

One of my first memories is of a small tan-colored room, walls lined with empty pots and opened letters strewn all over the ground. A timid ray of light dared to shine through the broken shutters, illuminating the abject destitution of my surroundings. I recall my grandmother gently picking me up off the ground, admonishing me for straying from her sight. Most of all, I remember waiting expectantly every night, propped up on a chair and peering out the window. My parents always returned together after sunset in an old, beat-up sedan, visibly exhausted from their jobs but still smiling as they came through the door and greeted me with a hug.

For my parents, who spent their childhoods as unwanted expatriates in impoverished Vietnamese villages, driven from one home to another by devastating war and poverty, their new lives in America were paradise. Although they worried about being able to feed a hungry family of five, they no longer lived in constant fear of military invasion or in total starvation, with famine and death circling over them like ravenous vultures stalking dying prey. My father had no choice but to enter the workforce earlier instead of completing his college degree. There he toiled for hours on end to fund a gradually improving lifestyle, while my mother gave up her lifelong passion in linguistics to study a more profitable subject. Though I missed them greatly each day, it must have been far more painful for them to leave me behind every morning. They were always out the door before sunrise and never back before sunset—but no matter how busy they were, they always found time in the evenings to sit me on my mother's lap and read me to sleep. Slowly, my parents worked their way up from almost nothing to admirable success and wealth; from a cramped apartment to a two-story house, from scrambled eggs on rice every day to three-course dinners and the occasional restaurant outing.

The decent life I live now is luxurious in comparison to my austere upbringing, and even more so to my parents' penniless childhoods. Although my parents possess nothing more than a modest college education, their continued and dedicated effort in this land of opportunity has provided me with comfort and freedom, free of the worries and burdens of poverty and want. Even now, I scarcely see my parents much more than I did a decade ago. Layoff after layoff, despite my constant objections, they work long hours so I can focus on my passions instead of taking on a job. My father trudges into the living room every night, completely exhausted and half-asleep, yet he never fails to ask, "Andrew, what piece have you been working on today? Keep practicing, I know you'll master it eventually!" I cannot help but smile as he inevitably dozes off to the melody of my music.

Whenever I come upon hard times in my life, I have looked back at my past for motivation. My parents bade farewell to the shores of Vietnam in pursuit of a hazy vision—an ethereal hope—the American Dream which so many take for granted. Since then, they have never returned to the land of their past, always plowing forward onto new ground with awe-inspiring strength of will. I, too, will chase after the dream I have inherited: a grand vision of each generation working for the betterment of the next, opening doors and providing opportunities. Seeing the calmness and tenacity with which my parents have handled the challenges of life has given me the both the determination and the independence to handle my own roadblocks. For me, there can be no sonata too complex—no class too difficult—no job too demanding.

Step by measured step, I drive onwards to college and beyond, surpassing my parents' greatest dreams with great potential fueled by the fierce spirit I have inherited twice over. My parents arrived in America with nothing but dirty backpacks, a family to feed, and limitless ambition. When they leave this world, it will be with the knowledge that their sacrifices have not been for naught.