Relic

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You may be surprised to learn that a man from Vietnam owns one of John Lennon's shoes. Not only one of John Lennon's shoes. One shoe that he was wearing when he was shot to death in front of the Dakota apartment building. That man is me, and I have money, of course, to buy this thing. I was a very wealthy man in my former country, before the spineless poor threw down their guns and let the communists take over. Something comes into your head as I speak: this is a hard man, a man of no caring, how can he speak of the "spineless poor."I do not mean to say that these people are poor because they are cowards. I am saying that being poor can take away a man's courage. For those who are poor, being beaten down, robbed of rights, repressed under the worst possible form of tyranny is not enough worse than just being poor. Why should they risk the pain and the maiming and the death for so little benefit? If I was a poor man, I too would be spineless.

But I had wealth in Vietnam and that gave me courage enough even to sail away on the South China Sea, sail away from all those things I owned and come to a foreign country and start again with nothing. That is what I did. I came at last to New Orleans, Louisiana, and because I was once from North Vietnam and was Catholic, I ended up among my own people far east in Orleans Parish, in a community called Versailles, named after an apartment complex they put us in as refugees. I lived in such a place for a time. The ceilings were hardly eight feet high and there was no veranda, nowhere even to hang a wind chime. The emptiness of the rooms threatened to cast me down, take my courage. In Saigon, I owned many wonderful things: furniture of teak, inlaid with scenes made of tiles of ivory and pearl, showing how the Trung sisters threw out the Chinese from our country in the year 40 A.D.; a part of an oracle bone from the earliest times of my country, the bone of some animal killed by ritual and carved with the future in Chinese characters; a dagger with a stag's antler handle in bronze. You might think that things like this should have protected me from what happened. There is much power in objects. My church teaches that clearly. A fragment of bone from a saint's body, a bit of skin, a lock of hair, all of these things have great power to do miracles, to cure, to heal.

But you see, though the Trung sisters threw the Chinese out, just one year later the Chinese returned and the Trung sisters had to retreat, and finally, in the year 43, they threw themselves into a river and drowned. And the oracle stone, though I did not know exactly what it said, probably dealt with events long past or maybe even foresaw this very world where I have ended up. And the dagger looked ceremonial and I'm sure was never drawn in anger. It would have been better if I had owned the tiniest fragment of some saint's body, but the church does not sell such things.

And here I sit, at the desk in the study in my house. I am growing rich once more and in the center of my desk sits this shoe. It is more like a little boot, coming up to the ankle and having no laces but a loop of leather at the back where John Lennon's forefinger went through to pull the shoe onto his foot, even that morning which was his last morning on this earth. Something comes into your head when I tell you this. It is my talent in making wealth to know what others are thinking. You wonder how I should come to have this shoe, how I know it is really what I say it is. I cannot give away the names of those who I dealt with, but I can tell you this much. I am a special collector of things. A man in New York who sells to me asked if I was interested in

something unusual. When he told me about this shoe, I had the same response—how can I know for sure? Well, I met the man who provided the shoe, and I have photographs and even a newspaper article that identifies him as a very close associate of John Lennon. He says that certain items were very painful for the family, so they were disposed of and he was in possession of them and he knew that some people would appreciate them very much. He too is a Catholic. The other shoe was already gone, which is unfortunate, but this shoe was still available, and I paid much money for it.

Of course, I have made much money in my new country. It is a gift I have, and America is the land of opportunity. I started in paper lanterns and fire crackers and *cay neu,* the New Year poles. I sold these at the time of Tet, our Vietnam New Year celebration, when the refugees wanted to think about home. I also sold them sandwiches and drinks and later I opened a restaurant and then a parlor with many video games. Versailles already has a pool hall, run by another good businessman, but I have video games in my place and the young men love these games, fighting alien spaceships and wizards and kung-fu villains with much greater skill than their fathers fought the communists. And I am now doing other things, bigger things, mostly in the shrimp industry. In ten years people from Vietnam will be the only shrimp fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico. I do not need an oracle bone to tell you this for sure. And when this is so, I will be making even more money.

I may even be able to break free of Versailles. I sit at my desk and I look beyond John Lennon's shoe, through the window, and what do I see? My house, unlike the others on this street, has two stories. I am on the second story at the back and outside is my carefully trimmed yard, the lush St. Augustine grass faintly tinted with blue, and there is my brick barbecue pit and my setting of cypress lawn furniture. But beyond is the bayou that runs through Versailles and my house is built at an angle on an acre and a half and I can see all the other backyards set side by side for the quarter mile to the place where the lagoon opens up and the Versailles apartments stand. All the backyards of these houses—all of them—are plowed and planted as if this was some provincial village in Vietnam. Such things are not done in America. In America a vegetable garden is a hobby. Here in Versailles the people of Vietnam are cultivating their backyards as a way of life. And behind the yards is a path and beyond the path is the border of city land along the bayou and on this land the people of Vietnam have planted a community garden stretching down to the lagoon and even now I can see a scattering of conical straw hats there, the women crouched flat-footed and working the garden, and I expect any moment to see a boy riding a water buffalo down the path or perhaps a sampan gliding along the bayou, heading for the South China Sea. Do you understand me? I am living in the past.

I have enough money to leave Versailles and become the American that I must be. But I have found that it isn't so simple. Something is missing. I know I am wrong when I say that still more money, from shrimp or from whatever else, will finally free me from the past. Perhaps the problem is that my businesses are all connected to the Vietnam community here. There was no way around that when I started. And perhaps it's true that I should find some American business to invest in. But there is nothing to keep me in this place even if my money is made here. I do not work the cash registers in my businesses.

Perhaps it is the absence of my family. But this is something they chose for themselves. My wife was a simple woman and she would not leave her parents and she feared America greatly. The children came from her body. They belong with her, and she felt she belonged in Vietnam. My only regret is that I have nothing of hers to touch, not a lock of hair or a ring or even a scarf—she had so many beautiful scarves, some of which she wore around her waist. But if my

family had come with me, would they not in fact be a further difficulty in my becoming American? As it is, I have only myself to consider in this problem and that should make things simpler.

But there are certain matters in life that a man is not able to control on his own. My religion teaches this clearly. For a rich man, for a man with the gift to become rich even a second time, this is a truth that is sometimes difficult to see. But he should realize that he is human and dependent on forces beyond himself and he should look to the opportunity that his wealth can give him.

I do not even know John Lennon's music very well. I have heard it and it is very nice, but in Vietnam I always preferred the popular singers in my own language, and in America I like the music they call easy-listening, though sometimes a favorite tune I will hear from the Living Strings or Mantovani turns out to be a song of John Lennon. It is of no matter to a man like John Lennon that I did not know his music well before I possessed his shoe. The significance of this object is the same. He is a very important figure. This is common knowledge. He wrote many songs that affected the lives of people in America and he sang about love and peace and then he died on the streets of New York as a martyr.

I touch his shoe. The leather is smooth and is the color of teakwood and my forefinger glides along the instep to the toe, where there is a jagged scrape. I lift my finger and put it on the spot where the scrape begins, at the point of the toe, and I trace the gash, follow the fuzzy track of the exposed underside of the leather. All along it I feel a faint grinding inside me, as if this is a wound in flesh that I touch. John Lennon's wound. I understand this scrape on the shoe. John Lennon fell and his leg pushed out on the pavement as he died. This is the stigmata of the shoe, the sign of his martyrdom.

With one hand I cup the shoe at its back and slide my other hand under the toe and I lift and the shoe always surprises me at its lightness, just as one who has moments before died a martyr's death might be surprised at the lightness of his own soul. I angle the shoe toward the light from my window and I look inside. I see the words Saville Row on the lining, but that is all. There is no size recorded here and I imagine that this shoe was made special for John Lennon, that they carefully measured his foot and this is its purest image in the softest leather. I am very quiet inside but there is this great pressure in my chest, coming from something I cannot identify as myself. This is because of what I will now do.

I wait until I can draw an adequate breath. Then I turn in my chair and gently lower the shoe to the floor and I place it before my bare right foot. I make the sign of the cross and slip my foot into John Lennon's shoe, sliding my forefinger into the loop at the back and pulling gently, just as John Lennon did on the day he joined the angels. The lining is made of something as soft as silk and there is a chill from it. I stand up before my desk and the shoe is large for me, but that's as it should be. I take one step and then another and I am in the center of my room and I stand there and my heart is very full and I wait for what I pray will one day be mine, a feeling about what has happened to me that I cannot even imagine until I actually feel it. I have asked the man in New York to look for another of John Lennon's shoes, a left shoe. Even if it is from some other pair, I want to own just one more shoe. Then I will put both of John Lennon's shoes on my feet and I will go out into the street and I will walk as far as I need to go to find the place where I belong.