

Ha, a South Vietnamese nurse, joins the Viet Cong after seeing her family home bulldozed to make room for a firebase on the DMZ. As she seeks to reclaim Her Father's Land, a relationship with a USAID officer causes a tragic turn of events.

HER FATHER'S LAND

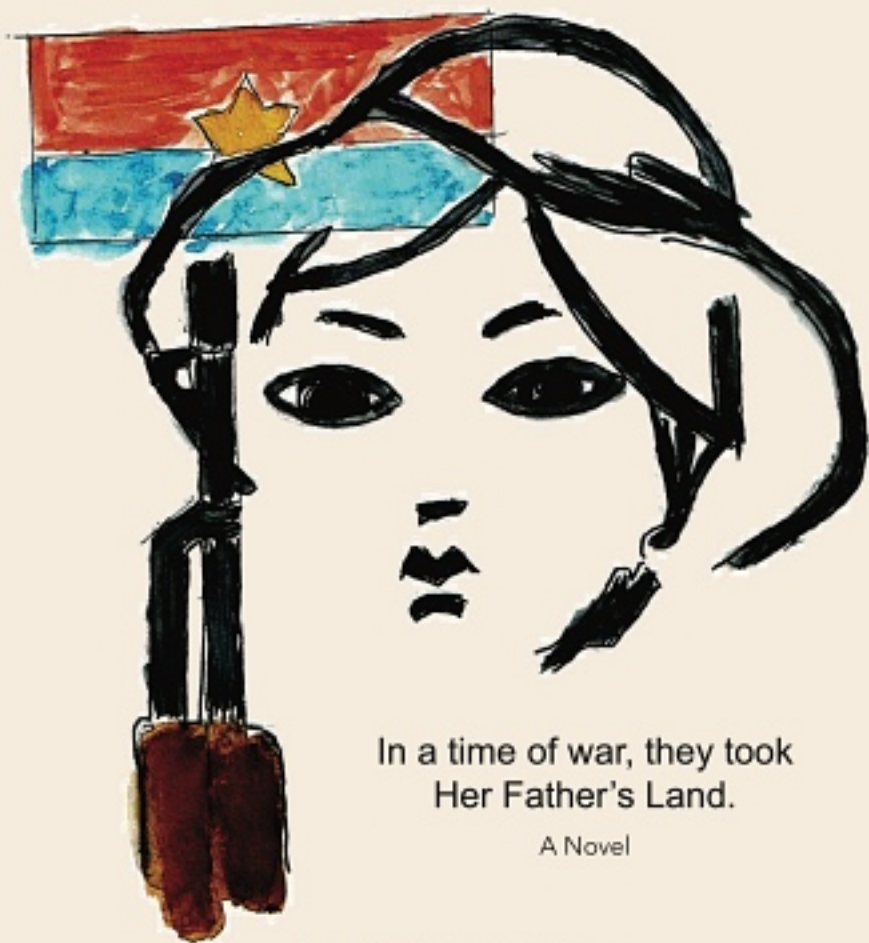
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HER FATHER'S LAND



In a time of war, they took
Her Father's Land.

A Novel

Jeff Kelly

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February 1968 – South Bank Ben Hai River

A weathered sampan emerged from the misty darkness and waddled across the rain-swollen Ben Hai River. Small breaks in the overcast admitted enough moonlight to faintly light the scene. Standing at the stern the oarsman propelled the craft by the sweep of a single, long oar. The canvas arch that normally protects cargo and passengers had been removed, and from the south bank Tran Xuan Ha saw five seated soldiers. The only sounds she heard were the creaking of the wooden oar working on its metal pivot, and occasional grunts as the oarsman fought the current.

“Excuse me miss, you’ve been here before, have you not,” the smiling soldier asked. He was from the security detail along the river. He placed a foot casually on the log she sat upon. His AK-47 hung loosely from a strap on his shoulder. The red tip of a cigarette glowed in his hand.

“Yes. I grew up in a village not far away. I know this land and can guide the fighters as well as anyone, I suppose.” She glanced quickly back to study the men in the boat.

“Of course, we all remember you from your last mission,” he persisted. “We don’t get many young women visiting our sector.”

She looked back up at him curiously, amused that he would say something so obvious. “All the people have been taken away. I doubt you see anyone but People’s Soldiers and invaders.”

The soldier threw down his cigarette and walk to meet the boat, now embarrassed by his clumsy attempt to befriend the beautiful Viet Cong girl.

The bow nudged the muddy bank, and the five passengers prepared to disembark. Even in the dim light she could see her

charges looked different from the other soldiers: their uniforms were fresh, their AK-47s clean and new looking, and they were noticeably young. The words of a perverse song came to her mind. It went, “Born in the North to die in the South.” Ha wondered if they would ever go back across the Ben Hai to their homes in North Vietnam.

They approached her with excitement on their faces and though they tried to hide it, a hint of apprehension. Like little brothers, she thought, naïve and anxious to participate. She stood waiting to greet them. Their innocence made her feel older than her twenty-three years, and she fought back a feeling of war weariness. Despite the combat she had endured, her beauty remained stunning. Her skin was smooth and unmarked, her cheekbones high without being overly so, but it was her smile that captivated. It was genuine; it came from the heart and appeared frequently. She liked people and it showed on her face.

For this mission she was dressed in the clothes of the village, a loose-fitting black muslin peasant shirt and trousers, and a non la conical straw hat that hid her short, jet-black hair. Only the occasional look of sadness in her eyes detracted from her beauty.

“Comrade, are you the guide who will be taking us to Phu Tho,” asked the first young soldier.

She nodded and smiled silently, waiting for the others to gather around. His clipped, northern accent told her he was from the Hanoi region, but not the city. They all seemed to be country boys lately, she thought. She was becoming quite good at placing northern accents.

Her mission was to guide them to a rendezvous outside Gio Linh, the one remaining village in the area. There she would hand them over to a squad from their unit, and they would be taken to the hidden base camp at Phu Tho, deep in the square. It

HER FATHER'S LAND

was only six kilometers to Gio Linh, but it crossed the most dangerous terrain in Vietnam. The Saigon government and the Americans had the area designated a free fire zone. Anyone: man, woman, or child caught there was to be killed on sight. Those were the rules of engagement, however they quickly discovered that Puppet soldiers were afraid to enter the area, and the American Marines would not kill children and were reluctant to kill women. For that reason, it was always village children or old women sent out from Gio Linh village to watch the American Alpha bases. For her however, dressed in farmer's clothes and guiding fighters from the North, there was no safety in being a woman; the Marines would not hesitate to kill her.

Their dangerous route would take them between two American firebases, and across the five-hundred-meter strip of cleared land between them. The Americans called it The Trace. American newspapers called it the McNamara Line. Her plan was to stay in the low areas whenever possible, out of sight of the observation towers. The threat of ambush was always present, and the Marines were increasingly sending out units at night and farther from their bases. This night, however, the watchers reported no Marine units coming out. Her next biggest concern was the random shelling of artillery fired with no set pattern and at no specific target. Harassment and interdiction fire the Americans called it.

“Comrades, welcome to Quang Tri,” she began as the five stood before her. “I am your guide. A dangerous journey lies ahead. If we are to arrive safely you must do exactly as I say.” They stood motionless, attuned to her words. “You must be quiet. Do not allow yourself to be silhouetted on the skyline. Do not talk amongst yourselves, and do not smoke. Do I have your commitment on these requirements?”

“Yes Miss,” they answered in unison.

“We’ve been briefed on this journey,” said their appointed leader. “We won’t let you down.”

“Very good,” she said with a smile and slight bow. “Occasionally we will pass through check points manned by People’s Soldiers just like yourselves. Please do not engage in conversations, even if spoken to. We must move fast and get you safely to your unit. This way.”

She turned and led the young fighters down a narrow muddy path through dense woods that lined the riverbank. As they passed through the first checkpoint, she was pleased to see her charges merely nodded or mumbled a quick greeting to the northern guards who pressed them for news from home. She realized the guards were just homesick boys, but it would take all night if she allowed every northerner to socialize with the new arrivals. One night a fighter in the group she was leading met a childhood friend at a checkpoint. They hugged and reminisced. It took her thirty minutes to get them to separate.

After a kilometer, the trail came out of the woods at the old Hanoi to Saigon rail line where trees had been cut back for the right of way. The rails were all gone now, as were most of the ties, dug up to be used for bunker building material for the numerous battles that swept the area since the American Marines arrived. But the roadbed was still sound except for a few bomb craters. They followed it south out of the woods where the land opened to a soggy area of abandoned rice fields. The roadbed continued straight and level as the land gradually descended. A kilometer south of the woods, the roadbed stood ten feet above the surrounding wet terrain. An old railroad trestle bridged a fifty-meter gap in the roadbed. It was the only way across what had become a deep swamp, and it was heavily mined.

HER FATHER'S LAND

Ha knew the location of every land mine. As they came upon the first one, she knelt beside it and pointed exactly where the fighter was to place his feet. "Step here," she said softly. "That's right, now here," she said, encouraging the nervous young man. "You're doing fine. One more step and you are beyond it. Good. Now wait over there for the others." She trusted that each man would do it right. If any of the young soldiers did not, both she and the young soldier would die.

Half a kilometer beyond the trestle the roadbed melded into a gently rolling hill, and all signs of the swamp and the railroad disappeared. They passed through a wooded area that was sprinkled with fruit trees. Cherry tomatoes and various vegetables were growing wild in the clearings. Ha paused before some ripe cherry tomatoes, picked a few and popped them into her mouth. They were perfectly ripe and sweet. She motioned for the others to have some. The wild fruit and vegetables were all that remained of a French agricultural station, now abandoned for many years.

They moved on for only a short way when the trees abruptly ended. Ha signaled a stop. Before them lay what the Americans called the Trace. Crossing it would be the most dangerous part of their journey. Ha paused to observe the strip of cleared land. She could not help but peer through the darkness to where her birthplace, Tan An Von Giap, used to be. The American firebase called Alpha-3 occupied the spot now. Alpha-3's low, strong bunkers and sandbagged watchtowers peering out malevolently. Ha's lips tightened; her jaw muscles flexed.

Alpha-3 Helicopter Landing Zone

Larry Jones had been waiting at the helicopter landing zone since first light with his gear packed, ready to go. According to the helicopter support team working the LZ, the chopper would not come until after seven thirty. He waited there anyway. When the twin rotor CH-46 finally came in at seven forty, amidst a hurricane of wind and noise, Jones, thinking only that his ride had arrived. He ran to the ramp at the rear of the aircraft and tried to go directly onboard. One of the ground crew had to block his way and shout in his ear for him to wait. The inbound passengers and supplies had to be unloaded first. Nothing draws North Vietnamese artillery from across the Ben Hai River faster than a helicopter sitting on the pad. Speed is of the essence. In less than a minute the big chopper lifted and carried Larry Jones away from Alpha-3 and 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines. He never looked back.

At 3/3's rear area on Dong Ha Combat Base, he first went to the jury-rigged shower beside the officer's quarters. It was a primitive affair with a five-gallon water can that had to be heated on a gas burner then carried up a ladder to a holding tank. Then he stood naked before the world and washed furiously as the precious hot water trickled down. My last grunt shower, he thought. Still, he had to admit it felt wonderful. It had been weeks since the last time he bathed, and that was in a flooded bomb crater. Since the rain and cold weather started, he, like everyone else, had not washed. He put on a new set of jungle utilities and boots and carried his filthy bush uniform to a trash barrel. Throwing it away was a symbolic act for him. It told him he would survive Vietnam. He toyed with the idea of squirting lighter fluid on the funky uniform and setting it ablaze, then

rejected that. No sense cranking up the animosity of what battalion officers might be lurking about. He was not unaware of the controversy his reassignment caused. An hour later his paperwork was finished, and he was divorced from Third Battalion, Third Marines. Jones could not be happier.

A driver and a jeep from division motor transport took Jones down Highway 1 from Dong Ha to Quang Tri City, a fifteen-minute ride. The driver was full of questions about life in the bush. Jones, who was doing everything humanly possible to leave all that behind him, responded with just nods and grunts, but the driver would not be put off.

“Yo lieutenant, ever on a patrol that sprang an ambush? Must have been decent, huh? Lighting up the gooks.”

“Hey, what’s the deal with you,” Jones snapped. He was growing tired of this. “You should be grateful you’re in the rear. You got hot chow, a roof over your head, a bed to sleep in. Man, you got it made, and you’re not getting your ass shot off.”

“I hate the rear, sir,” the driver said, now deeply serious. “I joined the Marines to fight. I never thought I would end up like this, a chauffeur for the brass. I been incountry four months and ain’t seen a VC, an NVA or a shot fired in anger. I thought being a Marine meant being a grunt. I didn’t know they had so many mechanics and clerks and drivers. I admire the guys in the bush. I admire you for what you’ve been through, sir.”

Jones heard the sincerity and realized that for some rear echelon personnel, his time in the bush carried esteem. He wondered if other non-combatants felt like this. Maybe this was some of that political mileage his uncle wrote about. As they crossed the Thach River on the dual railway and vehicle bridge and entered Quang Tri City, Jones realized that his infantry background was an exploitable asset.

HER FATHER'S LAND

They turned north once off the bridge and could see the Citadel's south wall when the driver pulled into USAID's gated compound. The first thing each of them noticed was the absence of military trappings, evidenced by the security guard's salute. "Look at that meatball," muttered the driver. The guard's insouciant salute was more wave than show of military respect.

Beyond the gate was a courtyard with a small fountain in the center and several Land Rovers parked around it. Although they were green, like every other vehicle in Northern I Corps, they were forest green instead of military olive drab. Across the courtyard was a large two-story building that had once housed French colonial administrative offices. Wooden louvers covered tall, thin windows and marked the building as coming from another era. A grandiose portico with stately white columns held up the portico's high roof. Identical white railings bordered both the ground floor porch and a second story balcony built on the roof. Together the railings lent a gingerbread effect. Jones could visualize the powerful gathered there, cocktail in hand, beautiful women at the elbow. His uncle would fit right in. So, he hoped, would he.

A man wearing jeans and a madras shirt leaped from a Land Rover. He ran across the courtyard and took the steps up to the portico two at a time.

He's ducking the rain, Jones thought. Two months of outdoor living had him inured to the elements. It was only a light mist of a rain that he hardly noticed. He lifted his green seabag from the back of the jeep, returned his driver's salute, and walked across the courtyard at an unhurried pace. The idea of scurrying from rain put a smile on his face. Perhaps in time he would acquire that attitude.

“You must be our Marine,” said the man in the madras shirt waiting under the portico, smiling, hand outstretched. Jones shook it. “I’m Bill Margolis, director of the mission. And if I am not mistaken, you are Larry Jones.”

“Affirmative, sir,” Jones said. He surprised himself with his choice of words. Why had he begun to talk like a grunt now that he no longer was one?

“Please, just call me Bill. We have an informal atmosphere here that I think you’ll find refreshing.” Margolis opened the front door, and they entered a center hall with a reception desk manned by a mature Vietnamese man. Margolis and the man smiled and nodded to one another. Paddle fans hung from the high ceiling slowly stirred the damp air. To the right was a large room with a counter and behind that a field of desks, only half of which were occupied. To the left was a room of equal size lined with bookshelves and furnished with comfortable chairs, sofas, and low tables. They drifted into it. A small wet bar stood against the back wall.

“Your office is upstairs, along with mine and the other officers. We have a kitchen in the back and the staff prepares a midday meal. They also do the catering when we schmooze the local dignitaries. I hope you like French food.”

“Oui. J’aime la cuisine Francaise,” Jones said, his accent reasonably good.

“Excellent. Your French is good, Larry. That will be useful. Vietnamese?”

Jones shook his head. “All the locals I’ve met so far have been shooting at me, so of course we didn’t converse.” He was already starting to feel urbane and sophisticated.

HER FATHER'S LAND

Margolis laughed. "It's going to be a lot different here. Your French you can use with our educated clients. For the others, well, you'll be surprised how fast you pick up the language."

"Clients?"

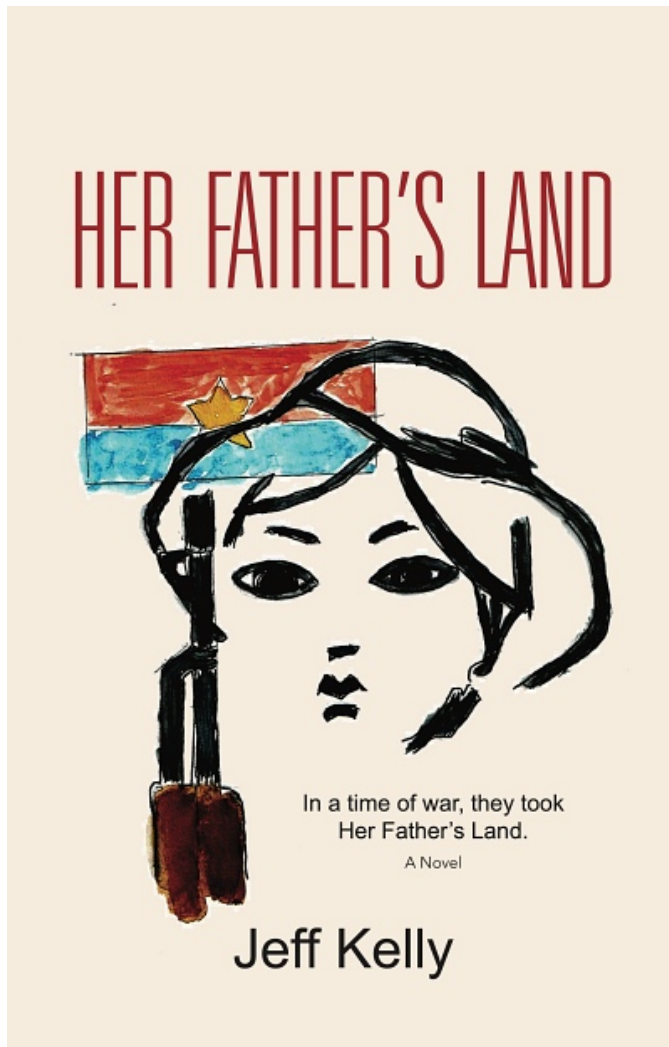
"That's what we call those who receive our aid. You will not be dealing with them so much. You are to be our security chief, dealing with your Marines, the different South Vietnamese commands, district chiefs, and so on. You have an important job. All our lives will be in your hands. You are to track the state of security and advise us where we can safely travel to, and where unescorted travel is too dangerous. You are to arrange our military escorts for those areas."

Jones liked the sound of that. He had been wondering what he would be doing. This sounded both interesting and challenging, even a bit daunting. "Sounds like important work. I feel honored to be chosen." He was moved. He needed something to feel good about himself. Although he would not admit it, even to himself, his failure to make it in the infantry left his self-confidence shaken.

Margolis smiled benignly, hiding his thoughts as only a career foreign service officer can. Chosen, he thought. The message from State left little in the way of choice. They were losing Minicci, an experienced man they trusted and enjoyed working with, transferred out to make room for this green kid who couldn't hack it in the Marines.

"Vince Minicci, who you are replacing, will be here a couple more weeks to show you the ropes, introduce you to contact persons at the various agencies and commands, the best restaurants in town. You know, all the important stuff."

Jones smiled. He could not believe his good fortune. He felt far removed from Kilo Company, Alpha-3, and the grunts.



Ha, a South Vietnamese nurse, joins the Viet Cong after seeing her family home bulldozed to make room for a firebase on the DMZ. As she seeks to reclaim Her Father's Land, a relationship with a USAID officer causes a tragic turn of events.

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