

Saigon, January 1, 1965

Dear Bill and Mary,

First of all, let me wish you - and all the family - a first-rate new Year. May it bring you many blessings and much genuine fulfilment. May the world become a saner, and a safer, place to live in as it runs its course - though I have my doubts about that. Let us each give our widow's mite toward that goal; perhaps it will do some good.

Thank you for the latest copy of Christmas Cheer, which I read with attention. The children are certainly growing up; this is obvious both from their contribution to the family newsletter and from the photographs. I was interested, and - I must confess, a bit dismayed - to read your endorsement of Malcolm X. No doubt he is a charming bloke, personally; but then so (it is said) is Barry Goldwater, and so was Senator McCarthy. But the convictions of these men, and what they stand for, if implemented in government policy, would have catastrophic consequences to the nation and to the world. God only knows that colored people have endured oppression and discrimination and indignity long enough; what a farce our "democracy" must seem to black people in the South. But the answer to white racism, as Adlai Stevenson so eloquently pointed out a few days ago at the U.N., must surely not be black racism! And one cannot deny that, whatever his personal magnetism, is what Malcolm X is an apostle of! If integration is to succeed, as it ultimately must if America is to survive, it will be thanks to the efforts of really great men, such as Martin Luther King, and in spite of the fulminations of people like X, who have worked to widen the breach rather than to close it.

Well, it has been a long time since I heard from you, or at least had been since the last Christmas Cheer arrived. I remember sending you a fairly graphic description, in November 1963, of the coup which unseated the Nhã-Diem regime. These events, which I witnessed from my perch on the Alfana hotel roof, scarcely two hundred yards from the Presidential Palace, I am not likely to ever forget. It was a long letter, and one which I wrote in response to your request, Bill, for news about Viet Nam; and it was never acknowledged, which rather peeved me. However, I knew how busy you were, and anyhow...."out of sight, out of mind....."

A lot of water under the bridge since then, of course. Saigon, though a somewhat dangerous and frequently frustrating city to live in...perhaps I might have said increasingly dangerous and frustrating, isn't a bad place, and life here has a frenetic urgency and a sense of uncertainty which suit my temperament rather well. Consequently, I chose to remain here when the time came, last July, to make a decision. And remain I shall, God willing, until next August, and quite possibly, -- if our assistance program continues in its present form -- for another year after that. But that is projecting much too far into Viet Nam's future and my own. A stray grenade or a chance encounter with a plastic bomb, and..."tomorrow? Why, tomorrow I may be...Myself, with yesterday's seven thousand years." (Khayyam). I have no plans to return to New York, either now or in the near future. But of course one never knows. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof!

This has been a fine assignment, on the whole. Presently I am in sole charge of the Vietnamese Navy's English program in Saigon. I'm responsible for the supervision of their language laboratory, just recently installed. Nearly all the VNN Navy people who have received, or are presently receiving, specialized training in their respective fields in the U.S.A., have benefited from this program, which has been a fairly successful one, everything considered. My relationship with both the USN and VNN is an excellent one, and the work has been quite rewarding.

Christmas was quietly observed here, and New Year's Eve was even more sedate. Thwarted in my efforts to spend the holiday season in Scotland (courtesy of MATS) I instead attempted a phone call to my parents via the local post office. That, too, proved abortive. At 6 p.m., just as Paris was showing signs of coming through, a tremendous explosion rocked the building and bits of broken plaster rained down from the ceiling. The VC had just blown up the "Brink" BOQ (killing two and injuring 107), just over 200 yards away.

In November, government forces took their worst shellacking from the Communists yet. These successes emboldened the VC, during the early part of December, to launch massive attacks against government forces. Some ground was lost, but on the whole the Viets took a terrific shellacking in terms of the losses they had to sustain. On the heels of this rare success, if you will, came the latest purge by the army and the forcible dissolution of the High National Council.

January 2. At night, one goes to sleep to the sound of guns booming outside Saigon. Yesterday, they were several times their usual intensity. Thirty-five kilometres to the south of this city, a battle is raging - one of the biggest of the war. An estimated six hard-core VC battalions are dug in in a forest, and the government is throwing everything that it can at them. So far we have taken a fearful hammering - thirty U.S. casualties reported alone, and the battle, which began on Christmas Eve, is still raging. The VNN army and Marine corps have lost hundreds of their men in this one engagement, and the Marines are the best they have. A government defeat here could have a decisive effect on the will of the Vietnamese to continue the war.

A USOM (AID) couple working here had invited their son, working his way through college as a free-lance photographer, to spend the Christmas vacation with them in Saigon. The boy arrived a couple of weeks ago. On Christmas Eve, he was sitting with three other Americans in a cafe near My Tho, about 20 miles south of here, when the VC suddenly attacked the place with small-arms fire and grenades. Fourteen Vietnamese in the cafe were killed, and all four Americans wounded. Today the boy lies, semi-conscious, in the Saigon infirmary, grenade fragments embedded in part of his brain; and the doctors are unable to say whether or not he will survive. Some of the fragments have been removed in a preliminary operation - and without sedation - but a second, and graver, operation will be necessary. A tragedy, certainly....but one among hundreds that occur daily and weekly in Viet Nam.

The reason I am writing you so early - since correspondence, at least when it is sustained, must be a two-way street - is to inquire whether you might be interested in helping a young Vietnamese girl, who has never traveled abroad, to adjust to life in New York. Her name is Miss Du Hue Lan, she's about 19 years of age, tall and most attractive. In fact, rather beautiful. Anyhow, Lan, whom I have not known very long, has saved up enough to pay for a trip to the U.S. She will have a tourist visa, but upon arrival, she will try to obtain permission from US authorities to remain as a student. She will have to work in order to support herself, however. Do you think you might be able, with your connections, to find her a part-time job modeling? Or perhaps the UN, which is skilled in the niceties of immigration rulings and procedures, might want to hire her as a guide or to work in an office. Or she would be willing to work as stewardess for an airline, if that were possible. She has, besides beauty, a first-rate mind, and the determination to better herself, a determination quite singular in one as young as she. She speaks English moderately well, and some French. A month or two in the States, and she should speak very fluently. If she succeeds in making it to the U.S., could you find a family willing to put her up until she is able to stand on her feet, so to speak? Someone suggested the YWCA, but that seems too cold and impersonal for someone such as she. I know that you can't possibly put her up, but perhaps you know someone who might, until the strangeness and impersonality of city life have ceased to frighten. She lives at 143 Nguyen Van Sam Street, Saigon, but I can of course contact her here. Let me know if you are interested, and to what extent you think you can help. I don't mean financially, of course! But as far as assisting her to settle in, and introducing Lan to sympathetic and helpful people. She knows no one in N.Y. and will be as far from home as she can possibly be.

No doubt you want to know how long I plan to remain in Viet Nam. My contract expires next July (1965), but I think I shall ask for a renewal. Whatever else it is, Viet Nam is still an interesting and challenging part of the world, and I far prefer my life here to the one I left behind. Spent Christmas 1963 with my friends the Fooks in Japan; and in June, visited both Thailand and Cambodia. Bangkok was wonderful, and Phnom Penh both interesting and quaint. Would like to go back to both, and also pay a visit to Laos, which they tell me is great. I cannot guarantee that I shall not return Stateside, but if I do, it will hardly be of my own volition.

As I have been writing this, in my ^{(fifth, U.S.)*} fourth floor apartment overlooking much of Saigon, a Sky-raider made a strafing run on an unseen target in the distance, and aircraft disgorged paratroops whose blossoming 'chutes could be clearly seen from here. Smoke is rising from the area; undoubtedly a battle is in progress, just a few miles from Saigon. Now the smoke is increasing, and a muffled thunder can be heard. I would say it's about three miles from here, as the crow flies. I hope we clobber them.

All for now. Remember me to the children. Amazing how grown-up they are. Enclosed check to help defray some of your Christmas expenses. Regards to any who may still remember me, however vaguely. And take care of yourselves.

Love,

George