

DAVE KIM

## The Hobbyist

I first met Wilson McKenzie in a restaurant on 86<sup>th</sup> Street. My wife Ji Hae was late so I was having a drink at the bar, where a tall stranger in camouflage pants sat reading the paper. He had excellent posture, even on the awkward aluminum stools that were too high for the bar and made you sit with your legs splayed over the sides. Next to him was a piece of twisted metal about five feet long, one of those rusty I-beams used in construction. It looked like a heavy burden to carry alone and I was curious to know how he'd dragged it inside by himself. I asked him what he was doing with it.

"I'm an actor," he said, in a deep baritone that suddenly made him seem older than he looked. "This is a prop."

I was trying to write plays at the time and a few of my friends were performers who resented being grouped into a single category. There were theatre actors, commercial and TV actors, film actors fishing for SAG credits. They felt it was important to make distinctions.

"What kind of work?" I asked.

"Performance art," he said. "I'm an Iraq War reenactor."

This was in early 2004. Wilson's insatiability, his relentless glory-seeking, hadn't yet revealed itself. He was just this good-natured guy who kept his passions to himself until you goaded him into talking about them. It wasn't until some years later that the floodgates would open on their own and you'd marvel at the force of his dreams, resist them the best you could before you were swept along with them. At the time I was happy just to meet someone with a weird job. Wilson folded up his newspaper and fielded my questions like a pro.

"Isn't it a little too soon for that?" I asked. "People are still getting killed out there."

"That's the beauty of it. We don't preach a message or pretend to analyze history. This is real life with a seventy-two-hour delay."

"And it's all live-action? The suicide bombings and everything?"

“Once a week, rain or shine. Some days we’re just sitting around playing cards. But all of it’s done with a real audience in mind.”

It started, he explained, when he’d joined a softball team made up of humanities grads and art students. They called themselves the Panopticons and after coming in last place for three straight seasons, quit the league and began staging performance pieces instead. Their fifth and current project, referred to simply as a set of “demonstrations,” had them reenacting scenes from Iraq based on reports that came in through the newswires. Each show ran about an hour in an open space in the East Village and was meant to be part of a journalistic series, a “hyperrealist chronicle,” he called it, of a strange and ever-extending war.

“What’s your prop do?” I asked. “It looks menacing.”

“This?” He picked up the I-beam with one hand and tapped my leg with it. “This is just foam. It falls and kills me in the piece we’re doing tomorrow.”

We introduced ourselves. He didn’t say much about his background but I’d later find out that he was from Boston and that his father was a major apparel manufacturer. During Gulf War I, Craig McKenzie had scored a military contract as a supplier of floppy desert hats, the kind that only tour guides and power hikers wear in the civilian world but come standard-issue for Marines. He died of throat cancer while Wilson was finishing his senior year at Amherst and left his only son a hefty inheritance. This explained how *Demonstrations* was being financed and why Wilson, who’d graduated cum laude and had ties to nearly every important industrialist on the Eastern seaboard, had never worked a real job in his life. Why he took a liking to me, I’ll never know. Maybe he thought I’d write a play about him someday.

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Wilson ended up joining Ji Hae and I for dinner. Afterwards, we went to a bar in Chinatown whose owner was a friend of Wilson’s and insisted on giving us free drinks all night. Ji Hae got his number—I had too many beers to work a phone—and the three of us started going out once or twice a month. Wilson always led the way.

His great talent was that he could get anyone to like him as soon as he opened his mouth. There wasn't a bar we couldn't get into, a show we couldn't get free passes for. I've never seen Ji Hae laugh as much as she did when Wilson was around; the one night I had the flu when he called us, I went out anyway just to keep an eye on them. We speculated on how much money he had. He lived fairly modestly in a studio downtown, but an eleven-month run of weekly performances couldn't have been cheap.

There were disagreements within his group after the first Iraq elections. Some felt this fledgling act of democracy was a sign to move on and give the watchdogging a rest. Others were adamant about continuing and stepping up production values. Key players left the group while those who remained couldn't agree on how to expand their audience. At most performances, people on the sidewalk would stop to watch for a few minutes but no one actually sat through an entire show. A few small papers wrote the piece up as a kind of museum piece you shuffled past, a well-meaning and under-developed curiosity, not an act of real protest. Wilson would say he'd never liked the word "protest" anyway and hadn't intended to color the project as one.

I went to see the last performance in March 2005, three days after a car bomb killed 127 people near Baghdad. Wilson played an older American sergeant stationed near the blast. He spent most of the show filling out order forms, barely flinching when the explosion thundered through the speakers and dozens of extras (hired an hour before the show) ran panicking across the stage. He got up once to use the bathroom but that was pretty much it for an hour. A lone man going about his business while the world collapsed around him.

After *Demonstrations*, Wilson started other projects and we heard from him less often. Ji Hae got a teaching gig and I began a late-twenties drift, stumbling from job to untenable job. My feelings toward Wilson and his lifestyle began to change, subtly at first, until what began as genial envy became clumsy, snappish resentment. Eventually he stopped calling altogether and then Ji and I became that boring domestic couple that stays in and watches whole seasons of television on weekends. When I finally ran into Wilson in Central

Park one summer afternoon, two years after I'd last seen him, he'd lost weight and was wearing clothes that could be called rags by anyone's standards. It finally happened, I thought, with a tinge of self-righteousness. He's blown all his money and now he's homeless.

"Thanh, you're alive!" he boomed. He threw an arm around my shoulder and steered me toward a restaurant on the Upper West Side. I asked him what he'd been up to.

"I'm collecting dirt," he said, "from famous battlefields."

I think it was his decisiveness that sold people on his ideas. He was so sure of himself that he could make any act of madness or perversity seem blessed by reason. Wilson was far from broke; he had gone to twenty-nine different countries to scoop up soil, rocks, grass, clay, or even chunks of cement from important war sites. He had more than seventy samples already, all packed in airtight mason jars or wrapped in plastic at a storage facility in Brooklyn.

"But why?" I asked.

He wouldn't tell me specifics but his plan was to collect as many as he could in three years and then construct his own battlefield on a large flat space. Each famous clash would be represented on a one-foot square and viewers could refer to a color-coded map to see which was which.

"Just imagine—Zama, Hastings, Agincourt, Stalingrad, Salamis. Lexington and Concord. All the major battles of history pieced together like a huge quilt."

"How many are you planning to get?"

"I'm not sure," he answered. "At least a few hundred. I'm going to Southeast Asia next, and then China for like half of next year. I realized the ones I had were way too west-centric."

"But where does it end?" I asked. "You could do this forever. Wars have been fought everywhere and who's to say one's more significant than the other?"

Wilson beamed at this. He looked like a parent whose child had just reached a milestone of maturity.

"That's exactly the point," he said. "That's exactly what I'm hoping people will say."

We sat down in some old school Italian place where Wilson ordered about half the menu and two bottles of wine. By the third course I was having trouble breathing. Between bites, Wilson gave me a long lecture on the history of the Indochinese peninsula, the wars and colonialism, the bitter infighting. He planned to start in Laos and work his way to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. I let him ramble on and at one point, just as a roasted lamb shank showed up at our table, it dawned on me what kind of person Wilson was. He was the eternal green light, the gung-ho idealist, the guy who'd never had to worry if his ideas actually worked or made sense before he saw them through. His whole life he could move without thinking, scoff at the possibility of failure while the rest of us started IRAs and took out renter's insurance.

"It all sounds amazing," I said. I told him I had extended family in Vietnam but hadn't met any of them, my parents having severed all ties after the war.

"You should come," he replied. "Thanh, you should *totally* come."

I laughed and told him no way. I'd lost an advertising job and was freelancing to keep my name in people's books. My recruiter had lined up some interviews for the month, nothing ideal, but I was getting desperate.

"How long you going for?" I asked.

"Two months."

"Right. See if it were a week—"

"Why the hell not? The job market's shit anyway."

We ate and ate. The chef even came out and gave us a few appetizers on the house. Then Wilson got serious. "If it's a resource issue," he said, "then don't worry about it."

I shook my head. "And you leave when?"

"Sunday," he said.

"It's Thursday, man."

Our desserts came and the sheer beauty of the *millefoglie* that was placed in front of me, its layered elaboration and masterful balancing, made me hungry again. I enjoyed about a quarter of it and then forced the rest down on principle. None of our food went to

waste. Coffee was served. We didn't bring up my going to Asia again until several hours later at the Pig and Whistle, when, after throwing back my last shot of Jameson and obliterating any bit of clarity left in my head, I told him I'd think about it.

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The next day was spent recovering on the sofa and explaining to a very irritated Ji Hae why I'd come home at three in the morning with a shoe missing and a pint glass in my pocket. When I told her who was at the source of it all, she lit up like a road flare and asked me what Wilson was doing. I told her all about his plan, how he'd asked me to tag along.

"And you turned him down?" she asked.

"I told him I'd think about it but I doubt he'll remember."

"What's there to think about? The job market's terrible right now."

There it was again. This flagrant denial, this throw-up-your-hands-and-blame-the-economy bullshit. Had he gotten to her too? Was the world going crazy?

"It's like winning a sweepstakes," Ji Hae continued. "He's *paying* for it."

"I'm sure I'd have to buy the plane ticket, at least."

She launched into a speech about how most people lived their whole lives clinging to some false sense of security, and how I should *go out and live* while I had the chance. I was in no mood for clichés. I stalked off to the shower, convincing myself that I, too, lived a rich and fulfilling life and didn't need to run all over the planet with a shovel. I was going to nurse this hangover and call my employment agency.

Around four that afternoon a bike messenger stopped by the apartment and dropped off an envelope. Ji Hae opened it and her eyes became little Frisbees. Inside was a note from Wilson and a one-way ticket to Laos, printed out from a home computer. The note read: "Pack everything into a single backpack and bring an empty carry-on suitcase. Meet me at JFK at 6 a.m. on Sunday. Wilson."

Ji Hae made cupcakes to celebrate.

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So I went to Laos. The ticket was non-refundable. We started in Vientiane, the capital, and worked our way north to Luang Prabang. Our primary mode of transport was a pair of used mopeds that broke down with infuriating regularity. There were no auto shops in the tiny hamlets we passed but each time the bikes pattered out, two or three kids would spring up out of nowhere and make repairs for a few American dollars. While we waited, Wilson would take out his map and tell me how many people had died at that very spot in some fourteenth century war, or how a lovely village had once thrived there before Colonel Whoever had napalmed it to the ground. He collected his samples and put them in our extra suitcases, which we tied to the backs of our scooters with rattan cords.

In a village south of Luang Prabang, one of Wilson's expat friends had put up ziplines across a thin section of the Mekong. I spent the better part of three days bombing back and forth across the river and drinking rice moonshine until dawn. It was hard to believe that I'd almost turned it down, this pastoral paradise where civilization was an accent, not a focal point. No amount of anxiety or self-loathing could mar a sunset over the limestone peaks of the river valley. I forgot why we'd come in the first place, pushed the idea of bloody war soil from my mind. It was the happiest I'd been in a long time. We rode north and wandered the streets of Luang Prabang, passing monks in bright saffron-colored robes. At the top of Mount Phousi one afternoon, we split a bottle of *laolao* and watched the light change on the soft carpet of the world below. Shirtless, androgynous children were selling snacks nearby and they pointed out some landmarks, which I promptly forgot the names of. It didn't matter. You could see everything clearly—the gold-tipped forests, the nubbins of thatch where people lived, the scabbard-thin boats inching up the river—and it made you want to stay absolutely still, so as not to disturb even the air around you.

"You know Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world, per capita," Wilson said. "In the sixties, the C.I.A. launched this secret war and had the Air Force drop 300 million bombs here.

Napalmed the shit out of it too. Over a ton of explosives for each person.”

That was when I told Wilson I was grateful for the trip and happy to be his mule, but couldn't he ease up on the war stories?

He said it was important for me to be on board artistically, that I wasn't his mule but his partner. This project was bigger than just collecting souvenirs and admiring sunsets. I asked him what sort of statement he thought he was making with this project. Wasn't it sort of patronizing? Wasn't there a long track record of scholars from the West trying to patch together their own vision of world history? Hadn't it occurred to him that he was now a classic archetype, a white man of privilege literally stealing land from other countries?

He put his face in his palm. At first I thought I'd gotten to him, that he was having a moment of clarity, but then I realized it was a gesture of total disappointment, one of a high school football coach seeing his team go down in flames. With one pitying stare, he made me feel like some blowhard crippled by PC dogma, who lashed out without seeing the bigger picture (whatever it was). We didn't say anything for a while. I could almost hear Ji Hae's voice echoing off the valley: "Why do you always ruin a good thing? This is why you can't keep your jobs. You always have a bone to pick with people."

When I woke up the next morning, Wilson was gone. His bags of dirt were still in his room and when I checked with the owner of the guesthouse, she told me he had paid up front for eight days and left.

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Wilson had talked about going south to Phonsavan to see the Plain of Jars, so I went north. I was angry. I threw all my stuff in his room and set out for Luang Namtha, where there were supposed to be some good trekking trails. There was only one highway going north and my scooter was running smoothly for once. Mountains surrounded me on all sides, some of them densely forested, others dotted with stumps. Rain came and went, the kind that followed a strict cycle: thirty minutes of scorching sunshine, thirty minutes of cloud cover, another thirty of apocalyptic downpour. Thick mists tightened around the hills and you could see a storm make its way from one

end of a valley to the other, its eyelet a distant beam of sunlight that never stayed put for long.

When the sun came out I stopped to dry off and eat at a noodle stand. An old man who spoke French brought me a bowl of noodles and told me someone else had stopped there that morning, a foreigner from the States. *Il a conduit une moto*, he added, *comme la vôtre*. It didn't take me long after getting back on the road to find out who the rider was. A few miles out, I saw Wilson's moped parked on the side of the road, its owner nowhere in sight. I almost didn't stop. I only did because the plastic siding lay in pieces nearby and there were parts strewn all over the highway. His pack was gone and his helmet hung from a chain around the front wheel. A single skid mark ran down the center of the lane and ended in a half circle, like a long question mark.

It was nearly three and the sky was conspiring to rain again. I parked my bike and hiked into the banyan-choked trees, swatting at mosquitoes and dragonflies as big as my palm. The terrain banked steeply and I could see a few dozen thatch roofs about a quarter-mile from the road. My shoes nearly came off with every step in the squelching mud until I found a stone footpath that led me straight into the village.

There were two boys playing in a small courtyard when I arrived. "*Sabaidee*," I said, which meant hello in Lao. I didn't know they were Hmong at the time.

They smiled but didn't respond. A few yards behind them, Wilson was sitting on his heels under a small gazebo, in the posture of someone going to the bathroom. When he saw me he nodded and said nothing.

"What happened?" I asked.

He was filthy. His hands were covered in bike grease and he had scratches on his face and neck, maybe from a fall in the bush or run-in with some kind of animal. His shirt was torn from collar to hem.

"There's a creek behind us," he said in a shaky voice. "We're right between two waterfalls and if you listen quietly, you can hear two distinct water tones. One high, one low."

"When did you get here? What happened to your face?"

He closed his eyes. “The Hmong call this little section the Singing River. When the bombs were dropping in the sixties, they lived in caves all along this mountain pass. They navigated at night by the sound of the water.”

Who knew how accurate this stuff was? The thought came to me that whatever Wilson believed about what he was doing, he lived for orchestrated beauty, not truth. I stood there for a moment, hearing nothing but a general trickle and the clucking of chickens, which were bobbing about on the dirt paths of the village. A young girl was feeding a flock of them, scattering seeds and managing the birds with a curved stick. I scanned the houses for any signs of trouble but the village, besides its livestock and a handful of children, was empty. Wilson got up. He looked pale, bewildered with pain.

“Your bike’s a mess,” I said. “You take a fall or something?”

He nodded. “I’ve been here a couple hours.”

“I thought you were supposed to go south.”

“I never said that.” It looked like he’d been crying and I backed off.

We took a walk. The two boys in the courtyard were kicking a ball of woven rattan back and forth and we heard their laughter wherever we went. The tiny houses were built on wooden flood posts and stood about five feet above the ground. Nearly everyone we saw was under ten or over sixty, the older ones perched on doorways and ladders, hiding from the punishing weather. At the water pump, Wilson threw up a little and washed away the vomit with a wooden bucket.

“You need to go to a hospital,” I said, but he shook his head.

The afternoon light was fading; storm clouds had formed a thick grey ceiling above us. Wilson was intent on finding some girl named Duly only he couldn’t remember which house was hers. A few of the huts had roofs of corrugated tin but they all had the same basic design.

“Hello?” shouted Wilson. “Hello, I’m here! American! Hello?”

The two boys with the ball parroted him: “Hello! Hello!” They began advertising for us, yelling as loudly as they could and laughing at each other. Then an old woman hobbled out of one of the houses

and came fast down the ladder. She held a pair of long wooden slats about the size and thickness of window blinds, and wore a robe made of heavy blue linen. I thought we'd disturbed some kind of ritual and stood frozen as she smacked the shit out of my friend, who went knees-down into the dust and covered his head. She was clenching her rust-brown teeth and there was blood all over the sleeves of her robe. The wood split into pieces but the woman kept on lashing Wilson until I finally came to my senses and pulled her away by her armpits.

"Please," I said to her, showing her my hands. She flung the splinters away and then she just stood in front of me, weeping.

"What is this, Wilson?" I asked. He was still kneeling on the ground and didn't answer, his neck and shoulders covered with red lines. I steeled myself for another charge, but after a minute or so of awkward silence, the woman ambled back to her house and hauled herself up the ladder.

"We should probably go," I said, when she was out of sight.

Wilson got up and walked straight to the hut. I went after him, shouting that he shouldn't do anything brash. Inside, the old woman was sitting over a young girl who had a deep gash on her head and was lying motionless on a straw mat. There was an older girl sitting in the corner, staring fearfully at our foreign faces. The old woman was speaking softly in her language and either didn't see us or care that we were standing in her doorway.

"Do you have any money?" Wilson asked me. He was pitched forward, leaning gut-punched and ashen on one of the ladder rungs. My eyes adjusted to the dimness of the room and I saw the younger girl's blood-soaked clothes, the cloudy pink water in the bowls around her head. She wasn't breathing.

"How much do you need?" I asked Wilson.

"Whatever you got," he said.

I pulled out eighteen U.S. dollars and a few thousand Lao kip, about twenty bucks total. Wilson laid all of it on the floor of the hut, choked out an apology, and then I finally understood.

We were gestured at to leave. Wilson's bike was shot so we had to take mine all the way to Luang Namtha, where a police officer

would listen to our report, fine us \$50, and tell us to be more careful on the highways. Wilson would stay quiet a long time after that—this man who'd reenacted death so many times, who used to read and analyze reports of it every day. He stopped collecting samples and never finished his battleground project. I remember him dumping out his soil jars before we left the village that afternoon. The dirt pile stood out against the tall weeds, and Wilson kicked at it furiously to disperse it, the clouds of brick-red dust staining his jeans and sneakers. We moved out just as the raindrops began falling again. I felt the weight of the dusk, the shuddering air. The young ballplayers trailed us to the footpath and called out, “helohelohelohelohelo.” They shouted this over and over and we heard it all the way to the main road.