

Rocks and River

By Marleen Pasch

Tran Huong Giang ticked off the sections of her final class project as she walked to her advanced marketing seminar. “Executive Summary. Strategy. Financial Analysis...”

The app she designed— *To You!*—would allow millennials to send a drink to someone they’d spotted across a bar, if they were too shy to introduce themselves the old-fashioned way.

She knew *To You!* would take off. Not just because her focus group data said so, but because she understood what it was like to feel shipwrecked. Alone. In her dorm room. Or surrounded by a hundred MacU students at Zeke’s bar downtown.

She stopped on MacMillan Bridge, eased her backpack from her slender shoulders to the ground, and peered over the waist-high stone wall to the ravine below.

MacU consistently ranked among the top ten on lists of America’s Most Beautiful College Campuses. The spot where she stood was a primary reason. Especially on a day like today, when the sun shimmered on the fast-moving water below, when the falls upstream whooshed fiercely, when early spring moss dotted the ominous shale outcroppings, and when the pink-budding laurels danced in the breeze on the distant Allegheny Ridge.

Giang leaned forward. Her luminous black hair draped around her face. She tucked it behind her ears and breathed. Thoughts of business plans and final grades quieted. The knotted fist in her chest unclenched as the water’s lullaby-rush soothed her.

Then she stepped back. Maybe it was the pills that soothed her? In the month since Dr. Hendrick prescribed them, she felt less jagged. She slept better. But she also felt heavier. Did she feel calm, or simply dull?

The bridge had been the site of four suicides over the last three years. The number of unsuccessful attempts couldn’t be counted. There was talk of constructing a fence of sorts atop the wall to prevent future jumps, but debate polarized those for and against. Op-ed pieces, university committee meetings, and town council gatherings perpetuated, but didn’t resolve, the spats:

Against: “Would a barrier prevent would-be jumpers from diving to certain destruction? Wouldn’t an aspiring suicide simply find another way: Pills? A gunshot to the head? Fraternity party binge drinking?”

For: “Data show that jumpers—compared to others who decide to end things—are impetuous. They tend not to try other means if their jumping attempt is thwarted.”

Against: “What about aesthetics? Would MacMillan University still land on all those Top Ten lists? What about recruitment? Alumni donations?”

For: “But if we save one life, just one...”

Giang thought a fence would be a terrible mistake. With bars obscuring the ravine, would she still hear the river speaking to her?

Over her one-and-a-half years at MacMillan, the river voice had taught her many things. How to take a quick but comforting respite from academic and family pressures. How to summon energy after an all-night study binge. And how to confide without fear of betrayal.

All you need to do is listen, the river voice said. *Just listen and let me do the rest*. Inevitably, after being taken in by the murmuring, Giang hungered to share what she had heard. But her mother had taught her the importance—the necessity—of silence. *Confiding gives people a way to grab onto you, to betray you*.

So Giang surrendered her thoughts, her fears, her hopes, only to the waterfall, which washed them down with no way to hurt her.

After listening to the river voice, Giang often wrote a poem. Not during school hours, or study time. Not until early morning, when schoolwork was done. *Work*, Giang's mother taught her, *would not betray*.

But six, seven weeks ago, the Bridge Teacher turned taciturn. The river voice barely whispered. The ravine's black outcroppings spoke instead. Their voices—rock voices—sounded like her mother. "What are your poems but lazy wanderings?" they taunted. "If you are so smart, why are you so alone? And if you are so alone, why are you a follower, swaying in the wind, not a leader, not strong and solid like us?"

At first, she responded with gentle river talk. After all, her name, Giang, meant river. Water, moving, flowing. And water, over time, smooths stone. "Are you in pain? Is that why you want to hurt me? Let me help you."

But the rock voices wanted to echo, to magnify, to betray. They grew more critical, so boisterous that, when the river voice faded, Giang went to the University Clinic for a doctor's opinion.

She didn't tell her mother about the voices. She had tried, dipping only her toes into a conversation she was afraid to have.

"Stop crazy talk! You smart girl. Study hard. Be big success." When Giang's mother turned from her daughter, she made the sign of the cross, then whispered to Father Francis-Xavier Truong Buu Diep. "I pray, work miracle in this girl. Drown crazy talk in salt water and plant her like tree. Strong roots. Bountiful fruit."

Giang had stopped going to church months earlier. The river became her church. But, she admitted, if she lived in the Diocese of Southern Can Tho, where her family came from before they left by boat decades earlier, she would make a pilgrimage to the Church of Tac Say. She would place white flowers near the tomb of the martyred saint. He was, after all, known to work miracles. Why wouldn't he attend to the prayers of someone who no longer heard the river voice, who was plagued by the rock voice?

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"Tell the doctor enough to make him feel you need a little help," Giang overheard Melissa telling her prom-queen posse in the dorm. "But not so much he'll think you're going to hurt yourself or somebody else. Make sure he doesn't think you're not MacMillan material."

At first Giang thought drugs might be alright for white girls, but not for her. She believed her mother: "Focus. Work. Then rock voices sleep like babies."

Giang continued settling into her poetry in the early hours, where her mother's hazy-gray Vietnam didn't exist. She imagined and wrote about the colors and flavors of the south, where the durian, or "*sau rieng*" grew. *One's own sorrows* the thorny-skinned fruit was named, after a couple so in love they ended their lives to be together forever. Six times the size of mangos, the durian's yellow flesh was honey-sweet enough to conjure memories of its namesake lovers.

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How long had she been standing on the bridge? Giang checked her phone. Eight forty-seven. She needed to hurry to make Engel's marketing class. And she needed coffee. To dispel the fuzzy morning pill-mist. Not just for class, but for Dr. Hendrick. too.

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Giang scanned the waiting room. Only one other student. Slight and scruffy, his jeans worn thin in the knees, his eyes on his book. Safe enough. But if one of the clinic secretaries knew her mother and mentioned Giang had been there?

"Tran Huong Giang," she whispered to the receptionist.

"Excuse me?"

"Tran Huong Giang."

The receptionist scrolled down her computer's appointment calendar. "Yes," she said. "Have a seat."

Giang turned to the row of tweedy blue chairs, lowered her backpack to the floor and sat. She glanced sideways. The other student was reading *The Artful Rowing Toward God*. Was Anne Sexton rowing toward rock voices when she killed herself? Giang wondered. And if Sexton's priest was right, that God was in her typewriter, why didn't The Almighty summon her back?

Maybe this poet across the room heard voices, too. Rock or river, she wanted to ask. But if he answered "no," he would eliminate possibility, the hope of being understood. He would affirm the need that had prompted Giang to create *To You!*

She pulled her tablet from her backpack and opened her business plan to proof it. Halfway through the executive summary, her project's insignificance made her nauseous. Did she have a reasonable shot at taking first in the class competition for best presentation? Of course. But once people connected through the app, would they speak truth? Or simply weave diaphanous, short-lived spells over each other? Spells that would inevitably be broken by betrayal.

Then again, Giang learned from her mother that deception and trickery—along with hard work—were vital, not just to success, but to survival. Who could blame her? Giang's mother had left Vietnam with her own mother in a fishing boat of dubious seaworthiness, with dozens of others, anxious to escape to America via the South China Sea and Thailand. The boat's captain, a neighbor of Giang's grandmother, assured them that, for a price, he could deliver them to freedom, possibility, prosperity. Post-war isolation and destitution would float away on the sea.

Giang's mother was eleven. Just the age pirates knew would snag a fat black market price. As those evil ones approached in their rickety craft, the fishing boat owner, the one who had taken hard-earned money from his passengers, steered right toward them. *Betrayal!* When his passengers cried for him to evade the pirates, he smiled. Giang's quick-thinking grandmother, realizing she had squandered her trust, reached into her bag for her sharp fruit knife, sawed off her daughter's hair. She dusted the girl's face with tapioca flour and ordered Giang's mother's brother to sacrifice his cap and shirt, which Giang's grandmother used to disguise her daughter's nascent breasts.

When the pirates disembarked, with three other screaming girls and all the cash and jewelry they could wrangle, Giang's mother, disguised as a farm boy, remained silent, wizened. Deception and trickery were as necessary as clean water, daily Mass and fresh vegetables.

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"Giang."

Giang lifted her eyes though the voice she heard wasn't Dr. Hendrick's. No, the woman who called to her struck Giang as nothing like stiff-legged Dr. Hendrick, with his attempt at a beard, predictable bow tie, and tendency to nod and smile, nod and smile. "My name is Dr. Rashad," the woman said. "Follow me."

Giang wasn't sure she wanted to follow. This woman, this doctor, dark-haired, voluptuous and brusque jostled her. How could she tell the woman about the voices, rock or river? But when the doctor waved down the hall, Giang trailed, then took her seat in the bright red chair facing the doctor's desk.

"Tell me how you're feeling," Dr. Rashad, reaching for Giang's file.

Giang hesitated. She didn't want to be *in therapy*, like some girls in the dorm. She only wanted to learn how to trick the rock voices, to turn them back into the river voice.

"I'm feeling . . ." How was she feeling? "Fine."

Dr. Rashad leafed through the file then looked up. "And the voices?"

"I still hear the rocks, but they're farther away. In a tunnel."

She didn't say, "I believe them. I trust them." She remembered what Melissa said. She couldn't tell Dr. Rashad so much that she would suggest Giang leave school. Giang didn't want to leave. She just wanted to hear the river voice again.

"I see." The doctor set Giang's file on the credenza behind her. She leaned forward, clasping her knees. "Speak to me," she said.

Giang tilted her head. The woman's voice changed from brusque to encouraging.

"The way the voices speak to you. Tell me what they want you to hear."

Giang's breath deepened in her chest. She looked into the doctor's dark eyes, which seemed to invite trust. She spoke, softly at first, in the river voice, then louder, furiously, as the rock voice too often did.

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When they landed in America, Giang's mother and grandmother and uncle settled in Connecticut where, eventually, Mama Lan, as she later became known, opened a dockside restaurant on Long Island Sound. They lived frugally, saved conscientiously, though they lost a good bit of savings to the conniver who left Giang's mother before his daughter was born.

But Giang's mother learned quickly from her patrons—the ones who bragged about their sons and daughters at Harvard and Dartmouth and MacMillan University—the importance of an *elite* education. So, in 2005, she moved with Giang to MacMillan, and took a job in the university's foodservice department. A step down, to be sure. But she had a predictable salary, a 401(k) plan, and, when it was time for her daughter to go to school, free tuition. All Giang would need to do was work hard, avoid scheming men and, when necessary, employ a little deception and trickery.

The only problem, from Giang's perspective, was that she didn't want to use the trickery in her blood to develop apps or run a company. She wanted to weave poems. After all, her mother had named her Huong Giang, pure, flowing river. Why couldn't she see her daughter's destiny was in creating beauty, not in money-making?

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"Please, river voice," Giang whispered on her way home as hope pulled her along to MacMillan Bridge, "be there." Though, thanks to the way Dr. Rashad allowed her to speak the rock voice, she no longer feared if that awaited her.

As she approached, she slowed, then stopped. Someone was standing in her spot. Not someone. The poet from the clinic. He stood without moving, his book in his left hand, his

reddish hair tousled by the breeze. Surely, Giang thought, he could hear the voice. But which one? Rock? Or river?

She gathered herself, approached him. Not too close. She glanced to him and opened her mouth to speak but remained silent. Then the river voice spoke. *Just listen. Let me do the rest.*

Her heart beat faster, faster. Even the pills couldn't slow it. Did she need them anymore anyway? "Do you hear her?" She didn't care that her voice wavered. She felt free, as if floating down, down to the river, like a fallen leaf, tumbling mid-air.

The poet turned to her, looking, Giang thought, as if she had wakened him from a weighty, toddler's sleep. When his green eyes focused on hers, he tilted his head. "The river, you mean?"

His voice struck Giang as clear and true. She waited for the river voice to guide her, or even the rock voice, to warn her. When she heard nothing but the water's rush below, she nodded and smiled. "Yes," she said. "The river."

Marleen Pasch began writing about the challenges of navigating the healthcare system when she was an award-winning human resources communication consultant. After being diagnosed with an enigmatic, supposedly incurable illness, her own healthcare experience led her to practice and write about healing in body, mind and spirit. Her novel, *At the End of the Storm*, about a woman's psychological and spiritual journey to wholeness, received the gold medal in contemporary fiction in the 2021 Global Book Awards. Her next novel, *Stars in Their Infancy*, about healing possibilities when Western medicine teams with traditional treatments in Madagascar, will be released in late 2021. Select anthologies and journals feature her shorter fiction and creative non-fiction on health, healing and spirituality.