

**Mo Ri Xon**  
By Thomas Leverett  
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(in order of appearance)  
NARRATOR  
ROBERT (MCNAMARA)  
ANNE (MORRISON WELSH)  
EMILY  
TINA  
DUC  
HOANG

*(Scene opens with **ROBERT** at a table in a cafe. **NARRATOR** enters.)*

**NARRATOR:**

On November 2, 1965, Norman Morrison, a Quaker from Baltimore, set himself on fire and killed himself outside Robert McNamara's window in the Pentagon, in Washington, D.C. This is a cafe near the Pentagon; now, it is 1999, thirty-four years later.

*(**NARRATOR** exits to right. **ANNE** enters from left. **ROBERT** stands when he sees her.)*

**ROBERT:**

Ms. Morrison Welsh, I'm glad to meet you! Robert McNamara. *(They shake hands)*. Please sit down.

**ANNE:**

It's my pleasure. Please call me Anne.

**ROBERT:**

Anne, as you know, I asked to meet you because of my book. I felt that, if I mentioned your former husband in my book, and in fact I've got a couple of pages, it would be only fair to check with you and get your approval of what I wrote.

**ANNE:**

It's not a problem. I approve of what you wrote. In fact, I read the whole book.

**ROBERT:**

You did?

**ANNE:**

And I commend you for it. It's not every day that a high government official, a Secretary of Defense no less, admits to doubts about American foreign policy, let alone admitting that it might have been a mistaken policy.

**ROBERT:**

Anne, I am aware that you and your husband were strongly against the war from the beginning. And that you protested, after his suicide, for years and years.

**ANNE:**

I prefer to call it a sacrifice. He sacrificed his life to protest that war.

**ROBERT:**

And believe me, what I want you to know is, if he did it to be noticed, he was noticed.

**ANNE:**

Well, he did it right outside your window.

**ROBERT:**

Yes, he did. Two of our men injured themselves trying to save him, in vain.

**ANNE:**

I am sorry that they were injured, and I am sorry that it was in vain.

**ROBERT:**

Don't worry about that; you've had enough on your mind.

**ANNE:**

I would still like to know about the baby. She was almost one at the time. Apparently he handed her to someone at the very end. She was physically unharmed and even in good spirits, though confused. I would like to get a clearer picture of that.

**ROBERT:**

Unfortunately, that's all we know. It happened quickly. The witnesses agree to that account. We really don't know any more.

**ANNE:**

I will have to live with that explanation, then.

**ROBERT:**

He left you to raise three children alone?

**ANNE:**

Yes, my oldest son, Ben, died of cancer in 1979.

**ROBERT:**

Oh, I'm so sorry.

**ANNE:**

*(hiding her eyes in her napkin for a moment, wiping away tears)*  
There's nothing we could do. He was fourteen. We are trying to move on. We are leaving for Vietnam in two weeks.

**ROBERT:**

You and your daughters?

**ANNE:**

And their husbands. I have been invited to Vietnam many times in the last thirty-four years. I am finally ready to accept their offer.

**ROBERT:**

I don't think they'll extend the same offer to me. *(standing)* I wish you well, Anne. Please come to the release of my book, when it comes out. I will look forward to your presence. And have good safe trip!

**ANNE:**

*(standing)* Thank you. It was good to meet you!

*(three seats are in a row such that the audience can see all three passengers. This is a flight from Hong Kong to Hanoi on Vietnam Airlines. ANNE, TINA, and EMILY come and sit in the seats with ANNE on the LEFT (aisle seat) and TINA in the middle. They enter, and settle in as you would on any flight (seatbelt, magazine, etc.)*

**NARRATOR:**

This is flight 265, from Hong Kong to Hanoi.

**EMILY:**

Mom, I know that Dad is very famous in Vietnam.

**ANNE:**

He may be more famous than we realize. They named a street after him. They call him Mo Ri Xon *(mo ri zhon)*. I have also heard him referred to as Uncle Morrison.

**TINA:**

(DUC

There were many famous poems, like *Emily, My Child*, written about him or for him.

**EMILY:**

Mom, now that I'm pregnant, I want to know more about Dad. He was so famous for what he did. But I didn't get to *know* him.

**ANNE:**

Our lives changed forever on that day. And you know what? Because of the public scrutiny, I don't think we ever really talked about it enough, or even grieved enough.

**TINA:**

You always told us to be strong. That he would have wanted it that way.

**ANNE:**

Yes, and I regret that now. Twenty years later, now I wish we had talked about it more. Grieved more.

**EMILY:**

But what was he *like*?

**ANNE:**

After much thought, this is what I'd like to say. He was not a saint. He also was not insane. He knew what he was doing and I think he did it on purpose. He believed in the Quaker principle of "holy obedience," or, listening carefully for direction, for God's guidance and inspiration. He was smart, confident, compassionate, and good with his hands...but he was desperate. Every day we read or heard about the war and it seemed like we had done everything we could do. He felt so strongly the suffering caused by the war. The suffering of the children, and the Vietnamese people, and the American soldiers dying. One day he said to me, what more could we do? That was right before it happened. And I didn't have an answer. All I said was, we shouldn't despair. Now, I wish I'd had a better answer.

**TINA:**

But what he did, that didn't stop the war.

**ANNE:**

Yes, you always reminded me of that. But it did make a difference, I think.

*(DUC arrives, faces audience but looks at Anne)*

**DUC:**

Would you like coffee or tea? *(looks at them carefully with quizzical look on his face)* Aren't you Ms. Morrison? I think I recognize you from pictures in our country's news.

**ANNE:**

Yes, I am.

**DUC:**

Then, these are your daughters? *(to EMILY)* Are you Emily, by any chance?

**EMILY:**

Yes I am.

**DUC:**

Oh, it is such an honor to meet you! *(He shakes hands with all three with great ceremony)* Emily, I want you to know that I know the entire poem, *Emily, My Child*, by the great poet To Huu. I received an honor, in my school, for memorizing it well.

**EMILY:**

Are you serious?

**DUC:**

*(reciting, hands outstretched)* Emily, come with me, So when grown up you will know the way, and not be lost.

**EMILY:**

You know the whole poem?

**DUC:**

*(reciting again, in dramatic fashion)* McNamara! Where are you hiding? In the graveyard Of your five-cornered house, Each corner a continent. You hide yourself From the flaming world... Oh, I'm sorry, I couldn't help it.

**EMILY:**

That's ok.

**DUC:**

I am so pleased to meet you. I will remember this moment forever. *(he bows, and backs off, offstage, exiting by backing up the aisle).*

*(ROBERT enters alone and speaks to the audience).*

*(A sing  
blanke*

**ROBERT:**

He did it right outside my window, she says. Yes indeed. He covered himself with gasoline, and he caught himself *on fire!* He handed his baby girl to someone, and set himself *on fire*. For years and years, I've been haunted by that, by that image. You know, there were other protestors. There were people who threw rocks, or blew up buildings. Whole crowds of them! But this was different. (pauses) You see, before that, we had resolve. We believed we were right. We believed it was the best thing for the US and for Vietnam. We believed that the protestors were just trying to get out of fighting, or just being young and rebellious. But after that, our doubts set in a little more. His act put the light on the suffering. After that, with all the suffering, we lost our resolve.

*(A single bed is in the center of the room. ANNE sits on it, sobbing into a blanket. TINA is at her side, comforting her. EMILY enters.)*

**EMILY:**

What's going on here?

**TINA:**

She's been wailing and sobbing uncontrollably for over an hour. Good thing we're in a five-star hotel, and sound doesn't carry through these walls!

**EMILY:**

*(to ANNE)* I don't think I've ever seen you cry like that!

**ANNE:**

I don't think I've ever cried so hard. You know, all those years I held strong. I faced the press. I talked about Norman and the sacrifice.

**TINA:**

And there was Ben, too.

**ANNE:**

Oh, yes. Years by his bedside, hoping he would beat that cancer. But you can't beat that kind of cancer. You know, Ben was very close to his father.

**TINA:**

Yes, I knew that.

**ANNE:**

And, you know what bothered him the most?

**TINA:**

Yes, it was that his father never said goodbye.

**ANNE:**

I tried to be strong. It took me this long to admit it. I was actually a little angry that I had to face it all alone. It is very difficult when your child dies before you do. If Norman were here, he could have helped me with that.

**TINA:**

I guess it was also good that you got out of the US, and away from the media attention.

**EMILY:**

There's a lot of media attention here too! In some ways it's even greater!

**TINA:**

Yes, he's a god here! And *everyone* knows that poem!

**EMILY:**

Yeah, remember that woman who carried ammunition up the hill? So that her comrades could shoot at American planes? And what did she say? That "Uncle Morrison" gave her the resolve and the courage to keep going, and to fight for her country?

**ANNE:**

That makes me a little uneasy, to be quite honest. I don't think Norman intended for anyone to fight *harder*. His act was intended to promote peace, and end the war.

**(HOANG enters)**

**HOANG:**

Are you feeling ok, Ms. Welch?

**ANNE:**

I will be all right, Hoang. Thank you for asking.

**HOANG:**

You have taught me how it is a Quaker tradition to hold others in the Light. Now we will hold you in the light, as you are fond of saying.

**ANNE:**

You have learned our ways very well, Hoang.

**HOANG:**

Are you all ready? We have met the poet To Huu, and today we go to meet the diplomat, in about ten minutes.

**TINA:**

It appears that our father was the inspiration for your people.

**HOANG:**

That is very true.

**TINA:**

But, he inspired them to fight harder, to keep fighting, rather than to make peace.

**HOANG:**

There are three things you don't understand, and maybe I should tell you. The first is that we, the Vietnamese people, fought many great powers over time. We resisted the Chinese, the French, the Americans. We never gave up, ever. To say that Mr. Morrison gave us courage to persevere is partly true. But we would persevere anyway.

Second, before his sacrifice, we did not really know the Americans. We saw bombers, and soldiers, and napalm. We saw a continuous assault of soldiers who did not know us. To us, it seemed like Americans were all like those soldiers, uncaring. I mean, they knew what they were doing, and maybe they felt badly about it, but they didn't know *us*. But from Mr. Morrison, we learned, really and truly, for the first time, that not all Americans were like that. We knew that some, or at least one, deeply cared about our people. That is why he has become a legend in our country. That is why everyone knows him.

Finally, Mr. Morrison really spoke to us in our language. We are Buddhists. Our Buddhist monks did what Mr. Morrison did, to show resolve, and courage, and determination that reigned over suffering. When he did that, we knew how much he cared about our situation.

**EMILY:**

It is a little overwhelming, I must say.

**HOANG:**

I cannot blame you for saying that. We have gone to see the poet To Huu, and now it is time for our visit with the diplomat. Are you ready?

**EMILY:**

I am still feeling sick. I have had the flu for several days now.

**HOANG:**

Then, you may stay back in the hotel. We will hold you in the light!

*(HOANG, TINA and ANNE exit to left).*

*(Back in the cafe. ROBERT is sitting at the table with a pile of books. NARRATOR enters from right.)*

**NARRATOR:**

We are back in the cafe. The book, *In Retrospect*, has been published. Many people are mad at McNamara. The book-signing has been contentious. *(exits right)*

*(ANNE and TINA walk in. ROBERT stands and offers his hand; they all shake).*

**ROBERT:**

Ms. Welsh, good to see you again! And are you Tina?

**TINA:**

Yes, good to meet you. Do you two know each other already?

**ANNE:**

You could say that. We have met.

**TINA:**

But you, *(to ROBERT)* you were the engineer of the war. The Secretary of the Defense, the one who planned it, carried it out, justified it. And you *(to ANNE)*, you protested, fought it, every step!

**ANNE:**

Yes, but that is ancient history. You could say that we are both victims of the war.

**ROBERT:**

*(signing book)* To Anne, My thoughts and prayers are with you - sincere condolences, Robert. *(Gives her book, she takes it.)*

**ANNE:**

Thank you. You could say that we have something in common.

*(EMILY enters alone).*

**EMILY:**

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OK, so it happened when I was almost one. He carried me; he gave me to someone. I don't remember it. Supposedly I was fine, when they handed me back to my Mom. I didn't cry, and I didn't understand, and I was glad to see her again.

I don't mind that he used me that way, maybe to represent the innocence of children who were dying. I became the hope for the future, to millions of people. I have gotten used to that, and I've come to understand it better.

But now, I have a one-year-old. And sometimes I look at him, and I think: how innocent, how wide-eyed, one who feels everything, though he doesn't say much, he can't talk about it. *(pauses)* I look at my own baby, and I think, HOW COULD HE?

**ANNE:**

My frozen grief took years to thaw, maybe thirty-four years. Sometimes, when I am talking about Norman, someone will say to me, is this action ever justified? When I consider the suffering our family has endured, I would say no. But in the larger scheme of things, I cannot say no. It may be that his death spoke more clearly to the Vietnamese people than to anyone else. But who better to receive it?

We learned one thing from the Vietnamese. In their houses, they make small altars, with pictures of their ancestors and those who have gone before. When we came home, we did the same. Nowadays, I look at my young grandson, and I take him to that altar. I hold him, and I feel Norman's presence, his pride. In that way, he is not really gone.

**TINA:**

I was five when my father died. I have a few precious memories of him, like holding his hand as we walked to school, and laughing as he spun me around to Scottish reels. When I first learned that he took my sister down to the Pentagon, I found it unacceptable. Now I find it a mystery and a miracle. But I believe my father's death was harder on Ben than anyone. Being a boy and knowing my dad longer, he felt the loss more keenly. When he became ill, maybe he was calling for help. Standing helplessly by while he died in a cancer ward was the saddest experience of my life.

My father loved me very much, and the farewell note I didn't receive from him is mine to write. As a little girl who wanted to feel special to her daddy, my heart was broken. But I'm proud of who he was and the way he lived.

*(THE END/CURTAIN CALL)*

Most of this play was taken from the following:  
Welsh, Anne Morrison. (2008). *Held in the Light*. With Joyce Hollyday.  
Maryknoll, NY. Orbis Books.

*Note: Because this play is about suicide, I am very sensitive about its being performed with or for a sensitive audience. Of course I would not ever want to feel like it encouraged anyone; rather, when performed, it should be stressed to both audience and performers that the infinite pain of the relatives left behind should always be considered. -TL*

A play written for

SAILOR #1  
SAILOR #2  
PASSENGER  
SEACAPTAIN  
MARINE CAPTAIN  
BILLY JACK (Marine)  
INGRID (Red Cross)  
OLD MAN  
RAE (Marine)  
WASSEF ALI (Marine)  
MOHAMMED (Arab)  
SHARIF (Arab)  
TRUCK DRIVER (Arab)  
MATE#1  
MATE#2  
MATE#3  
SOLDIER #1  
SOLDIER #2  
SOLDIER #3

SCENE ONE (*SIGNAL*)

Oh, man, w

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waves.

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lighter we'l

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