

7 Ghent

Highlights IN LIFE



Mrs. Than Thi Hong Ngat

“...And now for the official announcement of the Vietnamese Literature competition results! In third place, we have a young, talented girl from Da Nang local school..."

I lay my head against the wall behind me, slowly zoning out. It's not like I have a chance of winning, anyway. After all, I was just a fill-in: someone to ensure our school has enough members to enter the competition. The other contestants had been preparing for months, and I'd just decided to wing it and give it my best shot.

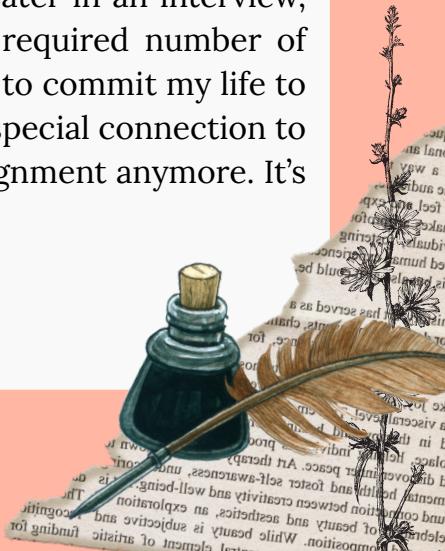
Overall though, the competition had been fun, and a part of me was proud that I'd done way better than expected.

I snapped back to reality as loud cheers erupted from the crowd. My classmates were chanting a girl's name – one that sounds strangely like mine, but I knew that couldn't be right. As I tried to figure out what was going on, my best friend tackled me from behind with a huge bear hug and screamed “YOU DID IT! I KNEW YOU COULD DO IT!”. My mouth fell open. My eyes stung with happy tears. As it turned out, I had, against all odds, won first place.

The noises died down as the head organizer of the competition stood up, my essay in hand, and proceeded to read it to the crowd. At that moment, surrounded by unfamiliar eyes of admiration, I suddenly felt something shifting inside me. A spark, perhaps. And that was when I realized that maybe, just maybe, following the footsteps of my ancestors as a literature teacher wasn't so impossible after all.

And that moment, that ordinary-turned-extraordinary day, was the turning point in the life of Than Thi Hong Ngat – the woman my classmates and I know today as Mrs Ngat, our beloved Literature teacher.

For Mrs Ngat, that unexpected moment didn't just bring home a medal and a certificate, it had created something special in her that she'd never known existed. Later in an interview, she told me, “I joined the competition as a last resort, to fill in the required number of students... but I unexpectedly won first place. And that's when I decided to commit my life to Literature.” According to Mrs Ngat, that day was the first time she felt a special connection to the subject – the first time she felt as if writing an essay isn't just an assignment anymore. It's now a passion, a subject she



could commit the rest of her life to. After discovering her passion, she became motivated to study harder, unlock her full potential, and eventually become a teacher. But, while most of us know her after she'd arrived at her destination, the journey she led cannot be overlooked.

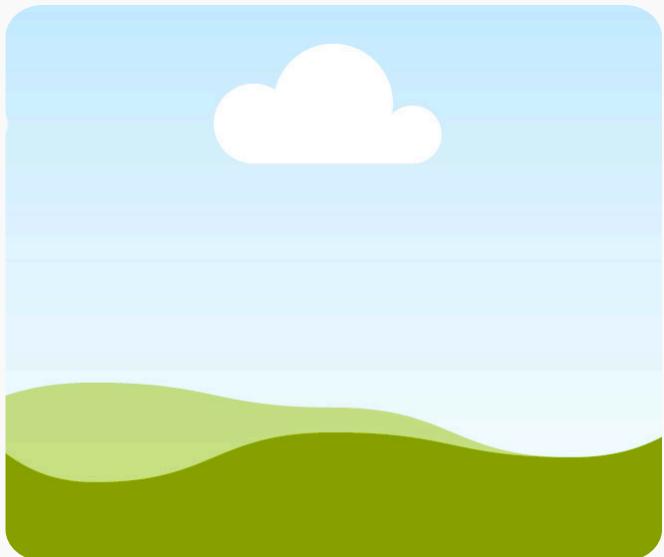
That defining moment was no accident. Mrs Ngat wasn't just a young girl who was simply "lucky" - she'd managed to recognize her potential and pursue it with all she'd got, which is remarkable.

A huge reason why she was able to achieve this was her independence.

From a young age, Mrs Ngat has learnt to take responsibility for her own choices, set high expectations for herself and refuse to rely on others to determine her future. Ever since she was 13, she has been in charge of her own life, from her subject majors to her lifestyle. "I was always the one who created academic pressure for myself" she admitted. "I didn't want to be a disappointment to my parents, and most importantly, myself." And incredibly, rather than breaking her, that pressure only strengthened her resolve. It taught her discipline, resilience, and the courage to face challenges alone. By turning pressure into a source of motivation, Mrs Ngat has managed to do what countless others failed: recognize her own potential and work hard to turn that potential into mastery and success.

Despite her strong sense of self-reliance, Mrs Ngat never allowed independence to distance her from her family. While her dad is mostly busy with his work and rarely comes home, she still managed to maintain a good relationship with him. He deeply cared for and respected her brother, with whom she shared her highs and lows during childhood. However, the person she has the deepest connection with is her mother.

Mrs Ngat shared almost everything with her mother: from her academic progress at school to her relationship with her friends. According to her, her mother has always been respectful towards her boundaries and emotions. In fact, never once had she questioned her about her private life, not even her crushes at school or the moment she had her first boyfriend. Because of this, Mrs Ngat has immense respect and admiration for her mother - so much so that as a child she'd dreamt to follow her mother's footsteps in becoming a teacher (which she later achieved). However, the more she grew up, the less time she spent hanging out with her mother. Mrs Ngat described it as a normal part of



A QUIET STORM

Colin Brownlie

If you watch my mother long enough, you will notice something unusual: she rarely wastes a sentence. While my dad often decorates his words with flourishes and metaphors, my mother delivers hers like a well-placed stone - compact, accurate, and impossible to misunderstand. It is perhaps the first sign that she is an only child, raised in a home where words mattered not for beauty but for clarity.

My grandma worked at the Vietnam Institute of Literature, immersed in the world of poetry and manuscripts, yet her daughter grew up wielding language with a simplicity that bordered on computer language. My grandfather works as a freelancer, drifting between projects and opportunities, but my mom learned early the value of anchoring oneself on purpose.

She once said, almost offhandedly. "Talking a lot does not mean you are saying something." It became a kind of signature. There is a clean, distilled quality to everything she does.

And yet, for someone so concise, her life has never been small.

THE PRACTICAL NONCONFORMIST

My mother's story is defined not by rebellion - in fact, she values rules and compliance over everything else. But she possesses a consistent sense of being able to think differently. Even in high school, at the prestigious Hanoi Amsterdam, she chose the Chinese major—a quiet but unmistakable act of divergence at a time when English was the glittering, obvious choice. Her friends were lining up for the same language, the same clubs, the same future paths. Somehow, my mother stepped aside and chose differently. Her high school time was rather quiet, but when the time came to choose her college path, she ignored the gravitational pull of the United States that swept up so many of her friends. English was already a global language. Korea, back in 2006, was not yet the cultural giant it would soon become.

Korean was difficult, unfamiliar, and rarely chosen. And that, to her, was exactly the point. Amongst around 1,000 students from her class of '07, she was the only one who studied in Korea for her college degree. **"If everyone rushes to one door," she once explained, "then the other door is often less crowded and will eventually be more in demand."** Most people arrive at practicality as they get older, often after disappointment or hardship.



My mother arrives at it early, almost instinctively. She had a gift for reading the landscape of competition - where it was crowded, where it was empty, and where she could place herself to gain the most advantage with the least noise. Her life would later prove that this instinct was not only strong but consistently right.

She later went to Yonsei University on a full scholarship—one of the most prestigious schools in Korea, sometimes called the Harvard of Seoul.

Her parents did not have to pay for her college fee, and even her personal expenses were all paid off by the scholarship program. While in college, my mother spent most of her time learning the language, understanding the culture, and making lifelong friends. She appeared on television shows, hosted a EBS Korean TV program for foreigners, and worked as an intern at Korean major chaebols.

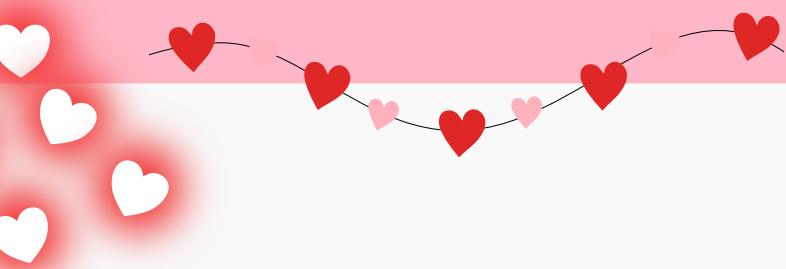
Years later, when Korean culture finally exploded across Asia, and Korean companies led the FDI market in Vietnam, her unusual academic choice suddenly made perfect sense. People would look around and wonder how she positioned herself so perfectly long before the wave arrived. But she has always been there, quietly building networks, understanding Korean culture, learning how to negotiate with directness and nuance. What looked like foresight or luck to others was the natural result of a mind trained to spot opportunity where no one else bothers to look.

She established a company dealing exclusively with Korean clients. Her success was made possible by providing her clients with a deep understanding of their culture and direct communication. Koreans value their language above all else, and her ability to understand Korean expectations, match their pace, and speak with clarity made her indispensable. Success, to her, was not about outdoing others in everything, but about choosing wisely which battles to fight.

THE ART OF PUSHING WITHOUT BREAKING

To understand my mother fully, you have to understand the way she pushes people. Not with cruelty, not with ego, but with an unflinching belief in what they can become.

Colin Brownlie



Colin Brownlie

She has a rare ability: she understands human emotions but refuses to let them affect her decision until a very specific moment - the moment she knows a person has reached their limit.

While my dad often worries about hurting feelings or overstepping boundaries when it comes to people around him, my mom is as relentless as one can be. But it is not simply a reaction without calculation.

My mother tests emotional limits the way an expert craftsman tests the strength of materials: gently at first, then increasingly, until she knows exactly where the breaking point lies. And she stops just before it.

This, more than any academic title or career milestone, is her genius.

She has an intuition calibrated through a lifetime of observing people quietly. It allows her to see the difference between exhaustion and laziness, discomfort and actual limits, fear and genuine incapacity. Most people stop pushing at the first sign of resistance. She pushes until the truth reveals itself.

She has applied this philosophy everywhere: in school, in work, and most powerfully, in raising her children.

A SACRIFICE MADE WITHOUT HESITATION

Her practicality might make her seem calculating - until you see how she loves.

The most extraordinary chapter of her life began when she was only twenty-four, about to complete her Master's degree in Korea, with a future full of academic possibilities unraveling before her. Professors encouraged her to stay. Opportunities were forming. She was on a path that many dream of but few reach.

Then she became pregnant with me.

For someone whose decisions were always strategic, calm, and practical, the next step was surprisingly emotional yet also entirely characteristic. She chose to walk away from her degree, leave Korea, and return home to Vietnam so that I could grow up surrounded by family and stability.

People asked if she regretted it. My dad often joked about how she only got a Bachelor's Degree. To those who asked, she always answered with the same, quiet, steady tone she uses when she has made up her mind: "Some things you choose with your head. Some things you choose with your heart. In leaving Korea, I chose both."

To her, motherhood was not a detour but a refocusing of her life's momentum.



She poured into me and my younger brother the same discipline she poured into her studies. She rejected the idea that youth should be preserved at the cost of responsibility. Her decision was not a sacrifice. To her, it was simply the right thing to do.

A LOVE WITHOUT COMPROMISE

Professionally, she is all angles: sharp, precise, and incredibly consistent. At home, my mother is something softer but no less powerful. Her love is unconditional but never indulgent. She will comfort you, but only after she has told you the truth; she will hug you, but only after she has asked whether you've learned something from the situation.

She is strict because she believes the world is strict. She is understanding because she believes empathy makes discipline bearable. After twelve years of being her daughter, I understood the fundamental rule of her household, one that she once said to me: "I will always stand behind you, but I will not carry you when you can walk."

It is a sentence that I know to hold both love and responsibility, wrapped together in the balance she has mastered since adolescence. As her children, we all know she is our fiercest advocate, our toughest teacher, and our safest home - all at once.

A LIFE OF DEDICATION

At 37, my mom stands at the intersection of everything she has built and everything she has sacrificed. A mother who gave up a prestigious academic path to raise her children. A professional who turned an unusual linguistic gamble into a thriving company. A woman who has never sought applause but has earned quiet respect from everyone who works with or learns from her.

She is the kind of mother who will show up for me every time I need her, but also the kind who will firmly refuse any nonsensical demand. Her practicality , once a defining strength, has transformed into a philosophy of life.

She believes in choosing the harder path early so the future will become easier. She believes in pushing people only until they reach their true limit, not the limit they think they have. She believes that love without discipline is sentiment, and discipline without love is cruelty. And so she walks the tightrope of both with a level of dedication only a few can manage.

Her story is not dramatic. It is not loud. It is the silent story of a Vietnamese woman who measures her steps, chooses her words, and builds her life with intention. A woman who leads not by inspiration but by example. A woman who understands that extraordinary lives are often constructed quietly, long before anyone notices. A woman of sheer will.

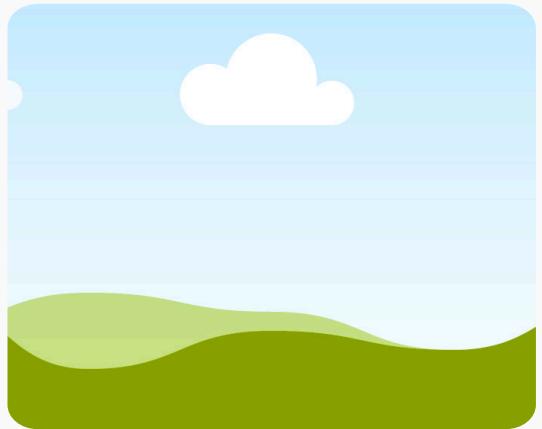
If you ask her what she considers her greatest achievement, she will not mention Yonsei University, the scholarship, the company, or even the bold choices she made when everyone else chooses safety.

She will point to me and my younger brother.

And she will say, in that simple, unmistakable way of hers. "**Everything I did makes sense because of them.**"

Colin Brownlie

When my grandmother was evacuated to safety in Hanoi, my grandpa was still working in the troupe. This is where I truly understand what stood behind my grandpa's smile. "Even in the Vietnam war, when roads are bombed and destroyed, your grandpa still rides two hundred kilometres on his bike from Hai Phong back to the bomb bunker in Hanoi to meet his family and make sure they're safe", my grandmother said.



He rode two hundred kilometres, on a small bicycle, through bombed and destroyed roads, just to check on his family, talk to them, eat a meal, then he would ride all the way back to Hai Phong just the next morning to play for the troupe. He was very brave, very devoted to his job, while also caring for his family, he would risk it all just to see his family and make sure they were fine. Bravery is in every part of our life, and in this case, it was shown through a quiet act, riding on a bike through hundreds of kilometres, among thousands of soldiers and bombs.

In 1966, a year later, when the war was still escalating, my grandfather moved on to the next chapter of his life. He stopped working at the Hai Phong song and dance troupe and was called back to Hanoi to go on to a job that made his name. He went on to be a poet, and he didn't stop for the next 60 years of his life. Nguyen Trong Tao, a famous Vietnamese critic and poet says: "Looking back on the 60 years of Van Long's poetry, I ask myself how he could have had such a long journey. A journey of poetry without tiredness, a journey that walks alongside many generations." My grandfather didn't write as a job, it was natural. My grandmother says: "Your grandpa's poems were romantic, lively, and real. He knows how to make everything, even objects feel real and romantic." He wrote about people, about nature, from the smallest details he sees in the morning, to small boats sailing in the evening. His poems keep the memories and pictures he saw, they were bright and pure. "His poems were even found in fallen soldiers' pockets, they kept his poems to read in the war.", says my grandma. There wasn't the internet back then in the 1960s, so soldiers keeping the poems they liked to read in the war was a common thing. They carried my grandpa's words throughout the war, they lived with it, and those words were a spiritual support for them in the Vietnam war. My grandfather's poems don't only shine in the war, they continue to shine after it, when the war ended. They continue to reflect and draw up a picture of my grandpa's daily life. Passion isn't just something you do, it can shape who you are.

His dedication and passion earned him the respect of other critics and poets throughout the years, but fame was never what he cared about, his writings are made with passion, they show who he is: a humble, passionate, and caring person. But to me, his grandson, he was always just the grandpa who would teach me Origami, play football with me when he was free. "He is a very kind dad, who is strict, but at the same time allows me to have my own decisions. He respects your ideas and decisions.", my father says. This defines him both as a father and a grandfather. Even when he was old, my grandpa never stopped writing, poetry remained with him until the end. His book, "Van Long - Hanh Trinh Tho", was printed into copies, and saved online, allowing readers to find and read his works. His legacy is not only found in physical books, it was saved in family memories and the passions he sparked in people. One of those passions he sparked was the passion of Origami that I have. "I think he is a very kind person from my perspective. He spends time playing with me and making sure to have fun everytime a visit my grandparents house. He, along with my grandmother's sister, are the two people who sparked my passion about origami.", I once answered when someone interviewed me about my passion for origami. The passion he sparked always stayed with me, every time I folded an origami, I am reminded of him, of that evening when he taught me the art.

My grandfather passed away in 2022, yet, there is still an empty feeling when I come to my grandparent's house. Sometimes I still imagined him sitting at the desk, with a newspaper, calmly reading. Some other times I would remember him sitting patiently and teaching me each crease of that crane. Now that I recall these memories, I see them differently. The calm and kind grandfather reading at the sofa is the same man who rode through hundreds of kilometres of bombed roads, who is also the same man who spent 60 years of his life passionate about poetry. My grandpa's life shows that passion and determination can guide someone through their hardest times, even shaping them into someone gentle and kind instead of harsh. This story of my grandfather shows us that sometimes, resilience and bravery doesn't look dramatic, sometimes it's quiet, sometimes it looks like a crane, sometimes it looks like a poem, sometimes it's just a small man riding through forests, lakes, and roads just to reach his family.