

Harry Kamian

A Meandering Moped

I turned my head and watched the moped meander precariously down the alley. In Vietnam, this is no extraordinary occurrence; the entire population navigates the labyrinth of Hanoi perched on motorized scooters. On the back of this particular moped, however, there were 10 mattresses, stacked on top of one another, the entire structure held down by a single bungee cord. And yet somehow the moped remained upright. Stunned by the man who had successfully contradicted every principle of nature, I slowly began to realize I had won the game.

From the ages of 10-13, I lived in Hanoi, Vietnam. When my family and I first arrived, I thought I would be able to adjust quickly to life in Vietnam as I had in other countries where we had lived, such as Turkey and Chile. It turns out I was wrong. I was utterly terrified of the chaotic traffic, bizarre smells, and the prospect of living in a house sandwiched between two neighborhood brothels. In part to divert our attention from certain less appealing details of our new home, my parents created a game that we would play for the next three years: “Who could spot the weirdest thing on the back of a moped?”

A moped is not like the Harley-Davidson we generally picture when someone says “motorcycle.” A moped can comfortably hold one person, two at the most. Yet while playing our game of “spot the oddest object” we saw mopeds piled with hundreds of goldfish in plastic bags, a dead water buffalo, and even six children (the youngest was on the shoulders of her brother).

Even after seeing all of these seemingly impossible feats, watching a man drive a moped with 10 mattresses stacked on the back made my head turn. After the shock wore off, I announced –

with the supreme confidence of a 10-year old – that I was the winner of the game my parents had created.

I loved that game, and by the time I spotted my winning moped, I realized I had come to love Vietnam as well. I loved living in a place where everyone was different from me, where everything I saw surprised me, where I could step outside and instantly be exposed to the unexpected. I loved waking up to hundreds of honking horns, the sight of cattle walking up our alley, and the taste of my favorite breakfast of sticky rice and peanuts. But most importantly, I loved that I had come to feel at home living in a place where nothing was just like me.

After three years in Vietnam, we moved to Arlington, Virginia, and within a week I attended a youth group session at the invitation of a new friend. I was stunned when the pastor running the session pulled out a ham, and used it to tell the group why we should only be around people who are just like us. “The pure flesh represents Christians like you, and the fat around it is all the Muslims, Jews, and atheists. When you eat ham, you want to pick the meat, not the fat. And when you choose your friends, you want to pick the Christians, the people like you.”

Never once since I left Vietnam have I seen a hundred goldfish, a dead water buffalo, or six children on the back of a moped. But that experience still affects me every day. I now know that I am happy when surrounded by new smells, unique sights, and diverse people who sometimes are not at all like me. Arlington is an amazing city, but whenever I can, I take the time to look for the extraordinary. I don't know where I'll end up, and I can't say at this moment if I'll be happy there, but if I see a moped with 10 mattresses drive by, I'll know I am in the right place.