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From Animals to Human

Sabrina Lee

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I sat down on the living room couch, waiting for my grandma to come. I could hear her little footsteps coming down from the hallway, making her way towards me. She sat down right next to me on our brown fur couch, which made a creaking noise since it was so old. The children were chaotic and noisy, but it slowly died down as I got ready to take notes. “Grandma, why did you leave Laos?”

From 1962 to 1975, there was a war going on in Laos known as The Secret War. It was a war between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao, a political group who were from Northern Vietnam. The war lived up to its name. It was indeed kept in secret by the United States government. Also, during that time, there were other wars like the Vietnam War, and the war between the United States and the Soviet Union, that overshadowed the Secret War. It is believed that the war is still going on and that there are still some current genocides involving my people, the Hmong.

The Hmong is a sub-group of the Miao ethnicity that are from China. Since the late 18th century, they have slowly migrated out of the southern province of China and into the highlands of Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos, where they would farm. Their practices have branched away into something new, but you can still find similarities through their culture. They have found a way to survive and adjust to a new way of living. Now, they’re scattered all around the world from Canada, France, Australia, and, of course, the United States of America.

The Hmong were allies with the United States. The United States promised the Hmong that if they were to stay and help, they would be rewarded with guns, food, money and possibly the chance to come to the United States. They were going to be given personal freedom. However, some former Hmong veterans have come out and spoken about the fact that that was a lie. The United States left, which led everyone to defend and run for their lives. The ones who could make it to Thailand were able to receive help from the U.S. However, those that have died in the forest and mountains of Laos were left there, unbothered, rotting away like animals.

“I was only ten or eleven years old at that time, I was barely able to carry my younger brother. My parents went to the farm while all of this happened. Before they left, my parents told me to run and hide if anything were to happen or if the bombs were to come again,” said Grandma.

My grandma was the oldest of six kids. She had to be the third parent to her three sisters and two brothers when her parents weren't around. She was given so many responsibilities that she never even had a chance to play in the dirt. However, this was a typical situation, where kids were no longer kids, but rather adults. If you were old enough to speak and comprehend what people were telling you, then you were old enough to be considered an “adult.” You were expected to be a grown up and do chores and take care of the younger ones. My grandma was taught to cook, keep a house together, go to the garden and do their daily task of farming, but, keep in mind, the garden was a far walk across hills and even mountains sometimes. This was our culture. Us girls are taught these tasks because one day, we're going to be married off into another family, where it will be our duty to know how to become a good house wife. It will be our duty to take care of our husband and his family. This is especially true in Laos, where they usually get married at the age of fourteen, and begin starting the next chapter of their life.

Laos was one of the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. The bombings killed thousands and thousands of innocent people. Some of those people were relatives of my grandma. They all lived side by side in a small village that they called Ho Vah Sha, which was located up in the highlands. They did not have any paved roads. There was one huge dirt road that would go through their village. Their houses were made of sticks and straws that they would wool to make the structure and the roof. Since the materials were not stable, sometimes the weather would destroy it causing them to have to rebuild. Animals—domesticated or not—would be able to get in. Their clothes were worn out and torn; they walked barefoot everywhere they went. They did not own a vehicle to get around, therefore, they would travel by foot. With all these disadvantages, their chances of survival were minimal.

There was never a way to figure out when the bombs were going to come again. When the bombs came, my grandma grabbed her younger brother, whom she was watching at that time, and ran to the trees. She was sick during that time too, but the sickness suddenly vanished at the sound of the explosions. *BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!* The bombs came from everywhere. According to my grandma, the closest it came to hitting them was probably a block away. Hope and her younger brother were the only things she was holding on to. She held her breath as her body molded into the tree, praying to our ancestors that the planes would not see them. After what seemed to be like hours, the plane finally went away, she then came out of hiding and went back to what was left of their house. Luckily, there was not any extreme damage done to her house, but her neighbors were not as lucky.

In 1968, when my grandma was fifteen years old, the Vietnamese were shooting and coming after them, which forced them to migrate to Luang Prabang to start their new life there. Their journey there was not all that pleasant. They were being chased; they were no longer humans,

but rather like animals who were being hunted for their lives. Some of the people that my grandma was traveling with included a couple and their three sons, ages five, three, and seven months old. During this time, my grandma was not married; therefore, my dad hadn't been born yet. But little did she know that later in life, that very couple would have a daughter around the same time she had my dad, they would later become my parents. Bombs came from everywhere as usual. Since their only way to travel was by foot, they had no light to guide them. They ran in complete darkness holding onto one another. Their only light was the moon, shining away, guiding them to tomorrow. In the essay, "Ashes," by Dylan Nice, he states, "I was convinced I could get myself to be something like beautiful. I could leave and go someplace where there would be soft light and pretty daughters." I believe this is what my grandma and everyone else was thinking. A place that would be peaceful, reassuring, and where they would not have to be cautious at all times. A place that they hope to get to one day; a place called America.

When everyone was tired, they would go find whatever hiding places that they could, and slept like animals. For a moment, they lost their humanity, at the thought of wanting to live. The couples' 7-month-old son was crying nonstop due to starvation. But how were you supposed to breastfeed a baby when you do not even have any food in your system to create milk? The baby cried nonstop and the villagers had enough. They told the couple that if they didn't find a way to shut the baby up, they were going to slit the baby's throat because the baby's crying was going to give everyone's location away. Better the baby dead than them. The couple couldn't do it, so they took their son to a nearby stream and hid there, hoping the water would wash out the sound of the crying. And thankfully, it did. Some people were killed throughout this journey. The ones who had been killed were left behind. Those that were injured, but still somewhat alive, were carried all the way to Luang Prabang, where they were admitted to a hospital.

During the first year in the new city, my grandma's parents passed away, which devastated her. How can anyone love an orphan like her? Who would want her? Then suddenly, she met my grandpa. They met each other at a festival called Hmong New Year, which occurs every year during the months of October through December. It was a festival that provided food, music, shops, and a chance to find a spouse. My grandparents fell in love instantly. They got married and she moved in with his family. Soon after that, they moved to a smaller village name Sainyabuli located in Laos. She was finally a housewife, or as they would call it, the head housewife since my grandpa was the eldest son. They lived there for seven years, until the Vietnamese came after them, which made them relocate, but only this time, it was to Thailand. They did not live out there for long, but only for a while until the Vietnamese were gone. Unfortunately, they could not stay there any longer due to financial reasons. In 1975, they made the decision to move back to Sainyabuli and lived there for another five years. In 1980, the Vietnamese came back, resulting in my family's move back to Thailand. Everything was good up until the third year there.

“Your grandpa married a second wife in 1983, in December,” said Grandma.

Polygamy was common amongst most Asian countries and definitely within the Hmong community. However, it is illegal to have more than one spouse here in the United States. In the article, “Second Wives' Club: Mapping the Impact of Polygamy in U.S. Immigration Law,” by Claire A. Smearman, she states,

At the same time, outrage over the practice of polygamy by Mormon settlers in the Western territories sparked a national debate about the importance of monogamy and Christian marriage to democracy and resulted in the passage of a series of federal statutes outlawing polygamy.

There are so many wrongs with the act of polygamy. I truly can't understand the pain that one must go through, in having to now share their husband with another woman. But there was no law at that time that could stop him and even if there was, my grandpa would have found a way to do it in secret.

The way my grandma had described it was that my grandpa was "in need" of another wife. He had seen other husbands with multiple wives and envied it all. He would flirt with other women, yet still "love" my grandma. My grandma knew it all. She knew about the cheating and his desires. However as usual—as a woman, or shall I say, a Hmong woman—she kept quiet and waited. One day my grandpa came to my grandma and finally confessed his need. My grandma was calm and collective, but deep down she was deeply hurt. When my grandpa asked for some money to pay for the dowry of the second wife, my grandma refused to give up the location to where she hid their savings. That provoked my grandpa to lash out at her, and for once, threatened to beat her with a shovel. My grandma didn't panic or fight back. She simply was calm and said she would rather die with the money than to have him bring another woman into this house. My grandpa finally let it go, but would still beg often. Finally, my grandma couldn't take it anymore. Being the good and loving wife that she was, she wanted to please her husband. She gave him the money and, days after that, he brought home the second wife.

That same year, two Thai men took my grandparents and my grandpa's side of the family to get their papers done in order to come to the United States. It took eight years for the entire process. Finally, in 1991, their papers finally went through. It was a beautiful opportunity that they did not let slip by. But what was the price of it? They had to make sacrifices to leave some of their family members behind. My grandma left behind her entire family, except one of her younger sisters who could go to the U.S. with her. The rest of her siblings didn't want to come to the U.S.

because they were so used to the environment that they were living in. They would rather settle for their current situation than to have to adjust to something new. My grandparents had a different mindset. They did what they had to do with no regrets. No longer would they have to fear about people coming after them. For once, they were going to have the opportunity to start over and give their children what they never had: a chance.

In the article “Immigration and Adult Transition,” by Ruben G. Rumbaut and Golnaz Komaie, they had written about the routine of most immigrants when settling in America. They state,

What is more, their transitions to adult roles--leaving the parental home, finishing school, entering into full-time work, getting married, having children--not only differ significantly by generation and ethnicity, but often stand in marked contrast to patterns observed among their native counterparts who are conventionally assumed to set societal standards.

It was so amazing to see the impact that this country has on its people. It gives immigrants the chance to have a fresh start and actually have the opportunity to do something with their life. It helps them grow and become their very own person.

My grandma, her eight children—including my parents, who were already married—my mom’s side of the family, and my grandpa’s side of the family came to the U.S. first. My grandpa decided to stay back and come with his second wife and their children a year later. Since the day my grandpa married his second wife, up until 1991, they have had 6 kids, and then one more later in America. When my grandma and the rest of the family arrived in the U.S., they were placed in Fresno, California for a couple of months. Everything was so new to them. The people, the place,

the houses, everything. They stuck around there for a year and then decided to move up to Willows, California when my grandpa and his second wife finally arrived. Willows was a very small city with one main street that led to the big stores, gas stations, and churches. My grandma lived in the apartments where a majority of the people were also Hmong immigrants. The second wife also lived in the same apartment, just not under the same roof as my grandma, making it a hassle for my grandpa to go back and forth between his two wives. But he never really complained and neither did the two wives. Besides that, it was a pleasant and peaceful town. Nothing bad really occurred there. That was the place where all of my aunties and uncles grew up. They would play in the quad, which was located in the middle of the apartment buildings where the playground was. They were able to be kids and play, while my grandma and parents cooked and took care of the house. A couple of years later, my parents decided to move to North Carolina due to a job opportunity where they still live today.

“We were so poor. The only income we had was welfare. There was only [she’s using her fingers to count] \$700, but after paying the bills, we had \$200 left to buy everything else. There was seven of us,” said Grandma.

The first couple of years living there were certainly different since they were still adjusting to their new life here in America. In the essay “The Same Air,” by David Shields, he wrote about how Rachel and her husband are different than Rachel’s side of the family. Rachel and her husband view things differently and have a totally different mindset which sets them apart from everybody. Shields writes, “Rachel’s mother and stepfather and stepsister were beautiful in a way that neither Rachel nor I was.” I wonder if that’s what my grandma and family felt when they came here, never having seen any other ethnicity but their own. They felt like they were different and at a disadvantage because they weren’t born here. They didn’t have the same features and same skin

color as these “other people,” but that never stopped them from doing everything in their power to not fall behind. My grandparents went to these special classes that taught minor English to help them get by in life. Due to lack of experience, they weren’t able to get any jobs. The only income that they had to rely on was welfare. My grandma has always been a hardworking person, always been a saver, never much of a spender, unless it’s for necessary things. Since they only had \$200 left after every month, whatever cash she had left after buying groceries and houseware products, she would put away. Whether it was an extra \$10 to \$20, she would put it away into an envelope and kept it safe just in case of an emergency. Some months were harder than the rest, to the point where there wasn’t any extra money to be put away into the envelope. However, that never stopped her from trying a little bit harder the next month to put something away. The only store they knew was this Asian store where they would find familiar products to cook with like eggs, ramen, and some vegetables. If they had any extra money, then they would buy meat. Since they didn’t have a vehicle, they walked everywhere. No matter if it was a two-hour walk, they were willing to go the distance and back. As time went by, she finally saved up \$1000 and was able to get a car for the family. One of our relatives taught my grandpa how to drive, and later on, my grandpa taught my grandma.

Since there was little money, they couldn’t afford to get new clothes. Luckily, there was this Caucasian lady named Peggy who would come by once a month to the apartments carrying bags of free used clothes. She would lay them out in the middle of the quad where the playground was, and all of the Hmong people would come out rushing like hungry animals. Peggy was like a farmer: when the animal sees her, you know it’s feeding time. My grandma, being the good mother that she was, would try to find clothes for all of her children first and saved herself for last. She

always saved herself for last in almost everything. Even when we're eating, she's the last one to eat because she wants to make sure that all of us had enough to eat first.

“That's how we got new clothes [laughing because she still has a dress from that time]. That was our life. Getting donations from others, basically just taking their “garbage” from them,” said Grandma.

In 1999, my parents made the decision to send me to California to live with my grandma at only 1 month old. Due to financial and health reasons, they were not capable of taking care of me, their youngest child. Ever since then, I've lived with my grandma. Me living with them certainly took a lot of money and energy out of my grandma, but she loved me as her very own and would refer to me as her ninth child and I would refer to her as “mom.” The leftover money that she would try to save every single month, went towards me in terms of getting diapers and formula. The clothes that Peggy brought didn't really fit me, so I didn't have much to wear. Suddenly, my parents no longer remembered that they had another child who lived in California. My parents stopped sending money every month to support me, pushing my grandma to have to provide everything for me. She decided to work for one of our relatives and helped them with their daily farming in order to bring in some type of income to feed me. As for getting me new clothes, she would go to my aunt, her third oldest daughter, who was already married and had two toddler boys and she would bring me their hand-me-downs. Up until the age of five, I grew up wearing boy clothes. When there was an event, like Christmas or my birthday, I would get new clothes. As time went by, and my aunties and uncles grew up and were finally at the legal working age, that's when we didn't seem to struggle that much anymore. They were able to provide me with new clothes and school supplies when I started going to school.

Even at an early age, I knew we were struggling. I remember my grandma would go do her daily task of farming from five in the morning until five at night. Sometimes my grandpa and I would bring her lunch and accompany her. Whenever she got paid, a majority of the money would go towards my school lunch fees. I can still picture my grandma walking me into the cafeteria where I would go and sit with my classmates while she goes over to the cafeteria lady to pay \$60 for my lunch for the month. It broke my heart each time seeing her give the lady the money. As a kid, what can I do? How can I help or make it easier on her? How can my parents do this to me? It was as if I had never been born. In the memoir “The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts,” by Maxine Hong Kingston, she writes, “Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts.” That’s what I did. When my lunch money was out, I wouldn’t inform my grandma. I would sit in my next class, holding my stomach tightly to avoid unleashing the roar of this animal that was inside of me. “There has to be a better solution for all of this,” I would think to myself. Finally, all of my questions were answered. I had learned from one of my classmates that if I were to serve lunch in the cafeteria, then I would be able to get that meal free for the day. I remember looking back at the clock that was hanging from the back of my classroom. “Five minutes left; I should probably pack up and go now,” I thought. I slowly raised my hand, which signaled my ELD (English Learning Development) teacher to give me a nod indicating that it’s okay to go. I enthusiastically packed up my stuff in my backpack and rushed out the door. I made my way past the playground, the 2nd graders classroom, the hall, the cafeteria, and into the kitchen. There was a little hook at the back of the kitchen where I would have hung my jacket and backpack. I quickly tied my hair up, put a cap over my head, got on my apron and gloves just in time. . . *RING! *. . . it was time to serve lunch. I had to sacrifice my lunch recess due to serving and

eating once everyone else got their food, but I did not care. She has always worked hard to provide for me, now it was time for me to do the same. I may have been an eight-year-old at that time, but my soul was as old as hers.

My grandma is now sixty-five years old and sometimes I still can't believe it. She wasn't your typical grandma. My grandma was super active throughout her life and still is. She loves to exercise and can never stay still. She enjoys accompanying my grandpa on his hunting and fishing trips. She knows how to handle a gun and survive in the wild. For once, instead of being the animal, she was now the hunter.

She hadn't seen her siblings in decades up until two years ago. My aunt and uncle finally took her back to Laos and to Thailand, where she was reunited with all of them. By looking at the pictures that they took, my grandma may be the oldest, but compared to them, she was now the youngest. Her siblings worked ten times harder since they still lived in Laos, which caused them to age twice as fast as my grandma. Her arrival to Laos brought all of her siblings immense joy and happiness. Although they didn't have much money, they were able to go out and buy a new blanket, pillow, and chickens in my grandma's honor. That was more than enough to make my grandma happy. She was able to meet family members that she had not met before. She now had nieces and nephews, sister and brothers-in-law and cousins. Although this was one of the happiest moments in her life, she was also sad. She was sad because she didn't have enough money to leave behind for them or treat them out. Since she had not seen them in decades or know how many nieces or nephews she had, she was not able to bring them any gifts. When it was time for them to leave, it was like 1991 all over again. When will she see them again? They all were getting old. Who knows how long they have left with each other. Till this very day, she will call them every

other month and catch up. If they ever needed anything, like money, she would send them some in a heartbeat.

Looking back at how we used to live back then, we definitely have come a long way. Thanks to the sacrifices of my grandparents and to my grandma's love and guidance, her children and grandchildren had the opportunity to have an education and better themselves so they won't ever have to suffer like she has suffered. My aunties and uncles were able to attend college and now have stable jobs and started their very own families. Because of their successes, they were able to provide for me and care for me the way my parents never did. They bought me my first phone, laptop, and car. Everything that I ever owned came from them, up until the age of sixteen, when I finally started working. Nonetheless, everything came down to my grandma. She was the seed to this ever-growing tree. My grandma had always taught all of us that we must work hard in order to survive. We must be patient and kind to those around us even if it's not a two-way street; always be fair and have morals.

We were finally living most immigrants' dream: to be able to live in the United States to have a better life. Although we were blessed with this life changing opportunity, it saddens me that my grandparents didn't get the chance to be born, or at least, raised here. Even with their little experience and knowledge, they have so much talent to offer that this country has missed out. My grandpa is super brilliant. He is one of those people that can pick up any task so easily and quickly. All you have to do is just show him how to do something once or twice and he will immediately pick it up and probably even do it better than the original person. Since living in America, he has become an engineer for our family. Whenever we had an issue with anything, whether it's with our car, air conditioner, shower hose, or cabinets, he was capable of fixing it all. My grandma had a similar talent, but it wasn't for fixing broken junk. Her talent went towards gardening, cooking,

and keeping the house together. Her other talent, or shall I say gift, is that she's very hard working. I do not know any other woman on this earth that works harder than her. Even now, she would get up at six in the morning to watch my uncle's kids, cook, clean, take care of the house, and then go to sleep around ten o'clock at night. That's her daily task that she does every single day. I truly don't know where she gets her energy from. With all of these talents, they would have been extremely successful if they had the opportunities that us children had. Education and college would have taken their talents to a whole new level. But since that was not the case, us children are living their dreams for them. We were no longer animals, begging others for food and clothes. We were finally human beings with a purpose.

Even now, she would constantly remind me to focus in college and to not be foolish and take this journey for granted. She's old now, which prevents her from farming like how she used to in order to support me financially. My parents have never supported me and just because I'm now in college, that was not going to change anything. Therefore, everything is coming out of my pocket and it is in my hands to keep myself on track and not slip up. Some days are harder than the rest to where I would be so exhausted and stressed. Luckily, whenever I was down and drained from all of my school work, my grandma would be my savior and remind me to keep pushing and never give up. She is the reason I'm so determined to be successful. My drive to give her everything she never had is indescribable.

"This is like farming. You have to keep working on your acre and taking care of your crops if you want it to grow," said Grandma.

Life here in America may have been difficult for my grandma to adjust to, but now she has the hang of it. She has lived here for twenty-six years, but never once did she forget her roots and where she came from. She would often tell me of the dreams she has. Her dreams would involve

reliving the war, her childhood home, and even seeing her parents alive again. When she would wake up from her dream, she was able to describe to me in detail what happened. She would tell me the sound of the guns that came after them, what clothes they were wearing, and what her parents looked like. I can see it in her face whenever talking about her life back in Laos, that she misses it very much and wished things didn't go down the way they did. There were times when she would talk to herself about her siblings, especially after a meal. "Look at all of these leftover meat and food. It's a shame my siblings don't live close to me. They would have been able to eat this food instead of starving," she would say to herself. Sadness would consume her as she cleaned the table up and put the food away.

She is old now, so often she would repeat herself and retell these stories to me, but never once have I complained and I still will not complain about it until this day. To me, these stories are treasures to keep. It honestly amazes me that she can still recall these memories from decades ago. Sometimes, the littlest things would make my grandma reminisce about some long-lost items that she once had. We could be watching a Hmong movie and she would see the actress wearing an outfit that was similar to the one she had when she was a teenager and had left behind during the war. In the essay "Swim, Memory," by Megan Nix, she writes, "You know when someone asks you what you'd bring from your house in a fire? Well the answer is: all the wrong things. You don't know what you'd bring until it's years later and you're still keeping an inventory of loss." That's exactly what my grandma did. She had left so many valuable possessions behind, but the one thing that she will forever have to hold is her memories.

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