

Bruce Guernsey

Doublemint

It cleans your teeth and breath," Gene Autrey used to tell us just after he'd emptied his six-shooter into some scruffy bad guy those Sundays nights I was allowed to stay up to watch my favorite cowboy show. Gene's dental advice had little effect on my mother, however. "No," was all she had to say, which meant in no uncertain terms, no gum for me, despite my pleading at the grocery store.

The memory of tugging at my mother's sleeve came forcefully back to me last year on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City when a rag doll of a child, this unwashed little girl, kept tugging at my shirt with her dirty hand, a green pack of clean-Gene's version of toothpaste in the other. "Don't buy it," John said. "If you do, she's yours for life." Little did I know at the time how true those words would be.

John is John Balaban, a good friend now, but then my experienced guide around the city where I'd arrived as a faculty member with Semester-at-Sea, the unique program of worldwide travel and shipboard study sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh. Viet Nam was our fourth port of call and Balaban had joined us in Hong Kong, our previous landing, as an interport lecturer. This was one of his many visits to the country. A specialist in Vietnamese culture, he'd been a conscientious objector during the war, courageously helping to find medical care for napalmed children.

"No," I told her, taking his advice and echoing my mother, but this kid with the smudged face was more daring and persistent than I was at her age. I kept thinking that had she a mother like mine to swat her bottom, she wouldn't keep after me this way, buzzing about like a fly. "Mister, mister," I heard wherever I turned, but I didn't give in.

That night, back in the safety of our ship, the SS Universe Explorer—nicknamed “The Great White Mother”—I heard similar tales from my colleagues about street children like “Double,” as I had come to call my tenacious shadow by the end of the day. Over drinks and dinner, Balaban explained to us that these kids had no certain set of parents and were essentially homeless. “They do look out for one another,” he went on to say, “a kind of extended family,” but he warned that we’d continue something that had gone on since the war by buying the candy and gum they had to sell.

Later, in the snug of my cabin, I was struck by the pathos of a child trying to market the very sweets most kids beg for as I had. Thank goodness she vanished, I thought, but falling asleep, I saw her again, her thin, oversized dress slipping into the crowd outside the fence at the dock. Giving in to my guilt would be good for *me*, not her, I kept saying to myself like a bedtime prayer. Balaban is right and so was my old lady. And what would the equivalent of twenty-five cents really mean out there anyway? Yes, it’s a good thing she’s gone, but where I wondered, where?

I didn’t sleep well that night. Dreams are the soul’s home movies, someone once said, and somehow home and TV and images of the “American” war, as the Vietnamese call it, all got confused in my head. The next morning, at the old American Embassy where I’d gone with Balaban to take some pictures, was I sleeping or awake? Everywhere litter was blowing about, bits of paper and shredded strips of palm leaves from the whirring blades overhead, the chopper lifting, desperate hands reaching, trying to grab on, then falling back to ground, wailing faces wedged in the bars of the locked iron gate.

I stood now at that very place and it all came back to me, the last days of the war, the horror of that evacuation I watched with my fellow Americans in our living rooms as our country abandoned the many thousands of South Vietnamese who would surely die. The Embassy was sealed off still but hardly regal now, overgrown and falling in. “Mister, mister,” I heard in my waking dream, and even John was amazed. How she found us I have no idea any more than I could explain how a lost dog finds its way home. Was she even the same child, I wondered, because today her hair was combed and her hands washed as if she were meeting someone special. She wore the same long dress, however, a gossamer hand-me-down from who-knows-whom that made her look even smaller and

younger than the eight or nine she probably was—that made her look almost transparent, more wraith than flesh. But in her fist there was the pack of Doublemint. She was back, and she was real.

By the end of the day, I finally gave in. Balaban, my version of Virgil, had gone into a shop and the little girl and I were alone. “Listen,” I said to her as if she could understand, “if I buy some gum will you go away?” Resisting her salesmanship hadn’t worked, so I thought I’d try the other, though something inside of me kept saying, no, no. But what was this voice saying “no” to, I wondered—to buying the gum or having her leave? “No, no, please don’t, don’t go,” yet who was saying this, her or me?

I offered John a stick of gum when he came out. I thought he’d be miffed, especially when I told him about the extra quarter I’d given her for a tip, but he, too, seemed to admire her incredible persistence and maybe even missed having her around the way I did on our way back to the ship. While watching for pickpockets and dodging motor scooters, I couldn’t help but search the twilight for my small friend, but like any shadow at dusk, she was nowhere to be seen. Was she only after my money, little as I gave her? I was strangely sad, felt somehow abandoned, and spent the evening with my children who were students on board.

They were wisely not taking any of my courses, but I wanted them to know about a Vietnamese story I’d just taught called “The Key” by Vo Phien. It deals with a family’s having to leave behind a very old and feeble grandfather during the hurried evacuation. In that frenzy the narrator forgot to leave a key for the old man who is his father, to open a trunk where his valuables are stored. Having made it safely to America with wife and children, the narrator wears the key around his neck like a cross. No matter where he goes, even in the refugee shower where he tells his tale like a penance, he wears that key, opening his heart to all who will listen.

The Vietnamese have a deep tradition of ancestor worship. Despite how he cleaned himself in that hot, steamy water, the voice in Vo Phien’s touching story can never wash away his memories. I couldn’t get “Double” out of my mind either, and vowed the next day, after I visited the market, to find her. I’ll buy every pack of gum that kid has, by God. Every stick of the stuff.

I happen to love markets and go to them each time I visit a new country. Some people claim that to know a culture, study their burial rights. I say instead, go to where they live, to the place they buy their food: to where the colors delight and the smells arouse, or don’t. Then you’ll

discover through your senses who these people are. My visit to this particular one made me realize even more how little we knew, and know, about the Vietnamese.

Arranged with the wonder of a child's eye, the central market place in Ho Chi Minh City is a coloring book of lively lemons and purple dragon fruit piled high against an orange sky, a dazzle of line and light. Wandering the web of aisles, it didn't take long for me to lose myself in vast deserts of rice tinged nut-brown to angel-white in dunes the size of pyramids. The aquarium I kept as a kid never swam with the motion of the fish in the chilly stalls I came upon, silver-pink and mooney-gold on beds of ice where tiger prawns the length of lobsters still crawled a coral reef.

I think I bought one of each, of the fruit at least. Stepping out into the hoots and horns of the city reminded me of leaving the shelter of the Saturday matinee, still dreamy, still riding with my heroes like Gene Autrey in the latest western and rubbing my eyes at the light. The traffic soon brought me back to my mission, and I hired a cyclo to take me around town. A shadow needs to eat, I said to myself. Good thing you bought all that fruit. It's bound to spoil, so you'd better find her.

A cyclo ride is exciting. The driver, the Vietnamese version of a gondolier, sits behind and slightly above his passenger, peddling deftly around the city's many flowered circles. A scary but aesthetic experience as carts and wagons, trucks and cars, merge with the flashing spokes of spinning wheels, meshing together in a myriad of colors. It's like being in a kaleidoscope.

Bags of fruit for company, I rode my hired tricycle wherever I pointed, much to the confusion of the driver in his cone-shaped straw hat. "Where go?" he wanted to know, but I had no answer, other than to wave my hand like a wand, hoping my missing friend would magically appear. "There was a girl," I finally tried to explain, almost an hour later, and he nodded his head. "Girl," he understood, and we took a right down a side street I'd not yet seen, to a bar where the hanging beads for a door swayed softly, seductively.

Sorrow came upon me in a rush. This, of course, is where she might someday be but not with gum to clean your teeth and breath. At that moment there was nothing more I wanted in the world than "clean," nothing more than to be a kid again, riding his trike down the block, but even the fruit beside me seemed to leer up luridly. "The zoo," I blurted out, "take me to the zoo." That's where kids go, and opening my map, I found the city gardens.

I paid him well, my driver, who departed shaking his head, confused by my lack of direction, baffled perhaps by my manhood. “Girls” were undoubtedly one of his typical fares, but what could he think of some lost guy interested in monkeys and elephants? And a humble zoo it was besides. I bought some peanuts to feed the sad-faced pachyderm that came snuffling toward me, its face full of flies. A group of small children all in school uniform came by but “Double,” of course, was not among them.

Some older girls, too, in their late teens, wearing the emblems of their status: traditional white blouses, silky-long over their flowing pants, so beautiful. How ironic, I thought—no, how sad—that the same word in Vietnamese for “America” is this very one, “beautiful.” I almost tried to say it—“mehi,” or something like that, as I’d learned from John Balaban—so lovely were these young women before me, in procession like they were going to communion, but the chattering of monkeys woke me from my wanderings, and I made my empty way back to the “Great White Mother,” needing the warmth of her sheltering arms but realizing at the same time how privileged we all were in her protectiveness. The ship was always there to welcome us back, to feed and tuck us in, her motion a cradle, forever rocking. And where does Doublemint sleep, I wondered.

We set sail the next morning early, long before anybody might be at the gate to wave good-bye. I waved back anyway, climbing to the top deck at sunrise, a symbolic gesture to a country I’d first known as a time, not a place; not a country at all, in fact, but a war I’d done my best to stay out of. White and well educated, I had learned how to use the deferment system. I was lucky in the draft lottery, too, where to come in last was to win. But having now finally been to this haunted land, it was time to rethink what was lost or won. “If you do, she’s yours for life.” Balaban’s words still echo. How did he know? Could it be that he, too, walked hand-in-hand with the same little girl? Is that why he keeps returning? Is this what he meant?

Fortunately, busy work with classes kept me busy. For a while, at least. My shadow still hid in the dark and tugged at my sleeve again a few days later out at sea. Some students I hadn’t thought much of, the giggly and studly types, told in our daily “core” class of something they’d done in Vietnam. We were all required to attend these general meetings which were often a drag, but not this one.

“She was like such a mess, this little girl. I mean, she was like, you know, dirty.” I was stunned at what I was hearing. So that’s where she was, my Doublemint! These students, as they went on to tell us, had taken her out to buy some clothes. Amazing! Out of all those thousands of children on the streets, they’d dressed *her* up that last day. I felt relieved. No wonder we couldn’t find each other: she was with them, being cared for, I at that moment believed.

And part of me still does. After all, as I was warned, she’s mine for life, just like the country she’d come to mean.

Bruce Guernsey is Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University. His poetry and prose have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *The American Scholar*, *Country Journal*, *Fly Rod & Reel*, and many of the quarterlies. In 1998 he was a Writer-in-Residence at Hawthornden Castle in Scotland, an international retreat for writers.