

**Between Heaven & Earth:
Le Ly Hayslip's Epic Spiritual Journey in
Child of War, Woman of Peace**

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"I have been too long *la nuoc la cai* -
Lost and lonely in a foreign land."
(Song of the Sau Dau Tree)

In 1970, faced with "*a world without ancestors - without cause and effect*" (3), Le Ly Hayslip begins her odyssey of "*coming to terms with her past while reaching out for a better future*" (4) in the United States. As an immigrant in an alien world, Le Ly's highly traumatic experience highlights the many conflicts and issues faced by anyone "*who ever found herself dispossessed, abandoned, and swallowed up by the world only to be spat out: a stranger in a strange new place*" (4). Yet, her epic search for peace takes on new spiritual meaning when we read the powerful, and very poignant, memoir that is the legacy of her journey from the peasant rice paddies of Vietnam to the affluent 'enemy' neighborhoods of America - a distance as great as the journey between heaven and earth.

By the age of 14, Le Ly Hayslip (born Phung Thi Le Ly) had already seen her simple, "*claustrophobic*" (19) village life in Ky La desecrated by repeated invasions of hostile forces (first the French, then the Viet Cong, then the South Vietnamese assisted by the Americans) intent on claiming the right to direct the future of Vietnam and her people. She herself had experienced the loss of her brothers to the Viet Cong war effort, the destruction of her ancestral home, rape and torture at the hands of both the North and

South Vietnamese, and rejection by her family and her village for the resulting shame she could neither defend nor explain. Ostracized to the city streets of Danang after her rape, Le Ly finds refuge working in the home of a wealthy South Vietnamese couple, only to be further violated and disgraced by the man who employs her and then turned out on the streets by his wife when she becomes pregnant with his child. Before “*youth had left, old age had come*” (25), and by the time she had lived her “*first twenty years on earth*” (25) Le Ly had lost her virginity:

not once, but three times: bodily to the Viet Cong . . . spiritually to Anh, Jimmy’s father . . . and morally to the sad little GI in Danang who kept her family off the street by paying four hundred U.S. dollars green money for a last happy memory of her country” (11).

What follows is a series of repeated encounters with men who alternately protect then abuse her, all in the name of love linked to possession; until finally, under the guidance of a Buddhist monk, she acknowledges the “*lessons*” of the men who came into her life to “*free her from . . . her karmic soul debt*” (297). Her first American lover, Ed, leads her to safety in America as his bride and introduces her to the ignorance, bigotry and mistrust of an America at war with itself, as well as with her home country. As Mrs. Munro, Le Ly undergoes the transformation from “*faithful and attentive wife*” (56) to a woman who puts her “*right to independence above her duty to serve her husband*” (57).

But “*because she knew family love as a girl*” (298) and felt lost in America’s “*alien land*” (298), she allows the next man, Dan DeParma, an American military advisor, to “*rescue her from her mistake with Ed and teach her womanly love*” (298). By abandoning Ed and staying with Dan in An Khe during the height of the escalation of Vietnam’s military conflict, she “*puts her children in mortal danger*” (57) to “*satisfy her own desire for a dream-happy life*” (76), only to be abandoned once again by a man she has vested with trust. Le Ly returns to Saigon “*with empty hands and a heavy heart*”

(84), her schoolgirl infatuation nullified by Dan's parting words of advice: *"Go back to Ed. Make the best life you can. . . . Someday I'll come for you when we're both free"* (84).

Those words haunt Le Ly as she returns to Ed in America, and she *"discovers - perhaps early, perhaps late in life"* (86) that wherever she goes, her *"troubles only followed . . . and that lasting victories are won in the heart . . . It is a state of grace. Someone may rescue you; but only you can save yourself"* (86). After Ed's death, Le Ly pursues the American dream of wealth and independence with a vengeance. But, against the advice of well-meaning friends and her own intuition, she still waits for Dan to divorce his American-born wife and marry her.

Believing she *"needed a man to fill the void created by the loss of her native land, her family, and her innocence"* (298), Le Ly finally gives up waiting for Dan and instead marries Dennis Hayslip in gratitude and obligation for his rescue of her sister, Chi Lan, from the communist takeover of South Vietnam. On July 21, 1975, just over five years from her initial arrival in the United States, Le Ly's *"marker is called in"* (134) and, pregnant with her third child, she marries an American for the second time and as *"the months rolled by . . . their extended family put its roots down farther in American soil"* (135).

The birth of her third son, Alan, in December, 1975 brings into her world with Dennis *"a sweet dollop of love where before there had been only the thick crust of duty"* (141), but it is not long before Le Ly realizes *"it takes more than a name to make a family"* (141). Even their move to a new, large five-bedroom house in a San Diego neighborhood is *"a move backward"* (141) for Le Ly, since she and her children feel *"no more welcome than another Asian gardener"* (141) in the reserved, white-collar surroundings. However, when she hires a Vietnamese geomancer to evaluate the house she receives more than just astrological advice - she is reconnected to the familiarity of a

temple to worship her Buddhist spiritual beliefs and receive guidance from “*the Hoe Thuong - chief priest*” (143). It is “*the Buddha’s message of transcendence and reincarnation*” (144) that Le Ly tries to follow when her marriage to Dennis deteriorates from mutual feelings of neglect, financial pressures, and violence spun out of control by a husband more fond of guns and alcohol than his wife or children.

“*Like the symptoms of a terrible disease, the signs of their impending disaster accumulated slowly*” (152), and the “*blossoming expenses*” (153) of their mixed household of natural and foster children, coupled with Dennis’ obsessive acquisition of guns, quickly led to a conflict that was magnified by their religious and cultural differences and “*took their toll on everyone*” (149). In the midst of this conflict, Dennis “*smoldered . . . feeding his hates the way maggots eat festering flesh*” (154), and his faith turns to guns as “*the only thing that stands between you and a threat to your life*” (154). Le Ly seeks guidance first from a Christian marriage counselor, who tells her to “*give up the Buddhist temple and spend more time at her (sic) husband’s church*” (156) and to “*keep up the sex*” (157) as a way to save her marriage. Believing “*sex, guns and Christ . . . were all Americans cared about*” (157), she then consults the Buddhist monk for direction on how to reconcile with her husband. His words, although surprising, make perfect sense to her: “*everything happens for a reason. Discover the cause, act properly, and the effect will follow you into your next life. If you want to go on to a higher plane, you must trust your feelings and act upon them*” (157).

Armed with the monk’s words of wisdom, Le Ly returns to her husband in one last attempt to reconcile and repair their divergent lives, believing that “*like the water buffalo, she must labor long and hard and without complaint*” (169) in order to remain true to her character and fulfill her destiny. At the same time, she redirects her mental and emotional energies to writing a book about her life in Vietnam - “*to try to explain to Americans what it was like to grow up in a village and what the war meant to ordinary*

people in the countryside” (163). Unsuccessful in her attempt to save her marriage and Dennis from destruction (his death ends all hope of transcending their differences), Le Ly is, nonetheless, able to publish her memoir communicating the lesson history had taught her - namely:

that each generation must learn for itself what love, war, child-rearing, and universal law are all about. . . . Unless people took it upon themselves to share what they had learned, each country would never be anything more to another than colors on a map (214).

Most of her life Le Ly searched for the balance between love and hate, hoping to find with a man “*two halves that make a perfect whole*” (4) because she believed that “*one needs the other to have meaning, to be complete*” (297). Instead, she discovers that her “*karma*” (298) is to love mankind better than any **one** man, and it is this revelation about her “*own true higher self*” (298) that finally brings her soul peace, her heart forgiveness, and starts her on the road back to Vietnam to heal the wounds of her family and her country.

When she returns to her native Vietnam over twenty years later, she is no longer a wounded child-victim of the war and its brutality, but a strong woman intent on healing her past, her family, her village and her country by uniting them in the struggle for forgiveness:

to these bloodied and worn-out souls, I could only offer my father’s advice: Turn enemies into friends and your hate will yield to joy. Forgive yourself, forget the sins of others and get on with your life. (227).

Her journey back to her Asian roots completes her karmic circle, and spiritually reacquaints her with the universal truth that “*soil underfoot, wherever it is, becomes the soil of home*” (3). In the end, Le Ly learns to accept the differences between East and West, between Vietnam and America, and, most importantly, between the freedom of her

soul and the boundaries of her human existence – what she identifies as the borders of “heaven and earth.”

Works Cited

Hayslip, Le Ly, and James Hayslip. Child of War, Woman of Peace. New York: Doubleday, 1993.