

Agent Orange and My Father

by

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1.

If there is such a thing as falling in love with a house, that's what happened. The moment I stepped through the red front door, I was in love. There was something about the three levels that was so appealing to me. The backyard was beautiful and looked out over hills. Wooden stairs led up to a balcony which overlooked the city. The back patio allowed enough room for a dining table. My father loved the house more than I did and he was so proud of it.

In 2004 my parents made a habit of going house shopping. Up until then we were satisfied with rented houses. We stayed the longest in a rented house in Fremont, California, a three-bedroom, two-bath, single-story house. It was in this house that my father found out he had stomach cancer. We lived in that one for seven years, until the end of my sophomore year in high school. Saying goodbye to 32847 Lake Mead Drive was easy, because there was a beautiful tri-level house on Mission Hills in Union City, a ten-minute drive away, waiting for us.

The house that I fell in love with was on Appian Way, just a few blocks from the Masonic Home for Adults, off of Mission Boulevard, one of the main roads in Fremont. On the day of the open house event, my father drove us up a hill with a parkway in the middle of the road, all the way up until the road ended. Once he reached the end, he made a U-turn and started back down the road, turning right into the cul-de-sac where the house stood.

My father took out his compass and measured in which direction the front door pointed. Southwest. That wasn't what he wanted to see. He wanted to see Northwest, but since we were already there, it wouldn't hurt to look around, he thought. Maybe it was because my parents were one step closer to owning a house for the first time since they had come to the U.S., or maybe it was because the backyard made it seem so idyllic. Whatever the reason, everyone quickly came to love the house. Everyone but my mother.

Because the front door pointed Southwest, my mother didn't exactly feel the same way about the house. In Vietnamese culture, each person has his or her own direction. The front door of the house in which a person lives should point toward the direction that matches the head of the household. It is believed this will ensure that the entire family will be prosperous and safe from ill-health.

My parents invited a Vietnamese psychic to the house. He confirmed that the direction was not desirable, but my father loved the house so much that he bought it anyway. And it was exciting. When the walls were painted a champagne color, hardwood floors replaced carpet, and the furniture put in place, it felt like I was living in one of those model homes that we had seen so many of in the past year. Finally, my parents owned a house, something they had been working toward for fifteen years.

Then my father started having problems with his health again. All I knew was that he was hurting inside, near his stomach. I cared too much to ask what was wrong, so I never asked. One day when my mother turned into the cul-de-sac after taking me home from school, we saw my

father's car in the driveway. She let out a sigh. She knew why he was home early, especially since he worked overtime most days. It was the one time she didn't want to see him at home, the one time she didn't look forward to seeing him. She knew he was home because he was hurting, and she didn't want that to be the reason.

I didn't know why he was hurting. He was admitted to the hospital shortly after we moved into the new house, sometime between April and June, and then was discharged. It was hard for him to walk, and so he spent most of his time lying in bed. My father called me into his room one day and told me to sit on the floor at the foot of the bed. He struggled to get out of bed, but eventually made his way to where I was sitting. There were a few bills that had to be paid. He taught me how to pay them. I wrote out the checks and he signed them. On a laptop, he instructed me to open up the folder containing an Excel spreadsheet and taught me how to keep track of how much money remained in the checking account. Together, we balanced the checkbook on the computer.

I knew what my father was doing. He was preparing me to do the everyday things he used to do, and he was giving me the responsibility of paying the bills and keeping track of the family finances. After we were done, after I felt like I had gotten the hang of those duties, we thanked each other. My father went back to bed to lie down and I left the bedroom. But I didn't go back downstairs. Instead I went to the upstairs bathroom, shut the door behind me, ran the water, and just let the tears I felt beating fall.

2.

My half-brother introduced me to Agent Orange a little over a month ago. I immediately knew this was the subject that I wanted to research for my term project. The subject matter resonated with me. There was a sense of urgency that something had to be done about the controversy. I wanted to bring a topic that had been buried for decades back to the surface.

Agent Orange is the code name for one of the many herbicides and defoliants used during the Vietnam War which caused the leaves of plants to fall off prematurely.. Produced by the U.S. in 1961 as part of an herbicide program called Operation Ranch Hand, Agent Orange was used by the South Vietnamese Air Force as part of the first defoliation test on August 10, 1961. On January 3, 1962, pressured by the need to expedite and improve military conditions in Vietnam, President Kennedy personally authorized the spraying of defoliants in Vietnam. Classified by the color of the band on the 208-liter storage barrels that contained this herbicide, Agent Orange was contaminated with dioxin, an accidental byproduct that is now known to cause several different cancers and birth defects. Between 1961 and 1971, approximately twenty-one million gallons of this toxin-contaminated defoliant were sprayed on the forests of southern Vietnam, covering over six million acres of land, for the purpose of eliminating enemy cover as well as destroying crops, a military tactic for decreasing enemy food supplies. Dioxin hot spots are still being addressed today because dioxin is a toxic chemical that does not readily degrade, and isn't water soluble. It is still present in Vietnam's water supply and ecosystem.

The first legally documented victims of dioxin exposure were the employees of Monsanto, an agricultural company with a history of toxic contamination, that is known today for producing genetically modified seeds. On March 8, 1949, an explosion at Monsanto's Nitro West Virginia plant exposed more than 220 workers to dioxin. A *Vanity Fair* article published in May 2008 reported that following the explosion, workers reported leg and chest pain and a skin condition called chloracne, one of the medical conditions that later allowed some Vietnam veterans to claim benefits following exposure to Agent Orange. In 1981, these exposed workers filed a

lawsuit against Monsanto. The case was settled out of court, with Monsanto agreeing to pay a lump sum of \$1.5 million to several of the former Nitro employees.

In Vietnam, southern Vietnamese newspapers began reporting in June of 1969 that herbicides were causing birth defects. This prompted a study by K. Diane Courtney and her colleagues at the National Institutes of Health. They presented evidence that a component of Agent Orange called 2,4,5-T caused malformed babies and stillbirth in laboratory mice. In 1970, the U.S. military ceased the use of this defoliant in Vietnam, and 2,4,5-T was banned from most U.S. domestic products soon after. The spraying of other herbicides continued, but in 1971 Operation Ranch Hand finally ended.

More than 2.5 million American military personnel had served in Vietnam by the time the war ended in May 1975. Around that time, the Veterans Administration and other established veterans' organizations began to see an increase in inquiries from Vietnam veterans that reflected rates of illnesses much higher than previously recorded. But these organizations did not respond to the veterans' increasing inquiries. In 1978, the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) was established as a system of support and advocacy. Herbicide-related illnesses dramatically surfaced, but these newly-founded organizations were still gathering resources to take up the cause.

Also in 1978, Vietnam veterans filed a class-action product liability lawsuit against five chemical manufacturers that produced contaminated herbicides for the U.S. during the war. Six years and two judges later in 1984, the suit was settled out of court just hours before the trial was to take place, for \$180 million. Payments were made between 1988 to 1997, the most common being for mental disorders, which thus far have not been proven to be the result of Agent Orange exposure.

Despite the 1984 settlement, the controversy that revolves around U.S. victims of Agent Orange and who or what is responsible persisted. In 1998, veterans filed a new lawsuit, this time arguing that reparations did not adequately address the new illnesses that surfaced as a result of the link to Agent Orange exposure. This case proved unsuccessful; the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the claim and the Supreme Court declined to hear the case.

Vietnam veterans in the U.S. today are still struggling with the adverse health effects of being exposed to this defoliant during the war. Many who have filed for benefits have to await approval, denial, anything from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The answer is not automatic. In December 2009 the *Chicago Tribune* reported that some veterans have had to wait as long as fourteen months for approval of their disability claims.

U.S. Vietnam veterans, however, were not the only group that was exposed to Agent Orange during the war. Vietnamese civilians could see the effect of the herbicides on the plants and crops. Airplanes that flew at low altitudes left behind trails of white dust that percolated through the air, down to the plants, and onto the soil. Spraying times lasted around eight minutes per mission. In the following weeks, plants would lose their leaves, and what were once acres of rich forest would become dry and barren. The health problems linked to the defoliant did not publicly surface until 1968, when Dr. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, an obstetrician who was working at Tu Du Maternity Hospital in Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City, started delivering babies with birth defects. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported last year:

'It was very horrible for me and my colleagues,' [Dr. Nguyen] said, her voice cracking as she wiped away tears. 'The first case

happened on my duty. I didn't show the mother because I was afraid she would go into shock. But the father and other family members demanded to see, and it was horrible.'

Dr. Nguyen then took this news to her friends at the South Vietnamese newspapers, who began reporting stories of birth defects linked to the use of herbicides two years before Operation Ranch Hand ended in 1971. It is estimated that at least 2.1 million to as many as 4.8 million people who were present during the spraying had been exposed to dioxin levels of a magnitude much greater than what was used for U.S. domestic purposes. The Red Cross of Vietnam estimates that three million Vietnamese civilians in Vietnam are still living with the legacy of Agent Orange today, four decades after its introduction during the war.

3.

I desperately wanted to find a Vietnamese Agent Orange victim currently living in California, but was having trouble. Feeling discouraged, I turned to the best resource I knew: my mother.

I gave her a call one evening and asked her if she knew anything about the topic. In Vietnamese, it's called *Chất độc da cam*, which literally translates to "orange skin poison." My mother knew the basics: that it was a chemical sprayed in Vietnam during the war. She told me she didn't know anyone who was currently affected by it, adding that even if she did, they would have died by now.

But she promised me that she would ask her friends. She did—to no avail. No one knew of anyone living in the U.S. who was a victim of this poison. But the next day, my mother called me back and asked me a strange question.

"Do you really want to pursue this project?"

"Of course," I said.

"Because if you do, I will tell you something."

And so I sat in silence as my mother told me that my father's health had been affected by exposure to Agent Orange during the war. When she told me this, I wanted to believe her. But I also knew that it would be hard to prove, especially because he died of kidney and cardiopulmonary failure, and the final stages of stomach cancer, all of which are not currently on the presumptive-eligibility list of conditions known to be caused by Agent Orange.

As of the end of last year, three more diseases were added to the list of medical conditions presumed to be connected to wartime exposure to dioxin-contaminated herbicides: Parkinson's disease, B-cell Leukemia and Ischemic heart disease. Hodgkin's disease, multiple myeloma, respiratory cancers, prostate cancer, and Type-2 diabetes were among the diseases listed in 2008. Many doctors who treat patients with diseases that are linked to Agent Orange are not even aware of potential links. And even if veterans do know, the process of enrolling for benefits is time-consuming. By the time veterans do get approved for benefits, it may be too late.

The problem with the presumptive-eligibility list is that it continues to grow. The more research that goes into finding more health conditions that are linked to this defoliant, the more disability benefits will have to go out to veterans. The other problem with the list is that it doesn't grow fast enough. Veterans who have a certain disease may not receive benefits because the disease is not on the list, but that specific disease could be added later, at which point it may be too late.

4.

My father was born on February 12, 1947 to Ton Nhu-Thi Thoa and Tran Van Hai (his mother and father, respectively) in Da Nang in central Vietnam. Growing up in a household with many children, my father was the one who was counted on the most. His parents pushed him to excel in school. With the added responsibility of taking care of his parents, my father grew up with a sense of duty and honor. He served his parents, and soon served in the Vietnam War as a bomber pilot for the Southern Vietnam Air Force. As a captain in the war his job was to drop bombs on orders. I don't know how many bombs he dropped, how many times he went on missions, or how many people he killed. All I know is that he was a pilot and flew planes.

From 1970 to 1972, my father was in the U.S. as part of his pilot training. During this time, in 1971, U.S. forces ceased spraying Agent Orange after finding out that its components led to birth defects in laboratory mice. After the end of the war, the Viet Cong (VC) notified every Republic of Vietnam soldier that he must come forth to be imprisoned. My father did just that, and was imprisoned in the camps from 1975 to 1977. He lived in the jungle and performed duties required by the VC. Prisoners were allowed two bowls of rice each week and cassava. The rest of the food came from the ground and the trees.

After he was released, my father was imprisoned again, this time for nine years after being caught fleeing the country by boat. So when my mother asked him the second time she ever saw him if he wanted to leave the country, his eyes widened and he asked her, "Aren't you afraid I'm going to tell the Viet Cong?"

My parents met each other because my mom was curious about the men who had served in the war. One of her friends had mentioned that there was a man who had just been released from the VC camps. She wanted to see him, to talk to him. In her words, she wanted to see someone who had helped fight Communism. When she saw him for the first time, my mother described him as sickly. It had been two months since his release from the camps. As he sat near the railroad right behind his home, thin and brooding—about the disappointment of the war, of his first wife leaving him for a VC soldier while he was imprisoned, of his many failed attempts to flee the country—my mother spoke to him. According to her, his skin did not look normal. It had a yellow tinge to it. His eyes told her he was tired of life.

But soon their courtship began and my parents married. Their first child together was named Cà-rốt, which phonetically translates to "carrot" in English. Malnutrition caused her to die within months of her birth. When my mother was pregnant with her second child, the two decided to make another attempt at fleeing Vietnam.

En route to Hong Kong, my parents dealt with storms, seasickness, and a scarcity of food. On one particular day, my mom felt pressure down below. She could feel the baby coming out, five months before the due date. Losing her first child with my father turned her into a determined woman, and she was determined to not let another baby die. With her hands, my mother held the baby inside her body.

After they arrived in Hong Kong, they settled into refugee camps with other Vietnamese. While my father worked for the administration as a translator, my mom stayed in the camps. Five months passed and my mother went into labor. She was taken to Saint Margaret Hospital. Lines of communication were not well-developed, so my father did not know she had gone to the hospital until after she gave birth.

In order to process the paperwork, the nurses demanded that the baby be given a name. But this is not the Vietnamese custom, where names are given a month after the baby's birth. With a pen, my mother wrote down "Hong Kong."

She named me Hong Kong to hold on to the memory of my birthplace—the country to which my parents fled from Communist Vietnam for a new beginning, and as a kind of shorthand for the adversity they had experienced as refugees.

5.

In an effort to address growing health problems and what they felt was neglect from the U.S. government, the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange, a nonprofit organization representing Vietnamese Agent Orange victims in Vietnam, was founded on January 10, 2004. VAVA consists of a group of Vietnamese doctors, scientists, and others who have spent nearly three decades working with Vietnamese Agent Orange victims.

On January 30, 2004, VAVA filed a lawsuit with the help of American lawyers against thirty-two chemical companies that produced defoliants used during the war. The first hearing was held on March 18, 2004 in the U.S. District Court, Eastern District in Brooklyn, New York.

According to the War Legacies Project, a nonprofit organization based in Vermont, the Vietnamese plaintiffs brought the case in the belief that the U.S. government and its contractors, chemical manufacturers of herbicides and defoliants, were responsible for the suffering of three million Vietnamese currently living in Vietnam with the long-term, adverse effects of exposure to Agent Orange. The plaintiffs also wanted medical and economic assistance, as well as social care for the purpose of facilitating victims' adjustment back into the community.

On March 10, 2005, Judge Weinstein dismissed the case on the basis that although international law prohibits the use of poison in war, the use of Agent Orange and other chemical defoliants was not intended to poison civilians. The chemical companies were government contractors at the time that they produced Agent Orange, which means they enjoy the same immunity as the U.S. government in a U.S. court of law. This did not stop VAVA, which filed an appeal to the Second Circuit Court later that year in September 2005. It wasn't until June 18, 2007 that oral arguments from both sides were heard from three judges of the Court of Appeals.

On February 22, 2008, The Federal Court of Appeals in Manhattan, New York rejected VAVA's claim to reinstate its lawsuit against the chemical companies. The ruling was based on the plaintiffs' failure to show that the herbicides produced by the chemical companies and used by the U.S. military violated the ban on the use of poison in warfare. At this time, several U.S. veterans also filed appeals, but the court dismissed them too, ruling that because the chemical companies were government contractors, they were not liable for any adverse health effects caused by Agent Orange.

6.

Family is big in our household. But our family is actually quite small—the nuclear family is what is most important to us. We hardly keep in touch with extended relatives. Dinnertime is also very important. It's the one time in the day when everyone gathers around for a single, common experience. In the middle of our last meal as a family on the patio sometime in June 2004, my father rose up from the table and started across the porch and inside the house. I looked around the dinner table to see everyone's reactions: my mom's, my sisters', my half-brother, my half-sister and her husband. "Ba đang bị đau đó," said my mother. "He's hurting." My mother got up from the table to see what was wrong, to see if what my father was feeling confirmed her speculation. And it did. Wearing gray sweatpants and a white t-shirt, my father slipped into his shoes and got into the passenger seat of our Honda Accord. My mom drove him to the hospital where he was admitted that evening.

I don't know what the doctors said. I don't know why he went to the hospital that night. I do remember a sense of relief when he was released about a week later. But he didn't come home to his bed. He had another bed waiting for him, a home hospital bed from a medical equipment company. For the next couple of weeks he was confined to that bed, which was set up on the first floor in the family room. He only left to use the bathroom. Sometimes he would pick up his guitar to play a few tunes. There is a picture of him on this bed in his hospital gown, much skinnier than before he had gone to the hospital in June, sitting up and smiling down at his guitar as he holds it to play.

My father would have to go to the hospital to get periodic check-ups. One time he went in for what we thought was another check-up, and that was the last time he ever saw his home.

That year I developed a fear of ringing telephones. I was so terrified because as long as my father was in the hospital and I was at home, a ringing telephone would bring news and updates on my father. On that Tuesday night my two younger sisters, Roselie and Lily, and I were in the kitchen when the home telephone rang. Lily picked it up. It was my half-sister on the other line. I opened the refrigerator door and stared into it, not looking for anything in particular, trying to act indifferently but still pay full attention to the phone call at the same time.

"Who was that?" I asked, closing the refrigerator and turning around.

"Chi Bi. She said that Dad died," said Lily, still holding the phone in the air. Her eyebrows got closer together and she said those words, confused.

I walked towards Lily, past the peninsula in the kitchen. Half of me believed the words that I had just heard. The other half wished so hard that those words weren't true. I didn't think about it. I didn't want to think about it until I had to. I didn't know for sure whether those words were true, and so I didn't let myself think such thoughts. I then made my way up the short flight of steps to my bedroom to grab a jacket. Chi Bi's husband, Binh, was on his way to come pick the three of us up. I don't remember much until we reached the hospital, but I do recall that when we were in the car, Binh told my sisters and me to be calm. We didn't say anything, partly because we didn't care much for what he told us, and partly because all I was thinking about was how good it would feel if my half-sister had lied—if my father really hadn't died after all.

I remember looking at my father lying in the hospital bed. I remember asking myself where all these people in the room with my family and me came from, and why they were nudging me to go up to see my father. I don't remember crying. The death certificate notes the date of death as July 21, 2004. When I looked at the clock it was before midnight on July 20, 2004. At the hospital, as much as I denied that my father had died, and as much as I had hoped that he would suddenly bolt up from the hospital bed, I knew he was gone.

7.

It happens each time, right at the same point, and we've all learned to expect it. I am in the driver's seat, my mom is in the passenger seat, and my two younger sisters are in the back seat. We approach the freeway exit and no one says a word. No one ever does. Up until the freeway exit we talk as usual. But when we turn off the I-880 we can no longer avoid the fact that we are visiting Dad—my dad, my sisters' dad, my mom's husband—the person we've come to stop talking about.

I know these silences all too well. The closer we get to him, the quieter we become.

It is a typical December day in Fremont, California. The overcast sky enshrouds the sun, making the visit seem gloomy already, even though we haven't reached my father yet. I'm trying my hardest to remember a time in which the visits aren't gloomy, and I just can't. The mood

today is especially glum—it is the last time we’ll see him this year. The next time will be in a couple of months from now, in the New Year. A new year to greet new moods. But I know all too well that a new year won’t change anything.

As I turn into Cedar Lawn Memorial Cemetery, my mom lets out a sigh and shakes her head as she lays her eyes on the many headstones and grave markers. Each time she does that I want to grab her by her shoulders and shake her and tell her that it’s not helping. Instead, as I always do, I remain silent and focus on the 5 miles an hour sign ahead. Cars are parked sporadically here and there. On this, road if two cars are parked on either side, there’s only enough room for one car to pass in between. But there are no burials today, and thus not many cars, giving my car much more freedom as I round the corner.

My sisters in the backseat, both of whom still haven’t said a word, continue to look out their tinted windows. On the straightaway is when I see some life in the car. Heading northwest, we all look to our right, all for the same reason: to see if anyone had come to visit and left Dad something.

It has only happened twice. The first time my half-sister and her husband had come and left flowers. I know this because the couple was still there when we arrived. Out of politeness my mom made small conversation. I ignored them and made sure that when they left, our flowers would be bigger, prettier, livelier. The second time, someone had left a cup of coffee on the grave marker. That was almost six years ago.

On this day there is nothing. Just as we expected. But every time we get on the straightaway our heads turn out of curiosity to see if anyone else cared, and out of hopefulness that someone remembers.

This is the routine. I shift the gear to “park” and my mom frees herself from the seat belt, leaving her purse and jacket and anything else she brought along in the car. She’s always the first to get out. As she heads toward my dad, my sisters and I grab my mom’s things, the food, the lighter, the incense, and the flowers. We, too, leave the car and head out.

There are a few things that need to be taken care of before we arrange the flowers: First things first, check to see if the grave marker is dirty. If it is, clean it using the water from a water pipe nearby. Second, clean the bronze flower vase connected to the slab of concrete just below the marker. Third, place the food offerings around the marker. If there is fruit, arrange it nicely on a plate. Whenever possible we always try to create a pyramid with a square base. For snacks, open the boxes and/or bags. For drinks, open the lid.

The flowers need to be perfect. They need to be beautiful, colorful, and have a lifespan of more than a few days. Rosalie, the older of my two sisters, makes a habit of taking a picture of the flowers each time we replace them. My mom insists on carnations because they last a long time. They’re also her favorite. I never knew what my dad’s favorite flowers were.

Windy days at the cemetery are the worst. Things don’t stay in place, and the incense doesn’t stay lit. The incense gives off a sense of warmth, which is why I love it.

As the incense continues to burn, my mom, sitting in the fetal position, with her head resting on her knees, rubs the grass below the marker with her hands. The grass that she rubs is the same piece of grass that was used to cover up the once-open dirt, the dirt that was used to bury the casket, the casket that was used to enclose the body of a beloved husband and father. Her gold-colored bracelets jingle as she moves her hands back and forth—a nice break from the silence. Though strange, seeing her rub the grass comforts me.

After everything is set in place, we admire the food offerings and incense that surround the rectangular piece of gray granite, which is another work of art in itself. On the left side is a

fountain around which two birds fly. My two younger sisters and I selected the grave marker. My mom chose what it should read:

David Van Tran
February 12, 1947
July 20, 2004

Vợ và các con sẽ mãi mãi thương nhớ anh

Each time I read the marker it seems as if what it reads becomes truer. “Wife and kids will forever love you.” For a while I refused to believe what I read, because acknowledging it would mean I was accepting a loss. So for the longest time I convinced myself that what I read was ephemeral, until I found myself crying one morning as I woke up from a dream in which my dad met me in the school parking lot after school. I didn’t know which was worse: knowing that he wouldn’t be there to meet me, or finally accepting the loss.

As the incense finishes burning, my mom stands up and puts her palms together, bowing three times toward the grave marker. “Xin ba đi về, con,” she says. Instructing my sisters and I to “Ask Dad for his permission to go home,” the three of us stand up and do the same. Just as my mom is the first to leave the car when we arrive, she is the last to leave here. My sisters and I watch her from the car. She stands there with her head down, looking at the grave marker, letting out who knows how many sighs of grief.

It happens each time that at this point we’ve all learned to expect it. I am in the driver’s seat, my mom in the passenger seat, and my two younger sisters in the back seat. No one says a word as we drive away. Except for my mom, the only one who looks back to the site. “Bye, anh,” she says.

8.

I last visited my father three months ago, in December 2009. Earlier that year, on March 2, 2009, the U.S. Supreme Court denied the writ of certiorari filed by lawyers of VAVA. Last year, the Supreme Court also denied the writ of certiorari filed on behalf of U.S. Veterans against the chemical companies, bringing both cases to an official end.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s rejection of the appeal puts a halt, and possibly an end, to nearly five years of the Vietnamese victims’ fight to obtain reparations for and recognition of the problem of Agent Orange that still persists nearly forty years after its introduction.

What hasn’t ended are the deep-rooted tensions surrounding this topic and the Vietnamese victims’ belief that the U.S. has the humanity to support the countless number of victims in Vietnam. The fight continues for nonprofit organizations like VAVA and the War Legacies Project, both of which include in their mission statements the absolute need to make Agent Orange a mainstream subject and no longer a slowly forgotten memory. There is one thing missing in all of this. It’s a sense of urgency. While non-government funded research continues, countless victims are dying.

And it really is countless. An estimated three million victims remain in Vietnam, but no one knows the exact number. No one will know for certain if those who have illnesses on the presumptive-eligibility list are actually victims of Agent Orange. What is certain is the neglect from the U.S. of the Vietnamese who were exposed to this herbicide. As for my father, I’ll never know if Agent Orange caused his death. As I sit and write this, I am filled with an overwhelming

feeling of helplessness. The most I can do now is remember, look back, miss, and reflect. The answers may come later—for now, my father joins the Vietnam War veterans and civilians in a spectrum of uncertainty: a kind of lonely miracle.



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