

The Quiet Dane – by Bill Nelson
Runner Up in the AA Directions New Travel Writer of the Year Award 2009
Vietnam to Wellington in 366 days

I've stacked the dishwasher and old newspapers are being thrown behind the couch when two thoughts crowd into my mind, one, I barely know this guy I've invited to stay with us and two, I've neglected to offer him a ride up the steep and endless hill we live on. Fear and shame drain simultaneously through me, two things I find are intrinsic to travel: missed flights, lost passports, conspicuous clothing, cultural ignorance. You learn to live with these things in foreign places, but as I am now learning, also when hosting foreign travellers in your own home. I put some beer in the fridge and watch an episode of Magnum P.I. It is a good one where Magnum's dark military past comes to light and Higgins finally gets his comeuppance. I start to feel better, relax, I even crack one of the beers as if it were a normal evening. Magnum raises his eyebrows. There is a knock at the door.

Nicolai and I met a year earlier in a restaurant called Little Hanoi. He sits quietly, blonde hair over his eyes, unkempt but fashionable in that way only Scandinavians can pull off. His brown arms obviously haven't been back to Europe in a while and his straight posture indicates either a diligent mother or a sport where balance and nimbleness are crucial. He smiles at the waitress, asks politely for more spring rolls and glances at the hodgepodge groups of tourists eating, drinking and asking the waitresses what Xả is. I am stooped over, slurping my Pho Bo, a mess made of the crusty baguettes and the room eyed dangerously in the hope no-one will notice I am alone. My mother did a good job too, but it was more about getting me to eat my vegetables as fast as possible than the finer social graces of posture and etiquette. I swig the last of my Hanoi Beer and order another.

My brother left earlier that morning to fly back to Australia and I had time to kill until my flight later that night. Nicolai, I found out later, had cycled more or less non-stop from Ho Chi Minh City and needed a few days rest.

'You on your own?' I say.

He slowly lowers his chopsticks, 'Just me and my bicycle.'

I munch another spring roll, flakes of pastry rain down on the table cloth.

'Another Hanoi please,' I say to a waitress with a stack of plates.

'Me too,' Nicolai says.

After dinner I take him to the intersection of Luong Ngoc Quyen and Ta Hien, two lanes in the old quarter I found a few days before. Bia hoi crowd the footpath on each corner, little room left for pedestrians. An old toothless woman pours us a couple of glasses of watery beer served for 2000 Dong and we sit ourselves down in kindergarten sized plastic chairs arranged haphazardly around her, our toes almost hang over the kerb. I feel anchored, stationary, somehow apart from the mayhem despite the scooters that roar past only inches away. They seem to be let loose at random intervals by some kind of telepathic traffic light, their horns blaze and drown out the background of street vendor chatter, haggling and touts as they narrowly miss oncoming traffic. The smell of meat, steam and sweet Vietnamese coffee drift down the street. Occasionally a kid approaches, 'Lighter, lighter. Cigarette? Book? You like The Killers yes?' We have both learnt to shake our heads and not make eye contact or break conversation. I'd bought a book and a lighter the day I arrived. The lighter had a map of Vietnam on it and the book was 'The Quiet American' by Graham Greene. I thought both were perfect mementos for a country where waves of oppressors had been fought back by a spirited and resourceful people and communism had been ultimately adapted to suit themselves. The next day the lighter stopped working and I discovered many of the words in the book were spelt wrong. I read it anyway and keep the lighter in a box.

Nicolai and I talk for several hours as the beer slowly works its way in. I learn how he had studied anthropology for years, how he left a girlfriend behind and how a friend had started the journey with him, but had only made it to the Czech Republic before he bailed out with an injury. He doesn't seem to have any particular drive or ambition to tell his story to the world or save the children or even study the anthropological nuances of each place, he does it only for himself. He won't save anybody, but he won't hurt anyone either. I can respect that, even so I offer to help translate the book into English that, 'you have to do when you get back.' He nimbly shrugs off the idea with a laugh as he orders us another round of beer.

A group of drunk American college students sit next to us at the bia hoi, loud voices discuss how cheap everything is. The kid with the lighters and CDs comes back and one of the Americans, a chubby guy with a baseball cap, tries to haggle him down to half what is asked for a Zippo. The Vietnamese kid shakes his head like he has been terminally insulted and repeats his price, this goes on for awhile until the guy agrees to 200,000 Dong, about 80% what the kid was asking. As he walks over to the next bia hoi the American laughs, 'these are worth five times as much in the states.'

Nicolai sent me an email from Ecuador recently to say he has been on the road for 1000 days almost 700 days after I first met him. That is a long time, longer than I've ever been in a single job. And yet he has pedalled his legs for that long, each stroke, each revolution taking him somewhere. I've followed his trip through regular email updates and photos he posts on the internet. He takes a lot of self portraits in front of long empty roads where his forearm looms large in the foreground and disappears behind the camera. I like to scan his weathered face, the lines around his smile and forehead deeper than I remember. I don't see any fear, any shame. He is comfortable with his little bike, his big roads, whatever else comes his way. I wonder if he ever thinks about what he'll do when he gets back to Denmark. If that is the only thing he fears, home, the settle-down, the stay-still? Somehow I doubt it ever crosses his mind, there is always another road, another friend.

'Nicolai! It's good to see you mate. Come in. I'll open the garage and you can put your bike in there.' He smiles and shakes my hand. He looks essentially the same: thin, worn, baby blonde hair a little shorter than before. 'Nice hill' he says with a grin as he wheels the bike inside. 'Would you like a beer?' His grin gets even bigger. We catch up and fall into the same easy conversation we had in Vietnam. 'It's good to see you are still going,' I say.

He stays a couple of days and decides to spend his time reading in the winter sun, the cat's bean bag claimed for himself. The only touristy thing we do is walk up Tinakori Hill for the view. He is grateful for the time to rest, most people he tells me, drag him around the local sites, eager to show him their town. He buys a bag of apples from the market and tells me they are the best he's ever tasted. I've never thought about that before. The next day he gets back on his bike and heads for Palmerston North, someone there has

kindly offered to take him on a pig hunt. Before he goes we watch part two of the Magnum episode.

'It's the characters that make it,' he says. 'Higgins, T.C., Rick.'

'Couldn't agree more,' I say. 'But it wouldn't be Magnum without Hawaii or the Ferrari.'

Note: Nicolai Bangsgaard is still travelling around the world on his bicycle. At the time of writing this article he is in Cartagena, Colombia, 1037 days out of Denmark. You can check his progress at www.worldtravellers.dk.