

Vietnam, 2001

Lan Duong, Thi Phong, street vendor, 22.

A Young Girl From The Countryside

It is noon in Hanoi. The temperature has risen to its temporary peak, 35 degrees Celsius. The humidity is high like in a hothouse, making ones clothes clammy and sticky. Anyone who is able, to hurries away from the street, into the shade, into the air-conditioned cool and electric table fans. But not Lan. Like thousands of other female street-vendors, she continues her endless daily walk, carrying a yoke across her shoulders and two baskets brimming with fruits and vegetables, which she must sell before dusk. She only stops to service customers. Bending her knees, she lowers the yoke and the baskets, squats, and lets the customers choose some chili, a mango, and a bundle of coriander.

Wearing a pointy straw hat and a pyjamas-like outfit, she is a picturesque feature of the Vietnamese street, a popular postcard motif to the tourist. Even to the government she symbolizes the success of the fiscal reform programme, Doi Moi (= Renewal, a relaxation of the communist plan economy and an approach to a free market economy, introduced in the mid-eighties): "Look at them blooming like lotus flowers on the Perfume River! These entrepreneurial women with their unique commercial talent! If anyone has understood the idea of private initiative, they have! With a minimum investment they are able to build their own business from the ground, become independent and strong, working their way up from the bottom, maybe one day to become the owners of industrial empires, fitness clubs, and hotel-franchises! Wonderful, isn't it?"

Well, sort of. It is definitely true that the majority of the street vendors are women. It is also true that the myth about small-scale businesses being the best way to climb the social ladder has been floating like a red balloon above the harsh reality for a long time - a balloon that has been shut down recently by a study conducted by an independent gender research centre (CGFED, refer to the story about Madame Tuyet). The study shows that the Vietnamese female street vendor, whether she carries her burden in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City or Hue, and despite walking thousands of miles in the streets, has not gotten one step closer to a life as a diamond-flashing millionaire or a wealthy hotel owner. On the contrary, she is impoverished, degraded and worn-down, and the majority of these women are unable to earn enough dong to rent even a piece of the pavement. The street vendor is a loser, only one step above the prostitute. She is a doormat. No one offers her protection, not even the police or the judicial system.

But Lan knew none of this when she arrived in Hanoi four or five months ago, a naïve 22-year-old girl from the country. Just like in the fairytales, she had gone out into the world to try her fortune, because the riches were found in the city, not back home in the village where the small piece of land could not sustain a family of five growing children. Being the second oldest, Lan was pushed from the nest; now she had to learn to fly. According to relatives, she could earn enough in Hanoi to send money back home. Of course, one day she would return, as the stay in the city was only to be temporary, a necessary evil that simply had to be endured. Lan's heart has not left her hometown in the Ha Tinh province located near the ocean, 300 kilometres away. There, the family is still growing rice, sweet potatoes and peanuts. And her boyfriend is from there, too— that is, if

he is still her boyfriend. Her fiancé...he has moved to Ho Chi Minh City and might be working at some kind of cafeteria, she has been told. She doesn't exactly know, since she has lost touch with him. Now she worries that he might have forgotten about her and is looking at other girls, fancy city girls like the ones who keep roaring past her on their chic Honda-Dream motorcycles while she trudges up and down the streets with her baskets, feeling the weight all the way down to her tired feet.

Lan is the third street vendor we try to contact. The first two scurry away, frightened, when the interpreter approaches them. I am unsure why Lan, who seems as fearful as the others, agrees to accompany us to a humble café. Perhaps she is simply used to obeying. Perhaps she is curious. And perhaps sitting on blue plastic stools, drinking sugarcane-juice and talking to a western reporter is, after all, a welcome break in a monotonous routine, a luxury (merely to sit down!) that normally she cannot afford. Things didn't turn out like she had hoped. Life in the street — from dawn till dusk, seven days a week — is no picnic. It is hard, much harder both mentally and physically than she had imagined, she confides in us as we begin to converse.

Her voice is feeble and prattling, like a child's. The questions make her squirm with embarrassment and her eyes flutter, seeking her hands before she answers. And just like me, who is virtually choking from the humid heat, she is sweating. Pearls of perspiration line her upper lip and her hair sticks to her brow. Yes, she nods, it feels very hot to be carrying the yoke in this heat. And yet it's only April, summer hasn't even begun....Then the conversation halts. And when I try to kick-start it by asking her to talk about her life and her days, her only response is a self-conscious giggle. What is there to tell....?

Just tell what it's like to be a street vendor? How is your day?

I give her a smile of support and encourage her to drink her juice, which she has barely touched. Carefully she brings the glass to her lips, puts it back down and begins to speak. The words come in stutters, reluctant, as though she won't admit to this life that should have been so different. And, indeed, what's the fun of acknowledging one's defeats? Of verbalising one's disappointments? This is not something she likes to talk about, how it turned out. About the mattress, her only zone of privacy, that she rents in a room upstairs from the Dung-Sung market, for example. About the thirty vendors who room there, which is sort of practical because she buys her groceries wholesale at the market early in the morning.

"I get up at five. Each morning I'm afraid to sleep late. As soon as I am up, I hurry to the market to shop. Mangos, oranges, plums - it depends on the season, but I try to have the same selection every day because of the regular customers. The shopping itself takes a couple of hours, and only when that is done do I eat breakfast - sticky rice at 1000 dong. Then I go out into the streets. I don't walk any regular route, but chose the busiest streets. Sometimes when it's hot like today, the demand is very low and I may walk for a long time without selling anything. I am not allowed to sit down; it's against the law. If we are caught sitting down, the people who own the stands there push us away or the police arrive. Both scenarios are very unpleasant. Around noon I stop for lunch. Either I buy a dish of noodles at a street kitchen or eat rice at a cheap restaurant. Afterwards I rest for a bit in the shade in one of the places where we know we are allowed to sit. It might be beneath a tree or against a tall building. Us vendors meet there and chat about this and

that; about business, about our families at home, things like that. I like that. We tease each other, laugh and have a good time. Once in a while I catch a short nap. But around two-two-thirty it's back up again. I stay out in the streets the whole day until I have sold out. You see, the food cannot be stored. It needs to be fresh. Most of the time I am off around eight or nine p.m. Sometimes a few of us cook together at our room. Once in a while, if I'm off early, I watch a bit of TV. But usually I go to bed right after dinner. No later than ten o'clock. I am so exhausted that I fall asleep right away. The last thing I think about before going to sleep are the people at home. I am always homesick before going to sleep. I miss my mother in particular. I save and save in order to send money back home to my family. The hostess holds it for me. "

"What do you think about during the day?"

"Oh, I worry about my future. I'm afraid of what will happen. I really want to go back and live the rest of my life in the village. Here in the city I feel lonely; you have to fight alone, fight for yourself all the time. We're also exposed to awful things— people steal from us, hit and assault us. If we report it to the police it only gets worse. Either they beat us, give us a fine or take both our baskets and our merchandise. It is very draining to be here, but I have to. Until one day maybe I will get married to someone from back home and we could get our own home. That's what I dream about. But I also know that I could still be forced to go back to the city. In case we couldn't make enough money from farming. That's what some of the women I know here have had to do. They only go back to see their husband and their children a couple of times a year. It's horrible, but what are they to do? That's the way it is."

"When are you most happy?"

Lan's face lights up in a smile that could melt a glacier. That is a question she knows how to answer!

"Oh, when I'm home on a visit and finally reunite with my family, my parents and my siblings, and we all sit around the dinner table again. Then I am happy!"

"What else do you like?"

"I love the flowers and the birds and the sea. When I was in school we often went swimming. Sometimes we went on trips and were allowed to skip classes and to swim and have fun instead. That's how it is now, too, when we get together at home, me and my old friends from back then. Then we go to the ocean together. It's wonderful."

"What is your take on the relationship between the sexes?"

The boys are better off than the girls. They are treated better, sometimes even spoiled. They get what they want! Being a girl that can seem unfair, but on the other hand, maybe it's okay because it is the son's duty to care for his parents when they are old. Therefore he needs the best conditions."

How many children would you like to have?

"Only two. I can't afford any more."

Have you received any information about birth control?

Lan shakes her head in the negative.

"Only from the media and such. Personally I have never received any kind of counselling."

Do you know how to avoid having more than two children?

"No, I don't."

Apologetically, she shrugs, unsure of whether she has been sleeping in class. The college-educated interpreter gazes at the ceiling. I suppress an inappropriate smile and think about the high number of Vietnamese abortions and about the Vietnamese man who is "obsessed with sex!" according to a female UN-observer.

Do you know anyone who has had an abortion?

"Yes, one girl who had sex before marriage. She had an abortion. That's something we are afraid of. Abortions."

What is your biggest wish in the world? If you won five million dong, how would you spend it?

"I would give it to my parents. They would have to decide how to spend the money. I have no dreams of owning a motorcycle or a house or anything like that. Not at all. I only wish to be able to go home and live a peaceful life in the country. But if I had to stay in the city I would like to have a small stand or a steady stall at the market. Or maybe a street kitchen. But I am not sure I dare become self-employed. You have to be strong in order to run your own business. I am not very clever. I dropped out of school early. My grades were poor, so it was no use continuing."

If you could ask anything of the government, what would it be? If you could improve your situation?

"We should have some rights, us vendors. So that those who assault or rob us could be punished. The police should not be allowed to bother us either."

Lan's voice fades. She has nothing more to add. And now she would like to get back into the street again. She has to take care of business. At my request, the interpreter discreetly puts a bill in her hand. 50,000 dong or xx dollars. It is almost twice the daily earnings of approximately 30,000 dong. She accepts the money without batting an eyelid. Doesn't even look at the note. Just eases it into the leather pouch that is tied around her waist.

What does Lan mean ?

"Orchid."

Her smile is wiped off as she gets up and moves into the street. Out here on the broken pavement she places the yoke with the two baskets back on her shoulders in an expert move and quickly disappears, bouncing busily among the colourful throng of the city. The heat is still stifling, the noise from scooters and horns infernal. Breathing heavily, I jump into an air-conditioned car and ask the driver to turn up the fan. I suddenly see her at a crossing. I wave, but either she doesn't see me or she ignores me. It is two o'clock in the afternoon. She still has at least five more hours in the street. And God knows how many years.