

The Last Pigeon

The Last Pigeon

An Essay for Empty-Nesters

Vui Le

The Last Pigeon

The Last Pigeon stood at the edge of the nest taking in the vastness of the open sky beyond the old branch of the oak tree. Ever since birth, he had stayed inside the nest. It was small, but he felt safe and secured in it. When it rained, Momma Pigeon and Daddy Pigeon always took turns to keep the nest dry and clean. Many times, Daddy Pigeon had chased the old squirrel away, when he ventured too close. And many times, Momma Pigeon took the far corner of the nest and used her body to block the stormy gusts of wind. He, his Brother Pigeon and Sister Pigeon were never in any real danger in this nest on this old branch of the oak tree.

His Brother Pigeon and Sister Pigeon had recently left the nest. He remembered the day his Sister Pigeon took her first flight. It was a beautiful day, when she took off. Her wings were wide and powerful. She flew west and the wind lifted her high onto the clear sky. From the nest, he caught the sight of her flight all the way until she disappeared behind the trees. He was sad, but Momma Pigeon stayed close to the nest and comforted him.

Shortly afterward, Brother Pigeon took his first flight as well. He was strong and beautiful. His feather was straight and shiny. He was taller than the Last Pigeon, and his wings were wider. From the old branch, he flew north. His flaps were powerful, and in no time, he too disappeared beyond the trees. The Last Pigeon missed his Brother Pigeon and Sister Pigeon so much, but he too wanted to fly just as they did.

Each day the Last Pigeon grew bigger, stronger and braver. Momma and Daddy Pigeons had fed him

well, and recently, the old nest just seemed too small for him. More and more, he wanted to fly as Brother Pigeon and Sister Pigeon did. He even made up his mind about flying north on his first flight.

This was the day. All morning Daddy Pigeon had been flying back and forth between the old branch and the brick fence. Each time, the Last Pigeon watched in increased fascination. And he wanted to fly this day.

Standing on the old branch, Momma Pigeon nudged him slightly, and then she took off to join Daddy Pigeon at the fence. It was a beautiful summer morning; the sky was blue and clear all the way to the horizon. The air was clean and fresh. A light breeze blew in from the south promising a good day to fly.

The Last Pigeon hopped carefully out of the nest. He stretched his wings and was surprise to see how far he could reach. His feather was smooth and shiny, and his tail was straight and long. He was pleased with the way he looks, and it reminded him of Brother and Sister Pigeons.

There, on the old solid branch of the oak tree, the koi pond below seemed so precariously large and deep. For months, he has been watching the baby koi swimming, eating and growing from the comfort of his own nest. Now standing on the branch, he noticed how the baby koi seemed so lively and happy, as they darted back and forth in the clear reflecting water. He felt confident. Something inside him has taught him how to balance on the tree branch. The wind rattled the leaves at the outer branch and slightly rocked the branch back and

forth, but his feet were firmly planted on the branch. He felt good.

The urge to fly was too powerful for him. He had observed how Daddy Pigeon took flight, and he has long been admiring the graceful way that Momma Pigeon landed. And lately, every time the wind blew, his urge to fly increased.

Momma Pigeon gave him a quiet call urging him to join her on the fence. Daddy Pigeon had flown to a branch of the pear tree nearby and stood guard. He had watched out for the old squirrel and Lacy the Girl Dog all morning. The old squirrel was too lazy to bother the nest anymore, but Lacy the Girl Dog was unpredictable. Every time the home owner let Lacy out, she raced around the backyard in full speed looking and chasing squirrels. She had never caught any squirrels, but she sure enjoyed the chase. Lacy the Girl Dog knew to leave birds alone. She was a nice dog. Yet Daddy Pigeon stood guard nearby. The Last Pigeon wanted to make Momma Pigeon and Daddy Pigeon proud, and he sure was glad that Daddy Pigeon was nearby, just in case.

The Last Pigeon took in a long deep breath. The warm air filled up his body and made him feel lighter. He gave his wings a light shake and was pleased to see how far he can stretch them out. He looked at Momma Pigeon and she gave him a slight smile. He bent his knees slightly the way Daddy Pigeon always does, and he extended his wings forward and flapped. With that simple motion, he was in the air. Another small quick flap of his wings and he glided smoothly through the air. His wings steadied him as his legs naturally folded into his body. He breathed in more air and it made him feel lighter. Several more flaps and he was already at

the fence. He extended his wings wide to catch in more air and unfolded his legs. In his excitement, he landed hard onto the concrete fence. It was his first landing and it was not anything resembled the graceful way Momma Pigeon always does, but he landed on the fence next to his mother the way he wished.

Momma Pigeon hopped next him and rubbed her neck against the feather of his neck. She was so proud and so happy to see his first flight. Daddy Pigeon joined them on the fence. He too was proud. The Last Pigeon stood tall. He was a beautiful bird. All of his feather were in place, smooth and shinny. He stood a good head taller than Momma Pigeon and his wings were wider. His slender body was ideal for flying.

The south wind picked up gently and he again wanted to fly. The old tree branch thirty feet away seemed so small and insignificant, and he could barely make out the old nest edged into the trunk of the old oak tree. The pond now seems so small, and he already felt sad for the koi fish that can never leave that circle of water.

Beyond the fence, the wide open sky beckoned him to take flight. He could see the green leaves rattled by the wind miles away luring him into the air. The warm air seemed to embrace and uplift him. The sun shone brightly upon him and beckoned him to take to the air.

The Last Pigeon glanced at Daddy Pigeon, and then he gently looked at Momma Pigeon. Mama Pigeon gave him a slight nod of approval. And with that he bent his knees, breathed in the air and swung wide his wings. In seconds, the warm air lifted him high

in the morning sky. The air in his lungs expanded to lighten up his body. He folded his legs and flapped his wings, and let the air current carried him higher and higher. He glanced back to the brick fence where Momma Pigeon and Daddy Pigeon still stood together watching. They seemed so small and he could no longer tell the differences among the old oak trees any more. And he wondered if he would or could ever find the old nest again.

A strong gust of wind lifted him higher and carried him farther north. With each flap of his powerful wings, he was flying farther and higher. He felt good. He was doing what he was born to do.

The Last Pigeon was born to fly.

Back at the brick fence, Momma Pigeon and Daddy Pigeon stood together silently watching, until the Last Pigeon was just a small dot in the clear blue sky before the warm summer air embraced and carried him away beyond the tree line on the horizon.

Daddy Pigeon nudged Momma Pigeon slightly, as she stood looking into the direction of the Last Pigeon. Her shoulder sunk and her head lowered. A minute passed, and together they too flew away.

The wind lightly shook the branch of the oak tree by the pond. And on it, the nest was empty.

Boston

Saturday, August 28

The Boeing 737 touched down at Logan Airport at 3:30 in the afternoon. From the first class cabin, Dung looked back and gave me a slight smile. The Continental Airlines flight from Houston International Airport to Logan International Airport of Boston took a little less than four hours, and it carried one of our most precious cargos. Sitting next to Dung was Minh, our youngest. Minh Le was going to his new home at Boston College. For the next four years, Minh would live, eat, sleep and go to school here in this city in the far northeast corner of the United States.

Minh was the youngest of our three children. His sister Van had graduated from the University of Texas in Austin more than two years ago. She did well in college and landed a good job with General Mills in Minneapolis. His brother Vinh is attending New York University in Manhattan as a junior majoring in Marketing and Brand Management. And now, it was Minh's turn to shine.

Last summer, Dung and I took Minh to Boston for his high school senior year's college day trip. We visited Northeastern University, Harvard, MIT and Boston College.

We went to Northeastern first and were impressed with the school, but it was such a turn-off, as the sophomore girl from the admission office kept yapping about how Northeastern is focusing on training its students for the job market. "What about creating a wholesome education experience?"

A well-rounded educated person?” Dung and I asked each other afterward. Minh was quiet; he did not have much to say.

At Harvard, Dung and I fell in love with the school. The campus was peaceful and beautiful. The resident dormitories, buildings and classrooms projected an air of commitment to excellence. We have read and heard about this great school, and it felt even more grandeur when we walked the campus. Harvard took the candidates and their parents seriously, and it put up a great session for us. All three of us were impressed with the ways Harvard paid attention to its students and their lives at the school and beyond. Dung and I liked the ways the school would help the parents financially. Minh was quiet throughout; perhaps he did not want to raise his hope for such prestigious school.

MIT was a bust. The school located right in the middle of a busy part of town with buildings and classrooms scattered throughout the business district. It did not look like a university and most certainly did not feel like one either. It took us a long time to find the admission office, and when we get there, no one was around. We picked up some brochures and materials and walked around the “campus”.

The school was a series of buildings, and the classrooms were mostly laboratories. MIT felt like a glorified research lab for the government and businesses. We did not bother to hang out and wait for the recruiting session; instead, we went to Fenway Baseball Park and took a tour of this famous stadium.

Boston College was great. The Catholic Jesuit campus located at the end of the Green T (Transit train line from Boston) on a heavily wooded hill called Chestnut Hill. We took the B line to the campus, walked up the hill to the main entrance, and strolled down the shaded avenue among gothic buildings and serene churches. The folks at the admission office made us feel right at home. They had staffs and students welcome us, and they had four current junior and senior students lined up on stage to answer our questions during the session.

“How come y’all are New Englanders? Do y’all take people from out of state?” Minh raised his hand and asked.

Everyone in the session including the staffs, students, parents and candidates were falling out laughing.

“Aw, I loved the way you guys say “y’all” down south.” One of the girls on the stage commented. Yet it took them a long second to realize that everyone there were very much from the northeast of the US.

The admission counselor asked, “Where are you from?”

“Houston, Texas.” Minh said proudly.

“Yes, we have a few people from Texas here at our school.” But she could not remember how many. From her smile, I could tell that she was thinking, “Wow, a Texan-Asian student!”

The folks at Boston College were first class. They gave us a full tour of their beautiful school. They

talked about their Jesuit educational values. And they emphasized the importance of creating in their students a complete person. Dung and I loved this school. Minh did too, even though he did not admit it out loud.

None of our three children had gone to any private grade schools or Catholic high schools, but both Dung and I had quietly wished that at least one of them would experience the Catholic education that we both had had the privilege of experience, while we were growing up in Vietnam.

For high school in Vietnam, Dung attended a famous Catholic high school in Saigon called Saint Paul High School. St. Paul was an all-girl private school taught by Catholic nuns. It was the school where the rich and famous families of South Vietnam sent their children. The nuns were known for strict discipline and the school was known for its stringent curriculum all taught in French language. Most kids graduated from St. Paul went on to study abroad in Europe. Few of them ever came back to Vietnam.

As for me, I attended Thanh-Linh grade school near Cho-Lon. It was a private Catholic boarding school also taught by nuns. Then I went on to An-Phong Hoc-Vien, a Catholic Seminary in Thu-Duc, not so far from Saigon.

Both Dung and I valued our Catholic schools experience. We respected the discipline, but above all, we appreciated the unique education of the Catholic ways that were beyond the courses taught straight out of the text books. At these schools, we both had met and made good friends that we are still keeping in touch until this day.

We wished the same for all of our children. And after visiting Boston College, it was difficult to tell, if we both wanted Minh to go to BC more, or did he.

My ranking of these schools after the visit was (1) BC, (2) Harvard, (3) Northeastern and (4) MIT. Dung's ranking was different with her first preference being Harvard, then BC. But Minh still wanted to check out McGill University in Montreal first before sharing his rankings.

After the trip, Minh applied to McGill and Boston College. And for back-up, he also applied for UT Austin. I asked him to apply to Dung's and my alma mater Texas A&M University, but he refused.

In the fall of 2009, Dung took Minh up to Montreal, Canada, to tour McGill University. It was cold. But Minh liked it. He wanted to study Linguistics and take a minor in Mathematics at McGill University. Dung and I were quietly worried about the financial aids of a foreign school.

To all of our surprise, McGill answered Minh's application first, and they put him on a waitlist. Minh was greatly disappointed, but Dung and I were not overly sad about it. Then UT also put Minh on a waitlist too, because they had received his application late due to a late submission of his SAT scores by the testing company. Dung was very worried, and I called the admission office of UT and filed a formal complaint, since the situation was not of Minh's fault. I also called several folks I knew that were involved with the school to ask them to intervene. It was hard for an Aggie to push so hard for UT to admit one of our kids, but Dung and I

both did everything we can. The answer from UT was “There is nothing that we can do.”

Our prayers were answered, when Boston College accepted Minh.

By May 2010 and before Minh’s high school graduation, both McGill and UT extended their offers for Minh to join their freshman class. Minh declined both offers. He had made up his mind about Boston College. Minh was determined to be one of the BC Eagles.

Since that November morning when he received the acceptance letter from Boston College, Minh was ready. He has seen and helped us move his older sister Van to college at UT Austin. Then couple years ago, he flew to New York with us and helped his older brother Vinh move into the dorm at New York University. Minh was no stranger to growing up and going to college; and he was anxious for his turn.

The last couple weeks in Houston, Minh quitted his job at Abercrombie and spent more time with his friends. Unlike his popular brother and sister, Minh was quiet and measured. His manager and friends at work loved him, and they often hung out after work. When he got home, he often stayed up all night chatting online with them. Dung and I could hear him laughing and chatting all night long, even with his bedroom door closed.

Minh started to pack his belongings early. He told Dung that he only needs one suit case, not like his older siblings who needed many suitcases for their moves. Dung gave him the biggest Samsonite that

we got, but I also put another large one at the end of stairs, in case he needed it.

Minh packed well. When I came into his room to check on the Thursday before we left, his one suitcase was heavy and bursting at the seam. And his carry-on duffle bag too was packed heavy and solid. I took the large suitcase that he left standing at the foot of the stairs and asked him to re-pack. "Balance the loads", I told him. Then I get another medium size suitcase and asked him to use it for his electronic stuffs. Of course, Minh said that he would not need it.

On Saturday's morning, we loaded two large suitcases, one medium size one, one large carton box filled with his bed and linen stuffs, one large duffle bag and his backpack into our family car. All of them were Minh's "stuffs". Two small carry-ons for Dung and me, and Minh had barely enough room in the back seat of the car on the way to the airport. Dung said, "Whatever else Minh needs, we can buy them in Boston."

Because of Dung's and my Continental frequent flyer status, we both got upgraded to First Class for the flight to Boston. First Class passengers can have two free check baggages, so we did not have to pay any extras. Meanwhile Minh used my ticket and sat proudly next to his Mom in the First Class cabin. Continental fed him well and he had choices of up to 60 channels from DirecTV on the new airplane. He seemed happy when we landed in Boston.

We got to the DoubleTree Hotel at five o'clock. The hotel located in Downtown Boston south of Chinatown. I found the hotel luggage cart, loaded

our baggage and told Dung and Minh to go to the second floor to check us in.

As Dung and Minh walked pass the lobby, there they were. Van and Vinh were sitting in the lobby of the DoubleTree waiting for our arrival. Dung was shocked, but her smile was wide. Minh too was happy to see his brother and sister in Boston.

Van, Vinh and Minh

Early in July, Van called me and pointed out that Dung's birthday is the Friday prior to our trip to move Minh to BC. Van told me that she wanted to do something special for her mom, to cheer her up for the tough week ahead in Boston.

Van was growing up to be so much like Dung. They both had this deep and sincere caring for other people. And they both loved to travel. For years, wherever we went, Dung would buy these little gifts for her friends and families. Either a Japanese wooden statue for her sister, a shot glass that said Paris for her co-worker, or a scarf from Italy for her friend, Dung always found the right gifts to bring back for her folks. Van started to do the same. I got General Mills shirts from her. Her Momma and her brothers all received gifts from wherever she travelled.

Last year, Van came back from Minnesota to surprise Dung on her birthday. I had to keep that secret from Dung for a month and went to pick Van up from the airport without Dung's knowing. Dung was so surprise and happy to see Van, and it was one of her best birthday's gifts ever. Dung truly appreciated what Van did for her. Minh and I were glad to see Van and appreciated Van's gesture as well.

Throughout the year, Van sent care packages of foods to Vinh at school and her Grandma in San Jose, California. She gave Vinh spending money and visited him in NYC. When my former teacher Priest came to the US, she helped me with tickets for his travelling. And at work, Van spearheaded

the efforts between General Mills and CARE to sponsor villages in Africa. Her charity work for Africa women and children earned her a photo on the Company's Wheaties Cereal Box.

Van worked hard at her job, yet she truly enjoyed her life. She travelled well throughout the country for work and for pleasure. General Mills had promoted her several times, and she had gone above and beyond to volunteer for many charitable works on the behalf of the company.

When I was invited to give a speech at a charity in Minnesota, Van picked me up at the airport and went with me to the event. She took me out to dinner and gave me tour of her workplace. Throughout the visit, Van would not let me pay for anything.

Just like her mother, Van was ambitious. Every day after work, she studied for her GMAT. She wanted to pursue a MBA at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. Her dream was to run a charity organization one day.

To surprise her mom this time, Van flew into New York City first and spent a day with Vinh. She took her brother out to eat and spent time with him and his friends. Then the next day, both of them took the bus from Manhattan to Boston to wait for our arrival.

Dung was so surprise to see Van and Vinh in the lobby of the hotel.

“What are you guys doing here? Are you lost?”
Dung asked.

“No, Momma. We both are here for your birthday.” Van replied. “I went to New York, picked up Vinh and brought him here.”

Lots of hugs and kisses, and Dung was so happy. The long trip did not bother her anymore, and she was smiling and talking up a storm with Van and Vinh. Minh too was happy to see his brother and sister.

“Need any help with the luggage, Dad?” Vinh asked from the stairways.

I looked up and said, “No, I can handle these. Help your mom check in, Vinh.”

Our second child Vinh was now a grown man. He stood a good head above Dung. Skinny but good looking, Vinh possessed a gentle smile with deep dimples from his mother.

Vinh spent the last spring semester in Florence, Italy, as part of the study-abroad program at NYU. Had never made a B in his academic life, Vinh was really thriving at Stern Business School at NYU. Every semester, the Dean at Stern sent us commendation letters and notified us that Vinh had again made the Dean List.

At first, Vinh wanted to go to France, since many of his friends were going to study abroad there. And Dung also had families that live in Paris. But somehow, he did not make the list. NYU gave him his second choice to go to Florence, and they also let him be the Resident Assistant (RA) for the semester. As an RA, Vinh would receive free room and board during the semester in Florence. Vinh was not happy about this second choice at all, but

we were pleased about the free room and board as an RA for Vinh. In fact, the first week in Italy, he was miserable. But then, as days went on, he really liked the place, the school and the friends he made in Italy.

Vinh studied hard, learned a bit of Italian, travelled well throughout Europe; and best of all, he made great friends during his stay in Florence. Vinh posted a photo blog on the Internet of his study-abroad experience and his adventures throughout Europe. Dung and I followed his blog and enjoyed the photos tremendously. There was great joy to see our son embraced his freedom and independence in a foreign land.

Upon getting back to the States, Vinh spent his summer in New York. He took couple courses during summer school and worked an intern job as well as another job at J Crew for extra money. Vinh loved New York City. This Largest City in the World has so much to offer him and he enjoyed everything it had to offer.

More than two years ago, when Vinh was a senior at Cy-Fair High School, he received many invitations from top universities in the nation to join them. His SAT scores and his leadership in the Cy-Fair Choir gave him many choices to go to excellent colleges. Excellent in Math and Science, but Vinh wanted to study Business.

“You should check out New York University, Vinh.” I told him one day at our dinner table. “It is the top liberal arts school in the country and it could give you many opportunities in the future.”

“Yea, Dad.” Vinh replied in his typical teenager manner.

But for the College Day trip, Vinh told Dung that he wanted to visit Columbia and NYU in New York City. So we all went school shopping in NYC.

Dung used the Hilton points that we had collected over the year to put us at the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan. We walked down to the Marriott on Times Square and got discount tickets for *Wicked* and *Hair Spray*.

“Let’s make it a mini vacation,” Dung said, “the kids would enjoy their trip to the Big Apple.” And that was how we all looked at the trip.

Vinh did not like Columbia University. It located in the upper west side of Manhattan, in a not so great neighborhood. The school is surrounded by high walls of concrete with iron gates separated the students from the nearby communities. The folks at Columbia talked about its business, engineering and medical programs; but they failed to attract Vinh.

After the visit to Columbia, we went out for a fancy dinner and attended a play called *Wicked*. We toured Times Square and walked down to see the world largest Macy’s Department Stores. We also checked out many souvenir stores along Broadway Avenue. New York in early spring was great. People from all over the world cramped onto the sidewalks, hustling, taking pictures, rushing back and forth as though they know where they want to go and cannot wait to get there.

Vinh and Van loved New York City. Minh was tagging along happily. And Dung and I were just so happy to see the family together.

The next morning, we got to NYU early. We walked down the streets along the buildings of the campus at the heart of Greenwich Village right at the center of Manhattan. NYU was impressive. Its buildings edged along the major thoroughfares of NY City, yet it maintained the air of a prestigious university. It was like the University of Texas in Austin with buildings stacking on top of each other into high rises.

At the session, the junior student majored in Business with a minor in Music talked on and on about the greatness of NYU. On the front seat, I was thinking about lunch and perhaps where to go for dinner. Vinh and Van sat attentive and followed every word about this great school.

“Mom, I think Vinh really likes this school.” Van whispered to Dung mid way through the session. She glanced at Vinh, as he sat mesmerized about the presentation.

“This is it, Mom.” Vinh declared to Dung after the session, “This is the school I want to go to.” He smiled broadly like a little kid that had finally found his toys. And we have not even gone to see the residence halls yet.

The rest of the trip was history. While Dung and I had quietly hoped that Vinh would follow his sister’s footsteps and enroll into the University of Texas at Austin. McCombs Business School at UT is one of the top colleges in the nation. And it is much closer to home. But seeing the excitement

and happiness in Vinh's eyes, we knew that there was no other school for Vinh.

Vinh applied for early admission at NYU and did not care for any back-up plans. He got accepted and put the NYU sticker on the back of his car's window the next day. I don't know if he could be any prouder than Dung and me.

For the past two years, New York University had been good and treated Vinh well. A budding teenager had grown into a mature and educated young man. Vinh carried with him now an air of gentleness that was elusive when he was a high school kid. His earlier cockiness was replaced with modest confidence. It was the confidence of a young man that knows what he wants and how to get it.

But this summer was tough upon Vinh. Dung and I were not able to financially support him as we had done before, so Vinh worked several jobs while attending summer school. For the last couple weeks, he had to lodge with his buddies in a cramped apartment near 9th Street while waiting for the Fall Semester to begin. This summer was particularly hot in NYC and it was obvious that Vinh had not eaten well.

"Vinh is so skinny." Dung whispered sadly to me after the children had gotten out of the elevator. "Perhaps he didn't have enough money to eat." The concern in her voice sunk my heart. I held her hands and kissed them. But how do you kiss away a mother's concern?

Our three children were so glad to see each other. They did not mind the tiny space of the hotel room.

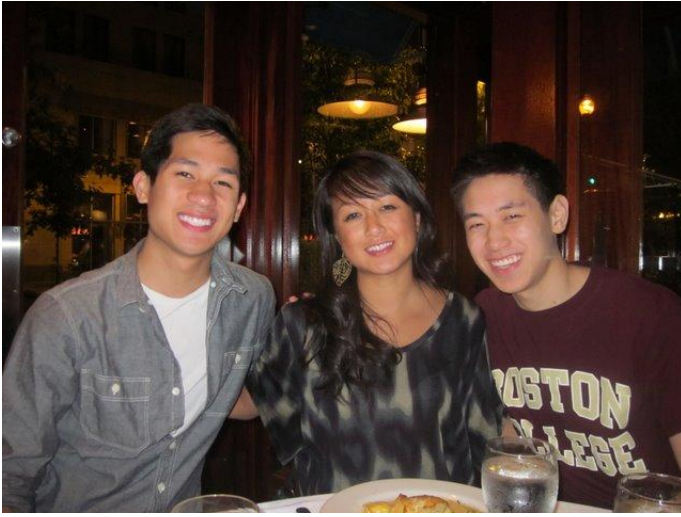
Vinh was on the roll-in bed; while Minh, Dung and Van rested on the king size bed, as I sat on the chair by the desk pretending to work yet enjoying the chit-chat going back and forth among them.

Van had reserved a table for us at one of Boston's finest restaurants, The Atlantic Fish Company, and at 8 o'clock, we strolled down Boylston Avenue enjoying the first evening in Minh's new city.

Lily Tran, the daughter of our long time friends Thanh and Nga from here in Houston, met us at the restaurant. Lily is a sophomore at MIT, which located not too far from Downtown Boston. Lily loved MIT and Boston. She had stayed at her aunt's house in Boston this summer while attending summer school. She knew Boston well, and we felt good that at least Minh has a friend in his new town. Lily was a smart and pretty little lady; she majored in Neuro Sciences and planned to get her PhD from MIT. Nga and Thanh had great reasons to be very proud of her.

Dinner was good. And Van ordered the wait staff to bring out a small birthday cake for Dung at the end. A proud mother surrounded by her family and friend, Dung was in heaven. Again, Van has outdone herself on this birthday for Dung.

The Last Pigeon



Vinh, Van and Minh

Boston College



Freshman Michael Minh Le

Sunday, August 29

On Sunday's morning, we walked down to China Town to check out Pho Pasteur that Van and Vinh had found on Washington Street the day earlier. But it was too early; instead we grabbed a quick breakfast at the nearby McDonalds. I made the point to go back later.

After breakfast, we loaded Minh's luggage onto a cab and headed out to Boston College. Boston College is located in Chestnut Hill, six and a half mile from Downtown Boston, but it could have been on another planet. Away from the crowded and dirty China Town, Boston College was pristinely clean. The hillside air was fresh, and rows and rows of old oak trees extended out to shade the wide streets of the serene campus making the

campus an oasis out of the concrete jungle called Boston.

The cab dropped us in front of Loyola Dormitory. Dung went down to the Welcome Center at the foot of the hill and checked Minh in quickly. Loyola Dormitory was one of four connected dorms, and it was an older dorm with a majestic facade on top of the hill. Inside, like all other dorm rooms, Room 218 was small.

Minh's dorm room was about 12 feet by 13 feet. Two twin size beds set against the walls. Small closet opened out on each side of the entry door. By the windows, there were two small desks and two small dresser drawers. On one side, a lateral bookshelf lined the wall above one of the beds. No air conditioning. No fans. And the communal bathroom was down the hall. That was it. This is Minh's and his roommate's new room for the next ten months.



Loyola Dorm

With Van's and Vinh's help, Minh unpacked, had his bed made and his stuffs in order in less than 30 minutes. The building had wireless Internet, and it took no time for Minh to sign on. Van made a list of things that Minh needs for his new dorm including snacks, drinks, a fan and a TV. His roommate was to bring a small refrigerator.

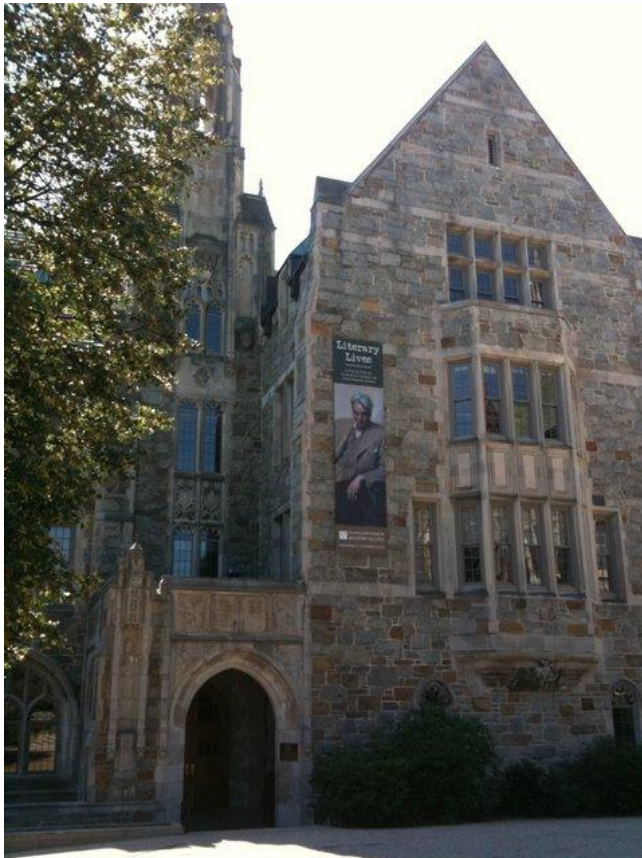
We left the hot dorm room and walked the campus. Minh's dorm sat on an area called "upper campus", which composed of more than half dozen dormitory buildings in similar architectural styles. These dorms situated at the far southwest corner of the BC campus, and they were dedicated to co-ed freshman housing. While the hallways, lounges and entrances were air conditioned, the dorm rooms themselves were not. I guessed that the folks in Boston have little use for AC the ways we Houstonians cannot live without.

From the hill, we descended down a series of steps to the Main Campus. A grand open green area called the "Dust Bowl" sat at the center of the campus. Around the Dust Bowl were stately academic buildings, dining halls, libraries, and chapels. Apple trees, grand oaks and magnificent maples dotted the entire area giving it a sense of peace and community.

Past the Dust Bowl, more splendid chapels, more libraries mixed in with beautiful administration and student services buildings. On the far end, the gigantic Boston College football stadium sunk down along the hillside and surrounded by other recreational facilities. The main administration building, which used to be a gothic cathedral, stood magnificently at the end of two rows of grand oak trees welcoming students and families coming in

from the main entrance. On one side was another gothic church that was converted into a library; the opposite side was the residences of the Jesuit priests, who lived and taught at BC.

Further down more steps beside the main library were the theater and auditorium and more academic buildings. Along the main street were more upper classmen dormitories. And located at the far northeast corner of the campus was St. Ignatius Church. The end of the Green T Line was only steps across Commonwealth Avenue from the church.



Admission Office

We stopped at one of the 11 dining halls on Campus and ate lunch. The foods were good and hot and the place was crowded. Football cheerleaders coming out from practice were at the table next to us. The people we came across were nice and polite. Many parents ate lunch with their children. Many of these kids were at the verge of independence, yet they all seemed so young.

After lunch, Van and Vinh took the train back to town. Vinh was going back to NYC to prepare for his own upcoming NYU freshmen orientation, in which he was the upper-classman Team Leader. Van went back to town to visit her friends at Harvard.

“Would you be back here to see me tomorrow, Van?” Minh asked.

“No,” Van answered, “I will help Mom shop for your stuffs tomorrow, and then I have to go back to Minnesota for work. You’ll be OK here.” She gave Minh a long hug. Minh was acting cool with an awkward smile on his face.

“Call me if you need anything.” And with that Van and Vinh took off.

Minh, Dung and I went upstairs to register and pick up our welcoming packages. We then went back up the hill to Minh’s dorm.

At the dorm, Minh set up his brand new Apple MacBook Pro and printer. Right away, he was online with his high school friends from Texas. He video-chatted with them and showed them his dorm room. They in turn did the same. It was crazy cool to see how our children use technologies.

At 5 o'clock, we went to the Welcoming Mass at St. Ignatius. The church was beautiful and packed with parents and students from all over the world. Father Joseph Marchese, the Director of First Year Experience at BC, celebrated the Mass and welcomed everyone.

During Mass, when he said, "We welcome your sons and daughters into our family. Please rest assured that we will take good care of them." Dung cried.

After the Mass, the entire group of 1,500 parents and students of Orientation Session 7 went to McElroy Commons for dinner. The foods were excellent, and meeting with the other parents and students sitting at our table was fun. Sitting next to us were folks from Wisconsin, Hawaii, Florida and California. By the conversations, we could tell that these folks take the education of their children seriously. They were mostly well to do folks that care deeply about their children.

Minh met other students his own age at the table. They talked and got along quickly. It felt good to see our youngest open up to new experiences and new people.

After dinner, the students got to go to their sessions. Minh rushed out with his newly made friends. Dung and I took a cab back to the hotel.

Orientation

Monday, August 30

We skipped Orientation on Monday. Instead, Van, Dung and I ate pho at Pho Pasteur in China Town, then we took the train cross town to Target to shop for Minh. The list from Minh was long. Lots of school supplies. A TV, a fan, a pair of flip-flops, a shower caddy for the communal bathroom, soap, shampoo... And Dung also bought lots of snacks and drinks for Minh. A runner from Target hauled us and our stuffs back to Minh's dorm, where we unloaded quickly and headed back to town. Van texted Minh, while he was in sessions, to let him know that we had delivered lots of stuffs to his room.

After lunch at Neptune Oyster, Van left for the airport that afternoon to go back to Minnesota. Dung was sad, and we both were grateful for the caring and compassion she had shown for her brothers. We were so pleased to see that Van had matured into a caring and loving person. I was also glad to see that Van had developed good organization skills to master her schedule, organize and plan birthday party for her mom, bring the boys together, and still help her mom with things to do.

That night, Dung and I ate *Com Thit Nuong* at Pho Hoa in China Town and went to bed early.

Tuesday, August 31

On Tuesday, we ate breakfast at Pho Pasteur again, before taking the Green T Line back to BC. The sessions throughout the day were very informative. Boston College took great care to inform and answer every questions and concerns from the parents. Hot lunches were served to the entire group. Afterward, we caught up with Minh and went to the book store to purchase books for him.

The final session was at 3 o'clock. And BC did a great job bringing all students and parents together at the auditorium for some fun activities and funny videos of students at their respective sessions. Father Joe delivered a touching closing speech at the end.

Afterward we took Minh to Cleveland Circle, a student hang-out place near BC. We ate dinner at a pub called Ruggles; then we took the school bus back to Minh's dorm room. I brought with me a screw driver that we bought earlier from a convenience store across campus, so I proceeded to assemble the TV and the fan for Minh, while Dung sat and talked to Minh.

"Do you want us to come back tomorrow, Minh?" Dung asked.

"No, I am OK here, Mom." Minh replied, "I can hang out with my new friends here. Don't worry."

"Call us and we'll pick you and your friends up for dinner, if you like." Dung insisted.

"No. Really, I am OK."

Dung gave Minh a long hug. Her eyes were red and her voice quivered.

“Be good, Minh.” I said, “Study hard and be good. Call us if you need anything.” I patted Minh on his arm, as I led Dung down the hall. Minh stood by the door of his dorm room, his eyes too were red.

We got back to the hotel late in the evening. Dung wasn't hungry. She was sad and missing Minh already. She was sad and missing Van and Vinh as well.

Wednesday, September 01

We both slept late on Wednesday's morning. We ate at Pho Pasteur again and go back to the room for me to make a conference call. In the afternoon, we walked around Downtown Boston. Dung was sad and didn't say much.

I texted Minh and asked him if he wants to go to dinner with us. He texted back, “Yes”. I told Dung and she instantly came alive. We took the train back to BC and picked up Minh at the train station. We then took the train back in town to Government Center Station. We ate at McCormick and Schmicks. Minh ordered steak, Dung ate lobster roll, and I got some seafood pasta. The foods were good, but seeing Dung so happy to see Minh again made my day.

We took the train back and got off at our stop near China Town. Dung gave Minh another long hug before getting off the train.

“Stay on this train until you reached Reservoir Station, OK Minh?” Dung told Minh.

“OK, Mom,” Minh replied, “I know.”

“Text me and let me know that you made it to your dorm, OK?”

“OK, Mom,” Minh replied, “I will.”

With that, the train took off and Dung and I walked silently back to our hotel. I didn't know if I had done any favors for Minh or Dung by suggesting our having dinner together that evening. But I was longing to see a smile on Dung's face and I was desperate to feed Minh well one more time.

New York City

Thursday, September 02

We checked out of the DoubleTree Hotel and took the \$15 bus to NYC on Thursday's morning. The bus was nice and new and it went from Boston's China Town to Penn Station in Manhattan in three and a half hours. I took my time and started this essay on the bus, while Dung sat by my side listening to her iPod.

We got to NYC and checked in at the Hilton Garden Inn on 49th Street at Eighth Avenue. Vinh came join us after his meetings at NYU. And as promised to Vinh earlier, we set out to have dinner at the famous Smith & Wollensky on 49th and 3rd Avenue.

Vinh sat across the table from us and ordered prime ribs, a famous dish from S&W. After a long week as the Orientation Leader for new freshmen at NYU, Vinh seemed tired. His smile was still bright and it sparked the joy in his mother's eyes. Dung and Vinh talked incessantly about foods, restaurants and school.

Vinh was really enjoying his classes at NYU and he was looking forward to the new semester.

"What are you studying now, Vinh?" I asked.

"Brand Management," He answered quickly, "it is a major part of the Marketing curriculum, and it is quite interesting. My professor is well-known in the industry and he is a very interesting guy. His class is a lot of fun" Vinh smiled enthusiastically and went on about his other classes.

Our oldest son had come a long way from being a sleepy-head high school teenager to a passionate and articulate young man with interests that go beyond those of his own. He sat taller and straighter. There was an air of authority in his voice. He talked about his friends, who had received job offers from major international companies in their junior year at NYU. And I could feel the ambition in his heart.

Vinh still loved New York. He told Dung about all the new happenings in his town. And he talked about his plans for the new academic year. Dung really enjoyed the conversation. Just like Dung, Vinh was passionate in the ways of talking. His eyes spoke and his hands gestured.

Vinh assured his mom that Minh would be OK at Boston College.

“Remember how you used to worry about me coming to New York?” Vinh asked his mom, “It worked out well for me and I loved it here, Mom. Boston College is Minh’s kind of school, and he would be OK in Boston. Don’t worry, Mom. I will check in with him once in awhile.”

Dung smiled gently, and I was glad that she had heard it from Vinh. Just two years ago, we had moved Vinh into his dorm room near Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village.

That day was hot, but NYU had many students to help us out with our moving. The lines for the elevator were long with parents and students loaded with luggage. Vinh, Minh, Dung and I took the stairs up to the fourth floor carrying Vinh’s

luggage. Then we repeated the process after going to Bed, Bath and Beyond for more stuffs for his dorm room. We hung out with him until we had to leave for the airport. Dung cried in the cab from 14th Street all the way to LaGuardia Airport.

I remembered sitting next to her in the cab that day holding her hands. I could feel her anxiousness and her worries about Vinh living in such a big town. Every time a tear rolled down her face, I could hear the questions in her heart. Have we done everything we could for Vinh? Should we have spent more time with him while he was growing up? Would he be OK in this big city so far away from home?

It felt so good to hear that Vinh had recognized the love and worries in his mother's heart. And that he was mature enough to comfort her.

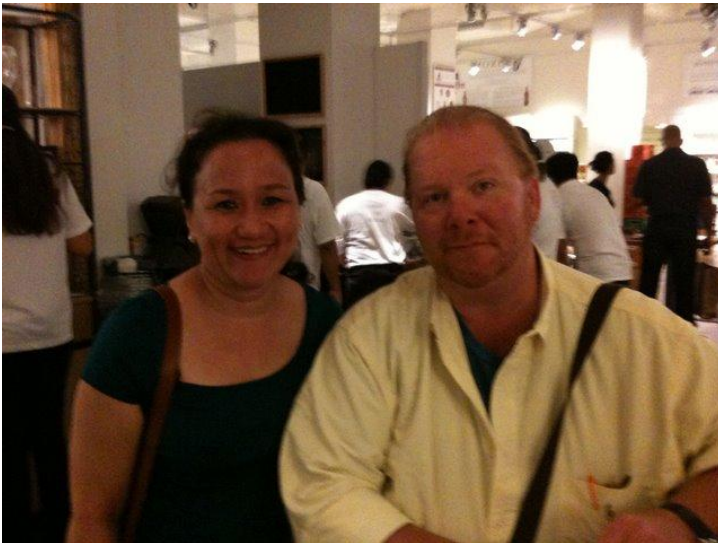
But how could anyone ever understand the feelings of a Mother, except for another mother? Who could imagine the joy of bringing a baby to life, of raising a child, of reliving your life through him? And how painful it must be to live through the transition of your child into adulthood? It must feel like losing the biggest part of yourself, because it is in fact what it is.

My grown son was becoming a compassionate man. His caring attitude toward his mother extended toward his little brother as well. Dung needed to know that Minh is going to be fine, and through his experience, Vinh had given her the assurance she needs. The two years away from home had taught Vinh well.

After dinner, Vinh walked with us back to our hotel, and then he took the subway back to his apartment.

Friday, September 03

We woke up late on Friday and ate breakfast at the hotel, and then we took the subway to Eataly, a new food market/restaurant by Chef Mario Batali, that Dung had learned from the Food Channel on TV. It located at 23rd Street at Fifth Avenue. The place had just opened since September 1st, but had already gained much publicity in the food business.



Dung and Chef Mario Batali at Eataly New York

Vinh met us there at noon, and we ate lunch at one of the restaurants inside Eataly. Vinh ordered pizza and Dung some sort of pasta. The place, the atmosphere and the foods reminded Vinh of Italy.

Vinh talked about his study abroad in Italy. He had truly enjoyed the entire experience and described it in a nostalgic tone. Dung listened tentatively and relived her past time living in Europe as well.

Afterward, we took the subway to the ferry to go to Ikea in Brooklyn to buy Vinh a bed for his new apartment. Walking pass Wall Street, I asked Vinh.

“Are you going to work here one day, Vinh?”

“No, Dad.” Vinh said, “I will be working at corporate doing Marketing, and not Trading, Dad.” He shook his head slightly, perhaps thinking what an engineer knows about marketing or business.



Vinh and Dung at the NYSE on Wall Street

The water taxi took us to the Ikea store on the Brooklyn side of New York. The trip took 20 minutes from Manhattan to Brooklyn and it passed by the Statue of Liberty on Ellis Island.

*“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”*

The Statue of Liberty and the above inscription meant so much to me as a refugee. It reminded me how my family had come to this land tired, poor and huddled and yearning to be free.

I looked at Vinh and wondered if he, Van and Minh would ever share the same sentiment. Would the prestige schools of NYU, Stanford and Boston College erase the humbled beginning, when my Mom and Dad and their eight little kids first came here as refugees from a war halfway around the world? Or would these universities help my children appreciate the background of their heritage and become fearless in reaching for the stars in all that they do?

In Brooklyn, the Ikea store was packed with parents and students buying things for their dorms. Everywhere we looked, there were out-of-stock signs, and the lines at the registers were long and slow to move. We found the bed that Vinh had earlier selected, but the mattress was out of stock. We also found a small desk and chair for him, but we finally put everything back in frustration with the mass confusion at the store.

We took the water taxi back to Manhattan and decided to go to Macy’s and look for just the mattress. Luckily, we found a set of twin mattress

and spring box on sale at a great price for Vinh at Macy's. They also wanted \$99 for the bed frame, which we passed. But it would take 10 days before they can deliver; so Vinh had to wait a little longer.

Dung and I then followed Vinh back to his friends' apartment. His friends lived in a typical small apartment in Greenwich Village several blocks from NYU. The neighborhood is old but full of young people. It was supposedly the "Center of Culture" of New York City with small shops and restaurants lined both sides of the street.

One of his friends, Matt, was a junior majored in Finance at NYU. Matt came from a family of physicians, but decided to go into Business instead of Medicine. He was one of the top students in his class and had just recently received an employment offer from Barclays Bank in NY to join them after graduation. The offer came with a \$15,000 sign-in bonus.

His other friend Nick was also a smart student coming from another family of physicians from Stratton Island, NY. Nick studied pre-med at NYU and was planning to go to medical school in the area.

Matt and Nick let Vinh stay with them for the period between summer school and the fall semester. Good thing was that their tiny apartment had a small window air conditioning unit.

Vinh packed his belongings into suitcases, bags and boxes; and then the three of us carried them three blocks to his new apartment on First Avenue between 9th and 10th Streets.

His tiny apartment was located on the fourth floor of an old building. There was no elevator; the stairs were steep, and the floors were slanted. On the ground floor was a club called “Coyote Ugly”, where girls danced on the bar. I don’t know if this was the club that inspired the movie with the same title, or if it was the other way around. But the music was loud. Luckily Vinh’s apartment was on the fourth floor at the back of the building.

We had to make two trips to fetch all of his stuffs. His roommate, a girl named Katie had already moved in. But since it was such a warm day in NYC, Katie and her family had already took off, perhaps to some place with air conditioning.

Katie was a good friend of Vinh and they were studying abroad together in Italy over last spring semester. She was also in Stern Business School with Vinh and they both had applied to be RA for dorms for the next school year. Katie’s dad owned a limousine service in Detroit, Michigan, and was willing to work with us to split the rent for the apartment.

After moving, we ate dinner at a small neighborhood Italian restaurant near his apartment. The foods were OK, but the fixed price of \$15 per plate was great. We all were tired after a long day.

“You like this neighborhood, Vinh?” Dung asked at dinner.

“Yes, Mom.” Vinh said, “This is where all the young and up-and-coming people live. It is very safe and it is close to my school. I can walk to classes in 10 minutes.”

Dung was OK with it, I guessed. So this is where \$2,550 a month would allow one to live in NYC. I was about to make some smart comments, but Dung kicked my leg under the table as a sign to be quiet.

After dinner, a friend of mine Ed Torres who lived in New Jersey brought over a bed frame for Vinh. Meanwhile, Vinh had borrowed an air mattress from one of his friend to use temporarily. The evening was hot and the fans that Katie's dad had installed on the windows could not keep the air cool. So we asked Vinh to go with us back to the hotel, where he may be able to sleep better with air conditioning.

We three took the subway back to the Hilton Garden Inn on 49th Street.

Saturday, September 04

On Saturday's morning, we ate breakfast at the hotel's restaurant. Then we went back to the room to pack. We checked out of the hotel before noon, and Dung was still so worried about the heat and the lack of air conditioning at Vinh's apartment.

"We should get you a window air conditioning unit for your apartment, Vinh." Dung said. "Daddy can ask his friend Ed to install it for you."

"Or we can get you a portable air unit that you can take it with you, wherever you move next." I chimed in.

“It is getting cooler here soon, Mom.” Vinh tried to convince himself.

Dung gave him a long hug, “Are you going to be OK, Vinh?” Tears were in her eyes.

“Yes, Mom, I am going to be fine.” Her baby replied, “Have a good trip home.”

If money wasn't too tight, we would have spent another day in NYC with Vinh, and perhaps go get him a portable air conditioner at Best Buy. But instead, we took a cab to LaGuardia and watched Vinh disappeared around the corner on his way to the subway underneath the City of New York.

Empty Nest

The wind lifted the Boeing 737 high into the sky, as it banked south along the Atlantic Coast heading back to Houston, Texas.

I hold Dung's hands as she sat staring out the window quietly crying. Down there in the busy city of New York is our son Vinh. Somewhere northeast of this vast country is our other son Minh. And westward is our daughter Van.

Back on the ground in Houston, the wind lightly shook the branch of the oak tree by the pond. And on it, the nest was empty.

May God bless our children and keep them.

Vui Le