

*Ivan Prashker*

## Van

I served in the Army from 1958 through 1960—two years that, like a lucky pair of dice, fell between the Korean and Vietnam wars. Fate, history, whatever had conspired so that between the time I was drafted and the time I was discharged, America remained at peace. Although, just as I was concluding basic training at Fort Dix, some trouble did occur in Lebanon, and a rumor circulated that if President Eisenhower decided to send troops there, we'd be among the first to go. But the crisis passed, and I was assigned, instead, to Headquarters Company, 1st Radio, Broadcasting, and Leaflet Battalion, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It was a psy war unit, though our barracks were situated next to Special Forces', which even then was considered among the Army's elite fighting contingents.

I put my time in the military, coping with its pervasive boredom and chickenshit rules. Weekends, when I had enough money, I'd rent a hotel room Saturday afternoon in Fayetteville, the town about fifteen miles from Bragg, and spent most of the Saturday and Sunday there. Trying to unwind, I'd listen to the New York Philharmonic for two hours and fall asleep reading a book. I had my own john. Blessed privacy made Saturday and Sunday in Fayetteville the high spot of the week.

The town had recently built a new library of terra-cotta bricks and long, sun-splashed windows. There was a nearby copse of trees and a small stream. The side street where the library was located struck me as a kind of oasis among the neighboring bars, pizza joints, and movie houses strung like glaring bulbs along the town's main drag.

It was in the library one Saturday afternoon during the spring of 1959 that I first noticed Van. Actually, his name was Duong Van Thi, although once we became friends he asked me to call him "Van." He was a Viet-

namese officer. Those years, a number of foreign officers were being sent to the Special Warfare Center School at Bragg. Among other things, they were taught the latest in counterinsurgency and the finer points of survival training.

Van was twenty-five then, a couple of years older than me, a slender man, about five-five. He was fascinated by our Civil War and read Bruce Catton, Douglas Southall Freeman, and just about anyone else who wrote about Jackson, Lee, Stuart, and Longstreet. The subject of good and honorable men fighting for a less than good and honorable cause obsessed him.

Waiting for the elevator to my hotel room later that afternoon, I saw Van coming out of the hotel's coffee shop. He was carrying a couple of library books. So was I. He nodded to me, and I nodded back. He'd probably noticed me in the library. Neither of us was wearing a uniform, and I didn't really know then if he was stationed at Bragg, whether he was an officer, or what country he came from. We were simply two guys in a dinky Army town who'd sought out Fayetteville's library and only decent hotel, the Prince Charles.

I ran into Van the following Monday, on my way down to the personnel section where I worked as a clerk. He was in uniform this time, a captain, and heading over to a nearby Special Warfare classroom. Recognizing me, he not only returned my salute but again offered that friendly nod we'd shared in the hotel lobby two days before.

The following Saturday, we got to talking. I was in the Fayetteville library, browsing near the shelves where they kept their most recent acquisitions when Van came over, said hello, and asked if I'd like to have a drink or some coffee with him. He spoke English surprisingly well.

Officers, foreign or otherwise, weren't in the habit of befriending lowly PFCs those days. "You're the first guy I've noticed from Bragg who not only likes to read but enjoys the privacy of a hotel room weekends," he explained. "I'm the same."

A kindred soul in the middle of nowhere? Maybe, and because I had another year to go at Bragg, I said, "I duck the bars in town because there are always fights. But coffee sounds fine."

He extended his hand. "Duong Van Thi, only call me 'Van,' it'll simplify things."

"Goren," I said, "Michael Goren," and we shook hands.

We went to the coffee shop in the Prince Charles. No one wore uniforms there, nor were any drunks from the 82nd Airborne looking to prove they were the toughest cowboys this side of the Iron Curtain.

Van said he'd attended and graduated from The Citadel, a military school down in South Carolina, which explained why he spoke English so well. His father was a general back in Saigon.

I asked if he missed being away from home.

Van smiled indulgently. "You know anything about Vietnam, Michael?"

Christ, I didn't even know then it was south of China, let alone that it bordered Laos and Cambodia. "No, I'm sorry to say I know nothing of your country."

"The honcho running it, Diem, is a mandarin and patronizing, and his family is corrupt and greedy. I miss my wife like crazy, but the country not at all. In fact, I wish I could make a life for myself in the States, but that's impossible."

I told him, half-kiddingly, that in America *anything* was possible.

"How can I turn my back on my father?" Van asked painfully. "Also my mother's buried there, and my wife's family lives in Saigon. You know, your General Lee was an upright man: he didn't believe in secession as a constitutional right, he wanted to abolish slavery, and he didn't even think the South would win without foreign intervention. But when he finally had to decide, he chose the state of Virginia, his forebears, his ancestry." It was a subject Van often returned to during the year he and I became close friends.

When he asked what I planned doing after I got out of the Army, I told him I'd probably wind up going to law school.

"Well, those guys are supposed to make big bucks, only what's the famous line—'Let's hang the lawyers first?'" Van laughed good-naturedly.

I must have looked slightly pissed off, however, because he quickly added, "Only kidding, Michael, only kidding. I mean, I didn't write it. Blame Shakespeare."

I always remember the Sunday evening bus ride from Fayetteville back to Bragg as among the most forlorn of my life. It would take about an hour. You'd sit in a darkened, packed bus bouncing along, and once you reached the post, the driver would begin calling out, "503" or "415 MPs" or "Smoke Bomb Hill," as the bus snaked through the winding black roads, depositing returning soldiers to their units. And my heart would contract as I walked back to the barracks, the hillbilly music, the petty harassment, KP and Guard Duty, the arbitrary decisions, bullshit inspections and GI parties—all the Mickey Mouse that made of the peacetime Army the always potentially humiliating, monumental bore anyone who experienced it never forgets.

But that particular Sunday, I rode back to the base with Van in his 1941 Ford, and the Sunday evening loneliness I'd learned to anticipate no longer seemed quite so formidable.

"You pulling any details next weekend?" Van asked.

"I'll have to check the duty roster next few days, but I don't think so."

"I'll probably see you in town Saturday, then," he said.

"Thanks for the ride." I got out of the car, and he waved goodbye before heading over to the parking lot near his BOQ.

The following weekend, I had to pay a guy to take a Sunday KP for me to get off the base. That meant still having enough money for my hotel room, bus fare, and maybe two or three bucks left over for some bread, fruit, candy bars, and the Sunday *New York Times*. But that was okay, because getting off the post and doing exactly what I wished when I chose to do it meant everything to me.

Van was already in the library when I arrived there shortly after having checked into the hotel. It was three-thirty.

"Kind of late for you to get into town, isn't it?" he asked with a smile. We finished working Saturdays at twelve, and I usually ran back to the barracks, changed into my civvies, and caught the first available bus heading for Fayetteville.

"There was a last-minute switch, and I had KP tomorrow. It took a while and some persuasion to find someone willing to take it for me for twenty bucks." The usual price was ten.

He asked what I was doing for dinner that night, would I like to join him?

"Sorry, but those twenty bucks leave me a little short."

"It's on me," Van offered.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"At least for some coffee?"

"Sure." I liked him for offering to spring for dinner, and liked even more that he did not press me about accepting his first offer.

It was when we were walking back from the library to the hotel later that afternoon that we came across Sergeant Markowski and Leslie. Leonard Markowski was the first sergeant of Headquarters Company, 1st RB&L.

"Hello, Michael," Leslie said. She was a striking blonde, who wore her hair long, and her eyes were a malachite green I've never seen before or since.

"Leslie," I said. "Hello, Sergeant Markowski. This is my friend, Captain Thi."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir," Markowinski boomed out in his rich baritone. I don't exaggerate when I say that Markowinski had the bleached white teeth and flaring nostrils of a born paladin.

Van shook their hands, and we wished each other a pleasant weekend.

"Who are they?" Van asked, as we resumed our way back to the hotel.

"Markowinski's my first sergeant," I said. "Leslie's my wife. They're living together."

He stopped walking, looking at me to see if I was kidding. Then he smiled slowly, as if he still suspected I'd told a joke he'd somehow missed.

"My God, you're serious," Van finally said.

When I first met Markowinski, he almost immediately reminded me of Mr. Posner. Mr. Posner was a French teacher I'd had in junior high school. He had curly hair, luminous eyes, was handsome, brilliant, and charming. It was obvious even to a pimply thirteen-year-old that Mr. Posner should have been Secretary of State or writing stylish novels; he should have been a Park Avenue surgeon or a dazzling Broadway actor. The great mystery was why a man possessing his many obvious gifts had settled for teaching junior high school students how to conjugate French verbs.

Well, Markowinski had that same fluorescent combination of looks, brains, and personality, and why he'd remained a sergeant in the peacetime Army was another mystery I never got around to solving. He was in his mid-thirties and twice divorced when he'd met Leslie and me in town shortly after we'd arrived at Bragg. Later, Leslie told me he'd looked her up within a month and they'd gone to bed the following week.

I could see that Van was still slightly stunned when we sat down in the coffee shop in the hotel. "Why don't you request a transfer to a different unit or to a different post?" he asked after the waitress brought our coffee. "I'm sure if you went to the chaplain, your battalion commander, someone in authority, and explained the situation, something could be done."

"I'm not going anywhere, Van," I said evenly. "I'm staying in 1st RB&L until my discharge, which is next June. Markowinski wants to request a transfer and move on, that's his business."

"How long has your wife been living with him?" Van got out a pack of cigarettes and lit up. I didn't smoke cigars then.

“About three months” It was ironic she’d left me to have an affair with a sergeant, a military man. We’d been married a year before I was drafted. I’d had a heart murmur as a kid and could have probably ducked the Army. But my father had sat out World War I, making hats for the Navy, and I didn’t wish my son to ever wonder about me as I’d occasionally wonder about my old man. So when I went for a physical, I never mentioned the murmur, and the Army doctors didn’t find zilch. Although Leslie came to live with me off-post at Bragg after I’d finished basic, she never forgave my temporarily leaving her by going into the Army when I could have gotten out of it so easily.

“Is the reason you haven’t transferred because you think she might return to you if you stick around?” Van asked, stubbing out his cigarette.

“You never know.” Leslie was one of those chronically envious people who invariably thinks the folks next door have it better. She was also easily bored. It wasn’t totally inconceivable that Markowinski would find her envy grating or her impatience insufferable. Keeping Leslie amused was a twenty-four-hour vocation.

I finished my coffee, which was a big improvement over that mud they served in the mess hall.

Van shuddered. “I don’t think I could stand your situation, Michael.”

“Markowinski doesn’t think I can stand it either. ‘I won’t have to lift a finger, young trooper,’ were his words. ‘Knowing she’s sleeping with me, not you, will drive you nuts, and after a couple of months you’ll beg for a transfer.’”

Van shook his head in disbelief. “And you’ve decided to prove him wrong?”

“If it fucking kills me,” I said.

A month later, Leslie called and said she wanted to meet Saturday about two in a parking lot behind one of the supermarkets in downtown Fayetteville. I freely confess I was stupid enough to hope that she and Markowinski were about to split up and she wanted me to take her back.

“Thanks for coming, Michael,” she said, as I got in the car and sat beside her. A blue ribbon trailed in her hair. She was wearing a blue and pink striped sleeveless jersey. The down on her arms was silvery from the sun. It was pathetic—four innocuous words from her, and I was getting a hard-on.

“How are you, Leslie?” I said.

“Fine. How’s your friend Captain Thi? Did I pronounce it right?”

“Van? Nice guy. He’s Vietnamese,” and I told her all I knew about him. I was trying to conceal my nervousness. Of course, the more I kept

talking, the more I kept hoping she was about to say she'd made a terrible mistake leaving me.

But what she said when I finally ran out of gas was, "I want a divorce, Michael. Leonard and I want to get married." Leslie gazed at me with those appealing green eyes, and for a second my heart seemed to stand still.

"The day after I get discharged and go home is the day I go to a lawyer and file for divorce," I repeated. I'd first told her that the morning she'd walked out on me, believing if I could keep to that date everything else in life after would be a cinch.

"I'm pregnant with Leonard's child," Leslie said reluctantly.

But I didn't believe her, as I hadn't believed her the time she lied when she first began sleeping with Markowski before she left me.

"I'll take you to an obstetrician in Fayetteville," I said reasonably. "We'll tell him you think you're pregnant. Only the pregnancy results come to me. If you're pregnant, I'll agree to a quick divorce, clean and simple. Otherwise, nothing doing until I'm out of the Army."

I suppose she'd tried to anticipate how I'd respond, and what I wound up saying wasn't a possibility that ever occurred to her, because she looked genuinely stunned. "You're just being willful and inflexible," she finally said. "They're your worst qualities, always were."

We'd been together, one way or another, since high school, and for all I knew she was absolutely right about identifying my worst faults. But they had nothing to do with this. "I'm not about to ever again be manipulated to suit your convenience, Leslie. The day after I get discharged, not twenty-four hours sooner."

"You know," she said confidently, "as first sergeant Leonard could make your life rather miserable if he chose to."

I laughed. "How's he going to look, Leslie, if he messes around with me and I tell the IG my wife's been living with him for the last four months?"

"You bastard, you have an answer for everything, don't you?" she hissed. "Get out of here! Get out of my sight!" She switched on the ignition, and the car roared to life as I opened the door.

I watched as she drove away, her back wheels releasing an angry spray of small pebbles. Then, instead of meeting Van in the library, our Saturday afternoon rendezvous, I went back to the hotel. It was one thing to act tough sitting next to Leslie in her car. But alone, with no

legitimate target off which to bounce my defiance, I felt empty and beaten, and in my hotel room it was difficult not to weep.

Van showed up there a couple of hours later. I must have appeared pretty shaky, because he almost immediately said, “You look ill, Michael, what’s the matter?”

“I saw my wife this afternoon. She definitely wants a divorce so she can marry that prick Markowski.”

“Ah, my friend,” he said sympathetically. “My friend.”

I shrugged and laughed. What else was there to do? “I feel like getting a bottle of Scotch and tying one on.”

Van nodded approvingly. “It’s over, so divorce is better, a fresh start, Michael, a fresh start.”

“You’re right, I know you’re right, only I’m not going down on their timetable.”

He put his hand on my shoulder. Wanting to be helpful in a practical way, he said, “I’ll get us a bottle. What’s your brand, Michael—Chivas?”

We did not get drunk that afternoon but we certainly had more than a few, before going in Van’s car to the Charcoal Steak House, which was the one decent restaurant near Bragg. Not only were the steaks delicious but they also served large salads as a main course plus all the bread you could handle. You ate on pink tablecloths, used a matching pink linen napkin, and the lighting was subdued and civilized.

During the months that followed, whenever Van thought I was having a particularly rough time, he’d insist on our going to the Charcoal Steak House. “You must keep up your strength, Michael,” he’d say, a born Jewish mother. I wouldn’t discuss Leslie or my failed marriage those nights, or any nights. Rather, I’d get Van to tell me about Vietnam. He didn’t require much encouragement, because his distrust of Diem and the coterie surrounding Diem was intense.

The way Van explained it, a 1954 agreement had been signed in Geneva to hold a general election in all of Vietnam two years later. But because the north, with its population of fifteen million, outnumbered the south’s twelve million, Diem, as the leader of the south, refused to sanction the election. The reason he gave was that the election in the north would have been rigged. But Van insisted the real reason was that Diem, an unpopular leader, would have lost, rigged election in the north or not.

“Diem has powerful friends here—Cardinal Spellman, Justice Douglas, Senator Mansfield—which explains why America supported Diem in his decision,” Van said. “Don’t get me wrong, Michael, those guys in

the north aren't angels. But a great democracy like America shouldn't support frauds like Diem and his miserable brothers. It will all lead to disaster, and I'll be swept up by a current I won't be able to resist. My father helped Diem break a coup in 1955 and is still tortured by having had to shoot a rebel officer, whose brother was a close friend. He told me before I left for Bragg, 'Don't make my mistake.' But when I asked him how to avoid it, he simply looked at me and said, 'I don't know, my son, I don't know.'"

I told Van that whatever happened, his good judgment and generous instincts would see him through.

He smiled patiently. "My father also has good judgment and generous instincts."

"You'll be okay, Van, I know it." I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Old friend, you wouldn't be slightly prejudiced?"

Van left Bragg the month I was discharged, returning to Vietnam in the summer of 1960, and we kept in touch by mail.

The day after I got home, I consulted one of my father's close friends, a lawyer, and began the process of obtaining a divorce. For a considerable time after, I avoided getting involved with another woman. I attended Columbia Law School and worked my tail off. Made the *Law Review*, clerked for a famous federal judge from New York's Southern District, then joined a prestigious law firm, and was on my way.

During this period, the Vietnam War kept heating up. When Diem was overthrown and assassinated in the fall of 1963, Van wrote me, "Perhaps the country will rally around its new leaders, the Army." A day after the coup, in which his father had participated, the old man suffered a fatal heart attack. "As surely as the coup killed Diem and his brother Nhu," Van wrote, "it also killed my father, whose loyalties were strained beyond the breaking point. I think of you often, Michael, and of our weekends together in Fayetteville. They seem long ago and far away. Will we ever see each other again?" He was then a major, fighting in the Delta.

When the war reached its height, a famous picture appeared in many American newspapers. It showed a general attached to security summarily executing a young man thought to be a Vietcong agent on a Saigon street. As I recall, it was actually a sequence of pictures. In the first, you saw the general, partially bald, lifting his snub-nosed revolver; in the next, you saw him extending it, practically brushing the face of the VC suspect, who was much younger and had a full head of hair; in the third, the general has squeezed the trigger and the suspect starts to fall; in the last, the suspect lies on the ground, and the general, pistol in hand, can be seen

looking down at him, expressionless. The pictures caused a storm of outrage when they appeared in the States.

In 1970, another, similar shot was published in the *New York Times*. Again, it showed a Vietnamese officer summarily executing a suspected VC on a Saigon street. This photo elicited much less *mea culpa* than the first set, no doubt because by then the American public had become inured to the horror of the Vietnam War. The officer in the second picture was my friend Van. I recognized him immediately, although his last name was misspelled in the caption. Van was then a colonel.

I wrote him the following day. I didn't mention seeing the picture. Instead, I stated that the war seemed to me irremediably lost, and the generals leading South Vietnam hopelessly inept and corrupt. Through my law work, I knew people in the State Department and in the Pentagon who owed me certain favors. If there was anything I could do to help Van and his family leave Vietnam and enter the States, I wrote, I was fully prepared to approach my influential contacts.

Less than a month later, I received his reply. "Of course," he wrote, "I remember your waiting anxiously for the *New York Times* to arrive in Fayetteville early Sunday afternoons, and the pleasure you radiated when the paper actually appeared. Your eyes, Michael, would absolutely light up. I mention this, because without your having said so, I know that before you last wrote you'd seen my picture in the *Times*. Quite unflattering, if you ask me, and I am surprised that, of all papers, the august *Times* should have misspelled my name.

"This war, Michael, is more wretched than you can possibly imagine. My wife was assassinated by the VC a week before I shot the suspect in Saigon. They cut off her breasts and stuffed them in her mouth, which is how I found her in our bedroom. It is, of course, no excuse for my action.

"Your General Sherman once wrote that 'War is cruelty and you cannot refine it; and those who brought war into our country deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out.' I naturally attempt to comfort myself with such sentiments. But they are like poultices, and what I require is quite different—a new heart.

"I tried to prepare myself for this trial as early as the time I spent at Bragg. But I have obviously failed, and I will not survive this war. I don't deserve to, and I no longer even wish to. When death comes, believe me, I will embrace it eagerly. Remember our friendship during an odd moment or two, dear Michael, and pray for my soul."

Of course, I wrote him again, immediately, “Here, Van, you’d be able to make a fresh start, a new beginning. As you told me the day Leslie asked for a divorce, it’s over, done with, you must begin again. Your father is dead, your wife is dead, your country has lost its war and will soon be in shambles. Nor will the victors treat you with generosity. Come here where you will have a blank check on whatever money and influence I possess. Give me the word, dear Van, and I will turn Washington upside down to get you out as soon as possible, certainly before the Vietcong enter Saigon.”

I regret to say that he did not answer my letter. Nor did he answer any of the dozen others I wrote him that year. None were returned to the sender, does that mean Van received them? I’ve no way of knowing, but I’ve no doubt that he did not survive the war. He knew he was a marked man if the VC captured him. He would, I am certain, have taken his life first. Plus the opportunities to die under fire were so numerous during the last years of the war, Van would surely have found one that satisfied his deepest longing.

About a year after Van’s last response, I received a letter from Leslie. She wrote that her husband, Sergeant Markowski, was killed in Vietnam the previous year and she was now living in Portland, Oregon. It’s a beautiful city, Leslie wrote, the air is clean, there are green mountains nearby and rivers clearer than crystal. If I ever got out that way, she’d be happy to see me, although she wasn’t sure I’d want to see her. It was a long, chatty letter, broad with hints that we might even get it going again if I came.

I considered ignoring the letter. I hadn’t seen or heard from her since our divorce in 1961, nor had I wished to. It had taken me ten years, but I was about to remarry—to a lawyer from the same firm, a terrific lady, smart, loving, good-looking, worldly. I was a lucky man, and I wasn’t about to do anything so foolish as fly out to Portland.

But that didn’t mean, I finally decided, Leslie didn’t deserve a response. After all, her husband had been killed in Vietnam, and that must have been terrible for her. I wrote, offering my sympathy. No, I didn’t often travel to the West Coast, I added. But I thanked her for the invitation and said if I ever did reach Portland, I’d be sure to look her up. I didn’t mention that I was about to remarry.

Not too long ago, I had to go to Washington on business and found myself walking near the Vietnam Memorial. It was a beautiful spring morning. The forsythia were out, so were the daffodils and tulips. Clusters of visitors milled around

the memorial. The visitors were mostly men who appeared ten years younger than me, men who, no doubt, had served in Vietnam. Occasionally, you'd see an older woman, alone or with her husband, only she did not walk among the different granite panels but stared inconsolably at a single name.

I thought about Van, and wished his name was on the monument. Then I recalled Leslie's letter and, having some time to kill, began looking for Markowski's name. There was no way I could have forgotten it, nor could I have possibly misspelled it. But the name was not where it should have been. I considered alternate spellings, searching back and forth among the monument's many black panels. I also considered that perhaps Leslie had misstated the year, and again retraced my steps. But try as hard as I could to find it, Leonard Markowski's name simply was not on that monument. I must have appeared slightly frantic when I realized this, because people were beginning to look at me strangely.

Taking a deep breath, I made myself stand quietly in the leafy shadows, calming down but experiencing that same indelible emptiness I knew the day Leslie asked for a divorce and Van and I shared a bottle of Scotch. Because I never forgot that Van helped pull me through that long year at Bragg, it did not come as a complete surprise that after a while I could almost feel his hand, cupping my shoulder again. Van's touch was light, as always, and as always his words were unmistakably fraternal. "Hang in there, old friend," he kept saying. "It'll pass, it'll pass."

**Ivan Prashker's** short stories have appeared in *Harper's*, *Playboy*, *McCall's*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and elsewhere. He's also published a nonfiction book, *Duty, Honor, Vietnam*.