to [give Eric a shout at his blog if you do](#).

I added some random photos from around town. This story is over 6,000 words long, so it might make sense to bookmark it for when you have some spare time. Enjoy!

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**“I was not all certain how I had come to be seated here in this room with thirty thousand dollars on the table in front of me.”**



There is a tendency among western travelers to hold their foreign hosts in suspicion, and it's not entirely unwarranted. But for every "horror story" I've ever heard – and let's note that "horror" is relative – there is an equally compelling account of someone who took a small risk that yielded a manifold reward. There is a happy medium between outright cynicism and a sort of aw shucks Wally-and-the-Beav vulnerability. Over the previous three weeks-- my first ever in South East Asia-- I felt I'd found it.

On the road everyone had spoken very highly of the Vietnamese people and of their capacity for friendliness. I wanted to connect with them as with all others and to have experiences that would reinforce my commitments. The weather on my first morning in Saigon was good, and so were my spirits.

So there was a concerted self-priming already underway when I was approached by a squirrely little man just off the park on Le Lai Street, a man who was very

impressed by my height.

“Hey, Man,” he said, “how tall are you?”

I smiled, despite myself, and even began calculating the centimeters. But I didn’t actually answer. Instead I just tried to anticipate the nature of the hustle. It could be a ride on the motorbike; maybe a massage.

“Where you from, man?” he said.

“The United States,” I said.

“An American! Which state?”

“Pennsylvania,” I said. “Philadelphia.”

At this, he stopped walking and stared at me slack-jawed.

“Philadelphia?!” he said. “Phil-a-delphia?! Listen. You’re not gonna believe this.”

But in fact I did believe and even anticipated it. There are a number of common tropes in street scams that recur again and again as you cross Southeast Asia. The guidebooks offer detailed tutorials. Often you will be approached by a man on the street who wants to learn a thing or two about you, and is shocked to find that you share a city with his brother, or his cousin, or a niece or nephew who is studying at the university. Thus the unfathomable distance between souls is overcome with striking ease and few details. One thing leads to another and soon you find yourself in a jewelry store or a restaurant, getting pressured to buy shit you don’t want.

“My sister,” he said. “My sister is moving to Philadelphia in a few months to work at the hospital there!”

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Which one?”

“Hmm,” he said. “I don’t remember the name. But she is packing her things already and is very excited. Let me ask you. Will you sit with me for a minute or

two as I ask you some questions?”

I was incredulous, but didn't see the harm. “Sure,” I said.

We sat on a park bench and the man told me his name was Mato. We exchanged pleasantries and I began to find myself more and more at ease. Mato was a charming character – a real backslapping good old boy with a quick smile and easy laugh. Again and again he exulted in the serendipity of our meeting, all the while pummeling me with very pragmatic questions. What was the rent like in Philadelphia? Was it safe? Would a Vietnamese girl fit in with Americans? Would she make friends?

We had been talking like this for about ten minutes when I finally began to open myself to the possibility that he was legitimate. I shared his concern for his sister. I would be happy to help her in any way I could.

Our conversation was interrupted when a woman approached us, looking like she was on the tail end of a stroll through the park. Mato jumped up to meet her and rushed to introduce us.

“This is my sister,” he said. “Not that sister – another one.” Then, turning to her, “This man is from Philadelphia!”

This sister beamed. “Phil-a-delphia?!” she said. “Our sister! She is moving there!”

“I heard,” I said.

Whatever suspicions I still carried about Mato and his intentions were soon further eased by Linh, who radiated kindness and quickly verified just about everything I'd been told. She may have been younger than Mato; both were probably in their 40s. She was just as friendly, though with a certain bourgeois dignity that reminded me of my aunts back home.

Her English was very strong too, which made me feel more comfortable. I can remember clinging to my doubts, but feeling the pendulum swing increasingly toward my new friends. They were nice, and I was happy to meet them. We were

having a cross-cultural experience.

“You must have lunch with us!” Linh said. “Our mother – she is very scared and does not want our sister to go to United States. But if she meets you, she will see that it is okay. You can tell her all about it!”

I don’t remember giving this proposition any serious thought.

“Okay,” I said, no doubt smiling. “Sure.”

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**“You cannot do anything in Brunei,” the uncle said. “It is all forbidden. So if you want to drink, you want women, you want to play games – then you come to Vietnam.”**



The taxi ride was long, taking us into a part of town that I did not recognize. But this was no surprise. I couldn’t have recognized any part of town except for that represented on the simple map the guy at the hostel had given me.

As we drove, Linh told me about their family and about Vietnamese culture more

broadly. I shared a bit about myself as well, and we did a compare-and-contrast that revealed the many strands of our mutual humanity. Mato sat up front, jabbering away on his cell phone, apparently having a friendly banter session with one of his buddies. From time to time he would turn back to translate for me. Something about the previous night's drinking, a girlfriend, an inappropriate advance. The driver ignored us all.

When we arrived at the house, Mato asked me if I could pay the fare, as he did not have the right change. This, I noted, is the first time I am being asked to produce money. But as I counted the cash, Mato disappeared into the house and quickly reemerged with enough to reimburse me in full. I thanked him, but only accepted half, and asked if I should take off my shoes.

“Don't be silly!” Linh said. “This is Vietnam – not China! Make yourself comfortable!”

It was a nice house, typical of and somewhat indistinguishable from the others on this crowded backstreet. The living room was large, with lots of great space – concrete floors, big doorways with no doors, open windows that birds could fly through. A few paintings decorated the walls and there was a game show on the television. Here we found a youngish woman – close to thirty – and an older man, who reclined on the sofa smoking a cigarette. The woman was introduced to me as a sister, but again, not that sister. The man was an uncle. Regrettably, I can only refer to these two in terms of their relation to the others. They told me their names but I do not remember them.

“Where is mother?” Linh asked. “And—?”

“They have gone to the hospital,” the uncle said. “They will come back in an hour.”

“Okay,” Linh said, turning to me. “We will have lunch and then you will meet them.”

Mato, sitting at the far end of the sofa, nodded toward the kitchen.

“Be careful,” he said. “My sister does not have a husband and she likes handsome white men.”

“Ah, that’s true,” Linh added. “If you stay here long enough you will have all the Vietnamese girls after you.”

I probably just smiled dumbly at this, having never quite mastered the art of taking a compliment well. When the sister brought out coffee, she looked at me the way a lioness looks at gazelle – or how I imagine one does. As the women set the table, we men chatted idly.

“They say you are from Philadelphia?” the uncle said.

“Sort of,” I said. “I am from near there, but I say Philadelphia because it’s the closest city that people recognize.”

“I understand,” he said. “I do not live in Ho Chi Minh. I live closer to the border with Cambodia.”

“You are here visiting?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I am here for two weeks. I have high – how do you say? – high blood pressure. So I am given two weeks off from my job.”

“What do you do?” I asked.

“I work in the casino,” he said. “I am a dealer. Poker, blackjack, everything. Have you ever been to Las Vegas?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Do you play cards?” he asked.

“Some,” I said. “I was in college when poker became very popular in the US. I learned to play because that’s all my friends wanted to do.”

“Ah,” he said. “Texas Hold-em, yes? That is very popular here as well. A lot of people play Russian poker and blackjack. There is also a different form of

blackjack with betting like Texas Hold-em. Very popular.”

“Do you enjoy dealing?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “but it would be better to do it in the United States. Here we are not paid well, and the casinos discourage tipping. They say it looks bad – like a dealer will do favors for a player that tips him.”

“I see,” I said.

“Of course I would not do that,” he said. “Not with just anyone. But I could. I do know how. Next time you visit Vietnam you must come to my casino and we will make an arrangement. I will give you the sign and you will know the cards. Then you will win a lot of money and we will split it.”

I said that sounded fine to me, and I was almost moved by the invitation. Something in his voice told me he believed it could happen – that I would be back one day, and we would be friends.

Soon lunch was served and we moved to the table. All except for the uncle, that is, who seemed unwilling or unable to move from his spot on the sofa. Linh ladled out chicken and rice, along with fried potatoes and a salad that looked like it was entirely comprised of onions. Determined not to offend my hosts, I made an inner vow to eat everything whether I liked or not. But this proved irrelevant – the food was good.

We talked about many things – food, etiquette, the cultural differences that separate people from different nations. Mato seemed mostly interested in talking about women, and how many girlfriends I would have if I moved to Vietnam. Linh often agreed, and the uncle interjected his thoughts from across the room.

“You do not want a Vietnamese woman,” he said. “Very – how do you say? – nagging.”

When we were finished, the sister rose to clear the table. I moved to help but she stopped me short, placing a hand on my chest and shaking her head sweetly. I

was reminded of a conversation I had had with a German backpacker in Thailand who said he would never return to Australia. When I asked why, he said that it's very expensive, and that no one is interested in you. I didn't quite understand him at the time, but it was beginning to make sense. If nothing else, this family had made me feel interesting, and I liked it.

Back on the sofa I chatted idly with the uncle as we continued to wait for mother and sister to return from the hospital. He told me he had been up late the night before playing mahjong with a group of Muslim oilmen from Brunei. He had met them while dealing cards at the casino, and now they look him up whenever they're in Vietnam.

Given the strict moral codes in countries like Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, Vietnam had become a popular destination for devout men with worldly interests. The oilmen were avid gamblers, and they liked having a professional dealer on call.

"You cannot do anything in Brunei," the uncle said. "It is all forbidden. So if you want to drink, you want women, you want to play games – then you come to Vietnam."

The conversation lulled, and the wait still on, the uncle asked me if I would like to see how he could rig a blackjack game. It was easy to learn, and interesting, and maybe I could make some money when I returned to the states. It was now early afternoon, and it occurred to me that my cross-cultural experience was starting to shift into a cross-cultural waste of time. But they had given me lunch and this guy was basically on his ass for two weeks.

If he wanted to show me something, I would oblige.

We walked up the stairs to one of the bedrooms, where there was a table covered in green felt. Not quite a poker table, but perhaps a poker end table if it was made hastily by someone's little brother. The uncle invited me to sit across from him, and Linh sat down beside me. She said she wanted to watch.

“How much do you know about blackjack?” the uncle asked.

“Just the basics,” I said. “Get close to 21 but don’t go over.”

“Okay,” he said. “Soon you will know everything.”

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**"You will give me the \$200 and he will match it. Then you and I will make some money."**



The tutorial thus began with the basics. I had never really been into blackjack, so the theory of it all was kind of a mystery. But I learned a lot very quickly – when to hit, when to stand, when to calculate that the dealer was due for a bust. The uncle shared his dealer’s perspective, explaining the house advantage and how it usually holds. Once I was up to speed, he moved into a description of the other version of the game, the one that was popular in Vietnamese casinos. It was basically the same game, except that there was a round of betting after every card. You could check, bet, raise, or fold – just like in poker – and there was no limit on

the wagers, so you could push all of your chips in at any time.

If the competition couldn't match your bet, you would win by default. This was an important wrinkle. In a poker game, the player with the most chips would simply retract the overage until he and his opponent were square. In this game, the opponent would need to find some money fast.

As we talked rules and regs, Mato appeared in the doorway. He said he had to leave, but that it was very nice to meet me and that he hoped I enjoyed my time in Saigon. Dude even came around the table and gave me a hug. As he walked out, he mentioned to the uncle that there was a visitor downstairs. "One of your guests is here," he said. The uncle nodded and waved him off. "Tell him I will be down in a minute."

Now that I was card literate, it was time to turn me into a card shark. The uncle and I played out many hands, he instructing me exactly how to play each one. Then he broke out the signals. If a dealer knows what he is doing, he explained, he can always see what the next card in the deck is going to be. In blackjack, this is everything. So if he and I were working together, we would need only a few simple hand motions to ensure that we were on the same page at all times.

"After I deal the cards," the uncle said, "I will rest my hand on the table. You just have to watch and count my fingers. Each finger is worth two. Understand? So four fingers flat on the table means that the next card is going to be an eight. Three means a six. If I put my thumb out, that's a one – so the number is odd. Three fingers and a thumb is a seven. Two and a thumb is a five. If I put my hand palm up, the next card is a ten – a king, a jack, whatever. Understand?"

Then we got Linh involved. He dealt her in and showed me how the same signals, deployed this time with his left hand, could fill me in on the content of her cards. If she and I were squaring off against each other – as players often do in the Vietnamese form of the game – I would be the panopticon. There was even time for hypotheticals.

"Suppose you have eighteen and you know she has nineteen," the uncle said. "Then suppose that I signal you that the next card is a three. She bets into you.

What do you do?”

“Fold,” I said.

“Why?” he said.

“Because I would never hit with 18 unless I knew that I was behind and that my card was coming. It would be too obvious.”

“That’s smart,” he said. “But you actually can hit in that spot while protecting me and our little arrangement. Know how?”

“How?” I asked.

“All you have to do,” he said, “is shuffle your hand before showing. Then it will not be obvious what order your cards came in. Your opponent will not know if you hit with 18 or with 13, and we will be safe.”

We also practiced betting – when to bet a lot, when a little, when to raise or fold. It was all very interesting, but I was starting to wonder about the guest downstairs. It seemed rude to leave him hanging, and now that my day was slipping away I thought his entrance may give me cause to exit.

“This is all very interesting,” I said. “But, you know, I should probably get going. I hate to keep you from your guest.”

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” the uncle said. “Linh, go get my friend and bring him up. You will like this man.” Linh hustled out and the uncle lowered his voice. “This man, he is – how do you say? – he likes the woman, he likes the man....”

“A bisexual?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “A bisexual. He is one of the Muslim men I told you about before. He has a wife but he comes here to find men. And to play mahjong. This man inherited an oil company from his father. He is very, very rich but not so smart.”

I nodded. The uncle reached into his pocket.

“Here,” he said. “This is our chance to try out what I taught you. Take this.” He handed me two crisp, American \$100 bills. “When he comes up here, I will introduce you as Linh’s fiancée. Then I will invite him to join us for a game of blackjack. You will give me the \$200 and he will match it. Then you and I will make some money.”

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**"I had begun my day on the lookout for hustlers, and now had become one of them... I was about to roll a wealthy Muslim oilman out of his hard earned – or at least inherited – money."**



I wish I could see the look on my own face as I processed these lines. I had begun my day consciously on the lookout for hustlers, and now, only hours later, I had become one of them. Because I was from Philadelphia, I was offered a lunch. And because I accepted that offer, I was about to roll a wealthy Muslim oilman out of his hard earned – or at least inherited – money. But there was no time to think it

over.

Just then Linh re-entered the room, followed by a well-quaffed man in what looked to be a very expensive suit. He carried a duffle bag, and wore a watch with a large face. When the uncle introduced me – I was now Linh’s fiancée – the man took my hand daintily, the way southern women shake in Civil War period pieces. When he said “Nice to meet you,” he did so with a wink and a pronounced lisp. We took our seats at the table.

“He is from United States,” the uncle said. “I was just teaching him how to play blackjack.”

“Ohhh, blackjack,” the oilman said. “I like blackjack but I prefer to play mahjong. Do you play mahjong?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t know how.”

“Ohhh,” he said, gesturing with his hands, “you should. You would like it.” He kept his elbows tight against the sides of his chest when he spoke, his forearms out and hands swinging at the wrist. He looked like one of the flight attendants from the Almodovar movie. “I have to say,” he added. “I like you.”



“Stop that, my friend,” the uncle said, “none of that here. We are just being friendly.”

“Oh, of course,” the oilman said. “Of course. I’m being friendly too.”

“Well,” the uncle said, “since he is only learning blackjack and since you, my

friend, have not played too much of it, why don't we play a friendly game now?"

"Of course, of course," the oilman said. With that, he lifted the duffle bag onto his lap and unzipped it. He reached in and withdrew a fat brick of American cash and proceeded to peel off a number of bills. "\$500, please," he said to the uncle. As I stared at the bag, my head began to spin.

"And you, Eric?" the uncle said, "how much would you like?"

"Oh," I said, "um, just \$200 please." I handed him the money and he handed me some chips.

The uncle kept a clipboard on the table and scrupulously recorded the chip amounts we had purchased. He placed the money off to the side, out of the way but still in plain sight. I had to admit, there was certainly the appearance of professionalism and propriety. But as he dealt the cards, I felt increasingly uncomfortable.

We played a hand, and everything went exactly according to plan. The uncle gave me the signals, and I acted on them. The oilman led out with a bet and I matched it. After the next card, we did the same. Based on the uncle's signals, I understood that the oilman's three cards totaled eighteen. Mine were worse, totaling only fourteen. But when it was my turn, the uncle signaled that a six was up next, so I took the card and raised the oilman for everything I had. He called, and I won. I now had \$400 on the table in front of me.

The next hand went the same way. This time the uncle dealt me blackjack, and the oilman picked up a third card that gave him twenty. I led out and he called, but then he raised me on the next round, pushing his remaining chips. I pushed the rest of mine, and since I had more he was obligated to buy back. He asked the uncle for \$1000 this time, and called. He was chagrined on the flip, but not upset.

"I guess I don't mind losing a little money to Eric," he said. He gave me this tight, shy smile, and blushed. He actually blushed.

The hands continued in this vein and I continued to win them. After five or six, I

had amassed a stack of over \$5000, and the oilman didn't seem to give two shits about losing it. He wasn't suspicious. He just kept flirting with me awkwardly like I was the Thelma Lou to his Barney Fife.

Uncomfortable as I was with the whole scenario, I could still find it bearable for these two reasons. This man had no particular attachment to his money, and whatever aggressiveness or competitive edge he may have had was completely nullified by his overwhelming and non-threatening effeminacy. There was simply no way he was going to hurt me, regardless of the outcome. There would be no macho posturing, no drawing of pistols. I felt like a criminal, but it was practically a victimless crime.

I can't say exactly how many hands we played. But it soon became clear to me that we were building to something. There was an undeniable trajectory in the flow of the game, and it was moving steadily toward higher and higher stakes. No matter how many hands I won, and no matter how obvious it was that I was cheating, the oilman continued to dig into his bag and pony up cash, doubling down and pushing in so that everything was at stake practically every time. When I topped \$10,000, he bought in for \$20,000. When I had taken that, he came back for \$50,000. I felt the way people say they feel after a car accident or a stick-up: everything happened so fast. Finally, it became more than I could bear.

"I'm sorry," I said after winning what must have been ten straight hands. "I am not used to gambling and this is more money than I am comfortable with. I would like to stop now."

At this, the uncle laughed, but it was clearly a nervous laugh – the kind of laugh you try to muster at the Thanksgiving table when a relative says something crazy or racist. He looked at me sideways, apparently trying to convey something important about the situation and how I was affecting it. The oilman laughed too, but lightly, and said he was certainly uncomfortable losing so much money to me. Still, he added, "You do have a movie star's chin. Doesn't he have a movie star's chin?"

The uncle thought about it for a moment and then offered a compromise. "Okay,"

he said to the oilman, "I can see that he is getting scared playing for this money. He is not used to it as you are and he feels guilty for winning so much from you." The oilman giggled and batted a hand at me in oh, you fashion. "So," the uncle said, "let's play just one more hand. Then he can go and you and I will play mahjong."

"Of course," the oilman said. "One more game."

"Good," said the uncle. "Now shake hands so we know we are all still friends."

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**"I wanted to grab him by the lapels, shake him, explain to him that if he wasn't the richest, then he must be the stupidest motherfucker on the whole planet."**



We shook hands and I sat frozen as the uncle dealt the cards. I was confused, and disoriented, and not at all certain how I had come to be seated here in this room in this house with these people and thirty thousand dollars on the table in front of me. In my mind I replayed the events of the day, looking for moments of consequence, trying to follow the breadcrumbs back out of the woods.

I remembered that, initially, I had planned to visit the museum. Now I didn't know what had happened or was happening. All I knew was that I felt physically sick. I thought about making a break for it – trying to rush past everyone and out the door – but the table was pressed against the wall and Linh was still sitting beside me. There was a bed behind and the uncle and the oilman were positioned between us and the door. If I was going to bust out, it wouldn't be clean.

I looked down at my cards, and sure enough, I had an Ace and a King. This was my third blackjack of the afternoon, prompting me – though apparently only me – to suspect that the dealing was not on the up-and-up. I looked across at the

uncle, and he signaled that the oilmen had two tens, a nearly unbeatable hand. I looked at the oilman, and he had 20 written straight across his face. His whole countenance radiated, like he had found candy in his pocket.

Whatever sympathy I had for this man evaporated in that moment. I wanted to grab him by the lapels, shake him, explain to him that if he wasn't the richest, then he must be the stupidest motherfucker on the whole planet. I wanted to shout to him that he was being had, that I was an unwilling participant, and that it was simply crazy to be dealing in these types of figures in this type of venue. I wanted to blow it all up, to reset the clock, to return to some sense of normalcy.

I wanted to leave. I may have done it, too, were it not for the creeping, visceral sensation rising in my body, quietly explaining to me that, somehow, though I had not yet risked anything of my own, I was the mark here, not him. It was my turn, so I wagered \$10,000 in chips. Predictably, the oilman pushed his entire stack of \$50,000 into the center of the table.

Recall that, according to the rules of the game as it was being played here, a bet must be either matched or forfeited. I had won \$30k in the space of about thirty minutes, which was a pretty impressive wage. But since I had been raised, I was left with only two options at this juncture – I could fold, despite having an assured victory, or I could try to find a way to produce \$20,000 that I did not have. Across the table, the uncle's eyes offered quiet but stern advice.

"I can't cover that," I said.

"Well," said the oilman, "then it looks like I win."

"It would be unfortunate," the uncle said, "if the game had to end because of a lack of money. I do not have a stake in it either way, but I do want my niece's fiancée to win or lose because of the cards and how he plays them – not because he plays them against a richer man."

"What do you suggest?" asked the oilman.

"If Eric wants to call this bet," the uncle said, "I am willing to credit him the

\$20,000. I will give you my assurance that I will pay the remainder if he loses the hand. Is this agreeable to you?”

The oilman leaned back in his chair and scratched his chin. He thought it over.

“Actually,” I said, “I need to go. I’m really not comfortable with this.”

“Hold on,” the uncle said. “There is a lot of money at stake here so we should not be careless. Let’s see what my friend has to say.”

The oilman continued to mull. “Okay,” he said. “If you are willing to cover the debt, I am willing to accept your offer. But I would like to see the money. I have my money here on the table, so it is only fair that you produce yours as well.”

“Of course,” the uncle said. “Of course. Do you agree, Eric?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think it would be best if I stopped here.”

“My friend,” the uncle said, turning to the oilman. “Would it be okay with you if I stepped outside with Eric for a moment to discuss the matter?”

“Of course,” the oilman said. “Discuss.”

“Eric,” the uncle said. “Put your cards in your pocket and step outside with me.”

I did this and we walked across the hall and into a bathroom. The uncle closed the door. When it latched, his demeanor changed. He whirled on me.

“What the hell are you doing out there?!” he whispered. “You are not staying calm! You make him suspicious!”

“Hey!” I said. “You invited me for lunch! For lunch! And now I’m in a high stakes blackjack game with an oil baron from Brunei? What is this?!”

“Listen,” he said. “This is my thing. I am doing this. I put up the money – you risk nothing. This man is a pervert. He fucks men! You understand that? He is so rich, this money is nothing to him! If he is too stupid to protect it, that is his problem.” I remember being struck by his eyes. They bulged; the veins throbbed. “If you

stay calm – if you just stay calm for ten minutes, I promise you, you will walk out of this house today with \$10,000 in your pocket. I will keep \$30,000 and give the rest to Linh. Do you understand that?”

I looked at the ceiling. There was some nervous arm-crossing and biting-of-the-thumb nail.

“Okay,” I said. “I understand.”

“Good,” he said. “Now we are going back in there. You tell him you need to request a break so that we can gather the money. Then I will get it, we will finish this hand, you will win – you already know you will win! – and everything will be fine. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Back in the room, I returned to my seat and the uncle returned to his.

“What have you decided?” the oilman asked.

“Eric has a request to make,” the uncle said.

“Uh, yes,” I said. “I would like to request a break so that we can gather the money.”

“We will need twenty minutes,” the uncle said. “I will place both hands in separate envelopes, write your names on them and seal them in your presence. We will leave these on the table and Eric and I will go to get the money. We will then return, unseal the envelopes and finish the hand with all the money on the table. Is that agreeable?”

The oilman thought it over. “Of course,” he said. “I agree to this.” Then turning to the uncle, and with a hand shielding his mouth, he whispered, “I will go and visit my boyfriend.” Turning back to me he added, “Eric may come too if he wants.”

“None of that, my friend,” the uncle said.

With the agreement reached and cards sealed in envelopes, the oilman took his duffle bag and left the room. The uncle walked toward the door but turned to offer assurance. “Okay, he said, “I will go and get the money. You just wait here and stay calm. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

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**"If social conventions and cultural sensitivity had contained me to this stage in the drama, they were now overcome by something much more basic."**



The uncle disappeared and I was left in the room with Linh, who hadn't said a word in what seemed like days. Sitting in my own cloud of stupor, I almost forget that she was there.

I remembered meeting her in the park, riding with her in the taxi, and chatting with her over lunch, but these were submerged memories, like those you struggle to recover after taking a nap. You know you did x and y today, but it seems a lot like they happened yesterday or the day before. Everything is shrouded in surreal fog. You are lost, but usually it doesn't matter. In this case I felt like it did.

“Isn’t this crazy?” Linh asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “It is. What’s going on here?”

“I don’t know!” she said. “I didn’t know he was going to start betting so much!”

“You didn’t?” I asked.

“No!” she said, “I’m as shocked as you!”

But there was something in the way she said this that told me she did know this would happen. I had been in the drama club in middle school, and thus spent three years ensconced in terrible acting. Like so many of those well-meaning thirteen-year-olds, Linh just couldn’t sell it. A born conversationalist, she excelled at making me feel comfortable, but her range was limited and the stronger emotions were beyond her scope. Maybe this was why she had so few lines in the second act.

I was now sure that I was in trouble. I didn’t know how it would go down – I still hadn’t opened my wallet, after all – but there was little doubt in my mind that this would end badly for me. Maybe we would win the money and the oilman would pull a gun from his bag in anger. Maybe the uncle would not be able to get enough money and I would be asked to cover the rest. Even if I did win the money, and even if the uncle allowed me to keep my share, I was fairly certain that things would turn for the worse. How this would happen was anyone’s guess. That it would happen was something of a certainty. In the absence of knowledge I had a feeling, as they say, a deep-set dread that rang alarms in my stomach and all up and down my veins. In that moment I resolved to leave.

“I can’t do this,” I said to Linh. “I’m out.”

I stood to go but she jumped to meet me. “Wait!” she said. “You can’t go now! You have to finish!” Maybe her eyes implored me. I can’t say for sure.

Pinned between wall, table, bed, and Linh, I was effectively caged, and reminded of something my father told me when I was very young – something about how

you never back a squirrel into a corner because he might just come out scratching. I was a shaken can of beer, a stick of dynamite wedged in rocks. If social conventions and cultural sensitivity had contained me to this stage in the drama, they were now overcome by something much more basic – a primal, animal will to power. I had been had, and had enough. With one swift thrust of my arm, I tossed Linh’s small frame onto the bed.

What followed was truly a mad dash. I had lost the ability to think. All I could do now was act, impose myself on the forces arrayed against me. I rushed into the hallway and down the stairs, swinging around the railing and into the living room. There I saw the uncle, seated across the table from a strange man, stacks and stacks of bills piled on the table. They turned to look at me, but I was already looking past them, assessing the exit. I bolted straight through the room and out the door, stopping only when I reached the high iron gate, which was closed.

“Wait!” I heard the uncle scream, “Where are you going?!”

I fumbled with the gate, but only for a second, and forced it open. I did not reply. I simply ran, as fast as I could. I ran down the street and around the corner, dipping into side streets and the side streets of side streets, unsure of my direction but guided by instincts foreign to modernity. I ran past storefronts and houses, dodged motorbikes and children. I ran past a dog that briefly chased after.

There is no way to know how long I ran or how far. But I did not get tired; I didn’t even sweat. I ran and ran and looked behind me periodically, sensing threat in the gaze of everyone I passed.

When I came out on one of the main streets, I hailed a taxi. Once inside, I asked the driver to take me to the War Remnants Museum. There I spent several hours just walking around and breathing, trying to assemble the pieces of my puzzle and see what they depicted. In the meanwhile I learned many things about the atrocities committed by US soldiers during the War of American Aggression.

Part of me thought there was something in this – a juxtaposition to be drawn, a way to situate the events of my day within a larger and more complicated

historical context, maybe a way to account for the strained relations between our great peoples. But I was not there yet.

Another part of me continued to wonder about the sister – where she'd go, who she'd meet, whether she would be happy in Philadelphia.



You can read more from Eric and his thoughts on rhetoric in the media and in policy dialogue of religion at [his blog, EricCMiller.com](http://ericcmiller.com).

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