

Mr. & Mrs. Lap

by

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“We have to leave right away. We need to be at the airport in half an hour. Go home and take the children. Don’t tell anyone we’re leaving.”

Mrs. Lap had hoped to never hear those words, but now she knew it was time to go. A deep sense of uncertainty loomed over Vietnam as the North (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and the South (Republic of Vietnam) continued to fight for independence, a concept that meant something different to each side. As of April 21, 1975, with the North continuing to close in on the South, victory was within their reach. The fate of South Vietnam looked bleak, the idea of a Communist government more of a reality.

For ten days, Mrs. Lap had been quietly meeting with her friends to discuss plans of escape. Staying in Saigon would mean complete loss of freedom. Countless nightmares about the Viet Cong ripping off Mrs. Lap’s painted fingernails with pliers, or pulling out her newly permed hair, prevented her from sleeping at night. She also worried about the fate of Mr. Lap, a member of the South Vietnam Air Force. So after Mr. Lap told his wife the news, she went straight home without saying goodbye to her closest friends, her parents who lived across the street, or her two younger sisters. She packed two sets of clothing each for her husband, two children and herself, plus a few toiletries. At 11:30 a.m., less than an hour later, the family assembled on the Vespa, with Mr. Lap driving, Mrs. Lap on the back of the seat and their two kids wedged in between. They were headed to Tan Son Nhat Air Base to wait for a plane that would take them out of Vietnam.

Tan Son Nhat, Vietnam’s largest international airport, served as one of the busiest military bases for the United States and the Vietnam Air Force. The air base was a familiar place for Mr. Lap—he had worked there for ten years. As chief officer of the 600th Photo Squadron, Mr. Lap took aerial images that were later used to plan enemy attacks. Now his workplace functioned as a meeting point where hundreds of people sat and waited for their chance of escape. The family searched for an open space to settle into, trying to get as comfortable as they could.

At 5 p.m., Mr. Lap decided it was time to go home and check on his mother and sisters. When he left earlier that morning, he had only told his mother that he needed to take his family to the air base. He did not have time to tell her much else. She was probably waiting for him to come home for dinner. Mr. Lap reassured his wife that he would be back soon and quickly left the air base.

Alone with the children in Tan Son Nhat, Mrs. Lap felt overwhelmed by all the people around her. To keep herself busy, she befriended a young woman sitting nearby who also had two children. Mrs. Lap and the young woman chatted away about their husbands and the hope of seeing each other again once they reached the United States. When it came time for Mrs. Lap to shower, the woman offered to keep an eye on her son and daughter. When Mrs. Lap finished, she

returned the favor, watching as their kids played without a care in the world. Mrs. Lap's son Quoc was eight years old, her daughter Uyen, seven. She feared they were too young to understand and would become frantic if she told them too much. She only said, "We are here and we have to go to the United States. We don't know exactly where yet, but don't worry. Mom and Dad will go with you." Mrs. Lap had no idea where the plane would take them, or if it would even arrive successfully, but she took comfort in knowing that her family would be with her. *At least we can all go together*, she thought while watching Quoc and Uyen peacefully asleep in her lap.

Mr. Lap arrived at home and sure enough, his mother was expecting him. She had not known when he would return, but she knew he would have to come home eventually. Mr. Lap's mind felt heavy with all the things he had to do and all the things he could not say. He could not answer very many of his mother's questions about what would happen next, because he honestly did not know. His orders were simple: Meet in Tan Son Nhat and a plane would take his family out of Vietnam. Their destination was unknown.

After a short silent dinner, it was time for Mr. Lap to return to the air base. As he walked out of his house, two of his wife's younger sisters, who lived across the street, rushed over. "Are you going back to the airport? Where are you taking our sister? Why aren't you taking us?"

It pained Mr. Lap to know that he couldn't bring them. "I can't take you because the Air Force said I can't," he told them. "But don't worry, we'll be back soon." He wanted to explain everything, but he knew he couldn't. His family's escape had to be kept a secret. If word spread through their small neighborhood that they were fleeing, the family would be caught and punished by the Viet Cong. Ngoc-Van and Ngoc-Thuy accepted Mr. Lap's brief explanation and asked him to give Mrs. Lap a letter. They'd written it after seeing the family leaving on their Vespa earlier that morning. Ngoc-Van had something else for her sister. She was wearing a set of "semaine" bracelets, seven bracelets that represented a day of the week. She took off two of the thin gold bands and gave them to Mr. Lap. He promised both sisters that the letter and bracelets would reach Mrs. Lap. He then headed back to the air base.

Mrs. Lap was talking to those around her when Mr. Lap returned. He told her he'd been at home and that he had some things for her. Mrs. Lap immediately opened the letter. It read: *We didn't think that we would ever be far away from you because we have always been together. Please wear these bracelets so that you can remember us every time you look at them. I gave you two to represent Ngoc-Thuy and me. You need to go so you can take care of the children. We don't have a family yet so we'll be ok. We don't know what's going to happen to us. We don't know if we can leave yet, but hopefully one day we will be reunited. If we can't be, then please take care of yourself.*

Mrs. Lap could barely get through the letter. She loved her two sisters as much as she loved her husband and children. The three of them had been inseparable. Ever since their mother died during childbirth, Mrs. Lap had vowed to care for them no matter what. Now, at age 29, Mrs. Lap took responsibility for Ngoc-Van, 24, and Ngoc-Thuy, 20. Upon arrival at the air base, she had asked Mr. Lap if there was any way her sisters could go, too. Mr. Lap was gentle, but

firm. “No, we can’t. The Air Force has a specific list that allows only the wives and children to go. Just be happy they allow that many. We can’t ask for more.”

After reading her sisters’ letter, it now occurred to Mrs. Lap that she would likely never see Ngoc-Van and Ngoc-Thuy again. She tried to stay strong by telling herself that she must leave for her family’s future, that even though she could not take her sisters, at least she still had her husband and children. Mrs. Lap then tucked the letter in a safe place and put on the bracelets.

At midnight, Mr. Lap returned to his office, which was a trailer located on the air base. He was not allowed to stay in the civilians’ section with his wife and children. He told Mrs. Lap he would see her in the morning. After he left, she spent the night nodding off, unable to sleep.

Mr. Lap came back to the civilian area at 4 a.m. All of the adults and children anxiously awaited further instruction. Finally, at 8 a.m., an American official with a speakerphone ordered everyone to be ready. In 15 minutes, a bus would transport them to the airplane.

It did not take long for the Laps to gather their things. After all, they had only the one small bag they’d packed in half an hour. Soon the bus arrived. The American official held a list of names in his hands and started calling them off to determine who would board first. He reached Mrs. Lap and her children. Mrs. Lap looked at her husband. He told her to go on because women and children were first. Mrs. Lap did what she was told and found a seat toward the back of the bus. She felt uneasy when she saw that Mr. Lap was still not on the bus. *I will just have to wait. He will get on after the women and children.*

The bus filled up quickly. *Where is my husband going to sit?* Then the door began to close. Mrs. Lap fought her way to a window and pried it opened. She saw Mr. Lap still standing outside, wiping tears from his face. Then she knew. Mrs. Lap finally understood why her husband had been especially quiet the night before. Mr. Lap feared that if he spoke too much, he would reveal the heavy secret he had been keeping from her. He knew that she would not want to go if he couldn’t join them. Mrs. Lap called out to him with a desperate hope that he could still get on the bus with her. She could see his mouth move, and strained to hear him. “They told me that only wives and children could go. They want me to stay and be prepared to fight. I can’t go, but I’ll try to find a way to be with you again. Just take care of the children. Don’t worry, I will do everything I can to see you again. Please take care.” Those were his last words to her as the bus drove away.

Mr. Lap had known all along that he couldn’t go with his family. He had specific orders that only the immediate family members of the men in the Air Force could be on the plane. With South Vietnam on the brink of surrender, men needed to stay and be ready to fight at a moment’s notice. If Mr. Lap fled the country, he would be considered a traitor. What’s more, he knew that an entire family that stayed together would have a smaller chance. He had heard stories of families thrown in jail because they were caught fleeing. The fear for the safety of his family forced Mr. Lap to make the decision of letting them go.

Mrs. Lap’s head felt empty. She still did not have a complete understanding of what had happened. Mrs. Lap had thought all along that her family would be headed toward safety

together. The reassurance of having her children and Mr. Lap by her side had kept her in one piece. Now he was gone. She could not get the last image of Mr. Lap out of her head—standing outside the bus, crying. That was the second time she had ever seen him cry. The first time was when he proposed to her and she didn't quite say yes.

Mr. Lap and Mrs. Lap met at the ages of five and six, respectively. Living across the street from one another, their parents had been longtime friends. Mrs. Lap remembered how the two had spent their childhood days playing house and pretending to cook. As they got older, Mr. Lap would come over to her house strumming on the guitar while her younger sister, who had a beautiful voice, sang. Mrs. Lap considered the visits completely innocent and certainly did not see her childhood friend as a romantic companion. Plus, she always saw girls filtering in and out of his house. He was quite the social butterfly.

Suddenly, Mrs. Lap began to notice that Mr. Lap had been coming over more than usual. She did not pay him much attention. Then one day he approached her with a proposition. He said, "I want to get to know you." Mrs. Lap was confused. "But you already know me," she said. He responded with something corny like, "But I want to get to know you in a different way." He meant he wanted to be her boyfriend. Shortly after, he boldly asked her out to the movies. Hesitant about being alone with him, she said that she would go only if one of her girlfriends went, too. Mr. Lap of course yielded to her wishes and the three of them went to the movies and had dinner.

After several more group dates, Mrs. Lap became more comfortable going out with her suitor alone. Her strict parents demanded to know where she had been when she came home later than usual. Like a good student, she told them she was studying at her friend's house.

On one particular date, the couple ate dinner and went to the movies. Then Mr. Lap took Mrs. Lap to a park located next to the Notre-Dame Basilica, a landmark cathedral in downtown Saigon with heavy French influences.

Sitting on a bench in the park, Mr. Lap said, "I want to marry you." Mrs. Lap was silent so he continued. "I'm going somewhere far away." After another long silence, she finally asked him where. "To Nha Trang, which is far away from Saigon. I'm joining the Air Force and they want me to train out there. If you agree to marry me, I will ask to be stationed closer to home. If not, then I will leave and never come back." Mr. Lap ended his dramatic speech. Mrs. Lap did not move. She feared marriage for many reasons. At 20, she was still going to school and studying architecture. Also, she only liked him as a friend; she certainly was not in love with him. Things might have been different if they had not grown up together. Maybe she would have seen him in a more romantic light, rather than just the boy she played house with. Mrs. Lap finally broke her silence and expressed all those uncertainties to the man who wanted to marry her. That moment marked the first time she had ever seen him cry. Stunned by the tears he shed for her, Mrs. Lap reconsidered. She thought about how strict her parents were and how marriage would be her ticket to freedom. Plus she really did like him, and she felt terrible for making him cry. After mulling it over in her head, Mrs. Lap, while sitting on the bench in the park next to the biggest Catholic church in Saigon, agreed to the proposal. Mr. Lap stopped crying. The two were married a year later, in 1966. She was 20, he 21.

Mr. Lap stood there until he could no longer see the bus. It made him uneasy not to know where the plane would take his family. In truth, he had only told Mrs. Lap those last reassuring words to ease her fears and possibly his own. He struggled with the reality that he might never see his family again. But the urgency of the situation did not allow Mr. Lap to dwell. He quickly composed himself and thought about his next step. He needed to return to his office at Tan Son Nhat. When he arrived there, he went straight to his collection of vital classified documents and burned them. In the time of war, any information could be used in a dangerous way if it got into the wrong hands. After Mr. Lap burned as much as he could, he went home for dinner.

The bus carrying Mrs. Lap and her children reached the plane that would fly them to Subic Bay, an island in the Philippines. Once again, Mrs. Lap and her children were one of the first to board, so they got a spot in the back. She looked around and noticed the same expression of worry, sadness, and fear clouding everyone's faces. Mrs. Lap wished things would slow down so she'd have time to think. Then she felt the plane begin to move and take off. Mrs. Lap watched with despair as the ground below her disappeared.

After being in the air for an hour, Mrs. Lap found the flight to be extremely turbulent. Oddly, she did not vomit even though she usually suffered from motion sickness. In a daze, she clung on to some netting as the plane plunged up and down. She tried to digest the fact that today might be the last time she would ever see her husband or her country.

Then something happened and Mrs. Lap snapped out of it. She suddenly felt the magnitude of her responsibility as a mother. She needed to care for Quoc and Uyen, as Mr. Lap instructed. After nine years of marriage, this was the first time she had ever truly been away from him. In the past, Mrs. Lap had spent several nights alone because Mr. Lap's duties in the Air Force prevented him from coming home in the evening. Those nights made her realize how much she truly loved him. A day was the longest time they had been apart. Now she had to learn to care for herself and her children without her husband. Knowing she could no longer depend on him, Mrs. Lap stopped being sad and looked ahead to their next destination.

On April 22, 1975, the last battle of the war between the North and South ended. The South had lost Xuan Loc after two weeks of combat. The North had won. South Vietnam's chances of freedom deteriorated as the North Vietnamese continued edging toward Saigon. By April 27, at least 140,000 Communist troops had encircled the city, blocking off all exits out of the capital. At night, Mr. Lap could hear gunshots in the distance. During the day, he could see people in a panic, trying to find a way to escape. Everyone rushed from one market to another to buy emergency supplies of extra food and water. Constant fear and worry strained their faces. The end was approaching, but no one knew when. Mr. Lap must leave Vietnam now.

After Mrs. Lap and his children's departure, Mr. Lap had resumed work as normal. He would take the 20-minute trip on his Vespa to Tan Son Nhat in the morning and come back home for dinner. On April 28, Mr. Lap had just finished eating when he heard on the radio that the

North Vietnamese Army had captured two A-37 jets from Phan Rang Air Base and bombed Tan Son Nhat. Mr. Lap immediately drove to the air base. The gates were locked when he arrived. Those stuck on the air base during the attack could not get out. Mr. Lap waited outside with his comrades. Rumors circulated that a South Vietnam Air Force pilot had flown one of the A-37s. For years, he had been a spy for the North Vietnamese Army.

Three hours later, at 10 p.m., the gates of the air base opened. Mr. Lap dashed to his office and burned several more important documents. He knew that those affiliated with the Air Force now faced imminent danger, especially with the attack on the main air base. After completing his task, Mr. Lap went to sleep in his office.

At 4 a.m., Mr. Lap awoke when he heard a loud crash. It did not take him long to recognize the sound of a rocket breaking the sound barrier. Water splashed everywhere. The rocket had hit a water tower about thirty feet from where Mr. Lap slept. He would have been dead if it had exploded any closer. Running around, Mr. Lap finally found an exit and darted outside. From there, he saw the Headquarters office explode. Without much time to react, he hid in the gutter-water trail that ran around the air base. Mr. Lap waited there until the bombing ceased.

At 5 p.m., after almost 12 hours, Mr. Lap decided it was safe to go home. On the way back, he felt compelled to check on his best friend. To his relief, Mr. Lap found his friend and family safe in their home. He told his friend that Mrs. Lap and the children had already escaped, that the air base had been attacked, that now he needed to leave as well. The two friends said goodbye and Mr. Lap headed home.

The attack of Tan Son Nhat had caused a commotion. Police, no doubt members of the North Vietnamese Army, were trying to keep things under control. In other words, they did not want anyone to leave Vietnam. Stationed in front of Mr. Lap's house, the police had fenced off the entrance. Knowing he could not get in through the front, Mr. Lap went around and entered his house through the back. Airplanes could no longer fly out of Vietnam because of the attack on the air base. Now the only way to escape was by sea. Mr. Lap would have to seek the help of his brother-in-law, a member of the Navy. Also, Mr. Lap's mother might be able to go with him if they traveled by boat. He asked her if she wanted to go. She refused, unless the rest of her children could go also. Mr. Lap knew that could not happen and he was forced to make another difficult decision. He had to leave his mother. Having already separated from his wife and children, he felt little emotion. His main objective was to flee Vietnam in order to find his family. Mr. Lap said goodbye to his mother, got on his Vespa for the last time and headed to Saigon Seaport Base.

With little hope left for Saigon, people ran through the streets desperately searching for an escape route. Mr. Lap maneuvered through the debris and dead bodies on his Vespa. He wondered about the handful of unclaimed bodies, how they died, whether they were shot by the Viet Cong, why an ambulance had not come to their rescue. No one paid any attention to those lying dead on the street. Mr. Lap saw thieves go into the houses of the people who had already left and take their belongings. They carried out beds, t.v.'s and mattresses. It became clear to Mr. Lap that it was every man for himself. He could not believe what had happened to his beloved country. It was April 29, 1975 and little did he know that tomorrow, Saigon would officially fall to Communist rule.

Mr. Lap arrived at the Navy Seaport Base at 6 p.m. Just as the Navy boat began to slowly leave the dock, Mr. Lap ran and jumped onto the boat. Looking back, he saw thieves pouncing

on his Vespa and snatching a small bag carrying what little personal belongings he had, including a Colt 45 pistol and a camera he had used to document the atrocities he witnessed on his way to the boat.

Ten minutes later, Mr. Lap reached Hai Quan Cong Xuong, a ship repair center. From there, Mr. Lap and forty other people were transferred to another small boat, belonging to the Vietnamese Navy. Then the boat set sail again. At around 8 p.m., Cat Lai, an ammunition storage center, exploded. Everyone became fixated on the flames burning in the distance.

At 11 p.m., a hurricane blew in at full force. As the small boat bobbed up and down, people vomited on each other's necks and backs, the smell inescapable. Mr. Lap and another man were the only two who did not get sick. The hurricane raged for about two hours. By 1 a.m., everything was still.

No one slept that night. At 5 a.m., the boat reached Con Son, an island off the coast of southern Vietnam. Three or four hours later, the passengers were again transferred, this time to a larger Navy ship that would finally take them out of Vietnam.

Mrs. Lap and the children reached Subic Bay on April 22. She did not know how long they would have to stay there. They tried to settle into a large, empty house that had once been occupied by men in the army.

In the evening, someone took out a radio and everyone gathered around to hear reports about Vietnam. The voice on the radio revealed disheartening news. On April 21, 1975, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu had resigned and had nominated Vice President Tran Van Huong to take his place. After only one week in office, Huong had handed over the presidency to Doung Van Minh. There were rumors that Minh supported the Communist Party. Everyone listening to the broadcast who was old enough to understand wept. Mrs. Lap had been holding on to an inkling of hope that she would one day be able to return to Vietnam. Now with the news of President Thieu's resignation, she knew she was leaving for good.

Still out at sea, Mr. Lap sat on a larger Vietnamese Navy cargo ship not meant to transport humans. Two planks set up outside, on the edge of the boat, functioned as a toilet. Falling through the planks meant falling into the ocean. Each person ate just enough canned food to survive. Many could not eat at all because they had been vomiting so much. Although constantly aware of his hunger, Mr. Lap felt grateful for being able to stomach his food.

On May 1, the captain announced that they would soon arrive at Subic Bay in the Philippines. The ship had sailed up next to a U.S. Navy ship. Mr. Lap did not understand what was happening, but he heard that the U.S. ship would supply the Vietnamese ship with water under two conditions: The captain must lower the South Vietnamese flag before entering the island, as a sign of surrender, and all of the weapons on the ship must be thrown into the sea. Those at Subic Bay would be willing to shelter the refugees, but they needed to make sure that no one caused any trouble. The captain had no choice. He stepped up to the flag, yellow with three red stripes, and lowered it. At that moment, Mr. Lap knew that his home town of Cong Troung Dan Chu—where he grew up, met his wife and raised his two children—would no longer

be the way he remembered it. He had truly lost his country. Mr. Lap wept as he watched the captain take down the flag and hold it to his chest.

It was April 30, and Mrs. Lap had arrived at Orote Point, a refugee camp in Guam. Boatloads and buses filled with people filtered through Guam everyday. That morning Mrs. Lap ran into one of her friends who had just been reunited with her husband. She gave Mrs. Lap \$2. Mrs. Lap gratefully accepted, thanked her friend, and then rushed off to wait for a bus carrying men from the Air Force. She watched as the last man got off the bus. It was not Mr. Lap.

Mrs. Lap stopped one of the men and asked him when the next bus would arrive. He told her this was the last bus. All of the men had come from Utapoa, an air base in Thailand. The man said, "If your husband is not here, then he probably was not able to leave Vietnam." After seeing Mrs. Lap's expression, he tried to comfort her. "Maybe he flew in another plane and landed somewhere else. But all of us are from Tan Son Nhat." With that last bus, Mrs. Lap lost any hope of finding her husband.

Mr. Lap arrived in Guam on May 15. He had been at sea for 15 days after being transferred to yet another ship. As soon as the ship reached the island, people were rounded up and put into a large shower room—the men in one room, the women in another. Mr. Lap stood in a stall and waited. Soon a foul-smelling powder poured down from the showerhead. Mr. Lap held his breath. The powder was DDT, one of the best-known synthetic pesticides. The U.S. officials at Guam, fearing that the Vietnamese brought with them diseases, were using DDT as a cleaning agent. After being sprayed with the powder, Mr. Lap received permission to take a shower. He felt lower than an animal.

When he was settled in, Mr. Lap knew he needed to start searching for his family. For the next few days, he posted notices about them on the Red Cross bulletin board. He also inquired at the Red Cross office located in the camp. Mr. Lap vowed that he would do everything he could to find his family.

Mrs. Lap had lost track of time. She knew it was sometime in May. Since the last bus had arrived on April 30 without her husband she had given up hope that they would one day be reunited.

After leaving Orote Point, she was transferred to Black Construction, another refugee camp in Guam. There, Mrs. Lap passed the time by volunteering at the Red Cross organization, administering supplies to new refugees needing assistance. She had to keep busy in order to not think too much. Uyen and Quoc needed her.

Then one day while passing out diapers and clothing, an American Red Cross employee approached Mrs. Lap and told her she had a phone call from Orote Point. He led her to the Red Cross office and gave her the phone. Mrs. Lap held it to her ear. A familiar voice said, *Mui, minh ne*. Mrs. Lap began to cry. She knew who it was.

Mrs. Lap and Mr. Lap did not have a traditional Vietnamese marriage or relationship. Out of respect, a wife would call her husband “anh,” and a husband would call his wife “em” to show he possessed authority over his wife. Rarely would a wife address her husband by his first name. Mrs. Lap had been calling Mr. Lap by his first name ever since they met 23 years ago. What’s more, Mr. Lap never used “anh” when talking to her. He would always refer to himself as “minh,” which affectionately translated into “me” or “myself.” He also never called her “em.” Instead, Mr. Lap called Mrs. Lap one of two things: “cung” or “mui.” “Cung” meant “dear” in English. “Mui” was something he started calling her years ago. Mrs. Lap used to have a Chinese babysitter who could not pronounce her name. So the babysitter called her “mui,” which was a loving pet name for a baby girl. The name stuck and Mrs. Lap continued to be Mr. Lap’s “mui” even after they were married.

When Mrs. Lap heard those words through the phone, she knew it was him. To make absolutely sure she asked, “*Cung*, is that you?”

“Yes it is. I’m here with all your brothers and sisters.”

“Please try to find a way to come here to be with the children and me,” she pleaded. Yes. Mr. Lap promised to see her soon—and this time, he believed every word he said.

“Ok, I will wait for you.” And just as a bus had taken Mrs. Lap’s husband away from her, she now waited for the bus that would bring him back.



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