

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

■ Polo



Island rules

An Old World compass on our chaotic new continent

Why old ways and old guys matter so much

Second of two parts

Last issue I talked story about our island elder aunts telling and telling us, since the time of early Homo erectus (Java Man), to be kind to strangers. Last issue also, I recalled Ma Nghia (Chinese-Vietnamese man) suddenly appearing soaked and chilled at my desk while I was daydreaming about a lovely lady in her office window across rainy S.W. Stark Street.

I met Ma Nghia exactly 30 years earlier. He coincidentally (or not) carries the same ancestral family name as that Chinese mariner also appearing in last issue's column — the Muslim Han admiral whose grand fleets left Chinese veggies and medicinal herbs, white porcelain and stubborn genes, ev-ver-rywhere. All that, mind you, about a century before Columbus sailed the ocean blue — as the saying goes.

It was February 1986 when Nghia brought his heartbreak to our Saturday law office — back table of Phan Pham's little Eiffel Tower café. In grim East Salem. Me and my crazy Samoan cuz David were discussing a case, while our kids were working felt pens one table over. Mr. Phan's crazy Dalat coffee was coursing our veins. His savory French pastries were fulfilling my fondest dreams. I threw down three.

We introduced ourselves. He tenderly took a picture of his pretty girl and his very-very ill son out of his worn wallet. They were the same age as our Caricia and Aden. When he looked up from that photo, a river of tears and snot was streaming around his mouth, then over his chin. He was desperately wiping with both backhands. He was struggling for control. He got it. He lost it. He got it. He lost it. He firmly grabbed it back with two determined breaths.

When I put my hand on Nghia's shuddering shoulder — aduh'illaah (OMG), the man really-really lost it.

A quick explanatory note: I'm an Indo-Catalan mix. That first, more thoughtful, part of me cannot control this other, more immediate, part. Because of this, because of my Latin impulse to comfort this hurting brother, Nghia tumbled into wave after sobbing wave of sorrow. There was no way to slow them or stop him. So David and I retreated into our flakey pâté chaud and scalding rocket-fuel coffee. Our kids, used to our kind of work, went back to their coloring.

Here's why he cried: Nghia's second grade boy was growing an ugly brain tumor. Generous Oregon Health & Science U docs were doing their best, but Nghia's debt was already deeper than those dark seas discussed last issue. And many more critical medical services ordinarily provided by the Social Security Administration, were also denied to this ill boy. Our federal government had deemed Nghia's refugee family owned too many assets for the kid to receive public (free) benefits.

Here's how that happened: Two years earlier, Nghia's family and about 80,000 others shoved out into the dark South China Sea. They slipped out at night, in unlit fishing sampans. Parents drugged their babies and toddlers to prevent their cries from alerting Communist Viet Nam's soldiers and sailors.

Like two centuries of New Americans before them, though Nghia's family landed

here with little cash, they arrived with boatloads of cultural and spiritual capital. And like every dignified immigrant dad, Nghia immediately inventoried his elders' and ancestors' assets, and got to work. He connected with his overseas Chinese business association, and borrowed enough bucks to buy Woodburn's abandoned Greyhound bus station café.

Ma Nghia did what 20 centuries of Mother China's streams of merchants — dealing in pots and pans, pens and papers, fast-fried chow mein and steaming green tea — have always done out of small shops on every street corner of our pretty little planet: He secured a traditional Chinese business loan and he got to work. From that his wife paid rent, bought groceries, dressed their kids real well for school, and made payments on their debt.

The problem for Nghia's critically ill boy was that Anglo-America statutory law did not recognize Chinese customary law. Nghia's solemn promise to his stern creditors, our government declared *not* a legal debt. Meaning, that his secondhand stove and exhaust, those platters, pans, plates, and tableware, were evaluated as if Nghia *owned* them. Meaning, he had too many assets for his sick son to be eligible for Social Security medical benefits.

Nghia's case was one, among a hundred bad intersections between many of Oregon's ethnic streams and our unkind mainstream, that our community law firm worked year in year out. It was one more instance of mainstream American institutions failing to value ethnic-minority America's tried and true systems of social and economic organization.

Not an enforceable contract, the feds declared. "Oh really?" every Chinese business owner in each vigorous little shop of every sleepy village and robust city on every continent, could be heard exclaiming. In chorus. Because it couldn't be more untrue. Not among traditional people. Every borrower's "face," and his family's "place" in good society, binds Chinese businessmen and businesswomen to their word. Punto (period). It's always been so. Ask anyone. Dude.

Repaying is *not* optional. Sure, if things go busuk, you can ask a U.S. federal bankruptcy court to get your Chinese creditor off your back. But there's nothing a judge, a Vatican pope, or a U.S. president can then do to restore your or your parents' or your children's honor. Or to reconstruct trust in your family. You're done.

It took six years to win Nghia's son's case. It took a Malaysian physician and a Chinese Portlander, a Republic of South Viet Nam Air Force commander and a Lao community auntie, a mixed Samoan/Chinese/Hawaiian/Missouri Band of the Choctow Indian Nation legal researcher and an Indo rice sparrow. It took us arguing against floor after tidy floor of Men's Wearhouse U.S. attorneys and their well-salaried and abundant staffs, until ultimately a judge justly reinterpreted that staid 2,000-year-old business convention — and declared legal Nghia's debt. His boy got Social Security.

Three decades passed between all that and right now. When Ma Nghia and all those memories snuck up behind me, I did what every worn time traveller asks another. I offered him to silah'kan duduk. To please sit. Because he looked dog tired. "Thank you, Mr. Polo," he said. "But I

cannot sit with you." He pointed his gray stubbly chin outside. Out to a blue Union Cab below, parked five floors below my white-blouse neighbor's warm window.

Nghia told me he'd opened an Asian supermercado in South Central L.A.; angry men torched it after the Rodney King beating; but he'd built it up again. I told him that David and I had expanded our practice into a political extraction business; built up a billion frequent-flyer miles; but lost it all when communism crumbled and United Airlines collapsed. And then there was that big love I made, the one gone so wrong. Which brought me to today, a natty government guy.

He smiled. I smiled. At our memories. Out my window.

"I fly Viet Nam, tonight," he said. "My father passing away —" He paused. He and me paused. We examined then examined some more the unremarkable Monsanto carpeting between his black loafers and mine. His eyes moved up, onto my desktop, into a picture of my father and me, my kids and grandkids. Smiling and all. All that exile and building, all our losing and rebuilding, mattering less than us near each other. Smiling.

Aduh'illaah, I thought he was burst-blubbing, again. Like 30 years ago. But he didn't. He reached around and took out his wallet — my heart skipped a beat, thinking he was going to deal me some Ben Franklin bills. Instead, Nghia handed me a photo of his handsome son with his kind wife, arms around their two bright and beautiful babies — Nghia's granddaughters, same ages and attitudes as mine. Then he said, "If you let me Mr. Polo, I must offer you something small, please."

Then before my heart could resume a regular rhythm, he undid two coat buttons and pulled out a manila envelope. A thick one. Thick and heavy as a Gabriel García Márquez novel.

He held it between him and me, in two hands. A humbled gesture no one, nowhere — not since Java Man sauntered about, looking for little munchables, skinny mice, fat tilapia, and the like — can turn away from. Tidak dudes. Not ever.

I took it with two hands, I touched it to my hot forehead then to my thumping heart. I stuffed it into my triple-pleat khakis (Bi-Mart, \$12.99 with coupon). I took a quick scan left-right for my nose office buds, I took another quickie left-right for our blinking office cams. I took a long-long look at that pretty lady across busy Stark Street and bluesy Oregon rain.

Aduh'illaah! I mean: I'm no longer a community mechanic like back then, back when his boy was sick, back when crazy commies were shoving our families out to sea, and America was adding hurt to a world of hurt. Now I'm a gov guapo. I do da public's business during City Hall hours on regulation gray wall-to-wall rugging.

I live the daily dread of official discipline — smackdowns of a much smaller scale than denying medical coverage to your cancerous kid — but it's still the same humming fear of white folks' awful ability to pull that proverbial rug out from under any of us. The one pulled out after 300 years of European colonial rule on our precious Indonesian archipelago, and in Nghia's homeland; the one carpeting this continent, the one at constant risk of getting yanked out from under Nghia's livelihood and mine, all the same.

Today, me plus almost a third of Portlanders live this status quo, the one built upon awfully asymmetrical power relationships between our muscular mainstream and our many energetic ethnic streams. It's an uneasy stasis. One we might easily make more civil and more sustainable by applying that old-old rule our abuelas told and told us. The one that started this story. *Be kind to everyone you meet on the street. Es-spec-ially strangers in rags.*

Instead of humiliating my brother Ma Nghia, a refugee dad of a terribly ill boy,

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imagine all that institutional might moving in the same direction as our elder aunts, as our overseas Chinese, as our jihadi crew of New Americans working the back table of Mr. Phan's heavenly Eiffel Tower café. Imagine us that way, thick envelopes of grace and gratitude in our hands, near our hearts. Stuffed in our pants, too.

Imagine a place and time thus shared by Americans new and settled. OMG, the love and time and money not squandered. Imagine our peace.

Editor's note: If you missed part one of "Island rules," visit <www.asianreporter.com/columns-Polo.htm>.

The Asian Reporter's Expanding America Lexicon

Abuela (Spanish, Indo patois, Pilipino patois): Grandma. Affectionate address for an elder who may or may not actually be your grandma.

Aduh'illaah (Indo patois from Koranic Arabic): Oh my God.

February and father passing: Reference to Lunar New Year. A most holy day for traditional Chinese, and neighboring national populations recipient of Mother China's enormous cultural largesse, a week of making right past mistakes and past obligations. Especially, when also taking into account a passing parent's karma, i.e. the spiritual debts intrinsically tied to that elder's descendants.

Café back-table crew: Our deepest affection and respect for making this case into case law goes to OHSU's Dr. Paul Leung; PSU professor Phyllis S. Lee; RSVN Air Force Col. (Ret.) Nguyen Quoc Hung; Chanhong Sikhamsouk; NWCC researcher David Tagalao Ah Soon.

Catalan: A nationality, ethnic population, and language group of northern Spain, southern France, northern Italia. Our father's father.

Dalat: A cozy city in Viet Nam's highlands. Historically, a cool retreat for southern royalty from the heat of southern cities. Recently, a region of revived coffee plantations dating back to French colonial rule. Then and now, a great cash crop.

Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014): Colombian writer. 1982 Nobel Prize winner. Popularly attributed as originator of Latin-American Magical Realism. Generally awed as the grandpa of the grandest run-on sentences, ever. Entire pages without periods. Marvellous.

Guapo (Spanish, Pilipino, Indo and Hawai'i patois): Good-looking guy. In this instance, a guy attractive because of his stable government paycheck, insurance, pension.

Jihadi (Arabic): As used here, a true believer, an actor singularly guided by his or her faith.

Pâté chaud (French): A hot flakey pastry with savory meat inside. One of those great gifts left behind after French imperialism was shoved out.

Political extraction business: The urgent need and mad market for getting vulnerable voices out from under awful political regimes. The business: bribing politicians, policemen, prison officials (the 3 Ps) into giving a loved one back to sorrowing families and communities. Reference here is to U.S.-made disasters when nation-building in faraway places collapses, when the 4 Ps (poets, priests, professors, politicians) get tortured and killed, turned into forced labor, or sold back to loved ones.

Tilapia (origin not clear or important): A freshwater fish grown everywhere with minimal care. Great source of protein and calcium. Great flash-fried with just fresh garlic and Walla Walla onions.

Union Cab: City of Portland licensee, owned by refugees from the collapsed Ethiopian Kingdom. Like other taxis run by refugees from the disintegrated Soviet Union or Somalia, these hard-long-working men without the workplace skills necessary for hip urban Portland, need this kind of dignified business to earn honest incomes. Gracias mil to Mr. Musse Olol and to Mme. Judith Mowry for advocating for these drivers and their familias.