

THE SPECTER: A FIRST-GENERATION PLAY

Draft #7

An APIA Thesis Project Script

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SCENE 1: INTRO

(Lights up on an empty stage, except for a table and a laptop.)

VINH

Do you have a “have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful you believe your application would be incomplete without it?”

Do I? A background, identity... all I've done is been in a few plays.

Uh, theatre, sure I'll go with that. “The walls have always been my friends. There's lots of walls in theatre! Like the fourth wall.” No, that sucks. How about... chairs! “I've been sitting in chairs all my life. I would love to not sit in them... anymore?”

Well... that's... not really me though. Maybe that just won't work.

SCENE 2: TALKING THROUGH TIME

VINH

Maybe I could go for the easy way out and just talk about being Asian. I never really had much of a problem with, like, racism in my life to be honest with you. Not many people outwardly made fun of me for my upbringing or the way I looked or the things I ate. My dad's told me a lot of stories though, like right after he got off the boat (*plays out the interaction with the man*) That other guy eventually taught my dad English.

See, the thing is that I grew up on these stories, like little nuggets of information and morals and lessons all tied up into one. But there was one story that sticks out, whether it was because of its importance, or the way my dad would just always retell it over and over. One lesson. The Communists are bad. and America is good.

My dad escaped Vietnam after the Communists took over the South and told me about the cruelty that the regime put his family under. He was the son of the richest man in town, and the Communists came and took all their wealth away. Had to hide some of it in gold by burying it in the backyard. The Communists arrested my dad routinely for doing nothing but pushing a bike up a hill, or just hanging out and being a teenager. When it came to the war, I was taught to respect troops. That the Americans did everything they could to help the South Vietnamese when they were being taken over by an authoritarian government. They were helping. They were doing good.

(Off stage.) VOICE

But there's two sides to every coin.

VINH

Who was that?

(SPECTER enters.)

SPECTER

While yes, the Americans were helping the democratic South Vietnamese retain their independence, when you look at the broader picture it can seem more like the democratic Americans were just trying to prevent the spread of Communism, in a zero-sum game that had been waged for decades where South Vietnam was just a pawn and the people were just... collateral.

VINH

Who the fuck asked you?

SPECTER

When you put it like that, the war doesn't seem as valiant anymore does it?

VINH

Who are you, some commie sympathizer? Yeah, the democratic Americans were trying to prevent the spread of a TYRANNICAL GOVERNMENT that was hellbent on killing its own citizens. So yeah when you put it like that it still seems valiant to me.

SPECTER

Have you ever heard of Just War doctrine?

VINH

Yeah, I learned about it in middle school.

SPECTER

(Overlapping) - in middle school, yeah. Well a just war is defined when the conflict is spurred by things like having a just cause, a right intention, and proportionality. When you take into account the ways in which events like the My Lai Massacre were portrayed by the media, and the larger geopolitical conflicts...

VINH

What do you mean the Vietnam War was unjust?

SPECTER

No, I'm not saying that the war was unjust, I'm just trying to-

VINH

Do you know what my dad went through to get here? Do you know what the Communists did to him?

SPECTER

Did you hear anything I just said? The war could be SEEN as unjust based on the criteria-

VINH

If you're going to tell me the war is unjust you might as well be saying that my dad should have died in Vietnam!

(SPECTER exits.)

VINH

Hey! Hey, come back here! What was that about a massacre, the "Mee Lie"...?

(VINH looks up the My Lai Massacre. Images of pages like Wikipedia and History begin flashing on the screen, possibly with pictures of the massacre.)

VINH

What? American soldiers... that's... oh my god. Oh my god. What the fuck?

(Lights down.)

SCENE 3: TALKING TO DAD

(Lights up on VINH'S FATHER, Pham, who is working at his desk. He is a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair. He looks pretty busy.)

(VINH enters.)

VINH

Hey Dad, are you busy right now?

PHAM

No, son. What's going on?

VINH

Well nothing really, I was just wondering if you knew about something called the My Lai massacre. I heard about it from... somewhere.

PHAM

What did you hear about it?

VINH

Well I read online about how American soldiers killed people. And raped people.

PHAM

Vinh. Where did you hear this from? Did your teacher tell you this? A textbook?

VINH

No, I heard about it from someone and then I read about it. How could you still support the American war effort in Vietnam after hearing about it?

PHAM

Because, Vinh. That's not really what happened. Let me explain. The My Lai massacre was done by the North Vietnamese. They were the ones who did all the killings, and then they took the pictures. Then they sent those pictures to the American media and said, "Look, the Americans are killing civilians!"

VINH

Don't you think the American media would catch on to any false news reporting, especially if the source was from the enemy?

PHAM

No, Vinh. They would take any news they could get to make money. On top of that, do you know how the Viet Cong would fight? Right, guerilla warfare. They could be anyone! They dressed like civilians, acted like civilians, and made it so hard for the American soldiers to know who the enemy was so that when they took pictures of the war, they could point and say, "Look at what the Americans are doing. They are committing war crimes." Those Communists are horrible. They would kill their own people just to make the Americans look bad. And once they had the media on their side, that's when people started protesting the war.

VINH

And that's when the Americans lost.

PHAM

Yes, Vinh. Who told you all that stuff about American soldiers doing it?

VINH

It's just what I read online, Dad.

PHAM

They're wrong. Dead wrong. That's how they get you, those Communists. I'm glad you asked me because those are all lies.

(PHAM exits. Lights down.)

SCENE 4: LEARNING

(Lights up on VINH at his laptop.)

VINH

I'm not finding anything about what Dad was talking about. Everything I'm finding is about how Americans did this. Is it really because the media was that stupid? And how is this going to help me write this essay anyways? When it comes to my own story, I just keep drawing a blank. When I think about what motivates me though, what I always end up talking about is my parents. So maybe I'll just write more about that.

Something about that though just feels... off. It's still not *me*. They want to know about me, not about my parents. What the hell am I supposed to say?

(SPECTER enters.)

SPECTER

Maybe you tell them exactly that.

VINH

You again.

SPECTER

Me. Again.

VINH

You're a fucking liar. Spouting a bunch of commie propoganda. My Lai wasn't done by the Americans, the North Vietnamese set them up so they could antagonize American troops.

SPECTER

Where'd you hear that? Dad?

VINH

Yes, my Dad told me that! I'm a little more inclined to believe him about this stuff than you. He was there, you weren't.

SPECTER

You're going to believe him over the entirety of the internet? Someone tells you to stop listening to the news and you're just going to do it? Listen to yourself.

VINH

Well it makes sense! Of course the media would snap the story up, and now that's the narrative!

SPECTER

Listen to yourself! Did you see that an American officer was charged and convicted for it? Do you think that's a lie?

VINH

I don't know! I wasn't there!

SPECTER

Well, maybe you should be.

VINH

What? Nevermind, just get out of here.

SPECTER

You don't need the help?

VINH

No, just go.

SPECTER

I know what you're missing for this. *(Points at laptop.)*

VINH

...What?

SPECTER

No, you said I should go.

VINH

No, wait. What am I missing? What are you talking about?

SPECTER

You need some perspective. Maybe instead of sitting here and wondering how things actually are because of stories you've heard, you should just go there instead.

VINH

Go where?

SPECTER

To Vietnam. *(Points at the laptop and a scholarship application is pulled up.)*

(SPECTER exits.)

VINH

What is this? That looks... perfect. *(Beat.)*

(Lights down.)

SCENE 5: TALK WITH MOM?

(Lights up on VINH'S MOM, THAO. She is sitting at a table, presumably looking over the mail or some other task. VINH enters.)

VINH

I rushed to my mom. "Mom, could I ask you a question? I've been working on this application and I'm trying to figure out what to write but nothing seems to be sticking." And she said they want to hear about what I've done, like my clubs and extracurriculars but I told her that's not my story. But I didn't know what my story was. I told her I need a "background or identity" and she told me to "identify as a go-getter". What is that even supposed to mean? I said, "if I had a chance to figure out what that story of mine is, do

you think I should take it? Like, if I had the ability to do something so that I could have a more compelling story to my own life, would you be okay if I did that? Like go to Vietnam?”

THAO

Now why the hell would you want to do that?

VINH

I've been struggling with trying to find a story that's mine, but I think if I go to Vietnam, where I have a connection with the place, I might be able to gain some perspective.

THAO

Well Vinh, I don't know if you'll find what you're looking for over there.

VINH

I don't really know what I'm looking for to be honest. But I know that if I go over there, at least I'll get to see where you and Dad grew up. I'll get to see the places that you used to go to, eat the things you guys would. Maybe that might help me to figure out what my story is.

THAO

I really don't think it's worth it for you to go. We escaped from there for a reason. It's not our country anymore, not our food, not our place. Do you know what I had to go through when I escaped? I sat on a beach in Mongolia for six months at a refugee camp. Everyday all I could do was sit and stare out at the sea for hours, wasting away just so that I could get a plane ticket here. Do you think it was worth it?

VINH

I mean, you're here now. And you've got a story to tell.

THAO

But really was it worth it? Giving up everything I have to get here only for you to go back? *(Beat.)* Do what you want Vinh, I won't stop you.

VINH

That's all I need to hear.

(Lights down.)

SCENE 6: CONVERSATION WITH PARENTS/DEPARTURE

(Lights up on THAO and PHAM sitting at a table. There is a light above the table.)

VINH

Hey mom. Hey dad. So... guess what? So, I applied for this scholarship for a summer program a friend showed me called the Freeman Fellowship. They're gonna let me work at this Malaysian theatre company for a couple months over the summer. Yeah, in Malaysia! Pretty much all expenses paid, I'm gonna be working at this theatre company where they do all kinds of stuff, they even do traditional Malaysian shadow puppetry which looks really interesting... I think getting paid to work in Asia, in a place I've never been, is just too good of an opportunity to... And when it comes to looking at a resume, I think having a Malaysian Theatre Company would be way more unique than something like another Shakespeare show, don't you think? And plus, they'll be paying ME, so I'll even be saving money while I'm at it.

PHAM

Vinh, why didn't you tell us this? You've never been away for so long or so far.

THAO

Well I'm happy that you decided to go to Malaysia. It's a good place to go if you're looking for a story for yourself.

PHAM

You better be careful over there. A lot of... weird stuff over there. Over there they got a lot of people who do... voodoo. You know voodoo? If you do something wrong, they can put a spell on you and make you really sick. Don't go and mess around with any girls over there because you don't know... who you might be messing with. They can put a spell on you, I heard from a guy that he went over there and got really sick. Every night he got so sick but felt better in the morning. He went to all these doctors and all of them said nothing was wrong. But he still kept getting sick! One day he went to an uhh... a... what do you call it? Yeah! A monk. And he said that he had some kind of... dark magic put on him. So he prayed for him and told him to cleanse himself with something and he said it worked. *(Beat.)* So don't mess around with anyone over there. Especially the girls.

VINH

Yeah I mean, I'll be living in a pretty rich part of the city, so I think I'll be pretty safe. I won't mess around with anyone. I'll just be there for work.

THAO

So how much are they giving you?

VINH

It's crazy. It's \$10,000. That's more than enough to live comfortably in Malaysia for a few months, and even have some more on the side to travel to other countries.

PHAM

So where else do you want to go?

VINH

Well I'm not sure yet. I think I just want to be able to travel around and see different types of Asian theatre, so probably like China, Korea, Japan... And I was thinking about going to Vietnam. Mom, I know we talked about this, but I think it would be really good for me to go.

PHAM

Wait, Thao, *khi nào bạn nói về điều này?* When did you talk about this?

VINH

When will I get this kind of opportunity again? They're going to give me \$10,000...

PHAM

No, Vinh. your mother told you this already. You are not going over there, where the Communists will brainwash you.

VINH

Dad, they're not going to brainwash me. I know that they are Communist over there but like, they still have a culture. I think it'll be really important for me to be able to go over there and like, see for myself what is going on over there you know?

(The light above the table begins to slowly move in circles casting shadows on the actors. The centerpiece on the table casts a vague shadow of a person circling between them.)

(SPECTER enters.)

PHAM

Son, listen. You said they'll give you ten thousand dollars to go over there right? So when you go over there, you have to buy food. And you're gonna buy little things to

bring back home... little souvenirs. And you know where that money is gonna go? Exactly, to the Communists. And Vinh, they do not have any culture or anything. All they do is show you all the nice places and give you all the nice things so that when you come back over you can come back to me and say, "See, Dad? Nothing is wrong over there! They're all good! You're crazy, Dad!" And then you'll be just like one of them.

VINH

Dad, you've raised me this whole time under the notion that Communism is the worst thing ever. I go to college, you really think I'd be that susceptible to propaganda? That I'd just forget everything you told me?

PHAM

Vinh, they will LIE to you. They make stuff up all the time! Just like about the My Lai massacre... And it was who that told the American people that it was American soldiers? The MEDIA. They will lie to you son. Son, I- look, how can I know I can trust you when you come back? Once you go over there, they already get to work. They get into your mind from the start. They brainwash you. Just like my brother. He went over there even when I told him not to, and he comes back and says, "it's not bad anymore Thank!" I stopped talking to him. For two years I didn't talk to him.

VINH

So you wouldn't talk to me if I went over there.

PHAM

No. Because you will not be my son anymore if you go over there. Because no son of mine would EVER go over to those COMMUNISTS. You know? If I had a gun and a room full of Communists, I would put a bullet in every single one of their heads. You know that?

VINH

But LISTEN Dad! I know that you ran away from there, I know that they shot at you when you left the beaches on that boat, I know what happened! I just feel like I need to go somewhere where I can feel like I am not a minority. I want to grow as a person and as an artist and-

SPECTER

There's so much to see over there! There's water puppetry -

VINH

Chau Van singing -

SPECTER

I could even go to that place with our family name -

VINH

And eat pho and banh mi -

THAO

You can eat banh mi from DC! I can cook you pho! Is my pho not enough for you that you have to go all the way to Vietnam just so that you can get a taste of “real” pho?!

PHAM

So you think you can only grow if you go over to Vietnam? Then why the hell am I sending you to college?

VINH

No, it's just that... I feel like if I have the opportunity to go anywhere in Asia, and I'm trying to connect more with my Asian side as opposed to my American side... I feel like Vietnam is the only place that I have a real connection with.

PHAM

We do NOT have a connection with that country. MY country is not that one. MY country has the yellow flag with the three red stripes, NOT the one with the STAR in the middle of it.

VINH

But DAD, the place still physically exists! I can go to the places you're talking about and actually see them! I understand that they aren't the same Vietnam as the one you lived in, but I feel like-

PHAM

NO Vinh. I said NO. If you go to Vietnam, don't bother coming back.

THAO

Don't go Vinh. I told you, it's not worth it.

VINH

Maybe to you. But to me, (*SPECTER simultaneously*) I think it's the only thing that I can do to find a story that's really for me.

PHAM

Then go. But once you leave, don't bother coming to me for anything.

(Lights down.)

SCENE 7: TRAVELING

(The next scene is essentially done entirely in pantomime. VINH gets his bags ready, and takes off for the airport, alone. He gets on the plane to Vietnam, joined only by his shadow. He looks back at the screen and begins to make shadow puppets. Eventually, the shadow comes alive once more as the SPECTER. They journey across the sea to Vietnam, documenting their journeys in the form of movements.)

(The stage slowly begins to fill with water until it reaches their ankles. They do everything that they had talked about. They go sightseeing, they eat street food, they watch shows. They have a grand old time. At some point, the SPECTER exits. VINH continues to have a good time, sightseeing in more places and taking down notes. The movement slows until VINH is looking out onto a field.)

VINH

This is... amazing.

(SPECTER enters, in the form of a middle-aged man. He is wearing a loose shirt and loose pants. He sits down next to VINH.)

MAN

Isn't it?

VINH

Who the -? Where did you come from?

MAN

Don't worry, I just live over there. Thought I'd join you in enjoying this day.

VINH

Well, I appreciate company. You live over there? How is it being able to enjoy this every day?

MAN

Well, after a while it just becomes part of the background. When you see this every day, it loses its luster. Is this your first time visiting here?

VINH

Yeah it is.

MAN

Where are you coming from? You look like you might be coming from... let me guess. Bien Hoa?

VINH

No, no, no. I'm from America.

MAN

Oh, really? I couldn't tell!

VINH

Really? Because I don't speak Vietnamese or anything. *(Beat.)* What did you say your name was?

VO

You can just call me Vo.

VINH

Vo? Am I saying that right?

VO

Yep, Vo. And you?

VINH

Vinh.

VO

Well it's nice to meet you Vinh. So what brought you here to My Lai? Here to pay your respects?

VINH

Wait, where am I? *(Reaches into his backpack and checks his map.)* Oh wow, I didn't even notice. This is My Lai?

VO

Yep.

VINH

Wow. Well, not to sound ignorant, but I wasn't familiar with the locations of things and I didn't know that I was here.

VO

Well, here you are.

VINH

I can't believe that this is the place that that all... happened.

VO

What do you know about what happened here?

VINH

Well, this is where the My Lai Massacre happened right? I mean, I've read a lot about it, but I've heard a lot about it as well from my father.

VO

Did your father come from Vietnam?

VINH

Yes he did. He escaped back in the 80s.

VO

Ah. I see.

VINH

See I've read online that the American troops were the ones who killed the people here. It was an atrocity, and only one person was actually convicted. But I've heard so many other ways that it's happened from my father, things about how the American troops couldn't take the risk of letting anyone go because the Viet Cong could be in there, you know? The way the Viet Cong used guerrilla warfare it was impossible to tell who was and wasn't a combatant, so that's why they gave the order. I've also heard that it wasn't the Americans, and that it was the North Vietnamese who did it, and then took pictures of all the... stuff... and sent it to the American press to antagonize the American troops.

VO

Mm. What was your father's name again?

VINH

His name is Pham. I've just been travelling around Vietnam, trying to figure out what I believe using my own eyes instead of -

(VO hits VINH over the head with a stick. He is knocked out cold. Lights down.)

SCENE 8: DISCOVERY

(Lights up on VINH, handcuffed, in a chair. VO, in a suit, sits across from him. There is a light that hangs above them. VO checks his watch, and then throws his cup of water on VINH.)

VINH

(Inhaling) HAAAUGH. Oh my god, my head... where the hell am I? Vo? Is that you?

VO

Yes.

VINH

Where the hell -?

VO

Shut up, con cặc. I am Major Vo with the People's Public Security of Vietnam. Câm miệng. Shut up. You've been brought in for questioning. So you told me that the My Lai massacre was perpetrated by the Vietnamese, correct.

VINH

(Shakes head.)

VO

And you've been going all around Vietnam, telling people this bullshit?

VINH

(Shakes head.)

VO

(Strikes VINH across the face) Bullshit! I've done a little digging on you too. Your name is Vinh Ngo, correct?

VINH

(Nods.)

VO

And your father is Pham Ngo, correct?

VINH

(Struggles.)

VO

(Takes off his hat and brandishes a gun on the table) Answer my question, con cặc.

VINH

(Nods.)

VO

He has been quite outspoken online about his opposition to the Party. Did you know about this?

VINH

(Shakes head.)

VO

So did he send you here? So that you could come and bring all this bullshit American propaganda over here?

VINH

(Shakes head.)

VO

What, so you can tell them your story? What story do you even have?

VINH

(Shrugs shoulders.)

VO

Other than more American lies? You're going to answer me, con cặc. Or I'll put this bullet right into your head. Well, if word gets back that his son disappeared, do you think he'd get the message about his... endeavors?

VINH

(Looks up at VO, gets beat up.)

(Lights down.)

(Gunshot.)

SCENE 9: SOUVENIR

(VINH sits up in bed, gasping for breath. After a few moments of heavy breathing, and looking around, he begins to sob loudly and uncontrollably.)

VINH

Mommy! Baba!

No, no it wasn't a nightmare... it was so real. I remember it all.

No, I'm not just stressed out! I don't... I don't think I want to go anymore.

No, I don't think I should go anymore. I think I should probably just stay at home.

Yeah, Baba, I just think it would be a bad idea. Let me go and cancel my plane ticket.

(Seeing the image of General Vo on his computer screen) AHHHHHHH!!

Don't use the internet, you have to change the passwords! They know about you, they know about all of us!

The... the Vietnamese government!

NO! No water. Don't do that, they might have gotten to the water lines. They could poison us!

NO! I told you, it might be poisoned!

Baba, I don't know. I just think if I go, something horrible will happen to me.
No, mom, I don't want to.

(Tries to take a sip, begins to cry) I SAID NO! No water! I told you!

Where are you going?!

(THAO grabs PHAM and moves outside of the room.)

PHAM

This is ridiculous. You shouldn't have gotten him water. Are you going to treat him like a baby for the rest of his life?

THAO

Pham, what are you doing? Can't you see he's scared?

PHAM

Yeah. I told him so many times. For his whole life, "don't go to Vietnam", "don't go to Vietnam", "don't go to Vietnam", and look what he did! It's like, he doesn't even care. And now he goes and he's crying, and he's saying, "Oh Mommy, oh Baba, I'm so scared!" And now you're just going to baby him? If he wants to make his own decisions, let him make his own decisions.

THAO

Your son had a nightmare because of the things you said to him. He's scared but he said he doesn't want to go.

PHAM

What did I say to him? I told him the truth. That over there he'd get brainwashed.

THAO

Anh Pham, you told him so much stuff to be afraid of about going over there and now he's waking up screaming in the middle of the night. Does that remind you of anything?

PHAM

No.

THAO

You've woken me up with your screaming more times than I can count! I can't sleep because you yell, and you jerk around in your sleep-

PHAM

This isn't the same as that! Yeah, I have nightmares. But that's because I've seen things. I've seen people get killed. Raped. Starve. Thrown overboard. I saw all of those things and that's why I have nightmares. What does he have to be scared of?

(A loud noise comes from the room. THAO and PHAM enter to see VINH standing in the window. General Vo stares him down.)

THAO

Oh my god, Vinh! Get down from there!

PHAM

(Moving towards him) Vinh, what are you doing?!

VINH

Don't touch me! Don't fucking touch me!

VO

Come down here, Vinh. Justice will be served.

VINH

No! You won't get me, you'll never get me!

PHAM

Vinh, the whole neighborhood is going to hear you. Get. Down. NOW.

VO

Follow your parent's orders, Vinh.

VINH

Why should I listen to you? Who's side are you on? I shouldn't listen to you anymore. I see it now. I see right through you, both of you! Fucking commie FUCKS! You WANTED me to go to Vietnam, didn't you? That's why... that's why you told me NOT to go! Because you knew... you knew I wouldn't want to listen. And you knew that THIS would happen! You... you MADE ME have that dream! You know General Vo, don't you?

PHAM

Who is General -

VINH

Don't even try that shit with me, you know exactly who I'm talking about! He's right there!

THAO & VO

Vinh, there's no one else here but us.

VINH

Wha... what?

PHAM & VO

Just come down, please Vinh.

VINH

No... not you too. Please...

THAO

Come here, Vinh.

PHAM

Just come here.

VINH

(Screaming out the window) Somebody! Help me! Please! Where... where do I go?
(Slowly coming down, sobbing) Mommy, Baba?

(VINH comes down from the window ledge, into his parents' arms. They comfort him on the floor as he cries. General Vo watches on, almost a part of this family huddle.)

VINH

Help me...

(Lights down.)

End of play.