

Mida Malena

**Days and Nights
of
Vietnam**

~ The Puzzle of My Soul ~

Mida Malena

Independent Publisher

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**“What magic unfolds within us when the dream, once
imagined, becomes a part of who we are?”**

Yda

“The Key to the Unknown”

A few months ago, I left Romania, and with each passing day, I feel further away from everything I once knew. Now, I'm adrift in a foreign world, enveloped in uncertainty, trying to find my footing. I sometimes feel like a ship lost on a vast ocean, drifting without direction. Other times, the winds of change hit me from all sides – vulnerable, but not without hope.

I carry the weight of memories and doubts in my heart, feeling like a prisoner of my own mind. But somewhere deep inside, a spark of determination still burns. Despite the fears that follow me like a shadow, I know I must move forward, push past my limits, and find my place in this vast Universe.

“But how can I move forward when the past keeps pulling me back?” I feel trapped in a web of fears. “The book...,” I whisper – “this project is my key.” It's strange how a single thought can become a golden thread, capable of pulling you from the deepest labyrinths of your mind.

Writing is my compass. With every word I write, I discover a little more about myself. Each page becomes a mirror reflecting my soul. Sometimes the image is blurry; other times, clear as a mountain stream. Words are my only tools in this inner exploration, and my potential unfolds as I keep writing, digging, looking beyond the surface.

I often wonder: “Does my story matter to anyone else?” This question haunts me. And yet, I understand that each of us carries an entire world within – a unique story worth telling. I've decided not to let doubt hold me captive.

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Like a detective of my own existence, I look back, examine clues, and recover pieces of myself. In every experience, I find a lesson, a hint that propels me further. My writing becomes a bridge between past, present, and future – an attempt to make sense of the chaos.

In this process of self-discovery, I've realized I'm not alone. We are all threads in a cosmic tapestry, each story contributing to something greater. Maybe my questions are also someone else's questions. Maybe my uncertainties reflect the struggles of other souls.

Curiosity, that invisible force, pulls me forward. It is the key that unlocks the door to the unknown, to those uncharted territories within me. Every word I write brings me closer to my true essence, to that deep mystery that surrounds me.

My journey is one of evolution. I've learned that you can't look forward without understanding what you've left behind. The past isn't a burden, but a compass that guides me through the unknown. By looking back, I extract the lessons that shaped my becoming. With each decision, each encounter, and each step, I draw closer to the meaning of my journey. And perhaps, through this story, I'll be able to inspire others to discover their path.

“The Step Into the Unknown”

December 21st, 2022

“I look at the past with my mind’s eye...”

I landed at Bucharest's Henri Coandă Airport at 8:30 PM, freshly returned from a 30-day journey through the Philippines. It was a cold evening, minus 3 degrees in the capital. The winter holidays were approaching, and I had planned my return so I would be home by Christmas. But something had profoundly changed within me. My loved ones were waiting for me, yet I felt detached from their world, as if I no longer belonged to that familiar Universe.

I kept asking myself: “Can a single month change everything?” It seemed absurd. I had everything I’ve ever wanted: a beautiful apartment in the capital, a luxury car, a successful business, and money in the bank. But now, coming back to Romania, everything felt weightless, as if every material possession had lost its meaning. I remembered the beaches of Palawan, the overwhelming silence of the ocean. I wished I could have stayed there and never returned. I felt like Asia was my home. But Romania was pulling me back, with invisible, unshakable roots.

“What unfinished business do I have left here?” I wondered. The question floated in my mind, like a smoldering storm without a clear answer. I had gone through all those stages in search of “something”... but I didn’t know at the time what I was truly seeking.

I saw him among the crowd at the airport. His face felt like an anchor to reality, a piece of familiarity in a sea of uncertainty. When he hugged me, I felt warmth wrapping around my body. It was a strange sensation – like I was no longer myself. “I didn’t recognize you at first;

you look younger, more beautiful,” he said with a smile. I wanted to believe him, but deep down I asked myself: “Who is this Yda that landed at Otopeni?”

We walked out of the airport together, chatting cheerfully. The snowflakes were falling softly, wrapping the city in a strange silence. I didn't feel the cold. My green jacket, the one that had been such a hassle in Asia, was unbuttoned. “Aren't you cold?” he asked, looking at my thin T-shirt. “No, I'm not cold,” I smiled, enchanted by his presence. At that moment, nothing else mattered. No cold, no fear, no worries. It was a moment frozen in time, one I wanted to hold onto forever. The morning found us still together, talking about trivial things that seemed to matter, as if we wanted to stretch that moment infinitely. “Could we do this?” I wondered.

But reality slipped in subtly. In the quiet of the morning, I woke up from the dream. I was alone. Alone in the airport. The taxi took me home, to a house that felt colder and emptier than ever. I turned on the heating, unpacked carefully, placing each item back in its place, in an order I wasn't sure belonged to me. I smiled. I spoke to myself, just to hear my voice in that silent space. It felt strange, as if it was no longer my voice.

I fell asleep thinking about the Philippines, about everything I had experienced there. “Did I find a portal to something new in the Palawan?” I wondered. I had thought I was just going on vacation, but the truth was I had been carried by a destiny I didn't yet fully understand. It opened a door to myself, to a transformation. I came back with an unexpected urge to write, to create. I felt that the experience had been just the beginning of a change that would overturn everything I knew. Those 30 days left a deep imprint, and I knew I would never return to my old self.

“Freedom.” That was the key that I gained in Asia, though I didn't know it at the time. I thought of the people that I met there, each leaving a mark on me. Yow taught me that we are never truly alone,

no matter how isolated we feel. Essra showed me that freedom comes from small but radical decisions. Lina was a quiet support, and Ej... Ej was the cherry on top, a presence that opened my eyes to everything I didn't understand. In fact, they all showed me what it means to truly live freely, each in their own way. And during that time, I started to wonder if I was really ready to embrace this freedom, even if it meant letting go of everything I had known until then. Each of them gave me a "piece" of a puzzle. And now, looking back, I could almost see the whole picture.

"But what's holding me back from being free? Why is it so hard to take that big step?" On cold nights, I would toss and turn, unable to sleep, tormented by questions. A Romanian proverb kept echoing in my mind: "Don't trade the bird in your hand for the crow on the fence." But did the bird in my hand offer me anything anymore? Had it not just become a burden? The truth was, I didn't know what awaited me if I took that step into the unknown. I couldn't see clearly, but I couldn't remain in this void either.

The decision came gradually, like a revelation, slow and inevitable. I had to make room for something new. That meant letting go of what I knew, of comfort, of security. Let go of love, of money, of friends. I decided to leave the capital and everything it represented. I lost my only source of income. I felt betrayed by people and situations, but each loss was necessary. It was no longer about what I was losing, but about what I was leaving behind in order to move forward.

"If I don't try, I'll never know what could happen!" But who could I possibly talk to about all of this? It was just me and my own thoughts: the old me and the new me, freshly returned from one of the most beautiful islands in the world. "What a mystical resonance that name has: Palawan!"

In the following months, I lost a worrying amount of weight. At one point, the scale showed 47 kilograms. I lived for days on just

coffee, lost in thoughts and worries, consumed by the labyrinth I was in, until, finally, I understood: I was fighting a battle of transformation. I had to free myself from everything that no longer served me.

The hard decisions weren't about loss but about making space for a new reality. I realized it was all a process. A one-way road, and though the losses were real, they weren't permanent. I left behind everything that weighed me down. The doors I closed opened new paths.

Now, with all that behind me, I'm almost ready. I postponed my flight to Asia three times, but this time I know I have to leave. I know it's no longer just a journey of exploration, but a conscious choice for my future.

And yet, one question lingers: "What happens to the dream when you finally live it?" It's a question that haunts and intrigues me at the same time. I dreamt of freedom, of the unknown, of a life lived without constraints. But now, as I stand on the edge of fulfilling that dream, I'm beginning to understand that the real challenge isn't just getting there, but keeping the courage to live in this new reality.

Maybe dreams aren't final destinations, but steps toward continuous evolution. And when the dream becomes reality, it doesn't end – it simply changes shape, opening new doors to other unknowns. The real mystery isn't what you find at the end of the road, but how you keep moving forward, how you continue to dream, even when you've reached the place where you thought all the answers would be.

So, I'm no longer afraid of the unknown. I understand now that it is part of us, that it is the space where we grow, discover, and transform ourselves. And happiness doesn't come from security or from achieving a dream, but from the courage to venture every day into mysterious terrain, from the strength to be carried by what we cannot fully control.

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“The greatest discovery any traveler can make is that every time, they find themselves.” – Lawrence Durrell

Chapter 1. “On the Threshold of a New World”

June 19th, 2023

Bucharest, Romania

Bucharest is just as I know it: the same dry air and concrete scorching in the relentless sun. I walk slowly, preparing to say my goodbye in my own way, not knowing when – or if – I will return. I wander around the North Train Station and Calea Griviței, casually looking for a battery for my wristwatch – an old watch that worked perfectly for exactly three weeks. The heat is almost suffocating, and my steps, without a clear direction, are carried by time. The plane doesn't leave until late tonight.

My knees feel weak from fatigue, and my throat burns with thirst, like I'm walking through a desert. I stop to buy some water and two cheese pastries, even though I'm not hungry. But the familiar taste of the cheese pulls me in, like a memory of home, so I give in. I sit on a bench in the shade, slowly munching, my thoughts drifting far away to distant corners of Asia, unexplored places, and dreams just starting to take shape.

A deafening noise suddenly jolts me back to reality. A machine is drilling nearby, violently shattering the morning's quiet. I get up slowly from the bench – my legs are sweaty, like after a hot sauna. There are a few more things I need to do before I leave. I have to go home and finish the last details – online check-in, a call to Turkish Airlines about those tricky cosmetics, and the luggage... ah, the luggage, still giving me headaches. But these are all trifles. I just want time to pass so I can be in the air already.

“And yet, why am I always waiting for time to pass? Do I do this out of some automatic habit, deeply ingrained in my mind?” Or maybe it's a primal setting, telling us all that this is how it should be. Or maybe time itself doesn't exist. It's just something we invented, a safety net to organize our lives. I shake off these thoughts – too many questions, too few answers.

I get home and gobble up a few cherries. The cat is sprawled across my spot on the bed, purring and looking at me with her big, round eyes. I nudge her aside, and she grudgingly meows, lazily jumping down, as if I had interrupted some important dream of hers. I ignore her and continue my phone conversation.

I can't believe it! I'm really leaving! “I'm going to Asia!” A new beginning is waiting for me – a different journey, an unexplored path. I can feel it in every fiber of my being – a new chapter is being written. I've been through so much in the past few months, and now I've received the green light. All the formalities are complete, my work was done impeccably, so there's no turning back.

Soon, it's time to call a taxi. I stand outside the gate with Ralu, waiting, when the rain starts to fall. Without hurry, we retreat under the house's eaves, listening to the heavy raindrops splattering on the asphalt. A small summer storm, of course. Bucharest won't let me leave without a little rain. Suddenly, the taxi cancels the ride. We request another one...

“They're giving you heart palpitations before you leave...” Ralu says with a tender seriousness.

I chuckle briefly, but the truth is, I'm already feeling those palpitations. Inside, my thoughts are racing in all directions. Something tells me Ralu senses this.

“Yes, you're right... but I know everything will be fine,” I repeat mechanically, as if I'm clinging to the words like a lifeboat in the middle of a storm. But a small tremor in my voice betrays me.

Ralu takes my hand and squeezes it, looking me straight in the eye. Her blue eyes always have a calming effect on me.

“Listen to me,” she says, her voice a mix of care and confidence. “It’s going to be okay, Yda. You always find your way. Just trust. In yourself. In everything.”

I stay quiet for a moment, letting her words settle inside me, like a soft blanket over an agitated heart. I truly feel them, and I believe her.

The taxi finally arrives. It’s pouring rain now. I gently roll down the window and notice how a few warm drops sneak into the car, brushing against my skin like delicate feathers. I allow myself a smile. The driver glances at me through the rearview mirror, as if trying to decipher the story behind my smile. I feel his gaze, an intense curiosity. “What does he think? What does he think he sees?”

At the airport, it’s the usual chaos. A sea of people, each with their own story, and me, alone in the middle of them, because that’s what I’ve chosen. I make my final phone calls, not rushing. I arrived early. At security, my nerves tense up again – my carry-on bag is full of cosmetics. But the officer is distracted by his phone, and I pass through without a hitch. I exhale in relief. “Just get me to my destination, and next time, I’ll be better prepared.” I promise myself this, seriously.

Slowly, time seems to compress. It feels like I was just here yesterday, but six months have already passed since the last trip. So much has changed. And yet, it’s as if nothing is different. Or maybe I’m the one who has changed.

On the plane, the two seats next to me are empty. I let myself sink deep into thought. I plunge into a quick reflection of the past months – full of turmoil, losses, and hidden victories. Life has tested me, but the stakes have always been higher than anything I’ve lost.

The smile of a little girl, about 2-3 years old, pulls me out of my reverie. She's waving at me from the row ahead, peeking through the seats. We both enter a game of peek-a-boo, and I find myself laughing. A simple, but genuine joy, dressed in a bright yellow blouse.

Then I check my conversation with Sawa again. I've read it twice, but I read it once more. Useful information, advice that makes me feel more confident. I lean on these words like a compass. The Universe has sent me people to guide me, so I don't lose my way. The trip to the Philippines, six months ago, showed me the path. It showed me that we're never truly alone when we're exactly where we need to be. Now, everything is real. The flight. A new country. A new life. I've even forgotten what little English I knew, but... I'm starting over. Like the Aries that I am.

The little girl has fallen asleep, and I let myself be carried by the quiet of the flight, with only the dull hum of the engine echoing the world left behind. I look out the window at the absolute darkness of the night, embraced by the tiny flickers of city lights below us.

My thoughts swirl, just as the sky seems to blend with the earth. I feel suspended in time and space, between who I was and who I am about to become. Usually, flying makes me feel light, free. But now I feel a strange weight on my shoulders, like an invisible cloak of emotions I haven't fully processed.

I think back to the Philippines. That was the first time I realized that paths aren't just geographic – they're personal too. It's a kind of hidden map, drawn inside us, that we only decipher when we're ready. That was the first time I felt I was on my path, no longer lost. "But now? What awaits me at the end of this flight? Do I truly know what my destination is, beyond the geography of a new country?"

I try to control my breathing, to relax, but my body doesn't seem to listen. It's as if all the fears and insecurities I've buried under layers of reason are now crowding together in this confined space of

the plane, demanding my attention. A shiver of anxiety runs down my spine, but I swallow it, letting it dissolve into the vibrations of the plane.

“Why do I feel this way?” I silently ask myself. I should be excited, happy, eager to start this new chapter. Yet deep down, I feel vulnerable. It’s just me, alone with myself, in a sea of strangers. I realize there’s no turning back. I’ve chosen to leave, to start over. “But who will I be at the end of this road?”

I shake off the thoughts and check my phone one last time. My conversation with Sawa appears again on the screen like a bright compass. His information is precise, calculated, but I feel something beyond these coordinates. Maybe he has drawn a direction for me, but the real path is one I must discover on my own. “It’s not about places; it’s about you,” I say to myself, repeating it like a mantra.

The flight continues, and I feel half-awake, half-caught in a dream. Ralu’s words come back to me, those last pieces of advice she gave before I left: “Write to me every time you move to a new place...” They sounded like care at the time, but now I’m starting to understand them differently. They were more than just practical instructions. They were a connection, an invisible thread to keep me anchored to who I am and where I come from.

Suddenly, I feel an overwhelming gratitude for all the small things that brought me here – Ralu, Sawa, Mone, the conversations, the little signs I ignored or gave too little importance to. It’s as if they all show me that I’m never truly alone. I realize that in the middle of uncertainty, I’m being guided, even when I feel like I’m fumbling through the dark.

Finally, we begin our descent... Through the thick night air, the lights of Istanbul glimmer faintly in the distance. I sink into this final moment of quietness before the plane’s wheels touch the ground and reality greets me again, but I don’t feel unprepared. In a strange way, I

know I'm exactly where I need to be. My pulse slows. I smile faintly in the darkness of the plane, as if I've made pace with a part of myself I've long ignored. I am ready to see what comes next.

Once on the ground, I step forward with confidence, following the crowd toward the control zone. The massive airport clock reads 11:23 PM. "Another sign?" Maybe. Or perhaps I'm just learning to seek signs where I need to find them.

Istanbul International Airport – Istanbul, Turkey

A strange shiver runs through my skin, like a fine electric charge, making the hairs on my body stand on end. I feel as if I've just been awakened from a long and confusing dream. "Am I really here? Am I truly in this place where everything seems to pulse, to bubble with life?" My gaze lifts slowly, and reality hits me – I'm standing in the midst of the same overwhelming chaos of the Turkish airport. The noise, the smells, the bustling travelers all crash over me, just as they did the last time. The air carries memories. Emotions. Sensations. They all come rushing back with a force I can't control.

I don't waste time. I feel the need to ground myself in something familiar, so I instinctively head to the café I stopped at last time. It's the place where I wrote, where I gathered my thoughts before taking the first big step toward the unknown. Now, I sit at a table, trying to organize my mind.

Starting today, I'm back on the road. A traveler again. The Universe has given me a new mission, another chapter to write. I'm pushing the ever-growing weight of destiny. Even if I wanted to stop, I couldn't – but I don't want to. I let it roll freely, sensing that at the end of this journey, the most amazing experience of my life is waiting for me.

Finally, I am once again "just me and the rest of the world." I missed this feeling – the absolute freedom I feel only when I break away from everything I know, from the comfort of the predictable days

in Romania. At that last landing, I lost this state. What can I do? Romania isn't the place for it – perhaps that “me” cannot function there. I need my Asia for that, the wide, unknown space where I find myself. Here, between worlds, I feel like I'm coming home. Home to myself.

The quiet that surrounds me now is of a different kind. It's the quiet that comes before an answer. No, not the kind of answer you already know. It's the one you feel, like a subtle spell, an invisible wave that surrounds me, making me sense that every step I take is already traced by the unseen hand of destiny.

A retrospective begins to unfold: I got what I wanted, but not without a price. Advantages and disadvantages, as always. But I made room for something else, something that's just beginning to take shape. I haven't spoken to many people about this new destination. Only to those meant to stand by me during the tough moments. They know, they are the ones who will understand what I'm doing and why. The rest of the world doesn't matter right now.

My destination is a paradox, completely different from what I initially wanted. It wasn't in my plans, but I feel in every cell of my body that this journey will bring me the answers I seek. I promise myself right here and now that I'll find all the answers. There's no other option. The Universe has already traced the path, and I just have to follow it.

I check my watch: two hours until the next flight. The destination? Hanoi, Vietnam – a country I know almost nothing about. It wasn't even on my dream list. Vietnam wasn't even on my radar. But maybe the Universe knew better all along. I'm carried by a new wave of energy, a kind of anticipatory hum that makes me feel alive.

I decided to play a little game: besides the deeper discoveries, I want to explore Vietnam's culinary culture. I'm curious. It could be one of the great pleasures of my journey. The last time I traveled, I

was vegetarian, but now I'm not. Why? Maybe this is how it was meant to be. I'm not looking for clear answers, I let things be as they are. I can't wait to taste their food – to feel the explosion of unfamiliar flavors, to let each taste surprise me. It's not the ultimate goal of the trip, but it will definitely be a part of it. A treat for the senses, an adventure for the taste buds.

Before I arrived at this destination, I spent long nights studying other places in Asia. Nothing truly attracted me. My dreams of Bali faded away due to vaccination restrictions. I have no intention of getting the Covid vaccine, so Bali wasn't an option. I was faced with a choice. I could have given up, canceled everything. But no. It wasn't the time for that. I wanted something different, a place that would surprise me. The Philippines was an option, but I wanted more than to repeat an already lived experience. Bora Bora? A beautiful dream, but the prices made me let it go.

I kept searching, wondering where my next step was being prepared. Destinations blurred together in my mind, but no decision was taking shape. Then, a spark. I remembered a vague conversation, from eight months ago, when Sawa told me with excitement about Vietnam. A message lost among thousands of conversations. I searched for it feverishly, as if the key to all my questions was hidden there. I found it.

"If I were to choose another country to visit, it would be Vietnam. It's unmatched. I would go back there anytime. It's like nothing else – landscapes, culture, experience: everything is amazing."

Vietnam. A country I could barely place on the map until then. So, I quickly checked the travel restrictions. And, miraculously, just a day before I considered this destination, Vietnam lifted all its Covid restrictions. "Is this a sign? A coincidence?" Maybe. But no coincidence can stop my journey now. Two delays were enough. Now, I'm leaving.

They announce boarding, but I'm in no hurry. The plane won't leave without me. I look around at the bustling crowd, each with their own story, and I allow myself to write a little more. My world is waiting to be laid out on the page. Soon, I'll be in the air again, and the quiet of the flight will become my reflection space. But now, here, among people, I feel both invisible and invincible at the same time. Just a tiny point in the vast swirl of humanity.

"We cannot change the direction of the wind, but we can adjust our sails." – Dolly Parton

Chapter 2. “Beyond the Rain: Discovering the Unknown”

June 20th, 2023

Noi Bai International Airport – Hanoi, Vietnam

After nearly 13 and a half hours of flight, I finally landed in Hanoi. My exhausted body felt every second spent in the air, as if the weight of the flight had doubled. I had managed to sleep about six hours, but they were interrupted by Latin rhythms dancing in my head through my headphones. It's funny how I slept – like I was at a continuous party, with salsa and bachata beats drowning out the airplane noise. When I turned off the music, the ambient sounds kept me awake, as if I had transformed into a fox, alert to every ventilation hiss or rustle of movement. So, I chose to let the music flow, like a kind of protective shield, and the hours passed.

Between bursts of sleep and electrifying rhythms, I watched a film called simply “11.11” – a mysterious title, just as enigmatic as the story itself. As the plot unfolded, I felt that synchronization, the concept being discussed, was the key that unlocks many of the mysteries of our existence – if you can recognize it. It was a captivating movie, full of revelations about how our reality is tied to numbers. In the end, everything revolves around them.

I knew this vaguely, but the film threw this certainty at me like ping-pong balls bouncing around in my mind. Time. Our lives. Birthdays. Deathdays. The flight schedule to Hanoi. My seat number. A page from a book. The number of my destiny. The car that took me to the airport. The third attempt to leave to Asia.

All these numbers spun around in my head like a mad carousel, leaving me dizzy and trapped. Without the music in my ears, I probably would have drifted anchorless, like a dry leaf carried by an unknown wind. It's strange how my journey into the unknown passed through such trivial moments. But even this moment of clarity is essential. I embrace it fully because, from this point on, I don't want to pass it up a single second of my new adventure.

I didn't pay for a special seat on the plane, so it didn't matter much where I sat. All I wanted was a cheap spot with no frills. I ended up in an aisle seat, next to a young couple. They were probably around 27. Their clothing gave away their religious background, and the request for a kosher meal didn't surprise me. What did surprise me was something else: they took everything offered to them during the flight. The sealed headphones from the TV, the two comfort blankets, and the night kits – they all disappeared into two large bags that appeared as if by magic. The night kits contained disposable slippers, socks, tiny toothbrushes, and even earplugs. They left nothing behind except the pillows, probably too bulky.

Watching them, I was reminded of how different we all approach travel, and it made me think of my own journey ahead.

I found it bizarre, especially since they were both dressed elegantly and wore expensive jewelry. Their watches gleamed with every move. I was shocked by the contrast between their sophisticated appearance and their unexpected behavior. We didn't socialize during the 13 hours, and they didn't seem remotely interested in talking to a stranger. Once we landed, I quickly forgot about them, but now, re-reading these lines, I wonder why this memory stuck with me. "Maybe it's part of the journey." That's why I refuse to erase this paragraph.

We landed safely. I stepped off the plane, following the flow of travelers toward passport control. It was 4:16 PM local time. I felt like I

had stepped into a tropical version of Bucharest: 32 degrees, thick, hot air. A heat that wrapped around your body like a damp blanket.

At the airport, everything went smoothly and efficiently. I passed through security without incident, no one checked my bags, and my visa was approved without any issues. A 30-day stamp and a brief smile were given to me. Everything was too calm. I found myself thinking, “If everything’s so easy, what will I write in my book? It seems too *boring*.” But that thought disappeared quickly. I don’t like being bored, and the Universe rarely lets me be.

I exchanged \$100 at a counter, and two apathetic men gave me 23,303 dong for every dollar. They handed me the money with a sluggishness that felt like each bill weighed a ton. The SIM card with internet for 28 days cost 350,000 dong (around \$15), but I remembered Sawa’s advice – “Don’t buy from the airport” – so I decided to make do without the internet until tomorrow.

After my unpleasant taxi experiences in Manila, I promised myself that this time I would try public transport. I wanted a challenge. I felt that, after everything I had been through, the lack of access to Google wasn’t an insurmountable problem. I was ready to manage on my own. My notes, read and re-read obsessively, were like an invisible life raft.

With the help of the airport’s Wi-Fi, I saved my hotel’s location and found the route on Google Maps. It showed me which bus to take, how much it cost, and how long it would take to reach the city center. From there, it was just a 12-minute walk. Relatively simple, right? This time, I wouldn’t be fooled. The insistent taxi drivers outside eyed me like easy prey, trying to lure me with their “special offers.” I walked past them almost whistling, feeling invincible.

I grabbed a free map of the city and studied it intensely on the bus. As a joke, I said I already knew almost the entire old center before even getting there, but the reality was different. The twists and

turns of the Vietnamese language were hard to decipher. Still, I felt good. I felt in control.

I checked a taxi fare out of curiosity – 50 minutes in traffic and 375,000 dong (around \$15) for the same route. By comparison, the bus only cost 45,000 dong (around \$2). I bought my ticket and showed the driver the map, pointing out where I needed to get off. Everything was under control. Sitting in my seat, I waited for the bus to fill with people. I don't know how much time passed; I was too absorbed in trying to memorize the walking route. I knew I had five stops and about 20 kilometers to cover, so I had plenty of time to organize my thoughts.

An electrifying shiver ran down my spine. In the midst of this controlled chaos, I felt a stirring freedom. It was a feeling I had “missed” for a long time. I watched the green fields of Vietnam unfold as the bus moved forward, and my thoughts swirled at the same slow pace. A deep calm washed over my soul. The kind of calm you feel only when you are exactly where you're meant to be. The bold decisions I had made now seemed distant, like echoes of a life lived long ago. The Universe was guiding me, and I was letting myself be carried by the current.

The road seemed endless, as if the bus was slipping through a suspended reality, where time flows differently – slower, heavier. Fatigue weighed on me like a giant stone pressing down on my shoulders, dragging me down with every minute that passed. I straightened my back suddenly, aware that I had been slouching for some time. My muscles were tense, as if they had forgotten how to relax.

“Is time different here too?” I wondered, lost in thought, trying to regain clarity. I laughed at the absurdity of the question. Time doesn't change, but it felt as if it were stretching, lengthening under the weight of the heat that enveloped everything and the uncertainty of every step I took in this new world.

The sky darkened suddenly, like a heavy curtain falling all at once without warning over a play that hadn't announced its end. It felt as if all the clouds in the Universe had gathered above us, heavy and threatening, ready to unleash something unpredictable. It was a strange sensation, like the prelude to chaos, and the air was thick with an unsettling tension, as if nature itself was holding its breath, preparing to release something. "You're in Vietnam," I whispered to myself, trying to remember where I was, as if that would change the reality beginning to unfold around me.

I looked at the silent faces in the bus. No one moved, no one spoke. Their faces seemed frozen in that oppressive silence, and the quiet was so profound it seemed to have its own weight. It was as if all the passengers were caught in a shared dream, suspended between two worlds, unable to react. I felt like I had stepped into another reality – one where everything seemed frozen, yet loaded with an unclear tension, like a taut string about to snap.

The bus jerked violently, as if it had hit an invisible obstacle, and the sudden motion made me jump. A strong vibration passed through me, and I felt my heart clench for a moment. Within seconds, the rain began to pour down torrentially. A deluge. A deluge like the end of the world. The thunder rolled above us, its rumble reverberating through the wet earth, while lightning cracked the sky like violent tears, illuminating the silhouettes of buildings in the distance for a fleeting second.

The raindrops pounded the windows with relentless fury, and their noise became a constant backdrop, drowning out every sound, every thought. It was like a haunting symphony, orchestrated by nature, where every drop fell with fatal precision. I felt as if I were trapped in a world of glass, isolated from everything outside, yet vulnerable to the overwhelming force of the storm.

A fleeting thought crossed my mind: "How can the driver see anything in this downpour? Can he even see the road?" I wondered if

the road ahead was still visible or if we were all inside a giant machine, lost in a sea of water and thunder. The bus kept struggling through the storm, and I wondered how I could ever have thought Hanoi might be “boring.” Nothing felt boring in those moments. Everything felt like a controlled vortex – every sound, every raindrop blending with the pounding of my heart, which now beat much faster.

In those moments, the world around me seemed to unravel, losing its coherence, and I felt small, like a speck of dust before the immense power of nature. The storm wasn’t just outside – I could feel it inside me, slowly unleashing, challenging me to confront my vulnerability. The rain, with all its intensity, seemed to wash not just the flooded streets of Hanoi, but also my thoughts – each lightning strike was a flash of clarity, and each thunderclap shook me out of my inner silence.

Everything seemed suspended in that moment: the bus, the people, my thoughts. It was a moment of collapse and rebirth at the same time, and all I could do was sit, observe, and accept that in the face of the storm, I had no control over anything.

By the time the bus finally reached my stop, the rain had intensified. A dense, furious wave of water was pouring over the streets. If I could have stayed on the bus, I would have, but I had no choice. I had to get off. The sky was black – a darkness that seemed to swallow everything, and the water falling from it felt like it carried bad news, like a silent warning. With no other options, I mustered my courage and stepped out into the storm, walking with determined steps and an unexpected boldness, though my body trembled slightly. I was the only one getting off, and the eyes of the passengers, a mix of pity and amazement, followed me in silence.

At the station, under a makeshift shelter, a few people huddled beneath the rain, hiding like silent shadows wrapped in long raincoats. The atmosphere was surreal, like a confusing dream where the details don’t quite fit. Rain was coming from every direction, splashing

mercilessly, while a suffocating heat clenched at my throat. The thick darkness swallowed the city, and the faint, flickering street lights fought against the downpour, creating a scene worthy of a horror movie. In the middle of this storm, I felt lost and yet, surprisingly calm. As if this chaos held some hidden meaning that only I was meant to discover.

My mind raced, searching for solutions. "Which way should I go?" I wondered, trying to find a thread of reason in what felt like an apocalyptic landscape. I pulled my jacket from my backpack and tried to put it on, though I knew it would only protect me for a few seconds. Then, a woman appeared out of nowhere. Her sudden appearance startled me. She said something in her language, pointing to transparent bags filled with rain ponchos – those ponchos that cover your whole body like plastic sacks with hoods and sleeves. "Here's my salvation," I thought, smiling bitterly at the irony of the situation – Hanoi, the "boring" city, was now giving me a lesson in the middle of a storm.

I chose a red poncho, stubbornly holding onto a touch of style even amidst the chaos. Without knowing how much it cost, I handed the woman a 50,000 dong bill (around \$2). At that moment, the price didn't matter. Nothing mattered except that I had to keep going.

Hanoi welcomed me with open arms, drenching me in the rain. The torrential downpour felt like some sort of impromptu baptism, a wild blessing for the new path I was about to embark on. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, realizing I had just stepped off the bus directly into an invisible river that didn't exist on any map. I slung my backpack onto my shoulders and pulled the poncho over it, helped by another woman who, unlike the vendor, offered her assistance without asking for anything in return.

With courage in my heart, I forged ahead, guided by the GPS. My ponchos only reached my knees, and the water at the crosswalk was already over my ankles. With no other choice but to press on, I

walked determinedly. There was no time for fuss today. The water immediately seeped into my sneakers, making my feet slip inside them with every step. "Great!" I said sarcastically to myself, but I couldn't help but be amused by the situation.

The warm rain made me sweat under the plastic poncho, and this unexpected discomfort added another layer of ridiculousness to the whole ordeal. I stopped under an awning next to a boy on a motorcycle who smiled at me and said it had been raining for a while. The irony of the moment made me laugh even more.

There was no point in staying there. The rain hit from all directions. I decided to move forward, even though I was already soaked from the knees down. Water sloshed in my sneakers with each step, but I quickly got used to the sensation. At an intersection, I hesitated. I didn't know which way to go. I struggled to pull my phone out from under the poncho, my fingers slipped on the wet screen as I tried to find the right direction on the GPS.

I pushed on resolutely, but after about 100 meters, I had to stop. The rain was becoming impossible. It was apocalyptic, as if it intended to swallow the city whole. I sought shelter under another awning, where the water couldn't reach, and sat down on the steps of a building. Next to me, a few women sat in silence. One of them offered me something for \$30 – I didn't understand what: lodging, food, who knows? When she gave up, she pulled out her phone and started playing a game. It was an absurd scene, but typical of our times. Here, in the midst of a deluge, she was shooting virtual enemies. I looked at her and burst into laughter. People are truly amazing. Encapsulated in the virtual world, we often forget that real life is passing us by. And when we realize it, it's usually too late. Life, with all its moments, has already slipped away.

When the rain finally let up, I set off again, not caring much about what lays ahead. Even though it was still drizzling, I was determined to keep going. I was soaked to the skin, but it no longer

bothered me. In the middle of the storm, I felt an inexplicable happiness. I have no words for the feeling that flooded my heart – a feeling that defied any description. At that moment, I felt like a “lost daughter of the rain,” wandering through Hanoi, yet happy that no one knew where I was or what I was doing.

Starlight Boutique Hotel – Hanoi, Vietnam

After about fifteen minutes of walking through puddles and wandering the narrow streets of this unknown city, I finally reached my destination. The rain had receded like a heavy curtain, leaving the air filled with the scent of wet asphalt. A slight sense of desolation hung over the buildings, but I pushed the hotel door open and stepped into another reality.

At the reception, a young woman with a mechanical smile and icy gaze processed my check-in. She handed me the room key, located on the second floor, and made a brief, almost disdainful gesture toward the elevator. Without lingering, I crossed the long, dark hallway, where shadows clung to the walls like silent ghosts. Every step felt like a Herculean effort, as if the entire weight of the world had latched onto my feet, pressing harder than the water in my soaked shoes.

My room... the verdict came instantly, without much analysis: ugly, suffocating, and unwelcoming. It didn't even have a window. My first impulse was to go back to reception and ask for another room. But I remembered the receptionist's cold look and thought, “No chance, Yda, not even if you paid her. Probably none of the rooms here see daylight.” That's it! I won't die if I stay here for six nights.

Exhausted, I undressed and rushed under the hot shower, letting the water soothe my tired skin. The steam quickly rose, wrapping the room in a fog. I stood under the hot stream until my body began to lose all sensation, as if the water was dissolving the last traces of tension. Finally, I reluctantly turned off the tap. With wet

clothes draped everywhere, the room now looked deplorable. But, staring at my own chaos, I let out a bitter smile. I was naked, my skin red from the hot water, in the middle of a room that smelled of steam and dampness. Thousands of miles from home, in a completely foreign world. It was one of those perfect moments for either crying or laughing hysterically. But the Yda of now, a Yda I barely recognize myself, chose to ignore it all. “What’s the point?” It wasn’t what I had imagined, but it didn’t have to be. I decided not to be picky anymore and to take things as they came, without comment.

Suddenly, I remembered I hadn’t checked my backpack. To my surprise, everything was dry, not a single drop of water had seeped in. A small victory on a day that seemed lost. I pulled out some dry clothes, got dressed, and headed down to the reception. I was starving, and my stomach had no patience left. Like a blind person, I walked up to the receptionist, not paying attention to my surroundings when I had arrived.

The girl, with the same fake smile and expressionless eyes, pointed me to a place where I could eat something traditional. A question popped into my mind: “How real is her smile? What’s she hiding?” But as soon as I stepped out of the hotel, I forgot all about her. Now, my only concern was food, and the desire to try new flavors flooded my thoughts. I was already salivating at the thought of unknown dishes.

The city, which had seemed gloomy upon my arrival, changed right before my eyes. The sounds, the smells, the honking, the laughter of people – all rose from the wet asphalt and crashed into my senses in an incomprehensible explosion. The old buildings reminded me I was in the historical center, just like Sawa had told me. Everything seemed new and fascinating, and for a moment, I forgot about hunger, exhaustion, and the windowless room. It was as if, along with the rain, all my worries had dissolved into the fragrant air of the Vietnamese city.

I wandered the streets without a clear purpose, lost among people whose language I didn't understand. "How will I manage here, alone?" That was the question gnawing at me, but I let it slip away, overwhelmed by the mesmerizing beauty of the place.

Eventually, I found a small restaurant with just four tables, intimate and tucked away from the street's hustle. The menu displayed outside had no English translations, and just as I was about to leave, a young woman approached and said something in rapid Vietnamese. I smiled awkwardly and pointed to the menu, but she didn't seem to understand English. We exchanged amused glances for a few seconds until one of the boys sitting at a nearby table came over and spoke to me in simple but clear English. He recommended three dishes and suggested I take a closer look at the pictures – "They'll be helpful," he said with a slightly ironic smile.

I sat at one of the tables facing the street and ordered one of the dishes the boy recommended, not knowing what flavors awaited me. When the bowl of soup arrived in front of me, it was like a door to a whole new world had opened. Before I even tasted it, the smell of the unknown soup hit my senses in a surprising way – a combination of sweet and salty aromas, fresh herbs, and meat, something I had never encountered before.

I leaned in, letting the steam rise into my face, and for a moment, I felt like a child in a fairy tale world, ready to discover something magical. In that instant, my hunger melted into pure curiosity.

I was afraid to start. "How do I combine all these flavors without ruining something?" I wondered, as I observed the strands of noodles tangled with unfamiliar greens, tiny eggs, and pieces of meat. The dish looked like a mysterious work of art, and I was an intruder.

When I took the first spoonful, a strange mix of sensations flooded my taste buds. The noodles were soft, slipping through my

teeth with an almost velvety texture. The pork, slightly crispy on the outside, broke into juicy strips, vaguely reminding me of the taste of home, but with an exotic, almost wild twist. The fish? Never would I have imagined combining pork with fish, but here, in this world that didn't seem to follow my rules, the combination made sense. It was as if Hanoi itself was speaking to me through its flavors, telling me that sometimes it's okay to set logic aside and let yourself be surprised.

I took another bite, and the greens offered an explosion of freshness, cleansing my mouth of the intense taste of the meat. There was something both familiar and unknown in this fresh mint, as if each bite whispered, "You came here to understand, but in fact, you will learn to feel."

As I chewed slowly, letting each ingredient settle into my world, I suddenly felt connected to the place. The streets outside, the hustle, the faces of strangers passing by the restaurant – all seemed to be part of the same composition, like a living painting, where the food was just another way to decipher this world.

But not everything was pleasant. The bamboo shoots, for example, had a strange texture, almost woody, and a slightly bitter taste that contrasted with the other flavors in the soup. I wrinkled my face but kept eating. I chose to live the entire experience, even if it wasn't perfect. Here, it wasn't just about pleasure, but about acceptance – taking life as it comes, without asking too many questions.

Meanwhile, I noticed that the chopsticks kept slipping from my hands every time I tried to grab something. I felt my clumsiness like a burden, but it didn't stop me from smiling. There was something so simple yet so distant from any habit from home.

The chopsticks were like a test, a trial I had to pass to become part of this place. And even though I resorted to using the spoon,

deep down I promised myself that one day I would learn how to handle them, as if that would help me get closer to this culture.

As the soup slowly disappeared from the bowl, I realized that not only had my hunger faded, but so had some of the anxieties that had followed me since my arrival. This food, with all its unexpected combinations, gave me a strange sense of release. It reminded me that you don't have to understand everything from the start, that you don't have to control every aspect of your life to enjoy it. Sometimes, you just have to taste, accept, and live in the moment.

This was only my first Vietnamese culinary experience, but I already felt at home. I would have eaten two portions if my stomach had allowed it. Full and refreshed, I wandered a bit more through the nearby streets, until my energy reserves were completely depleted, like the water evaporating from the city's asphalt.

Back in my gloomy room, I didn't fall asleep right away. I spent some time on WhatsApp, losing track of time, until exhaustion won, and I set my alarm for the next day. A new day of exploration through Hanoi awaited me, and I was determined to start it with full force.

“Travel is a school with no walls.” – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Chapter 3. “Panic, Rain, and the Scents of Fire: The Unknown Hanoi”

June 21st, 2023

With no windows in this room, the darkness swallows me completely. It would be easy to gouge out my eyes in this thick blackness, without even meaning to. It's probably morning... My phone alarm blares like an ambulance siren, vibrating straight into my brain. I twist sharply toward the nightstand and, with agile movements, press the button, silencing the infernal noise just before reality fully catches me awake. “Yesss...” I think to myself, “I’ll get up in a second...” and immediately fall back asleep, still clutching my phone, with no regrets.

The noise from the hallway startles me awake. I jolt up, my heart pounding in my ears, and start searching for my phone among the sheets. I find it with difficulty and stare at the screen: 9:45 AM. “What was that? That I’ll get right out of bed?” The day really kicks off... by noon.

It was well past 12:00 PM by the time I finally dragged myself out of the hotel room. The list of “tasks” loomed in my mind: buying a SIM card with a local number, taking a tour to explore the local sights, finding a coffee to bring me back to life, and, of course, visiting the city – because, after all, that’s why I came here. I left the room with all of this in my head, as if I were humming an upbeat tune: “Explore the world, Yda! Explore, explore!” And so began my first real day in Vietnam.

At the reception, there was a new guy – friendly, with gelled hair shining like a raven’s wing – grinning wide, showing teeth that

were almost unnaturally white. “Does he bleach them, or are they naturally that way?” I wondered as he flashed me that polite smile. Clearly, the girl from yesterday desperately needed a break, and this guy looked more than well-rested. I asked him where I could buy a SIM card, and his response came in such “intelligible” English that, in my half-asleep state, I barely understood anything. I caught a few fragments: turn right at the first intersection and another right. I smiled angelically, thanked him, and walked out of the hotel, pleased that at least the directions seemed clear.

“So, Yda, you’re on your own!” Ever since I left Romania, my mind keeps talking to me like we’re two separate people – a weird but comforting dialogue in this loneliness. So today, that’s all that’s left for me to do: survive on my own, using all the skills I’ve gathered over the years. No one’s here to look after me, so I walk out with my head held high, chest out, just like a friend once taught me.

As I walk through the streets, I remember seeing a few travel agencies selling everything: tours, accommodation, currency exchange, bus, train, and plane tickets. They’d probably sell your parents if needed. I picked one at random, without any recommendations.

After a few interactions with the agents, I ended up in a place where a chatty woman sold me a tour for 950,000 dong (around \$40), leaving tomorrow morning. She wanted to sell me three tours at once, but I didn’t fall for it. I also got a SIM card with a local number, with unlimited internet for 28 days, which cost me 200,000 dong (around \$8). If I had stayed there much longer, she would’ve sold me something else for sure, so I quickly left, happy that – finally – I had internet, and I felt ready to tackle the day.

It was the perfect moment for a coffee. I felt almost euphoric after ticking so many things off my list in such a short time. I floated down the streets, looking for the perfect café where I could sit and write in peace. None of them caught my eye at first, and all this

walking left me drenched in the suffocating heat. I finally found a decent café and sat down, facing the street, ordering an iced latte.

I quickly downloaded WhatsApp on my new number and sent a few messages. “It’s too early in Romania,” I told myself, seeing no replies. “It’s the perfect time to write.” With so many impressions gathered, I felt the need to put them down on virtual paper before they slipped into the corners of my mind.

I pulled my laptop out of its case, but the moment I touched it, a burning sensation shot through my fingers. It was hot, like it had been directly exposed to Vietnam’s merciless sun. I gently lifted it and held it to my ear. “Does it still work?” Amid the infernal noise of the street, I managed to hear a faint buzzing. I frantically pressed all the buttons, but the screen stays black, lifeless. Panic gripped me like a cold claw. My laptop, my writing tool, my technological soul, wasn’t responding.

“Why won’t it turn on?” I wondered as I felt the heat of the laptop seeping through my fingers like a burning stove. “It must’ve stayed too long in the backpack, suffocated by the sun and heat.” I knew I had been careless, but now all the excuses in the world seemed pointless. Desperation set in. “Damn it!” I muttered under my breath, the only word that came out like a muted cry of helplessness. The guy at the table next to me glanced over curiously, and I shrugged with a bitter smile. In my head, I started frantically pressing the keys again, as if the laptop could sense my desperation and decide to come back to life out of pure sympathy.

It felt like the whole day was ruined. Panic had slowly crept up my spine, freezing every muscle. “What if my laptop is really broken? What if I can’t use it at all anymore?” I swallowed the lump in my throat and made a sudden decision: I had to return to the hotel, even if it meant trekking 1.4 kilometers back through the oppressive heat.

I gulped down the coffee, paid the bill, and quickly started back toward the hotel, practically running from an impending disaster. My thoughts were racing in every direction, trying to calm myself with ideas like “maybe it’s not that bad,” but the panic was too deeply rooted.

When I got back to the room, the first thing I did was turn the air conditioner on full blast and hold the laptop in the stream of cold air, hoping to cool it down. I stood there, ridiculous, holding the laptop like it was an injured animal. “Please, work!” I prayed silently, as cold sweat trickled down my back – a strange mix of the outside heat and the fear inside me.

Minutes passed, and the laptop still showed no signs of life. Each failed attempt deepened my sense of helplessness. It was like my entire creative future was trapped in that small, hot, silent device. After multiple tries, almost resigned, the screen flickered on. I felt the tension in my body evaporate in an instant. My knees buckled, and a long sigh escaped my chest. “Finally...”

I sat down on the edge of the bed, staring at the laptop, now quietly resting on the nightstand, cooling off. On the way back, I had imagined apocalyptic scenarios – what I would do if the laptop didn’t work anymore. But now, with it turned on, I realized how fragile technology can be against nature. Deep down, I knew I had to be more vigilant in the future. I promised myself I’d never be so careless with important things again.

I looked at the laptop once more, relieved, and left, this time with the intention of losing myself in the city streets. The heavy air of the room now felt suffocating, and the idea of leaving my emotions behind enticed me like a promise of freedom. I had a few tourist spots on my list, suggested by Sawa, so without wasting any time, I activated the GPS and set off exploring. With each step, my earlier anxiety faded, and my smile widened, making me want to greet everyone I passed.

Relieved that my laptop was working again, I left the hotel, eager to lose myself in the streets of Hanoi. The first point of interest was “Train Street,” which, surprisingly, was very close. I didn’t know much about the place – my plan for the first day was just to write and reflect, but as usual, life had other plans for me. Apparently, “Train Street” was exactly what the name suggests: a street traversed by an active railway, around which people lived their ordinary lives – with houses, shops, and artisan workshops all just a few meters from the tracks where trains passed. Fascinating and, at the same time, a bit surreal.

As I wandered aimlessly, the locals' gazes followed me with mild curiosity. Clearly, with my pale skin and blonde hair, I stood out like a foreign splash of color in a local painting. Soon enough, a woman approached me, smiling broadly, and invited me to sit down in her small establishment. I accepted without hesitation – my mouth was dry as desert sand, and my thirst turned every thought into a distant echo.

I crossed the barrier and reached the train tracks. Everything looked like a scene from a Hollywood movie – small buildings, restaurants, and cafés lined up along the tracks, shops with paintings and colorful handicrafts brimming with life. It felt like a world frozen in time, where modernity met tradition in a perfectly choreographed dance. I was quickly handed a menu, and without a second thought, I ordered a mango shake. The woman watched me closely, as if I were a rare treasure she didn’t want to part with too easily. In just a few minutes, the shake arrived – extremely sweet, definitely packed with sugar. A mental note for next time: ask for it without sugar.

Sipping my cold drink, I was fascinated by everything around me. Every corner was an explosion of ingenuity and creativity – houses turned into small businesses, shop windows filled with colorful items, all waiting for curious tourists. It was hard to believe that, at certain times, these little paradises had to be quickly packed up... to make way for the passing train. A game of chance, beautifully

orchestrated by simple, yet ingenious people. Without realizing it, I was being absorbed by the magic of the place.

After finishing my shake, I got up to explore. I wanted to take some photos, to capture everything that caught my eye – from the stalls filled with trinkets to the flowers adorning the little houses. Fascinated, I didn't wait for the train – not knowing the schedule, I kept wandering among the people and the stalls. Every place seemed to hide a story in its colors, in its forms, in the handcrafted materials. It was an incredible contrast to the chaos of Hanoi I had passed through.

Eventually, the heat became unbearable, and exhaustion set in. People were tugging at my sleeve, trying to sell me various things, but all I wanted was some peace and a cool place to relax. I visited a few more monuments, taking dozens of photos and videos. Everything seemed new, alive, even the most mundane things – the little flowers by the roadside looked like jewels, and the giant trees, real time-worn colossi, took my breath away. The traffic? An indescribable amalgam, an orchestrated madness of honks and engines, something that seemed to defy every law of physics. I had seen traffic in Manila, but here... it was beyond imagination.

Slowly, I had completely forgotten that just two days ago, I was still in Romania. Now and then, a flash would remind me of the past few months, of the world I felt trapped in. I had fled from it like a vicious wolf, and I clearly didn't want to return anytime soon. Strangely enough, "here" didn't feel foreign to me at all. The only difference was the language I couldn't understand.

Evening fell early, though it wasn't yet 7:00 PM. Darkness settled over the city like a heavy cloak, but I wasn't far from the hotel. Still, I didn't want to go back to that soulless room so quickly. So, I kept wandering without a clear purpose, stopping in front of shop windows, sometimes admiring my own reflection.

Suddenly, the rain came down in torrents, forcing me into a nearby travel agency. The rain had caught me off guard, and the large, cold drops hit my face. It felt like the agency chose me, not the other way around. Barely a few seconds had passed since I stepped inside, and already there was a downpour outside. It was all happening again: just like last night, when I arrived in Hanoi. “Does it rain here every evening?” I wondered, smiling bitterly.

The guy at the desk smiled back, a gentle smile from behind thick-framed glasses. His round face and flat nose were almost hidden under those glasses. I returned his greeting, suddenly realizing how ironic it was that the Universe sometimes throws you into completely unexpected situations. If I’d seen him in the morning, I probably wouldn’t have come in here.

“How can I help you?” he asked, as if he hadn’t noticed I was only there because of the torrential rain. As if trying to convince me that entering the agency was a deliberate choice. Smiling, I decided to play along. On the wall behind him was a huge photograph of the beautiful rice terraces of Sapa, an image that immediately captivated me. From Sawa’s list, the name “Sapa” echoed in my mind like a reminder. It was listed as “a must-see,” and this lush green image seemed to confirm everything.

Tom, as I soon learned his name, invited me to take a seat. I sat down, crossing my legs, ready to listen – I had no other choice, as the rain showed no sign of stopping. It seemed like I had been somewhat captured by the moment, and Tom, relaxed, began presenting the available tours. He talked nonstop, bombarding me with information like a verbal torrent, without slowing down. Soon, I had a detailed plan on a large sheet of paper, just like the woman this morning. “Is this their usual way of working?” I wondered, smiling.

Tom was persistent, speaking quickly and confidently, but he seemed to know what he was doing, and his enthusiasm for the tours was infectious. I had the urge to leave immediately, just to escape his

pressure, but the torrential rain had cut off any escape route. So, I remained caught in Tom's web, as he casually talked about motorcycle tours and other adventures. "Ha Giang Loop," he said, "is a unique experience" – a motorbike tour with a driver. Tempting, but something didn't quite fit with my plans. Sapa, however, had completely captured my attention. Those rice terraces seemed to be calling me.

My mind was racing – I had booked 6 nights in Hanoi, but only had a 30-day visa. I still had over 1,600 kilometers to cover before reaching Ho Chi Minh. Tomorrow I was going on the Ha Long Bay tour, and the days were starting to feel shorter. "But those rice terraces... Ugh!"

In the end, I decided to refuse the motorcycle tour, tempting as it sounded. With a deep sigh, I chose the two-day, one-night homestay trip to Sapa, paying €75. Even though I'd lose one night of accommodation in Hanoi, I didn't care. I had made the right choice. Tomorrow, Ha Long Bay, then Thursday and Friday I'd explore Hanoi. Saturday morning, I'd leave for Sapa. The plan was perfect. Or at least, so I thought.

I paid for the tour, and when I left, as if by magic, the rain had stopped. "Perfect timing!" Tom was satisfied, and I... was hungry. I realized I hadn't eaten much all day, so I asked him if he could recommend a place to eat.

"What are you in the mood for?" he responded with a trap question, one I wasn't prepared for.

"Umm, I'm not sure," I said, smiling awkwardly, and he burst out laughing, making his glasses tremble on his nose.

I got the address of a restaurant from Tom, who assured me the food was delicious, and that once I got there, I'd be able to choose whatever caught my eye. His recommendation gave me confidence,

so I turned on the GPS, and in just five minutes, I arrived at my destination.

The restaurant felt like an oasis of light and life, filled with laughter and lively conversations. As soon as I opened the door, I was hit by the cheerful noise of tourists and the enticing aroma wafting from the kitchen. A young waitress immediately greeted me, "Would you like to eat?"

"Yes, definitely!" I replied without hesitation, and she told me there were a few seats available upstairs, showing me the stairs tucked away behind the room. I weaved through the tables, down the narrow aisle, with only one thought in mind: "Famous restaurant, packed with tourists... must be good food!" I laughed to myself. I never would have set foot in this place without Tom's recommendation, but now I felt full of enthusiasm and hunger. The delicious smells coming from the kitchen made my stomach do a happy dance.

When I reached the top step, a young guy who couldn't have been older than 18 greeted me with a smile and invited me to follow him. The atmosphere upstairs was vibrant, with two large groups of European tourists, probably Germans or Dutch. A small table for two, by the window, was free. I sat there, next to a man with curly hair, around 60 years old, covered in tattoos that gave him a rebellious look. He smiled briefly from behind his glasses and returned to his meal.

I made myself comfortable as the boy, whose badge read "Tung," brought me the menu. As I flipped through the pages, I couldn't help but notice how "fancy" the place felt. The décor was refined, the waiters attentive, and their uniforms impeccable. These details impressed me deeply.

Tung came back. I still couldn't decide, so I asked him for a recommendation. Without hesitation, he suggested a pineapple juice and a dish that, according to him, I would surely enjoy. I had no idea

what I would be eating, but that didn't matter anymore – I had promised myself I'd explore Vietnamese cuisine without any preconceptions. All I knew was that the total price would be 130,000 dong (around \$5), and I was perfectly fine with that.

When the food arrived, Tung looked at me with a knowing smile and asked, "Do you think you need instructions?" I laughed heartily. "Of course!" I replied, staring at the three plates in front of me as if they were pieces of a puzzle I needed to solve. The first plate was full of green lettuce leaves, fresh mint, and perfectly cooked white noodles. The second plate held caramelized onions, bamboo shoots, and fried pieces of meat, still sizzling. And my stomach... it was practically putting on a sound performance.

On a small saucer, a bowl of yellow sauce sat provocatively beside thinly sliced red chili peppers. In a discreet little packet, something that looked like transparent napkins caught my eye – I had no idea what they were. Two disposable gloves placed on top of the packet completed the setup. And the third plate? Empty, waiting to be filled with my culinary creativity under Tung's watchful eye.

I must have had an expression that betrayed complete confusion, and with a wide smile, Tung decided to take over. He began showing me each step of the process, moving with the care of someone crafting a work of art. I couldn't take my eyes off his hands, which moved with a dexterity that was almost hypnotic. Rockets could have flown by, and I wouldn't have noticed.

Tung put on the gloves and pulled out a thin sheet of rice paper from the packet, as transparent as a dragonfly's wing, and placed it on the plate. He layered it with a lettuce leaf and a few sprigs of mint. The fresh mint aroma hit me suddenly, like a burst of spring. Then, with precise movements, he unraveled some noodles, laying them delicately over the mint before adding the caramelized onions, bamboo shoots, and pieces of meat, topping it all off with a few thin strips of chili pepper.

The result? A perfect green roll that Tung indicated I should dip into the yellow sauce. My curiosity had already beaten any hesitation, so I took a bite without thinking too much. An explosion of flavors filled my mouth – the fresh mint, the sweet and slightly crispy onions, the juicy meat, and the spicy chili... Each bite felt like its own story. The chili quickly brought a tear to my left eye, but I didn't care. "Wow... wow... wow...", I thought, taking another bite.

I looked up and saw Tung standing by the table, observing every reaction on my face with interest. He smiled contentedly, like an artist watching his masterpiece being admired. "From here, you can manage on your own," he said, leaving the remaining ingredients and giving me a playful wink.

I continued making the next rolls myself, but... honestly, they mostly fell apart on the plate. My hands didn't have Tung's precision, but that didn't matter. I ate with my hands, the chili brought more tears than I expected, but I enjoyed every bite. "Never say never, Yda!" I laughed to myself.

At one point, Tung appeared next to me again, asking with a conspiratorial air, "Are you full?" I looked up, surprised. What waiter asks if you're full? But yes, I was full – and quite spicy! Satisfied with my answer, Tung asked me to leave a review on TripAdvisor if I enjoyed the experience. Before I even received the check, I wrote the review so I wouldn't forget any details.

Satisfied and full, I stepped back into the noisy, bustling streets, ready for whatever Hanoi had in store next. I was fascinated about the vibrant lights of the night. It felt like I had been transported to another dimension at that table with Tung and his rolls. Everything seemed to change when I walked out of the restaurant. I paused on the sidewalk and, like a moment of revelation, I realized just how unpredictable life could be if you let it. I laughed out loud, not caring about the looks from people passing by. "I'm all alone in the world and I loooove ittt!"

A street ice cream stand caught my attention. I stopped to get a cone, hoping it would cool the burning in my mouth. It was a welcome relief. The perfect end to a day full of sensations. Back in my room, the first thing I did was check my laptop. “Ah, my trusty laptop, waiting all calm and quiet... and it actually works.”

I took a shower, stretched out on the bed, and let my thoughts drift toward tomorrow’s tour at Ha Long Bay.

I found myself thinking about the adventures in Palawan, about Yow’s persistence and Essra’s charm, and that blue boat that carried me through Big Lagoon. Nostalgia washed over me for a few moments, but I quickly shook it off. I opened Instagram – nothing new. “Reset, Yda!” I told myself, smiling.

On WhatsApp, messages kept coming in, but I didn’t feel tired. I had a strange energy, as if all the events of the day were just the beginning of a new adventure. “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I sleep?” I thought I might take another lap around the city, but instead, I got up for a few exercises. No luck. The clock was already 3:30 AM, and the alarm for the tour was set to go off any minute. I felt like a ghost, in this bunker-like room full of echoes. I could feel the alarm’s sound about to shatter the silence soon, like a fanfare in the middle of the darkness. But I had to get up... the tour awaited.

***“In nature, nothing is perfect and everything is perfect.” –
Alice Walker***

Chapter 4. “Among Pearls, Rocks, and Dreamlands”

June 22nd, 2023

Ha Long Bay, Vietnam

At 8:40 AM, I finally got on the bus for the Ha Long Bay tour after waiting for about 20 minutes in the hotel lobby for the driver to pick me up. I was so tired that I felt like stretching out on that couch and falling into a deep sleep, not caring about the rest of the world. Our guide for today, a sweet young woman around 25 years old, dressed in the company's orange shirt, informs me that I'm the last person to boarding and that now, with the bus full, we are ready to depart. The only available seat is next to a blonde woman, her skin so pale and freckled it seemed as though she hadn't seen the sun in years. She quickly introduces herself – Jenny, from the UK. But we don't exchange many words. I put my headphones on, eager to immerse myself in music and, probably, doze off until the first stop.

The passengers kept to themselves, and the guide allowed us to relax in peace, something I silently appreciated. I think I may have dozed off a bit because the next thing I remember is stopping at a gas station for a bathroom break. I quickly get off to stretch my legs but soon find myself back on the bus, almost desperate from the suffocating heat. The air inside had become unbearable, and when the guide announced the second stop, I barely understood what she was saying. But seeing everyone get off, I followed.

It wasn't until I stepped outside that I realized where we were. A pearl farm! “Wow!” I whispered to myself, surprised. I shook off my fatigue a little, intrigued by the new place. Enchanted by the new surroundings, I entered along with the other tourists, but we quickly

scattered through the enormous room. The place was a hive of activity – an unimaginable buzz, with dozens of people moving chaotically, each absorbed in something. I felt completely unprepared for this stop. “Did the woman who sold me the tour mention this pearl farm?” I wondered, confused. Clearly, my broken English had tricked me once again.

I wandered through the first room, where there were several booths explaining the pearl cultivation process. It felt like I was at a congress dedicated to these little oceanic marvels, and being there felt surreal. I wandered among the booths, filming a few clips, but I couldn’t spot our guide in her orange shirt anywhere. I felt lost, but not desperate. I didn’t even know what my fellow bus mates looked like, and I couldn’t spot any familiar faces. I shrugged and moved on, absorbed by the deafening hum that filled the huge room, amplified by the hangar’s walls.

I spent some time admiring the pearl stands – all those jewelry pieces shimmering under the neon lights like tiny treasures of the sea. But at some point, I felt it was time to tear myself away from the mesmerizing world of pearls and moved on to the next room. The displays were filled with jewelry, paintings, glassware, ceramics, as well as clothing, sweets, and local drinks. There were so many things for sale that the place felt like a cathedral of consumption.

Still, although many people, like me, weren’t buying anything, they crowded around the displays with their cameras. So, I decided to step outside. The blinding sun hit me immediately, like a dagger of light straight to the forehead. My first instinct was to retreat into the coolness of the building, but the thought of listening to that echoing ding again felt unbearable. I was hungry too, so I headed towards the stalls in front of the building, looking for a quick snack.

The smell of coffee snapped me out of my lethargy, and I realized I hadn’t had any yet today. “And I haven’t eaten anything either!” my stomach reminded me, almost indignantly. It was almost

11:00 AM, but remembering that lunch was included on the boat, I told myself I could hold out. Yet a cold shiver suddenly ran down my spine: “Which bus did I come in?” I realized I hadn’t remembered anything about our bus, and I suddenly felt disoriented. I wandered around the enormous parking lot for a while, scanning for anyone familiar. Fortunately, I spotted our guide, so I headed straight for her.

Pink was a petite, slender girl with olive skin and a striking contrast between her long black hair and the pink name she bore. “Who in the world thought of calling her Pink?” I wondered, amused, but the thought quickly faded. I exchanged a few words with her about the excursion, and at that moment, another guy from our bus appeared. I told them about my plans for Sapa, and he, suddenly enthusiastic, began telling me about the Ha Giang Loop. He told me I shouldn’t miss that motorbike tour, that it was an unforgettable experience, as he had just returned from there. I listened, fascinated. “I didn’t ask him anything, and yet he’s telling me all this with so much passion...” After all the conversations yesterday with Tom, who had tried to convince me to go on the Ha Giang Loop? “What a strange coincidence!”

I check my phone, and searching for more information, I discover that Vietnam is often praised for its breathtaking natural beauty. Who would have thought? When my mom first heard that I wanted to visit this country, she asked, confused, “Isn’t there a war going on there?” No, the war had been a long time ago, but Vietnam is so much more than the conflict that once shadowed its image. Pearl farms were just one of the many hidden treasures of this country. I read with fascination about the process of cultivating pearls, and every detail I discovered clarified the things I hadn’t understood earlier.

Still mesmerized by the pearl farm, we’re back on the coach, continuing our way to HaLong Bay – another famous UNESCO World Heritage destination. It was already past noon when we arrived at the port, and my phone had completely died after hours of music.

Alongside the other young tourists from the bus, we cheerfully and noisily get off in the port's enormous parking lot. After a few minutes of waiting, Pink hands us our tickets, and we head towards our boat.

The boat, actually a small day cruise ship, wasn't very big, but it had a restaurant and an upper deck where we could relax. The restaurant, enclosed on all sides with large glass windows, felt like a huge greenhouse, where the sun poured in relentlessly. Without air conditioning, it was unimaginable to stay there for more than a few minutes.

Pink invited us to sit at the already prepared tables. The boat started moving gently, but we were far too occupied with the delicious food being served, devouring everything brought to our table by a few girls from the crew. There were eight of us at each table, and I ended up in a group of lively young people. Dish after dish was brought to the table – stuffed rolls, chicken and mushroom sauce, boiled rice, noodles white as snow. Two of the young people were familiar with Vietnamese cuisine and enthusiastically explained the contents of certain dishes. Our curiosity seemed endless, and we sampled from every plate, enchanted by the diverse flavors.

One heart-shaped dish caused a small stir at the table, but what was truly surprising was the way the food came in waves. Each new dish was greeted with enthusiasm, even though we were already full. Raw vegetable salad, crabs, huge fried fish, boiled octopus – all were served one after the other, alongside a multitude of sauces. We stuffed ourselves, and I felt like I could barely breathe, as if my stomach was about to burst.

Now, as I write these lines, I realize how memorable it would have been if someone had filmed us in that restaurant. The laughter, the disappearing plates, the funny conversations – it would have turned into a delightful comedy movie. The delicious dishes disappeared before our eyes with dizzying speed, as if we hadn't even had time to properly see them. After we were full, our voices grew

even louder, and the atmosphere felt like a festival. We only quieted down when Pink appeared among us, explaining the day's program and inviting us to relax on the upper deck of the boat.

There was no way we could refuse the invitation to enjoy the gentle sun and the breathtaking view of the famous rocks we were sailing among. We all eagerly squeezed up the narrow staircase leading to the upper deck. Distracted by the delicious food and the stories during the meal, we hadn't even bothered to glance out the window. When we reached the deck, we stopped abruptly, captivated by the view unfolding before us. It was as if time itself had slowed down to allow us to contemplate the grandeur of nature.

The rocks we had seen in the agency's photos, which had seemed small and insignificant, now revealed themselves as towering giants of stone, rising imposingly from the sea. We were so small before them, as if nature was showing us our place in this vast world. I immediately found an empty swing and let myself be rocked by the sea breeze, absorbing with all my senses the natural spectacle before me. Each of us found a spot – some sat on benches, others on the floor, in silence, each lost in their own reverie.

The spectacle was more than astonishing – it was visceral, an experience you can't truly understand unless you're there, witnessing this display of natural grandeur. As I gazed at the towering rocks and the calm sea, I felt a strange sense of peace wash over me, as if this place held answers to questions I hadn't yet asked.

Suddenly, I remembered Sawa's words, who, in his own way, had anticipated the fascination I was about to experience here:

"If I had to choose a country to visit again, it would be Vietnam. It's unparalleled. I would return any time. There's nothing else like it. Everything – from the landscapes to the culture – is amazing."

"Magnificent, breathtaking, stunning!" I kept repeating the words in my mind, almost like a mantra. The energy of this place

pulsed through me, coursing over my skin like a short circuit. I was wrapped in a dream – a dream where I saw myself floating at night under a starlit sky, on the deck of a boat, with the thought that maybe I could stay here forever. The idea that we were so close to China added a mystical aura to the place, as if we were standing on the border between two worlds.

The sea, calm as a crystal mirror, reflected the tall rocks and strange shapes of these geological wonders, as our little boat drifted slowly, in a silence that seemed unreal. Everyone else was busy taking photos, selfies, recording every moment, but I no longer needed digital memories. What I would have liked, though, was to read their thoughts. “I wonder what each person feels in front of this overwhelming beauty?”

Pink appeared at some point, but she was too far away for me to hear her. My inner world had become too captivating for me to return to reality.

After a while, our boat approached a small beach – our next stop. Unlike the surprise of the pearl farms, this time I embraced the situation with a calm acceptance. Everything fit perfectly with the experience, as if the place had its own rhythm, and we were following it without resistance. Pink gave us two options: climb to a viewpoint to see the sea from above or stay on the beach. The stifling heat and my unsuitable flip-flops for climbing quickly convinced me to choose the beach.

Most of the tourists chose to climb, but we, the few “lazy” ones, sought refuge in the warm, gentle sea. Every moment spent there, with my feet submerged in water and my skin caressed by the sun, felt like a blessing. We stayed there for about an hour, time that passed too quickly, and then we left for the next destination: a cave where our boat anchored next to a pier.

We began the ascent up endless steps, the heat so intense that sweat poured off us as if we had just finished a marathon. But the effort was worth it. When we reached the top of the stairs, the panorama that unfolded before our eyes took our breath away. It was as if someone had transposed a dream landscape into reality. I remembered the image I had seen on the agency's poster – the same landscape, but now it was alive, pulsating before me.

The water, in its shades of sea green, looked like a magical mirror where the sun played, reflecting its rays in the gentle ripples of the calm sea. The rocks seemed randomly scattered, like toys left behind by a child god who had abandoned his play. I gazed at the stunning landscape and felt transported to another world, a fairytale land far from any familiar reality.

I took a few photos, but the camera on my phone could only capture a pale shadow of the grandeur unfolding before me. What I was seeing with my eyes was simply unreal. I may sound like I'm exaggerating, but I'm telling you with complete sincerity – this bay is from another world.

With difficulty and gasping for breath, we climbed all the steps to the entrance of the cave. Pink seemed immune to the beauty around her, climbing without any visible emotion. She explained something, answered questions, but for her, everything seemed routine. "Is it possible to ever get tired of such beauty?" I wondered. "Why do we get bored with beautiful things?" When we don't have something, it seems magnificent, but when we do, it becomes ordinary, mundane. I remember Mone's words: "Routine is like rust." Maybe that's what makes me travel – the desire to escape this "rust" that seems to erode even the most beautiful things in life.

The cave was cool, but the heavy, sticky humidity clung to my skin. The air felt suffocating, and my nostrils were invaded by a strange sensation, as if they were covered in an invisible slime. The cave was divided into three large chambers, and although I was far

from Pink and her stories, I enjoyed the peace of this mysterious place. It was as if nature had played with time, sculpting shapes from stone and creating a mythical spectacle.

After exploring the cave, we emerged into the light and descended once again down the seemingly endless steps. We crossed the pier and returned to our boat, which waited silently, gently rocking on the water. We returned to the bus, exhausted but filled with a quiet happiness. It's amazing how such beautiful places can drain all your energy, yet leave your soul completely recharged.

On the boat, I charged my phone, preparing for the long journey ahead. I settled in comfortably, turned on some music, and let myself be carried away by the melodies. With heavy, tired eyes, I dozed off for most of the roughly 170-kilometer to Hanoi. When I woke up, my phone's battery was drained again – as if it, too, had been consumed by the beauty of the day.

Starlight Boutique Hotel – Hanoi, Vietnam

It was almost 9:00 PM when the bus dropped me off in front of the hotel. I felt slightly refreshed, though my body was still tired after the long journey. Along the way, everyone slept. Even Pink, our guide, had drifted off to sleep, and the silence grew so profound that the sound of the bus engine felt like another passenger, humming monotonously in the background.

I took the stairs up to my room, the elevator being occupied, thinking about the colossal rocks I had seen earlier. It seemed incredible that those natural formations had stared back at me with such profound silence, as if they had guarded the calm waters of HaLong Bay for millennia. As my thoughts floated among those overwhelming images, I wondered if I'd be able to sleep or if the night would be long and restless again. I had dozed off on the bus, but it wasn't enough to shake off my exhaustion.

I went into the bathroom for a well-deserved shower. The warm jet of water embraced me like a comforting hug, washing away the fine sand and sweat accumulated during the day. Only when I got out did I realize there was no towel. “Oops!” I stood there, naked, in the middle of the bathroom, with water still dripping off my skin and a slightly confused look in my eyes. “What do I do now?” I repeated to myself. The cleaning lady had forgotten to leave me a fresh towel. With no other option, I rummaged for my beach towel, still gritty with sand and carrying the scent of hot days. So, I had to go down to the reception to ask for a new towel. “I wouldn’t want to dry myself with this tomorrow morning...” I said to myself, amused by the thought that the beach towel might become an unwanted accessory.

As I was getting dressed to go to the reception, the idea of changing my plans suddenly popped into my head. I thought about it earlier on the bus, but had planned to wait until tomorrow. But why wait until tomorrow? After all, that was the plan anyway.

Yet something pushed me to act now – the impulse was too strong to ignore. I was forced by circumstances to leave the room, so... I decided to write to Tom. I had nothing to lose, maybe just receive a refusal or not find him at the agency at this hour.

“Hello, Tom!” I wrote to him on WhatsApp.

His reply came almost immediately, surprising me: “Hello, Yda! Can I help you with something?”

“Yes, please. Are you still at the agency?” I replied, feeling slightly impatient.

“Yes, I’m here. Tell me, what can I do for you?”

“I’d like to change the date of my ticket to Sapa. Is that possible?” I asked, feeling my tension rise as I waited for his verdict.

“Yes, it’s possible. But what happened?”

“Can I come by in 10 minutes? I’ll explain when I get there.” I didn’t want to waste time. I rushed out of the room before he could even reply.

“Yes, of course,” he wrote. I didn’t respond back.

I went down to the reception, where a different staff member from the one in the morning smiled at me kindly from behind the desk. I explained the towel issue, and with natural politeness, he apologized, promising that I would have a fresh one when I returned.

I left the hotel with my heart beating a little faster. I felt a mix of excitement, impatience, and curiosity. “What’s driving me to do this now?” I wondered, though the answer was clear in my mind. I was already thinking about changing my travel route through Vietnam, and Tom was the right person to help me organize everything.

As I walked, my eyes got lost in the streetlights, in the cars and scooters that flowed endlessly through the city. “Do all these people have a purpose?” I asked myself. Just like me, each one seemed absorbed by their own destination, rushing to complete their night’s mission.

Tom’s agency was located on a narrow street in the Old Quarter, dimly lit by a few struggling light bulbs hanging from old, dusty buildings. As I got closer, I received a short message from Tom with the exact location and the words: “I’m waiting for you!” I smiled, feeling a wave of calm – it was comforting to know that someone was expecting me.

When I arrived, Tom was already outside, looking in the direction I was coming from. His warm, friendly smile immediately relaxed me. “Yda, are you okay? You got here faster than I expected,” he said with a cheerful tone that melted away any trace of tension.

“Yes, I hurried a bit. I’m sorry for bothering you at this hour, but I really need your help,” I replied, unable to hide the emotion in my voice.

Tom invited me inside, offering me the same seat in front of his desk. Until that moment, I hadn’t even realized how small the agency was – a modest room, with walls covered in colorful posters, each promoting some magical destination. “So, you want to change the date of your ticket to Sapa, right?” he asked, as he settled comfortably at his desk and began typing on the computer.

I started explaining how my plans had unexpectedly changed due to a new opportunity. I told him I wanted to leave for Sapa one day later and also include Ha Giang Loop in my itinerary. As I spoke, I felt anxious and worried that things might not go as I hoped.

But Tom listened attentively without interrupting, and when I finished, he started laughing so hard that his glasses shook on his small, flat nose.

“Didn’t I tell you the first time you came into the agency that you must go to Ha Giang Loop? No... You said you wanted Sapa. You didn’t even let me explain!” he said in that teasing tone I was already used to hearing.

“Yeah, I know, I know... But I changed my mind!” I said, laughing too. “I talked to someone today, and they told me it’s a must-see.”

“Haha, great. You believed them right away, but you didn’t listen to me at all, as if I was talking to myself. I should scold you a little now.” I couldn’t tell if he was joking or being serious, but at that point, it didn’t matter.

“Yeah... Sorry, sorry!” I didn’t have a plausible excuse – only that I had refused to listen.

"Never mind, it's no problem," he said, returning to his friendly tone. "I'll check the availability right away and sort everything out for you. We'll make sure you have a story-worthy experience." He looked over his glasses at me and gave me a playful wink.

"Thank you so much, Tom!" What else could I say?

A heavy weight had suddenly been lifted from my shoulders. I knew that my plans would change dramatically, but I felt like I was on the right path. It was clear that the Universe had a different plan for me, and today, everything was starting to make sense.

"Ha Giang Loop is like you haven't truly visited Vietnam if you don't go there," said that mysterious man from the bus. And even though I didn't know what country he was from, those words convinced me that I had to listen to the Universe's signals.

In that moment, nothing else mattered – not the cost of the trip, not the time limitations in Vietnam, not that I had come for the sea and not the mountains, and least of all that I had thousands of kilometers to travel. I wanted to get to Ha Giang with the same eagerness a child has for the candy on the counter. I wanted to live every moment to the fullest without thinking about limitations. The freedom to choose the path that brought me joy was becoming a tangible reality, and I felt as if I had just won a cosmic lottery.

I strongly felt that the Universe was guiding me toward a new adventure.

As Tom updated my itinerary, I felt a mix of exhilaration and anxiety. Changing my plans so drastically was exciting, but the uncertainty of what lay ahead also made my heart race.

After a few minutes, Tom presented me with all the arrangements. He had changed everything for me – instead of leaving for Sapa on Saturday morning, as I had initially planned, I now had a completely new route. I would leave on Sunday morning, spend one

night in a homestay in Sapa, and on Monday night, I would head straight to Ha Giang Loop. There, a motorcycle tour awaited me, with accommodation in the homes of local villagers in the mountains. The total for the new tour and schedule changes – just 180 dollars – a more than good deal.

I was in a state of pure joy and felt like I was floating on a giant, fluffy white cloud. I thanked Tom and told him I was leaving, assuring him that if there was anything else to sort out, we'd talk on WhatsApp. It was already quite late, and I wanted to let him go home. And that's when I found out that he slept in the agency, in a small room at the back. I couldn't believe it.

This experience is by far the most extraordinary of them all. Four years ago, stuck in the suffocating routine at home, I didn't even dare dream of the freedom I'm living now. And six months ago, when I returned from the Philippines, I wanted to come back to Asia, but I never imagined everything would unfold so quickly and that I would come so far from Romania. Reality has far exceeded any expectations!

I left everything behind to be able to go. I sold the company, the car, gave up my apartment rental, and left behind all the worries at home – bills, taxes, employees. After years of working, all I want now is peace and the freedom to travel. "Am I asking for too much?" I sometimes wonder. People told me I was crazy, but maybe this madness is just another form of wisdom.

I haven't lost anything – I've only gained new experiences. Now, I want to explore the mountains on a motorcycle with a personal driver, and I can't even believe that I'm going to do this. I am free to travel anywhere and change my plans as I please. This newfound liberty feels like a revelation – a gift I never saw coming.

I have a new lease on life, and I want to grab it with both hands, to play with it like a child with their most desired toy. This stage

is the one I've waited for so long, and I promise myself that I'll savor every moment as if it were the last.

I headed back to the hotel with purposeful strides. The receptionist handed me two towels, not just one, and I went up to my room. It somehow felt more welcoming, warmer. Or maybe I had just changed my mindset. It had been a day full of changes, and even though I was happy with how things had turned out, I couldn't fall asleep. I tossed and turned in bed like a chicken on a rotisserie, trying to find peace.

I turned on the light and did a few exercises, but they didn't help at all. I could've run around the hotel, but it was too late. So, I turned the light off again and lay down in bed, hoping that sleep would come. In the darkness, I felt my whole body vibrating with energy, as if I was glowing in my own night. Eventually, fatigue overwhelmed me, and slowly, I fell asleep, smiling to myself for all that was yet to come.

“You cannot discover new oceans unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.” – André Gide

Chapter 5. “In the Shadow of Pagodas, In the Light of Serenity”

June 23rd, 2023

I don't think I moved at all from the position I fell asleep in, because I woke up completely numb, as if I'd been caught in a stone embrace. My phone rang desperately, trying to pull me from my deep sleep – an alarm I had set without realizing how early it would wake me. “7:00 AM?” The absurdity of waking up so early to visit the city made me smile wryly. I lazily reached for my phone and turned off the alarm, then snuggled back into the warm sheets. Sleep quickly enveloped me again, like a heavy velvet blanket, pulling me back into deep, serene rest.

I was really woken up at 10:25 AM when a loud knock on the door jolted me out of my sleep. It was the maid, holding two towels and a roll of toilet paper, as if she were armed for a domestic battle. I stared at her, groggy, trying to pull some words from my confused state of sleep. English suddenly felt like a foreign concept, far too complex... How could I explain that I had already received towels from the reception?

I gestured, trying to say “no, no,” but wasn't sure if she understood my disordered message. In the end, I just slammed the door in her face and headed straight to the bathroom.

Was it raining outside? Or was my imagination playing tricks on me? In this windowless room, reality always seemed suspended. Everything was encapsulated in an atmosphere of uncertainty. I don't like windowless rooms – they're like invisible prisons, cutting off any connection to the rhythm of life outside.

I spent a long time in the shower, letting the water wash away the numbness, trying to refresh myself from the heaviness of sleep. The water had a certain magic, as if it reconfigured every piece of me. When I stepped out, I felt more alive, but the bathroom mirror betrayed the truth – deep circles under my eyes, a tired gaze, a face that begged for more rest. “I need to sleep more, or I’ll collapse,” I told myself, though deep down, I knew that wasn’t likely to happen anytime soon. The adventures of Vietnam didn’t seem to leave much room for rest.

With my phone in hand, I installed the Grab taxi app, a symbol of my fragile connection to the modern world. Remembering Sawa’s messages, a slight thrill went through me. Hanoi was waiting for me, but there wasn’t much time left to uncover its secrets. On Sunday, I’d be heading to Sapa, leaving behind this vibrant hustle and bustle.

At 12:15 PM, I stepped out of the hotel into the blinding sunlight. The sun spread like a golden veil over the city, as if the morning rain had been nothing more than an illusion born from my confused sleep. A young man on a scooter arrived within minutes after I called. I climbed on behind him, and we set off towards the Ho Chi Minh Museum.

Hanoi’s traffic – chaotic and yet fascinating – enveloped me like a moving sea of people and vehicles. For a moment, I wondered what it would be like to have such a driver just for myself, to ride with him through the city every day, silently guiding me through the perfectly orchestrated chaos of the Vietnamese streets. “It’s absurd,” yet this simple thought brings a smile to my face.

When the scooter stopped, I was greeted by a huge, imposing building, though I couldn’t see any obvious entrance. Feeling disoriented, as if I’d arrived in a place without doors, I wondered if I’d chosen the wrong location. But it no longer mattered. I checked the address on GPS and realized I had to walk around the building to reach the main gate, about 300 meters away. I started walking,

passing by a café that seemed to whisper for me to come in, but I resisted the temptation. I was determined to visit the museum first. The coffee could wait.

At the main gate, I was stopped by a guard. “The dress code doesn’t allow shorts and tank tops,” he told me in a gentle yet firm voice. Rules were rules, and I wasn’t dressed appropriately. With a hint of frustration, I decided to head back to the café. A sense of discomfort grew in me – It felt like my plans were falling apart over the smallest details.

On the way, a man stopped me, offering long pants. “Seriously?” I thought, surprised by how well he anticipated my need. The man was insistent, but I politely refused, still hoping to find a simpler solution. I chuckled to myself – quick, precise street-corner business transactions. Some people know how to adapt to any context.

Frustration mixed with amusement as I walked back toward the café, thinking how small details can sometimes completely derail your plans.

In the café, I took a moment to breathe. I stepped into a space that felt more like an art souvenir shop. Statues, paintings, beautifully decorated bowls surrounded me, like in a miniature museum. Only in a corner did I notice the bar. I ordered a cappuccino and sat at a painted table. The place had a bohemian vibe, as if it were a gathering spot for creative souls, a place where artists met to share their thoughts and dreams. “A refuge for young creators,” I thought, fascinated.

The taste of hot coffee brought a moment of peace. I opened my phone and quickly messaged Sawa.

“They won’t let me into the museum in shorts and a tank top...” His reply came immediately:

“Yeah, yeah... you know you need proper attire for temples and museums.”

Our conversation flowed easily, but in my mind, the image of the vendor offering me pants kept returning. “Why not?” I asked myself. I decided to go back and buy the long pants. The vendor recognized me immediately and offered a pair “special just for me.” I negotiated the price a bit and bought them for 150,000 dong (around \$6).

With my newly acquired pants, I headed back to the museum, only to be stopped again – this time for my bare shoulders. It was almost comical, like a never-ending series of small missteps. As luck would have it, another vendor appeared, this time with scarves. I couldn’t help but laugh at how well-rehearsed the whole situation seemed.

After all the hassle, I finally made it into the museum. I spent hours wandering through the history-filled halls, feeling like a traveler through time. But the true revelation of the day was the Inner Pagoda.

When I stepped inside, I felt like I was entering another world. The energy of the place was tangible, flooding my senses and bringing a peace I hadn’t felt in a long time. The smell of incense, the soft music, the dense and mysterious air wrapped around me completely. Tears streamed down my face, beyond my control, swept away by a wave of emotion. They weren’t tears of sadness but of pure happiness. I cried because I was there, living the moment, and because I was profoundly grateful to life for giving me the chance to be exactly as I had always wanted - free, unrestrained.

I didn’t even know how long I had stood there, overwhelmed by the power of that place. I didn’t take any pictures. It was clear to me that such moments couldn’t be captured in an image. The experience was too intense to be reduced to a mere frame.

As I exited, the sun was shining just as brightly as it had in the morning. I continued my journey to other pagodas, each with its own magic. It was clear: I was on my Path.

By the end of the day, fatigue had set in. I visited all I could, but my “to-do” list was still long. I returned to the hotel, but my mind was still restless, full of thoughts and emotions. Finally, when night fell completely and my room was swallowed by silence, I drifted off to sleep. I didn’t dream of anything.

“Travel is not about the places you see, but about how they change you.” – Rolf Potts

Chapter 6. “Invisible Threads: Meetings Arranged by the Universe”

June 24th, 2023

I wake up slowly to the familiar sound of my phone's alarm, obedient like a disciplined child who knows they must comply, even when sleep begs for a few more minutes of rest. I promise myself to wake up early at least once a week, resisting the urge to be lazy. The morning ritual pulls me out of bed, slowly but surely, like a well-worn routine that guides me out of habit.

I allow myself a few moments to respond to the flood of messages on social media. Curious friends constantly ask me where I am now and when I plan to return. My well-rehearsed answer comes easily, without hesitation: “I have no idea, I don't have a return ticket.” In a way, I like this sense of unlimited freedom, like a bird with no fixed nest.

The cleaning lady is waiting outside my door, ready to come in after I leave, but she doesn't rush or seem impatient. I smile at her and quickly step out of the room with my little bag slung over my shoulder. It's already 11:30 AM, and I realize the only thing on my mind is... coffee. Last night, I heard about the famous “Egg Coffee,” the Vietnamese coffee with egg. Opinions were mixed, but I didn't care. My culinary curiosity was at its peak, so I just had to try it.

A light rain is falling, with large, cold drops rhythmically hitting the narrow streets. But I, unprepared, realized I didn't bring my raincoat. I duck into a small shop and buy new raincoat and a selfie stick, determined not to let the rain spoil my plans to capture beautiful moments. With the GPS activated, I head toward the recommended

café. The walk through the raindrops gives me a strange feeling of freshness, but also a slight impatience to sit in a warm spot.

When I reach the location, I feel slightly confused. “Where’s the café?” I discover the entrance hidden behind a shop, among lit candles and parked motorbikes, in a mysterious semi-darkness. “What a strange yet charming place,” I think to myself as I follow the stairs leading me toward the rooftop. When I finally reach the top, the view takes my breath away. Although the terrace is empty because of the rain, the lake glistens in the distance, covered by a gray veil of clouds, and the silence of this hidden corner feels surreal.

I find an empty table inside, where a few tourists are chatting. The girl who comes to take my order smiles, and without even looking at the menu, I tell her clearly what I want: the famous egg coffee. My taste buds are already prepared for something unique, something I’ve never experienced before.

When the coffee arrives, its aroma envelops me. I take the first sip, and I’m instantly transported back to childhood. The sweet, rich, and creamy taste reminds me of those spoonfuls of raw egg and sugar from the cake batter my grandmother used to make – those secret little tastes I’d steal before the flour was added. The egg coffee has a velvety texture, and its embrace feels like a hug from the past. I paid 45,000 dong (around \$2) for this little marvel, and every penny feels well spent.

I look outside and realize that today, I want something different. I gaze at the lake and feel its beauty calming my thoughts. “Maybe sometimes it’s good to set aside the list of plans and just follow your instincts,” I tell myself. Today, I don’t want to check off temples or pagodas. Today, I want a truly unique experience, something that will take me out of the ordinary.

I open my phone, ignoring the murmur around me, and search for something new nearby. One attraction immediately catches my

eye: a Puppet Show. I've never been to a puppet show, but it sounds interesting enough to make me want to try my luck. Without overthinking it, I called a Grab motorcycle taxi. I like feeling the wind in my hair and seeing the city unfold frenetically around me.

The taxi driver, experienced in the art of avoiding traffic jams, weaves through the Hanoi's relentless traffic. I love being a passenger here, with no worries other than admiring the city as it rolls past like a movie.

I arrive at the Puppet Show and realize I have some time to kill before the performance. It's only 2:50 PM, and the show is scheduled for 5:15 PM. I buy my ticket early to secure my spot, then wonder how to pass the time until then. The An Market seems like a good option, so I quickly plan a visit there.

Unfortunately, the taxi ride fails. The rain has started falling more heavily, like a thick curtain of water, and the driver doesn't show up. After ten minutes of waiting in the cold rain, I decided to cancel the ride and take it as a sign that I should stay close to the show venue. Instead of heading to the big market, I put on my red raincoat and stroll leisurely toward the small market I saw yesterday.

The rain creates a melancholic landscape, turning the lake into a foggy mirror, and I let my thoughts drift freely. People rush past me, almost invisible in their own daily hustle. But I'm in no hurry. Each step feels like a small ritual, a slow dance through a city that seems to be catching its breath between two bouts of rain.

Along the way, I passed by an ice cream cart. I stop, glance at the list of flavors on the little board, and feel a strong temptation to get one. But I quickly remind myself that I haven't eaten anything all day, just the egg coffee. I smile to myself and decide dessert can wait.

I arrive at the market and head straight for the almond stall. But strangely, I no longer feel the same desire to buy them. So I choose something different: a kind of crunchy nut, similar to cashews,

that seems to have an interesting flavor. I grab my little bag and feel like a child who has discovered a small treasure. The price? 110,000 dong (around \$5).

Trying to satisfy my hunger, I wander through the market and my eyes land on a food stand. Skewers are being fried in a large pan by women dressed identically. Curiosity pushes me forward, and one of the women speaks to me in English, presenting the options: chicken, beef, or vegetables. I decide it's time to enjoy an authentic culinary experience, so I choose chicken and vegetables. The conditions seem okay, and I'm ready for the adventure of taste.

I grab my sauces and fresh cucumbers in a takeout box and leave with the feeling that I've conquered a small gastronomic Everest. "Who would've thought I'd end up eating street food?" I chuckle to myself. Yet another reminder that you have to say "never" with great caution.

My thoughts run in all directions. As I search for a place to sit and eat, I realize how much we are held back by the barriers we impose on ourselves. "I don't want this," "I can't do that" – these are all limitations we build like invisible walls. But who created them? We did. We are the architects of our own limitations.

I sit on a bench by the lake, my takeout box on my lap, and begin eating peacefully. The flavors envelop me, each bite feels like a new discovery. I think life is a bit like that – full of new flavors, unexpected experiences, if you're willing to lower your guard and try.

As I eat, savoring each bite, I realize that the Universe always has plans for me, even when I don't see them. We're just intermediaries, temporary travelers in a world that weaves its own threads of destiny, often without our awareness.

And now, with my belly full and the sun timidly peeking out from behind the heavy clouds, I wonder with a smile: "Will it rain again today?"

I make a short video of the lake, lost between the scenery and my own thoughts, then I set my takeout box on the bench. The trash can is too far away, and this peace is too precious to break with such a mundane action. The lake changes color as the rain retreats, and the sky is clearer, more vivid. The air has a special freshness. Even the leaves on the trees seem greener, as if every drop of rain had given them a new life.

I realized I still had an hour before the show started. I think about how I wanted to go to the An Market, but here I am, with my belly full of skewers and a welcome sense of calm in my soul. People walk past me – some glance at me briefly, others continue on, lost in their own thoughts. I smile at the sun as it breaks through the clouds, as if it were an old friend who's come to keep me company.

Lost in contemplation of the lake and the slow rhythm of life around me, I didn't even notice when a boy approached. I suddenly realized he was standing right in front of me, staring, a kid of about 8 or 9 years old, wearing a blue T-shirt and navy pants. His big eyes, full of disarming curiosity, studied me as if I were an unexpected element in his familiar Universe. The confidence with which he looked at me caught me off guard.

"Hello, can I talk to you? Am I bothering you?" he asked with a clear and determined voice.

I smiled, surprised by his courage. "Hello. Yes, you can talk to me. Why not?"

"I want to practice my English with you, if you don't mind," he added, sitting down casually on the bench next to me without waiting for an invitation.

I laughed to myself. Who's practicing English with whom here? Still, I let him lead the conversation, happy with the spontaneity of the moment.

"My name is Huy. What's your name?"

"I'm Yda. Nice to meet you, Huy."

His big eyes lit up immediately. "I'm happy to meet you too!" Then he sat even more comfortably, giving me the impression that we were old friends, catching up after a long time. I moved my takeout box aside, giving him more space, while my mind wandered to an unexpected question: "Is this why I didn't make it to An Market? Because I was meant to be here, for Huy?"

"Where are you from?" he asked, curiosity sparkling in his eyes like a flame.

"From Romania," I replied, smiling.

"Romania?" He paused for a moment, thinking, then continued enthusiastically, "Where is that? How far? How do you spell it?"

I quickly opened Google Maps and showed him. I pointed out the tiny spot where Romania was and compared it to Vietnam. His eyes grew wide again, filled with wonder.

"Woow! It's so far away... And what money do you use there?"

I quickly searched for an image of Romanian banknotes and showed him. Huy took the phone and zoomed in on the pictures, studying the details of each bill like a little detective on an important mission.

"Do you have coins? We don't," he said seriously, as if discovering a major difference between our worlds.

"Yes, we have coins. Sometimes too many," I said, laughing.

"Do you have beaches in your country?"

"We do, but they're very small compared to your beaches," I told him, imagining how insignificant our Black Sea coast would seem compared to their vast stretches of shoreline.

"Can you show me how much coastline you have?" he insisted, not losing any of his enthusiasm.

I searched again on my phone and showed him pictures of the Romanian coastline. He looked closely, alternating between looking at me and at the images, fascinated by every detail.

"Woow, it's small!" he said, and his serious tone made me burst into a smile.

"You're right, it's small," I replied, thinking about how he saw the world, with a purity and clarity only children have.

"How old are you?" I asked, curious to know more about this little inquisitive boy in front of me.

"I'm 9. My mom is 31 and my dad is 34. My mom got married at one and eight... I don't know how to say it in English."

"Eighteen," I corrected him, and he repeated after me, trying to pronounce it correctly.

Our conversation flowed naturally, with Huy asking questions about school, how he learned English from games, and how he loved learning as much as he could about the world. I smiled, thinking about how different our generations were. At 9 years old, I had no idea that one day I would have the entire Internet at my fingertips. Huy, on the other hand, had the whole world open to him.

I listened to him with pleasure and realized how lucky he was, but also how far we've come in terms of global connection. It was an unexpected but incredibly enjoyable encounter.

After a while, his mother, who had been quietly watching us from a nearby bench, signaled that it was time to go. We said our goodbyes, and I stood up to take my takeout box to the trash, feeling light as a feather and full of energy. “Maybe the Universe really did have a plan for me at this moment,” I thought. Then I headed toward the theater, but not without casting one last glance at Huy, who was waving at me from afar.

After meeting Huy, a few more steps led me to another bench, not far from the theater’s entrance. The lake was calm, and I felt the peacefulness filling my soul. When two women sat down next to me, I didn’t immediately lift my eyes from my phone. There was plenty of space, and it didn’t seem out of the ordinary. But I could feel their presence. Finally, one of them spoke, and her voice pulled me out of my reverie.

“Hello... excuse me, can I talk to you?”

I looked up and met the eyes of a girl about 17 years old, with long black hair, who bore a strong resemblance to the older woman sitting next to her – probably her mother. I smiled politely.

“Hello... yes, of course.”

“Were you listening to music in your headphones?” she asked with a shy smile, full of curiosity.

“No, I was just on TikTok,” I replied, laughing.

“Aaa... I see. My mom and I were wondering if we could talk to you... we’d like to practice our English, if you don’t mind.” Her gaze was warm and sincere, and her smile extended to her mother’s eyes, who sat quietly beside her, smiling too.

I agreed, smiling to myself at the incredible coincidence: first Huy, and now these two women? What’s happening today? It seems like the Universe has decided to fill my day with new people.

We chatted, letting the conversation flow smoothly. The young woman asked me questions about my travels, about what I do in my country, while her mother listened silently, smiling and following every word.

When I stood up to say goodbye, both of them rose at the same time, as if in a reflex of gratitude. Their faces radiated a warm energy, almost glowing, that seemed to shine beyond their modest smiles. For a moment, I felt part of something bigger, a connection that transcended language or culture.

I left, but after barely 10 steps, I turned back to them, feeling a sudden impulse, as if the Universe was pulling me back by the hand.

“Excuse me, can I take a picture with you, for memory’s sake? Is that okay?”

“Yesss...” they said almost in unison, surprised that I had returned but happy, their eyes sparkling with joy. The photo perfectly captured the moment – a snapshot of a unique moment, immortalized between worlds, between people from different corners of the Earth.

After taking two pictures, I left again, smiling, this time determined not to turn back. It felt like the connection ended right there, with the click of the camera.

A deep sense of gratitude flooded my soul, and I understood that sometimes, the simplest act – a smile, a hello – can completely change someone’s day.

I’m never completely alone when I travel. Every person I meet is part of a bigger story, and I’m just a character passing through their lives, just as they pass through mine. And my life continued its course...

Before going into the theater, I sat on the steps and sent the photos on Facebook. It was a small gesture, but it felt like I was

leaving a piece of myself with them. Shortly after, I received two heart reactions from Vhu. It made me smile again.

When I walked into the hall, I was surprised to see it wasn't packed, as I had expected. Almost half the seats were empty. "Where's the crowd the ticket girl mentioned?" I wondered. But as soon as the show began, I forgot all about the question.

The music was amazing, but although the rhythms captivated me, the fact that everything was in Vietnamese made me feel a bit disconnected, as if I were watching through a window into a world I didn't fully belong to. It wasn't what I had imagined, but I decided to enjoy the experience as it was. After all, it was a glimpse into their culture, a moment that offered me a peek inside a world completely different from my own. After exactly 50 minutes, the show ended, and the hall slowly emptied.

When I walked out, I was still determined to go to An Market, even though it had started raining again. It was on my list, and I didn't want to miss it. I called another Grab motorcycle taxi, put on my raincoat, and discovered that riding a motorcycle in the rain was a completely different experience than I had imagined. The traffic was sheer madness. People seemed frantic, cars moved faster, and it felt like all of Hanoi was racing in a competition I couldn't comprehend. Where were they all rushing to? What were they losing? Who was chasing them? If I hadn't been in the middle of this madness, I wouldn't have believed what I was seeing.

The ride took about 20 minutes, but it felt much longer. Three times I felt my stomach lurch into my throat from the sudden swerves and stunts the driver was pulling. When we arrived at the market, it was already completely dark, even though it was only 6:30 PM. Night had fallen heavily and thick, bringing with it a strange silence, as if the entire city had hidden somewhere from the storm.

I got off the bike, and the driver looked at me long and hard, a shadow of doubt in his eyes. "Are you sure you want to stay here?" he asked, as if he knew something I didn't.

It was drizzling, the place was nearly deserted, and the darkness seemed to swallow the market in a heavy melancholy. "What an ugly place..." I thought to myself. The driver insisted, "Don't you want me to take you somewhere else?" I felt uncertain for a moment but answered firmly, "No, thank you. I can manage from here."

After he left, I found myself alone in the middle of that desolation. Pfff... What was I expecting to find here? Maybe a covered market, something grand, given the place's reputation. But no, it was an open bazaar, with makeshift stalls that looked like they had been hastily abandoned. Everything was covered in mud, and the vendors were few, scattered among the stalls that had once been full of life. The women selling flowers seemed to be the only ones happy about the rain that kept pouring down endlessly.

Mmm... I ventured out as usual, without checking, without asking. It wouldn't be the first time. I took a few photos of the flowers that retained their beauty amidst this bleak backdrop. The women at the stalls were talking among themselves, but their words were lost in the hum of my own thoughts. I was smiling mechanically, almost automatically. Someone once told me I was born smiling. Maybe it's true, though I never asked my mother about it.

I called another Grab motorcycle, and this time, I hoped for a calmer driver. In five minutes, he arrived and took me straight back to the hotel. I didn't know what else I could do in this never-ending rain. When I got off in front of the hotel, I sighed in relief. It wasn't worse than the first ride, but it wasn't much better either. The rain must have scrambled everyone's minds because even the drivers didn't seem to know how to drive. With wet and cold feet, I couldn't wait to get to my

room. I went straight under a hot shower, letting the water wash away the cold and my wandering thoughts.

The water ran over my tired skin like a soothing touch. I stayed there for a while, letting the warmth calm me. A sneeze took me by surprise, and in that moment, I got goosebumps on my skin. “I hope I’m not catching a cold,” I thought, but I couldn’t help laughing at how ironic it would be.

An hour later, I decided to go out and withdraw some money from an ATM. The dollars I exchanged at the airport were running low, and I knew that without cash, I wouldn’t be able to leave for Sapa. I pulled on my red raincoat and ventured out again into the rain. I found an ATM, but I got stuck – the system wasn’t helpful at all. I felt powerless, as if a simple task had suddenly become a massive challenge. I called Sawa, and calmly, he guided me via video call. We tried together, but to no avail. Maybe my card wasn’t recognized by that particular ATM.

How was I supposed to get cash now? Frustration overwhelmed me for a moment. I tried another ATM, but got the same cryptic messages. There was nothing more I could do. Fortunately, I had a few dollars on me, so I headed to a currency exchange. I exchanged 50 dollars and walked out feeling triumphant, as if I had just won the lottery.

On my way back to the hotel, one last ATM caught my eye. “Should I try here too?” Yes, I’d give it a shot. This time, I was able to select English, and I went through the steps to withdraw cash. A wave of relief washed over me – until another message popped up: a massive withdrawal fee. “Pfff! Of course, I’m not paying that!” I muttered to myself, annoyed, and quickly canceled the transaction.

Back in the room, I packed my bags. I had to wake up at 5:00 AM tomorrow and hoped I’d get at least seven hours of sleep. But ever since I arrived in Hanoi, my evenings had been filled with energy,

and sleep was hard to catch. “Why can’t I fall asleep early?” I wondered. I tossed and turned, turned off the lights, but my mind refused to stop. Even when I closed my eyes and told myself that I had to sleep, the machinery in my brain kept running. And yet, I accepted it. It was better than being at home, where my thoughts weighed me down in a different way.

“There are no coincidences, only encounters arranged by the Universe to help us discover ourselves.” – Paulo Coelho

Chapter 7. “Landscapes of the Soul in Sapa: A Journey Through Hidden Beauty”

June 25th, 2023

Sapa, Vietnam

At 6:00 AM, I was in the hotel lobby, as instructed by Tom, but for some unknown reason, the entire schedule was thrown off. Outside, a cold, drizzly rain seemed never-ending. A man on a scooter picked me up and took me to the meeting point, leaving behind the empty streets, washed clean by the rain.

I was cold. Despite my colorful jacket, the dampness seeped through, and the wind chilled me to the bone. I stood along with other travelers, gathered like shadows on a narrow street in front of a closed restaurant. There were about fifteen of us, each lost in our own thoughts under the same rain that fell like a curtain over the city.

After more than an hour of uncertain waiting, the bus finally arrived at 7:17, and we were off to Sapa. The bus was quiet, everyone seemed drained from the wait. I made myself comfortable in the reclining seat and wrapped myself in the blanket provided. But sleep... sleep seemed far away. Even though my body was tired, my mind was awake, troubled by countless thoughts. I closed my eyes only to open them again after a few seconds, unable to escape the questions occupying my mind.

“What awaits me there? What will Sapa be like? How will I manage in a world completely different?”

The landscapes outside were as dark as my uncertainties. Each passing moment dragged me deeper into my thoughts, into a

state between sleep and wakefulness, where doubts seemed to multiply. A few hours later, when the bus stopped for short breaks, I gave up on the idea of sleeping. Instead, I pulled out my laptop and retreated into writing, trying to find some order amidst the scattered thoughts.

An Italian man with tattoos, sitting next to me, spoke softly on the phone, casting me sidelong glances, probably annoyed by the sound of my typing. Eventually, he put on his headphones and tried to sleep, but I couldn't stop typing. I needed it – an anchor amidst the storm inside me.

Time passed, and the scenery outside began to change subtly. The rain stopped, and the sun broke through the sky in small shards of light, spreading over the fields around us. I felt like the atmosphere in the bus had shifted too – everything seemed more promising, as if nature itself was trying to tell me that this journey had its purpose.

“Maybe it really will be alright,” I told myself, though part of me still clung to doubts.

When we got off the bus in Sapa, I was hit by a wave of confusion. A fine veil of dust covered the town, and the locals seemed agitated, completely ignoring our invisible boundaries of personal space. The noise – voices, engines, honking – was overwhelming. The hot, sticky air clung to my skin and flooded my senses, and for a moment, I wondered if I had arrived in the wrong place. The contrast between Hanoi's rainy calm and this chaos was absolutely striking. “I need to adapt,” I told myself, but my inner voice was weak, uncertain. I kept repeating that I had been in situations like this before and that I would manage, but a shadow of doubt lingered. “If I can't handle a paid tour, what will I do wandering the world alone?”

“Your attitude can truly change everything,” I told myself as I headed toward the pile of luggage. But could it really? How could a simple thought influence this messy, chaotic reality?

The tattooed Italian showed up beside me, barefoot, holding his sneakers and looking for his luggage. He smiled at me, a knowing smile, as if he felt the same – as if we were all strangers in a strange place, each trying to adapt in our own way. But before I could respond, he disappeared into the crowd.

The other travelers seemed as lost as I was. Around me, puzzled faces, people searching for their way among the luggage and the unknown. I texted Tom. “Hello.”

His reply came quickly: “Hey, Yda! Did you arrive safely?”

I sent him a photo of the hotel entrance. “Ok. Perfect! Stay there, someone will come to pick you up in a few minutes.”

I took a deep breath and looked around again. A friendly woman from Poland smiled at me, telling me that they didn’t know what to do either. Her husband returned from the reception, confirming that they also had to wait. I smiled back, slightly reassured by their presence. Maybe, in all this delicate balance, I’m not truly alone.

After a while, our guide appeared, but I wasn’t on his list. I showed him the paper from Tom, and he apologized, making a few phone calls. Time seemed to stretch out again, and uncertainty clenched my stomach. “Will I really manage here?” It was a question that kept coming back to me, like an echo.

Finally, another guide appeared and called my name. I felt relieved, but it was a relief mixed with a hint of unease. The Polish family smiled at me again, and we parted with the promise that maybe we would see each other again on the trail.

I left with the new guide, a tall and quiet young man. The city pulsed around us, a lively, almost aggressive bustle. The colors of the buildings seemed brighter, but not in a comforting way – it was as if everything was screaming for attention. In the middle of this whirlwind,

I felt overwhelmed, as if every sound and smell was mercilessly invading me.

Tom called, and I handed the phone to the guide. I heard him laughing, so it seemed like everything was fine. The guide smiled at me and said, "Everything's good, we're going to the restaurant."

I breathed a sigh of relief, but the agitation around me continued to press down on me. I dragged my heavy backpack behind me, feeling it as a burden anchoring me to reality. And yet, amidst this fragile balance, something inside me began to shift. "I have to manage, I've always managed," I repeated to myself, but this time it sounded different. Less like a command and more like acceptance. Maybe that's the key – not to resist, but to embrace whatever comes.

In the small restaurant, the atmosphere feels heavy. Two women from Singapore sat next to me, politely curious but too intense for my current mood. I gave short answers, feeling how their conversation became background noise. While they kept talking, I looked up and scanned the rest of the group – strange faces, each immersed in their own thoughts.

A moment of inner silence settled over me. For the first time since I got off the bus, I felt a strange calm. It was as if, in the middle of an infinite abyss, I had found a fixed point. Maybe that's the essence of traveling – not controlling everything but accepting the unpredictability.

When the guides gave the signal to start the trek, I felt a wave of relief. The women from Singapore left with another group, and finally, I could enjoy my own peace. Step by step, I sunk into this new world, into this path that was pushing me out of my comfort zone, but urging me to accept everything as it came. I felt as if I was walking along the edge of a cliff, not knowing what awaited me on the other side. But that's the adventure, isn't it?

As we prepared to hit the trail, I felt tension creeping back in, slowly infiltrating my mind like a fog. I wondered, for the umpteenth time, if I was truly ready for what lay ahead. “Another planet? No, just the famous Sapa,” I told myself, forcing a smile, as if trying to give myself courage, to convince myself that everything would be fine.

The scorching air and the dust swirling around made it hard to breathe, and the hum of the street buzzed in my ears like a concert of dissonant sounds. Every step pulled me farther from familiar comfort, bringing me closer to an undiscovered world. But I couldn’t stop. I had chosen this path, and now I had to follow it, no matter what obstacles might come.

Our guide, a lively and smiling brunette named Zi – an exotic name, hard to forget – wore a funny hat and several layers of clothing, as if she was immune to the heat that was melting the rest of us. We, the tourists, in shorts and T-shirts, had long given up the idea of protecting ourselves from the sun. Two of the girls didn’t have hats, but I was proud of myself for bringing my black cap, even if it attracted the sun like a magnet. Better than nothing.

“The sun is relentless today,” Zi warns us, as she asks if we’ve protected our skin with sunscreen. We’re about to embark on a 12-kilometer trek. “Twelve kilometers, in this heat?” I wonder, shocked. Fortunately, we left our large bags at the restaurant; they’ll be transported by car to the homestay where we’ll spend the night. But we, on the other hand, will walk – or rather, trek, because that’s what we came for. If I had to carry my heavy backpack, I might have given up. Or maybe not...

We step out of the restaurant into the bustling streets, the five of us and our guide, forming a small group of explorers. We were supposed to be six, but one of the guys went straight to the homestay because he wasn’t feeling well. Slowly, I start getting to know the others: a young couple from Australia, a girl from Argentina, and a woman from Uganda, with flawless, smooth skin framed by long

African braids – a striking beauty that draws attention. Her husband, the one who wasn't feeling well, had already gone ahead to the accommodation.

I walk alongside them, leaving behind the crowd and the urban noise. Each step brings a fresh wave of energy, like a warm breeze infusing me with the strength to face the unknown. The journey has just begun, and like a leaf carried by the wind, I feel ready to discover where this path will take me.

The day is simply perfect. The sun shines brightly, the sky is clear, and the visibility is incredible. Reading about Sapa, I learned that on rainy days, the terraced rice fields disappear under a dense veil of fog, hiding the beauty of the landscape. But today, luck is on our side: the weather spoils us, the group is full of life, and the town surprises me at every corner. "What more could I want on such a perfect day?" I wonder, suddenly filled with enthusiasm. It feels like I could fly over these green terraces, like a drone capturing every hidden corner through the eyes of a curious, eager child. The paradise of rice terraces! It would have been a shame to miss this experience, and it's no wonder Sawa told me that Sapa is a "must-see" destination. I hope to thank him someday for this advice.

The town is a burst of life, with cafes, restaurants, and lodging – you can find anything you want here. I remember my first impression when I got off the bus from Hanoi: how chaotic and disorganized everything seemed. Now, looking around, it's unbelievable how different the center of this little town is compared to its edges. Or maybe back then, I was so overwhelmed by exhaustion and uncertainty that everything seemed distorted. The buildings in the center of Sapa are charming, some even more spectacular than those in Hanoi. It's like I've stepped into a fairytale, into a storybook village where every corner is decorated with lights, garlands, and colorful flowers. "Sapa is an incredible place!" I tell myself. I would move here in an instant, as the energy of this place has an undeniable magnetism.

We've already walked at least half an hour through the town, admiring everything and taking pictures at every step. We're all amazed by the beauty around us. As we leave the town, we begin to see the first glimpses of the famous terraced rice fields. "Wow!" our exclamations are almost simultaneous. We stop every few steps for photos, smiling and laughing with excitement. The landscape opens up more and more in front of us, and its beauty leaves us speechless.

As we move forward, large hotels perched on the edges of valleys display their rooms with views over this natural wonder. I wonder if the locals still appreciate this view, or if it has become just part of their daily landscape, something ordinary. Perhaps, being used to it, they see it as something banal. But for me, my foreign eyes see it as a living painting, fresh and fascinating at every step.

At the town's outskirts, a few local women join us: three older women and a young one carrying a small child in a brightly colored sling, sewn with all the care and maternal love. Each of them asks us, with the friendly curiosity typical of the place, where we're from, how old we are, and what our names are. I'm already used to these questions, so I answer with a smile, without feeling invaded. Unlike the two women from Singapore I met earlier, these local women radiate an authentic warmth. Their wide, serene smiles give me a sense of well-being, as if, for a few moments, we're part of their community.

As we leave the asphalt behind and immerse ourselves in the landscape, we descend onto narrow paths, worn only by the locals' footsteps, like trails forgotten by time. We're already far from the town's bustle, and I feel the air become lighter, carrying with it the scent of freedom and freshly turned earth. Along the way, we pass modest homes that seem straight out of another era. Some don't even have doors or windows, and the yards are open, without fences, as if the world has forgotten what boundaries are. Everything is improvised, and most of the houses are built from fragile bamboo. In these modest, almost unimaginable conditions, people live simply but

peacefully. It's amazing to see how, in the midst of so many hardships, they seem to have found balance, to be at peace with their lives.

Zi, our guide, occasionally tells us about the locals' way of life. She explains that only some of them can afford to have animals, and those who don't have jobs in town live off the land, selling whatever they manage to grow. With a calm voice, like a living documentary, she tells us about the plants along the way and the traditional techniques the locals use to make their clothes, often using materials they've grown and processed themselves. At one point, she even tells us about a local legend, "Mother Fire" – a mysterious story that remains shrouded in mystery. "What could this Mother Fire be?" I wonder, fascinated, but it remains an unsolved mystery.

As fascinating as the path is, it becomes more exhausting under the scorching sun, which seems to slowly melt away our energy. We're already overheated, and the muddy, rocky paths test our patience and endurance with every step. The local women, who've walked silently alongside us, show us how to navigate the mud without getting too dirty. They all wear rubber boots – a clear sign that they are well-prepared for such conditions. "What must this area be like during the monsoon season?" I wonder, realizing that their adaptability is key to survival here, in the heart of untamed nature.

One of the women stays close to me, silently accompanying me along the way. She told me her name, but her complicated name got lost somewhere in the flood of thoughts invading my mind. She is 57 years old and has five children. Her face, marked by wrinkles and pigmentation spots, tells the story of a life lived under the relentless sun and torrential rains. Her eyes, tired and deep with sadness, flicker only occasionally, like candles on the verge of burning out. Her smile is warm, but it hides more than it reveals. I look at her and wonder what her life would have been like in a different context, in a big city, with a career and a different family. But, looking at her, I realize she seems at peace with her fate. "What could she be carrying in that basket hanging from her back?" I wonder, wrapped in curiosity.

The path continues, and at some point, we step into a small bamboo forest. Zi tells us that tomorrow we'll visit a much larger one. After not even half the trail, we're already exhausted, with sweat pouring down our faces like endless streams. Our stops become more frequent, and along the roadside, the locals have set up small makeshift stalls. They greet us with bracelets, purses, and toys, all handmade with incredible precision. Their vivid colors speak louder than the simplicity of the objects themselves, catching our eyes like a kaleidoscope of tradition.

Further up, we make a longer stop, under the shade of a breathtaking view. I could almost stay there just to feed off the beauty of the landscape. We can buy cold water, soft drinks, or beer, and we're offered refreshing slices of cucumber for hydration. In a playful moment, I make a heart shape out of the cucumber slices and take a photo. Suddenly, a surprise! Guess who I ran into? My Polish friends from the Hanoi trip. "What a coincidence!" we all exclaim, shocked by the unexpected synchronicity. We chat for a few minutes, but they have to continue on their way, their break almost over.

After a short rest, we get up and resume the trail, taking heavy steps but with lighter hearts.

The woman who had silently stayed beside me, like a quiet shadow, points to a small cluster of scattered houses down in the valley and tells me that's where we'll be staying. "Only two more kilometers," I tell myself, but in my thoughts, they feel like an eternity. The soles of my feet throb with pain, and every step feels like walking on burning coals. I try to encourage myself – there's not much left, I just need to hold on a little longer.

Suddenly, the woman surprises me, pulling me out of the torrent of my thoughts. I forget about the exhaustion, the fatigue, and the acute lack of energy when I see her start to methodically untie the bundle from her back, revealing all sorts of things for sale. "Aha, so that's what she was carrying!" I tell myself, caught between surprise

and amusement. “Shouldn’t I have been wishing for a million dollars or at least a private helicopter?”

Like a seasoned vendor, she pulls out bags, colorful scarves, and bracelets – just like the ones sold by all the merchants along the way. In a soft yet persistent voice, she tells me how happy she’d be if I bought something from her. Watching her insist, I find myself in a delicate position, realizing, like a lightning bolt hitting me, that this had been their strategy all along: to accompany us, help us, each woman with her own “favorite” from the group. I glance around and realize everyone else is in the same boat – each of us “paired” with a local woman.

I burst into nervous laughter. “Well, it is what it is. I guess I have to buy something now,” I tell myself, fully aware of the position I’m in. I no longer have a choice. I benefited from their help, and refusing now would feel like I’m upsetting the balance of the Universe. “At least I figured it out. Now I just need to pick something, anything.” I don’t want to refuse, and honestly, I don’t have many options. So, I settle on the smallest thing possible – a tiny, blue canvas wallet with a cute pattern and a thin zipper. “It’s kind of cute, after all,” I tell myself, trying to ease my frustration. It’s very small but practical enough – it can hold a phone, passport, and some cash – perfect for a small adventure. At least no one can say I didn’t buy anything.

I felt like the good daughter in some folktale, caught in an unexpected bargain. I ask how much it costs, and when I hear the price, my breath catches. “200,000 dong (around \$8) for this tiny thing?” I almost feel like I’m going to faint. I ask our guide and she confirms with a raised eyebrow: that’s the correct price. It seems outrageous, but there’s no way out. I tell the woman that it’s too much, that our guide earns in a whole day what she’s asking for this little wallet. But my comment is met with a vague, tired smile.

Zi steps in, her warm voice telling me the woman is poor and needs the money for her family. “Yeah, yeah, I get it,” I tell myself.

“Another lesson, Yda, another lesson.” I hand over the 200,000 dong and take my “treasure” – a wallet that suddenly feels way too precious for its actual value. I stuff it into my bag, feeling a mix of frustration and resignation. Later, on my wanderings, I would discover the same kind of wallet for 25,000 dong (around \$1). “No comment, Yda!” I tell myself, trying to laugh at the situation.

We part ways with the local women who had walked with us and sold us things at exorbitant prices. “Was this all part of their plan from the start?” I wonder, but in the end, I realize that everyone has their own methods of survival. I know I did what I had to do, but her? What will she do with that money? “It’s not my business,” I tell myself. That’s her problem, not mine.

The journey continues, and we walk in silence, just the five of us and Zi, our guide. The mood changed, but not in a good way. A tension hung in the air. My mind is still tangled in the aftermath of the earlier encounter. We pass by a beautiful river, but its beauty no longer reaches me. I’m too upset – at the woman who convinced me to buy something, at the situation, but mostly at myself. It’s strange how, in such moments, our minds can carry us so far from where we physically are. I don’t see anything around me anymore, I don’t hear anything. My thoughts consume me, gnawing at me and draining my energy.

I ask myself, “Why am I letting this bother me so much?” I know that, energetically, it’s dragged me down. I try to tell myself “it is what it is” and move on, but it’s not working. I’m too affected. I keep thinking about the money, about how much I paid. I should be telling myself that I helped her, that the money matters more to her. But no, my mind refuses to accept that I’ve been duped.

We press on, and after a few silent steps, I force my eyes off the ground. I look around at the landscape again. The river flows peacefully, the green rice terraces open up before me like an invitation to let go of all the thoughts tormenting me. I realize the beauty around

me has always been there, but my mind was too preoccupied to see it.

It's not easy to detach from your own thoughts, but maybe that's the hard part of this journey. It's a lesson I'm learning right now, in the middle of this endless path. "It's just a lesson. I'll get through it," I tell myself, taking a deep breath.

The hot air fills my lungs, but for the first time since we set off, it feels light and refreshing. I realize that this place is more than just a tourist destination. It's a space where my mind can get lost and, in an unexpected way, find something new – perhaps even a part of myself.

I lift my gaze, and with a newfound sense of calm, I move forward, leaving behind the frustrations and, along with them, a small piece of myself I no longer need.

After hours of effort through the endless rice terraces, we finally arrive at our beautiful homestay. "What a view! Wow!" I've been given a bungalow – not exactly spotless, but spacious enough, with a huge bed just for me.

When I finally take off my sneakers, my feet feel like they're on fire, freed from their day-long cage. My socks, stuck to my skin, go straight into the sink under a strong stream of water – I didn't even want to smell them... I admit it. The hot water is waiting for me like an embrace, and I don't waste a second. I take a long, blessed shower, letting the water wash away all the dust and fatigue of the day.

After freshening up and changing clothes, I head to the rustic restaurant where dinner is served. We're all so hungry that we look at the plates like precious treasures. The food is delicious, and although there are six of us at the table, there's so much food that we can't even finish it all.

Finally, the sixth member of our group joins us at the table – my Ugandan friend's husband. A tall, thin... blonde guy from London.

“Hehe... what a mix!” She’s beautifully dark-skinned, and he’s strikingly fair. “I wonder what their kids will look like?” I can’t help but think, even though I know it’s none of my business. They’ve just gotten married after a few years of being together and chose Vietnam for their honeymoon. How cool! But what’s even cooler than their contrasting looks is their energy – they’re super chill, relaxed, and happy people.

We chat around the table, but I slowly retreat from the conversation. Their English is complicated, with accents and words that mix together beyond my comprehension, so I give up trying to follow the thread and start fiddling with my phone. I know it’s not polite to do this at the table, but I let myself be carried by impulse. I posted something on TikTok, a funny story on Facebook...

We don’t stay long at the table; the fatigue hits all of us, and one by one, we head to our rooms. Even though I’m refreshed after the shower, I feel completely drained, and I can’t wait to lie down. My feet throb like overworked engines, and the thought that tomorrow brings another day of trekking makes me want nothing more than to collapse into bed. I finally reach the top of the bed, but instead of resting, the phone remains firmly in my hand. Or maybe it’s the phone that won’t let go of me?

As I battle the urge to post something, I get a message from Silvia, my friend who hasn’t reached out in days. “Hey! Where are you, babe?”

“Hey! I’m in Sapa, Vietnam. Miss me?” I reply instantly, curious about the conversation.

Silvia: “Yeah... it looks really nice there. I just saw your story on Facebook.”

Me: “Yeah, it’s absolutely amazing here.”

Silvia: “How’s the weather?”

Me: "It's great, though a bit too hot."

Silvia: "I almost went to India, but the weather's crappy there right now, so I decided to wait a bit."

I feel the urge to ask her more, but I suddenly remember: "You shouldn't intrude in people's lives, Yda!" So I hold back.

"When did you leave the country?" Silvia continues, unfazed.

Me: "Last week, Monday."

Silvia: "Aha. Congrats! Still solo?"

"Yeah, yeah, still solo," I reply, smiling, wondering who could possibly join me in my "crazy" solo adventures around the world.

Silvia keeps talking about a guru in India, how they had a falling out before meeting, and her frustration with shallow relationships. "They swarm around me like flies," she says, and I smile to myself, unsure how to help. Our conversation turns into a mix of thoughts about life, relationships, and personal searches.

As I step back from the conversation, I realize how intense it had been. Silvia seems to be going through a period of deep searching and introspection. I can feel her frustration, her fear of repeating the same patterns, and I realize I'm grappling with similar questions myself, though in a different way. Will we ever truly know what's best for us?

I take another shower, cold this time, trying to revive my tired body. I feel like a Phoenix rising from its ashes, but also with a slight sense of melancholy. I put on a Netflix movie, but my thoughts prevent me from focusing. While the screen plays silently, other messages on my phone catch my attention. It's not Silvia this time, but Vhu, the girl I met on the bench in Hanoi.

“You’re very beautiful. My mom really likes you. She told me to tell you that.”

I was taken aback. “Ohhh... Thank you so much!” I didn’t know what else to say, it totally caught me off guard.

Our conversation continues simply, but full of warmth. Vhu asks for pictures from Sapa and tells me that neither she nor her mother have ever been there. I realize how privileged I am to be able to travel to these places, places that others don’t even have access to, even though they live so close.

After our chat, I lost all interest in the movie. I lie in bed, letting my thoughts wander freely. How many Vietnamese people have never seen places like Sapa or Ha Long Bay? I wonder. How many of us can’t see the wonderful places near us simply because we lack the money, the time, or perhaps even the knowledge? It’s fascinating how the world works.

With difficulty, I get up to turn off the light. It’s late, and tomorrow brings another adventure, another day trekking through the wilderness. I stretch out in bed, smiling, closing my eyes with thoughts of everything I experienced today. The journey continues, and with it, so do my discoveries.

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing is more important than staying on my own path, no matter where it leads.” – Anonymous

Chapter 8. “In the Heart of the Mountains: Wandering Between Rules and Freedoms”

June 26th, 2023

“I had such a good night’s sleep,” I thought to myself as the quiet morning wrapped around me. The deep sleep I so desperately needed had been like a balm for my tired body. My phone rang, relentless as ever, at exactly 7:00 AM, just as I was starting to savor the morning’s soft light creeping into the room. I jumped out of bed abruptly, afraid that I might sink back into the intoxicating warmth of the sheets. In the last few days, “just a little longer” had been a trap I had fallen into far too often. But not today. Today, I was determined. “Come on, Yda, get up!” I urged myself. A quick shower, some nourishing cream, and by 8:00 AM, I was already sitting at the breakfast table.

Surprisingly, the place was empty. Only a dense silence, as if it had drifted in from the depths of the mountains, hung over the entire room. From the kitchen came faint sounds, like whispers, and a woman appeared briefly. I asked for a coffee. She simply replied, “ok,” and disappeared just as quickly. When she returned, she brought a packet of instant coffee and a large bottle of hot water, tossing them onto the table like objects of no value. Oddly, her gesture made me smile. So raw, so simple, yet so authentic. I liked the novelty of this place: a homestay nestled in the heart of the mountains, among people who lived differently, perhaps closer to the essence of life.

I stepped outside for a moment, letting the cool morning air embrace my skin. My gaze settled on the valley. The sun’s rays, just waking from their own slumber, bathed everything in golden light, as if blessing this new day. I wondered how many of the locals still saw the

beauty in this daily routine of nature... how many still allowed themselves to feel the miracles around them.

My companions arrived around 8:15 AM, and the quiet broke into a wave of sounds, laughter, and stories. For a brief moment, I regretted those silent moments I'd had to myself. Breakfast was simple – fluffy pancakes, ripe bananas, a drizzle of honey, and toast – but it was exactly what I needed. Between us, conversations flowed naturally, like a mountain stream searching for its path among the rocks.

Today, we had a 6-kilometer trek ahead of us, and the idea of wandering through the bamboo forest made me feel as though I were setting out on an initiatory journey.

We set off full of enthusiasm, except for the Londoner, who still didn't seem to have quite started his day on the right foot. The air, thick and humid, seemed to wrap us in its essence. It had poured torrentially the night before, and the ground was damp and slippery. Along the path to the forest, puddles reflected like tiny mirrors caught between earth and sky. As we stepped into the forest, our feet sank into the mud, and our shoes became heavy, like the burdens of pilgrims from another era. And yet, I wasn't bothered. It was a challenge.

Passing through the towering green bamboo, I let my gaze lose itself among the sun-kissed leaves. I tried to capture the beauty of the moment in photos but quickly realized no camera could truly capture the reality. This reality, in all its fullness, surpassed any imagination.

And how could I not get lost in it? My desire to explore wasn't just about discovering new places, but about feeding my soul with the hidden beauty of life. In every step, in every breath of air, in every beam of light, I saw miracles. It was as if every mud puddle held a

diamond waiting to be discovered. Miracles aren't big and loud, they're tiny sparks of life that hide in overlooked details.

My feet reminded me of yesterday, sore and tired, and my shoes clenched around my toes like a vice. But I chose to ignore the pain. Maybe true freedom means choosing what to ignore, not just what to experience.

Along the way, I spoke a lot with Zi and Barbara, my colleague from Uganda. Barbara was fascinated by my plan to write a book and told me she couldn't wait to read it once it's translated into English. I was surprised at how impressed she was by my decision to leave everything behind in Romania and travel freely through Asia. I surprise even myself sometimes with how much I inspire people. It's a new feeling, but a pleasant one. Maybe sometimes we need to see things from the outside to truly understand who we are.

After returning to the homestay, a refreshing shower felt like a rebirth. Every drop of water felt like a balm that revived both body and mind. As I dressed and stuffed my dirty shoes into my backpack, I felt a new sense of freedom – the freedom to live exactly as I wanted.

At lunch, I was already feeling that hunger that no longer cared about aesthetics. The rice and meat, though lacking visual charm, satisfied me for the moment. But, unfortunately, the sauce I added without realizing made me regret it. Everything turned salty and inedible. Still, even this wasn't a real obstacle. I'd learned during these travels to accept small inconveniences with calm. Life isn't perfect, but every imperfection brings us closer to its truth.

After lunch, I felt the need to give something back. Something in return for the generosity with which this place had offered me experiences. I gave Zi a \$10 tip. Her gesture – kissing the money with an almost sacred sense of wonder – shook me. At that moment, I realized how differently people live here and what gratitude truly means.

On the way back to town, in the noisy minibus that seemed like it would fall apart at any moment, I let my thoughts wander. This town, with its lively streets and curious passersby, stirred a desire in me to explore it even more. I got off at the restaurant where we ate yesterday and left my backpack, thinking I'd spend a few carefree hours wandering around.

Sitting on a terrace, ice cream in hand, I watched the town in all its hustle and bustle. Every passerby seemed to tell me a story, even if I never knew exactly what it was. I watched, smiled, and felt my heart open wide. Life, with all its shades, was beautiful on that quiet afternoon in Sapa. "If I had left for Hanoi today, I would have missed these moments..." And suddenly, I had a craving for a good coffee.

I found an elegant café in the center of town and sat down at one of the tiny tables on the terrace. There was something fascinating about these small chairs and tables, almost like toys, which seemed to come from a miniature world. And yet, they had their own charm, perfectly completing the intimate atmosphere of the place. I ordered an iced "Coconut Coffee." Though I wasn't sure at first, the taste pleasantly surprised me – a delightful combination of flavors, where the light sweetness of coconut blended perfectly with the boldness of the coffee. I thought to myself that I should try all the local specialties, even if not all would suit my taste. It was part of the experience, part of this adventure of discovery.

I strategically chose a seat at the front table, wanting to catch as much of the city's life as possible. I love observing people, studying how they walk, how they're dressed, how their curious gazes scan the faces of strangers. It was a kind of game, trying to guess their stories just from the way they passed by me. I realized that many were looking at me, slightly puzzled, maybe because I seemed too relaxed, too happy. I was smiling widely for no particular reason, as if my happiness was a secret they hadn't encountered in a long time.

Just as my coffee was brought to the table, I witnessed my first accident in Vietnam. A motorbike collided with a car, just a few meters away from me. The sound of the impact abruptly shattered the calm atmosphere. I had often wondered how such incidents didn't happen more frequently, given the chaos of the traffic here, but now I had it right in front of my eyes. Thankfully, nothing serious happened. The motorbike driver seemed fine, and the car driver took a quick glance at the scratches, exchanged a few words, and both went their separate ways. Probably a "local understanding," swift and without much fuss. A resolution as simple as everything else seemed to be in this place.

After that episode, I savored my coffee with a different kind of attention. I became more alert, my eyes following every movement around me with a heightened curiosity. I felt like a hawk surveying everything from above, ready to catch any detail, any change. I paid 45,000 dong (around \$2) for my coffee and walked back to the restaurant. I put on my headphones and let my thoughts flow freely, like a river. I hummed softly along to the songs in my playlist, and my heart was brimming with joy. I was so happy that I felt like I was overflowing. Vietnam was offering me a little surprise, a tiny miracle at every turn, and I was certain that these days spent here would remain etched in my heart forever.

After snapping some photos from every possible angle, I went back to the restaurant, ready to get some writing done. My bag was exactly where I had left it, waiting for me patiently. I pulled out my laptop, ready to continue what I had started, but my thoughts quickly drifted to the movie *The Wonder*, which I had begun watching on Netflix the night before but hadn't finished due to all the WhatsApp messages.

I had barely pressed play and watched a few minutes of the movie when a loud noise made me jump: "Crash!" I couldn't believe it! Less than half an hour after the first accident, there was another one, right in front of me. "Is this a coincidence, or am I somehow attracting

accidents today?" Maybe the city was trying to send me some subtle signals that I wasn't quite picking up yet. Perhaps I should have left before witnessing any more incidents, but something kept me there.

I ordered a mango shake – my favorite – and a portion of fries, leaving the movie for another time. I opened my Word document and started writing, revisiting the notes and impressions from the day. Unlike other times, I no longer felt the pressure of time. I was starting to learn that you can't rush things, that everything has its own pace. And, after all, that's the beauty of it. Everything falls into place exactly as it should.

I stayed at the restaurant until around 5:30 PM when the clouds outside began to gather, threatening to unleash a heavy downpour. I didn't want to take any risks, so I decided to head to the bus station earlier. I gathered my things, paid the bill, and said goodbye to the staff. My backpack felt heavier now, even though I hadn't added anything extra. Perhaps the fatigue of the day was starting to settle in. "Come on, Yda, just carry it!" I told myself, trying to motivate myself.

I hadn't walked more than 100 meters when I stumbled upon a heated argument between a few locals. They were shouting at each other with an intensity that seemed to grow with every second, and even though I didn't understand the language, the tone had a certain violence that made me flinch. "What could they be fighting about? Money or jealousy?" I wondered, smiling slightly at the thought. I passed by without getting caught in the tension, but the commotion almost made me miss the bus station. Station? More like an improvisation! I asked for a stool and sat down on the sidewalk, waiting for the bus. I sat there for two hours, like one of the dwarves from *Snow White*. My backside had gone numb, but there was no one to complain to. Thankfully, my phone was my most reliable companion in such moments.

Time passed more quickly than I expected, chatting with Mone. I told him about my experiences in Vietnam, but especially about the madness of Hanoi's traffic. We laughed together when I described how people drive anywhere – even on sidewalks, weaving between pedestrians – just to get somewhere faster. “In Bucharest, the Asian delivery guys from Glovo are almost the same, with their mopeds,” he replied. We laughed again, but I explained that it didn't quite compare to the Vietnamese traffic. “Here, there are no lanes or clear rules. It's total chaos, but somehow, for them, it seems like freedom.”

Mone didn't agree. “Order and rules bring discipline, not subjugation,” he said. “Without rules, everything would collapse into complete confusion.” And in a way, he was right. But I replied that people living in an organized chaos like this would be lost if taken out of their environment. And vice versa – those from more orderly societies wouldn't easily adapt here.

We continued our discussion about happiness and rules. Mone was convinced that rules bring happiness, citing the Nordic countries as an example, where people are among the happiest in the world. “Maybe, but happiness doesn't only come from order and material comfort,” I told him. “In my last relationship, I had everything I wanted, but I wasn't happy.” I felt our conversation touch on a sensitive point, but Mone concluded with a smile that perhaps, one day, I would better understand what it means to belong to a place.

Maybe Mone was right. Maybe one day, I would understand what it truly means to belong somewhere. But until then, my travels will continue, each experience bringing with it a new lesson about life and about myself. Yet our conversation lingered in my mind, like an echo that kept returning. “How did I end up being unhappy in my own country? What pushed me to travel so far away from everything I know?” Perhaps it's just a matter of perception – that I'm judging everything wrong. I promised myself to take things as they are, to live in the present, but I still find myself comparing. It's not easy to leave

the past behind when it follows you, unseen, in every thought. And yet, maybe that's what I need to try.

At 7:30 PM, the bus arrived. I boarded and sat in seat 6B, as per the ticket Tom had given me. Although the bus wasn't exactly like the one I had arrived in Sapa with, the seat seemed softer, and each seat had a small curtain offering a bit more privacy. "VIP Bus," they called it, but I decided not to make any comparisons. After all, comparisons only fuel unnecessary dissatisfaction.

As soon as we set off, a wave of nausea hit me. Was it from the winding roads? Or maybe the uncomfortable seat position that refused to adjust the way I wanted? Or perhaps it was all the thoughts swirling in my mind, refusing to settle. My stomach churned, and the sensation that I might vomit at any moment made me tense up. "What am I going to do for six hours until we reach Ha Giang?" I wondered silently, trying to control my breathing.

Suddenly, I realized that I had no idea where I was actually going. In my hands, I only had a sheet of paper with a few details: my name, "Ha Giang Loop," my bus seat number, and the price I had paid. But the destination? Unknown. Plans? Zero. It felt like I was a ship adrift. And maybe that was the best thing. "Just go with the flow," I told myself. "Why keep trying to control everything?"

I tried to doze off, but as soon as I closed my eyes, I felt an urgent need to use the bathroom. I sighed deeply, frustrated by the limitations of my body, these mundane but essential needs that always hold me back. "How fragile our bodies are," I thought, dragging myself out of the seat.

After we stopped for a break, I felt a little better. I tried to redirect my thoughts, to reset my mind. "The chaos isn't in the world; it's only in my mind." Looking out the window, the road to the unknown began to feel not so much threatening as fascinating. Maybe, in essence, I'm not afraid of the unknown – maybe, in fact, I'm drawn to

it. With every kilometer passing beneath the bus wheels, I felt like I was getting closer to myself.

Although I had closed all the air vents, the cold crept under my clothes like a draft from another world. I grabbed the blanket from the seat next to me and wrapped myself in both, hoping to block at least some of the chill seeping into my bones. The trembling lessened, but I couldn't shake the feeling of sickness. I fiddled with my phone, but I was afraid to open my laptop – I knew staring at the screen would only make the nausea worse. I closed my eyes and listened to music on YouTube, letting the sounds chase away my thoughts. Slowly, I drifted off to sleep with my headphones in my ears.

Johnny Tran Homestay – Ha Giang, Vietnam

I'm not sure how much time had passed, but I woke up with a jolt when the driver suddenly yelled, "Jasmine, Jasmine, Jasmine..." His sharp voice cut through the sleepy quiet of the bus. He quickly explained that three people had to get off at Jasmine Homestay. I asked him about my stop too. In the meantime, I messaged Tom because I had no idea where I was supposed to get off. The driver answered curtly, saying we'd arrive in a few minutes and that he knew all about the "girl in seat 6B." "Ah, Tom took care of it," I thought, relieved.

When we reached my destination, I was still groggy with sleep. We stopped on a deserted, dimly lit street. The driver handed me my backpack, said a quick goodbye, and drove off without looking back. The bus's headlights disappeared, leaving me in darkness, like everything had vanished all at once.

I looked up at the sky. The moon was small, barely visible, but still there. "I'm not completely alone in the Universe," I thought with a faint smile, amused by my situation. There wasn't much I could do. My homestay was right across the street, hidden in the same quiet darkness. I climbed the steps and pushed open the creaky door. From

a corner of the room, a tall figure slowly emerged, like a shadow pulled from a dream.

The man, a local with deep, weathered lines on his face, motioned for me to follow him. A faint light flickered somewhere in the back, guiding us. The cold air and heavy scent of dampness filled my senses. I wasn't scared – in fact, I felt strangely like I belonged in this scene, as if I was a character in someone else's dream. We climbed a staircase and reached the first floor. He opened a door, which creaked as well, and when he switched on the dim light, I could finally see clearly. It was a large room with 14 bunk beds, all empty. I was alone.

He looked at me, expressionless. "I wonder what he's thinking? What am I, a lone woman, doing here in Vietnam at this hour?" Or maybe he didn't care at all. Perhaps to him, I was just another shadow that would pass unnoticed. I asked him where the bathroom was, and he pointed to a brown door at the end of the hallway. He told me breakfast would be at 8:00 AM, and that six people would be going on the tour. Then he left, as abruptly as he had appeared. I was left alone in the room, this vast space enveloped in silence. "I've made it to Ha Giang," I told myself, realizing how far I'd come, not just geographically, but emotionally too.

"What will it be like?" I wondered, but without any fear. If I'm already here, I might as well live it to the fullest. The Universe has its way of guiding things. Who am I to resist?

I went to shower, and the hot water felt like a gentle relief on my tired skin. For the first time that day, I felt completely relaxed. The mirror fogged up, and instinctively, I drew some childish shapes: a smiling face, a heart, a few stars. I chuckled softly to myself. "I'm a big kid," I thought, wiping the drawings away with my hand.

After my shower, I felt a little more grounded, but when I returned to the room, I realized that sleep had abandoned me for

good. I grabbed my phone and sent a few messages. Mone responded almost right away. I just needed to get my thoughts out.

“I felt sick on the bus. Now I’m at the hostel, feeling better,” I texted, trying to keep it concise.

“Why did you feel sick?” came his predictable question.

“I don’t know. Maybe it was the winding roads, maybe the seat... Or maybe it was all combined,” I replied, but without much conviction.

Mone: “Did you take Emetix?”

Me: “No, I don’t have that with me.”

“Make sure to take some tomorrow,” he suggested, simply and directly.

I smiled at his practical way of looking at things. “Do you think I can find something like that here, in the middle of the mountains?” I responded playfully. “I’ll ask for something for motion sickness if I find a pharmacy. Anyway, I feel like I’m on another planet.”

“You felt the same in the Philippines,” came his quick reply. “You’re still in Asia.”

I sighed. “Yes, but it’s different,” I wrote back, trying to figure out for myself why every place I visit feels so unique.

Mone: “What’s different? You chose the route.”

“You don’t get it,” I replied. “I love what I’m doing. But this is a 10+ on the comfort-zone-exit scale.”

Mone: “It can’t be different. You’ve already had your Philippines experience. Don’t freak out over every little thing.”

I smiled softly. He was right. My worries had nothing to do with the journey. They were about me, about how I still hadn't fully learned to manage my emotions when faced with the unknown. "How do I let go of them?" I wondered, but I knew the answer wouldn't come easily.

Around 3:00 AM, I turned off the light and tried to get a few hours of sleep. I had to be ready by 7:00 AM for the tour waiting for me. I had barely closed my eyes when I heard a bus stopping outside the hostel. "Looks like I'll have some roommates," I thought, and soon enough, two girls and a guy entered the room, speaking in French.

We exchanged quick hellos, and then they shuffled around the room, using only their phone lights so as not to disturb me. In the quiet that settled once they fell asleep, I listened to their calm breathing, feeling, for the first time today, perhaps, in harmony with everything around me. Soon, I fell asleep too, letting the night, the unknown, and the peace I'd finally found within myself wash over me.

"Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions." – Dalai Lama

Chapter 9. “The Journey Beyond Curves: Between Laughter and Revelations”

June 27th, 2023

~ Day One of the Ha Giang Loop ~

By 7:00 AM, I was already awake, determined to be the first in the communal bathroom. The cold shower felt like a brutal awakening, but it was also necessary. The water enveloping my skin made me feel suddenly more alive, more alert, as if life itself was flowing through me, bringing me back to reality. The cream I applied afterward was like a personal ritual, a moment just for me, something that anchored me in the present. Despite everything, I returned to the room surprised by how good I felt, considering I had only slept for three hours. Some days really do manage to surprise you from the very first moments.

In the meantime, my roommates had woken up as well. One of the girls disappeared immediately into the bathroom, taking my place. I smiled. “I hope she’s not in a rush,” I thought to myself. The others chatted amongst themselves, but it was as if I didn’t exist. I felt invisible, but strangely, it didn’t bother me. I let myself sink into the quiet, content to remain a mere observer. Sometimes, being invisible is a blessing, a gift that allows you to get closer to yourself.

At 8:00 AM, I sat down at the table in the small hall next to the improvised kitchen. The room was dominated by a long wooden table and two worn, but welcoming benches. A girl was preparing breakfast with almost mechanical movements, like a well-oiled clock, as if every step had been repeated thousands of times. The man who had shown me to my room the previous night motioned for me to take a seat, then disappeared just as quickly as he’d arrived, probably busy with

something else. Slowly, the others began to arrive, sitting down beside me. At one point, a phone rang loudly, breaking the silence in the room. For a moment, the sound pulled me out of my own thoughts.

I glanced at my roommates – the French travelers I had slept beside the night before. They sat at the other end of the table, giving me a clear view of each of them. Young, probably around 30 years old, with that slightly arrogant air of those who know they're attractive. One was blonde, the other a brunette, and the guy – blue eyes and aristocratic features. Two other guys, Spaniards, sat next to me, flashing wide smiles as if every day was a new adventure for them. I watched them for a few seconds, feeling the energy they brought filling the room.

The menu was familiar: pancakes, bananas, and honey. "I'm going to burst soon from all these pancakes," I thought, amused, but this simple food had something comforting about it. We introduced ourselves politely, though the conversations remained superficial. The Universe had brought us together for the next three days, and somehow, we all felt that this was exactly where we were meant to be.

9:00 AM came quickly, and we prepared to head out. The Vietnamese are extremely punctual, and I liked that. They stuck to the schedule like clockwork. I had a kind driver, though he didn't speak much English. His name was Zen, and as I watched his calm gestures and the way he always seemed serene, his name suited him perfectly. There was something soothing about his presence. It was as if, even though we didn't exchange many words, there was already an unspoken understanding between us.

I wouldn't have missed this experience for the world. Me, who at one time wouldn't have dared to get on a motorcycle, was now crossing the mountains on two wheels. What a contrast! I promised myself I'd never say "never" again. The decision had been made. The most fascinating part was how all the recent events had led me here.

Decisions, coincidences, encounters... Everything connected, and now I found myself on this path I hadn't even initially planned. I could have gone to Ninh Binh, but something – an instinct, maybe – had stopped me. As if the signs were guiding me. "How did I notice those signs? And how did I follow them?" I wondered. But here I was, and that's all that mattered now.

I hadn't seen Zen's face when we set off. There were five drivers with us because the French guy was riding solo. The rest of us each had our own driver. I didn't know what rules determined which motorcyclist went with whom, but I felt like destiny had made the choice for me. I hoped the most handsome one would be my driver, but fate had other plans. When they put on their helmets, I couldn't even recognize them anymore. The bustle around us had grown, and everyone looked the same, with their balaclavas and similar gear. "Who's taking me?" I wondered, slightly panicked, as I looked around.

One of the guys motioned towards the last motorcycle. Of course. The guy on the bike was calmly adjusting his mirror. He had a balaclava covering his face, so all I could see were his eyes. "He's not the one I wanted," I muttered inwardly, sighing slightly. But the choice wasn't mine, not today. Without saying a word, he motioned for me to get on. I complied, understanding that sometimes life doesn't give you what you think you want, but what you actually need.

I noticed that my luggage was already strapped to the motorcycle. "Ah, so that's how it is." I had thought the bags would be transported by car, but no, we were taking them with us. The others had only small backpacks. "Am I the only one with a full bag?" I wondered, smiling wryly. But there was no way I could have packed lighter – what should I have left behind?

I smiled under my helmet, noticing my driver's brown socks – a strange detail, but the only one that set him apart from the others. "Let's hope he doesn't change them tomorrow," I thought, amused. Zen was slimmer than I'd expected, probably thinner than me. I

placed my small bag between us to keep a little distance. I liked the way he drove – calm and steady. He gave me a sense of security, as if he knew exactly how to get me where I needed to be.

We set off, and I pulled out my phone to record a video. “Who would have thought I’d ever cross the mountains of Vietnam on a motorcycle?” I heard my inner laughter, an echo of the freedom I was feeling. “Pure madness,” my mother would say. It’s better she doesn’t know.

The sensation of being on the motorcycle was incredible. The wind brushed against my face, and adrenaline coursed through every cell of my body. I almost wanted to lean into Zen, to wrap my arms around him out of sheer joy. Every bump, every curve reminded me that life is full of surprises. Zen rode in silence, focused on the road, and his quiet presence brought me a sense of inner peace as well. We didn’t need to exchange words to understand each other. The road became an extension of my thoughts, and each curve felt like another step in my journey of self-discovery.

Before we left, we’d been shown the route on a map at the hostel. 175 kilometers today, with six stops, including one for lunch. Tomorrow, another 175 kilometers, and then on the last day, 160 kilometers. It was fascinating how everything was so well organized, and how each kilometer brought me closer to something I couldn’t quite define yet.

On the road, I let my thoughts wander, like a wind carrying me away from myself. Every glance towards the green mountains around me gave me a sense of pure freedom. I realized that this was the closest I’d ever felt to my true self. I savored each moment, each sensation this journey had to offer.

Everything is organized with astonishing precision. There are six motorcycles, and the group leader rides ahead of us, leading the way. At our first stop, I finally see Zen without his helmet. His eyes,

calm and warm, look at me without any rush, radiating a quiet and steady energy. I learn his name here, but I stay silent, enjoying a rare moment: time just for myself. A luxury I've never truly had before – the ability to stop and think about myself, to reflect on everything that has accumulated inside me. For hours, it's just me and this incredible nature blending together. "Me and the rest of the world," I say to myself, while feeling Zen's calm presence, like a silent guardian, always there.

During one of our breaks, I realize that the nice guy I'd noticed at the beginning is the driver for the brunette French girl. The other two, the blonde and the blue-eyed guy, are a couple. This dynamic surprises me a bit, but I think that sometimes you have to step aside and make room for youth and beauty. Maybe it's better this way, I tell myself, with a certain resignation mixed with wisdom. Nothing is accidental.

The landscapes continue to unfold endlessly before us, the vibrant green of the vegetation becoming an ocean that captures my gaze, and the wind whips my hair under my helmet. The reality around me becomes overwhelming – in the best way. Mountains, rivers, corn growing on steep cliffs – it all feels like it's been pulled from a fantastic world. "It's incredible how real all of this is," I say quietly to myself. You know those perfect pictures of mountains and rivers that look like giant dragons, and the sky is such an unreal blue it seems photoshopped? Well, now I know they're real. I feel small, but not in a bad way – more like a piece of a grand puzzle, part of a whole that doesn't need to be fully understood or controlled. We were only a stone's throw from China, and they showed us where the border was. The motorcycles were cruising along like in a Chinese painting, with vivid colors and the absolute silence of the mountain.

I smile, realizing that these moments will stay with me forever. The wind shifts direction, lightly brushing Zen's face as he adjusts his helmet without slowing down. I think to myself that this long, winding road is just like my life: each turn hides a new surprise. "It's not

important to know the destination,” I tell myself. “It’s enough to trust the journey.” Zen, silent and sure of himself, knows the way, and that gives me a sense of peace.

This tour was completely unplanned. If it weren’t for Tom and the boy from the Ha Long Bay tour, I probably wouldn’t be here. Tom planted the seed of the idea, and the boy from the tour watered it, bringing it to life. Sometimes, that’s how the Universe changes your path, I think. People appear out of nowhere and reroute your direction. It’s fascinating how life can take unexpected turns without asking if you’re ready. I feel good living this way, as if it were destined for me. The boy from the tour comes to mind – I don’t even know his name, but he was the one who convinced me to take this trip. And even though it was just a small interaction, it changed everything.

The revelation of the day? A stranger can change everything, even with an apparently insignificant interaction. This thought makes me smile. Life forges its own path, and we never know what awaits us around the next corner. Just like Essra made me think I could be a nomad through Asia, the boy from the tour changed my direction. Maybe that’s the beauty of these unexpected encounters.

We stop for pictures and to stretch our legs. Not everyone is used to sitting on a motorcycle for hours, so the breaks are necessary. But we continue. There are steep climbs and descents, sharp curves, rocks, mud – all part of this adventure. The road becomes steeper, and the rain turns the path into a dangerous mix of mud and water. At one point, I feel the wheels of the motorcycle slip a little, and my heart skips a beat. Zen grips the handlebars tighter and corrects the bike with a confident move. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. I hadn’t realized until now just how fragile safety can be on this adventure.

We get off the motorcycles and feel the soft earth sinking beneath our feet. Every step seems carefully calculated, as if a wrong move could drag us down. Zen gestures for me to stay calm, and his

faint smile gives me confidence. We walk through the difficult section, while the motorcycles struggle to get through the mud.

The rain comes in bursts, as if dancing with the mountain's rhythm. The sun breaks through briefly, only to disappear again behind thick sheets of rain. Even though our gear protects us, we feel like waterproof robots, moving forward along the serpentine roads. But the rain doesn't bother me. In fact, I find myself becoming friends with it. Water seeps into my sneakers, my clothes stick to my skin, but I don't care. "The rain and I are friends now," I say, smiling. "I love it." Each drop feels like a part of me being cleansed, purified.

By lunchtime, we stop at a restaurant and are invited to the third floor, where our meal awaits. After the light breakfast, we're all starving. The local food delights us with its intense flavors of cilantro and chili, and even though it's spicy, I don't stop savoring every bite. We're all absorbed in this perfect moment, the conversations flowing naturally, as if nothing else matters. I wish I could prolong every second, to stay in this magical tour that caught me completely off guard, but from which I no longer want to leave.

After lunch, the group leader calls out, "Di Thoi!" – a new Vietnamese word I've just learned, meaning "Let's go!" We gather by the motorcycles, put on our helmets, and prepare to continue the journey. Everything is so well organized that I can't help but feel impressed. I like everyone in the group, but Zen has unintentionally become my favorite – he's the one who safely carries me through the mountains. I found out that he is the older brother of the guy driving the brunette French girl, which brings an ironic smile to my face. "Sometimes, it's better not to choose. Let the unknown guide you."

After another round of rain, we stop at a viewpoint. Before us unfolds a giant rainbow, like a bridge between the sky and the earth. The spectacle is already magnificent, but then a second rainbow appears. "Wow!" It's all I can think of. We take pictures, we laugh, and I reflect on how extraordinary our existence is on this Earth. "I wonder

what other planets look like,” I think, watching Zen adjust his helmet as we prepare to continue our journey.

By 4:00 PM, we were supposed to visit a waterfall, but the heavy rain changed our plans. The leader decided we’d head straight to our accommodation. We had already spent hours on the motorcycles, and although the rain was constant and rhythmic, it had started to feel like a heavy burden. “Nothing stops here,” I think to myself, looking at the gray sky that didn’t seem willing to give us a break. At 4:20 PM, we pull into the homestay, where our motorcycles are quickly hidden under a tarp. We squeeze inside, crammed into a small space, peeling off our wet gear as if shaking off not just the rain, but the weight of the journey.

Everyone is laughing, the voices overlapping chaotically, while the Spaniards crack jokes nonstop – jokes the rain can’t drown out. Our passports are collected for registration, and I’m assigned to share a room and bed with Sarah, the friendly French girl who had “stolen” the driver I wanted. The irony of the situation makes me smile – now we have to share more than just a road. “Life plays funny games sometimes,” I think to myself.

Sarah, with a slightly ironic laugh, lights a cigarette as she casually tells me she forgot her backpack at last night’s accommodation. While she talks, I watch her, fascinated by the nonchalance with which she handles her small catastrophes.

“Doesn’t that stress you out?” I ask, feeling like my anxiety would have exploded in such a situation.

“Not really,” she says with a faint smile, blowing smoke in a controlled kind of abandon. “I’ve learned to live with what I have. What I don’t have, I don’t miss.” There was something profound behind that reply, something she wasn’t saying out loud. Beneath her laughter, I noticed a trace of well-hidden unease, like a cloud sneaking across the sky of an otherwise sunny day.

“You’re something else...” I say, feeling defeated by this lesson in nonchalance. “I would’ve lost my mind.”

Sarah laughs again, a pure, freeing laugh. “You don’t know how strong you are until you get here,” she adds, blowing smoke into the damp air that seems to absorb her every word.

I realize I have to help her. I lend her clothes, creams, deodorant – anything I have handy. It’s a small gesture, but in a way, it helps me regain control over a situation I would have considered lost. “I’ll even give you my driver,” I joke, laughing at the irony of fate. Sarah laughs, calling me her “savior.” An unexpected bond forms between us, seemingly out of nowhere.

By 7:30 PM, I retreat with my laptop, while Sarah stays outside chatting with the others. I type away, trying to find accommodation for my next stop in Ninh Binh, but the options are many and exhausting. So I turn to Sawa, my trusted guide in the digital world.

“Do you have any recommendations for accommodation in Ninh Binh? There are a lot of options outside the city, but the bus will drop me off in the center, and I’ll probably arrive late, after midnight,” I write, searching for clarity in a sea of information.

His reply comes quickly, as always: “You can try places like Trang An or Tam Coc – they’re popular and worth visiting. Book at least two nights so you have time to explore the area. Look for a place with 24-hour reception, and don’t miss the boat tour on the river in Tam Coc.”

I smile, grateful for his advice. It’s amazing how the right people always seem to appear at the right time, guiding you through your journey, whether it’s a physical or emotional one. I feel safe again, even though everything is, essentially, unpredictable.

At 7:30 PM, I head down for dinner, where the table is filled with local delicacies. After the long day, my hunger returns with a

vengeance. Every Vietnamese dish, with its exotic aromas, feels like a revelation. I start thinking that maybe the secret to Zen's slim figure is the motorcycle rides – a joke that makes me smile. The people around me begin clinking glasses filled with "Happy Water," a type of Vietnamese rice liquor, in a ritual I don't fully understand, but it feels like some kind of unspoken bond between us. The clinking of glasses and the laughter that follows gives me a sense of belonging, like I'm part of something larger, even if it's unknown.

After dinner, the atmosphere gets livelier, and karaoke begins. The Spaniards, full of energy, grab the microphone and start singing a song I don't recognize, but it makes everyone laugh. Sarah grabs my hand and says, "Come on, don't dodge it! What do you think about a duet?"

I laugh and politely refuse: "No way. You know it would be a disaster."

"It's not about how it sounds, it's about feeling it!" she says, laughing, her eyes sparkling with energy.

I step back, leaving the others to enjoy the moment. From the doorway, I listen to them laugh and realize how different we all are, and yet how well we've connected. Each of us brings something unique to this journey. "Maybe it's this diversity that unites us," I tell myself, feeling a new perspective taking shape.

I sit down to search again for accommodations in Ninh Binh, but I already feel exhausted. Instead of continuing, I opened Instagram. After a few minutes, I received a friend request from a guy named Allec. Curious, I accepted the request, and within seconds, he sent me a message. The conversation starts off casually but quickly turns playful and amusing. Before long, he tells me he's "old" at 25, which makes me laugh.

"How can you be old at 25?" I type, still laughing.

“Old in mind, my lady, but with the body of Adonis,” comes his reply, and I catch myself smiling. The conversation continues, shifting from jokes to small confessions, but I feel like it’s enough for one evening. I switch off my phone and get ready for bed.

Sarah comes into the room, tired but smiling. “I’m heading straight for the shower,” she says, and I agree. I get ready for bed as well. By 9:30 PM, we turned off the lights, like two well-behaved girls. I realize how rare it is for me to go to bed this early, but I’m too tired to care. Outside, the karaoke continues, but it doesn’t bother me at all. I fell asleep almost immediately.

“Not those who travel the most see the most, but those who see the deepest.” – Alexandre Dumas

Chapter 10. “In the Arms of Ha Giang's Mountains: A Journey Towards Freedom”

June 28th, 2023

~ Day Two of the Ha Giang Loop ~

I wake up early, around 6:00 AM, and the room is enveloped in an almost surreal silence. “Of course I’m not sleepy, I went to bed at the same time as the chickens,” I tell myself, smiling, a soft warmth filling my soul as the semi-darkness embraces my thoughts. I feel wrapped in the quiet of the Vietnamese morning, as if each second has its own breath. I glance at Sarah, who’s still asleep, probably deep in her dreams. A sense of peace washes over me; I don’t feel rushed to get out of bed. I stretch slowly, feeling like part of this calm moment. The subtle sounds of nature reach me through the closed window. I check my phone and see that I have no new messages, nothing urgent to disturb my morning. I like this silence and feel it smiling back at me from the shadows, a quiet accomplice.

By 7:00 AM, Sarah stirs and slowly wakes up. “We should open the window,” she says in a gentle, warm voice, looking at me as if truly seeing me for the first time. The humid morning air lightly brushes our faces, hinting at a day full of discoveries. The view before us makes it all worth it. The village below us seems peaceful, and the distant mountains are shrouded in a soft mist, fragile like a dream on the verge of dissolving, like a morning illusion. “Wow, why didn’t we do this yesterday?” I say, smiling at the thought that this view had been hidden from us behind the heavy wooden shutters.

We both get up, and without many words, we fall into our morning routine: a quick shower, lotions, brushing our hair. Sarah

lights a cigarette, the smoke rising lazily toward the ceiling. It's a quiet moment, unhurried. The simplicity of each gesture connects us in a comfortable, almost meditative rhythm. It feels like a small routine between friends.

At 8:00 AM, we head down for breakfast. Nothing has changed about breakfast either: pancakes with honey, bananas, and Vietnamese coffee – intense, almost bitter. Every day seems to begin the same, with a sense of familiarity that comforts me. It's a small but precious ritual before setting off on the road again.

By 9:00 AM, we're back on the motorbikes, ready to depart. I put on my helmet, and the humid heat of the air wraps around my skin. It's incredible how quickly I've grown accustomed to all of this: the drizzling rain, the sound of the engine roaring to life beneath me, that feeling of absolute freedom filling me as the motorbike glides down the road. We line up in orderly fashion and set off, and the sensation of being part of this orchestra of engines and nature fills me with energy.

Today's road is even more picturesque than yesterday's, if that's possible. Each turn reveals something new – small villages tucked away among the mountains, smiling people watching us with curious eyes. I'm fascinated by the landscape – the mountains that seem to change shape with every step, like silent giants dancing before our eyes. Sometimes I think I'd love to be able to draw them, to capture in lines and colors every emotion that stirs within me. Every turn in the road reveals a hidden story – a child playing, a tiny wooden house, a vast stretch of land that seems to go on forever.

We stop frequently at lookout points. We take pictures, but we all know that no photograph can truly capture the grandeur of this place. It's as if we're trying to put a dream into words, but reality is much vaster and deeper than any camera could capture. We stretch, laugh, massage our sore butts from the long ride, and tease each other: "Who said mountain roads are easy?"

The river we encounter along the way seems to have a will of its own. The emerald green water flows slowly but with an invisible strength, as if it knows exactly where it's going, indifferent to us, its small spectators. I feel captivated by its beauty, unable to capture in photos what I'm experiencing in this moment. I stand there in silence, trying to imprint its image in my mind, knowing that no picture will do it justice. It's one of those breathtaking moments that makes you feel small in the face of nature's grandeur.

The first significant stop is at the waterfall we missed yesterday. The road there is short, but it feels like we're stepping into another world. Wrapped in our rain ponchos, we feel like astronauts landing on an unknown planet. We cross an old bridge and reach a cabin with a wide terrace, where people gather to admire the waterfall from above. The sound of the water crashing down the rocks is like a magnet, irresistibly drawing you in, and I stand there, fascinated, watching the spray of water breaking against the rocks. Some brave souls leap from the rocks into the cold waters below, but I'm content just to watch from a distance. It's beautiful to enjoy the spectacle without being part of it.

The Spaniards in our group can't resist and dive into the water, laughing and splashing like children who've escaped supervision. Sarah and I stand under cover, laughing at their energy. I film them, thinking how wonderful it must be to live like that, without fear, to jump off a rock into cold water on a summer morning. "That's the life!" I think, admiring them.

After such a lively morning, lunch finds us at another local restaurant along the route. The meal is a feast. The food, though simple, has that authentic taste that stays with you. Soon enough, the plates are emptied quickly, as if we've all been consumed by insatiable appetites. "It's like termites passed through here," I joke, looking at the remnants on the table, small fragments of a feast devoured in a hurry. We already feel like family, connected by the

days spent together, by the laughter, the fatigue, and the constant rain that has bonded us more than any words spoken.

The group is still full of energy, though fatigue is beginning to show its teeth, gradually creeping into each of us. We struggle to get going, moving slowly, as if every kilometer ahead of us weighs more heavily. Today, we have 175 kilometers to cover – a long road that promises to be as exhausting as it is beautiful. The breaks become more frequent, and the time spent at each stop seems to stretch as we feel the increasing burden of the journey.

Today we're at the back of the column, the last in the line of motorbikes. Yesterday we were second-to-last, so it doesn't feel like much of a change. I find it amusing that our position in the column is like a silent dance, without rules, but somehow everyone finds their place. The boy from France, for instance, always seems to be in the middle, as if his instinct guides him to that neutral, safe zone. The thought makes me smile, imagining that maybe he calculates his place strategically, watching who's in front and who's behind, like a small survival game the rest of us don't understand.

We reach another lookout point and climb a series of steps. I feel my breathing getting heavier, but I know the effort will be worth it. When we reach the top, the view is simply stunning. A panoramic landscape, with a 360-degree vista, stretches out before us. Two perfectly symmetrical hills, as if carefully shaped by the hand of a divine artist, rise from the lush greenery. The distant mountain ranges seem to fade into the horizon, partially hidden by the mist that cloaks them in mystery. We're told that this place is called "Fairy Blossom." But I would call it "Magic View," because it feels like I'm looking into an enchanted world, a window open to a reality purer and more intense than anything I've ever experienced.

I feel like a child discovering the magic in fairy tales for the first time, that deep, inexplicable sense of wonder. The thought of returning to Romania feels more and more distant, a fragile thread I

no longer feel tied to. I'm absorbed by the magic in the air, a mysterious energy that makes me feel freer and more alive than ever.

We reach the next homestay around 4:30 PM. To our surprise, we no longer have proper beds, just two mattresses on the floor. The atmosphere is relaxed, peaceful, almost like a hidden yoga retreat in the mountains. Sarah is delighted that we no longer have to share a blanket like last night and starts bouncing on the mattress with youthful energy. I watch her with a smile but resist the urge to join in. Inside, a small voice tells me that I should let myself get carried away by this enthusiasm, allow myself to enjoy like a child, at least every once in a while. But it's too late. I stay lost in thought and accept it.

Dinner arrives at 7:30 PM, and as usual, the food is plentiful. The plates fill up quickly, and the "Happy Water" – that strong local liquor – begins to circulate among us. The Vietnamese are heavy drinkers, and each small glass is emptied swiftly, followed by laughter and calls for another round. Zen, my driver, remains as withdrawn and quiet as ever, which suits me just fine. I enjoy the quiet, the unspoken comfort between us. In contrast, his brother, much more outgoing, chats with Sarah. I watch them for a moment but realize that tonight I need a different kind of conversation, something quieter, so I retreat to the room.

I play with my phone and send a message to Mone. "Hey, look what I ate!" I write, excitedly sharing a picture of the dinner feast.

"Is the food good over there?" he asks, with that relaxed tone he always uses to make me laugh.

"Yeah, Vietnam is a real culinary feast! Although, I haven't tried snake yet," I reply, amused. "But I did try spicy peppers and bamboo shoots. I've never liked hot peppers, but I was brave here... and I paid for it! My mouth was on fire!"

"Spicy peppers?" Mone starts laughing loudly. I can already picture him imagining the scene.

“Yeah, yeah! It was like I swallowed a volcano!” I respond, laughing.

“You need to take out the seeds, Yda! Those are the killers! If you can separate them, do it. The seeds are the problem!” he advises, sounding like a culinary expert.

“You’re probably right,” I say, still giggling. “Next time, I’ll do that. Or who knows, maybe I like living dangerously!”

“Good for you! But remember, Yda, it’s all mental! The heat isn’t real, it’s just in your head!” he says, with a touch of zen philosophy in his voice.

“Uh-huh, sure! You’re saying that while I’m breathing fire here, right?” I reply playfully.

“Exactly! The fire is in you, not in the pepper!” He sends me a laughing emoji, and suddenly, I realize how much I miss his company.

Sarah is already asleep. She went to bed without many words, probably worn out from the alcohol and the day’s euphoria. I lie down too, setting my phone aside. I close my eyes in the darkness of the room and fall deeply asleep, without any time left for a recap of the day. This tour is exhausting, but I feel like it frees me a little more with each passing day. Slowly, I’m shedding everything that used to weigh me down, as if the rain and the long roads are washing away the burdens of my past. It’s a mental reset that I needed so badly. I’m fully living in the midst of this harmonious blend of mountains, rain, laughter, and silence. I absolutely love it! I finally feel like I’m truly breathing.

“It doesn’t matter how slowly you go, as long as you don’t stop.” – Confucius

Chapter 11. “The Road of Silence: At the Crossroads Between the Past and Freedom”

June 29th, 2023

~ Day Three of the Ha Giang Loop ~

Every night brings a torrential rain, an unrelenting downpour that rages over everything in its path. In most places, this would probably bother me, but here, the rain offers a soothing touch, like a gentle, calming presence, like a cloak that shields my sense of peace. Its constant sound, whispering on the roof, fills me with a strange happiness, a quiet joy. Not even this tireless storm can disturb the serenity I feel deep within.

After breakfast, we get ready to leave. We put on our rain gear again, which has already weathered many battles with nature. My pants tore between the legs yesterday when I took a wrong step. I smile at the thought that this adventure has left me with a few “fashion scars” as well. The group leader announces that today we will have only four stops. It sounds like an easier day, but by now, I know that in Ha Giang, no day is ever truly “easy.”

The landscapes that unfold before us are overwhelmingly beautiful, as if someone had cut them straight out of a dream. Every corner of nature speaks to me in a silent, yet profound language, and for a moment, I imagine what it would be like to lose myself here for a while. To live without worries, to wander freely on these steep winding roads, and let my soul dissolve into the silence of this place. Or maybe... to find my own “Zen,” lost somewhere on an endless road, on a motorcycle that takes me wherever my heart desires. It would be

so simple. Or maybe... it's just a beautiful dream, caught in the web of impossibility.

My fascination grows as I watch the locals manage to grow corn on the rough cliffs. I wonder how it survives there, between the cracks of the rocks. A few rice fields also timidly appear, but they are rare, a sign that the soil here does not offer the same generosity to rice as it does to the corn-covered mountains.

The villages we pass through seem suspended in time. Their simplicity is striking, yet full of life. Mud-covered children play carelessly in the puddles formed by the rain. Their innocent laughter echoes a life lived without barriers, without constraints. Some of them are completely naked, oblivious to the water and mud that coat their skin. I feel a mix of admiration and compassion for these children – for their pure freedom, untouched by the complications of the “civilized” world.

The road keeps surprising me, and I find myself marveling at every new landscape. This is their reality, the reality of the people here, a reality that I observe through the eyes of a stranger. And yet, in this strangeness, I feel a deep connection, as if this place speaks the language of my soul. The tour will end, I know that, but my journey through Vietnam is far from over. As the kilometers pass, thoughts of how different our lives are become more frequent. And then, suddenly, I ask myself, “What is my destination?”

We stop for a meal at a new place that seems to have a special charm. The air here has a unique vibration, as if this place knows it's our last meal together. We all understand that today marks the end of our shared adventure, and we laugh loudly, telling stories with an exuberance that seems to chase away any melancholy. In our own ways, we're all trying to pack our memories into words, to keep them forever.

The food disappears from our plates as quickly as it has every other day, but today it tastes different. Somehow more intense, deeper, more meaningful. The smell of coffee hits me with a wave of nostalgia, awakening memories of times long past – moments that, though distant, feel alive and tangible. I find myself almost sinking into those thoughts, but I refocused, refusing to let the past catch up with me. I live in the present now, in the pleasant silence of these last minutes with this temporary family I've found here.

I can't believe how quickly these three days have passed. At 3:30 PM, we return to Johnny Tran's Homestay, leaving behind those mountains that seem like they've been plucked from a legend. I gaze at them one last time, with an undefined sense of longing, wondering if I'll ever have the chance to see their imposing silhouettes again. My heart tightens, as if I've left a part of myself there, among the wild landscapes and winding roads I've crossed with so much awe. It's strange how a place so unknown can feel so familiar in such a short time. I promise myself I'll return one day, though I know deep down that no journey ever repeats itself the same way. Each one is unique, just like the memories that remain.

Now I think that maybe I should've chosen the five-day tour... If I tell Tom that, he'll probably strangle me. I smile at the thought and decide not to mention it. What's the point?

I realize, with a slight sense of regret, that I didn't write down all the places we passed through – the stops, the passes, the names of the villages or viewpoints, the restaurants and waterfalls we encountered. I decided to live in the moment, without anchoring myself to details. Now, looking back, I'm glad I set off without any fixed points, without expectations. It was like a Christmas gift, when you reach into Santa's sack not knowing what you'll find.

Sarah, my 29-year-old roommate from Marseille, France, is wearing my T-shirt today. She keeps thanking me for helping her, happy that she finally got her luggage back. She disappears into the

bathroom, and a few minutes later, she comes out, handing me the borrowed clothes, even though they're dirty. She explains, with an embarrassed smile, that she has no other option, especially since we're getting ready to say our goodbyes. I look at her for a few moments: her hair falls carelessly over her shoulders, and her green eyes shine with relief. She's now wearing a flowing hazelnut-colored dress that fits her perfectly. I smile and think, "You probably would've done the same for me." I'm not sure, but it doesn't matter. In the end, the help we receive makes us want to give back, as much as we can. "I'm glad I could help," I reply simply.

Suddenly, a revelation lights up my thoughts: "Sarah looks remarkably like Freya. How did I not realize this until now?" I'm surprised at how familiar she felt from the beginning. Maybe, in some hidden corner of my mind, I thought I was with Freya. What a strange, yet interesting thought! I begin to understand why I felt an instant connection.

Joseff, the cheerful guy from Argentina, always full of energy, has been the most playful of the group. An interesting guy, very clever and a big TikToker, who now lives in Spain. His friend, a true Spaniard, doesn't speak much English, so they often chat in Spanish. It amuses me to think that maybe I would've been the same with Freya if we had gone to Bali together last year. I would've depended on her for all the English conversations. But with her not here, I managed on my own. I'd love to tell this guy, but I hold back – it's not my place.

The couple with the cute guy and his blonde girlfriend was rather reserved. At one point, they even seemed to be arguing. Trouble in paradise? I wondered, amused. That happens sometimes. I found out they didn't know each other beforehand, though they're all from France, and they only met Sarah on the way to Ha Giang. What a coincidence!

They have a bus to Hanoi at 4:30 PM, and mine is at 7:30 PM, straight to Ninh Binh. The girl at the hostel's reception tells me I can go up and rest in the room I slept in last time. I gladly accept; I have nothing to do in the lobby for all those hours.

The tour companions leave one by one, and the goodbyes, though simple, leave behind a trace of finality. We hug briefly, exchange the usual words of farewell, but there's a fragile connection in the air, an invisible thread woven from the moments we shared together, from the laughter and the silences that only we experienced. I watch them squeeze into a taxi, and a wave of melancholy washes over me, knowing that we'll probably never meet again. Each will go their own way, but for these few days, we were a small family on two wheels.

I go up to the room on the first floor, take a shower, and wash my hair – making the most of my free time. I'll arrive in Ninh Binh late, and most likely, I won't have the energy for that then. Now I'm alone in the room, surrounded by 14 empty beds. I sit down and write, trying to catch up on the journal of this magnificent journey. Magnificent, yes, that's the word. Whoever doesn't believe me, I dare them to come here and experience it for themselves.

Do you remember what Sawa told me when I confessed I was heading to the Ha Giang Loop? "You won't regret it," he said simply. He was right. Yet another reason to thank him someday. And the reasons are certainly adding up...

Before leaving, I tipped Zen 10 dollars, appreciating the calmness and care with which he drove. He fully deserved it. I don't know if he was impressed – I left right after handing him the bill – but I caught him studying the note carefully, like a small foreign mystery.

I recommend this tour to anyone! The guys are truly incredible, and every second spent there was unique and unforgettable!

Friendly Home Hotel – Ninh Binh, Vietnam

It's time to close the laptop and head down. The clock shows 7:10 PM, and I'm getting ready to leave. A new chapter of my journey is starting. "I wonder how it'll be?" I ask myself, with that slight anticipation mixed with excitement. But... time passes. Pfff... It was well past 8:00 PM when the bus finally arrived. I'd been pacing impatiently in front of the hotel, like a caged lion, but in the end, I got on the bus and found a seat closer to the front, which oddly gave me a sense of peace. "I forgot my black cap on the bus to Ha Giang," I suddenly remembered. Eh, I'll just have to get another one. Oh well!

Outside, it's raining again. The drops fall slowly on the bus window as my thoughts drift back to the dizzying mountain roads I traveled these past few days. I smile to myself.

Now, the silence is different. Deeper, more settled. The three days on the motorbike gave me not just landscapes, but also the chance to revisit my life, piece by piece, at every bend in the road. The sharp curves of the road made me look inward, rediscovering forgotten fragments buried under the dust of years. Every decision I made, no matter how confusing or painful it was, led me here – to a place where freedom floats in the air. And suddenly, everything... made sense. I understood why I "had" to be here: without all the stages I've been through, I wouldn't be free today to roam the world.

It's strange how we sometimes complain about the weight of life, but you know what I've realized? That, in essence, life isn't hard. Though we often dread the tough moments, I've realized they're the ones that push us forward. The peaceful times, while comforting, can create the illusion of happiness, holding us back from growth. We stagnate. Why would you want to rewatch the same scene from a good movie, day after day? Why would you want to repeat the same moments in your own life?

I feel fatigue in every fiber of my body. I could use a good massage, but I don't have time for that. My next destination awaits, with more places to see, more discoveries to make.

The clock shows 5:05 AM when I arrive in Ninh Binh. The bus dropped me off just 200 meters from the hotel. Dawn had barely broken, and when I stepped out, I caught the lake shimmering under the moonlight, reflected on the still water's surface.

"What a wonderful feeling to be alone on a street, lost in an unknown city. And no one, Yda, absolutely no one knows where you are!" It's a feeling impossible to describe in words, a mix of freedom and anonymity that makes me smile. I almost feel like breaking all ties with the past and starting from scratch. But I know I still have people who depend on me, people who keep me anchored in their world. So I keep my ties, navigating between two parallel worlds. And that's fine. It doesn't take much effort, and everything stays perfect. I smile to myself, just for myself, feeling what it's like to simply exist, to be without constraints. It's... wonderful. Miraculous, even!

I reach the hotel. The shutters are drawn, and everything seems to be in a deep sleep. I had emailed them, saying I'd arrive around 4:00 AM, but now it's well past 5:00. I ring the bell. There's a big sign that says "Ring without hesitation." Funny... "Of course I'll ring, I'm not going to sleep on the steps," I tell myself, tired but amused by the situation. I need a hot shower and a comfortable bed, just for me this time. Not that I minded sharing the room with Sarah, but it's somehow better to be alone from time to time.

The host appears quickly, sleepy, with tousled hair. He opens the door and writes down my passport details in a huge ledger. He motions for me to follow him and leads me to my room on the third floor. He shows me where the shower is and explains that there's hot water. He probably figured out what I wanted; there was no need to say anything. I just hope I didn't smell too bad...

The room is... a small oasis of comfort. After days spent in modest accommodations in the mountains, it seemed almost royal. Clean walls, soft linens, every detail whispering that here, for a moment, I was the queen of my own little realm.

In just five minutes, I manage to create an indescribable mess: I take everything out of my bag, take a quick shower, and throw myself into the big, soft bed, ready for the much-awaited beauty sleep.

Thinking about how much I want to sleep, I set my phone alarm. I don't have breakfast included, so I can laze around in the morning as much as I want. I don't even finish my thought... and I'm already asleep.

“Not all those who wander are lost.” – J.R.R. Tolkien

Chapter 12. “On the Enchanted Road of Discovery”

June 30th, 2023

By 8:00 AM, I'm already up, even though I barely closed my eyes. And yet, I feel like an excited child, eager to open their gifts on Christmas morning. There's something about the air here, a hidden energy that keeps me going, keeping my spirit alive, awake, despite the fatigue hanging heavy on my shoulders. Today promises to be around 34 degrees, but I don't want to dwell too much on how much I'll be sweating. "I wanted the heat, and I'm getting plenty of it. No comment, Yda!"

I breeze through my morning ritual – the same motions, the same automatisms that prepare me for another adventure. I head down to the cozy little restaurant, where the smell of coffee mixes with the morning buzz. The owner, who last night seemed like a lost soul, with messy hair and sleepy eyes, is now transformed: hair neatly styled, outfit carefully put together, as if the hours had passed over him without leaving a trace. He looks like an actor ready to step back on stage, with his lines perfectly rehearsed. As soon as he sees me, he starts pitching his tours with impressive technique, like he's selling art. In just three minutes, he's "sold" me three excursions. "Alright," I tell him with a smile, "I'll drink my coffee and then we can discuss the details." I try not to laugh – he's so serious about what he does!

I savor the coffee, letting the bitter aroma awaken my senses. The atmosphere in the restaurant feels like a warm embrace – every detail seems to carry the soul of someone. Paintings with silent stories, jars of plants showing off their leaves like jewelry, small ornaments that seem like relics of lives lived with passion. And for a moment, I feel like I'm not far from home, but in a place that already knows my soul. And everything is perfectly clean, a sign that someone

takes care of this place with love. “It’s clear,” I tell myself, “this place has an energy that lifts your spirits without you even realizing it.”

The owner reappears beside me, as if reading my mind that I’ve finished my coffee. He’d been busy with some ledgers at the reception, looking like a very serious accountant with glasses on his nose. We finalize the day’s plan: I’ll visit two attractions with a personal motorbike driver. The man he’s found for me was probably ready for the tour before he even knew I’d be his client. We also discuss tickets for Phong Nha and Hue, the next destinations on Sawa’s list. Everything is arranged with impressive efficiency.

With the plan for the day sorted, I go up to my room to get ready. At 10:30 AM, I leave with my new driver, a kind and elderly man, on his motorbike, heading to the first destination: the famous Trang An river tour. “Unmissable! Unparalleled! A must-live experience!” – this is exactly how this place would be described. It’s hard to believe that my steps have brought me here, to a UNESCO-recognized site, a sanctuary of nature and time. Fragile ecosystems, caves that carry the echoes of millions of years, lagoons lying still under the sun’s rays, mountains rising towards the sky like ancient columns. Everything seems like something out of a dream, a dream I’m now living with my eyes wide open. “Who would’ve thought I’d ever end up here?” I wonder, as my eyes gleam with anticipation. It’s marked as “mandatory” on Sawa’s list.

My driver rides calmly through the suffocating heat, and I’m slowly melting on the motorbike. I’m dressed lightly, but he’s wearing jeans and a jacket over his T-shirt. “How can he stand being dressed like that?” I wonder, as the hot air and humidity weigh heavily on me. Yet the “old man” seems unfazed – not sweating at all, even though he’s almost 60. I admire him in silence.

After 25 minutes, we leave the city, pass through a forest, and arrive at a massive parking lot. I get off the motorbike, hand the helmet to my driver, and, to my surprise, a car pulls up behind us – it’s

the hotel owner. “What’s he doing here?” I wonder, astonished. Next to him is a young man I’d seen at the hotel this morning. He approaches and shows me where to get the entrance ticket, then snaps a few photos of me with my phone, capturing the absolutely stunning scenery of the underground passage we’re about to cross. He recommends tour number 3, the most beautiful one, he says, and then disappears as quickly as he came. I’m amused by the whole situation – it feels like they’re following me just to make sure everything goes perfectly.

At the ticket counter, I meet a girl who seems just as lost as I am. I greet her as if we’ve known each other forever, and she responds just as friendly. We get our tickets together, and I head towards the bathroom. When I came out, I ran into her again. “Alright,” I tell myself, amused, “the Universe wants us to be friends.” Without much formality, we join each other and start chatting. I find out she’s from Germany, a small, freckled girl with long blonde hair and a fragile stature. She’s wearing a large hat and a summer dress, and beneath the straps, her already well-sweated purple towel gives her a quirky charm. “Hehe, what an interesting look,” I think, smiling. She also has a motorcycle helmet with her – she had rented a scooter from the city.

When we reach the entrance, the man asks us which tour we want to do. I instantly say “3,” and Lisa, not knowing she had to choose, says the same. The man tells us we’ll have to wait, as there must be at least three people per boat. We sit on a bench, waiting for about 10–15 minutes, looking around. As we talk, I notice a guy at the entrance – he’s alone, dark-haired, wearing white shorts and a yellow tank top. Suddenly, all my attention shifts to him. “I can’t believe it... Essra?” Heat rushes through me. No, it’s not Essra, but he looks so much like him... The same build, the same features. Incredible!

The man at the entrance calls us over: this guy will be joining us on tour 3. “Seriously? What kind of joke is the Universe playing on me?” He looks so much like Essra, but younger. His name is Oscar, he’s from London, and he’s traveling alone. I can’t help but laugh at

my initial reaction. “Am I unconsciously thinking about Essra, and that’s why this guy, who looks so much like him, appeared?”

The boat tour unfolds like a journey through a story. Isolated temples rise timidly on the riverbank, seemingly sculpted by the hands of gods. “How did they manage to build them here?” I wonder, my heart beating faster, overwhelmed by the beauty and silence of these forgotten places. The landscapes are so breathtaking they steal my breath away. The sun burns mercilessly, we’re like in an oven with no breeze to cool us down. My thoughts drift back to my driver’s jacket, still amazed at how he can endure this heat.

The woman rowing gives us sun umbrellas to protect us from the scorching rays. Oscar and I share the same umbrella and decide to take turns holding it, so we can take pictures. When I saw him at the entrance and thought he was Essra, I never imagined we’d end up sharing the same umbrella. He’s really nice, and this whole boat ride is fun, reminding me of other tours and everyone’s experiences. “Who would want to miss out on experiences like these?”

As I sit in the boat with Oscar, I can’t help but think of Essra. It’s uncanny how much he resembles him, almost like a younger version. A wave of nostalgia hits me, and my mind drifts back to Palawan, in El Nido, where I met him. It was one of those encounters that feel both accidental and fated, the kind of meeting where the Universe seems to conspire to bring two souls together.

We were both on the same boat tour in the Blue Lagoon, and from the first moment we exchanged glances, there was a quiet understanding, a silent bond. We spent that entire hour exploring the lagoon, our conversation flowing as effortlessly as the water beneath our boat. The next day, by some twist of fate, we ran into each other again – this time on the beach. We spent the rest of the day together, just two wanderers lost in a tropical paradise, walking, talking, sharing stories. I still remember the warmth in his voice, the way he looked at me, as if every word I said mattered.

Now, sitting next to Oscar, my thoughts float back to those moments. It wasn't love, but something close to it – a connection that left a mark. I wonder what Essra is doing now. I haven't spoken to him in the last months, but somehow, I keep thinking of him whenever I'm reminded of that easy, carefree feeling we shared. Maybe that's why I'm projecting Essra onto Oscar – it's not him I see, but the memory of what I had with Essra, a fleeting but perfect day in paradise.

Oscar, oblivious to the thoughts swirling in my head, adjusts the umbrella we are sharing and smiles at me. I smile back, but inside, I'm thinking, "Is the Universe playing another trick on me?"

We laugh, joke, and the boat ride becomes a real adventure. The adrenaline keeps me awake, even though I've only slept for two hours. To balance it all out, I've got Oscar next to me. "Good thing he has no idea!" I enjoy the moment, the unexpected company, and the incredible beauty of the river.

The caves we pass through are spectacular – some are a kilometer long. We squeeze between rocks, like wise travelers who know how to bow to time. In some moments, we have to duck, as if greeting this underground world, with all its hidden mysteries. It's all surreal, like a dream where reality and fantasy dance together.

After almost two hours, we returned to the shore. We exchange Instagram and Facebook details. I say goodbye to Oscar and Lisa, glad to have met them. I walk around a bit, stopping by some souvenir stands, but I know I don't have room in my bags, so I don't buy anything, even though I'm tempted by a few items.

At the exit, I'm approached by some Vietnamese people who want to practice their English with me. "Again?" I smile and start chatting with a girl named Trangg, a 16-year-old teenager, much taller than me, with kind eyes and short hair. After a few minutes of conversation, we exchanged Facebook details and said goodbye. It's

funny how people randomly pick others from the crowd to interact with. And the river... funny enough, it has the girl's name! "Trang An!"

I walk out smiling, looking for my driver in the crowded parking lot. There he is, sitting in the shade, calm, like an old tree standing firm against the heat. "Pfff, he still hasn't taken that jacket off..." I say to myself, amused.

We head to the next destination: Bai Dinh Pagoda, one of those "unmissable" places from Sawa's list. The pagoda, renowned not only for its size but also for its historical and cultural importance, has been part of Vietnam's heritage since 1977, and in 2010, it became the largest religious tourist center in the country. "Wow..." I whisper, letting myself be filled with anticipation.

On the way, my driver stops a few times for me to take pictures. I appreciate this gesture – silent kindness, as if he knows exactly what I need without me asking for it. I feel grateful, like someone is opening the window to a unique experience for me, and I'm viewing the world from a new perspective.

The pagoda sprawls over a massive area, a sacred labyrinth where history and spirituality intertwine. I head towards the ticket booth. Three options: the first package, 60,000 dong (around \$2.50), includes only four sights. The second, the one I chose, costs 200,000 dong (around \$8), offering ten sights plus transport on an electric shuttle. The last package? A VIP tour with a private guide, at the exorbitant price of 2,700,000 dong (around \$110). "Who would pay that much for a ticket?" I wonder, laughing to myself.

I tell the woman at the counter which package I want, and receive my bracelet, ticket, and some brochures. The entrance beckons me into an unknown world. I head towards the electric shuttles, where a few tourists are already waiting. While I study the map in the brochure, I notice that the sights are numbered haphazardly – but it doesn't matter. The route is magical in itself. The

tour follows no particular order, jumping from number 2 to 7, and so on, but it doesn't matter; each stop is a world of its own. I lose myself in this confusing order and let curiosity guide me. There's no need for a perfect itinerary when you're in a place like this. I feel like a princess exploring a secret kingdom, led by a mysterious force through corners of a fairytale.

Along the way, I see the "Internal Three Gates," the "Buddha Sakyamuni Hall," the "Stupa," the "Bell Tower," the "Ancient Pagoda," the "Water Pavilion." They unfold before me like pages of history, turned by an invisible wind. I admire them wide-eyed, but I can feel fatigue slowly settling over me, like a thin blanket of mist. My energy reserves are dwindling, a sign that every step today has been lived intensely.

I climb the steps, feeling the weight of the long day settle into my legs, and as I reach the top, there he is again – the Chinese guy with the professional camera, the one who had smiled at me earlier. He notices me struggling with the heat, and without a word, he approaches, his smile warm and friendly. He says something in Chinese, even though I don't understand the words, his tone feels like a gentle offering, more than just words. I laugh, not sure how to respond, and blurt out, "I'm hungry."

It's a strange response, but in the moment, it feels just right. "What in my mind did this "Chinese guy" trigger to make me say that?" I asked myself. He chuckles softly and, to my surprise, reaches into his backpack, pulling out a small yellow-wrapped cake. It's such a simple gesture, but in that moment, it feels like a lifeline. I accept the cake, offering him a grateful nod and a smile in return. His kindness, so spontaneous and genuine, touches me more than I expect. It's funny how the smallest acts of generosity can feel so profound when you're far from home, surrounded by strangers. For a second, it feels like the Universe has placed this person in my path, just to remind me that, no matter where I am, there's always someone willing to offer a small piece of comfort.

We walk into the temple together, our paths crossing one more time before we part ways again. And, as I unwrap it a few days later, I'm reminded not just of its sweetness, but of the simple kindness that transcended language between two strangers, united for just a brief moment by a shared smile and a simple gift.

Hours pass, the sights follow one another, and every step feels heavier, as if the stones beneath my feet are weighing on my soul. At the Stupa, I slip on the protective booties and take the elevator straight to the 12th floors, as if stepping into a dream. I reach the top, and the view takes my breath away – the city, the mountains, the waters, all stretch out before me like a tapestry woven by unseen hands. I lose myself in their vastness, feeling, for a moment, like part of this world, a spectator invited to witness the miracle at the edge of time.

And then, I see him again. The Chinese guy with the perfect smile. As if all our paths today were meant to cross. We look at each other and burst into laughter, like two teenagers sharing an untold secret. He offers to take a few pictures of me, and I hand him my phone without hesitation. I notice his professional camera hanging from his neck, but I choose not to ask him to take pictures with it. I let him offer me this small act of kindness, without asking for more. Maybe this way, the moment stays perfect. I thank him and walk away, feeling the need to slip away from that energy, towards a deeper peace.

I wander in the wrong direction, the shadow of the complex seeming to close in around me. Time passes, and it's only around 7:00 PM that I finally exit the labyrinth of silence. Darkness has fallen, and everything is deserted. My driver is nowhere to be found. A shiver of unease runs down my spine. The taxis stare at me, their headlights glinting like the eyes of animals in the night, and the men approach, their voices intertwining in a monotonous song. "Pfff, where could the old man be?" I wonder, trying to mask my anxiety.

Luckily, I have the hotel owner's number saved, tightly held like a lifeline. I called him on WhatsApp. And, as if by magic, the old driver appears before me, just as calm, just as assured. I put on my helmet, and we head back to the hotel, leaving behind the darkness of the road and the shadow of my fears. The warmth of the motorbike wraps around my body, and the silence between us grows, like an untold story.

We arrive at the hotel, where the owner greets me, sensing the exhaustion in my eyes. His wife prepares something for me to eat – rice with chicken, vegetables, pineapple, and a mango shake. A feast for my worn-out senses. I take a shower, change, and when I come back down, I find the steaming plate on the table. Every bite is a return to life, an explosion of flavors that restore my strength.

I sent the pictures to Oscar on Instagram. Then I tried to find Lisa. Nothing. Maybe I got her name wrong. Maybe she'll appear one day, by chance, just as she did that day.

Later, I opened my WhatsApp chat with Sawa. We talked about today. And about tomorrow. I close the phone, go through my evening ritual, and collapse into bed. Tired. But happy. I go live on TikTok for the first time, just for a few minutes. Viktor encourages me, and I feel excited by my new "toy." The conversations are interesting, like they belong to another story. But it's enough for now... I fall asleep without realizing it, carried into another dream, on another path.

***"The only true journey is the one within yourself." –
Rainer Maria Rilke***

Chapter 13. “Beyond the Steps: Unexpected Encounters and Travel Lessons”

July 1st, 2023

It's a struggle to get out of bed at 7:00 AM. Today, I really could've slept a bit more. The nights with too few hours of rest and the constant chase after new things are starting to take their toll. My energy is running low, but the thought of having more places to discover pushes me forward. “One more day,” I tell myself, forcing myself to overcome the exhaustion.

I head to the shower in the small but charming bathroom. The cold water wakes up every cell in my body, washing away my fatigue like the dust that's settled on me during these long days on the road. A few minutes later, I feel fresh again, ready to face the day. By 8:00 AM, with my backpack ready, I head down to the reception. The owner, as attentive as ever, makes me a coffee. Then we finalize the last details of my trip. I pay him 550,000 dong (around \$22) for the bus ticket to Phong Nha and hand him the room key. I ask him to keep my luggage somewhere until I return from the tour, and without saying a word, he takes my black backpack to the back room.

My old driver is waiting for me, quietly, on the motorbike in front of the building. He smiles at me as always, with that warm humility, as if every meeting with me is a special occasion. He looks at me in silence, his deep wrinkles etched into his cheeks, like something out of an old fairytale. His denim jacket, always the same one, seems glued to him with Super Glue. I want to laugh, but instead, I give him a wide smile, appreciating his loyalty and his way of being.

I put on the helmet, and we set off. Every time we start, I get a slight pang of anxiety, feeling how the motorbike lurches heavily, as if in danger of tipping over at any moment. Despite the hesitation, I realize he knows exactly what he's doing. At first seemingly unsure, but incredibly precise once we're on the road. I feel like saying something, but I stay quiet, letting myself be guided by this invisible hand of trust.

The sun feels harsher today than it did yesterday. I can feel the rays penetrating my skin, and my sunscreen gave up long ago, absorbed by rivers of sweat. As I climb the Dragon Mountain, the last stop on today's list, I feel like I'm melting on the steps. I'm out of breath, but I tell myself it's worth every step.

But let's start from the beginning – it was a day full of discoveries.

The first stop was Hoa Lu, the former capital of Vietnam. The old man parks the motorbike by the gate and gestures toward the entrance, motioning for me to explore everything and exit from the other side. I immediately understand his gestures – a familiar language between us by now. I set off, not knowing I needed a ticket, and when I came out, he's waiting for me with the ticket in hand, smiling proudly. "Thank you," I say, laughing, and hand him 20,000 dong (around \$1). His smile was my reward – a simple gesture, but full of meaning.

The ruins of the old city greet me with blackened walls and overgrown paths, a sign that not much attention is given to the place. I wander for a while among the remnants that once bore the grandeur of a capital. Now, everything seemed left to die slowly, under the shadow of forgetfulness. Without a guide, I didn't understand much, and the gloomy, unwelcoming atmosphere made me leave sooner than I'd have liked. "Well, I can check that off the list," I tell myself, somewhat resigned.

Back on the motorbike, the old man takes me to Tam Coc Bich Dong, a famous pagoda. He parks in a crowded area, full of buses and motorbikes. "Not the best time, it's going to be packed with people," I think. He smiles at me and calmly points me in the right direction, without words. I head down the path leading to a beautiful pond, full of lotus flowers. The water reflects the sun, sparkling like a crystal surface, while the mountain behind seems to watch over the entire scene, with its pagodas rising from the lush vegetation like something out of a painting.

The stone bridge crossing the lake led me to an impressive gate, with wooden and stone structures, adorned with intricate, typically Vietnamese details. I noticed people taking photos, capturing this corner of paradise in the perfect frame.

Tam Coc Bich Dong is made up of three layered pagodas: the Lower Pagoda (Ha), the Middle Pagoda (Trung), and the Upper Pagoda (Thuong). Climbing to each pagoda felt like a journey in itself, on steep, worn-out steps, as if time had left deep marks there. The blackened walls, covered in moss, seemed to hide the secrets of a long-gone era. I felt a strange, sacred energy, as if the past still watched over this place.

People around me hurried to reach the top of the mountain, but I preferred to linger behind, studying every detail. Ha Pagoda, the first stop after the bridge, was adorned with statues of Buddha, and around the intricately carved pillars, people lit candles and offered prayers. The atmosphere was solemn, and I watched in silence.

At Trung Pagoda, after climbing about 100 stone steps, I walked through a cave, a mysterious opening like a portal to another world. Finally, at Thuong Pagoda, at the top of the mountain, everyone crowded to get a spot from where they could admire the view. I waited patiently until the place cleared up. When I finally reached the crowded platform, I felt the whole of nature unfolding before me, like a living painting. The mountains, the vegetation –

everything seemed like a dream. I would've liked to stay there alone, just me and the silence of nature. I wanted to sink into that moment, to clear my mind of all the human noise around me.

I don't know how long I stayed there. When I came down, I realized I was hungry – I hadn't eaten anything all day. I returned to the parking lot, where my old man was chatting with a woman at one of the warungs there. When he saw me, he stood up quickly, as if surprised I caught him red-handed. I laughed and told him I was hungry and would like to eat something before we left.

I chose a table by the lake, where I was alone. The sun beat down directly on the tables, but I didn't care. I enjoyed the peace, watching how the sun's rays danced on the surface of the water. The tourists had left, and I was left to savor the moment. I was glad I hadn't taken an organized tour – I would've just been another girl in the noisy groups from earlier. Now I was free, moving at my own pace.

I finished my soup, paid the bill, and connected to TikTok for a few minutes, gaining a few new followers. I chuckled at how quickly people messaged me, but I ignored them for the moment. My time was limited, the bus to Phong Nha was waiting, and I needed to be back at the hotel by 7:00 PM.

We set off again, the old man driving at a slow pace, as if the heat had slowed not only the motorbike but time itself. The sun pressed mercilessly on my shoulders, and the dusty roads stretched ahead like threads extending into infinity. We headed to another pagoda, small and forgotten by the world. I don't remember much about it – I didn't take any pictures at the entrance, and the name of the place has faded somewhere among my tired memories. Still, curiosity pushed me to enter, even though the place seemed abandoned, a labyrinth of neglect and disorder. I almost questioned how it could be called a pagoda.

Suddenly, the silence is shattered by a sound – a pleasant, soft music coming from somewhere deep inside the place. The instrument playing is unfamiliar to me, but its vibrations draw me in, like an invisible magnet. I feel each note slipping inside me, touching something deep, something undefined. Curious, I move towards the source.

I pass through an inner courtyard, surrounded by unkempt walls, and reach a building that looks like a pagoda, but everything seems chaotic – objects scattered around, thrown together without any rhyme or reason. I climb the steps and enter, searching for the music. In front of me, a monk is playing a strange instrument, some sort of invention of his mind, long and strung with wires and cords that vibrate in a unique harmony. I stop at the entrance, stunned by the scene. In front of him, two Europeans, a boy and a girl, sit on red plastic chairs, captivated, as if the sounds had hypnotized them.

I stand frozen at the door, undecided whether to enter or not. The monk senses my presence, raises his gaze, and gestures for me to join the others. I take off my shoes without hesitation – I notice they've also left their sneakers at the entrance. The place isn't very clean, but I comply, thinking it's a gesture of respect.

I tiptoe in, like a character in a cartoon, and sit in the indicated chair. The atmosphere in the room is strange, but captivating. I listen as each note the monk plays seems to open a door to another world, one I can't fully understand but feel with every fiber of my being. His music is a spell, and I lose track of time. The sounds flow like a secret river, and my mind floats, suspended between reality and dream.

Each note seemed to carry me further, as if the air was soaked in the stillness of forgotten years. It was as though the monk's music was revealing a hidden world, one where all worries melted away, and my spirit rose freely, above places and moments of everyday life.

The music flowed effortlessly through the air, but for a moment, the monk's gaze shifted. It was only for a second, but something in the way he looked at me sent a shiver down my spine. It was as if the spell wavered slightly, but I brushed off the feeling, still entranced by the enchanting sounds of his unusual instrument.

And then, suddenly, everything stops. A heavy silence falls over the room, and I'm still trapped in the web of sounds, floating between worlds, not realizing it's all over. The monk smiles at us, but his words hit like a cold strike: "Now you give me a tip for playing."

"What?" I feel myself snapping back to reality, as if I've fallen from a dream straight onto the rough floor of everyday life. It wasn't a question, but a direct demand, with no subtlety. I find myself pulling out my wallet and handing him 20,000 dong (around \$1). The other two whisper among themselves, just as shocked as I am. I quickly leave, letting them decide what they'll do.

How could he ask for money so bluntly? The delicate magic shattered instantly, like a fragile mirror struck by a hammer. The sounds that had lifted me to other realms turned into a heavy, oppressive silence, and the monk, once a master of harmony, became just an ordinary man.

I'm left with a bitter taste, as if the spell the music had woven was shattered into a thousand pieces. "How can you ask for tips so bluntly?" I wonder. He had lifted us up, onto a cloud of divine sounds, only to abruptly throw us back to the ground with his demand. I still wonder if he was truly a monk or just a man disguised in the robes of tranquility and spirituality. "Who was he, really?" I keep pondering.

I don't say anything to the old man, he wouldn't understand anyway. I just signal that we should go. As the motorbike starts up, the country roads unfold like an endless canvas beneath the wheels. The view is picturesque, but my mind is still on the monk. "What an illusion..." I see him in my mind, playing with a serene expression on

his deeply wrinkled face, his long white hair making him look like a character from a legend. But that “I want money” echoes in my head, shattering the spell.

I’m not sure when we arrive at the next destination, but the old man stops the motorbike and tells me there’s another pagoda up ahead. I feel like a zombie, climbing the steps mechanically, as if my body is moving on its own, without consulting me. At the top of the steps, I find a cave transformed into an altar, filled with offerings and statues. A dusty table with two plastic chairs sits forgotten in a corner. I sit on one of them and stare blankly into space.

The monk’s music still plays in my mind. It’s like an unsolved equation, and I, trapped between enchantment and disappointment, can’t escape it. Everything feels so strange, as if I’ve been caught in a dream I can’t wake up from.

I don’t know how long I’ve been sitting there, but the old man approaches slowly, like a silent shadow. I stand up abruptly, as if his presence snaps me out of a trance. We descend together.

The sun beats down mercilessly on my back again as I get on the motorbike. The burn on my shoulders is a reminder that choosing a tank top today wasn’t the smartest idea. We don’t even go half a kilometer before the old man stops by a river. He gestures for me to go under the rocks and look at the water. It’s only then that I realize where we are: the Trang An River, where I was yesterday.

Boats pass by, full of tourists admiring the scenery, but now I’m the one watching them from a different angle. Sitting under the rocks, I feel the river’s energy overwhelm me – waves of calm and strength flow through me. It’s as if the river has a soul of its own, one that gently caresses my senses, giving me a sense of peace.

Tourists take pictures of me from their boats, as if I’m the attraction here, and it amuses me greatly. I laugh, and for a few moments, the monk and his absurd request vanish from my mind. I

feel as though the river washes away all my dark thoughts, purifying me. “If only I had time...” I think, feeling that I’d love to take the river tour again. But I know I’m leaving today. I check my watch and head back to my old man, who waits for me calmly. It’s time to move on, to keep going...

The last stop on the list: Mua Cave. The hotel owner warned me to set aside at least three hours for the visit. It’s already past 2:30 PM, and after a few minutes of scenic roads, we arrive at a small village, a bustling oasis with shops, tourists, and endless activity. Old man parks the motorbike in the shade of a house, greets a few locals, and accompanies me to the entrance. He signals that he’ll wait for me by the motorbike, as usual, with the same iron patience. I smile and say “ok,” then head in, paying the 100,000 dong (around \$4) for the ticket.

I think that, after so many days together, I’m starting to understand his non-verbal language perfectly. In a few hours, we’ll part ways, and he’ll return to his quiet life in this small town. But once I pass the souvenir area, thoughts of goodbyes and travels evaporate. Everything around me pulls me in like a spell, and the outside world fades away. “What is this place?” I wonder, fascinated. It’s like I’ve suddenly stepped into Alice’s Wonderland.

The scenery in front of me looks like it’s out of a storybook. Ponds with crystal-clear water, brightly colored ornaments, flowers dancing in the wind, quaint restaurants exuding an ancient calm. To the right, a fence hides a massive lotus garden, or rather, a lake with wooden walkways that stretch gracefully across the water’s surface. Tourists are taking photos among the flowers, but I don’t stop. I keep walking, as if something unseen is pulling me forward. I see treehouses, ornamental mushrooms, mysterious statues, and flowers I’ve never encountered before. Everything vibrates with life and beauty.

Suddenly, I lift my gaze and stop. In front of me rises a mountain. An endless staircase, almost like a Vietnamese version of the Great Wall, stretches all the way to the top. I hadn't read anything about this, and I feel surprised, as if I've discovered a hidden realm, a place the brochure told me nothing about. Mua Cave isn't just another destination – it's a fairytale land, waiting to be conquered.

Caught up in fascination, I finally realize where I am. How did I miss this view from afar? How do I so often get lost in dreams and forget to live in the moment? I ask myself, smiling ironically.

Mua Cave has 486 grueling steps, each one steeper than the last, as if the mountain itself is testing my endurance. On my way, I come across a pond with large, round blue stones, like mushrooms straight out of a story. I cross, laughing, trying to take pictures and videos. My heart feels light, and my mind is free, like a child discovering the world for the first time. I sit on the steps of a little house by the pond, trying to go live on TikTok. But the weak signal keeps kicking me out of the app, and the sweat dripping onto my phone reminds me that I'm part of a scorching reality.

I give up and set off again.

Finally, I reach the foot of the mountain. "Let's see if I can make it to the top," I tell myself, eyeing the challenge ahead. It's only 486 steps, but the first 30 already leave me out of breath. "Who said I was in good shape? Definitely not me," I say to myself, amused by my own lack of fitness.

The people around me look just as exhausted. Those coming down smile broadly, full of satisfaction, as if they've just conquered Everest. Halfway up, I find a stall selling ice cream and cold water, strategically placed like an oasis in a desert of steps. I buy an ice cream, savoring every bite, as I gaze at the lotus lake and the green rice fields stretching out into the distance. I haven't even reached the top, but already the view leaves me speechless.

I continue climbing, and between stops and photos, my phone vibrates in my pocket. “Who’s bothering me now?” A message on TikTok. I respond, though I don’t know why I’m engaging in a conversation while climbing a mountain. But maybe that’s the funny part of life – having a random chat in the most unexpected moments.

Costa: “What’s up?” reads the message.

“Climbing 486 steps on a mountain,” I reply, panting between two pauses.

Costa: “Well, that’s good, you’re getting some exercise.”

“I’m melting off all my cellulite in this heat!” I reply, amused.

Costa: “How long are you staying on vacation?”

“I don’t have a return ticket,” I say, smiling as I catch my breath on a step.

Costa: “Awesome. How old are you?”

“Old enough,” I reply, a bit sarcastically but still amused.

Costa: “You look great for your age.”

Me: “Thanks.”

Costa: “I’d help you get rid of that cellulite if I were there.”

“I’ll manage on my own, thanks!” I type, laughing to myself.

The conversation turns into a pointless back-and-forth, but it helps me forget about the effort of the climb. Costa, the guy from TikTok, keeps making flirty remarks, and I let him talk. I realize this

conversation helped me completely forget about the fatigue, and somehow, I've reached the top without feeling the strain of the climb.

Once I'm at the top, I'm overcome by a deep silence. I have no words to describe the view – the scorching sun blends with a panorama that stretches to the horizon. The city, the green fields, and the lake below seem like part of another Universe. But the crowd of tourists distracts me. I look at the people jostling for photos and realize I won't be able to savor the place the way I'd like. Plus, my water ran out. And as breathtaking as the view is, the peace feels overshadowed by the hustle and bustle of the crowd.

I descend a different section, with more steps and walls. I try to find a more secluded spot but can't fully enjoy the magnificent views with so many people around. My thoughts whirl, and my body feels the fatigue of every step.

I realize that next time, I'll need to dedicate a whole day just to Mua Cave. But for now, the road is calling. It's time to go.

On the way back, my eyes land on a brochure with details about Mua Cave. A cute little story catches my attention: "The city of Ninh Binh was once the capital of Vietnam, and during the first war between Vietnam and Mongolia, the royal Tran family moved from Thang Long (the then-capital of Vietnam, now Hanoi) to Ninh Binh. For the king's entertainment, a large number of dancers would come to perform for him, and the shows were held at Mua Cave, which means 'Dancing Cave.'"

"How cool, I'm standing where the king used to come for entertainment!" I think with a smile on my face.

Today, though, I was just another tourist checking off the place on my list. I promise myself that next time I'll come to truly soak in the essence of this place. But until then, the road awaits, and I still have much more to discover.

I got to the parking lot, and guess what my old man was doing? He was fast asleep in a hammock, in the shade, like a sailor on a calm sea, with the same denim jacket on him, which seemed to be his second skin. Nothing and no one seemed to bother him, like an island in the middle of a storm. Yet, when someone shouted that the “princess” had arrived, he jumped up as if struck by lightning! This man is special, truly a remarkable figure, a character straight out of a story.

We’re not leaving just yet; he signals for me to wait and disappears for a few minutes, leaving me on the bench with no phone battery and no charge left in my power bank. I glance at the clock – 4:45 PM. There’s not much time left before I need to go.

The old man returns with two large glasses of iced lemon tea, a treat in the day’s heat. Wow! Seriously? What a sweet gesture! We sit there quietly on the bench, drinking like two old friends who’ve reunited. I needed this unplanned break, a moment of respite in the whirlwind of life. After a while, he signals that it’s time to go. On the way back to the hotel, my thoughts swirl around the day – how intense and full of contrasts it was, like a vibrant painting. What a life!

We arrive at the hotel, and I say goodbye to this extraordinary man, a guiding light in my day. He surprises me by asking for a picture with me. I smile and gladly accept, like an artist capturing a moment of inspiration. After we part, I step into the hotel, where the owner, with a warm smile, asks how my day was. How could it have been? Spectacular, like a fireworks display in the night. He sends me to take a shower in the downstairs bathroom, to change out of my sweat-soaked clothes, witnesses to my adventure. I order some fries from the menu – not that I’m hungry, but I feel the need for something salty to cheer up my taste buds. As a bonus, I even get a free dessert – some local fruit, juicy and delicious.

I pull out my laptop and start sculpting the day’s events into words, capturing every detail before it slips away. Meanwhile, the

clock shows 7:45 PM, and I head toward the bus to Phong Nha. I say goodbye to the owner and his wife, and the regret of not being able to stay longer tightens my throat, but the journey continues, and time's always against me on this trip. As the bus leaves the city and darkness begins to envelop the landscape, my thoughts wander, floating like leaves in the wind. "From darkness we come, to darkness we return." Phong Nha is far, about 400 kilometers away, a road that promises new discoveries and emotions.

On the bus, scrolling through my phone, I get a message from a guy who must have spotted me on TikTok. I smile and feel like laughing: "What a great networking tool TikTok is!" After my experience with Costa, curiosity pulls me toward this charming guy like a magnet. I wonder if he looks as good in real life as he does in his profile picture, or if, like a carnival illusion, he'll fade upon closer inspection. He asks for my phone number, and I give it without hesitation; an inexplicable thrill draws me to him, like a familiar melody playing in my head.

We switch to another chat and continue the conversation. Marty is 31, tall, dark-haired, and very charismatic. Our conversation flows much more naturally than with Costa. Talking to him has a different energy. Everything is more relaxed and fun. His question, "Do you always travel like this?" makes me pause.

"I travel as long as I can afford it." The answer slips out like an unfulfilled wish, a dream of freedom that unsettles me. "What if I could stay caught in this journey, turning every day into an adventure?" The question embraces me like a warm wave of sunlight, inspiring me to believe that life could be a never-ending series of joyful discoveries and surprises, just waiting to be lived.

"Well said," is his reply – simple yet complex at the same time. Our conversation unfolds like a clear river winding through rocks. Every word with Marty feels like a fresh breeze, a promise of

discovery. Clearly, Marty is different – perhaps this encounter will bring a new hue to the palette of my life.

But the messages don't stop. Another one pops up on my screen.

"Hi, are you still in Ninh Binh?"

"Hi... no, I left a while ago." It was Trangg, the girl who approached me at the Trang An River, apparently to practice her English. Although it didn't seem like just that.

Trangg: "I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask me anything. Well, almost anything," I replied with a little laugh Trangg couldn't see or hear.

Trangg: "You said you're from Romania, right?"

Me: "Yes, exactly." I smiled to myself. What's coming next?

Trangg: "Where are you now?"

Me: "On a bus, heading to Phong Nha."

Trangg: "Ooo... Phong Nha is far. Is the bus comfortable?"

"'Comfortable' is a stretch. If I survive the curves and the delightful smell, I'll be lucky." I giggled softly, though reality was less amusing than I let on.

Trangg: "Ha! I get it. But seriously, you're not coming back to Ninh Binh?"

Me: "No, after Phong Nha, I'm heading straight to Hue and Hoi An. I've got quite the journey ahead."

“Wow, what an adventure!” Trangg’s message practically buzzed with excitement. “I only go to the river twice a week to talk to tourists. That’s the farthest I ever go. I wouldn’t dare do what you’re doing.”

Me: “It’s not really that big of an adventure, just bus rides and exploring.”

Trangg: “Yeah, but I can’t see myself doing it alone. When I talk to tourists, it’s like I’m escaping my place for a bit, but no farther than that. Are you traveling for yourself?”

It seemed like a simple question, but somehow it made me think. It was sincere but hid something deeper. “Yes, I guess so. I’m traveling to discover new things, about places... and probably about myself.”

“Hmm,” she sighed. “That’s interesting. Maybe that’s why I like talking to tourists. In a way, they bring the world to me. It’s easier that way.”

We both went quiet for a few seconds. This conversation was turning deeper than I had expected.

“What do you think you’ll learn about yourself on this trip?” she asked.

I shrugged, even though she couldn’t see me. “I don’t really know. Maybe I’ll figure it out along the way... or maybe I won’t. Often, you discover things when you’re not even looking for them. Maybe that’s what it’s all about.”

I thought I could hear Trangg laughing, a short and sincere laugh. “I like how you think. Maybe next time, I’ll join you on one of your trips. Who knows?”

“Who knows...” I echoed, unsure if she was serious or just expressing curiosity.

Sometimes, seemingly random encounters are the ones that make us think more deeply about who we are and the direction we’re heading in. Just as Trangg brings the world to her through conversations with tourists, I travel the world searching for perhaps the same answers. Maybe there’s no right or wrong way to find our path, but it’s clear that sometimes people come into our lives just when we need them. Even if it’s just for a conversation that makes us smile and think about new things.

As my thoughts swirl between the odd chats with Costa, the more pleasant conversation with Marty, and the thoughtful questions from young Trangg, I realize that the day has been full of contrasts. I ask myself: “Is it a coincidence that I had these conversations? Or is the Universe sending me a subtle message?” Hmmm...

After remembering the brochures I grabbed from the hotel, I flip through them absentmindedly and text Sawa:

Me: “Have you ever been here? I found some brochures that include a zipline tour.”

Sawa: “I haven’t tried it, but I’ve heard of it,” he replies promptly. “I’d go to Paradise Cave, not Dark Cave. It’s more impressive, and if you do the zipline, it’s worth linking the two.”

Me: “Hm, sounds good... although I’m pretty wiped out after the past few days.”

Sawa: “I believe it. There’s no point paying a fortune for organized tours. And Hue? You’ve got three nights there, right?”

Me: “Yeah, three nights. Just like you suggested.”

Sawa: "Perfect, that's all you need. Hue is compact. The royal palaces are beautiful, but after a few, they get repetitive. After Hue, you're going to Hoi An?"

Me: "Exactly, but I don't have a place to stay yet."

Sawa: "Book at least three nights there. Hoi An is fabulous."

The conversation smoothly drifts toward logistics, and Sawa's advice, always precise, helps me rearrange my plans.

"I hadn't even booked Phong Nha until this morning," I continue. "I found something near the caves."

Sawa: "You're on the right track. But make sure to spend a few days in Da Nang – it's like a mini Vietnam version of New York."

Me: "Sounds great! I need a break anyway. I've been going non-stop for 11 days."

Sawa: "Then Da Nang is the perfect place for that. After Phong Nha, you'll need a reset."

Me: "I agree... These past few days in Tam Coc have drained me."

Sawa: "Did you make it to the lotus lake?"

Me: "I only took pictures from above. I didn't have the energy to go in."

I realize how full my phone is of photos and videos – a visual journal following me every step of the way. As Sawa continues to offer suggestions, I remember how much he helped me organize this trip. I could say he's been my invisible guide.

"By the way, how much have you spent so far?" he asks, as if reading my thoughts.

Me: “About 700 dollars, not counting the flight and visa. It’s a lot, but I’ve tracked every expense.”

Sawa: “That’s quite a bit, but you’ve done a lot of activities. I spent 1,200 in two months.”

Me: “Wow! And with just a few tours, right?”

Sawa: “Exactly. Transport only cost me 300 because I rode a motorbike everywhere. You’ve taken the safer route with drivers.”

Me: “Yeah, but yesterday and today I spent 44 dollars just on taxis. At least I get to admire the scenery.”

Sawa: “See? Every choice has its pros and cons. I covered over 4,000 kilometers on two wheels in Vietnam.”

Sawa’s advice always helped me see things clearer. I try to reply, but fatigue grabs hold of me like an invisible net. Without realizing it, I doze off in the crowded tourist bus.

At a bathroom stop, I wake up to find myself face to face with Oscar – the guy I mistook for Essra at Trang An. It’s strange to be on the same bus. We greet each other briefly, with no further words. I still see him occasionally on Instagram, wandering through Asia. Perhaps he too is a lost soul, searching for his path among foreign landscapes, I think, smiling as the day seems never-ending...

“At the end of the day, we realize that everything we’ve been searching for was always within us.” – Rainer Maria Rilke

Chapter 14. “The Princess and the Demons of the Mind”

July 2nd, 2023

Midtown Hotel – Phong Nha, Vietnam

After what felt like an endless journey, I finally step off the bus. It's 4:20 AM in the morning when I arrive in the small town of Phong Nha, and the humid air hits me like a soft slap, waking me up. My body feels like a rusted machine, creaking and groaning with each movement. Every joint aches, stiff from hours of twisted, broken sleep, and I can barely stretch my numb arms without wincing.

I text the guy from the hotel, as he asked me to, to let him know I've arrived. The bus stop shouldn't be far from the hotel, but he doesn't respond. I glance at Google Maps. “Only 1.1 kilometers,” I tell myself, so I decide to walk, hoping the morning air will loosen me up. Or maybe not... After a few minutes, I realized I forgot to set the app to “walking” mode. I'm wandering aimlessly, following a ridiculous route, like a car lost on winding roads. Sometimes I'm so scatterbrained...

Then, the owner responds, and the realization hits me with ironic force: the hotel was right across the street from the bus stop where I got off. I had walked nearly a kilometer with my backpack on, through a sleepy town full of barking dogs behind fences. I feel like laughing and shouting at the same time: “You've got to be kidding me!”

After a few more messages and a phone call, I finally manage to find the owner. He hands me the key and asks, in a gentle tone,

why I walked off without waiting for his reply. I just shrug, exhausted and not in the mood to explain.

My room is on the first floor, down a long, narrow hallway where every sound seems to echo endlessly. It's simple, with two beds and a bathroom decorated with wall paintings, but I feel like something's missing. Maybe it's the lack of a window, or maybe it's just the absence of any sense of "home." I take a quick shower and collapse into bed. The clock reads 5:05 AM. I set the alarm for 8:00 AM – I have breakfast included and want to visit the cave before leaving for Hue. I close my eyes, thinking I'm functioning on "autopilot," and wonder why I'm in such a rush.

When the alarm goes off, I feel like every part of me is protesting. Everything happens in an agonizing slow-motion. I take another shower, but nothing can truly wake me up. My head feels heavy, as if I'm trapped in a thick fog. "What's wrong with me? Have I run out of energy right now?"

I head down for breakfast, hoping the food will give me some energy. Last night I only had some fries and fruit. But my host won't leave me alone – he sits next to me, excitedly talking about a tour. I hear him as if in a dream, unable to focus. I reply mechanically, but the truth is I don't even remember what I said. Eventually, he leaves, and I retreat into the silence of my omelet and coffee, which fail to revive me.

I signal that I'm going back to my room. I collapse onto the bed again, trying to gather my thoughts. "Should I sleep? Extend my stay?" My body is begging for rest, but my mind refuses to give in. I do some breathing exercises, trying to connect with some mysterious force of the Universe. Finally, I feel a little more awake. I decided to stick to the original plan. "You didn't come to Phong Nha to sleep, Yda," an inner voice whispers.

At 10:30 AM, I hop on the motorbike, having left my bags at reception and with a bus ticket for Hue in my pocket, which cost 200,000 dong (around \$8). I have the whole day to explore Paradise Cave. My driver, silent and thin, with sunburned, wrinkled skin, looks like he's from another world. His bare feet in sandals show his calloused soles and ingrown toenails. He drives calmly, as if savoring every breath of wind. "He's an excellent driver," I think, as the wind whips my face, and the helmet barely stays on my head.

The road seems endless, and my thoughts drift among the hills and winding paths. I completely forgot I was feeling unwell. When I have a purpose, it's like all the symptoms vanish. It's only later that I realize I'm using up my energy reserves without replenishing them.

After about 40 minutes, we finally arrived. I get off the motorbike and feel the ground under my feet like a new beginning. "I made it," I tell myself, taking a deep breath of the humid morning air. I chuckle, thinking about how I told Sawa I booked a place "near the caves." "What was I thinking?"

At the entrance, I decide to walk through the forest instead of taking the buggy. My feet burn in my sandals, but I'm not discouraged. The path leads me into a world of green shadows and light filtering through the thick foliage. I eventually reach Paradise Cave, and its beauty hits me like a cool wave on a scorching day.

The stalactites and stalagmites seem sculpted by divine hands, millions of years old. The cave walls remind me of a natural cathedral, each corner revealing an untold story in stone. I want to sit and listen to the eternal silence of the place, but time is not on my side.

I delve deeper into the cave, and my feet throb with every step. I've walked nearly 10 kilometers, but it doesn't matter. I've seen Paradise Cave, and I know the effort was worth it. I sit on a wooden bench and let the cave speak to me through its profound coolness,

through its deep silence, seemingly preserved beyond time. It is, without a doubt, a masterpiece of nature, a work of art bathed in shadow and light. “I love caves,” is the only thought that pops into my mind.

For me, Paradise Cave is simply spec-ta-cu-lar!

I feel like I’ve reached my energy limit. I’m hungry, thirsty, and the oppressive heat is returning. My blistered feet whisper that it’s time to go.

I begin to descend the path slowly, feeling how each step becomes heavier, as if the earth itself is asking me to rest. But I don’t give in. I gather my remaining strength and keep walking, feeling the weight of every stone beneath my feet. It’s a battle between the desire to experience everything intensely and the exhaustion pressing on my chest like an invisible stone.

I find my driver in the parking lot, sitting quietly, seemingly unmoved by the passage of time. He smiles at me calmly, as if knowing there’s no need to ask me anything. I get back on the motorbike, and we head back to the hotel. The wind hits my face again, cooling my sweaty skin, and suddenly the road feels shorter. I think about how easily I lose myself in these endless landscapes, as if nature absorbs me completely, leaving me without thoughts, without questions. It’s peaceful... both around me and within me.

It’s almost 4:00 PM when we arrive at the hotel, and my bus to Hue will be leaving soon. My legs feel heavy, and the landscapes blur together in my mind. I pay the driver 400,000 dong (around \$16) and tell myself it’s time to eat something nourishing. I need to regain my energy. What to eat? I quickly search on Tripadvisor and find a highly-rated restaurant nearby. I consider myself unexpectedly lucky – a few minutes’ walk, and I’m there, sitting at a table outside, under the gentle gaze of the Vietnamese afternoon.

The waitress, smiling and kind, brings me a menu. I choose a local dish with rice and sauce, and also an egg coffee – to savor the authentic taste of Vietnam. It all costs 140,000 dong (around \$5.50), maybe a bit much for a small town, but it doesn't matter. Every bite is a delight, and the food revives my senses, bringing me an inner peace I hadn't felt in days.

As I finish eating, time seems to slow down. I watch the street and the passersby as if I'm a spectator invited to a play, and me... part of the set. Across the street, a salon with a large "Hanna SPA" sign catches my eye. Manicure, pedicure, massage, hairdressing – all in one place. My nails have been a disaster for days, so without hesitation, I pay the bill and cross the street.

I didn't notice what was waiting for me at the entrance, focused on the window ads, but a few meters from the door stood an incredibly attractive guy. He was smoking a cigarette, and our eyes locked suddenly, intensely, as if time had frozen in place. His dark, piercing eyes were scanning my face with an intensity that seemed like it was trying to see past any mask I might have been wearing. He flicked away his cigarette without breaking eye contact and walked towards me with a perfect smile that revealed immaculate, bright teeth – a stark contrast to the image of a smoker. "Please, come in," he said in a calm voice, as if he already knew I wouldn't refuse.

In a fraction of a second, I realized I was completely fascinated, without understanding why. "This hasn't happened to me in a long time," I thought to myself. He was the first, and probably the only guy in Vietnam who had stirred this kind of reaction in me. So I walked in.

Inside the salon, a few girls and a guy were diligently working on various tasks. A local woman sat relaxed, getting a pedicure. I politely greeted everyone, and the guy who had captivated me so quickly followed me like a shadow of my own thoughts. I told him I wanted a manicure and pedicure, showing him my rather neglected

nails. He examined them carefully and asked, “Do you want gel?” “No, just a simple manicure,” I replied with a playful smile. He smiled back, telling me that it would cost just 99,000 dong (around \$4) for hands, and the same for feet. I accepted immediately, amazed at the price.

“I’ve got a bus to catch soon, so I hope this doesn’t take too long.” I said with a slight hint of worry. He responded with a confident smile, “It won’t take that long.” It was clear he knew what he was doing. No one else in the salon spoke English, so he stayed by my side, translating for the others and chatting with me at the same time.

As the girls started working on my hands and feet simultaneously, he asked me various questions, and our conversation flowed easily, full of laughter and exchanged glances. I noticed him smiling from time to time, and I found myself fascinated by his simplicity and charisma. The moment when the manicurist stepped out to take a phone call was completely surprising. In her place, Luong – the guy I couldn’t take my eyes off – sat next to me and began working on my nails.

I watched him meticulously touching up my nails. His fingers moved gracefully and delicately, as if each gesture was a work of art. He focused all his energy on my hands and, in that moment, I realized how much those subtle and delicate sensations matter – those little details that can turn an ordinary day into something magical.

His quiet confidence and effortless charm drew me in. There was something special in the way he smiled, as if he had all the time in the world, making every moment we shared seem more important than it should. Yes, I found myself mesmerized by his simplicity, by the ease with which he moved through the world, unaffected by its chaos.

When he finished, he looked at me again, with that charming smile, and simply asked, “Do you like it?” I almost blurted out, “I like you!” but managed to just say, “Yes,” with an awkward smile.

But as our conversation flowed, I began to feel the weight of my next destination pulling me forward. For a moment, I entertained the thought of staying longer, letting this unexpected connection grow. Yet, deep down, I knew that this was just one of those fleeting encounters that travel throws at you – brilliant and intense, but destined to be temporary. Luong would remain in my memory as one of those wonderful people who cross your path, leave a mark, and then fade into the background of your journey.

My plans were already set. I silently thanked the Universe for the experience and continued on my way.

When I left the salon, the whole town seemed transformed. The light of the sunset danced playfully on the streets, and I felt light, as though the day had handed me a surprise I hadn't even known I needed. It was as if the simplest moments – the unexpected smiles, the kindness – had lifted a weight off my shoulders. I walked slowly back to the hotel, my thoughts still wrapped around Luong's smile and the feeling that sometimes the most beautiful encounters are the ones you least expect.

I picked up my bag from the reception, and the owner, as attentive as always, offered me a cold bottle of water. "To cool you down," he said with a kind smile, and I looked at him with gratitude. Sometimes, it's the small gestures that make your day a little easier.

I still had an hour before the bus departure, so I sat in the hotel lobby, scrolling aimlessly through my phone when I got a message.

Mone: "Hey, what are you up to?"

Me: "Surviving. Waiting for the bus, but I was a wreck this morning. I barely dragged myself to breakfast. Around 10:00 AM, I woke up as if from a fog, like by some miracle."

Mone: "How much sleep did you get?"

Me: "About 3 hours at the hotel, and maybe another 3-4 on the bus. So, 6-7 hours, but all broken up, you know how it is... you can't even tell if you slept or just dreamt you couldn't sleep."

Mone: "Hehe, sleep is sleep, even with breaks. Your mind is making things more complicated."

Me: "This morning, I thought I wasn't going to do anything today, not a drop of energy. Zero productivity."

Mone: "I told you to slow down, you're not a GPS. Take a few days to recover."

Me: "You're right. But 12 straight days of running, non-stop. Every day, another place to check off."

Mone: "Superhero traveler! Do you think you're saving the planet by seeing all the sights in three days?" he laughed.

Me: "Haha, yeah, I admit it, I got myself into this. I should've given myself more time in some places."

Mone: "If you don't slow down, you'll end up saying you saw everything but remembered nothing. Take it easy."

Me: "I'm heading to the beach soon, and I'm not moving from there. In the cities, I feel like a machine, going to sights out of habit. Today, I only visited one place. I could've gone to two, but... I let it go."

Mone: "Finally, wisdom strikes! This race is just a selfie marathon. Are you enjoying the places, or just checking them off?"

Me: "I know... I've been burning energy rushing from one spot to another. But hey, I went for a manicure today and met some really cool people."

Mone: “Now that’s progress! When you slow down, interesting encounters happen. You need to connect with the places, the people... and with yourself.”

Me: “Maybe that’s exactly how it should be. Less sprinting, more relaxed jogging.”

Mone’s messages made me pause. In my mad rush to see places, I’d lost the essence. Maybe it wasn’t about how many places I visited, but how I connected with them. The real discoveries come when you stop searching and let the places and people find you. The conclusion? This frantic pace wasn’t serving me anymore.

The bus arrived, and I boarded, exhausted, letting my body collapse onto the hard seat. The engine’s rumble was a familiar background noise, and I rested my head against the window, watching my reflection in the smudged glass. My eyes looked tired, but deep down, there was still a flicker of excitement for what was yet to come. Hue, Hoi An, Da Nang... each place was another promise, another chapter in my story.

As the bus started moving, I saw the city lights slowly fading into the distance, swallowed by the darkness. Inside, it was quiet, save for the hum of the engine. I tried to find a comfortable position, but the seats were stiff, and the wheels’ rough spinning only deepened my drowsiness.

I was lost between places I had seen and those I was about to discover. I closed my eyes and tried to let the rocking of the bus carry me, but sleep was slow to come. I felt every part of me still vibrating with the day’s adrenaline, the exhaustion, and the constant buzz of thoughts that refused to quiet.

A strange thought floated up in my mind: “When did I become so addicted to movement, to the constant search for something new?”

And suddenly, all the conversations, thoughts, and faces of the people I had met along the way blurred together in my mind like fragments of a distant dream. I had only stayed in Phong Nha for 15 hours, but leaving it left a heavy feeling in my chest. I felt like I had left a part of myself there. Maybe I will return one day, or maybe not. The Universe has its own way of guiding things. If I'm meant to return, I will when the time is right.

But deep down, I know that every step I take, every place I explore, brings me closer to who I really am. Despite the exhaustion and the swirling thoughts, I let myself be carried by the rhythm of the road. Hue was waiting – a new place, a new beginning.

Maybe there, I would find rest, or maybe there, hidden among the walls of the ancient imperial city, I'd discover another piece of myself.

After more hours of traveling in a deep stupor, I opened TikTok out of reflex. But I immediately closed it. I wasn't in the mood to hear anyone's voice. For a fraction of a second, I'd hoped it might distract me, bring a bit of light to the chaos in my mind. But no, it only wrapped my thoughts in more fog. My thoughts clashed against each other, like furious waves crashing against the shore. I felt a vague tension in my chest. "Why do I feel like this?" Something was wrong, but I couldn't quite identify that "something."

I closed my eyes and tried to tell myself, in an almost convincing murmur: "It'll be okay. Everything passes. It has to pass."

I tried to sleep again, but sleep stubbornly refused to come. I checked the time. The second hand of the clock moved slowly, almost painfully. We were supposed to arrive by 11:00 PM, but it was already past midnight when the bus came to an abrupt stop. The sound of the brakes jolted my tired mind, and someone announced the destination: Hue. I rose with a sigh and looked around.

“Finally!” I said softly, but the excitement quickly faded. We had stopped at a gas station, in the middle of nowhere. All I could see around me was emptiness, and in the distance, only a few pale lights. “Is this Hue?” I asked myself, with a vague sense of unease. I got off the bus along with four other travelers, all guys lugging heavy, oversized bags. Two women, a young one, and a man, completed our scattered group. I looked around, hoping to see something familiar or at least friendly, but all I found were fields and darkness.

I had told the hotel I would arrive around 11:30 PM, but here I was, in the dead of night, more than 10 kilometers away from the city center, where my accommodation was. “Seriously?” I thought, frustrated.

The young travelers seemed just as confused and started grumbling, not understanding why we were left in this deserted place. I joined their conversation, trying to find out where their accommodation was. “In the center,” they said. I asked if I could go with them since I was heading there too. Suddenly, a taxi driver approached us. “Car? City?” he asked in broken English, with a wide smile. “No, thanks,” I thought to myself. I didn’t trust going with the first person offering a ride, especially here, in the middle of nowhere.

The driver smiled, too wide, too eager, his eyes avoiding mine as he gestured towards the car. Something about his demeanor sent a chill through me, a quiet voice in the back of my mind whispering warnings I didn’t want to hear.

But the guys accepted immediately; I could see their desperate desire to escape. I watched as they crammed into his car, with backpacks hanging everywhere, and two of them nearly suffocating in the back seat. One of them looked at me with wide eyes: “We’d love to take you with us, but there’s no room... sorry.” The driver gestured for me to stay, promising to come back for me.

Frustration and exhaustion began flooding my body. “What a nightmare!” I thought. I was thirsty, my head ached, and the entire situation felt surreal. It was too much. I could feel tears stinging my eyes, but I told myself it wasn’t the right time. Not here. Not now. I headed to the gas station’s bathroom, trying to collect my thoughts. In the mirror, I saw a face that didn’t look like mine. A distorted version, twisted by fatigue and exhaustion. “Who are you?” I asked, but I already knew the answer. My face was lined, with deep dark circles, as if time had betrayed me in a single night. “No, that’s not me... it’s just a tortured version of myself.”

Frustration turned into a gnawing anxiety that grew with every passing minute. My hands felt clammy, my breathing shallow, and a knot tightened in my chest. The dim lights of the gas station cast long shadows, making everything seem more sinister than it probably was.

The silence was heavy. The three employees seemed lost in their thoughts, and although the place was lit, it felt empty. One of them noticed a bag left in the middle of the parking lot. “Is this yours?” he asked, bored. “No, it’s not mine,” I answered automatically. The 25-year-old girl, who had gotten off with me, stood nearby, just as confused and tired. She didn’t recognize the bag either. The other two women and the man had already left, probably taking the parked motorbikes near the gas station.

She looked at me with wide, fearful eyes, and for a moment, I saw my own fear reflected in her gaze. We didn’t need words; our shared glance said everything.

I tried communicating with the girl using Google Translate. English wasn’t part of her vocabulary. After many attempts and skeptical glances, she told me that the taxi the guys left in had been paid for by the bus company and that the driver would come back to get us too. “Ah, so I’m not completely abandoned in the middle of nowhere.” She showed me on the map where we’d be dropped off. Pfff... and from there, I still had 3 kilometers to my hotel. I tried

ordering a Grab taxi. I waited... and waited. Nothing? Panic started creeping in. I could feel its cold claws in my stomach. The girl saw me fidgeting and wrote to me: "No taxis come to this area."

My panic grew. The tension in my chest became stronger. Her desperate gaze met mine, and her words hit me like lightning: "Don't trust the driver." Everything inside me screamed "danger," but what else could I do? I tried to control my breathing. "How am I going to get to the hotel?"

They say when you're at rock bottom, all the burdens pile on top of you. That's how I felt – crushed by the situation, trembling with fear and uncertainty. "No, this isn't how it's supposed to feel. I need to get past this. I'm stronger than this." I started building a mental strategy, encouraging myself that I would make it to the hotel safely.

After 20 minutes of internal struggle, the driver returned promptly. He gestured for us to get in. My legs felt heavy, my voice trembled, but I knew I had no other option. I showed him the hotel address on my phone and asked him directly: "Can you take me there?" He answered vaguely, saying the hotel was far but that he would take me if I paid him an extra 50,000 dong (around \$2). "Aha, of course." So that was the catch...

I got into the backseat next to the girl who had gotten off the bus with me. They spoke in Vietnamese, laughing and exchanging quick glances. I didn't understand a word and felt my unease morph into a visceral fear. "What are they plotting?" Before I could get out, I messaged the girl again on my phone: "Can I trust him?" She replied briefly but clearly, in all caps: "NOOO!" Perfect...

The darkness outside the car seemed to seep into my mind. My thoughts spiraled into worst-case scenarios, but I had to trust my instincts. I had no other choice. I prayed to reach the hotel safely. "It'll be okay," I told myself again. "It'll be okay. It has to be..."

Poetic Hotel – Hue, Vietnam

The girl got out at her stop, leaving me alone with the driver. I watched him furtively from the backseat, catching myself analyzing his profile. His expression was neutral, calm. *“He doesn’t look like a criminal,”* I thought, trying to soothe my nerves. I needed to calm down, but I couldn’t help the scenarios running through my mind. In an effort to distract myself, I decided to start a conversation.

To my surprise, his voice was warm, almost gentle, as he asked why I was traveling alone. There was something disarming in the way he spoke – nothing like the image I had built in my head. *“Aha, so he’s okay,”* I thought, feeling my heart begin to relax. I smiled for the first time since getting into the car.

He asked me a few simple questions: where I was from, how long I planned to stay in Hue. The conversation flowed easily, and he suddenly seemed much friendlier than I had imagined.

After what felt like the “Adventure of Adventures” – more in my head than in reality – the man stopped the car in front of a narrow alley. I squinted in the dim light and spotted a sign with my hotel’s name. *“Here, you have to walk,”* he said, pointing down the alley. *“I can’t drive in.”* He got out and took my luggage from the trunk, his movements steady and calm. *“Take care of yourself and have a great trip!”* he said with a warm smile.

I handed him the 50,000 dong as we had agreed, watching as he drove away. Once he disappeared from sight, a laugh bubbled up inside me, short and slightly ironic. *“Really? I was worried about this?”* It wasn’t my usual laugh, more like the kind that comes when you realize how much your mind can play tricks on you, blowing fears out of proportion. I had let my imagination run wild, creating scenarios that never came to pass. *“What a strange experience.”*

I walked about 100 meters down the narrow street, following the signs pointing to the hotel. Along the way, two dogs barked

furiously at me from behind a fence, their growls echoing in the quiet night. “Please don’t chase me,” I thought, already imagining myself sprinting down the street with them after me. But thankfully, they stayed behind the gate, and I arrived at the hotel safely, just as I had hoped.

Seeing the lights on, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. “I’m expected,” I reassured myself. I climbed a few steps to the reception area, a modest open hall. But... no one was there. Pfff... I knocked on the large, dark gray door, hoping someone would come to greet me. Nothing. I wandered around the hall, feeling a little lost. My eyes caught sight of a surveillance camera tucked into the corner. “At least the place is monitored,” I thought. “That’s something.”

On the reception desk, a single key lay atop a stack of papers. “Could this be mine?” I wondered, picking it up. I twirled it between my fingers, glancing up at the camera as if asking permission from whoever was watching. “This must be for me,” I convinced myself.

With my backpack slung over one shoulder and the key in hand, I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, searching for room 401 – the number printed on the key tag. When I reached the top, I paused in front of the door. “Should I knock or just go in?” I hesitated for a moment, then knocked softly. When there was no response, I knocked again, a little more firmly. Still nothing.

“Alright then...” I unlocked the door and stepped inside, feeling a small knot of anxiety untangle in my chest when I saw that the room was empty. “Yay... it’s mine!” I grinned to myself, as if I had just won a small victory. The room was basic, but after this long day, it felt like a haven.

After a quick shower, I collapsed onto the bed. My body had given up long ago, and my mind was worn out too – not from the journey itself, but from all the mental games I had played along the way. I had pushed myself to the limit, again. Everyone kept telling me

to rest, but I, like a stubborn Batman on vacation, refused to listen. I had revved my engines to the max, even though I knew better.

The only real joy I had that night came from the hearts I saw on my Facebook posts. Luong, the boy from the salon, had found my page and had been liking my pictures nonstop. It made me smile – one of those small, childish grins you get when something unexpectedly sweet happens. I fell asleep thinking of him, smiling softly, like a teenager with a crush. I knew nothing would come of it, but who says I can't dream? And tonight, I wanted to dream of him.

“The greatest thing you can learn is to free your mind from all unnecessary thoughts.” – Confucius.

Chapter 15. “The Day I Stopped to Breathe”

July 3rd, 2023

The alarm rings at 8:30 AM, and I snooze it twice without hesitation. Eventually, I drag myself out of bed, my body protesting every movement. As I shower, I tell myself silently: “Today, I’m doing nothing. Absolutely nothing.” With that promise, I feel the weight of exhaustion slip away, like a heavy cloak I hadn’t realized I was wearing. I put on some lotion, get dressed, and head downstairs, ready to face the day and the hotel staff after sneaking in last night like a shadow, invisible in the night.

On the stairs, I run into a housekeeper who gives me a knowing smile, making me wonder if she sees something I haven’t quite figured out yet. I walk down slowly, as if each step is a journey back to reality, and finally reach the reception. It’s 9:30 AM, according to the large clock in the lobby, and a girl is focused on some paperwork. I approach her. She looks up and bursts out laughing. Before I can ask anything, she starts telling me how the owner waited for me last night, knowing I’d arrive late. He stayed beyond reception hours, falling asleep on the couch, hoping he’d hear me. When he woke up and saw the key was gone from the desk, he understood that I had figured things out on my own.

We share a laugh about the whole thing, the absurdity of it all suddenly making perfect sense. I never thought I’d check into a hotel alone, in silence, without even knowing someone was waiting for me. The girl reminds me that I have breakfast included – as if I’d forgotten – and asks if I want to take a tour the next morning. She tells me about a route that starts at 8:30 AM, and I agree, thinking that today

will be my “recovery” day. I don’t even bother asking about a taxi; she recommends the tour as the cheaper option.

When I arrive at the breakfast restaurant, the smell of coffee envelops me like a warm breeze. “I want a coffee, I’m dying for it!” I think to myself, smiling widely. After I eat, I lazily scroll through my phone. I see the hearts sent by Luong, who seems not to have slept all night. What a life! It feels like the Universe laid out this path for me, without me even realizing it. All the signs were there, but in the chaos of my exhaustion, I hadn’t seen them clearly. Somehow, I feel liberated from the doubts that had been haunting me. I start to understand that I had to leave Phong Nha, that everything made sense, even when it seemed like it didn’t.

I head back to my room after paying for the tour. I stretch out on the bed, determined to do nothing all day. “Maybe just a little nap?” I think to myself as I mentally review the past few days. The faces of the people I’ve met blur together in my mind – Zen, the Chinese guy from the Pagoda in Ninh Binh, Luong... Each one left behind a fragment of a story, a fleeting moment that added texture to my journey, whether it was a smile, a gesture, or even a pastry received on the steps of a pagoda. I found that pastry today, squished in my backpack, and I ate it with a melancholic smile. Its sweet taste sent my mind back to the times when weekends meant baking in the kitchen. “Pff... I’ve completely forgotten those days.”

But too much time in bed isn’t good either, so around 4:30 PM, I get up and leave the hotel. I need some air, even though I’d promised myself I wouldn’t do anything today. And I’m hungry – I realize that besides breakfast and that squished pastry, I haven’t eaten anything all day. The city streets, alive with honking motorbikes and the buzz of voices, hit my senses like a wave crashing into the calm I’d found in my room. I reach a main street where the chaos is even more intense. Taxi drivers pull up next to me, one after the other, as if I’m wearing a sign that says “Available Tourist.” “No, I don’t want a taxi, I’m just walking,” I repeat almost to myself.

I let my steps carry me, without a clear destination, like a leaf floating on a river. I remember I need a new adapter, so I start looking for a shop. I find a small one, but the prices are steep. I try haggling, without success at first. Just as I'm about to leave, the woman drops the price by half. "So, it was possible after all," I think, smiling. But I still refuse. It's not worth it. I walk away, leaving her grumbling behind me.

Eventually, I find myself in a bazaar. The prices here are ridiculously low. I browse through various things, but the caps catch my eye. I remember I left my black cap on the bus to Ha Giang. In the end, I walk out with a denim "Tommy Hilfiger Denim" cap – or so it says, even though it only cost around \$1.50. "Who would know the difference?"

Later, I reach the riverbank, where kitschy boats adorned with red dragons and colorful lights are parked like forgotten toys. They ask if I want a private ride, but I decline quickly. "Alone, at dusk, on a little boat? No, thanks," I think to myself. Maybe another time.

On the way back to the hotel, I buy some fruit from an old man. His rough, weathered hands carefully hand over the fruit as if he's offering small treasures. I make it back to the hotel without using GPS. "I still have a good visual memory," I smile to myself, surprised by my own sense of direction in a foreign place.

Back in my room, I consider going for a swim. The pool, tucked beneath the stairs, looks like an improvised space, as if a garage had been converted into a water refuge. The walls are so close that the water seems to be fighting for every corner of space. I smile at the absurdity of the idea but quickly abandon the thought. I don't have the energy for anything.

I head down to the restaurant for a simple dinner. The local soup warms my tired body, but the dessert – some frozen bananas –

fails to impress my taste buds. I only enjoy the cold pineapple juice as my mind drifts far away, beyond all of this.

I return to my room. My thoughts hit me from all directions, like waves in a storm. The expenses from the past few days, the endless journeys, the faces of the people I've met – they all blend into a silent chaos, mixing into a heavy mass that presses on my chest. "I need to be more careful," I tell myself, as the weight of each expense begins to press down, adding to the mental fog that already clouds my thoughts.

I stretch out on the bed, hoping to fall asleep. But the thoughts refuse to leave, swirling around me like heavy clouds, ready to burst into a downpour of worries. I try to chase them away, but they cling to me persistently. Eventually, exhausted by my own struggles, I fall asleep under their weight.

"Sometimes, doing nothing is the most productive thing you can do." – Paulo Coelho

Chapter 16. “On the Edge of Silence”

July 4th, 2023

The alarm blares at 7:00 AM, pulling me from the depths of exhaustion. I drag myself out of bed, crawling towards the bathroom, where I stop in front of the mirror. The face staring back at me feels foreign – tired, with dark circles under my eyes, as if I’ve never slept enough to truly recover.

I slip under the shower, letting the cold water shock my body awake. I need to snap out of it. I rub lotion into my skin, draw a thin line of black eyeliner on my lids, and apply a touch of mascara. “Am I trying to look good for the tour, or just covering up my exhaustion?” Maybe a little of both.

By 8:30 AM, I’m already on the bus, along with the other tourists. I rushed through breakfast, barely tasting it. My body feels heavy, and it’s hard to ignore the sluggishness that pulls at me. Honestly, I didn’t even bother paying attention to what kind of tour this was. I don’t remember much of what the girl at the reception told me yesterday. Does it even matter? We’re just six foreign tourists, the rest are Vietnamese. A few playful children are making noise around me, but I focus elsewhere. There are four young blonde English girls, no older than 22 or 23, and a Spanish man in his fifties with graying hair. I really hope he doesn’t try to talk to me today – I’m not in the mood for conversation. I decide to avoid him completely, unless absolutely necessary.

As we move through the historical sites, one after the other, the guide talks non-stop. The history of the former Vietnamese rulers’ castles and the grand buildings seems to captivate the group, especially the English girls, who ask questions one after another. The

guide's words flow over me, barely leaving a trace. My mind drifts, wondering why I even bothered signing up for this tour. The only thing I really want to do right now is lie down somewhere and do nothing. But I drag my feet behind the group, because I don't have another option.

We visited the Historic Citadel of Hue, the Noon Gate, the Thien Mu Pagoda, and two imposing mausoleums: those of Emperor Tu Duc and Khai Dinh. All the places were spectacular, with breathtaking beauty. The residences perched on the hills offered a dizzying view of the valley. At Tu Duc Pagoda, the walk through the forest impressed me deeply, followed by the fairytale-like landscape with the river flowing gently. We all took artsy photos, and a Vietnamese woman from my group wouldn't stop until she'd taken an entire photo session with me. It was strange, but it amused me. This woman had tried several times to get closer to me, and I kept thinking that maybe, in some way, she liked me. The Spaniard, however, wasn't bothersome at all, which was a relief.

We had lunch at a small, cramped, and bustling restaurant. I sat at a table with the Spaniard and a Vietnamese couple, who probably assumed that he and I were together. Our confused looks as we stared at the menu were met with friendly laughter, and the Vietnamese couple showed us how to eat each dish. I didn't understand a word of what they were saying, but it didn't really matter. I occasionally threw a shy smile at the Spaniard, but the truth is, all I wanted was to get back to the hotel. I wanted to collapse, without seeing or hearing anyone.

On the boat ride to another pagoda, my thoughts wandered, and I considered going live on TikTok for a few minutes – maybe it would distract me. I didn't expect much, but some guy started messaging me in the chat. I didn't reply. I wasn't in the mood for conversation.

On the way back, the Vietnamese woman with the photos sat next to me on the bus. It seemed like she wanted to talk, but couldn't find a way to do it. Finally, she handed me her phone with a message translated into English on Google Translate: "Where are you from?" I answered. Then she asked if I had Facebook, and we exchanged contacts. She continued asking me simple questions about my life – where I'm from, how long I'll be in Vietnam, how old I am.

But just before I got off at my hotel, she sent me a message that left me speechless: "I love you, but I can't tell you."

I was too emotionally drained to fully process what she had just said. It caught me off guard, leaving me unsure how to react. I simply replied, "Thank you very much!" – what else could I have said? I got off the bus, said goodbye to the group, and gave her a final smile, knowing it would probably be the last time I'd see her. As I write about it now, I realize that moment was a trigger. "What did this woman unlock in me, a drawer I'd been trying to keep closed... at least for a while?"

Walking back to the hotel, lost in thought, two big tears rolled down my cheeks, and I couldn't stop them. "Why are you crying, Yda?" I realized I had been holding them back for too long, and now they'd found their way out. Maybe it's for the best.

I was lucky that no one was at the reception. I went straight to my room and collapsed on the bed. I cried in deep, heaving sobs, releasing everything I had been holding inside. I don't know how long it lasted, but when I finally got up, I went straight to the bathroom. I washed my face and told myself: "That's it. It's over." As I looked at my tear – streaked, disheveled face in the mirror, I knew there was no turning back – now, I could move forward.

I grabbed my swimsuit and went down to the pool. It was empty, and the water was cold, but I swam for a few minutes, just to loosen up. I was hungry, and my stomach growled. I went back to

change and returned to the restaurant, ordering something from the local menu, just to taste Vietnam one more time. But today, the food tasted like nothing.

Later that evening, my phone buzzed lightly on the nightstand. A message from Sully, the guy who had “buzzed” me on the boat. He was persistent but somehow amusing. “Fight fire with fire,” I tell myself and open the conversation. A little escape wouldn’t hurt.

Sully: “Hey, Yda? You there?”

Me: “Hey, Sully... yeah, hi.”

Sully: “Why are you so beautiful?”

I smile at his clichéd but endearing approach. There’s something boyish in his tone.

Me: “I’m not that beautiful.”

Sully: “Yes, you are. Maybe a bit lonely...”

“Does loneliness make me more attractive?” I ask, with a hidden smile at the corner of my lips.

Sully: “It sucks to be alone. But I like older women. I’m tired of young girls.”

“Aha...” I reply, unimpressed.

Sully: “Ever had a relationship with a younger guy? Maybe you should try...”

Me: “Sully, my personal life isn’t really up for discussion.”

Sully: “But what are you looking for, Yda? If you don’t want a relationship, you could have an adventure. That’s more fun.”

“I’m not really the adventurous type,” I reply honestly.

Sully: “Anyway, after one night with me, you’d forget all the other guys.”

I smile sarcastically, amused by his overconfidence.

Me: “How can you say that? You don’t even know me.”

Sully: “I already know what you’re like. I want you to spend at least one night with me...”

“Sully, by the time I’m back in Romania, you’ll have forgotten I exist.” I laugh, entertained by the conversation.

Sully: “I don’t think so. And I’m leaving soon too, to work in Greece. I’m a welder by trade.”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned that.” I vaguely remembered this detail from the TikTok live.

Sully: “I spent 6,000 dollars on fun. It would’ve been better with a girl, but it didn’t happen.”

“Nice. So why don’t you have someone, if you’re young and have money?” I ask, intrigued by his honesty.

Sully: “I didn’t bother looking. I focused on work. And fun... no complications.”

Me: “Hmm, so you’re not really alone. You’re doing well, it’s just that they wanted something else?”

Sully: “In Constanța, many girls just want to party. They fall in love with my money, not me.”

Me: “And what makes you think I wouldn’t do the same?”

Sully: "I don't know yet... but I want to get to know you better."

To my surprise, the conversation shifts, becoming more open and honest than I had expected. I start to understand that Sully isn't just a player, as he first seemed. Behind the "conqueror" attitude lies a hidden vulnerability, a need to be seen and appreciated. He tells me about an ex-girlfriend from France, lost due to circumstances. An intense relationship, but without a clear future. Slowly, his words turn into confessions, and I listen with interest.

Maybe Sully isn't the shallow guy I thought he was at first. Maybe... he's actually worth listening to. Maybe... he's a piece of my puzzle... Who knows?

His story seems a bit sad, but I realize that his suffering has made him deeper than he initially let on. I don't judge him. "Who am I to do that?" I've had my share of losses too. Each of us carries hidden scars.

The story continues to unfold, and our dialogue becomes an exchange of sincere thoughts, with Sully gradually revealing his experiences and wounds. I didn't even realize how long I've been talking to him. Pfff!

"Should I write?" I ask myself, but the thought exhausts me. It's better to just lie here, floating between questions and confused states. "A retrospective? What am I actually searching for? Answers or excuses?" My mind feels like an echo chamber, and TikTok only makes the noise louder. "Why did I cry today? What was triggered in me?"

Questions upon questions... and no answers. And the need for answers is overwhelming, like a thirst for fresh air.

"How are you feeling?" Mone writes to me. It's like he can sense my mood from thousands of kilometers away.

“Feeling a bit better now,” I reply.

“Now?” he presses.

Me: “I had a terrible day. Low energy, I think it’s just another test... It was hard today.”

Mone: “Do you know where this feeling is coming from?”

Me: “I think I do. The problem is resolving it before it completely brings me down. But I know I’ll work through it.”

Mone: “Did it come out of nowhere?”

Me: “No, it’s surfaced before, but today... today was more intense. But I’m not giving up. I know what I need to do.”

Mone: “Maybe you should talk about it, ease your struggle a little.”

Me: “I can’t tell you.”

Mone: “Does that mean it involves me?”

Me: “Indirectly, maybe. But it’s not your fault. It’s just mine.”

Mone: “I hope you manage it. If you want to fight on your own...”

Me: “I have to do it alone. It’s my choice. Today, I had a lot running through my mind.”

Mone: “Aren’t you happy traveling anymore?”

Me: “I am... it’s just that this feeling hit me yesterday, and today, on the bus, I started crying out of nowhere.”

Mone: “How come?”

Me: "I don't even know. No clear reason."

Mone: "But I thought you were doing fine there..."

"Who said I'm not?" I respond, avoiding a direct answer.

Mone: "You're like a child, Yda. You want everything and nothing at the same time."

Me: "I know..."

He sends me a long sigh, as if my attempts to explain don't convince him.

Mone: "You need to be mentally stronger. Don't leave anything behind that can pull you back."

Me: "I am doing it."

Mone: "If you're crying, then you're not. It's just a weakness."

Me: "It's more complicated than that... Some things stir me deeply."

Mone: "Exactly. And if they're coming back, it means you haven't resolved them."

His words, though well-intentioned, irritate me. It's like everything is so simple in his mind.

Me: "Enough, I *am* strong. I just have to push through a few more stages."

Mone: "Don't think about what you're leaving behind, think about what you're gaining every day."

Me: "I know, but sometimes 'what I'm leaving behind' feels heavier than I imagined."

Mone: "It's not about the past, Yda. It's just about evolving. You've come this far because you understood that."

Me: "You're right. But these emotions won't let go. When they overwhelm me, everything goes wrong."

Mone: "You're the one amplifying them. Focus on your evolution, that's all that matters."

I find myself reflecting on the past, on all the decisions that have brought me here. But I can't remember anything clearly. My past is just a series of blurred fragments, like a dream I woke up from too early. "Whose past is it, if not mine?" I wonder, lost between memories and the present.

I try to distract myself and head down to the reception – I pay for a bus ticket to Da Nang. I'm leaving tomorrow, but I don't really know where I'm headed. I think about the conversations on TikTok, about the people invading my mental space without me inviting them in. "Are these the source of my unrest?" I ask myself. "Are they dragging me down? Or are they just tests showing me where I still need to work?"

My mind is a battlefield, and the fatigue only makes it more confusing. But amidst this chaos, I realize one thing: the answers I'm searching for won't come until I sort things out inside myself. "Everything will be okay... it has to be." I repeat the words to myself like a mantra.

"An unexamined life is not worth living." – Socrates

Chapter 17. “Points of Reflection”

July 5th, 2023

The morning begins slowly, at my own pace. It's 9:00 AM, and I follow my daily ritual without any rush, letting time flow peacefully, without pressure. The hotel offers a pick-up to the bus station, so I'm not stressed about the details. My phone starts vibrating.

Sully: “Good morning, beautiful. Are you up?”

Me: “Morning, Sully! Don't you ever sleep?”

Sully: “I'm out in the field with my brother-in-law, we're driving a truck.”

Me: “Good luck.”

Sully: “What about you? Have you eaten something?”

Me: “I haven't even left the room yet...”

Sully: “What time is it there? It's 6:00 AM here, so it must be 10:00 AM where you are.”

Me: “Yes, it's 10:00 AM. But I have a morning ritual. I don't like to rush.”

Sully: “Ritual? Seriously? That's what happens when you don't have a man around – you start doing rituals and all kinds of strange stuff...”

Me: “I pamper myself. Shower, lotions, music, dancing... I take time for myself.”

Sully: "Dancing in the morning? I've never heard that one before."

I smile and close the conversation. I head down to breakfast, still thinking about the conversation from earlier. It's surprising how much a casual conversation can mean to someone. His questions, though superficial, seem like an attempt to step into my life. But I wonder why I participate in them. What am I really looking for? Validation, companionship, or just a way to fill empty spaces?

I've come to realize that people assume they know me just because I answer them back. But rarely do I say anything truly deep. Maybe it's my way of protecting myself. These conversations feel like echoes of a life that doesn't quite feel like mine, yet somehow it is. I accept them because they maintain a fragile balance between who I am and what I let people perceive. Sometimes I wonder if people like him, those who live their lives between work and small daily joys, have figured out something I'm missing. Does happiness really come from simplicity? Am I the one making things more complicated than they need to be?

I go back to my room, torn between going for a walk or writing. I choose writing, but my mind is distracted. At 11:00 AM, I have to check out of my room, and after that, I have two hours to wait before heading to the bus station. I sit on the hotel terrace, trying to focus, but the heat is overwhelming, and flies attack me relentlessly. Even the fan doesn't help.

I open my laptop and start looking for accommodation in Da Nang, but I can't make a decision. I feel better today, but there's still a subtle discomfort, like something undefined is floating in the air. My thoughts wander back to last night's conversations, my inner struggles, the words I spoke hastily: "I can handle this alone." Now, I have no choice but to stick to that promise.

But in my absent-mindedness, I make a costly mistake. I accidentally booked a room... but only for two hours. I hadn't realized that the price was per hour, not per night, and when I tried to cancel, they informed me that cancelation comes with a 100% charge. So, for two hours, I'll pay \$13, when a full night would have been only \$23. Ridiculous!

Who said things were going wrong? Who said they wanted to be more careful with their spending? I think, scolding myself inwardly. I just seriously thinned out my budget for this week. I feel like laughing bitterly... "Am I feeling sorry for myself?" No. I stopped doing that a long time ago.

Frustration overwhelms me, and my mood takes a sharp downturn. My thoughts spiral out of control, like a chaotic storm I can't escape from. "How could I mess up like that?" I try to write, but there's no inspiration left. I close the laptop – it's pointless to force it right now. "Strange days, I just want them... all to pass."

At 12:30 PM, I leave the hotel, Poetic Hue, hidden away on a narrow street. A guy with a scooter takes me to the main road, where I get into a car with three other tourists. The car takes us to the bus station. I have no idea how the journey was; I looked out the window, but it's as if I didn't see anything. Everything floats around me, just like my thoughts, disorganized and unclear.

Zentara Sea View Hotel – Da Nang, Vietnam

I get off the bus in Da Nang and quickly check Google for the hotel address. I realize it's 4 kilometers away from the station. Not insurmountable, but given my luggage and the suffocating heat, I order a Grab motorcycle taxi. In 20 minutes, I arrive at the accommodation I had hastily booked just minutes before: La Lune Hotel. When I arrive in front of the building, I look around, confused. It's located in a crowded area, with shops and crammed buildings,

nothing special. I wonder why the prices are so “steep” compared to other places in the city. What did I miss about this location?

I get off the motorcycle in front of an unimpressive building. I climb the seven steps leading to a place that promises more than it shows at first glance. Inside, there’s a not-too-large room, but nicely arranged, with a reception desk on the left. I approach the counter and wait for the lady at reception to finish her phone call. But when she does, she doesn’t even ask me what I want – she just vaguely gestures for me to wait. After a few moments of confusion, she hands me the phone, asking me to talk to someone. I stare at her, baffled – what does she want? What’s going on?

On the other end, there’s a man’s deep voice, speaking broken English. I sharpen my senses, trying to understand what he’s saying. “You have no reservation. If you said in the chat it was a mistake, the booking was canceled.” I remain with the phone in my hand, trying to process this. How does he know who I am? How does he already know what I want, when I haven’t said a word to the receptionist? I realize they’re probably monitoring me through security cameras. It’s strange, but paradoxically, I feel more relaxed than I should. It feels like maybe I wasn’t meant to end up here, and this situation is just confirmation that this isn’t the right place for me.

It’s as if the Universe is telling me: “No, Yda, not here.”

Mistakes are sometimes signs, and when you accept them, solutions tend to follow. Even though I missed this booking, something tells me it’s for the best. The question that remains is whether they’ll charge me for it or not... I refuse to dwell on the possibility of paying over \$66 for a place where I won’t even stay.

The receptionist smiles at me without saying a word. Most likely, she doesn’t speak English. Or – who knows? I thank her silently, hand back the phone, and walk out of the hotel without any formalities.

I descend the steps, drop my backpack on the last one, and pull out my phone from my pocket. I sigh deeply. Obviously, I need to find another place to stay if I don't want to spend the next three nights on these steps, in the middle of a city that feels utterly unfamiliar. "What an absurd situation," I think, though a small ironic smile plays on my lips.

Not even three minutes pass before the receptionist comes down after me, still saying nothing. She offers me a chair and gestures for me to sit comfortably, instead of perching on the steps. An unexpected, but very kind gesture. She smiles at me conspiratorially, and in her eyes, I sense a deep understanding, maybe an empathy for my situation. Her gesture touches me, reminding me of the woman who told me on Google Translate that she loves me. People are so strange, yet so wonderful. "How do seemingly insignificant strangers manage to offer you moments so full of warmth?"

That was my experience with La Lune Hotel – the place that offers you a two-hour stay and puts you out on the street if you don't pay for the room. Of course, I exaggerate... but I still can't help but smile, amused by the irony of it all.

I frantically search on Agoda for new accommodation and finally find something that seems perfect: right by the sea, and at a more reasonable price. I quickly order a Grab motorcycle taxi. Ten minutes through the suffocating traffic, but I already feel better. I smile for no apparent reason, realizing I haven't smiled in days. It's strange how such insignificant details reappear when you least expect them.

I hop off the bike in front of the Zentara Sea View Hotel and climb yet another set of endless steps. Why do all these hotels have so many stairs? Is it because of the monsoon season? Or maybe I'm just overthinking...

I shake off the unnecessary questions and step inside. At the reception, a girl around 20 years old struggles to check me in. English seems to be a challenge for her. I watch her nervously talking on the phone, trying to find a solution. Eventually, she hands me the key to room 503.

Once I enter the room, I'm greeted by a huge bed and a window with a stunning sea view. The sight is breathtaking. Everything would be perfect if it weren't for... the bathroom. A nightmare. Greenish mold and a heavy smell, like the tiles have never seen cleaning detergent. The thought of going back to the reception tempts me, but I remember the girl's struggles. "It's not my job to fix this, and I don't have the energy for it." What matters is the view of the sea, which immediately grabs all my attention.

The South China Sea, with its constant crashing waves, calls to me. I feel drawn to the water, unable to resist its pull. Quickly, I throw off my clothes, take a quick shower to wash off the sweat, and slip into my swimsuit. I rush out of the hotel, not even looking back at the receptionist. I cross the street in a no-pedestrian zone, eager to feel the sand beneath my feet. Finally! The hot sand massages my soles, the warm water envelops me, and I feel like a child discovering a magical place I never knew existed.

"Here I am, by the sea." And what a sea! The intense blue of the water, the clear sky, a few scattered clouds... The water is warmer than expected, and large waves form offshore, crashing against the shore. I lay on my stomach, letting the waves gently wash over my body. I close my eyes and drift off into a perfect calm, into the freedom I've sought for so long. A true balm for all the emotions that have shaken me in recent days.

The beach is surprisingly clean, and people are everywhere: on the street, in the water, on the sand. I feel small in this crowd, but at the same time, freer than ever. Suddenly, the world fades away, and time seems to stretch. It's a different kind of inner exploration.

As evening falls, I float in a daydream, chat on TikTok, and get caught up in the digital flow. “It’s like a drug,” I tell myself. “Every time I say I’ll quit, but something keeps me there.” I try to pull myself away from this trap, but it’s not that simple. “I’d probably quit a man more easily...”

After shaking off my reverie, I stroll along the beach until I come across a charming little restaurant. The waiter, with the most sincere eyes, convinces me to order crab soup. It’s delicious, but the portion is so tiny... I leave slightly dissatisfied with the quantity, though compensated by the taste. I continue my walk, letting the sound of the waves and the distant music caress my ears. The city lights up, and its reflections on the sea are absolutely hypnotizing. “Tomorrow, I’ll explore everything Da Nang has to offer,” I promise myself. I drag my feet through the still-warm sand, even though the sun has long since set.

On the way back to the hotel, I stop at a mini-market and pick up a few snacks: cheese, olives, and tomatoes. Ah, and a non-alcoholic ginger beer, which I regard as a royal discovery. The perfect menu for a princess of travels.

In my room, I stretch my legs on the bed and let my mind wander over the last few days. “What disturbed me so much? What thoughts or situations brought on so much negative energy?” I start to feel more in control, but I still wonder why I keep returning to this lesson: “My evolution is mine alone.”

I’ve understood that for the thousandth time. Every decision is mine. Every step leads me closer to my path. I’m here, living the dream I’ve always wanted. I wake up when I want, I answer to no one. After years of trials, I’m finally living in the moment. Right now, I can say I have what I wanted: peace, quiet, time for myself.

“But when do I really start living my life? When do I break the monotony?” I wonder. Life has its ups and downs, storms and

moments of calm, but in the end, all these moments seem to shape the path I was meant to follow. Whether I like it or not, my destiny follows its course – indifferent to my thoughts.

Just as I'm lost in my thoughts, my phone buzzes, pulling me back to the present. It's Trangg, my teenage friend from Ninh Binh. She pulls me from my daydream with spontaneous questions, as if trying to fill the silence with something that matters.

"Have you tried any interesting Vietnamese food?" she writes enthusiastically.

I smile. The question seems simple, but I can sense behind it a desire to share her culture, to connect with someone from outside. In response, I send her a simple picture...

"Fried rice? That's nothing! You *have* to try Pho! It's the best thing you'll eat here."

"Pho? What's that exactly?" I ask, even though I know it's a superficial question, just to give her a chance to open up.

"It's a noodle soup. I'll send you a picture right now so you can see."

This girl has a way of turning every detail into a moment of wonder. That's what I like about her. It feels like every conversation she initiates is a little exercise in understanding, as if she's trying to figure out the world through a puzzle of seemingly simple questions.

After a short pause, she continues.

"I always wonder if people from outside, like you, feel the same things when they're here. I mean, what's it like for you to be so far from home, from everything you know? When I was little, I wanted

to go far away, to live adventures, but now... I don't know, it feels like Vietnam is big enough to find everything I need. What do you feel?"

Her response catches me off guard. It's not just about Pho or exotic places. It's a mix of curiosity and inner turmoil, typical for her age, but with a depth that surprises me. This isn't the first time I've felt that Trangg, in her naive way, is searching for answers I haven't even found myself yet.

"It's strange," I write back after a few seconds of hesitation. "It's hard to explain exactly how I feel, but sometimes it's like every new place makes me feel smaller and more vulnerable. Other times, I feel like the whole world is at my feet, and every corner is full of promise."

She replies instantly:

"I think we're all searching for something, right? I like to believe that our lives aren't just a series of little things we do every day. I want to feel like there's a bigger purpose for all of us... Or maybe I'm just a dreamer."

Her maturity surprises me. It's clear that Trangg isn't just a simple teenager content with surface-level answers. She's searching for meaning, even though she doesn't yet know how to fully express it. Despite the ocean of age and experience between us, I find myself in her struggles.

"Yes, maybe we're all on the same search," I write. "But you know what I've learned? Sometimes, even the small things we do every day can mean a lot more than we think. And sometimes, that's enough."

The pause that follows feels like more than just a slow-down in the conversation. It's a moment of reflection. I sense that Trangg is searching for answers, but at the same time, she's trying to create her

own questions, to understand the world she's just beginning to discover.

"Thank you," she writes simply. "You make me think about things I didn't even know I wanted to understand."

I close my phone and stretch out on the bed. My virtual encounter with Trangg makes me realize again how different everyone's journeys are. Not just geographically, but also within ourselves. Maybe all we're doing is searching for meaning and answers to the same old questions: who are we and what do we really want? And maybe, in the end, it doesn't matter so much what the answer is, but the journey itself.

Suddenly, I remember that tomorrow I'll have a full day. I've got "only" five sights to visit. I'm slipping back into the familiar rhythm of travel, even though I know how easily I forget how exhaustion hit me last time. I set my alarm for 8:00 AM and hope that tomorrow morning I'll be ready to face the day with the energy I need.

"We travel not to escape life, but so life doesn't escape us." – Anonymous

Chapter 18. “Fragment of a Road Without Destination”

July 6th, 2023

At 8:10 AM, after the alarm rang for the second time, I reluctantly dragged myself out of bed, as if an invisible magnet was holding me to that too-soft mattress. Somehow, by 9:00 AM, I was already out of the hotel, with my mind fixed on finding a coffee to give me a boost. Outside, the heat hit me like a thick, suffocating wave; I felt like I was slowly melting, like butter on a hot pan. “How am I supposed to survive the day with so many sights to see and this relentless sun beating down on me?”

With no clear idea of where to find a café, I started wandering down side streets. Despite the heat, the city buzzed with activity, even early in the morning. “What are all these people doing out here at this hour?” I wondered to myself, watching the locals bustle about their daily routines. I walked aimlessly, guided by a lazy curiosity and the desire to discover something unexpected.

After a few minutes, I found a beautiful café. Modern, lively, the place smelled divine with specialty coffee and pastries displayed in the glass case, like little sweet treasures. Yummy... everything looks divine. My mouth watered at the thought of those flavors, but I settled for a coconut pastry and a cappuccino with a little heart – simple, but enough to satisfy my craving for something sweet.

I hadn't even taken my second sip of hot coffee when my phone started vibrating. A message from Sully.

“Good morning, beautiful. How are you today?” He's up earlier than yesterday...

“Morning! I'm enjoying my coffee at a cute spot,” I replied, without going into details. I wanted peace, not conversation.

“Without me?... Hmmm. Send me a pic so I can see you,” he insisted, in his usual tone, as if he needed to check on my every move.

I sighed softly, but I realized I had no real reason to refuse. Sometimes, it's just easier not to complicate things. I took a selfie and sent it to him, hoping it wouldn't lead to a flood of messages.

“The morning's even better with you in it,” he quickly wrote back. “But it's sad to sit alone at the table.”

“Sometimes being alone is good. It's just time for myself.” I replied shortly, trying to impose some distance. I didn't feel like explaining why I valued this quiet time.

Sully: “Alone? Being alone isn't good! It sucks!”

I sighed inwardly. Clearly, he doesn't understand. “Have you ever been alone anywhere?” I asked him, hoping to get him to reflect at least a little.

“Yes,” he responded without hesitation.

Me: “I've wanted this my whole life. To be alone, to have time for myself.”

Sully: “I don't believe you.”

I smiled ironically, looking at my coffee cup. “Of course you don't believe me,” I thought. How could someone like him understand,

someone doesn't know what it's like to get lost in the quiet of their own mind?

Me: "Believe me, I'm really alone right now and I like it. I stopped waiting on others. I only care about myself now. I've spent too much time putting myself second."

"Your brain is playing tricks on you," he wrote back, as if he had deciphered some mystery about my existence. "You think you want this because your brain is controlling you, but it's not good. Without control, you'll go crazy."

I laughed quietly, sarcastically. "Go crazy? Who defines that?" I replied, playing with his words. "When I feel like I'm starting to go crazy, I'll look for a boyfriend. Problem solved."

Sully: "That's why things haven't worked out for you with anyone. You need a young, loving guy. That's the solution. He'll bring out the best in you. He'll open up all your senses."

I couldn't help but give a bitter smile. "Does he really believe that?" I realized how different our views on life were. For him, the answer to everything seems to be a relationship, a man to "fix" it all. For me, the silence of solitude offers something no one else can.

"Maybe you're right," I replied with vague interest, even though I already knew this conversation wouldn't go anywhere deep. There's no room for depth here.

He continued to describe the ideal life, in pastel colors, with all kinds of clichés that sounded like they were from a cheap movie. I imagined his scenario as an absurd melodrama.

"Thanks," I wrote curtly, hoping to end the conversation.

Sully: "Let me know when you're done at the café. I could talk to you all day, princess."

"I got it," I said with irony, trying to sound calm.

Sully: "What did you get?"

Me: "That you want to talk all day."

Sully: "And you don't like that?"

"No, clearly not," I responded bluntly. I wasn't in the mood for conversation, not even a sarcastic one.

The conversation gradually died out, but it left me with a strange feeling. A mix of calm and frustration. "*A Turkish man, huh*"... What can I say, a first in my repertoire, I thought amusedly. But never say "never" again, right?

I haven't written anything in the past two days. I keep postponing it, finding all sorts of excuses. But the truth is simple: I just haven't, and that's it. So what? Nobody's dying because of it. My thoughts come and go as they please, and writing either follows or doesn't. The fact that I don't feel like writing is also an emotion. Sometimes I accept it, other times I ignore it. It's fine. I don't have to force myself.

I've been gathering energy these days, I tell myself, sipping the last drop of coffee. Maybe that's my purpose: to gather and reflect. Not to rush.

Today, I woke up with a deep thought: "What's the point of us, as humans?" I was watching the people around me last night at the restaurant, and I wondered: Why were we created? What's our purpose?

Life is beautiful, yes, but everything seems to be a constant struggle. What are we fighting for? Why do we push ourselves? People are born in different circumstances – some easily, some unwanted, some with a heavy destiny. And they all struggle, each on

the battlegrounds of their own existence. The poor for survival, the rich to maintain their status.

Life's just stress, I think, a jungle we like to call human progress. The more you have, the more you want. It's a never-ending spiral. And where does that lead us? To what end will we stop?

I haven't written for two days, so what? Did the sky fall on me? Has anyone held me accountable for it? Did I somehow die? No. I just lived. Simply, without fuss, letting things flow. Honestly, I don't even feel like I missed anything. I actually lived with all my senses. Every sensation, every breeze passed through my skin and settled somewhere deep inside me.

Those clouds that floated above me, heavy but full of promise, the smells of this country... a strange mix of freedom and mystery, both unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. The smell of freedom. Yes, that's it. It's as if each breath opened the doors of my being, awakening everything that had been dormant for too long, anesthetized by calculations, bills, and to-do lists.

It's a strange idea, coming out of nowhere. Maybe freedom is a state you live inside, not a destination.

I try to remember exactly what I've done these past few days, but the memories feel like an unraveling tapestry, without a clear thread. I just know that I've felt alive.

These past two days have been an explosion of senses. I rode around Da Nang on a Grab motorcycle, tasting the city like an exotic dish. I saw everything I set out to see, but each moment was a dance between the suffocating heat and the pure joy of being there. The days were scorching, literally and figuratively, but I enjoyed every second.

Every morning, a cappuccino. I smile at the memory. A little ritual I discovered in that cute café, tucked away on a side street, like

a slice of heaven. Then, the conversations with Sully – a sort of background noise, but one I accepted, because it brought a different kind of sound into my silence.

Caves, museums, fast food from KFC, pizza at a restaurant by the water... Everything was a whirlwind of joy, mixed with walks along the beach back to the hotel. Da Nang is like the New York of Vietnam, bustling and vibrant, but with a warm heart. And the sea... ah, the sea with its spectacular waves, like arms reaching out to me.

How amazing it would be to be a surfer, to let myself be carried through its miraculous tunnels. I felt like the sea was speaking to me, like an old friend who doesn't judge, just invites me to get lost for a while.

Even Sawa was right: this city is unique, and around every corner, you find another reason to fall in love with it.

The first day here, meaning Thursday... After the conversation with Sully, I left the café and took a taxi straight to Marble Mountain. Marble Mountain, that place full of legends and forgotten stories. It was on my “must-do” list, and now I felt ready to explore it.

We rode about 9 kilometers, around 40 minutes on the motorcycle, leaving the city. But it was worth it. It felt like I was heading into another realm, one where time had stopped, and people lived in harmony with stone and myths. The Marble Mountains are a pilgrimage for tourists, a sacred place that gathers all the elements: mountain peaks, tunnels, caves, and temples. All the words you can invent for beauty seem insufficient here.

“Stunning. Magical. Divine.” I don't think there's a place that gathers more energy and mystery in one place.

In one of the tourist brochures, I read about the legend of the place: “It is said that a dragon emerged from the ocean and laid an egg on Non Nuoc beach. After a thousand days and nights, a

beautiful girl emerged from the egg, and the fragments of the shell became the five marble mountains, each representing an element: metal, water, wood, fire, and earth. 'Núi Cầm Thạch', the Hill of the Five Elements."

I started wandering around, climbing endless stairs, descending dozens more, passing along paths that snaked between trees and old temples. I visited caves, each hiding a mystery, a sculpture, a statue of Buddha that seemed to look straight into my soul. I tried to take it all in with eyes starved for beauty, but somehow, I felt like the place was looking at me too, trying to decipher my thoughts.

After hours of wandering, I bought a coconut from a shaded terrace and sat there for a while, listening to the silence. Later, I bought a cold water from a woman with a cart. Triple the price. What a rip-off! But when you're way up, thirsty, and soaked in sweat, what else can you do? The woman was right: "I carried the water up here, not you." And in that moment, I smiled. How much resonance some words can have on a tired mind...

But the view... Ah, the view. The panorama unfolding before me, seen from different angles, took my breath away. It was as if all these wonders had been placed there just for us, the onlookers, to make us wonder: "Do we even deserve all this?"

In the caves, there were Buddha statues and marble sculptures of all shapes and sizes. Ponds filled with flowers and greenery, oases that seemed to sprout from stories. Thousands of pilgrims climbing and descending the paths, each carrying their desires and hopes. And I, wandering among them, like a simple observer.

In one of the caves, I sat on a bench, letting the echoes of music fill my mind. I couldn't leave. I was enchanted by the sound and light dancing around me. I lay down on the bench, with my denim shirt

under my head, feeling the rocks transfer their energy to me. The human mind can't create as much beauty as nature can. How could I ever create something like this? Honestly, I felt like staying there forever, turning into stone and remaining there for eternity.

A message on my phone abruptly snapped me back to reality. Yes, yes... Sully. Restless. Worse than a jealous lover, always wanting to capture my attention, to be present even when I wanted to lose myself in the silence.

"Hey, where are you?" I sent him a photo, smiling.

Sully: "Ah, in a cave... Very beautiful... but it sucks without me."

"Well, if you're not here..." I replied, trying not to laugh.

Sully: "Oh, come on... I'm not there because you don't want me to be."

And again, the same words, the same games. But what can you really say to someone who sees life as a puzzle where every piece has to fit perfectly? I went along with the conversation, because why not? It was a way to keep Sully occupied.

By then, I had stepped back into the sunlight, feeling the warmth caress my tired skin after hours of exploring caves, grottos, and pagodas. I was smiling. "How could I not smile?" My new life embraces me with a freedom I never thought I would know. It's spontaneous, unpredictable, without a clear destination – just like a leaf carried by the wind along an unknown road.

The day, however, continued implacably, in its slow rhythm. I left there in a taxi, one that had been lurking, hunting for customers. I negotiated a decent price, higher than in the app, but I didn't have the patience to wait for another motorbike from the city. If anyone would even come. I told the driver to take me to "3D Museum Art in

Paradise” and after about 40 minutes, he dropped me off right at the front door.

I entered, feeling my feet relieved as I left my sandals in a basket. At first, I kept taking photos by myself, trying somehow to capture the magic of the place, but it's hard to do that when you're missing a partner for adventures. Luck smiled on me when I met a couple – she, exuberant, and he, quiet, always with his phone ready, playing the role of official photographer. I don't know if they were husband and wife or just lovers, but what did it matter? In those moments, we became friends, photographing each other and having fun together in all sorts of surprising poses, as if we'd known each other for a lifetime.

The photos turned out stunning, like paintings crafted by a professional. But it all ended abruptly when the guy's phone rang. “Bye-bye, we have to go!” they said in a rush, disappearing in an instant. I looked after them, mute with surprise. I didn't even ask them for a contact, a Facebook address, or something. Only the memories and the photos remained. People who appear in your life for a moment and disappear just as quickly, leaving behind a slight melancholy. Just like life.

I stayed in the museum for a while, but after they left, the place lost its charm. Without someone to take your picture or laugh with you, everything seemed empty. I spoke a bit with Sawa on video – he hadn't been to this museum either, so I showed him a few rooms. But it wasn't the same. In the small restaurant on-site, I ate something simple: fries and sausages – I was starving. I drank a coffee too, because the smell of freshly roasted beans was too tempting.

When I left the museum, I retrieved my sandals from the young man with a wide smile – a smile that filled your soul with sunshine. Then I called another taxi, ready to explore more corners of Da Nang, this crazy city with traffic that seems orchestrated by the

god of the chaos himself – impossible to comprehend, yet utterly fascinating.

The next stop was at the Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture, where I lost myself among stone sculptures, followed by a visit to Da Nang Fresco Village, a magical street filled with paintings that transformed each house into a story. I looked into people's courtyards, fascinated by the simplicity of their lives. It was as if I was walking along the path of my own life, seeing in advance all the stages to come. I like observing the Vietnamese, watching their everyday life – a modesty full of grace, a simplicity that hides a quiet wisdom.

In the evening, I stopped at a fancy restaurant, right on the beach. Spaghetti and a little chocolate "lava cake." The waves of the sea watched me from afar, and for a few moments, I felt like I was living in an elegant film, with warm lights and spectacular backdrops. The place was modern, fancy, belonging to a hotel whose name I've already forgotten, but what does it matter? I walked barefoot through the sand, leaving behind footprints that would soon be swallowed by the sea.

The night settled over the city, the buildings lighting up spectacularly, as if in a dream. I was taking picture after picture, capturing every moment. It was a magical feeling – to be free in the world, without worries, without a clear direction.

I got to my room late. A long, well-deserved shower washed away all the fatigue and residue of the hectic day, and the bed awaited me like an unspoken promise of peace. I made a few posts on social media, but my thoughts were quickly interrupted by Sully, whose stories made me smile. "Could an evening pass without him?" I laugh to myself... I was slightly enjoying his attention – even if he was the "young guy" with predictable lines. Still, his persistence was becoming annoying. Obsessive. Yes, that's the right word.

The first words said it all: "What are you doing? Where are you now?"

Me: "I've had enough wandering today. I'm at the hotel."

Sully: "Ooo, nice. Send me a picture."

Me: "Don't you have enough on social media?"

Sully: "I want one now, not from two months ago."

Me: "Fine..."

I send him the photo, and his response comes quickly, like a learned line:

Sully: "Ugh, you're adorable. You look like you're 27."

Me: "Really?"

Sully: "Seriously, no joke."

Me: "Thanks to filters, the years don't show."

Sully: "I see you how I want to see you, you're adorable either way."

I gave an ironic smile. "Adorable?" I felt like everything was becoming more and more superficial.

Me: "I know I'm not perfect, but I'm holding up well."

Sully: "I like you."

Me: "I'm fighting the years as best I can."

Sully: "We should fight them together. I guarantee you'd feel younger with me."

I suppress an internal sigh; his predictability exhausts me.

Me: "That's why I told you about my daily beauty routine..."

Sully: "That one's no good, I know a much more effective routine."

Ah, how predictable! The conversation slides into the same old clichés. I respond without thinking too much:

Me: "True, a woman blossoms when she's loved."

Sully: "Exactly! But you don't want to be loved by a young guy like me. If you wanted, you'd feel different, I promise."

I smile. "Does he actually believe what he's saying?" Sully seemed trapped in a parallel Universe, one where the solution to all problems was "a little love" and a few well-placed words.

Me: "You're sweet, Sully, but you're not charming me with those words."

Sully: "I'm not trying to charm you, babe. I'm just being honest. I'm naturally lovable."

Me: "And you think that's going to impress me?"

Sully: "I want to win you over, to make you my girlfriend."

Me: "I can tell what you want, but you've got a few steps to go before you get there."

Sully: "Trust me, when the time comes, you'll never want to let me go."

Promises. I'd heard so many like these that they barely meant anything anymore. I was too familiar with the game of appearances.

“Even though I want many things, sometimes I have to go beyond what I don’t want,” I reply, tired of the same exchange of lines.

Sully: “I promise you, a night with me will be more intense than all your relationships put together.”

I laugh to myself. People will say anything to get what they want, without thinking about the consequences. His words are like soap bubbles – beautiful, but fragile, ready to pop at the slightest touch. “That’s life for some people – a game of appearances.”

“If you say so,” I reply, my voice barely hiding the irony.

After I ended the conversation, I wondered: “Why do I even keep talking to him?” Every discussion ends up in the same place, one that doesn’t interest me at all. But I can’t stop, as if this superficial game is some kind of temporary escape. A way to fill the gaps.

We’re strange, us humans. We say things we don’t really believe in just to create the illusion of closeness. Who still believes in promises? Sully throws them around so easily, as if they were the only way to get what he wants. But to me, his words are just empty.

I fall asleep thinking about myself, about my own desires, about what I really want. It’s clear I need to limit these superficial interactions that come from TikTok and other virtual corners. “Learn when to stop,” I tell myself. Maybe Sully is just a short lesson, a test on my path, a stage I need to pass to better understand what I truly want. “Not all people who appear in our lives stay,” I remind myself.

Sleep slowly takes over, and my last thoughts dissolve into the quiet of the night. “Maybe tomorrow I’ll know better what to do.”

“When we can no longer find meaning in the chaos around us, sometimes all we have left is to find ourselves within it.” – Haruki Murakami

Chapter 19. “Waves of Thoughts and Questions”

July 7th, 2023

The phone alarm goes off at 8:00 AM, piercing like a celebratory fanfare, abruptly pulling me from the sweet morning slumber. By 9:00 AM, I’m already on my way, heading straight to my favorite café. A perfect cappuccino, followed by a smoothie bowl with grains and exotic fruits – so good I’m tempted to order another. Sully hasn’t sent me any messages yet; he’s probably still asleep. A moment of peace that I savor in silence.

I stayed there for quite a while, thinking about what to do next with my day. From the list Sawa sent me, my eyes fell on a pagoda, highly praised on TripAdvisor. By 10:30 AM, I finally manage to peel myself from the café and call a Grab to take me directly to the Linh Ung Pagoda. It was a bit of a distance, about 13 kilometers, and the dense, chaotic traffic kept us on the road for around 40 minutes, but the view from the motorcycle, along the beach, was like a dream. The sea unfolded below me, and the salty air woke me up, flooding my senses. The vegetation was an intense green, as if nature had been painted with the most vibrant colors from an artist’s inspired palette. How can I put into words the colors and sounds that surrounded me? It’s impossible for human language to capture such beauty.

Linh Ung Pagoda, perched on Son Tra Mountain, spans a vast area of 20 hectares, at an altitude of 693 meters above the sea. The silence there was deep, a silence that felt heavy, as if the air itself was breathing slowly. It was the perfect place to listen to yourself – because here, on this plateau, it seemed as though the sounds of the sky intertwined with the deep murmur of the sea.

I climbed the steps one by one, feeling how each step brought me closer to that perfect stillness. At the gate, an inscription made me smile:

“Linh ứng sở cầu như ý nguyện, Sơn Trà Bửu Bụt thật hiển linh.”

(At Linh Ứng, all wishes come true, Sơn Trà Bửu Bụt is truly divine.)

“Linh Ung” – the legend says that if you pray sincerely within the pagoda, your wishes will receive a miraculous answer. “What a beautiful idea,” I thought, smiling.

The first thing that struck me upon arrival was the towering statue of Lady Buddha. It’s the tallest statue in Vietnam, rising imposingly to 67 meters in height. I tried to capture it in a few photos, but the blinding sun made the task impossible, and later, when I looked at the pictures, I was disappointed. The statue seemed to gaze towards the sea, waiting for something or someone, in a solemn silence. She stood there like a queen lost in time, forever looking out at the endless horizon.

I didn’t go inside the statue, but I knew that each of its 17 levels housed altars with statues of Buddha. I would’ve loved to explore them all, but time didn’t allow for it.

On the plateau, I discovered gardens full of small trees and flowers, where women sat quietly on cushions, meditating. They seemed to have stepped out of a painting of serenity, each absorbed in her own thoughts. Without thinking too much, I sat down too, feeling the need to connect with the energy of the place. The fans barely kept up with the heat, annoying flies buzzed around, but I didn’t move. I felt the stillness seep into every cell, as if I had melted into that moment of absolute calm. I stayed there, motionless, for almost an hour, just savoring my own body, my own thoughts.

My last day in Da Nang. The thought suddenly pulled me out of my reverie. I would've stayed there longer, but I reluctantly got up. Hunger led me onward, so I quickly headed to Lotte Mart Supermarket and satisfied my craving for fast food at KFC. Sometimes the body demands its rights in the simplest way.

I then rode along My Khe Beach on the motorcycle, passing by Dragon Bridge, admiring the bustle of the city.

The evening found me at Asia Park Sun World Da Nang, an amusement park where I stayed until almost closing time. It's the first time I've gone to an amusement park alone, I thought, and the feeling was strange, but liberating at the same time. The looks from those around me caught my attention – who comes to an amusement park alone? But why not? I checked off everything there was to do, from Ferris wheels to carousels, from slides to the haunted house, and my smile never left my face. I was taking selfies everywhere, feeling like a child living in my own Universe of pure joy. Maybe that's why people were looking at me strangely – because I was being honest in my happiness, without any mask.

I only left when I had exhausted every corner of the park, tired but happy, my feet burning from all the walking. Hearing the Chinese music in the background reminded me again how much I want to visit China. Maybe destiny will take me there too, who knows? Maybe one day I'll even find a Chinese boyfriend, since I've always been drawn to that culture. I'm joking... or maybe not.

Back at the hotel, after 11:00 PM, I decided to take one last walk along the beach. Night had fallen over the city, wrapping everything in a velvety silence, and I somehow felt whole, as if all the hard days that once haunted me had dissolved into the sea. "I'm not a robot," I tell myself, but with every step, I felt like my energy was endless, that my soul could keep traveling, free, without limits. "If only the soul could travel wild, without the body pulling it back..."

I reach the hotel, and fatigue suddenly hits me like an invisible wall. All I want is to throw myself into bed and let my thoughts slip into sleep. But, of course, the phone starts ringing just as I'm in the shower. "Pfff... why now?" I ask myself. Sully. He hadn't shown any sign all day, but now he's stalking me on TikTok. Somehow, I felt like there was no escape from his grip.

His messages kept flooding in: "I saw you online on TikTok... why aren't you replying?"

I look at the message and feel invaded. "Why have I reached the point of explaining myself?" I feel my anger rising, like a volcano, but I push it down. "Zen, Yda... stay zen."

"Hey, I was in the shower."

His reply comes immediately, and it's more disrespectful than I expected: "Oh yeah? Who were you in the shower with? A boyfriend?"

My cheeks burn with anger, but I struggle to stay calm. "Seriously? That kind of question is that?" I push the thought away and respond as curtly as possible:

Me: "Sully, it's my personal life."

Sully: "Fine, dear... but I saw you online."

I roll my eyes, furious at his stupidity. "As if my online life belongs to him." I cut him off, swiftly:

"That's why I'm single, remember?"

He backs off, but not without a final comment: "Yeah, right."

"Enough, game over!" I think to myself, trying to stop the flood of messages. I need to end the conversation.

Me: "I'm going to sleep, it's almost midnight."

Sully: "How can it be midnight?"

Me: "It's 11:53 PM here." My patience is wearing thin by the second.

Sully: "Ugh. And you don't want to talk to me anymore?"

Me: "No, I'm tired."

Sully: "You talk to others on the phone, but not me..."

Me: "I have plans tomorrow."

Sully: "What plans?"

Me: "Goodnight, Sully."

Sully: "Ugh, fine, goodnight. At least give me a kiss."

I stay silent. The messages keep coming, but I don't reply. It's not worth it. What's the point? It's clear that Sully is becoming more and more possessive, and I don't have the time or the patience to get lost in his jealousy and insecurities.

I fall asleep with my thoughts wandering, reflecting on the absurd jealousy of some men, how they build scenarios like sandcastles, ready to collapse at the first breeze. Sully is just one of them, but the exhaustion of constantly justifying myself is starting to overwhelm me.

"Some people are just more trouble than they're worth," I tell myself, as sleep begins to embrace me, calming my agitated mind.

Tomorrow I'll wake up early to catch the sunrise. My last day in Da Nang. I want to see the sun rise from the sea. Do I care about possessive men? Not at all. I've already chosen a different path.

"Not all those who wander are lost." – J.R.R. Tolkien

Chapter 20. “Lanterns and Unspoken Questions”

July 8th, 2023

It's a beautiful Saturday morning, but I missed the sunrise. Instead of setting my alarm for 4:45 AM, I accidentally set it for 5:45 AM – probably with my mind still caught up in those endless conversations with Sully. “Goodbye, sun!” I said to myself with a smile when I opened my eyes and realized that the sunrise was already high in the sky. Maybe it was meant to be that way. I sighed softly and turned over, enjoying a few more minutes of sleep. After all, beauty sleep has its importance too. I didn't get out of bed until after 8:00 AM, feeling relaxed and still a little dreamy.

By 9:30 AM, I headed out to the beach. Not to sunbathe, but just to feel the sea, to check the water temperature. The large waves, with their foamy crests, gently lapped at my feet, and I stood there, mesmerized by their sound. I lingered on the sand, watching the other people, each lost in their own little routines. A child was meticulously building a sandcastle, a group of tourists waited eagerly for their turn to go parasailing, and two employees with jet skis were doing their jobs flawlessly, as if the waves were part of their daily choreography.

But my attention kept returning to the waves. Ah, the waves... A timeless, natural spectacle, accompanied by the sound of the water hitting the shore. The grandeur of a beautiful July day in central Vietnam. What a vibe! I'm here, present, with no constraints, no obligations. I feel every thrill of the moment, every second. It's incredible. If someone had told me four years ago that I would be doing this, I would've laughed it off. “Me, Yda, alone in a tropical paradise? No way!” is what I would've thought back then, and we probably would've had a good laugh at the idea.

But, as it sometimes happens, a dream becomes reality. Sometimes it does. Other times, it stays a dream, lost in the corners of my mind. Does it depend on the dream? Or the dreamer? Maybe it's not about either. Maybe on cosmic luck? I don't think so. The truth is, it just happens. No deep explanation, just chance. Why get lost in analysis? Isn't it better to live in the moment and enjoy it with all my being?

For the first time since I've been in Vietnam, I managed to book my bus ticket to Hoi An online. On my own. A small personal victory. I chatted with a guy from the agency on WhatsApp, and everything went smoothly. He told me exactly where to go and what to do. Simple, but for me, it was one more step towards complete independence.

After my beach walk, I went back to the hotel and packed my bags. 12:10 PM, check-out from Zentara Sea View. I had about 2 kilometers to walk to the pick-up point, where I needed to go to catch the bus. With my backpack on, I set out, but the heat... Ah, the heat! A heat so intense, it felt like walking into an oven. I could feel my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth, and sweat trickled down my back, but I kept going, step by step, I kept moving.

When I got close to my destination, I didn't want to wait in the blazing sun, so I entered the luxurious Furama Resort complex. The cool air greeted me like a blessing, and, gratefully, I ordered a cold orange juice and a coffee. Around me, only three people sat at a table, speaking loudly in a language I didn't recognize. Everything seemed so elegant, so sophisticated. For a moment, I thought about asking how much a room cost per night, but then I told myself, "What's the point?" It was clear from the atmosphere that the price matched the luxury. I smiled, sipping the cool juice and savoring the quiet moment.

170,000 dong (around \$7) for a cold drink and a spot in the cool air. A price I expected, but it still made me smile. I probably paid for the privilege of not melting in the heat outside.

At 1:30 PM, the driver picked me up right on time, and we set off for my next destination: Hoi An. The trip was short, just over an hour and a half, but somehow, it relaxed me. I was the only passenger in the minivan, and the driver seemed completely absorbed in his thoughts. No words were exchanged, no glances, just the endless road ahead of us. Maybe he had his own existential dilemmas to solve. Who knows?

At least he dropped me off close to my new accommodation, River Park Homestay. Another place, another beginning, but I still carried the weight of my journey.

River Park Homestay – Hoi An, Vietnam

Hoi An is simply unparalleled! These aren't just grand words, and if I choose to start at the end, it's because I can't find another way to open this chapter. I haven't written for two days again. This time, though, not out of laziness or lack of inspiration, but because I was caught up in the events of the days and had roommates in the hostel room. But let me get back to where I left off.

The randomly chosen homestay can't boast much elegance. Seven beds, a bathroom crying out for attention, and a location on the edge of the city, far from the daily hustle and bustle. But I didn't complain. That's what I promised myself. When I arrived, the room was empty... but there was still time until evening.

The distance from the city center made me opt for a taxi, although the friendly host had suggested renting a bicycle. I politely declined, not because I'm lazy, but more because I prefer safety. Remembering the chaos in the traffic, I congratulated myself for making the right choice.

I already knew from Sawa that Hoi An is famous for its *Phong* – those delicious Vietnamese sandwiches you simply can't miss. So, after I tossed my bags under the bed, I took a quick shower and changed, ready to explore. I called on a "friend" from Grab to take me directly to the famous restaurant. The "thrilling" traffic during the 15-minute motorcycle ride to my destination makes me glad I didn't choose a bicycle.

When the taxi stops and the driver signals me to get out, I'm amazed. I find myself in front of a small eatery on a crowded street.

I look around, bewildered – a sea of people, almost like a parade, all crowding at the entrance of the restaurant. Something I've never seen before. "Could it really be that famous?"

The place is modest: about 4-5 square meters on the ground floor and a bit more on the first floor, where there's an open terrace. A jumble of tables, chairs, and people. A frenzy like an anthill, the kind you only see in movies. But here, everything was as real as it gets.

Behind the counter, eight young people struggled to keep up with the flood of orders. The voices, the hustle, the vibe of the place are impossible to describe in words. People were crowding at the windows as if the sandwiches were free. Fascinated by this whole spectacle, I take a "monumental" photo and immediately send it to Sawa on WhatsApp. His reply comes quickly: a video call. We laugh together about the situation, and for a while, I chat with him in front of the building, until I tell him I need both hands to manage and that I'll call him back after I get a seat somewhere. He recommends going upstairs and not waiting, because it will "never" clear up.

The line at the entrance is so long you can't pass unless you literally elbow your way through, using every muscle you have. Some people looked at me like they wouldn't let me through, as they huddled by the windows, trying to see something or who knows why, afraid to lose their place. My look probably said it all... and, of course,

I managed to get upstairs, where a young man greeted me with a smile: “How many people?” I laughed and replied, “Just me!” and he gestured towards the terrace where a free spot awaited me at a makeshift bar table. “It’s better than nothing!” Smiling at the hectic street below, I sat down, thoroughly amused by the fierce “battle” to get there, and put on my headphones to continue the conversation with Sawa. I noticed the two ornamental trees that seemed like they were waiting for Christmas, and just as Sawa answered, a thought crossed my mind: “Am I still in Vietnam, or have I stepped into another dimension?”

At his recommendation, I ordered two *Phong* sandwiches, one with chicken and one with beef. Despite thinking it would be too much for me, I devoured both without blinking. I felt like my stomach was about to explode, but it was worth it.

“The Battle for *Phong* in Hoi An.” Now I understand why people are crowding here. It’s an unforgettable experience, a culinary adventure that, without exaggeration, changes your perspective. After finishing my meal and chatting with Sawa, I grab a Sprite, craving something fizzy. I ended the call, paid the bill, and tried to make my way down through the crowd, which miraculously parted to let me through.

With a broad smile and a belly full like a snake that had just swallowed its entire prey, I enthusiastically headed towards the city’s “Little Venice,” as Sawa calls it. Night had fallen, and the streets took on a magical air. I couldn’t leave without making one last video, capturing the chaos outside the restaurant. The thought made me smile: “What must it be like to work non-stop like these people?” They probably don’t even get to see their beds when they get home. I tip my hat to their culinary talent and note the address: Banh Mi Phuong, on Phan Chu Trinh Street – a place worth visiting and, above all, tasting.

I stroll along, letting myself be guided by the GPS, which says I'll reach my destination in 15 minutes. I have no idea where, but it doesn't matter. The city hums like a living being, lit up by thousands of small lights that turn everything into a continuous Christmas. I feel like I've been teleported to another dimension, a virtual reality that began back at that restaurant. The city is shocking, vibrant, and when I reach the canal, the final blow leaves me completely stunned.

I had no expectations, but what I see leaves me speechless. It's as if I've truly landed on another planet. The buzz of the crowd rises in a deafening crescendo, so intense that you don't know whether to laugh or cry. The river winds calmly under the lit-up bridges, boats adorned with colorful lanterns sail lazily, and the banks are filled with locals trying to sell you everything: candles, phone cases, anything. It's an indescribable bustle, and if you're not careful, you risk losing even your glasses off your face. "Pfff... What is this place?"

Honestly, no matter how much I try to describe the moment, reality surpasses any imagination. It's Saturday, and it seems like no one stayed home. The whole city seems to have migrated here, to the riverbank, and if you haven't experienced it firsthand, you won't understand it through just a few words. Reality beats any story.

I wander aimlessly, my eyes darting left and right, but I'm truly mesmerized by the lantern boats, proudly parading on the water. I reach the dock, and I'm immediately swarmed by vendors. Each one asks if I want to go on a boat ride. And yes, I do, but I hate being pressured. Still, after the sixth or seventh offer, I give in to their persistence. I admit, I was already enchanted by the boats, like a moth drawn to a flame. So, without even realizing it, I find myself aboard a small boat decorated with colorful lanterns, steered by a sturdy woman in her sixties. Her toothless smile gleams in the colorful night, and I lose myself in the moment.

All that matters is the present: the lights reflecting on the water, the murmur of the crowd, the shore gradually receding, full of people bustling around like ants, and the city smells blending into a bizarre but fascinating mix. Time stretches, and the 20 minutes pass in a flash. “Already?” I feel like I’m being brutally pulled from my dream, brought back down to earth, and it all ends so abruptly.

I step off the boat, slightly disappointed, and wander aimlessly. I take a few more photos, buy some fruit in a cup from an old lady, and look around. I observe myself and the crowd around me. I promise myself that I’ll return tomorrow. I need to see everything in daylight, to make sure it wasn’t just a dream.

I remember a question of my friend’s that echoes in my mind, refusing to give me peace.

“How can we say ‘I love you’ to different people and feel each time like it’s unique, like we’ve never loved anyone that way before? And then, years later, we say the same words, again and again... with the same feelings?”

I wonder why this question comes to mind now, on a night like this when I’m not in the mood for philosophical reflections. I needed peace, not complicated answers. The thought weighs on me, but I let it float without finding an immediate answer. My friend Criss would surely want a debate on this, but I’m not in the right state of mind.

I decide to head back to my accommodation. I call a taxi, and as I walk to the pick-up point, I’m amazed, as always, at how these drivers maneuver their motorbikes. It’s a frantic yet fascinating dance.

When I reach the front gate of the homestay, I see the light on in my room. I won’t be alone, as I had hoped. Inside the room are three girls of various nationalities. We greet each other politely, without many words. I know the feeling – no one wants to intrude on anyone else, so the silence is welcome. I take a quick shower and

spend the rest of the evening on my phone. I had completely forgotten about him until he messaged me...

Sully: "Hey, what are you doing?"

Me: "Hey. I'm getting ready for bed. I have plans for tomorrow morning."

Sully: "What plans?"

Me: "I'm visiting a new place. Good night!"

Sully: "Alright, alright... Good night to you too."

The peace lasts only a few minutes. Another message:

Sully: "You said you were going to sleep, but you're still online... See how much of a liar you are? Who are you talking to? Ydaaaa...!"

I sigh deeply. "What should I even reply?" Messages like this irritate me. I don't owe him anything, in fact, I don't owe anyone anything. Maybe only to myself. It's clear – sometimes people project their own insecurities into unnecessary messages. Pfff... Do all young guys become like this when they're jealous? A good joke, maybe. Anyway, at least now I have a solid reason not to reply to him. At all.

In the room, the lights go out. The girls want to sleep. I'm not sleepy, so I lower the brightness on my phone and continue scrolling through messages, still browsing on WhatsApp. Sully annoyed me, so I stick to my decision not to reply. Maybe it's better this way. "Who does he think he is, anyway?" Strange specimen.

Suddenly, I remember the question about love. A strange question, and yet, fitting for this moment. I decide to respond to my friend, letting my thoughts flow.

Me: "A good question, my dear."

Criss: "Yes. This is where my questions about 'I love you' came from, and I wanted you to know. Read it, and then I'll delete it," she writes quickly, as if, if I didn't read it immediately, she'd change her mind.

Me: "Okay, I've read it. What's it about?"

"It's nothing personal," Criss replies instantly. "Just thoughts that come to mind. I found a little note in an old book at my grandma's. You know how we say 'I love you' and think that person is the only one who will ever matter?"

"Exactly. But deep down, we know it's just an illusion," I reply.

"It's a mirage of the mind. I realized that true love isn't about possession or jealousy. It's about wanting the other person's happiness, whether or not they stay with you." Criss replied after a pause.

Me: "But who can live like that? Many people cling to the fear of losing something."

Criss: "And yet, pure love is wanting the best for the other person, even if you're no longer part of the picture. We're so attached to 'having' that we forget what it truly means to love."

Me: "Yeah, we get caught up in jealousy, possessiveness, and everything falls apart."

Criss: "And when you 'feel' like you don't love anymore, what once was just fades away. But why does everything change so suddenly?"

“Maybe because we project too much onto the other person. We turn love into a goal, and when the goal disappears, so does the love,” I reply.

Criss: “Exactly. It’s as if we’re living an illusion. Many don’t realize it and let themselves be consumed by the pain.”

Me: “And in the end, what’s left? Just those painful lessons...”

Criss: “I think it all reflects our inner need to become whole. But if we don’t love ourselves, how can we love someone else?” I sensed she was both sad and, at the same time, peaceful.

Me: : “That’s it. We’re caught up in devotion or attachment, instead of true love.” I was fully aware that the conversation had struck a chord in her.

Criss: “Yes, it’s like we’re programmed to self-sabotage. Every day we tell ourselves we’re not enough.”

Me: “It’s a vicious circle. And yet, every step brings us closer to the truth. Even if we may never fully understand it.”

Criss: “Who knows what lessons still await us...”

I stop the conversation, feeling fatigue wash over me. The discussion leaves me with many thoughts swirling in my mind. All these talks about love, life lessons, and introspection are exactly what I need right now. Maybe I’ve heard all this before, but I revisit it, repeat it, to better absorb it. The Universe always sends me people to show me what I need to see, even if they don’t realize it. My intuition is sharper than ever. I still have a long road ahead, but I feel like every step brings me closer to who I truly am.

“And what if love – the one we consider essential for existence – is the very thing that pulls us away from our path?” I sit and ponder this, turning the idea over in my mind.

A new message interrupts my thoughts:

“Hey, what are you doing? You haven’t told me about today’s events...” Mone writes, as if sensing my inner turmoil.

I smile. I quickly reply:

“Hey, I’m already in bed. Today was good... I went here,” and I sent him a few photos I took along the way.

Mone: “Wow, such beautiful places!”

Me: “Yeah, I went to Little Venice... It felt like I was on another planet. It was wow. So many people! I spent \$6 on a boat ride that lasted about 20 minutes, but it was worth it.”

Mone: “Super cool!”

Me: “Yeah, the city is so beautiful at night.”

Mone: “Is it big?”

Me: “Not really, but it’s charming. Alright, I’m going to sleep now. The girls are stirring; I think my phone scrolling is bothering them.”

Mone: “Okay, goodnight!”

I close my eyes and let myself drift in my thoughts. What a cool day I’ve had... Maybe it’s the adrenaline, the dynamic of the days. The more intensely I live, the more I want. Just before I fall asleep, I recall the phrase echoing in my mind: “I love you!” Strange words, aren’t they?

Yet, in the midst of this labyrinth of thoughts and emotions, I realize that life is a puzzle made up of moments of intensity, calm, and introspection. Love – whether we get it or not, whether it lifts us or trips us up – plays a role in life’s dance. It’s impossible to fully

decipher, but maybe it doesn't need to be. Maybe the answers aren't as important as the questions we ask ourselves.

At the end of the day, I'm left with the feeling that every step I take, every experience and every emotion lived brings me closer and closer to myself. And maybe that's the only form of evolution that truly matters. And I fall asleep...

"Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans." – John Lennon

Chapter 21. “Unexpected Encounters and Echoes of Thoughts”

July 9th, 2023

Early in the morning, one of the girls leaves in a rush. I hear her moving about, packing her things in the stillness that only night can bring. The house seems to suddenly wake up, creaking at every joint, with a dull echo. Even the walls seem to come alive. It's barely 6:00 AM. “She probably has a bus to catch to another destination,” I think. I don't even know what she looks like. Last night, I didn't pay much attention to her – just a fleeting passenger through my life, without a face or name. A fleeting presence, just like so many others who pass through our lives: those who matter stay, the rest are shadows lost in the crowd.

Around 8:00 AM, I get out of bed. The other two girls are still fast asleep. I slip into the bathroom, trying not to make any noise, but it's as if everything is conspiring against me: the door creaks, the floor groans, even the shower seems to have a life of its own, making more noise than it should. I quietly sneak downstairs, trying not to wake them. I'm hungry.

Downstairs, the woman from the homestay serves me a traditional breakfast with a smile – a *Phong* sandwich filled with omelet and a milk coffee. At the next table, a young couple is also sleepily sipping their coffee. The atmosphere is peaceful, but inside me, something is smoldering with impatience. I feel a surge of energy, something I haven't felt in a long time. “Hoi An is to blame,” I think. The idea of moving here, even for a while, crosses my mind, but I laugh at myself. That's a crazy thought!

By 10:00 AM, I leave the room after the girls have gone down for breakfast. I'm eager to see the city again, but this time in the daylight. I wait for my taxi – the woman at the homestay offers me the bicycle again, but I politely refuse. I don't want to complicate my day by worrying about a bike in a city where traffic is absolute madness. I'm here to relax, not stress out. So, I protect my pretty behind and pay for the taxi, for the sake of comfort and safety.

By day, the city is no less lively than it was at night. It's real! A crowd of people, foreigners from all over, are exploring the surroundings with the same curiosity. I buy a multiple-entry ticket for five attractions and let myself be carried away by the fascination of the streets. I photograph everything that catches my attention, any detail that draws me in. Until...

Suddenly, a strange feeling hits me. An intense nausea rises in my throat like a knot I can't swallow. I feel suffocated. I can't think clearly. I try to steady myself. I wonder if it's from the food, but it can't be – I had a good breakfast. "The heat?" Possibly. "The hustle and bustle of the city?" Maybe that too.

I retreat to a nearby café, hoping that another coffee will help. I try to stay calm, but the nausea is so strong that my knees tremble. I enter and sit by a fan. A cheerful girl comes over and recommends an "Egg Coffee." The cool air and soft cushions make me feel better, almost instantly. The nausea disappears as quickly as it came. I wonder if I just imagined it.

I sit more comfortably and take pictures of the surroundings. The location is wonderful, and the coffee gives me a good vibe. The feeling of sickness is now just a memory. After more than an hour of relaxing, I remember my plans for the day. I pay the bill, but before I leave, the girl asks me to leave them a review on TripAdvisor. I search for the name of the place online, but I can't find it, so I go back to the bar.

“How do I find you on TripAdvisor? Your place doesn’t seem to show up,” I say with a smile.

She laughs. “Oh, yeah, you need to search for...” and she tells me the full name, but at that moment, something completely distracts me.

Behind me, I hear familiar words. Romanian! “What?” I wonder. “Am I imagining it?” I perk up my ears. Someone is speaking Romanian, I’m sure of it. I discreetly turn around to see who it is. A family of three – a man, his wife, and a teenage girl. No doubt, they’re Romanian. I wait, like a panther stalking its prey, and I hear them again. Yes, they’re Romanian! Without hesitation, I turn around and walk right up to them.

“Hi! You’re Romanian, aren’t you?”

They look surprised but immediately smile and invite me to join them. I enthusiastically tell them how I heard them and how I was so close to leaving, but something made me turn back. I realize none of this was by chance. How strange it is, the way life brings people into our path, people who, somehow, are meant to cross it?

We stay together for over an hour. We talk about Romania, about Vietnam, but mostly about Korea, where they’re heading tonight. Adina and Ionuț live in Bucharest, and their daughter, Ioana, has been studying Korean since she was young. How cool! Could that be why I met them? Because I, too, am supposed to go to Korea? Who knows...

We exchange contacts on Instagram, and Adina says to me, smiling:

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again, either in Bucharest or somewhere in Asia on our next trip.”

I smile too. I'd definitely like to see them again. We part happily. The encounter lifted all of our spirits, you could see it on their faces. Only later do I realize I wouldn't have been here if I hadn't felt sick earlier. I look up at the sky and smile, in that way only I know how...

The rest of the day I spend leisurely walking through the city, checking off the remaining sights on my list. Among them, a local performance – a true delight for the senses. The brightly colored costumes and precise dances, accompanied by divine music, transported me to another world. For a few minutes, I completely forgot where I was, caught up in the spell of the show. Until my phone buzzed, abruptly bringing me back to reality.

"Hi. You haven't told me about Da Nang yet... what impression did the city leave on you?" – a message from Trangg. I had completely forgotten to reply. Ugh.

"Hi. Da Nang is wonderful..." I type quickly and send her a few pictures.

Trangg: "Wow, it looks super chill... Did you swim in the sea?"

Me: "No, I just walked along the beach."

Trangg: "I'd love to go to the beach now, but I always have studying to do."

"Study first, then the beach, right?" I try to lift her spirits.

Trangg: "Not necessarily. My parents are always busy. They don't have time for us to go out together..."

Me: "What do your parents do?"

Trangg: "My mom's a teacher, and my dad's a principal. They're busy now with grading the graduation exams."

Me: "Oh, I see..."

I realize how different our lives are. Trangg seems trapped in a strict schedule, where every moment is organized around someone else. I'd like to encourage her, to tell her that she'll also have the chance to be free, but the words don't come easily.

"Have you made many Vietnamese friends?" She changes the subject.

Me: "Not too many."

Trangg: "I'm sorry we didn't take a picture together when we met."

Me: "Me too."

Trangg reminds me of a younger sister, clinging to any conversation just to maintain a connection. I feel like telling her that, even though we didn't take a photo, our bond doesn't depend on a digital memory. She gives me the impression that she wishes she could be free like me. And to me, it seems like she's living a structured, secure life, but one stuck in a routine that doesn't allow her to break free. Sometimes she's just a child, and other times she shows a surprising maturity.

It's late, and the sunset is covering the city, and I feel the urge to explore Hoi An, which becomes more and more lively as evening falls, and I want to watch everything with fresh eyes, even if just from a distance. I'm fascinated by the crowd, it's like everyone is being pulled by an unseen energy in the same direction. The evening is magical, but it already feels familiar.

As I decide to look for a place to eat, my stomach reminds me how urgent it is, since I haven't eaten anything since breakfast. I struggle to choose a restaurant, wandering through the busy crowd for a while before I decide. I sit down at a table and order a local soup.

Strange tastes and mixtures, but good. It doesn't really matter what I eat today, honestly, I just need to trick my stomach.

On the way to the taxi pick-up area, my phone rings. Marty. I answer with a smile. He sounds excited by our conversation, his tone light, almost playful, with subtle hints of flirting. He tells me how fascinated he is by my beauty, how our conversations challenge him. I laugh. I know they're just lines, but they amuse me, and that's all that matters right now. We lose ourselves in light stories, even though nothing serious will come of them.

"Seriously, Yda, you leave me speechless every time..." he says with that calculated charm, but half-ironic.

"You're a poet, Marty," I reply, teasing.

We talk the whole way, until the taxi arrives, and the fast-driving driver takes me back to the homestay. The room is dark. The two girls have left, and their place has been taken by someone else, a girl who is now in the bathroom. Music is playing, and a ray of light slips out from under the door. When she comes out, we introduce ourselves, but nothing more. I have no idea where she's from, and honestly, I don't care too much. We both quietly tap away on our laptops, and I'm glad I've ended up with someone who doesn't go to bed at the same time as the chickens.

On my phone, there are messages from Sully, who has been insistent today as well. "Why don't you talk to me anymore? Are you afraid you're getting attached to me? Please answer..." But I don't reply. I need peace, without unnecessary persistence. Sully is caught up in emotional games that I don't have time for.

To change my energy, I open a conversation with Mone. Conversations with him always bring me peace and introspection.

"Man, I'm having such cool days in this city, pfff..." I texted him.

“Are you staying there longer?” he asks, always curious.

Me: “Yeah, two more nights. Tomorrow I’m doing a tour of Cham Island.”

Mone: “Cool.”

“I met some Romanians today... a family from Bucharest,” I continue.

Mone: “Wow! That’s awesome! How was it?”

Me: “They told me all about Korea. They’re going there now. They said it’s a perfect world, everything’s organized... a different reality.”

Mone: “Well, yeah, Korea is expensive but well-organized. What were the Romanians doing there?”

Me: “They were visiting. She’s a lawyer, but he didn’t say what he does. Anyway, they’re enchanted by Korea.”

Mone: “Yeah... Korea, Japan... Singapore... they’re all rich. That’s why it’s another world there.”

Me: “Yeah, maybe I should see it for myself. Just as an experiment.”

We both laugh at the idea of an expensive vacation in those “perfected” places, but the conversation opens my mind to new horizons. I close my phone and turn off the light. My roommate has fallen asleep. I’m still thinking about this long day. Just before I fall asleep, a thought pierces my mind: “Was that why I felt sick today? Because I was meant to meet those Romanians?”

“It’s not those who travel the most who see the most, but those who see the deepest.” – Alexandre Dumas

Chapter 22. “The Invisible Dance of Life”

July 10th, 2023

The morning begins with the phone alarm blaring at 7:00 AM. I quickly get out of bed, as if pulled from a restless dream. My roommate barely opens her eyes but stays quiet, idly scrolling through her phone, letting me prepare for a new experience. I’m glad she woke up – it spares me the worry and the effort of being careful not to disturb her sleep with any noise.

I go downstairs for breakfast, where the woman, with a bright smile on her face, greets me with the same *Phong* sandwich with omelet. I sip a few gulps of coffee, the bitter taste energized me for the new day. At 8:30 AM, a car takes me to the pier. Our group, a mix of sunburned Europeans with relaxed laughter, is already there, ready to go. There are three other young people in the car, picked up along the way. At the destination, we’re probably about twenty souls gathered this morning under the Asian sun.

The guide, a man with a playful sense of humor, whose name I didn’t catch, talks non-stop. I don’t understand much, but I laugh along with the others – their laughter is contagious, like a warm rain that catches you off guard. I pick up a few familiar words and start creating my own stories in my mind about his jokes, filling in what I can’t understand. He talks about the floods that sweep through the island, about schools that only operate in the dry season, and children having to travel far away to study. The distance between the island and the city feels like another continent when you’re forced to travel 45 minutes by motorboat, battered by wind and torrential rain. And the rainy season seems like a flood upon the earth.

The image of water-filled homes opens another door in my thoughts. I lose myself in thoughts about these people, born and raised in the middle of the water and at the mercy of nature. How do you come to accept your fate in a place where the monsoon season spares nothing? Do you eventually get used to this harsh existence, or is it simply something you choose not to change, due to a lack of other options? At the same time, I wonder why the idea of living in a warm place, far from my Romania, appeals to me so much. That's where I grew up, where the first layers of my personality were shaped. Without wanting to, I carry the attitude and mentality specific to the place I left.

There are people who adapt easily to change, but how many of them are there? Most remain close to their roots, tied to the place they come from. They dig their souls deep into their native land, and even if they leave, a part of them stays there, like a shadow that can't be separated from the body. And yet, when you ask someone, almost everyone says that in old age, they will return home, as if their homeland is the only place where a life can truly end.

I look around at the people smiling, and I wonder what automatic mechanism in our genes allows us to create such appearances. But I remind myself, nothing about evolution is ever easy.

I've always dreamed of coming to Asia. And now, here I am, under the blue sky, breathing air full of unknown stories. I love traveling, but I haven't stayed long in one place. I would've liked that – to be able to understand how they live. To live like them. To study them. To feel their energy and understand their experiences. But... this is my path.

We had a brief snorkeling session today, but an unnatural fear gripped me once again. The cold water seeped into every pore, and my heart pounded wildly in my chest, as if it wanted to escape from the grip of fear. With each breath, I felt the water freezing my courage,

but I forced myself to stay. I got cold, I trembled, I felt my bravery draining away with the cold water. I wanted to return to the boat, but I found myself, as I had last time, pushing myself and mentally encouraging myself that I could do it, despite the unnatural layers of fear. I had to confront that sensation, which felt foreign, out of place. And I succeeded.

At lunch, we ate in a village on the island, where the food seemed incredibly good – or maybe we were too hungry to be objective. Around us, thirty monkeys played among the trees, jumping from branch to branch. They watched us curiously, and I wondered, “What do they think of us?” Maybe they see us as giant, talking monkeys... Or perhaps they’re just smiling ironically at the human spectacle.

After a long day, I returned to the accommodation, but I felt restless. I wanted to explore more, to lose myself in this fascinating place. After a quick shower, I decided to search for a new adventure. Tripadvisor suggested a round boat ride on a nearby river. It sounded interesting, so I set off. After two days spent in the hustle and bustle of “Little Venice,” I needed something different, so I took it as a challenge.

The owner of the homestay gave me the address, and I called for a Grab motorbike. After about 15 minutes of navigating through traffic, I arrived at a place crowded with people. The location, known as Basket Boat River, was on the outskirts of the city. When I got off, the driver asked if I wanted him to wait for me. “No, thanks.” I had no idea what was there or how much time I needed, so why rush when I knew someone was waiting for me?

The atmosphere was chaotic – eager tourists gathered in noisy groups, and the music was so loud that we could barely hear each other. A girl asked me for 500,000 dong (around \$20) for a boat for four people, even though I was alone.

I didn't even know where to look first: at her, at the commotion around me, at the Chinese tourists – a group of charming guys laughing heartily less than a meter away from me – at the river with its muddy color, or at the eye-catching, colorful boats? I found myself stubbornly negotiating and left the agency, annoyed by her obvious attempt to trick me.

I was trying to get organized, asking myself, “What do I do now?” as if I had an answer ready but just couldn't see it yet. And immediately, I had the idea to search for another agency along the river.

A young local girl stopped me on the way, offering me a ride in her father's boat for 200,000 dong. Initially, I turned her down, but she didn't give up. She stood proudly in front of me and said, “Alright, I'll give it to you for 170,000 dong (\$7), is that okay?” I smiled, visibly impressed by her confident approach. I said yes. In the end, that's what makes the difference, right?

Her father? An old man around 70, with deep wrinkles etched into his face and worn fisherman's clothes. He had a broad smile and bright eyes, despite the visible hardships. As soon as I stepped onto his boat, he offered me a traditional Vietnamese hat, so for a while, I was absorbed by my new hat. I took pictures non-stop, but none managed to fully capture the beauty of the place. The surroundings felt unreal, like a dream. Everywhere, there were colorful boats full of cheerful tourists, and the river seemed like an anthill buzzing with life. I felt weightless, as if I were a spectator of Yda's life, watching from above: “She's happy, anyone can see it!”

The fisherman offered to take pictures of me, and as we moved in the small boat through the coconut groves, I gazed in fascination at the chirping birds and the sun making the water sparkle like pieces of diamond. At the end, he spun me around in a dizzying whirl with the boat. I laughed endlessly, feeling as if the weight of the world had vanished. Nothing else mattered, just the present moment,

filled with pure joy. When he stopped, I could feel my heart pounding wildly. What a feeling! Words pale in comparison to such incredible moments.

The boat ride wasn't planned, but it became one of the best experiences I've ever had in Vietnam. Often, the most precious moments are the ones you don't expect.

After I got off the boat, I didn't rush to leave. I stopped at a restaurant by the river and ordered a bottle of water, watching the slow dance of the boats. I opened TikTok and went live for a while, until people started leaving and the place became quieter and quieter.

The restaurant sank into silence. When I ended the live stream, I realized I was alone. Everyone else had left. I stared absently at the untouched bottle of water and, in a reflexive gesture, gathered my things and left.

The parking lot was empty. I ordered a taxi through the app, but no ride was picked up. When I saw that the walk back to the accommodation was only four kilometers, I decided to walk, even though the shadows of the night had begun to settle over the town.

I walked down unlit roads, crossed bridges, and passed by the homes of locals. I observed fragments of their lives: the smell of food, the smoke from cigarettes, clothes hanging to dry. It felt like a scene from a film about life's simple moments. Though I was a stranger, I felt connected to the world around me, like a silent but present witness.

I arrive at the homestay, and to my surprise, I discover I'm alone. The massive room with its seven empty beds belongs entirely to me. I close the door, and to the rhythm of an imaginary song, I start to dance lightly. My steps float, almost invisible in the vast space that swallows me. My energy feels like a multitude of brightly colored beads, swirling around me at a dizzying speed.

I stop and take a deep breath. The music in my mind fades, leaving room for the silence that fills the room. The dim light in the corner casts playful shadows on the walls.

I collapse gently onto one of the empty beds, feeling the exhaustion slowly take over my body. I pick up my phone. Unread messages await my attention.

The first message, from Sully, jumps out at me like a thorn buried deep: "Well, if you don't want to talk anymore, I'll stop... I don't like begging anyone to talk to me..."

I stand for a few seconds with my phone in my hand, staring at it, but Sully's words stir up that old bitterness. The past weighs heavily, but not heavily enough to make me change my mind. I run my fingers over the screen, but I don't reply. I ignore him, just as I had already decided. I don't even know how I could respond without seeming distant or cold. The bitterness, mixed with frustration and resignation, makes itself known, but I convince myself that this is for the best. Sometimes, you have to let things come to an end because you know that's the way it has to be.

The thought crosses my mind again, as it has so many times: "We cling absurdly to something we think belongs to us, even though we know it doesn't." To Sully, I was always an illusion. "Why am I still thinking about this?" It should be simple, but it's not. Yet, I'm aware that I can't save everyone. I let my fingers scroll further.

A message from Luong appears on the screen like a ray of light: "Wow, you're so beautiful!"

A smile blossoms on my lips. It's simple, but it has the effect of a soothing balm. His message brings a subtle warmth, like a gentle breeze blowing away the dark thoughts stirred up by Sully. I thank him and close the phone.

I turn off the light. The darkness swallows the room, and I let myself fall back onto the hard mattress. My thoughts start to drift away. Flashbacks from the day pass through my mind: the river, the boats, the unpaved roads, the people living their lives at their own rhythm, without truly noticing me.

Fatigue slowly takes over. A sweet feeling of relaxation settles over my whole body. I close my eyes, and the last thoughts evaporate with the day. The quiet of the night wraps around me. Tomorrow will be a new adventure, but for now, I let myself drift into the friendly darkness.

“Travel is the only form of education that truly enriches you.” – Mark Twain

Chapter 23. “The Quiet of the Night and Its Echoes”

July 11th, 2023

I got out of bed at 8:00 AM, determined to start my day at my own pace, without any rush, so I could enjoy my daily routine in peace. After packing up my things and checking out of the room, I leave my luggage in a corner of the kitchen. I only ate half of my breakfast – the same Phong omelet sandwich I’ve been having every day. The taste had become ordinary, even though it was good; I just wasn’t in the mood anymore. But the coffee... I drank the entire cup of unsweetened coffee to the last drop, even feeling the slight grit of the grounds between my teeth. Then I headed out toward the beach, walking slowly, leaving the town behind for a short walk to the beach.

I decided to spend half the day by the sea, because I can’t even remember what it feels like to lie on a lounge chair doing absolutely nothing, letting the sun gently caress me. It was 9:30 AM, and check-out was at 11:00 AM, but I had already handed in the room key so I wouldn’t have to rush back from the beach. I had simple plans for today: relaxation, no worries.

I found a white lounge chair and stretched out on it, letting the sun warm my body with each passing minute. The sea seemed to call me, so I got up and cooled off with a quick swim, letting the waves wash over me. After drying off in the sun, I ordered a cold mango shake, sipping it slowly, with each gulp bringing a sense of calm. I smiled, thinking it would’ve been perfect if I had brought a book, but I hadn’t been lucky enough to pack one. Instead, I contented myself with listening to music through my headphones, letting the sounds fill my mind.

I wasn't feeling like talking to anyone, even though the beach was crowded with tourists. I allowed myself to observe them from a distance, like watching a silent play, without getting involved. A group of fishermen began to stir on the shore, gesturing wildly as they tried to coordinate their actions. I studied their body language for a while, but eventually gave up, enjoying their comical presence instead. The clouds played in the sky, and the sun's rays danced on the surface of the sea, reflecting a pure, soothing blue. It was that peace I had been seeking for so long, a tranquility that made me wish I could stay there forever.

Around 2:00 PM, I decided to head back to the homestay. The sun had become too scorching, my skin gleamed, and I felt the beach umbrella no longer offered enough protection. Besides, I was risking getting sunburned. Better to retreat to the shade of the courtyard, sit on a bench, and work on my laptop until it was time to leave.

I exchanged a few words with the woman at the homestay, who told me she had four children and was 45 years old. I didn't understand her directly, because she didn't speak English, so I used Google Translate on my phone. The conversation amused both of us, but honestly, I couldn't help but think she looked closer to 55 than 45. I didn't say that, of course, but instead laughed at her jokes. She was so sweet that she brought me an avocado and a spoon, and we ate together like two old friends who had known each other forever.

As I sat on the bench, a message on Facebook caught my attention. It was from Luong:

"Where are you?"

I replied simply, "In Hoi An now."

A few seconds later, another message came:

Luong: "Woow. You look so young and beautiful in this picture, like you're in your late twenties."

I smiled and replied briefly, “Haha. Thanks. Do you like it?”

Luong: “Yesss. I like you a lot.”

Me: “I like you too.”

Luong: “Ohhh. Really?”

Me: “Yes.”

Luong: “When will you come back to Phong Nha?”

Me: “Why?”

But after that, silence. He didn’t respond anymore. Probably, he didn’t know why he asked me, just like I don’t have a clear answer about where my travels will take me. Maybe we don’t need to know. That’s the beauty of it – things happen when you let go. With Luong, it’s something simple yet complicated. The attraction between us is palpable, but what could there be beyond that? Here, everything seems easier, more carefree, as if only the present matters. And yet, sometimes I wonder if I might want to know him beyond the occasional messages and virtual smiles. I like his energy, the way he tells me I’m beautiful, but how long can a connection last that’s based on compliments and innocent flirting? I smile at the twist of this simple encounter. I know things shouldn’t be forced. I let the Universe do its work and put the pieces where they belong. If something is meant to be, it will be. I’m not lifting a finger, as I promised myself.

At 5:00 PM, a minivan picked me up and took me to the bus station, where I’d be leaving for Nha Trang. I had time to chat on the phone, while a group of young people gathered around me, all Europeans, most of them under 25. I wondered where they all came from. It felt strange, but at the same time, I somehow felt like I belonged to this group. The age difference didn’t matter – their youthful, relaxed energy made me feel just as enthusiastic.

Their buzzing reminded me of the vibrant center of Hoi An, as if each of us had carried a piece of that atmosphere with us.

The driver, along with two young guys, struggled to pack the mountain of luggage into the bus's compartment, laughing and joking with each other, carefree. The bus finally departed at 5:40 PM. I relaxed into the seat, letting the tiredness of the day seep into my bones, as my thoughts began to scatter, just like the landscape that unfolded before my eyes.

Alpha Bird Hotel – Nha Trang, Vietnam

We have over 500 kilometers to cover, a long road, maybe too long, but that's the route. In the end, I manage to sleep for about three good hours. I wake up from time to time, fiddling with my phone without any real purpose and listening to music through my headphones. I feel good, carefree, and so relaxed I can't even put it into words.

At 3:30 AM, the bus arrives at the destination, without any incidents, without delays. I get off along with a few other young people, but each seems wrapped in their own thoughts. No one pays me any attention. I search for my phone in my bag to check how far I am from the hotel I reserved. The city is well lit, as if it were already morning, and the streets are still lively, even at this hour. A taxi driver approaches me and asks if I need a ride. I tell him to wait because I can't find my phone. In the rush to get off the bus, I had thrown it somewhere different than usual, and for a moment, panic overwhelms me – what if I left it on the seat and the bus drove off with it? I breathe a sigh of relief when I finally find it.

I type the hotel's address into the Grab app and see it's only three kilometers away. I try to negotiate with the taxi driver, but he wants 60,000 dong (around \$2.50), while the app shows 31,000 dong (around \$1.20). I'm not going to pay double for the same trip, so I order a taxi through the app. The driver leaves, unhappy, but quickly

finds another client, as another bus full of tourists has just arrived. He won't be short of customers.

My taxi arrives within a few minutes. The driver is a young kid, maybe around 18, fragile and delicate, like a newly sprouted flower. He has that mix of innocence and courage only the very young seem to have.

We arrive at Alpha Bird Hotel, navigating through narrow, winding streets that seem to lead everywhere and nowhere. I wonder how I ended up finding this place, in the middle of a labyrinthine urban intersection. I can't recall the details – it's too early in the morning, and my thoughts aren't working as they should. A coffee would do me good, but at this hour, it's clear I have no chance. Maybe later, when I manage to get out of bed.

The hotel is shrouded in an unnatural darkness. They didn't even reply to my message saying I'd be arriving early in the morning. I hope I won't have to sleep on the stairs, or at least that they left a key somewhere within reach. I remember my last misadventure and enter carefully. A small night lamp does its job, casting a dim light that allows me to find my way through the darkness without tripping over anything.

In the lobby, the receptionist, a tall, thin young man, is peacefully sleeping on a couch, hugging a pillow like a child. His glasses had slipped to one side, and I can't help but smile. I watch him for a while – he's not handsome, but his features remind me of a medieval character from an old movie. I hesitate. "Should I wake him or lie down on the other couch myself?" The thought of lying there next to him makes me laugh to myself.

He didn't even blink when I entered, even though the door squeaked quite loudly in the stillness of the morning. I wander around, hoping to find a key at reception, but there's nothing. I sigh. I'll have to wake him. I glance at him one more time, still hesitating. Who knows

how he's going to react? But suddenly, he opens his eyes wide, as if he felt me watching him. He jumps up, startled, as if only now realizing someone's there. He must've sensed my gaze because otherwise, he should've woken up when I entered or when the motorcycle stopped in front of the hotel.

Disoriented and groggy, he gets up and comes, as if on autopilot, to the reception. He asks for my passport, as if he's been expecting me. I'm amused by his hurried manner and wonder if he's really okay or still half-dreaming. I give him everything he asks for, but without saying much. There's no point in talking too much. He's the first person in all of Vietnam to ask for my entry visa. Finally, he hands me a key card and sends me to the fifth floor, to room 503.

When the elevator doors open, I catch sight of him again out of the corner of my eye, returning to the couch and collapsing onto it like a robot that's completed its task.

I reach the room and open the door. I pause for a moment, stunned. "Wow!" Everything looks beautiful... The room is amazing, especially compared to where I've stayed before.

A large glass wall separates the bathroom from the rest of the room, and instantly, my thoughts drift to Marty and his fantasies. I smile. He's the kind of person who finds beauty in every detail, even in a glass wall, and it wouldn't have surprised me to hear him say that a hotel room could become a stage for the wildest fantasies. I remember our conversations and wonder if, maybe, we could've been more than just fantasies.

I'm tempted to call him. What if I told him where I am, showed him the room, made him laugh at the absurdity of this random hotel in an unknown city? "But what's the point?" I tell myself. It's just a fantasy, nothing more. And yet, a small part of me wants to hear his voice, to get caught up in our game once again. But I know how it always ends. It's an illusion, a dream that feels real only from a

distance. I don't call him. Better not. They're just my thoughts. The truth is, actions make the difference. Every time.

All my tiredness is gone. I've lost both my sleep and any trace of laziness. I put a face mask on, feeling its cool, velvety texture on my skin – a pleasant contrast to all the heat of the day. A brief sensation of chill runs through my body, making me shiver slightly, as if the night itself had come to caress my cheeks with its gentle touch. I look in the mirror and draw a little heart on my cheek, a childish gesture that makes me laugh. I start dancing around the room, my feet instinctively moving across the cool floor. The air is fresh, and the coolness mixed with the smell of clean sheets feels like a balm of tranquility. My body feels light, freed from fatigue, as if 4:00 AM in Nha Trang is the perfect moment to celebrate life. Why not dance? Why not enjoy this moment that's all mine?

What a life! "Is it so bad?" I wonder, smiling at the thought of a friend who once challenged me with that question.

I think it was well past 5:30 AM when I finally decided to go to bed. Between the fresh, clean sheets, smelling of crispness and purity, I felt myself slowly sinking into a peaceful sleep. A perfect ending to a morning that had surprised me in every way.

"It is not true that we explore the world to discover it; we explore it to discover ourselves." – James Baldwin

Chapter 24. “Journeys Among Jars and Breezes”

July 12th, 2023

Strange noises pull me out of my deep sleep, and a determined knock on the door interrupts my peace. “Housekeeping?” Seriously? Doesn’t this woman have anything better to do? I half-heartedly call out that I don’t need anything – I’ve only just arrived, I’ve barely dozed off. “What kind of cleaning does she expect in a room I just checked into?” What an insistent creature. Finally, her footsteps fade away down the hall. The quiet returns, and I slip back into a confused state, teetering between sleep and wakefulness.

I drift off again and lose track of time. The noises return, but this time they’re not at my door. Ah, what a relief! I get up with difficulty, still drowsy from sleep. How much time has passed since the first knock? The room is so dark it feels like I’m tripping over the shadows. “Where’s my phone?” I need to find it, but I’m too sleepy to search properly. Yet the noises in the hallway shift back to my door, and suddenly the housekeeper opens it without even waiting for a reply.

I fumble for the light switch, and our eyes meet – both of us surprised. Me, with my sleepy face and blurry eyes; she looks like a thief caught in the act, one hand frozen midair, as if asking for forgiveness. She mumbles something in her language and quickly retreats, closing the door behind her. Such chaos!

Finally, I find my phone, left charging beside the mirror on the vanity. I look at myself in the mirror for a long moment. Exhaustion has painted shadows under my eyes, but somehow, I find beauty in that image. It’s strange how, despite the imperfections, I can appreciate my reflection with a newfound calm. Maybe it’s the

tiredness playing tricks on me, but I feel more at peace with my appearance. I smile to myself. I wonder how a man would see me right now. “Which one?” The smile escapes me again, because at that moment, I realize that my solitude is perhaps the best partner I’ve ever had – a refuge, a sacred space where I rediscover and understand myself, little by little.

I take a long shower, surrounded by the calming scent of hot water. After my ritual of applying creams, I step out of the room in search of a good coffee. Outside, the heat hits me with the force of an invisible wall. It’s nearly 10:30 AM, and the Nha Trang sun is blazing. I quickly find a small, charming café – a true oasis in the middle of the hustle and bustle. Vietnamese cafés have a unique charm – each one feels like a little work of art, surrounded by plants and shade. The air is thick with the aroma of freshly roasted coffee, and each sip awakens my senses. “Single origin coffee,” the menu boasts. “This sells well to tourists!” I laugh to myself – still, it’s just coffee. I inhale deeply, and it wakes me up entirely, making me forget any skepticism. “It’s incredibly good!” It feels like everything I knew about coffee has been overturned in this cup.

While I was sipping my coffee, I glanced quickly at the map, trying to decide my next destination. The choice was easy: the Museum of Oceanography. I’m fascinated by everything related to the underwater world, and museums like this always have a kind of magnetism for me. I can’t continue my day without visiting it – I feel like I have to see it. I quickly call a Grab motorbike, as always – my trusty companion.

When I arrived, the second floor of the building at the back left the strongest impression on me. It’s a true hidden treasure – a bizarre and wonderful collection of thousands of jars. In each jar, a miniature Universe – preserved creatures, incomprehensible fossils, species I didn’t even know existed. Walking among these relics of the oceans, I felt like I was peering directly into the past, into a hidden world we only half understand. I’ve traveled a lot, seen many aquariums, in

Europe and elsewhere, but none have literally left me speechless the way this museum has. It was a combination of awe and deep fascination that seemed to freeze me in front of each jar.

Immersed in this strange beauty, I missed the usual sounds of my phone. I check it quickly and see messages... from Sully. They spark an amused smile: "Seriously! Why aren't you talking to me anymore? Did you find a lover over there?" A laugh escapes me in the middle of the museum's quiet corridor. "Oh, Sully..." After all his twisted logic, claiming to understand me perfectly, to ask me that is... pfff. I don't respond. There's no point. My thoughts quickly drift away from him. No point in engaging.

As I leave, I'm greeted by a small ice cream cart. What luck! I buy one with cocoa – 45,000 dong (around \$2) – and sit on a bench in the shade, soaking in the vibrant atmosphere around the museum. I watch the parking lot in front of me, where buses wait for tourists who are finishing their tours at a slow pace. I find it amusing how I explore places on my own, without rushing, without the pressure of time. I adapt to each city at my own pace, without being constrained by pre-arranged itineraries. Here in Vietnam, Grab taxis are so cheap that it's not even worth bothering with private tours.

Once the ice cream is gone, I head for the gate. As I prepare my phone to call another taxi, a young man approaches confidently. He asks where I'm going and if he can take me. Normally, I would've refused, but his gentle gaze makes me hesitate. Without thinking too much, I accept his offer. We quickly negotiate a price similar to the app, and he happily agrees. As I get on the motorbike, I wonder how hard it must be for him to make a living here in Vietnam. "How does he manage to get by, I wonder?" But those thoughts quickly fade away... We head to my next destination: Ponagar Temple.

The feeling on the motorbike is impossible to describe in simple words. The wind doesn't just whistle in my ears – it whispers stories of freedom, like a rebellious caress, making me feel part of the

landscape. The streets of Vietnam, seen from two wheels, become a living mosaic of a world I'm just beginning to discover, like a film only I can see. Every building, every person on the roadside becomes a fragment of a story that only I can read right now. It's amazing how perspective can change so quickly – just a few years ago, I was afraid to get on a motorbike. Today, I feel like I'm flying between worlds, free and unbound.

At first, the idea of getting on a motorbike seemed extremely risky. Every turn, every small obstacle on the road felt like a direct threat. Maybe that's why I signed up for motorcycle school – I needed to understand, to feel the sensation of riding on two wheels. To face my fear and turn it into a liberating experience. Now, when I get on a motorbike, I no longer have those reservations. I realize that every challenge I chose to face has brought me here, to this feeling of absolute freedom. Sometimes, we need to push ourselves beyond what we think we're capable of. For a reason beyond my control, I never finished that driving school, and I still can't drive on my own... I've got a long way to go.

An audio message interrupts my thoughts. It's from Sully. Seriously? Still not giving up? I hit play, and his whiny voice fills the silence. "You're so mean, you don't want to talk to me... It's been since yesterday that you haven't said anything. This is the second day you've been ignoring me... Why? Why are you so mean?"

I roll my eyes. It's hard to believe he's still insisting with the same senseless complaints. "Why is he so obsessed with my silence?" A few hours without answering, and I'm already "mean." Ridiculous... Maybe I really should block him soon. I toy with the idea, but smile ironically. In reality, I'm too caught up in these magical places to bother with such unnecessary dramas.

Meanwhile, I've arrived at the temple. Once I step into the ancient courtyard, Sully's message completely evaporates from my mind, like a memory I no longer need. All that matters now is the

peace of the temple, the sound of the wind, and the mystery of this place. Sully can wait. I have discoveries to make.

Ponagar Temple, like many other places in Vietnam, is crowded with both tourists and locals. A traditional band makes its presence felt, and the sounds of drums and ancient flutes seem to vibrate through the warm air. In front of me, a group of dancers in vibrant red and yellow traditional costumes move gracefully, their fans adding an air of elegance to the scene. Each gesture is hypnotic, as if telling an old, forgotten legend. The crowd frantically captures them with their phones, but I let myself be caught up in the moment. One of the girls smiles at me widely, with a look that gives me the impression that we've met in another life. I feel a special energy in that smile – a sense of connection, of belonging. What a magical moment!

I wander around a bit more, photographing every corner that catches my eye. I enter the temple, wrapped in a heavy cloak I received at the entrance, which envelops my body in a suffocating layer of fabric. The hot air sneaks under the cloak, turning each step into a battle with my own sweat. I can't wait to escape the heat and free my skin from all the layers. Hunger starts to gnaw at me slowly, like a subtle alarm reminding me I need to feed not only my spirit but my body, too.

Dam Market is on the list of places recommended by Sawa. GPS tells me it's close, so I call a taxi. In just ten minutes, we're navigating through a controlled chaos of cars, scooters, honking, and voices, intertwining in an urban symphony. When we arrive, the driver asks me playfully, "What are you looking to buy here?" His question catches me off guard. I smile and reply honestly, "I don't know." I had been so absorbed by the scenery along the way that I'd almost forgotten the hunger that had initially brought me here.

I stroll leisurely through the streets, absorbing all the market's hustle and bustle. Thousands of stalls crowd together, forming mountains of goods that seem never-ending. Dried fruits, exotic

sweets, colorful clothes, sparkling jewelry, and countless plastic products. From a huge pile, I choose a simple white bracelet, thinking I'll take a bit of the place's energy with me... The entire market is a blend of aromas and colors that dizzy your senses. Dried fish hang like trophies from the past, and on the shelves are bottles filled with mysterious liquids. I wonder, with a cynical curiosity, who can buy so many things and how an entire market can survive on such a surplus. But I let myself be drawn into the chaos, like a fascinated spectator of a spectacle I don't fully understand.

Fatigue starts to seep into my bones, making each step feel heavier than the last. It's nearly evening, and I've barely eaten – a coffee, a small pastry, and two bananas gulped down in haste. The emptiness in my stomach grows with each passing minute, like a reminder that my body has its limits, even in such an adventure.

I leave the market and walk determinedly, scanning for a place I might like. I'm starving... I come across a Sheraton with an elegant terrace offering a spectacular view of the sea, shimmering in the day's last rays. I don't care about prices anymore – hunger has won. I order a pizza loaded with cheese and a cappuccino, amused by the irony of eating pizza in Vietnam but completely happy with this unexpected indulgence. The girl serving me smiles and asks if I'd like to try a fruits cake from their promotion. I accept with joy – today, all rules are out the window.

With a full belly and a peaceful soul, I slowly make my way back to the hotel, following the narrow alley along the beach. The city has transformed into a festival of lights – every corner seems to want to show off a different facet of its nocturnal charm. Nha Trang at night is simply magical – every building glows, and the streets pulse with life. It feels like stepping into a tropical dream where time stands still. I could stay here forever, just to breathe in this unique vibe.

Once back in my room, I put on some music to relax my body, worn out from the day's adventures. I'm happy, simply happy to exist

in this moment. I dance freely, letting the music carry me, and my reflection in the giant mirror returns a playful smile. Life is beautiful when you surrender to the moment. This is life! That's what life's about! – the thought escapes me aloud, and my laughter fills the room.

Today, no one disturbed the calm of my evening. I found time for reflection and a bit of exercise, and the quiet was more than welcome. I fall asleep late, with the thought that one day, I'll come back here. Vietnam has managed to carve itself deep into my soul.

“It’s not about where you go, but who you become along the way.” – Anonymous

Chapter 25. “Under Da Lat’s Heavy Clouds”

July 13th, 2023

The morning finds me lazing in bed, in no hurry, savoring the moment. I never knew a simple July morning could feel so intense. The soft, white sheets add to the feeling of pure comfort. I stretch lazily, like a panther after a rich meal. I’m not hungry; I’m not lacking anything. I wonder why every corner of this country makes me want to come back and stay longer. Maybe one day, I’ll understand.

Today, no housekeeper disturbed me. They’ve probably grown tired of finding me here every time. I smile, thinking I’m surely not the only one in this situation. “Who thought it was a good idea to clean rooms so early in the morning?”

Initially, I had planned to go to the beach or dive into the hotel’s rooftop pool on the ninth floor. But I gave up. I’d only seen the pool in photos on Agoda. I’ve gotten everything I needed from this city: energy, good vibes, a fulfilling experience. Now I can leave in peace. A long and unknown road awaits. Sometimes I forget about Romania and the people back there. I only remember them when I talk to someone from home. It’s strange how quickly you can disconnect from everything that once felt familiar. “A change of scenery, Yda. A change of perspective,” I tell myself. Maybe I really have learned this lesson.

Around 11:30 AM, I left the room and checked out. Everything went smoothly. I sat on the hotel steps and called a Grab. In 20 minutes, the taxi took me through hellish traffic to the bus station, where a bus to Da Lat was waiting. The wind whispered in my ear through the Grab helmet, my old friend on these rides: “Yda, I’m waiting for you to come back!” My mind is probably playing tricks on

me.... I put on my sunglasses and savored one last look at this vibrant city.

We arrived at the destination, and the driver dropped me off at the main entrance. The bus station was a hive of activity. Total chaos, but with a little help, I managed to find my bus in the sea of vehicles. Navigating places like this without speaking the local language is always a challenge, but somehow, I always manage. I'm ready to leave the beach behind and head for the mountains. I feel a wave of calm as I get on the bus. They hand out wet wipes and a bottle of water. I arrive early, so I wait a little while before departure.

At 1:30 PM, the bus departs exactly on time. I'm impressed by the punctuality and professionalism of Futa Bus. The seats are comfortable, and the journey promises to be pleasant. I fiddle with my phone, taking care of some administrative tasks I've been putting off. I message Sawa, and the response comes almost immediately.

Me: "Where's a good place to stay in Ho Chi Minh? The city is huge... Give me at least a reference point."

Sawa: "District 1, no doubt. That's where all the action happens. Most of the interesting stuff is in that area."

Me: "Perfect! I was thinking about exploring that part. By the way, I heard there are some great parties in Vietnam. Is that true, or just a myth?"

Sawa: "Not rumors! Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi are super fun when it comes to parties. If you like dancing, you have to go. I have some friends there who can give you all the details."

Me: "Seriously? Give me a location; I want to see what it's like! I have to dance at least once in Vietnam!"

Sawa: “Hmm, you’re arriving on Sunday, right? I need to check because most of the parties are on Fridays and Saturdays. But let me message my friends, they might have something cool for you.”

Me: “Awesome, I can’t wait to find out! I miss dancing; I don’t even remember the last time I did.”

After a few minutes, during which memories of dancing flooded my mind, the much-anticipated reply arrived:

Sawa: “Done! My friend Trang from Ho Chi Minh says you’re in luck for Sunday. There’s a salsa and bachata beginner workshop followed by a party until 9:00 PM. For 100,000 dong (around \$4), you get the workshop and a drink included.”

Me: “Sounds great! How long is the workshop?”

Sawa: “Only about 30 minutes, from 7:00 Pm to 7:30 PM. But don’t worry, the fun really begins after, when the party starts!”

Me: “Exactly what I need! Maybe I’ll remember a few steps...”

Sawa: “Oh, wait, I found out something else! If you want to warm up before the party, my friend says they meet Sunday afternoon at 4:00 PM in a park to practice.”

Me: “Oh yeah? Where?”

Sawa: “In 23/9 Park, just above Central Market. They practice Afro-Cuban movement, Rumba, and Rueda. The exact address is 4 Đ. Phạm Ngũ Lão, District 1. Apparently, it’s open to everyone, so you can join in.”

Me: “How cool! So they dance all day and end with a party at night? I love the sound of that!”

Sawa: "Exactly. Vietnam is full of surprises. Wait till you see how good the Vietnamese are at dancing. You wouldn't think so, right?"

Me: "No, not at all. I can't wait to go!"

Sawa: "Have fun, and who knows, you might be blown away by how amazing the dance scene is there!"

Me: "Hehe, I can't wait! Thanks a lot, Sawa. This will be perfect, especially since I didn't have much planned for Ho Chi Minh."

I check the address he sent, my curiosity growing. I need to find accommodation near the park, I think. The good thing is that everything's within walking distance. Even though I hadn't planned on dancing, I quickly got excited at the thought of it. I love that Sawa always knows the right places.

The road to Da Lat is stunning: mountains that seem to touch the sky and winding roads that take your breath away. The journey takes four hours, but I barely feel them passing. I post a few updates for my followers and get lost in online conversations.

My phone vibrates softly – another new message:

Trangg: "Hi, where is this place?"

I smile. I open the app and reply quickly.

Me: "Hello, Trangg! It's Basket Boat River in Hoi An. It was amazing!"

Trangg: "Ok, I know that place! Did you take the boat ride there?"

"Of course! Here..." I sent her the video the old man took of me on the river. "It was fantastic."

Trangg: "Didn't the spinning make you dizzy?"

Me: "Nooo, I loved it! The sensation was amazing!"

Trangg: "So cool... Where are you now?"

Me: "I'm on a bus to Da Lat."

Trangg: "Really?"

Me: "Yes..."

I realize I'm eagerly waiting for her replies. Trangg shows up whenever she wants and writes about whatever she feels like. She follows all my posts, and in a way that's hard to explain, I like this unexpected friendship. There's something fascinating about how two completely unknown people, from different worlds, can communicate like this... I wonder if our paths will ever cross again.

I post a few more updates for my followers and let myself drift into thought. I listen to music but don't feel like sleeping. I'm savoring every moment.

Ngan Pho Hotel – Da Lat, Vietnam

We arrive in Da Lat around 5:30 PM. The cold air hits me the moment I step off the bus, and my nose immediately starts running. "Seriously?!" I grumble to myself. Sawa was right... It's way too cold for my taste, especially after the 32-degree Celsius (90-degrees Fahrenheit) heat by the sea. I rummage through my backpack and quickly pull on a pair of long pants over my shorts. I also put on my colorful jacket, but I'm still shivering. "How am I going to survive three days here, with this cold that seems to seep into your bones?" The temperature doesn't go over 20 degrees Celsius (68-degrees Fahrenheit), and I feel every missing degree like arrows piercing my skin. But I'll survive. I don't really have a choice.

I feel an urgent need to go to the bathroom. Inside, it's warmer, and my body temperature begins to balance out. I look at myself in the mirror and smile. Yes, it's better now.

I leave the Futa Bus Lines station and sit on the steps out front, searching for a Grab taxi in the app. A man on a motorcycle, who had been lurking as if waiting for something to happen out of the blue, asks me where I want to go.

"To the hotel," I say, smiling.

"Which hotel?"

"Ngan Pho," I reply, showing him the price in the app – 19,000 dong (around \$1).

"I'll take you for the same price," he says.

Without thinking twice, I hop on behind him, placing my backpack between his legs. I haven't feared the unknown in a while. Maybe I've gotten over that fear. In the past, the mere thought of going somewhere with a stranger would have made my skin crawl.

The cold wind howls as the motorcycle speeds up, making me shiver even more. I almost want to press up against him for warmth, but I push the thought away. Dark clouds are gathering ominously in the sky. "I just want a hot bath," I tell myself, my shivering body pleading for warmth. Before I can finish the thought, I feel a few cold raindrops on my face. "Is it raining? Seriously?"

Suddenly, the rain starts pouring down in sheets. The wind lashes from every direction, and within seconds, I'm soaked. The motorcyclist immediately pulls into a shelter where a few other people are already taking cover. The clouds are angry and ready for a long assault. "It won't stop anytime soon," I think as I watch them. My driver looks pensive, and I wonder what he's planning. He pulls a raincoat out of the motorcycle's sidecar and hands it to me without a word. He

puts on one for himself. I put on the red raincoat with white polka dots, suddenly feeling like a schoolgirl. We exchange a look that says we need to keep going.

The GPS shows that we have just 1.2 kilometers left to the hotel. It's not far, but in this torrential downpour, it feels like an eternity. All I can see ahead of me are raindrops and black clouds. "How is he managing to drive through this chaos?" I watch as he navigates through small streets, probably shortcuts, and we quickly reach the hotel.

I get off the bike, drenched to the skin, but the poncho has protected my clothes and backpack somewhat. I return the poncho and take out my wallet. I give him 50,000 dong (around \$2), much more than the app's price. "The rest is for you," I say, and his eyes widen, and his smile warms my heart. I like it when I can bring a little joy with a simple gesture.

The guy at the hotel reception takes my backpack and brings it to my room. When I open it, the laptop is dry. I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm given the key to room 102, on the first floor. As soon as I step inside, I turn off the air conditioning. Enough with the cold.

I toss my wet clothes aside and step into the shower. The hot water pours over me, warming my skin until it turns red. Despite the heat, I still feel the chills shaking me. I'm trembling as if I've just climbed a mountain. I hope I don't get sick. I've been chattering my teeth all day. The thought that I haven't eaten anything makes me feel even weaker. An iced coffee and a bottle of water are all I've had. "Is that why I'm so cold?"

I step out of the shower, and the room feels like a freezer. I dive straight into bed, naked, under the thick blanket. I'm shaking like a leaf. "Now would be the perfect time to have a man next to me to keep me warm," I think, amused. The smile brings a bit of relief.

Once I warm up a bit, I dare to get out of bed and put on dry clothes. In the mini-bar, I find two cups of instant soup. “How do I make this?” I think of my friend, Trangg, and decide to text her.

“Hey! Quick question, how do I make these soups?”

“You need hot water. Pour water over the noodles, then cover the cup and let it sit for 3-4 minutes.”

“Thanks! I have a kettle in the room, so it’s perfect.”

I make the soups and start eating them while we chat. It’s not the best meal of my life, but right now, it’s all I’ve got. At least my stomach is satisfied for a few hours. I put on a movie recommended by Trangg, *Dahmer*. I don’t even get past the first episode before sleep takes over.

I turn off the light and curl up in the warm sheets. The cold still lingers in my bones, so I take a Nurofen. I’m not about to get sick now. I drift off to sleep with one thought: “I love the heat...”

“The greatest revelation of any life is that you can change the future by changing your attitude toward the present.” – Oprah Winfrey

Chapter 26. “Dream Gardens and the Labyrinth of Lights”

July 14th, 2023

I slept so deeply it felt like I hadn't moved all night... I think it's the first time in a long while that I've truly rested. I stretch lazily and reach for my phone. 8:08 AM. It's been some time since I've woken up at this hour without an alarm forcing me. It's strange, but I'd almost forgotten what it feels like to let your body find its own rhythm. I remember the cold from yesterday and wonder if it's still raining. I jump out of bed and head straight for the window, curious. Last night, I didn't even have the energy to look outside. Who thinks about views when all you want is food and warmth?

I pull back the long, champagne-colored curtains, and for a few seconds, my breath is taken away. There's no cold wall or dull facade in sight. Before me unfolds a scene straight out of a Picasso painting: hills rolling into the distance, small scattered houses that dot the landscape like colorful specks in a world seemingly untouched by time. The morning light glows softly over everything, bathing the view in a gentle golden hue. It's an almost magical moment, indescribable. I try to find the words, but I stop myself. “How do you describe something like this?”

I open the window wide and inhale the fresh, crisp, ozone-filled air. It feels like it's my first real breath on Earth. All I can do is stand there, silent, awestruck. Not even Picasso could put this into words. I take out my phone to snap a picture but then stop. Pictures can't capture the essence of this. I came here to “see” with my own eyes, and no phone screen could capture the raw beauty of this moment. I

take another deep breath and almost feel like I could fly from here, I feel so light. It's incredible.

A sudden noise from the hallway brings me back down to earth. Someone dropped something right by my door. I shake off the reverie and head for the shower. Warm water flows over me, and my thoughts crash and retreat like waves. I remember I don't have much time here, and there's so much to explore. I've only given myself three nights in this little town, and one is already gone. Vietnam is a story that's nearing its end, but I don't want to think about that yet. I promised myself I would live in the moment, not get caught up in the worries of the future.

On the list Sawa gave me, there are 22 attractions in Da Lat. But my time? Too little. So, I'll choose with my heart – what I feel like seeing the most. But right now... I need a coffee. I can't think without one.

I finally leave the hotel around 10:00 AM. I ask at the reception about the route to Ho Chi Minh, and the guy tells me he'll take care of my bus ticket. The air is cool and reminds me of spring mornings in Romania. I stroll down the street, thinking about coffee, taking in everything around me. I pass by a market full of vegetables and piles of fruit, but I don't stop. I tell myself I'll have time for that on my way back. I walk past a market – a good thing to note, it's close to the hotel.

Finally, I see a small, cozy café. "Perfect," I tell myself. I walk in and sit at one of the free tables. The two boys behind the counter eye me curiously and whisper something to each other. Some young people at other tables notice me too, but I let myself be carried by the moment. I order a cappuccino – 30,000 dong (around \$1). The boy quickly brings it in a pink cup with a foam heart on top. I smile. This day is starting off perfectly. Well, the real start was when I pulled back the curtains this morning, but a good cappuccino completes it.

I savor it slowly, as if I have all the time in the world. While drinking, I glance at my list of attractions and start making some drastic cuts. *Crazy House* is at the top of the list, so I decide to start there. I check the GPS: 1.3 kilometers away. No need to take a taxi, I can walk. This way, I'll also discover the city.

I remember I need to withdraw some cash, as I'm running low. I finish the coffee, pay, and head out. I don't check the map for ATMs, convinced I'll find one along the way. The street is busy, and people glance at me curiously as I walk by. I haven't encountered any other tourists yet, but I don't mind. I feel like I'm the only one exploring this area. After walking a few hundred meters, I spot a bank on the other side of the street. Even though I was thinking of an ATM, instinctively, I head for the bank. I fight my way through the constant stream of vehicles that never slow down.

Inside, the security guard watches me intently. I ignore him and walk straight to the open counter. I smile politely at the girl behind the glass.

"I'd like to exchange some money," I say.

"How much?" she asks without hesitation.

"100 dollars," I reply calmly, looking her straight in the eye, like a scene from a movie. She points to the rates with her pen, and I see that for 1 dollar, I'll get 23,725 dong. "What?!" I can't believe it. Now it's my turn to be surprised. "Such a good rate?" I stare at her, but it doesn't seem like a mistake. She smiles as she counts the money. When she hands it to me, I half expect her to say she made an error, but no. It's real. I remember Mone's advice: "You'll find the best rates at the bank." I smiled and thanked her, leaving the bank with a triumphant air.

I walk past the security guard with confidence and head toward *Crazy House*. I remember the pictures Sawa sent me, but the reality far surpasses any expectation. The building is a fantasy maze.

It's like stepping into a fairy tale world, where architecture plays with imagination. The dozens of stairways, nooks, and bridges make me feel like Alice in Wonderland. Everything is so spectacular that I feel the need to share it with others.

Suddenly, I get the idea to go live on TikTok. In seconds, I'm connected and answering dozens of questions. I wander everywhere, showing the world the hidden beauties of Vietnam. People seem fascinated, and I can feel their energy through the screen. Some had heard of the location, while others are discovering it for the first time. After 45 minutes, I feel drained and end the live.

I realize I've reached the exit without fully taking in what was around me. As I wash my hands in the bathroom, I think, "But what did I get out of this whole experience?" The truth is, being so focused on sharing with others, I didn't actually enjoy the place. Maybe TikTok doesn't let you truly live in the moment. You can do that with something familiar, but not when discovering new places. You can't be present in two worlds at once.

I leave and buy a mango juice from a strategically placed stand in the flower-filled courtyard. I sit on a bench, sipping my juice and watching the tourists go by. They're all taking photos, recording videos. I smile to myself. I feel at peace, as if I could stay here forever, but I know there's still much to see. Still, something keeps me from leaving. I feel the need to explore it again.

I finish my juice, and guess what? I go back in. I start over, but this time, carefully, without any distractions. I explore every nook, every bridge, every detail. It's incredible how different things feel when you take time for yourself. "What a fascinating place!" I exclaim in my mind. *Crazy House* is without a doubt a must-see in Vietnam. I discover there are tiny rooms with a bed, bathroom, and kitchen, like dollhouses. I start dreaming of what it would be like to live here. I know it's not possible, but who can stop me from dreaming?

Finally, I step back out onto the street, energized by the exploration. It's late, and my list of places to see is long. Though I could have spent the whole day here, reality is calling me back. There's still so much to discover.

I set the next destination: *Maple Leaf Tourist Area*. It's 7 kilometers away, too far for a walk, so I quickly call a Grab taxi. As the taxi slowly climbs a hill, I feel my excitement growing. The place is beautifully laid out, a kind of garden full of life, with dining areas and cafés tempting your senses with the smell of fresh coffee and steaming food. A bridge crosses over a lake filled with enormous, multicolored fish, and from there, the view of the city is breathtaking. Music floats through the air, flowers and greenery stretch as far as the eye can see, and there's the scent of barbecue and freshly cut fruit. Many tourists wander about, each immersed in their own story, and I let myself get swept up in the vibrant atmosphere of the place.

A shop renting traditional costumes catches my eye. A few girls walk by, dressed like princesses, in wide gowns, slippers, and matching parasols. "How cool it would be to look like that," I think. In the shop, you can choose everything – the dress, the shoes, the accessories – and in just five minutes, you're transformed into a fairytale queen, strolling through the royal garden while someone takes artistic photos of you.

I sigh when I see the prices. Definitely out of my budget. "And what's the point without a personal photographer to capture every detail exactly how I want?" Maybe one day... I promise myself that this will be on my wish list: a personal photographer and a princess dress. I smile bitterly and leave, with a slight regret but resigned that it's not my moment.

I start to feel hungry. I choose a small fast-food spot, order something quick, and lose myself in my phone screen, scrolling through social media with my headphones on. The thought of getting ice cream tempts me, but by the time I reach the stand, it's closed. I

tell myself I'll come back, but of course, I forget. The idea of going live on TikTok again crosses my mind, to share the beauty of the place with others. I look at the panorama of the city, magnificent under the sun's rays. In a moment of excitement, I accept a live invitation from another user. I probably didn't think it through... The thing is, now I'm live with some guys asking inappropriate questions. Annoyed, I abruptly leave the live. "Why did I accept that?" I wonder, irritated.

I sit on a bench under a little tree, trying to calm myself down. It's very hot, and despite the beauty around me, I feel overwhelmed. I check my list of places and see that the next stop is *Fresh Garden*. It's 3:00 PM, so I call a taxi. I wait 10 minutes for it to arrive. The ride takes almost half an hour, and during the trip, we pass through a large market full of people bustling among stalls loaded with clothes and all sorts of trinkets. Finally, we arrive in front of a large building, seemingly ordinary. "Seriously? This is the flower garden?" I wonder. Still, I pass through the check-in area and open a huge door that leads outside. And beyond it... wow!

An explosion of color envelops me. Red, purple, green, yellow – a whole palette of shades vibrates under the sunlight. The garden is immense, a floral dream turned into reality. I feel overwhelmed by the beauty around me, and the energy of the place instantly recharges me. Out of reflex, I take out my phone and start a live, showing everyone the wonder of this place I've discovered. I take pictures, film, even dance along the paths between the flowers, feeling like a little bee flitting from bloom to bloom. The decorations are amazing: picturesque little houses, an ice-like cave, a lake with stones you can step on – it all feels straight out of a fairy tale. The sky is blue and clear, and the clouds look like they've been carefully painted. Whoever designed this place clearly has a deep passion for flowers.

I feel lost in this floral Universe and exclaim in my mind, "I could be a flower in this garden forever." But I quickly shake it off. "It's just me, Yda, among the magnificent flower beds." It's a dream day, and I feel incredibly lucky to be here.

Still, my time is limited. The garden closes at 6:30 PM, so I hurry to see as much as I can. As I pass through, I take a few more photos and stop, knowing I can't take it all in. I'm sad to leave, but I have to. When I step outside, the street that was bustling earlier is now deserted. Even the wind blows strangely through the awnings, and dogs bark in the distance. I head down toward the parking area, tired, and sit on the curb, feeling like I'm 80 years old. Today there were many tourists, cars, and motorcycles, but now there's silence. There's probably another tourist spot nearby, but I don't have the time or energy to find it.

I look at my list, trying to see what else is still open at this hour. I'm hungry, but I don't want to go back to the hotel. "Night Market?" Sounds good. Maybe I'll find something good to eat. I select the address in the app and wait for a taxi. The minutes pass, but no one responds. The app asks if I still want to wait. "Of course I'm waiting! What else can I do, alone in an empty parking lot on the outskirts of the city?" The market is 8 kilometers away, my hotel 11. "Should I walk?" No, I can't. I place another order. Finally, a taxi driver responds. I was already feeling desperate and exhausted, but at least I'll get somewhere.

The taxi arrives, and I hop in quickly. The motorcycle makes a deafening noise. "I hope we make it safely," I think to myself, gripping tightly behind the driver. The engine is so loud, it's as if the motorcycle had been "tuned." The guy seems so confident that I believe he could handle any extreme situation. He takes us through narrow streets, past canals that feel like something out of another world. But he's a driving ace, a kid who must have been born with a motor in his veins. Finally, my day feels like it's coming together, even though I'm completely drained.

After about 35 minutes of navigating through crazy traffic, probably half the city, we arrive at a huge intersection. The driver gestures to the left. "There's the Night Market," he says. "Seriously?" It takes me a few moments to gather myself and really take in the

surroundings. Around us, the crowd and the honking horns form a mad symphony. It's 7:19 PM, and night has already fallen over the city. But it seems like all the lights in the Universe are on. It's like I've been transported to another galaxy – one where bustle, noise, and commotion rule.

The intense hustle, motorcycles weaving deftly between people, the constant honking, all blend into an atmosphere vibrating with life. I feel like I'm in an urban mirage. "Where did you bring me, kid?" I say to myself, laughing at my own thoughts. Why am I even surprised? This is Vietnam.

The Night Market is a huge open-air bazaar, with glowing stalls and people crammed everywhere. It feels like you can barely find room to breathe, let alone pass through. Motorbikes try to snake their way through the dense crowd, and the small street-side restaurants, with chairs crowded onto the sidewalks, leave hardly any space to walk.

The market lies in the middle of a "bowl," surrounded by hills dotted with all kinds of buildings: houses, hotels, shops, in a chaotic architectural jumble illuminated by a blanket of sparkling lights. Everywhere you look, it's just light.

I finally get out of the taxi, and enveloped by the hum of the market, I ask myself, "What am I doing in all this chaos? Where do I go?" The market's frenzy amplifies my sense of being lost. Have you ever been caught in the middle of a crowd, not knowing which way to go? That's how I feel now. "I'm lost!" I mutter to myself, trying to find my way between stalls and people.

My stomach starts reminding me why I came here. Food – everywhere. Delicious smells – from grilled meat to fresh fruit – engulf my senses. But the crowd is suffocating, people trying to sell me everything from souvenirs to snacks, and the motorbikes keep honking as if they're trying to carve a path through the human chaos.

It's a cacophony of noise and color, each stall blaring its own music, as if some crazy DJ is switching tracks every few seconds.

It all seems magical, but at the same time, hypnotic. I feel like I've entered a maze that I don't know how or when I'll escape. The vendors tug at me, each trying to sell me something. In a way, I get it – it's like the jungle: the stronger, more persuasive, more persistent one wins.

I try to make a video, but I'm immediately approached at several stalls: "You need to buy something if you want to film," they tell me. I force a smile and move on. "These people must be crazy if they think that," I think to myself. "I'm the princess here, not them." But I play with the idea. Maybe I really am.

I let myself be carried by the market's flow, each stall telling its own story. Piles of fruit are perfectly arranged: strawberries so red they look like they came straight out of a fashion magazine, juicy blackberries lined up with military precision. I even see a few vendors with cherries, but I don't dare ask the price. I move on, lost in thought.

A guy invites me to try his grilled meat. I smile and shake my head. We continue our little game of "the elusive customer," as if I'm part of some market dance. Still, I realize I need a bathroom and start looking for one. I circle back to the guy's stall and ask where the bathroom is. He points me in the right direction with a satisfied smile. After I come out, he approaches me again, insistent. "You have to try my grilled meats!" he says proudly. I feel like I won't get rid of him easily, so I decide to give it a try. After all, I needed to eat anyway.

I take the menu from his hand and see they have fish. "Good, let's test one," I say to myself. The guy is absolutely thrilled, like he's just won the lottery. He straightens his back, winks at me, and proudly invites me to follow him, strutting like a rooster. Amused but compliant, I follow him like a smiling hen, thinking about how comical the whole scene is.

He leads me to a table behind the restaurant, near an improvised kitchen. Shelves of bottled drinks separate me from the cooking area, where tantalizing smells and the cheerful clatter of the cooks reach me. It's organized chaos, with everyone speaking their own language, gesturing energetically. I order the fish and a cold still water, scrolling through my phone while waiting. I steal glances from under my glasses. Curiosity makes me study what others are eating, how they're dressed, how they socialize. It's interesting to observe all this, I feel like a spectator of their daily lives.

But I'm not the only one observing. I'm being studied too. "A blonde alone in a locals' restaurant?" Hehe... I can feel their curiosity, but I don't mind. It's natural. I don't feel embarrassed, more amused by the situation.

The fish arrives, looking picture-perfect, like something out of a commercial. It's garnished with caramelized peanuts, and it looks incredible – its taste matches the appearance. I feel like sending pictures to my friends to brag. "Look what I'm having..." I write and send the picture of the beautiful fish. Mone replies instantly:

"I thought you said you couldn't find any fish..."

Me: "Well, don't you see where I am?"

Mone: "No... Where?"

Me: "I'm in Da Lat, at the Night Market. This city is absolutely surprising. And I'm only here for two days... it kills me to think about that!"

Mone: "Hmmm, so it's really that nice?"

Me: "Yeah! It's incredible! I feel like I could stay here forever!"

Mone: "Wow, how's the fish? Is it good?"

Me: "Delicious! I've had an amazing day! It's hard to believe how vibrant this city is!"

Mone: "Bravo!"

With a full stomach, I feel better. I'm no longer tempted by the smells, but those strawberries... I definitely have to try a few, I think.

After finishing the conversation, I pay and step back into the market's bustle. I stop by a strawberry stall, study the prices, and eventually buy a small cup of freshly washed and sliced strawberries. I savor them right there, by the stall. They don't have the strawberry flavor I was expecting, but I enjoy the moment. I wander around the market a bit more, just for the sake of seeing everything. The burning sensation in my feet betrays me – I'm completely exhausted. I feel like I can't take another step.

I manage to haul myself back to the area where I was dropped off earlier, trying to find a somewhat clear landmark for the taxi. I place another order in the app to take me to the hotel. However, the driver can't seem to locate me and calls. "Where are you?" he asks impatiently. "I'm at the entrance..." I reply, but I realize there's no clear "entrance" here. "Which entrance?" he continues. I hesitate for a few seconds. "How can I explain this?"

I send him a picture of the exact location – a pole next to me, the only landmark I have. It's not much, but I don't have anything else. I figure a blonde with a colorful jacket isn't exactly easy to miss in this crowd. I send him a picture of myself too. After a few minutes, he shows up and quickly recognizes me. I hop on the motorcycle behind him, and we slowly head towards the hotel, weaving through a sea of vehicles: cars, buses, motorbikes, people, carts, honking horns, and lights that seem to melt together in a surreal landscape.

Night in Da Lat is an explosion of colors. The city seems to vibrate under millions of bulbs and floodlights, illuminating every dark corner. It's all a dazzling kaleidoscope, an electric magic. I fleetingly

wonder: “When the Earth's resources run out, what will we do with all this?” and I smile bitterly at my own digression. The thought suddenly takes me back to another memory, to a Christmas in Romania when our mayor decided not to turn on the holiday lights in the name of energy conservation. “Really?” I say to myself, smiling. It's amazing how a simple thought can catapult you into another time, into another reality, into a forgotten corner of your mind. It's like memories are hiding, ready to jump out from behind a corner at the slightest cue.

I'm glad I made it to my destination in one piece, given how recklessly the guy was driving. “I wonder if he had a drink before?” Hmm... He tries to make some jokes, but the way he talks, it might as well be Chinese to me. I don't bother to listen, I'm too tired. It's late, and my body is completely drained after a day in which I revved all my engines to the max. I think maybe I should learn to pace myself better. Either I burn through everything at once, or I swing to the other extreme and crash. Clearly, I need to learn balance.

After a hot shower that revives me a little, I collapse into bed. I don't feel the chill from yesterday anymore, probably because the adrenaline of the day is still in my system. I turn on Netflix and try to continue the *Dahmer* series, but my mind can't process anything. I turn off the movie, realizing I don't have the energy to follow a complicated plot. So, I retreat to TikTok for a few minutes.

I fall asleep late, wrapped in thoughts and sensations, ready for another day of discoveries.

“Travel is an investment in the soul, bringing dividends for life.” – Anonymous

Chapter 27. “Lessons Under the Rain”

July 15th, 2023

In the morning, I barely manage to get out of bed. I feel like I'm walking on pins and needles. Ugh, the pain! Each step reminds me of the kilometers I walked yesterday. I go through my morning ritual, trying not to think too much about the discomfort. I can't afford to complain today. I throw open the window and take in the “painting” that unfolds before me. The view fills me with a soft calm, bringing a smile to my face. It's magical to see the city bathed in morning light, like a painting crafted just for me.

I finally manage to leave the hotel by 10:00 AM, moving slower than usual, and head straight for the café from yesterday. The guys smile broadly when they see me walking in, as if they've been waiting for me all morning. I order a cappuccino and a blackcurrant shake – I could use the energy. As a bonus, they offer me a small cup of jasmine tea on the house. It's delicious and instantly warms me up. I relax, scrolling through my phone, ignoring the discreet glances from the guys behind the counter. They look like they want to ask me something, but they don't dare. Better that way – I'm in a half-drowsy state at this hour and not in the mood for conversations.

I get a message:

Trangg: “Where are you? Those pictures you posted on your story are beautiful, I just saw them. These flowers are amazing, unique.”

Me: “Yeah, Trangg, I'm in Da Lat. That post is from Fresh Garden.”

Trangg: “Da Lat has a lot of flowers, right? Do you like it there? It’s called the ‘city of flowers’ in Vietnam. When you return to your country, can you send me pictures from there?”

Me: “Of course.”

Trangg: “Tell me something famous about your country, Romania.”

Me: “Just like Vietnam, Romania has many beautiful places, many tourist attractions. We have mountains, rivers... and even castles.”

Trangg: “Castles? Can I see?”

Me: “Sure, I’ll send you some pictures now.”

Trangg: “Have you ever been there?”

Me: “Yes, many times, but a long time ago.”

Trangg: “Are they very old?”

Me: “Yes, they’re old castles, now turned into museums. Thousands of tourists visit them every year. You can search on Google – you’ll find all the information.”

Trangg: “Are you spending a lot of money traveling through Asia right now?”

Me: “Yes, quite a bit.”

I sigh, thinking of my dwindling budget. I’ve already gone over the budget I had in mind, and if I keep this up, my trip will end sooner than I’d like. It’s an important lesson about managing resources, about how to travel long-term without being overwhelmed by expenses. True travelers aren’t the ones who dive into luxury, but those who know how to survive, how to make smart choices. “With money, you can do

anything,” I tell myself, but what do you do when you don’t have any? “Will I make it without working?” I made a pact with myself not to return to my old life, to live without a job. I’ve worked enough in advance for this entire existence, right? Time will tell if I was right.

I finish my coffee, pay, and call a taxi. I make my way to my first destination of the day: a pagoda I don’t know much about, only that it’s on my list to visit. But my mind is elsewhere, spinning all sorts of ideas about how I could earn money without working. Fantasies, maybe.

When I arrive, I’m greeted by a dismal sight. The pagoda looks somewhat neglected, and a few women are trying to clean, but their efforts seem futile. Everything feels gray and unwelcoming, and I wonder why I’m even here. Suddenly, it starts to rain – cold drops hitting my face. I feel chilled, and it’s as if all my energy drains away. Maybe I’d be better off going back to the hotel. I don’t even know why I feel so disappointed and unmotivated.

I sit down on a curb in front of the pagoda, turning my thoughts over in my head. “Did I come all the way to Da Lat just to sit in the hotel?” I ask myself, ironically. Logic pushes me not to give up and to try heading to the next destination, the Flower Garden. Maybe a walk through the flower gardens will recharge my energy I so desperately need.

I call a taxi, and in a few minutes, I arrive at the park. It’s not raining here, just a pleasant calm spread over everything. I walk slowly along the stone paths, admiring the flowers and the still lake. But my thoughts keep spinning. I wonder if this city has a mall, because in Romania, when it rains, everyone heads to the mall. Why do I keep comparing everything to Romania?

The rain starts again, heavier this time. I take shelter at a terrace, and since I can’t sit there without ordering something, I get a hot tea. I’m shivering, and I don’t know if it’s from the rain or the acute

lack of energy. To distract myself from the cold, I go live on TikTok. People start asking questions, but their intrusions irritate me. “Why can’t I just have a peaceful live session?” I wonder. I’m cold, sleepy, and I miss the warmth of summer. “Did I come to the mountains just to freeze like a drunk turkey?”

The rain keeps pounding without stopping. I’m the only customer at this terrace, and the girl who brought my tea is playing on her phone. I feel the cold seeping into my bones, and I realize that today won’t bring me anything good. I call for a taxi again – this time, a car. It’s more expensive, but I have no choice; I’m completely soaked and frozen. I huddle under a tree until the car arrives and get in with relief.

When I get back to the hotel, the boy at the reception greets me with the news that he’s found me a ticket for Ho Chi Minh. Tomorrow, at 6:00 AM, I’ll leave the hotel. A small success in the middle of a complicated day. I just want to change clothes, so I let him finish his story and quickly head up to my room. My wet clothes and the cold have seeped into my skin. I take a hot shower and I take a Nurofen, but the chills persist. My body is trembling, and I hope I’m not getting sick. By 3:00 PM, I’m already in bed, covered up to my neck, in Asia, in a warm country, with weather that seems completely against me.

A thought of mulled wine crosses my mind, but I let it go. I realize that some places, no matter how beautiful, just aren’t made for everyone. Another lesson. I watch a bit of a movie, but then I’m too hungry. I order food through the Grab app. When it arrives, I find it’s too spicy for my taste, but I eat just enough to satisfy my hunger. I get a message from Mone, as if sensing my weaknesses:

“What’s Yda up to?”

Me: “Hey... I’m in bed.”

Mone: “At 7:00 PM?”

Me: "Yeah, I've been in my room since 3:00 PM. It's been raining since then. I got soaked and took a hot shower; now I'm just lying under the blanket."

Mone: "Okay."

Me: "But I have some news. Tomorrow, I'm meeting a girl in Ho Chi Minh, and we're going to dance. I can't wait to meet new people."

The evening goes by quietly, I pack my bags and eagerly wait for the departure to Ho Chi Minh. "I didn't come to Asia to freeze!" I remember a guy from the Philippines who said he didn't come to Palawan for the rain. Back then, I laughed at him, but now I understand him perfectly. Not all places are made for us.

At 11:00 PM, my neighbors decide to start karaoke. They keep at it until after 2:00 AM. Their shrill voices grate on my ears, but I resign myself. If they're drunk, there's no point arguing with them. And anyway, they're not as noisy as some people from other accommodations. I tell myself that's just the traveler's life and close my eyes, waiting for the quiet that will finally bring me sleep.

"Life is a balance between holding on to control and letting go, knowing that chaos might be where you find your peace." – Eckhart Tolle

Chapter 28. “Unexpected Connections in Ho Chi Minh”

July 16th, 2023

I manage to sleep for about three hours. The thought of new adventures waiting for me wakes me up like a fresh wave, giving me an unusual burst of energy, even though I still feel the weight of not enough sleep. I head down to the reception at 5:55 AM, with a tired body but a sharp mind. I wait for a while, watching the rain pour over the dark streets. The receptionist hands me a long raincoat, telling me I'll have to walk to the main road. "The minivan won't come down this narrow street," he says. Luckily, the raincoat covers my backpack as well. I lift my collar and plunge into the rain, letting the cold seep into my bones. This humidity feels alive, seeping through every inch of fabric like an invisible creature pressing against my skin.

"Could I live here?" The thought pops up suddenly, but the answer is clear – definitely not. Two days ago, I was convinced I could, but the muscle pain nagging at me and the constant cold tell me otherwise. I feel every muscle tensed, as if I've been running for hours without stopping. The humidity clings to me with cold, heavy arms. My mind feels foggy. Even my thoughts seem numb.

I reach the large parking lot at Futa Bus, pay for my ticket, and head toward the bus. I take my seat, B03, the first one in the front. I appreciate the punctuality – 7:00 sharp. I put on my headphones and let the warmth of the bus envelop me, a welcome relief after the relentless rain. I turn off the air conditioning and savor the quiet. But soon, I realize something strange: I have no internet connection. I try again, restarting my phone repeatedly, but it's all in vain. No internet.

Seriously? Right now? I chuckle bitterly to myself. There's nothing I can do. For now.

I'm the only foreign tourist in a bus full of Vietnamese. The road to Ho Chi Minh is long, and without the internet, my mind starts racing. Thoughts come crashing like waves, one after another, bombarding me. "How will I get a taxi without the app? Where will the bus drop me off? How will I find Trang?" I even forgot to let her know I'm arriving. Each question brings a new wave of tension, like a claw squeezing my chest.

I felt lost, completely uprooted, like a dried leaf carried by the wind in an unknown direction. Everything seemed foreign to me, incomprehensible. I wanted to sleep, to escape the whirlwind of thoughts, but they kept colliding, chaotic, like relentless waves crashing against the shore. A cold panic gripped my mind, like a thin web gradually spreading, suffocating every corner of reason. "Is it the end of the world without the internet?" I can't stop the unease. It haunts me constantly, like a dark cloud refusing to leave.

I try to remember Trang. The thought crosses my mind to contact her, but how can I do that if I don't even know what time I'll arrive? I tell myself to wait a bit longer, not to stress her unnecessarily. Right now, I feel besieged – thoughts, emotions, fears – everything comes crashing down at once. My mind becomes a battlefield. I know I'll find a solution one way or another, but at this moment, I feel caught in this whirlwind. I feel like slapping myself to shake it off, to come back to my senses. But I pity my pretty face. I smile bitterly to myself, trying to pull myself together.

After nearly eight hours, we arrive in Ho Chi Minh. I get off the bus, grab my backpack from the luggage compartment, and head to a bench. I cram my laptop into my already-full backpack, feeling its weight in my arms. What now? I try to find Wi-Fi, but no luck. I ask a taxi driver, and he offers me his hotspot. I quickly connect and open the Grab app. When I see the 23-kilometer distance to the hotel and

the fare of 357,000 dong (around \$15), I feel like I've stopped breathing. "Seriously?" My heart sinks. I had no other options, so I accept. It's raining, I need to get to the hotel. And the taxi driver lingers beside me like a shadow, waiting for my answer.

In the taxi, I realize how careless I was when I booked the ticket to Ho Chi Minh. I didn't think about where the bus would drop me off. "Carelessness comes with a price, Yda! Next time, be more mindful of the details."

On the road, I write to Trang:

"Hey, Trang."

Trang: "Hey, Yda. How are you?"

Me: "I'm in a taxi now, heading to the hotel... in Ho Chi Minh. I'm fine."

Trang: "Sawa wrote to me yesterday that you'd contact me."

Me: "Yes. I lost my internet connection today, so I couldn't let you know sooner. Do you know how I can get my internet working again?"

Trang: "I don't know, but we can ask. I'll help you later when you arrive. Are you using the driver's internet now?"

Me: "Yeah, exactly. Okay, see you at 3:30 PM at the hotel?"

Trang: "Yes. Amory Apartments, right?"

Me: "Exactly, that's the reservation. See you there."

In the end, everything gets sorted out. Even though I paid 270,000 dong (around \$11) for the bus from Da Lat to Ho Chi Minh and 357,000 dong (around \$15) for the taxi to the hotel, I arrived safely. "With money, you can solve anything, but these lessons always

cost more than they should,” I think. It’s a repeated lesson, a reminder that I need to pay more attention to details. But at least I had the driver’s internet and could chat along the way. That’s the funny part of the story.

Me: “Done. I wrote to Trang. She’s waiting for me at 3:30 PM.”

“Great. What an adventure! The bus dropped you off 23 kilometers from District 1? It’s raining, and you don’t have internet...” Sawa writes after I complain a little about my situation...

“Yeah, a real adventure. I was lucky with the taxi driver, otherwise... who knows.” I reply, smiling as I gaze out the fogged-up window. I think about how easily I let myself get overwhelmed by discomfort and uncertainty, but also how quickly things resolve when you relax and let them flow.

“Is internet expensive there?” Sawa continues, as if trying to pry out one more detail from my hectic day.

“No, but I’ll find out. Trang said she’ll help me sort it when we meet.” I feel grateful once again that she’s there for me, even though we don’t know each other well. Friends sometimes appear from the most unexpected places, and Trang appeared just when I needed her.

Sawa: “Trang’s really nice. I can’t wait to hear how the meeting goes.”

“Me too! I still can’t believe everything I went through today,” I type quickly, before turning off my phone.

I lean back in the driver’s comfortable car, reflecting on everything that’s happened. These past days have reminded me how quickly our perspectives can change. I started the day worried and stressed, feeling lost in a foreign world without any bearings. But I ended up connecting with new people, finding comfort, and even a simple form of joy – words spoken from the heart.

“We’ll talk after my meeting with Trang, Sawa. Who knows what other adventures await me here.” I close the message and look outside at the continuous rain. A surprising sense of peace washes over me. Indonesia awaits, but now, in a strange way, I feel like Ho Chi Minh will also remain part of my story.

Amory Apartments – Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam

The car drops me off in front of the building with the soft hum of the engine. In five minutes, the keys to my room are already in my hand. I take the elevator to the third floor, and when I open the door, a heavy, stale smell hits me like a wave. In a second, I press the air conditioner remote and pull back the curtains, but what do I see? The dirty, blackened wall of a building squeezed into a narrow alley. A view that suffocates rather than inspires. I close the curtain again, swallowing the disappointment.

The room was small, with two beds and a huge wardrobe that seemed to loom indifferently. A dresser with a dirty mirror and a mini-kitchen completed the scene. Everything seemed neglected, but I didn’t have time to dwell on the details. I rush to the shower, feeling each drop of water wash away not only the tension from my skin but also the stress from my mind built up during those eight hours of travel.

At 3:35 PM, I head down to the lobby, where Trang is waiting for me. She greets me with the warmth of an old friend, even though we’d just met. She hugs me as if we had already shared endless stories and lived a lifetime together. I took a moment to really see her: a striking brunette, about 33, her smile gentle yet carrying an expression that hinted at stories left unsaid.

“How strange,” I think. “Three days ago, I didn’t even know about her, and now it feels like I’ve returned to a childhood friend.”

We go together to fix the internet problem, but in the end, I end up recharging it using her phone. I hand her 100,000 dong (around

\$4), but I didn't fully understand what she explained. The important thing is that I have internet again, and I feel an overwhelming sense of relief. As if all the control over my world had been restored. "How dependent can I be on something so trivial?" I realize how helpless I felt without the internet, an almost suffocating feeling. How did I survive eight hours without any bearings? An eternity of useless thoughts, wasted energy.

We head to the park across from the hotel, where my first dance session was to take place.

It's been three days since I last wrote anything. Now I'm preparing to leave for the airport, and the thought that I'll finally reach Indonesia makes my heart race. "Indonesia, I'm finally coming!" I say to myself. And yet, a small fear, like a faint shadow in the corner of my mind, makes me joke to myself: "Just don't let the plane crash into the ocean now."

But let me go back to Sunday. I went to the park with Trang for the dance session. There, I met Darren and Queen, our instructors. Darren, tall and slim, moved with the grace of a breeze – precise yet fluid, as if every beat of the music dictated his direction. Queen – her hair tied up, her tanned skin glowing, radiated a magnetic energy. When they spoke, their accents hinted they had been away from Vietnam for a long time, giving them an air of mystery. They fascinated me.

Later, the park filled with other young people: a curly-haired guy with a traveler's air, a blonde girl with milk-white skin, and a few locals from the city. I didn't manage to notice them all – my attention stayed fixed on Darren and his movements, as if his dance held a secret I was trying to decipher. But my stiff body, awkward and rigid, betrayed me. I felt clumsy, as if I were learning to walk again.

We started with Afro-Cuban, moved on to rumba, then rueda. Each step was a challenge, the choreography unfamiliar but

captivating. Every time I thought I'd gotten the rhythm, Darren would change it, challenging me to keep up. And I accepted the challenge, with a smile on my face. The atmosphere around us became a wave that swallowed us all.

Heavy clouds gathered above us, and soon the rain started falling. At first, timidly, then more decisively, like its own dance. We were sheltered under a canopy, but the sound of the rain mixed with the music and our steps. None of us cared. The rain had become part of us. Vietnamese kids played around, running through puddles, laughing with pure joy. I stopped dancing, caught up in their joy. I pulled out my phone and started filming them, laughing along with them.

It was past 6:00 PM, and we were still dancing. I felt time melting away, lost in the rhythms of the music. Rueda was becoming, somehow, a familiar dance, an escape from my own thoughts. I even danced with Andrea, the curly-haired guy. "From Italy," he told me, and his smile confirmed what I suspected. Around 7:00 PM, Trang told me she had to leave, but I could stay with the group. I didn't hesitate. Queen suggested we go out to eat, and joy overwhelmed me, like being handed a delightful surprise. The smile stayed glued to my face, and the others returned it. I couldn't believe that, after a month of barely speaking to anyone, I already had six friends in such a big and foreign city. It was unexpected and so pleasant.

Trang left me an umbrella, and the walk to the restaurant unfolded through the raindrops, a soft symphony of the evening. The restaurant, a small vibrant oasis on a busy street, seemed to be waiting for us. As soon as we sat down, we were handed menus, and Queen explained their custom of ordering several dishes and sharing the food. "It's their usual Sunday, and now I'm part of it too," I thought, with a hidden smile. The conversation quickly heated up, words flowing as if they were dancing in the air. I didn't understand everything, but it didn't matter. The smiles, the laughter – they were universal.

I shared a bit of my adventure too, and Moon invited me to a party on Tuesday. Andrea, the Italian guy, asked if I wanted to go out that night as well, but I hesitated. Fatigue pressed down on me like a heavy blanket, and at the same time, I didn't want to send the wrong signals. I politely declined, and teasing jokes about us began to flow. I smiled and let it pass, pretending I didn't understand everything.

At the end, we split the bill – 88,000 dong, just about \$4 each. If I had been alone, I would've spent much more. The food, though... it was infernally spicy. The first bite set my mouth on fire, and for a second, I felt like the volcano inside me erupted, spewing flames in all directions. But I didn't give up. I was hungry, my body needed food after a whole day of dancing and not eating. Tears streamed down my face, my cheeks burned, but I kept going with stoic determination. Queen looked at me, concerned, asking if I was okay. I nodded, though inside I felt like I was burning, like each bite was turning me into the dragon of my own emotions.

We left the restaurant around 9:30 PM. Andrea once again asked me to go dancing with him, but exhaustion and a vague sense that it might be a double-meaning invitation made me refuse, smiling politely. After a few minutes of street-side chatter, he called a taxi and left. I watched as he disappeared into the night, feeling a mix of relief and regret. I barely managed to cross the street, each step feeling like a small victory against the tiredness weighing down my body. I reached the front of the hotel but stopped. I craved something sweet. My eyes fell on a nearby KFC, and without hesitation, I headed there, determined to get an ice cream cone. After the spicy explosion at the restaurant, I needed something cold to quench the volcano in my stomach. The first spoonful of ice cream felt like a soothing balm.

Back in my room, I took a long shower. The water poured over me, and I felt how each drop relaxed my tense muscles, as if it were washing away not just the fatigue but also the small insecurities of the day. I lay down in bed, but sleep didn't come. My phone started

vibrating, a message from Sawa. It was like he'd been waiting for me to contact him.

Me: "I danced. Hehe."

Sawa: "Yeah, I saw you on Facebook. Trang posted."

Me: "Yeah, but she left around 7:00 PM. I stayed with the group for dinner."

Sawa: "That's awesome! How was it?"

Me: "It started raining at 5:30 PM. We were supposed to stop, but we kept dancing for another hour. After three hours of practice, I didn't have the energy for the party."

Sawa: "That's okay!"

His words linger, leaving me to reflect on the day. I think about meeting Trang, Darren's frenzied dancing, Queen's encouraging looks, the laughter that floated between the plates at dinner. "All these moments added something to my life," I realize. Perhaps the most important lesson of the day isn't about how much a trip costs or how stressful it can be to have no internet, but about how spontaneous moments can bring people into your life who change you, without you even realizing it.

I'm convinced I'll return here, to Ho Chi Minh, to the people who appeared in my life like little guiding stars. And maybe next time, I'll be less anxious and more open to letting things flow naturally. Traveling isn't just about the destination. It's about the people you meet along the way and how they change you, step by step.

I turn off the light and close my eyes. It's 2:00 AM again. Suddenly, a sharp pain slices through my stomach, like a cold blade. The pain comes in waves, growing stronger, leaving me breathless. I get up, take a No-Spa, hoping it will calm my stomach, but the pain

intensifies. “Why today?” I whisper into the darkness. The spicy food in Vietnam seemed to have claimed its toll, and now, alone in my room, I feel defeated by a battle I hadn’t anticipated. But maybe this is also part of the journey: accepting that not everything can be controlled, that sometimes you have to let the waves hit you and hope you’ll hold on until the next breath.

“In my silence, I found the answers that the noise was hiding.” – Anonymous

Chapter 29. “In the Heart of Pain”

July 17th, 2023

I can barely manage to fall asleep. The pain pulses through my body, like an invisible hand gripping me, and the spasms become increasingly harder to bear. Night finds me awake, pinned to the sheets, as if the bed has become a cage with no escape. From some corner of my consciousness, I hear laughter. Their echoes creep down the hallway, bouncing off the walls of my room and growing louder, turning into voices of a life that now feels so far away. It's strange how life goes on, indifferent, for others while I am a prisoner of my own pain.

It was already past 10:00 AM, and I knew I had to get up. “You must,” I tell myself, but my voice feels foreign, as if it doesn't belong to me. I feel my body heavy, as if nausea and fear have tied me to the bed. Every movement reminds me of my fragility, of the limits of a body I once believed invincible.

With effort, I get up and step into the shower. The water isn't soothing; it's as though every drop feeds the shadow clinging to me, tightening its hold. It trickles down my skin, cold and unforgiving, but it can't touch the fire burning inside. The pain isn't just physical. It's like a parasite feeding on my thoughts, making me doubt, making me wonder if I'll ever find the strength to break free.

Dressed, I leave around noon and head to the same restaurant where I ate with my dance friends. The light inside seems dull, and the air feels so heavy it's like it's pressing down on my shoulders. I feel as though I'm walking through water, while everyone around me moves at a different pace, in a trance I can't access.

I order an iced coffee and mango pancakes. Every bite becomes a test of my will. The coffee touches my lips, and the sweet-bitter taste slips into my foggy mind. For a moment, I feel almost normal, as if I could grab hold of this sensation and pull myself back to the surface.

But I don't feel well at all. My energy seems to be draining into an invisible abyss, and the pain comes in waves – long minutes of false calm, followed by bursts of agony that make me curl up, as if my body is on the verge of breaking apart. It's like I'm trapped in endless labor, giving birth to pain in its purest form. I wonder if this is just the result of the stress from yesterday. "Did I exhaust myself emotionally?" Maybe. But I don't even want to analyze it. The thoughts only feed the pain, which crawls back into me like a cold weight wrapping around me. And yet, sometimes, it suddenly vanishes, leaving behind a tense silence, like the heavy quiet before a storm.

The day drags on, like in a trance. I try to sleep, but sleep refuses to come; I crawl through the day, between short naps and messages on my phone. The manuscript from the agency sits untouched in front of me, but my focus is a faint shadow of what it should be. Even though that book should've been finished months ago, now I can barely concentrate on it. I don't even bother anymore. Trang also texted me:

"Hey, Yda, what are you doing today?"

I find it hard to respond. I want to say, "Nothing. I'm a prisoner in my pain," but I write something else instead.

Me: "Hey, Trang. I'm just in my room right now."

Trang: "Do you want to meet tomorrow for lunch? If you're free, of course. I can arrange my schedule so I can be there on time."

Me: “Yes, sure, I’d love to. Are you coming to tomorrow night’s party? Moon just sent me a message.”

Trang: “No, I won’t make it to the party, unfortunately.”

Me: “Ohhh... Why not?”

Trang: “I usually have evening plans, and sometimes I go to bed early because I have to be up at 6:30 AM and need to be rested.”

Me: “Ok.”

Trang: “But I’d be happy to meet tomorrow for lunch.”

Me: “Yeah, absolutely, I’d love to. I’m going to the party with Moon.”

Trang: “Great. I know a very nice vegetarian place; we can go there for lunch tomorrow.”

Me: “What time do you think you’ll get here?”

Trang: “I think I can be there around 12:30 PM. I’ll come to pick you up from the hotel, and we’ll go together. It’s not that far.”

Me: “Ok, perfect. See you tomorrow then.”

The rest of the day slips through my fingers, time losing its shape. The pain is still there, hidden under a veil of pills, but I feel it flickering like a thin thread of smoke. My stomach is empty, and hunger circles around me like a starving wolf. The pancake and coffee weren’t enough, but I can’t find the energy to get up. Beyond the window, the city pulses with its own life while I remain suspended in this state of discomfort, as if I’m stuck in a parallel Universe.

I think about texting the Italian – maybe a conversation would pull me out of this dark mood. But my hands feel heavy, as if they refuse to move. And yet, almost as if my thoughts touched an invisible

string, I get a message from Andrea just a few minutes later. “Seriously?” I smile, surprised, as if telepathy actually works. He asks if I want to go out for dinner. His message feels like a balm, a thin thread of light on this dull day.

“Sure,” I reply immediately, and in 40 minutes, we meet in front of the KFC. He hugs me when we see each other, as if we’ve known each other for a lifetime, and for a moment, I feel like the weight of my body dissolves, the pain becoming less oppressive. “What do you feel like eating?” he asks, and I give him a tired smile.

“Ahh, I feel like eating cheese,” I joke, but the truth is, I crave something familiar, something that will anchor me to the world I used to know. Cheese isn’t just a craving – it’s a fragment of a life where my body wasn’t a burden. Andrea smiles understandingly: “Cheese is rare and expensive in Vietnam.” We laugh together, and he tells me he’ll take me to the place where he eats daily.

We order fish with rice, and Andrea insists on paying. In return, I offer him a cappuccino – a small gesture that reminds me of simpler days when a cup of coffee was all I needed to feel at ease. We talk about smoking, and in my naivety, I criticize him, forgetting that some habits hide deeper wounds. Andrea lights a cigarette, and his story continues. I listen, but somewhere behind his words, I sense a sadness barely masked, like a sadness looming over him.

As he speaks, I feel myself sinking into my own silence. I’d like to tell him how lost I feel, but I remain clinging to his story, using it as a shield against my own fragility. His voice gives me a reprieve, a temporary anchor in an ocean of uncertainties.

The hours slip by, and he tells me about his life in Vietnam, about the relationship in Italy that shattered him. It’s a familiar story, with that universal sadness that breakups bring. He says he’s happy now, that he’s found purpose here, but when he talks about the future, his words tremble, as if sadness is sneaking into his voice.

When he shares the pain of the breakup, I feel his suffering reflecting in me, like two mirrors showing the same cracks. And yet, in this connection, I find comfort. Maybe we're never truly alone in our suffering. "Yes," I think to myself, "we all have a ghost of love that haunts us, even when we believe we've closed the door to the past."

I return to my room feeling a bit lighter. The pain is still there, but Andrea's presence made it more bearable, as if it had been split in two. Later, I text Mone about my stomach.

Me: "I don't know what to do; it still hurts."

Mone: "Take another No-Spa."

Me: "It's so annoying. I hate being sick."

Pain is a cruel teacher. It demands that I stop, that I look inward. In the midst of suffering, I discover a space where the pain can't reach, a deep quiet where I find myself again. Maybe there, in that hidden place, I'll eventually find freedom.

Late at night, I let myself be enveloped by another hot shower, allowing the water to soothe my tired body. I lie on my stomach, hoping that this way the pain will fade a little, and, at last, I feel it retreat, like an enemy acknowledging its temporary defeat.

"It's not the destination that matters, but the journey itself." – T.S. Eliot

Chapter 30. “Between Numbers and Fate”

July 18th, 2023

I laze around in bed all morning, wrapped in exhaustion and pain. Every fiber of my body seemed to be fighting against me, refusing to let up. I didn't even feel the need to go to the bathroom. It felt like any movement would betray the fragility that now defined me. Moon had sent me brochures with two local tours, but it seemed impossible to even leave the room, let alone walk for hours. I only had three days in Ho Chi Minh, but in my current state, each day felt like an eternity of fatigue and pain.

I felt like a living paradox: I wanted to make the most of these days, but all I really wanted was to rest and regain my balance. The stomach pain refused to leave, a silent companion preventing me from enjoying anything. What irony... to be here, in a place full of life and opportunities, but trapped in my own suffering.

My thoughts were in a whirlwind, a storm of anxieties and worries. I remembered the party I had promised Moon I'd attend tonight, but I felt too drained to get excited about it. I had planned to meet Trang for lunch. I wanted to see her, but part of me wished to stay hidden in bed, avoiding any interaction.

I finally got out of bed around 11:00 AM. A night of waking up and spasms had left me in a zombie-like state. The pain was strange, with no pattern, no logic. I looked in the mirror and didn't like what I saw – fatigue was written all over my face. I felt like a shadow of myself. Slowly, I began my transformation ritual, applying creams and brushing my hair as if creating a shield against my own weakness.

After last night's conversation, it was clear to me that Andrea was no longer in the mood for stories or outings with me. He hadn't

said it directly, but I sensed it in his tone, in the silence between us, which had turned into an invisible wall. Alin, on the other hand, sent me the manuscript again. “Who has the patience to look over the same pages for the umpteenth time?” I want to tell him that the corrections are driving me crazy, but I know it’s my duty, that this is part of the writing process, no matter how hard it is. Anyone who thinks writing is easy has never faced their own doubts and insecurities, never wrestled with the exhausting repetition of each sentence until it makes sense.

My thoughts swirl in my stomach, blending with the pain, as if they were part of the same vicious circle that holds me captive. I wonder if everything I’m feeling – frustration, fatigue, feels like it hits a barrier – has gathered into a painful knot that refuses to unravel. Maybe the pain isn’t just physical, it’s compounded by all these struggles, from the distances I feel between others and myself. “Could all this be the real cause of my suffering?” I wonder, as a shadow of doubt creeps into my mind.

At 12:30 PM, Trang arrives, punctual and radiant, in a cream-colored dress that gives her a subtle grace. I admire her wide smile and energy, so different from my lethargic state. I climb onto the back of her scooter, and the wind flutters my hair as we weave through the traffic. I hold onto her not just for balance but also for a sense of emotional stability.

We arrive at the vegetarian restaurant she had mentioned the day before. She orders local food for both of us, but my stomach protests again. I struggle with each bite, feeling like the food is challenging me rather than nourishing me. Still, I’m surprised by the number of people eating here. Trang gently explains that today is the first day of the New Moon in the Chinese calendar, and many people eat vegetarian as part of a spiritual tradition.

“A kind of fasting,” I think, trying to find a similarity to traditions in my own culture. I’m surprised by how crowded the restaurant is, we

barely found two free seats. A pleasant silence settles over us, but at the same time, I feel like my mind can't fully relax.

When she hears that I haven't had coffee today, Trang suggests we go to a cute place nearby, where she introduces me to the owner. I order a hot chocolate, trying to avoid coffee, though I crave the energy it would give me. The hot chocolate slides down my throat like a gentle caress, but the stomach pain doesn't completely fade. Trang gets a yogurt with fruit and starts talking about her passion for numerology.

Her calm voice slips into my thoughts like distant music, and every word she says becomes a thread trying to tether me to the present moment. She talks about numerology as a sacred science, one that offers keys to understanding fate. She tells me a story about a girl whose birth year was changed, intentionally altered by her parents. My attention is immediately caught – it's something I've never heard of. I listen, trying to understand, but my mind is still a bit foggy.

Trang explains that when the girl's birth date was altered, it was as if she were born again, and her destiny's trajectory shifted. "It's as if her life was rewritten," I think. The story grows more and more captivating, and I listen wide-eyed, caught between fascination and trying to figure out how these things might apply to my own life.

"Sometimes, we don't understand certain things until later in life," Trang says, her voice tinged with nostalgia, sending a shiver down my spine. I think about my own experiences, the moments when life took an unexpected turn, and I wonder if I, too, am the product of seemingly small decisions with huge consequences.

"What numbers have changed my destiny?" A few come to mind. I realize that, like life, numerology is full of signs that you only notice when you're ready to see them.

"The reading of numbers by numerologists helps you understand your strengths, talents, and the obstacles in your life..."

Trang continues, her voice warm, as if she were reading from a sacred text. She explains that I'm a "7" in numerology and gives me a brief analysis based on my name and birthdate. I try to keep up with all her explanations, but I get lost easily in the symbols and tables.

Then she shows me a text that says something like: "Three things determine a person's life: the chance given by the Universe; the place where you were born, lived, and worked; and the social relationships you've had."

I sit and think about these three elements, and my mind starts spinning in circles. "What is Trang's role in my life? What is the significance of the numbers she's talking about? What am I supposed to learn from this meeting?"

I'm absorbed in my thoughts when a message from Moon snaps me back to reality. She reminds me about the party tonight and is waiting for me to confirm if I'll go. Trang smiles at me, telling me I should go, that Lighthouse, the party venue, is very close to the hotel. In the end, I confirm to Moon that I'll be there, even though I still feel unsure. Maybe going to the party is what I need to shake off this feeling of stagnation.

The stomach pain? Still there, but I decide to ignore it. "It will pass," I tell myself. Nothing lasts forever. Trang drops me back at the hotel on her scooter, and when I get to my room, I try to work on the manuscript. But fatigue overwhelms me, and I doze off between the lines.

Around 7:00 PM, I get up to get ready for the party. A wave of excitement runs through me, like a spark of life suddenly reignited. "Maybe tonight will be memorable, my first party in Vietnam." What an incredible life... so full of contrasts and surprises.

Mone texts me, probably worried about how I've been feeling today. His message pulls me out of my thoughts.

Mone: "How are you?"

Me: "I was feeling better this morning. I went out with Trang for lunch, and the pain came back after I ate. I took another No-Spa earlier."

Mone: "Hmmm. I don't like this."

Me: "I know, me neither."

Mone: "What are you doing now?"

Me: "I'm getting ready to go dancing; maybe that will help with the pain."

Mone: "Great."

Me: "I'll text you when I'm back."

I put the phone aside and head to the mirror. I put on the green dress I keep for more special occasions. It's light, flowy, and gives me a sense of freedom. I tie my hair into a ponytail and slip on my black sandals. I like what I see in the mirror. It's a kind of transformation, as if I'm wearing a mask against the pain gnawing at my body.

"Better this than suffering like a wounded horse," I think with an ironic smile. I smile at myself, happy I've chosen to ignore the pain tonight. I won't let it defeat me.

Around 8:00 PM, I turn on the GPS and leave the building. The night air wraps around my skin like a cool balm, trying to soothe my inner fever. I pass by KFC and get myself some fries. I feel like a kid indulging in a guilty pleasure. I know they're not good for my already suffering stomach, but my craving overrides reason. I savor each fry as if it were my last meal on Earth, letting the salt linger on my lips.

Soon after, my stomach protests, sending sharp little stabs that make me wince. But I choose to ignore the signs. I push down the pain with childish stubbornness.

I wander around the building, unable to find the party entrance. I text Moon, but she doesn't reply. I feel like I'm stuck in a maze, stopped in front of a door to a world I don't yet have access to. After a few tries, I finally find the entrance. The elevator takes me up to the sixth floor, alongside two cute guys who smile at me curiously. I can feel their gaze on me, and I wonder what's going through their minds. "Am I just another mystery for them to figure out?"

I reach the floor and have to pay the 100,000 dong (around \$4) party fee. I pass through a black curtain, as if entering a parallel Universe. The room is small, but the view beyond the large windows is stunning. The city of Saigon stretches below me, pulsing with life like a giant heart beating endlessly.

There are 12 people inside, and we start dancing kizomba. It's a surreal moment – I'm in a building in the middle of Saigon, dancing with people I don't know, and the pain, at least for the moment, seems to fade. I look around and wonder what the others think of me. I'm alone, coming from nowhere, a foreign element in a tightly-knit world of dance and community. But their smiles make me feel welcome.

The 30 minutes of practice pass like a dream. The music changes, and the real party begins. In the meantime, many more people have shown up. In the crowd, I spot Moon, accompanied by two guys. I head over to her, and she hugs me warmly. She introduces me to the two, who are from America. Their questions hit me with quick, almost aggressive speed.

On the building's terrace, I feel like I'm trapped in an interrogation. They bombard my mind with questions about my life, my travels, my decisions. I barely manage to find my answers in English before another question comes. They want to know everything, as if

their existence depends on it. I smile, but I feel my patience slipping, and my thoughts start drifting to how I can escape this. I feel like my personal space is being invaded, as if they're digging too deep into things I want to keep to myself.

After 20 minutes of intense conversation, Moon disappears strategically, leaving me in their care. My stomach starts protesting again, cramps gripping my body, but I pretend everything is fine. I excuse myself, saying I urgently need the bathroom. The whole experience stresses me out. "What an invasion of personal territory. Ugh..."

The party comes to life, and people are dancing with contagious energy. Many invite me to dance, and I'm happy to socialize, even if only for a little while. One of the guys I met in the elevator invites me to dance again. He gave me the impression of being a beginner, but when I feel him dancing, I realize that was a wrong judgment. He moves with grace and amazing control. I smile, reminding myself not to judge people by first impressions.

He's wearing a crisp white shirt that contrasts with his dark skin. His gaze is intense, but he doesn't say much. Each dance is a form of nonverbal communication, a silent conversation where body language says everything.

I had missed a good party, with energy that vibrates through music and dance. Around midnight, even though the party is still pulsing with life, I decide to leave. It's good to leave while you're at your peak, so Cinderella leaves her ball with a smile on her face.

I unlock the door while texting Mone:

"I just got back to my room."

"Okay. Are you feeling better?" he replies, and I sense his unspoken concern in his words.

Me: "Yes. But I haven't shaken the pain; the cramps still hit me now and then."

Mone: "Ugh... You still have tomorrow to rest."

Me: "I have to come back here."

Mone: "When? To whom?"

Me: "In two months. I'm leaving some things at Trang's. I feel like I have a mission with her."

Mone: "The girl from the dance? Aha, nice!"

Me: "Yes, her. She has an interesting story and wants to become a coach. I feel that Trang has something special, and I want to come back to her. I know that's what I'm supposed to do. It's hard now, with my English, but I have to improve. I met a guy at the dance today who's lived in Vietnam for three years. He now works at the American School in Bucharest. His name is Joel. He told me that after spending some time in Asia, I won't want to return to Europe."

Mone: "We'll see!"

The fries demanded a No-Spa, so I take one as soon as I enter my room. I sleep for a few hours without interruption. No pain. "Maybe it's finally gone?"

"Our meetings are not accidental; they are threads that tie us to the unknown within ourselves." – Paulo Coelho

Chapter 31. “The Flow of Life”

July 19th, 2023

It's 9:30 AM when I open my eyes. It's nice to wake up feeling rested, without the weight of yesterday's lingering thoughts. Waking up without pain or anxiety. The first thing I see is a message from Trangg, the girl from Ninh Binh.

Trangg: “Did you go to the party? What city are you in now?”

Me: “Yes, in Ho Chi Minh. I've been here for three days. I danced last night.”

Trangg: “That's so cool! I was born in Vietnam, but I've never been to Ho Chi Minh.”

Me: “You'll get there one day. Do you know how to dance?”

Trangg: “No. But I'd love to learn. When are you leaving Vietnam?”

Me: “Tomorrow. I think I told you before. I'm flying to Indonesia.”

Trangg: “You're not going back to Romania?”

Me: “Not yet.”

Trangg: “Why Asia? Why not Europe?”

Me: “I already know Europe. I've been to Spain, England, France... the world is too big to settle in just one place.”

Trangg: "You travel a lot. Why?"

Me: "To discover people, places. I like filling my soul with experiences. Would you like that too?"

Trangg: "Yes, but right now I need to study. And I don't have the money."

Me: "When you're my age, who knows? Maybe you'll be dancing around the world too."

Her honesty surprises me, especially in how she acknowledges her limits – that she can't travel now, that she's still finding her path. I remember myself at her age, dreaming of distant lands but trapped in my own invisible borders. I can sense her curiosity, her hope, her desire to escape. Maybe one day, she'll have the chance to dance around the world too, free from others' expectations. And maybe, then, she'll remember this conversation with a stranger thousands of kilometers away.

I remain in bed, scrolling through messages on my phone. I like the slow rhythm of the morning, how time drips away without rush, without asking anything of me. Trang was supposed to come by around 11:00 AM to pick up the package I'd prepared for her, but she texted me saying she can't make it. We'll meet later, at 6:00 PM, in the park. I reply with a quick "ok" and let myself sink back into laziness.

When I open Instagram, I find a message sent at 4:40 AM. My heart skips a beat. No, it can't be. Essra... My heart starts racing wildly, as if someone has pressed an old, forgotten button after months. His message, simple yet loaded, sends a wave of unease through me.

"Hey, where are you now?"

It seems like a trivial question, but I can feel the weight of the silence between us. “Why today? Why now, when I thought I could leave him behind, at least in my mind?” My hands tremble as I stare at the screen. He hasn’t written to me since March, and yet, “why now?”

Essra has been traveling through Asia for a long time. After I returned from the Philippines, we kept in touch for a while, but then, like everything between us, the conversations faded away. Last I heard, he was in Laos. “Why do I feel like every word from him scratches at my soul?” I reply, though I know it’s not the best idea. I can’t ignore the vibration of those letters on the screen.

“Hey. I’m in Ho Chi Minh right now. But I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“What were the chances he’d write to me on my last day in Vietnam?” A cold shiver runs through me. I hope he’s not in Indonesia... The thought gnaws at me. His image comes back too vividly, and I feel a mix of panic and longing. The thought that he could be so close again, that we could restart something that never truly began, overwhelms me.

Not even two minutes pass before he replies. Too quickly, as if he had been waiting, phone in hand.

Essra: “Oh, you’re in Vietnam. Where are you going next?”

“Why does that matter? Why does he want to know where I’m going?” I can feel my heart racing. It’s like this game is becoming more dangerous, a game neither of us fully understands.

Me: “I’m going to Indonesia. Why?”

Essra: “Nice. Have fun. I’m in the Philippines now. How’s your project going? I’m still waiting for you to start it.”

I’m stuck between surprise and frustration. He’s in the Philippines. The thought that he’s still so close destabilizes me. I try to

focus on the words, but it feels like there's a subtext to the conversation that neither of us is acknowledging.

Me: "What project are you waiting for me to start? And where in the Philippines are you?"

Essra: "I'm in Manila. You told me you'd work with me, and I need the money."

"Oh, yes. The project." He still keeps me suspended in that gray area, between professional and personal, without realizing what an impact he has on me. My heart is beating slower now, but the pain lingers – a strange mix of longing and confusion. I reply, though I'm not sure why I continue the conversation.

Me: "Oh. You're still thinking about that? How long are you staying in the Philippines?"

Essra: "I don't know. I'm just following the flow of life."

"Following the flow of life..." Me? I feel like I'm in a labyrinth. My thoughts twist between what was and what could be. "Why am I still thinking about him?" I know full well he doesn't see things the way I do. He's looking for a partnership, while I... I'm still tangled in my own hesitations, not sure what I seek or what I'm even ready for.

Me: "And I'm following the flow of life too. I don't know exactly what I want right now. I just know I'll be coming back to Ho Chi Minh."

Essra: "So, I'll have to wait longer."

Me: "You're waiting for me?"

Essra: "Yes, to start a business."

It's as if my dreams and my struggles are clashing with his pragmatism. I see his need for money, his need for security. And yet,

deep down, I know that to him, I'm just another opportunity. I feel him so distant, yet paradoxically, so close.

Me: "I don't know if or when I'll start something here in Asia."

Essra: "Anyway, I'm still waiting. Life has gotten hard here."

Me: "Why is it hard? You're young, strong, smart. Life is beautiful, you've already managed to survive 10 months in Asia."

Essra: "But I'm out of money, and I'm tired."

The conversation unravels slowly, like heavy smoke rising. I feel him like a shadow – always around my thoughts, but never truly present. I stop replying, and he doesn't continue either. I feel a little adrift, but the truth is I don't know why I still think about him. My life has moved forward, but the simple fact that he writes to me turns everything upside down. His messages have the power to disturb my peace. "What power does this man have over me? What part of me is still clinging to him?"

"Reset, Yda," I tell myself, trying to calm my thoughts that have started spinning out of control. I'm safe... as long as he's far away.

I gather my strength and decide to go out to eat. My stomach revolts, as if it hasn't been fed in days. I tell myself a McDonald's burger will be a safe choice, so I follow the GPS route, weaving through dozens of cars, horns, and the city's hustle and bustle. Saigon is brimming with life around me, but I'm caught between the pain in my stomach and the thoughts swirling in my mind.

I only have a burger, no fries. The coolness of the restaurant is a relief, a temporary refuge from the suffocating heat outside. The asphalt feels so hot you could fry an egg on it. On the way back to the hotel, I stop at KFC for an ice cream and return to my room.

There are only a few hours left until I leave for Indonesia. Another dream on the verge of coming true. I try to work on the manuscript, but the mistakes frustrate me; my mind feels so unfocused sometimes. At 6:00 PM, Trang texts me to say she'll be late. Again.

We meet at 7:30 PM and go to a restaurant. We share a plate of bruschetta and a local dish, non-spicy as I requested. The conversation revolves around numerology again, and Trang shines. She has a fascinating energy, and every word she says captivates me. I watch her red lips as they move with her enthusiasm. I try to absorb everything, but some things slip through my fingers.

We say goodbye around 9:30 PM. I know I'll return to Vietnam. It's a strange, yet profound feeling. There are still stories to discover here, unfinished mysteries. The puzzle piece named "Trang" hasn't yet found its place. I watch her as she rides away on her scooter, with my pink backpack at her feet. I smile and feel a wave of peace.

I get back to my room, take a shower, and lie in bed. I try to focus on the manuscript, but my thoughts scatter in all directions. I fall asleep for a few hours until the sound of my phone reminds me it's time to leave.

"Everyone you meet is a reflection of a part of you that you don't yet know." – Rumi

Chapter 32. “Dreams on Wings of Flight”

July 20th, 2023

The alarm blares at 3:00 AM, pulling me out of a too-short sleep. I leap out of bed as if a smoldering flame were pushing me forward. Today is the day. The day I've been waiting for so long. I feel tired, but deep inside, I find reserves of energy I didn't know I had.

There's no time to linger. A new chapter awaits, and just the thought of it makes me feel like I'm already flying, even before reaching the airport.

At 3:50 AM, I head down to reception. The sleepy-eyed receptionist drags himself off the couch to take my key. He offers to help me get a taxi, but I smile and refuse. Today, every choice is mine. I order a taxi through the app, and in less than ten minutes, I'm leaving the hotel, leaving the city, and soon, I'll be leaving the country.

I feel the need to share this with someone. If I don't write, I feel like the excitement will explode inside me, like I won't be able to contain it. It's as if every fiber of my body is vibrating with the thought that a new dream is coming to life. I open WhatsApp, find “Mone,” and type:

“Hey! I'm in the taxi, heading to the airport. I'm flying to Indonesia... In a grand finale, it's all happening, just like in fairy tales!”

“Haha. Enjoy, Yda!” comes the instant reply, as if he had been waiting for this moment.

“I don't believe it!”

In the taxi, my thoughts run wild, like waves of memories and emotions crashing over me. I think back to all the challenges of the past few months – the paralyzing fear when I found out I couldn't enter Indonesia without a vaccine, the stress of selling my company for half the price I had set, like I was leaving a part of myself behind...

I abandoned my entire known Universe for an unknown that terrified me at every step. Romania? Sometimes I wonder how I could breathe there, in a world that felt so confined.

But Vietnam was my journey of release, my process of taming my fears. I drifted like a boat on an unfamiliar river, not knowing what lay beyond each bend, but I kept going. I rowed without knowing where I'd end up, but with the certainty that the path was mine.

"Who said dreams don't come true, Yda?" I whisper to myself, smiling with irony. After all, the only real obstacle in the way of my dreams was me. Me and my own emotions. In the back seat of the taxi, I feel how every decision, every step taken, had its own purpose, teaching me that I am the only one who can shape the course of my life.

Tan Son Nhat International Airport – Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam

I arrive at the airport, and the driver drops me at the entrance. It's a moment of transition – I'm leaving Ho Chi Minh behind, but it doesn't feel like I'm truly leaving. I don't say goodbye to the city, knowing deep in my soul that I will return.

Asia calls to me, and a part of me will always stay here, with Trang, with the people I met, with the lessons I learned. I've discovered that everything has its own rhythm, that life becomes easier when you let it flow. Without forcing it, without rushing it.

This past month has been a journey – not just through Vietnam, but through my own being. I've traveled the country from north to south, seen breathtaking landscapes, but the most profound

change has been within me. The fear, the exhaustion, the anxiety – they all melted away, slowly, day by day. I've discovered that I can handle things on my own, that I don't need constant help from others. I've found my own rhythm, and that's the greatest achievement.

I feel proud. I've surpassed the limits I once thought were insurmountable. Now I know I can follow my dreams, no matter the obstacles. Everything I experience, everything I feel, is mine. My decisions are mine alone.

I pass through security and stop at a café. I treat myself to a croissant and a mango shake, smiling without even realizing it. The prices are ridiculous, but I don't mind anymore. I write and glance at the big clock in the airport.

7:07 AM.

I smile again, feeling the Universe whispering that I'm on the right path.

I let myself get lost in reflection on the past month. Wonderful people, friends, dancing, laughter, tears – a journey of rediscovery. And now, I'm ready to move forward.

Boarding begins.

I get up confidently and step toward my next dream. The smiles of those around me wish me a "safe flight," and I step onto the plane, my heart beating faster and faster. Indonesia is so close now. So close to the place that has been calling me for so long.

A distant whisper, maybe just a figment of my imagination, reminds me that this journey is only just beginning. I settle into my seat on the plane, and a familiar song floats through the air, carried by the radio waves.

I smile to myself, suspended between dream and reality.

“Am I daydreaming, or am I just caught in my own dream?” I wonder, closing my eyes and letting myself be carried by the sensation of floating.

“But come...

The real journey is just beginning.”

Yda

Mida Malena
Days and Nights of Vietnam: The Puzzle of My Soul

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Dear Friend,

I hope this book has managed to inspire you, to transport you through the landscapes of Vietnam, and to offer you a glimpse into my world. I am truly grateful for the time you've spent with me and for reaching the end of this story.

If you enjoyed it, it would mean the world to me if you would recommend this book to your friends or anyone else who needs it. My next books are already in the works, and to know that you will join me in future adventures would be a great gift.

Stay in touch with me on social media! Feel free to contact me anytime with suggestions, thoughts, or simply to share your impressions.

Follow me on Instagram: **@mida_malena**

I'd love to hear from you!

With love and gratitude,

Mida Malena

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