

Truck Stop

Tang Ngo itched the line in the middle of his rib cage. His wife always clicked her tongue when she caught him itching the scar. Of course, it had healed over from a year ago, but she still disapproved. *"It's as if you want to rip it open again and bleed,"* his wife once said in her undoubtedly Southern Vietnamese. In Vietnam, he would have looked down on her and her provincial accent. But here in America, he thought it endearing. She was at home, and he was on this lonely winding road in Arizona. Other than the beautiful Grand Canyon, Tang knew very little about this place. He put his hand back on the steering wheel, trusting it to steer towards a truck stop.

Tang had been truck driving for six months. He hauled a 5-axle tractor semitrailer. From far away, the beast had a growling bear's head and a metallic snake's body. He was lucky enough to work for a Vietnamese supermarket in Little Saigon called America's Best Market. Tang could have ended up anywhere, working for anyone. But he ended up working for people as close as family, so they overlooked Tang's red flags. Firstly, he had an extensive resume. Secondly, he had a master's degree in business. Lastly, he underwent a bypass surgery a couple months before applying. But they didn't question Tang. Instead, they gave him the benefit of the doubt, something that came from mutual understanding.

Truck driving was a simple life. Every day, Tang reminded himself of three things. Get on the road, call wife, and find a truck stop. Get on the road, call wife, and find a truck stop. He had already called his wife. It was a short conversation--one that was more about what they didn't say rather than the words that came out. The last goal to accomplish was to find a truck stop before he could get a violation. Truck drivers had curfews. But he didn't worry--not like he used to about infractions. The prospect of a violation breathed on his neck like a wife's soft nags.

There was something in the distance.

The sun was hiding behind the burnt orange plateaus, so he couldn't be sure. He leaned over the steering wheel and squinted. Yes, there was a person wearing a dark parka walking at the side of the road. His wife had warned him about hitchhikers. To her, they were the literal embodiment of people who weren't family--people who did not bear a resemblance--people who couldn't be trusted. *"Don't be so nice all the time,"* he could hear her say. *"That's how you let them take your life from you--even your bones and your blood."* This was not an ordinary hitchhiker, though. Hitchhikers--at least in the movies Tang had watched--stood facing oncoming traffic and stuck their thumbs out. This one was hunched over away from the truck with feet dragging against the dark orange earth.

Tang sucked the air through his teeth and pulled over. When he made a complete stop, the Mother Mary statuette taped to the dashboard rattled as if in disagreement.

The hitchhiker kept walking down the side of the path, and each step looked more like a Lazarus reflex than an act of purpose. It was odd how the stranger didn't notice a semi truck had stopped. Tang figured the thunderous growl could wake the dead.

Tang honked.

The stranger jumped and turned. The boy took out an earphone and squinted at the headlights. He couldn't have been more than 16 years old. A child. An American. The boy had light brown hair peaking through his knit hat, blue eyes peaking through his squints. After a moment, the boy nodded, readjusted his hiking backpack, and walked to the passenger door. This was no hitchhiker if Tang had offered the boy solace before the boy could even ask.

A bit of cold slipped into the truck when the boy opened the door. The stranger sat himself in the passenger seat and closed the door. Tang observed the boy's blue-tipped hands rub together. Then they plunged into the boy's parka pockets.

Tang got the truck back on the highway.

Silence permeated the truck as if spoiled meat also found its way into the truck the same way the boy did. It had been a while since Tang had company. Tang stifled a laugh. What sort of company was this? What sort of host was Tang? Back at his home in California, Tang and his wife had hosted plenty of gatherings. They mostly were loud drunken parties, incomplete without Vietnamese food, beer breaths, and inappropriate jokes. No matter how casual, Tang took each guest by the hand and spurted a joke--only understood between the Vietnamese.

"What is your name?" Tang said. He spoke slowly, enunciating every word. The words felt more like strange food in his mouth.

The boy didn't say anything. "Name," Tang repeated. "What *is* your name?"

Again, the boy remained silent, even unaware of everything except the passenger window. Perhaps Tang spoke wasn't making himself clear. Perhaps Tang spoke a different language without even knowing it.

The boy's parka crinkled together. It was a sound that was so subtle, but it still sliced through the silence between them.

"My name is Tang," Tang offered. "Not Tom. Tang." Tang's offering did not feed the boy's curiosity, so Tang tried to feed his own instead. "Your parents, are they worried?"

"Yeah, right," the boy said. Tang barely heard him.

"Every parent worries for their child. Even not the best parents," Tang decided. He should know. He had three children of his own. Three daughters, in fact. Two had jobs and husbands.

One was going to graduate school, studying art history or something of that nature. There was not a day he didn't recognize the restless feeling at the back of his head as parental worry. Now, the tables have turned a bit. Since Tang's decision to become a truck driver, his daughters became three more wives, demanding weekly checkups and calls.

Tang heard another crinkle of the boy's parka.

"Listen," the boy finally said. It was a hollow sort of voice--a voice just getting accustomed to its depth. "Nobody has to get hurt here or nothing. Just give me all your money and then I'll leave."

Tang's heart felt like it burst in his chest, which felt more like a memory. In his mind, Tang could hear his wife speaking in the southern dialect, "*Trời ơi! Don't strain yourself. When a doctor fixes your heart, you need to take care of it.*" Doing what his figment wife said, he slowly drew in air as if it were hot soup. Tang looked over at the boy.

The boy had a Swiss army knife. A blade the size of a finger pointed at Tang.

Tang looked back at the windshield. He let the air pour out of his lungs. The truth of the matter was that Tang was not afraid to die. Tang never used to feel this way. He was scared of death in Vietnam. He was scared of death when he first came to America. He was scared of death a year ago, when he woke up in a hospital bed, wondering why his chest hurt. After driving on the road and having time to think, Tang realized that death lacked all human thoughts and motives, making it the kindest bogeyman invented by the human psyche.

"When I was young," Tang said slowly, "when I was in Vietnam, I saw my first dead body. My family and I were escaping from Phan Rang--my home. We drove the family car, and I sat by the window. I was 15. I did not know what was going on. I had this big feeling that we were not only running away, but we were being chased. Then, I saw the dead body. On the side

of the road. My father drove around the body, but I still saw it. It is a picture in my mind. Very still. Very real. The eyes were open. The mouth, too. Going to say something." Tang paused for effect. In truth, Tang did not fear the dead body. He was more curious--curious as to why the sight of a dead body didn't affect him as much as he thought it would. "The person did not die from a knife," Tang continued. "The person died from fear, from his country, and from a gun. Do you think I am afraid of you? Do you think I ran away from my home to be scared of a little boy with a little knife? How could I be?" Tang glanced over at the boy, who had lowered his Swiss army knife.

"Here is the deal," Tang said. "Put the knife away. You stay for a little bit. I will get you some food. When you ready, I will give you money, and you can leave. Sound good?"

There was another crinkle of the boy's parka. Tang glanced over to see that the knife was gone. "Yeah," the boy said. "Whatever."

The truck was quiet again. Tang didn't mind so much. He found solace in their shared similarity of silence. It promised some semblance of peace.

After a few long moments, there was a truck stop. It sat on the side of the road like a glowing mirage. Without the fervor he had before, Tang turned into it. There were already domino rows of trucks inside the space. Tang drove down the path between semis and found a little bit of space at the end. He parked the truck and turned off the ignition.

Tang looked over at the hitchhiker. The boy was staring out the window. He was staring out the window for some time now. With the sun nearly set, Tang wondered what was there to see. Still, the boy looked. The boy stared. The boy. Tang could not see the boy as anything but a

child. If he was correct, Tang was nearly three times as old as this child. Maybe Tang was wrong. Maybe Tang was older.

Tang sighed. "Eat?"

The boy jumped. His tired eyes looked over at Tang. The boy gave a nod.

Tang and the boy walked to the building, which was in the back center of the lot. It looked like it used to have a working sign out in front. From the last bit of sunlight, Tang made out the words, "Al's," and "Cafe." Every so often, the large sign flickered to life as if it were struck by lightening. When it flickered, the sign gave a small buzz. Tang grabbed the large handle of one of the double doors and pulled. He nodded for the boy to walk in. The boy walked inside, and Tang followed. The warm smell of coffee and greasy food touched every inch of Tang's face like a fleece blanket.

The same kind of crowd was inside of this truck stop. These were the typical truck drivers. Baseball caps, facial hair, and large stomachs. Each truck driver had his own table or his own hidden corner. Instead of talk, there were the clinking of utensils on porcelain plates. And Tang wondered how odd he and the boy looked. A Vietnamese man and an American child. This had to be a start to an American joke--one about a bar and walking into it. Tang wanted to laugh even though he didn't even know the punch line.

They walked up to the cashier, who was picking at her long red nails.

"What can I get for ya?" the waitress said. Tang had read the name on her nametag but quickly forgot it. The waitress had this grainy voice. When she asked the question, the words fell out so easily, as if she were blowing a stream of smoke.

Tang looked at the boy, who was staring at the floor.

"What do you have?" Tang asked.

The waitress took a big sideways chew of her gum and pointed at the menu above her head with her pen.

"Oh," Tang said with a light laugh. "Two orders of the Breakfast for Dinner Special," Tang said slowly.

With a glossy-nailed finger, the waitress clicked a button on the cash register twice. "Will that be all for you today, sir?"

Tang glanced over at the boy again, but the boy's head still hung there.

"And a chocolate pie," Tang said.

Debbie the waitress clicked another button. "Will that be all for you today, sir?"

"Yes," Tang said, pulling out his wallet from his back pocket.

Tang and the boy sat down at one of the small tables. There was that small moment of potential. Either they could acknowledge each other existence, or they could maintain the status quo of strangers. The boy scooted his bottom to the edge of the chair, his shoulder blades resting on the back of the chair. He closed his eyes and assumed some disguise of sleep. Tang passed the time by scrunching the paper off the straw and twisting the loose skin.

In a couple minutes, the waitress's heels clopped towards them. Tang looked up to see the waitress with two steaming plates in her hand and a chocolate pie at her elbow. "Here ya go," the waitress said, giving Tang a closed lipped smile. She put two stretched plates of food in front of Tang and the boy. She put the chocolate pie in front of Tang. When she turned to leave, Tang put the chocolate pie in front of the boy.

The boy's eyes opened and stared at the light wisp of steam. He looked at it as if he hadn't seen food do that in a very long time.

With hands clasped together, Tang did what he did every time he had food in front of him. Tang prayed a short prayer and crossed himself.

"Eat, eat," Tang encouraged.

The boy unrolled the napkin, and the fork and knife fell out in a clamor. The boy took the fork in a shaking fist. The fork stabbed into the fluffy scrambled eggs, and the force of the metal made the porcelain scream. He took the first bite. The boy scooted his chair in so that his face hung over the plate, and he shoveled in bite after bite. The food must have passed through the boy's gullet so quickly that taste was irrelevant.

Tang gave his second sigh of the night. It was then that Tang felt the truth of what he asked the boy. How could Tang be afraid of this boy?

It was around 8 pm when Tang and the boy walked back to the truck. They walked parallel to one another, two lines on a graph that would never meet. When they got to the truck, Tang took his keys out and unlocked it. The boy climbed in through the passenger door. Tang squeezed in behind the seat, and the boy grabbed the hiker's backpack from the passenger seat and followed suit.

Without needing to grope for it, Tang found the light switch and turned it on. The light revealed the small cabin. The space was about six foot by six foot--a perfect square of the simplest living. The cot was straight against the back wall. It stood five feet high with a skinny ladder leading up to it. Below the cot was a small sitting area where Tang usually ate his food. Right next to the sitting area was the microwave and mini fridge. Off in the other corner was a small standing shower. Within that shower was a miniature porcelain toilet. He kept a trash bag over it to keep it dry.

The boy looked around the place, analyzing everything without touching.

"Make yourself at home," Tang said to the boy. This was another one of those American phrases he never truly understood, but the boy threw his hiking backpack onto the cot. "Use the shower. But do not use it for too long. You might take all the hot water."

The boy didn't turn, but he said, "Where will you sleep?"

"Over here," Tang said and nodded to the driver's seat, though Tang knew the boy wasn't looking. The driver's seat was as comfortable as a couch. Well, it had to be for someone to sit in it for hours on end. Tang pulled out the small heater from the front compartment. He looked for the end of the plug and put it in the outlet. Tang turned the dial of the heater to two.

After the shower went off, Tang prayed his last prayer of the day. Somehow, his prayer drifted into his daily reminders. He had to be on the road at the break of dawn, call his wife in the afternoon, and find another truck stop. Tang added a new reminder. The boy. Figure out what to do with the boy. It had been a while since his mind was ruled by problems. Perhaps it was because he couldn't figure out the solution to this one. When Tang realized he wasn't praying anymore, he crossed himself and gave a third sigh. He leaned back against the chair and went to sleep.

Tang woke up before his alarm. After a few seconds of fully realizing his reality, he reached over to the alarm clock and turned it off. He took the windbreaker that was draped over him and put it on. He rubbed his face with his hands, and then he rubbed his hands together. Then, the memory of last night seeped into his bones, and he turned to look for the boy. There was a lump in the cot, which Tang assumed was a sleeping boy.

With a carefulness he hadn't used in a long time, Tang skulked around the cabin to gather his toiletries. Then, he went into the half-asleep gray morning and into the cafe. When he came out, he was clean--at least by the truck driver's generous definition. In his hands, he had two grease-spotted paper bags of croissants, a cup of lidded coffee, and his toiletries in a small basket, hanging by his ring and pinky fingers. With the hand holding the two paper bags, he unlocked the truck and opened it. After he was all settled, Tang turned the ignition. Finally, he drove out of the truck stop and onto the road.

The routine made him forget about his stowaway. Tang continued on his route and even started to hum to fill the silence.

About two hours into driving, Tang drove past a sign that caught his eye. It was an emerald green sign that said in white letters, "Grand Canyon." The great and beautiful. When his children were young enough to expect things from him, Tang promised to take them to the Grand Canyon one day. He promised them other places, too. Hawaii, the White House, and even Vietnam. He just never had the time with work and everything. But when he promised the Grand Canyon, his daughters jumped up and down with excited smiles. Year after year, Tang promised his children the prospect of a small road trip to the Grand Canyon. Year after year, his children became more immune to hopeful words. There was a sort of weightlessness to children, and Tang had an idea as to why adults dragged their feet.

Tang checked the time to see it was already ten in the morning. His eyes lifted to catch the sight of the Mother Mary statuette, and her eyes were looking past him. Tang felt a jolt spread from his core, and he couldn't help scratch the scar on his chest.

"Boy?" Tang heard himself say.

There was no response. Tang wondered how long the boy had been asleep. It had to have been 14 hours now. A terrible thought passed through Tang's mind. Maybe last night's dinner Tang had bought the boy was the boy's last meal. Maybe the boy was dead. Tang's hand was now digging at the scar, and it began to hurt. Tang brought the clawing hand back to the wheel. It was sweaty, so he gripped tighter on the wheel.

At his left mirror, Tang spotted a car speeding up to him. It looked like a white bug scurrying across his mirror. Tang knew how this went. Smaller cars were always in such a hurry, and they did not hesitate to go into the opposite lane to get past. But this one had blinking lights on top, and the closer it came, the more it wailed.

Tang pulled the truck over to the side of the road. When he stopped, the orange dirt picked up into a faint cloud around him. The white car with the lights blinking on top parked behind Tang's truck.

All that went through his mind were his daily reminders. Get on the road. Call wife. Find truck stop. Figure out what to do with the boy. Tang looked behind him to see the lump in the cot; the dark blanket made it look like a mound of dirt.

There was a knock at Tang's window, which startled him. Tang rolled down the window. Before him was a man in a dark green uniform. His tanned skin had a pink glow as if the dark green baseball cap on his head was too tight and cut off circulation. His pointed, crooked nose glowed the deepest pink and had sand-colored hairs sticking out. He wore aviators. Tang looked at the patch on the man's left breast. It said "Border Patrol."

"Hidin' anyone?" the man said with a grin.

"No," Tang said. Tang had said it too quickly, which made the man's sand-colored eyebrows raise.

"Sorry for the delay," the man said with much less friendliness than before. "I have to go through random and routine checkups on these big-rigs here. You see, we've been having an influx of illegals comin' in, and we suspect that some of the truck drivers have something to do with it. Now, I'm gonna ask again. Are you hidin' anyone?"

"No," Tang said again, but with control.

"Then, you don't mind me looking through this beauty?" The man tapped the side of Tang's truck.

"Yes," Tang said. "I mean, no. I do not mind."

"Where are you from anyway?" the man asked, now leaning an elbow on Tang's truck.

"Vietnam," Tang replied.

"Wouldn't have guessed that," the man said. "You've got dark skin. I was almost sure you were one of the illegals I'm lookin' for." He laughed, though Tang wondered if it were a joke.

"Nam, huh? You must be one of them refugees. See, that's the legal way of comin' here. The illegals here, they don't know shit. They come in here, don't pay taxes, take all the jobs my son could be workin'. They gotta learn from people like you. You're goin' all about it right."

"I will open the door in the back," Tang said.

"America thanks you for your cooperation," the man said, stepping back a few steps to let Tang out.

Tang watched the man. The man was inside the fridge of the truck, moving crates and boxes. Tang felt as though his insides were twisting and untwisting as time passed--the same sort of twisting and untwisting with the straw cover at the cafe the night before. The man did a thorough check going all the way back into the fridge, and then he did a thorough check back.

"All clear," the man said when he was at the opening.

Tang was back in the driver's seat, and the door was back as the border between Tang and the man. The man was writing something on his notepad. He had been asking Tang questions, and Tang had been answering. Tang hoped if Tang had complied so easily this far, that the man would not search the truck any further.

"Alright," the man said, clicking the back of his pen on his chest. "That about wraps that up." The man put his elbow on Tang's truck again. He was looking behind Tang, at the small cabin. Tang's back stiffened. "I gotta say, truck drivin' is some of the freakiest shit in the world. How'd you get into this line of work anyway?"

Tang could have said a whole host of things. He could have told the man that Tang made six figures at his previous job. Tang could have told the man about Tang's previous boss--not too different from the man in the green uniform. Tang could have told the man about Tang's heart hurting. "Odd jobs sometime need odd men," Tang decided.

"You're tellin' me."

When the man left, Tang let out a breath he had seemed to be holding in for some time. After he saw the man's white car drive past, Tang unbuckled his seat and went back to the cot. The boy was curled up away from Tang. Tang put a hand in front of the boy's nose. It was faint, but he felt the soft sign of life. As if by some miracle, the boy began to stir.

Tang walked back and sat there on his driver's seat and stared out the windshield. He jumped when the boy plopped into the seat beside Tang. Tang looked over. The boy had more color to his cheeks. In fact, there were small clouds of faint pink blooming on either side of his nose.

"Can I please use your toilet?" he asked. The boy looked like a student asking for permission.

"You may," Tang said, pointing to the shower.

After the boy was all settled, Tang got the truck on the road again. The boy sat himself in the passenger seat.

"Did you really see a dead body?" the boy asked. "In Vietnam, I mean."

Tang couldn't help grin. "Yes," Tang said. "It is nothing like imagination. Not a lot of things are."

"Cool."

They rode together without speaking another word for a while. It was a calm ride. The sun was at a high angle in the sky. The orange earth illuminated and made Tang think of Mars. It was only when Tang saw another familiar emerald green sign that Tang said something.

"You been to the Grand Canyon?" Tang said.

"Hm?" The boy perked up in his seat.

Tang nodded to the boy's passenger seat window. "Grand Canyon," Tang repeated. "It is one mile away."

"Never been."

"Same for me."

Tang parked somewhere on the shoulder of the road. He turned on the hazard lights just in case. The boy did not question Tang, so Tang did not question himself. They walked out of the car, leaving behind their jackets. They found a narrow road paved by other travelers--other seekers. They walked until they found the railing. They followed the railing until they found the Grand Canyon.

Tang slapped his hands on the railing and stared. And waited. He stared out into the chasm. He could only compare it to man-made creations, like New York City and its magnificent buildings of impossible heights. Or a footprint left deep into a muddy ground left by some giant. Or a gigantic pool in the summer with the shadows in the canyon serving as some lifeless liquid. Tang kept staring and waiting. But nothing came. No overwhelming emotion. No epiphany. No understanding or incomprehension of greatness. Tang stood there feeling the tickle in his stomach to laugh but kept silent. Perhaps Tang was the first man to have thought that the Grand Canyon was just another piece of land.

Tang looked over to see what the boy thought. The boy was staring straight down. It occurred to Tang that the Grand Canyon meant different things to both of them. Here was the boy Tang had found far from life--far from hope. And the bottom of this cliff was a quick mercy.

"Do you know why I drive a truck?" Tang said. "I used to work at big company. We sold ideas, which are very expensive in America. I was program manager. It was a good job." The smile Tang wore began to feel heavier and heavier. "My boss and coworkers made jokes. They made little jokes. Sometimes funny jokes. Other times not very funny. A lot of them were about me. They called me Tom. They knew my name but called me Tom. My boss said once, "Tom, don't forget to speak English today." Jokes are okay with me. My skin," Tang slapped the skin on his forearm, "very thick. Every day, though, I began to see truth in jokes. The truth seeped into my heart."

"What happened?" the boy said, glancing up at Tang.

"My heart felt heavy," Tang said. "So heavy that it began to hurt. In Vietnam, something like this means your soul is damaged. In America, call it coronary artery disease. They cut me open," Tang made a fist to his chest to recover whatever masculinity he shed off, "and they give

me a bypass surgery. Doctor said to take it easy. Then, I did something stupid. I quit my job. Then, I did another stupid thing. I became a truck driver."

"You're saying there are second chances?" the boy said with a false half grin.

"No," Tang said. "I say this piece of land does not deserve your bones and blood." Tang pointed to the fall in the chasm. "But you know what it deserve?" With a dollop of spit cradled in his mouth, Tang bent over and spit into the Grand Canyon.

"What are you doing?" the boy asked, incredulous.

"Try it," Tang suggested.

The boy shook his head, but he looked down at the chasm again. This time, the boy let some spit fall out of his mouth.

"There," Tang said with a laugh he was waiting to let out. "We own the Grand Canyon now."

Tang and the boy were back on the road. By the time the sun was behind the plateaus again, he knew he had to find another truck stop. Tang found the next truck stop almost as soon as he thought he had to find one, and he decided truck stops were fickle. Just like expectations. Since Tang was early, he was able to park at the forefront of the truck stop. He turned off the engine.

The clock under the Mother Mary statuette read 4:46 in the evening.

"Do you know when the bus comes?" the boy asked.

"Sometimes every hour. Sometimes shorter. Sometimes longer." Tang looked over at the boy. The boy suddenly looked much older than before. Maybe it was the orientation of the sun. Maybe it was mutual understanding. Tang decided not to ask if the boy wanted dinner, not to

lecture, not to show worry, though Tang would wonder about this boy for the rest of Tang's life. Instead, Tang pulled out his wallet and pulled out whatever money was left in the wallet. It was a little over a hundred dollars. Johnny looked at the money for a long time. Then, the boy took it and put it in the pocket of his parka.

"Cool," the boy said. "Thanks."

Tang nodded, and the boy took the hiking backpack and left.

The boy walked all the way to the empty bus stop. Tang looked to where the boy had been sitting. To his surprise, Tang found a slim orange piece of polished wood. When he picked it up, he knew exactly what it was. The Swiss army knife was a little heavier than Tang expected. Tang looked up to see that a bus was coming. When the bus made an exhaled stop, the boy climbed on, and he was gone.

Tang's phone went off, and he expected it to. He walked out of the truck and stepped into the glowing orange earth. Then, he took out his phone. His wife was calling. Tang opened up the flip phone and pressed it to his ear.

"Hello," Tang sang, emphasizing the second syllable.

"Why haven't you called yet?" his wife's Vietnamese shouted through the receiver.

"Ah, there were a few distractions," Tang said, looking at the Swiss army knife.

"Distractions?"

"Border patrol," Tang said in English. He implemented the same Vietnamese emphases and intonations.

"What did they want?"

"They wanted to see if I was stowing anyone illegal." Tang said the last word in English. The word illegal in Vietnamese wouldn't have meant the same. He opened the knife, so that a blade the size of a finger stuck out.

"Well, were you?"

"No. Not illegal." Tang set the phone, so that it was wedged between his shoulder and ear. With the free hand, he pressed the index finger against the blade. At first it glowed a pale yellow. When it pricked, the pain felt more like a memory. *"I have something else to tell you."*

"Mmm?"

"I'll explain later," Tang decided. The raw part of his finger began to feel cool and wet. *"It's a long story, and it's been a long day."*

"Long day, long day," his wife said with a small sign of resentment. *"Don't forget to call next time."*

"Mmm."

"Bye."

Then, he let the blood drip on the ground. *"Bye."*