

THE QUIET AMERICAN 2002

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OVERVIEW

Veteran English reporter Thomas Fowler has been living in Saigon for years with his Vietnamese lover, Phuong. Their quiet life is disturbed by the arrival of Mr Pyle, a young American apparently working for a charity. Pyle falls for Phuong, who leaves Fowler when he lies to her about getting a divorce from his wife back in England. Fowler begins to suspect that Pyle has a political agenda and eventually colludes in his assassination by the Communists. Phuong, who had been ready to leave Vietnam and go to America with Pyle, settles back into her life with Fowler. Their love triangle is played out against the backdrop of a bloody civil war, in which Communists fight French and French-backed forces. There is also a mysterious 'third force' led by a general, who has a vague link with Pyle and his 'mission.'

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

This is the second screen adaptation of Graham Greene's novel. The first, by Joseph L Mankiewicz in 1958, cut out the novel's bleak ending, whereas this film restores it. This later film also retains the strong anti-American slant of the novel, something which delayed the release of the film since it followed shortly after the September 11 terrorist attack in the US in 2001. In keeping with that emphasis, the film presents the American Pyle as less innocent and more guilty of the violence on the streets of Saigon.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Fowler	Thomas Fowler is an English reporter in Saigon.
Phuong	Phuong is his young Vietnamese lover.
Miss Hei	Miss Hei is Phuong's older sister.
Pyle	Alden Pyle is young American who comes to Saigon with a medical charity.
Thé	General Thé is the leader of 'the third force.'
Moi	Mr Moi is a Vietnamese businessman who supports Thé.

STORY

Dead body A bloodied body floats, face down, in the river. Fowler is called in by the French police inspector for questioning about Pyle, without revealing that he has been found dead. 'I know about as much as you do,' Fowler says, disingenuously. 'He's an American. About 30. Works for the economic aid mission. And I like him. He's a very good chap. Serious, like the others. He's quiet.' Fowler then asks if he is dead, which surprises the inspector because nothing has been said of a body. Fowler looks nervous, shakes his head and says, 'I'm not guilty. I just...put two and two together.' After Fowler identifies the body, the Inspector complains that the 'Americans are causing a lot of trouble, but still, a murder is a murder.' He asks Fowler if he can help them in their investigation, and Fowler says he knows nothing.

Phuong Phuong, a young Vietnamese woman, is in Fowler's apartment. He takes her hands and speaks slowly to say, 'Pyle. He's dead. Stabbed.' Phuong is speechless for a moment and then says, 'He was in love with me.' Fowler offers his condolences, and Phuong says, 'I thought you were rivals. I must think now.'

Pyle A flashback, narrated by Fowler, explains that he met Pyle at a well-known hotel in Saigon. He's drinking morning tea when he saw 'the face with no history, no problems.' Pyle notices the Englishman and introduces himself. When Fowler does the same, Pyle recognises his name as a correspondent with a London paper and explains that he's in Saigon as part of the economic aid mission, 'on the medical side.' Pyle asks questions and Fowler gives him a mini-history lesson on why the French are losing the war and the Communists are winning. Then Pyle holds forth on why Communism must be stopped.

News Fowler goes to his office and is told by his assistant that a rumour is circulating that the Communists are about to launch a major offensive in the north. He is also shown a cable from his head office in London asking him to relocate back there. Realising that he hasn't been filing enough stories to justify his posting in Vietnam, Fowler decides to go up north, to Phat Diem, to cover the possible offensive. That evening, Fowler makes love to Phuong in his flat.

Miss Hei At a restaurant, she and Fowler run into Pyle, who introduces them to his American friends, the noisy types, who are rude and racist toward Phuong. Fowler rescues Phuong, taking her to another restaurant, and goes back to fetch Pyle. The three of them spend the evening together. Pyle and Phuong dance and become attracted to one another, while sad-eyed Fowler looks on. Phuong's older sister, Miss Hei, comes up to Fowler and wants to know who her sister is dancing with. Learning that he is American, unmarried and from a good family, she begins to get ideas. Later, she tells Pyle to visit her and Phuong when Fowler is up north, 'to cheer her up.'

Rivals Fowler and Pyle say goodnight, but not before Fowler tells Pyle, with a smack of revenge, that Phuong is a good dancer because 'she used to do it for a living.' Pyle asks if he is married, and Fowler says, 'Yes, but not to Phuong.'

Trouble ahead Back in his flat, Phuong prepares an opium pipe for Fowler. He tells her that he has been recalled to London and that he has requested an extension. 'But,' he says, 'if they stop my salary, I'm not sure how we'd live.' Phuong lies down beside him and says, 'I'd go back to London with you.' Fowler smiles and says, 'I'd marry you, if I could.' Phuong asks if his wife would divorce him, and he says probably not.

War zone Up north, Fowler follows a squadron of French soldiers who are fighting the rebels and losing the battles. They trudge through fields and half-burnt villages, nervous that the enemy will spring out from behind trees or walls. Suddenly, Pyle turns up, and Fowler calls him crazy for risking his life, but Pyle says he's there to bring medicines to trachoma sufferers. As they enter one village, they see dozens of bodies, local people massacred. Pyle asks if they are Communists, and the French officer answers, 'Clearly. This is not the work of French soldiers.' But Fowler has his doubts, noting that Communists do not kill villagers.

The Third Force Fowler asks Pyle about the book he's reading (*Danger to Democracy*), and Pyle says that its main argument is the need for 'a third force' in Vietnam, neither Communist nor French. 'Not the Americans?' Fowler retorts. 'Oh, no. We're not colonialists,' says Pyle. The French officer warns them that an attack is possible and hands Fowler a pistol. 'You don't want to be taken alive,' he says. 'Believe me.' He holds his fingers to his head, miming a gun, and says, 'Shoot yourself.'

Confessions That night, while Pyle and Fowler take cover in a bunker, Pyle admits that he didn't come up north to check on his medical team. He's been sent by the US government to 'do a little intelligence work.' Pyle smiles and says that he isn't good at keeping secrets. 'There is another reason,' he says. 'It's you.' Haltingly, he says that he wants to 'protect Phuong', that is, marry her. A bombardment begins overhead as he says he doesn't mean to hurt Fowler and that it would be different if he were married to Phuong. Just as Fowler says he can't marry her because his wife won't agree to a divorce, the bombs cut off his sentence. In the morning, Fowler awakes to find a note from Pyle, reassuring him that he will not see Phuong until he returns to Saigon. He makes an appointment to see them both, in his flat, the following Friday evening.

Saigon Back in Saigon, Fowler hands a report on the massacre to his assistant and tells him to cable it to London. Fowler sees a large rally and is told it's a new political party. It is led by General Thé, who is marching with the crowd to loud applause and band music. Pyle arrives at Fowler's flat on schedule, with a dog, which he has rescued from the street. The two men are nervous but Pyle comes to the point. Phuong's sister has explained Phuong's situation to him: she cannot marry Fowler and, while still Fowler's mistress, cannot marry a Vietnamese man, either. Fowler explains that she doesn't need to marry anyone because 'she's with me.'

Proposal At that moment, Phuong enters and the three of them sit down to talk. Pyle makes a moving, polite and awkward declaration of love, which Fowler mocks. It is, in effect, a marriage proposal. The exchange turns to angry accusations until Phuong whispers 'no' and offers Pyle a pipe as a peace offering. 'Pipe?' the naïve Pyle asks, leaving Fowler to say, 'Opium.' Pyle leaves, disheartened.

Communications Fowler writes to his wife in England, asking for a divorce, and also gets a telegram

from his London office granting him a one-month reprieve before he should return.

Military camp Fowler decides that he must risk a trip to the mountains to interview General Thé, leader of a 'third force', independent of both Communists and the French. He arrives alone in his car and is passed through military checkpoints but is then told to turn back. Suddenly, he sees Pyle, dressed in his white doctor's coat and with enough influence to arrange for his friend to stay in the camp. The two rivals have not seen each other for two months, following the ill-tempered meeting with Phuong. Now, in this unusual setting, they are congenial. Pyle explains that Thé has allowed him to bring his medical team into the camp to treat soldiers and the local population.

Interview Fowler is also granted an interview with the general, through his interpreter, Mr Moi, a rich businessman, who describes himself as a 'patriot.' Fowler asks how the general expects to win against better-resourced opponents and where his own supplies come from. When the question is relayed to the general in translation, he becomes angry and terminates the interview.

Night watchtower When Fowler leaves, intending to return to Saigon, Pyle goes with him since his own car has broken down. As they drive through the night, Fowler's car runs out of petrol, siphoned off by one of the general's soldiers. Fowler approaches a watchtower, hoping there might be some petrol stored there. Inside, he is confronted by two frightened but armed Vietnamese soldiers on the French side. They allow the two foreigners to spend the night with them. Fowler and Pyle talk about Phuong, and Fowler expresses his desperate need for her.

Attack A Communist patrol uses a loud hailer to announce that they will attack the tower unless the guards surrender. Pyle seizes the guards' gun and gets Fowler out of the tower just before it and the car are torched. Pyle leaves the injured Fowler in a field while he goes ahead to find the next watchtower to get help. Pyle brings back a French patrol and the injured Fowler is taken back to Saigon.

Mr Moi In his office, Fowler asks his assistant about Mr Moi, the man who is said to be Thé's financial backer. When the assistant informs Fowler that Mr Moi only owns a bicycle factory, Fowler tells him to find out more.

Letter Fowler limps into his flat, where Phuong is dancing by herself to western band music. After a sweet reunion, she gives him a letter that has come from London, which he reads and hides. Pyle appears with a big smile and a bottle of wine. Fowler tells Phuong that she must thank Pyle for saving his life. Fowler then tells them both that the letter is from his wife, who has 'more or less agreed to a divorce.' Phuong is overjoyed and Pyle leaves downhearted.

Lie exposed The next day, Pyle, Phuong and Phuong's sister, Miss Hei, confront Fowler in his office. Phuong found the letter from his wife, which the English-educated Miss Hei read and discovered that no divorce had been agreed. 'Why did you lie to me?' Phuong asks in tears. 'Because I want to keep you,' he says.

Suspicious Fowler's assistant reports that Mr Moi has suspicious business connections. Large consignments of goods have been moving through his warehouse, without clearance from customs. Still disturbed about Phuong, Fowler is reluctant to do anything, but his assistant urges him to act. Fowler and his assistant sneak into Moi's warehouse and see crates containing 'diolacton' but are prevented from learning more by thugs who tell them to leave.

Anger Back in his flat, he sees that Phuong has left him and storms into the American consulate, where Miss Hei works. He insults her and demands to see Pyle, who is not there. The irate and unstable Fowler hides in the bathroom and breaks down in tears.

Assurance Days later, Phuong is in Pyle's flat, packing her clothes and looking at postcards of the US. She seeks assurance that she will not be abandoned at the airport, like other Vietnamese women whose French boyfriends promised to marry them but did not. Pyle says that would never happen to her.

Reconciliation Fowler and Pyle meet on the street and agree to be friends. Pyle says he will marry Phuong when he takes her back to the US, so his parents can be at the wedding. Fowler says that he has been recalled to London and is glad that Phuong has Pyle, instead of some unsavoury American who might mistreat her.

Advice Fowler asks Pyle what he knows about the diolacton stored in Moi's warehouse, and he

is told that it is a kind of plastic, used for eyeglass frames. When Pyle also says that he is still using Moi to clear medical supplies, Fowler gives him some advice: forget all that and go home with Phuong.

Explosion The next morning, Fowler and others are enjoying coffee in an outside café when a bomb explodes, killing many and maiming more. Fowler is appalled by the innocent suffering and rushes to help some of the injured. Communists are suspected and arrested. Fowler is surprised to overhear Pyle speaking fluent Vietnamese during the disaster, directing police and medical staff.

Diolacton In the library, Fowler looks up diolacton and discovers that it can be used as a plasticiser in explosive compounds. He researches more and comes to the conclusion that the Americans have been supplying Thé's men with diolacton in order to make bombs, like the one that just exploded in a crowded street.

Assassination plot His assistant suggests that Pyle is CIA and is the key man in the supply chain of explosives. The assistant then suggests a way to remove Pyle. He has a Communist contact who can't get near Pyle on his own, but if Fowler invited Pyle to meet him at a particular restaurant that evening, then his contact could 'talk' to Pyle. 'What will they do to him [Pyle]?' Fowler asks and his assistant assures him that his contact will 'act as gently as the situation allows.' If Fowler agrees to this plan, he is to give a signal that evening at 6pm, by opening a book while looking out of his flat window. A man below will see it and set the plot in motion.

Compliance Before deciding, Fowler writes and asks Pyle to come to his flat, where he questions him again about diolacton, Moi and General Thé. Pyle admits that he is supplying the general with explosives, and claims that the target of the recent bombing was a military parade and that it went wrong. Despite Fowler practically begging Pyle to confess doubts about his and the general's methods, Pyle grows more enthusiastic about the need to stop Communism by using the Third Way. Fowler then opens the book at the window and invites Pyle to dinner at the restaurant.

Murder Not suspecting anything, Pyle walks to the restaurant at the agreed time and straight into the plot. He is kidnapped and, after a desperate attempt to flee, his dead body is thrown into the river.

Investigation At this point, the story catches up with the first scene, when the French Inspector visits Fowler to find out who murdered Pyle. He knows that Pyle visited Fowler's flat that evening and he knows that Fowler ordered a table for one, not two. Fowler is polite with the Inspector but admits nothing.

Reunion At his usual nightclub, Fowler sees Phuong working as an escort, as she was before he met her years ago. At first, she refuses to dance with Fowler but then agrees. Fowler begs her to come back to him because he is lonely and is not returning to London. She reluctantly embraces him. In his flat, he asks her if she misses Pyle and she says yes. Fowler says he's sorry, and Phuong wants to know why. 'I don't know,' he says, 'I just thought I should apologise to someone.' Phuong smiles and says, 'Not to me.'

The future A series of newspaper headlines appear on screen, from the French defeat in 1954 through to US bombing raids and then troop deployment in the 1960s. The news stories are all written by Thomas Fowler.

THEMES

Love across cultures and generations Unlike the source novel and the 1958 screen adaptation, both of which focused largely on the political themes, this film shifts the emphasis to the love affair between Fowler and Phuong, with a touch of Orientalism thrown in for good measure. This is clear from the very beginning, before the story actually begins, when Fowler's voice-over speaks these lines: 'I can't say what made me fall in love with Vietnam. But a woman's voice can drug you. Everything is so intense: the colours, the taste... They say whatever you're looking for you will find here. They say you come to Vietnam and you understand a lot in a few minutes. But the rest has got to be lived.' Fowler is a jaded older British journalist who falls in love with the radiant, much younger Phuong. In another film, their liaison might be eroticised and depicted with sensation, possibly degradation and manipulation. In this film, however, it is handled gently, bringing out the aging Fowler's dependence on her, as well as her desire for him to provide her with a secure future. There is passion and lust, too, viewed through a haze of opium smoke. They quarrel, especially when Phuong discovers that Fowler lied to her, but they are reunited at the end. Perhaps Phuong does not

love Fowler, but she appears to respect him and to enjoy his company. Would she really have been happier living in Boston as Mrs Pyle?

Commitment and guilt As a reporter, and not a 'journalist,' Fowler does not 'take sides' or express opinions. He reports what he sees. This is how the veteran newspaper man describes himself, a convenient fiction that is unsettled by the appearance of Pyle, the earnest American. At first, Pyle also seems to be in the middle by supporting the 'third force,' which is neither Communist nor colonialist. By the end, though, it is revealed that he is 100% American, part of a CIA undercover operation to support anti-Communist rebels and generate disinformation to smear the Communists. When Pyle (politely) steals his girlfriend, Fowler begins to stir from his neutral position and to suspect his rival of political deception. The question of remaining uninvolved comes to a head with the bomb explosion on the street. Fowler immediately rushes to help the injured and remains shaken by the senseless violence for days to come. When he learns that Pyle is responsible, however indirectly, for the bloodshed, he moves closer to taking a side and plays a key part in Pyle's assassination. As his assistant says, 'Sooner or later, one has to take sides. If one is to remain human.' What he did not add was that involvement, especially in a civil war such as that in Vietnam, will also generate guilt for violence committed to end violence. And that is Fowler's burden: he cannot be sure that he colluded in the assassination plot for purely humanitarian reasons. Might he have wanted to kill Pyle because he was about to take Phuong away from him for good?

American naiveté Despite the focus on the love affair, the film also includes a heavy dose of anti-Americanism, consistent with Greene's novel. Fowler, the weary European, is the polar opposite of Pyle, the enthusiastic young American. From their first encounter, Fowler pokes fun at his companion's naiveté. When Pyle pipes up about bringing 'liberty' to Vietnam, Fowler asks him to define the term. Pyle trots out a clichéd answer: 'the freedom to choose.' Fowler laughs and says, 'Ok, you hold an election and they elect Ho Chi Minh. Things are more complicated than they seem.' On another occasion, when he is introduced to American reporters in a bar, Fowler sneers at one: 'What's the news? Invaded any small countries lately?' Pyle, the ingenue, is an embodiment of American political objectives and mistakes in Vietnam. He wants to 'save' Phuong by taking her away from her country and giving her an American life-style. If we are in any doubt about right and wrong in Vietnam, the film erases it with a montage of headlines at the end, which describe the slow and disastrous American intervention in the country.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Fowler

Character Fowler is a cynical veteran of newspaper reporting. He's seen it all and has no faith in any 'ism.' Behind his cool detachment, though, he has deep emotions. He is kind, almost avuncular with Phuong, whom he loves desperately. And he has a fundamental compassion, which triggers a decision that fixes the fate of all three main characters.

Illustrative moments

Withdrawn Although Thomas Fowler is a newspaper man, he is not an extrovert. He is, in fact, withdrawn, secretive and detached from the outside world. This aspect of his character is illustrated in a scene at the beginning of the film, when he first meets Pyle. Or, to more accurate, when Pyle introduces himself to the languid Fowler sitting in an outside café. 'What a stroke of luck,' Pyle says to him with admiration. 'You're one of the few correspondents who has the reputation of actually going out into the field to see what's happening.' Fowler is quick to correct him: 'Not any more. Besides, I have never thought of myself as a correspondent. I'm just a reporter. I take no point of view. I express no opinion. I don't get involved. I just report what I see.' It is a cool exterior that he presents, a comfortable façade, behind which he can hide any fear or pain. He has problems, his wife back in London and his anxiety that his Vietnamese lover will tire of his aging self. And so he withdraws himself, from the political situation raging around him and retreats inside his flat, in his bedroom with the pleasant feel of opium in his lungs and Phuong by his side.

Cynical Like many of Graham Greene's characters, Fowler is cynical, which is part of his emotional detachment but with the added spice of sarcasm. There are numerous examples of his mockery in the film (and the source novel), mostly directed at Pyle and his American project. But the most barbed example is heard when the three main characters (Fowler, Pyle and Phuong) are in a restaurant. Pyle introduces Fowler to some of his compatriots from the American consulate in Saigon. Everyone exchanges meaningless pleasantries except Fowler, who tosses in a show-stopper when he says,

'Overthrown any small countries lately?' This is dismissed because, as one American puts it, 'Fowler sees conspiracies everywhere.' There is laughter, but it is brittle. The cynical remark has hit home.

Fragile Fragility is perhaps the last thing we would associate with the cynical and tough-minded Fowler. But in one extraordinary scene, he expresses his lonely and desperate relationship with Phuong. He and Pyle are hiding out in watchtower, with two Vietnamese soldiers on the French side. It is night, the Communists might attack at any minute and the soldiers are nervous. Fowler asks Pyle what he is thinking and he says Phuong and what she's doing. Fowler smiles and, talking almost in a whisper, gives a detailed description of her day—going with friends to the café for ice cream and gossip, to the market and then home to look at magazines. Pyle asks if he has had many relationships, and Fowler looks grave before saying, 'I know I'm not essential to Phuong. But believe me when I tell you that, if I were to lose her, for me, it would be the beginning of death.' The words are delivered (by Michael Caine) in a slow and deliberate manner, as if he is revealing a secret that he wants to share. It is a confession, an admission of everything that he has seemed not to be: weak, dependent and afraid. Fowler may be jaded, but he is also sentimental.

Compassionate Another side of Fowler's character hidden behind the detached exterior is his compassion for others in suffering. And, again, this is illustrated in one of the most memorable scenes in the film, when bombs explode on a busy street in Saigon. It is a normal morning, people are sipping coffee in cafes, chatting, crossing the street. Then two explosions kill dozens of people and leave others screaming for help, with serious wounds. Fowler jumps up from his white wicker chair and runs across the street, toward a café that a friend has entered. A Vietnamese police man tries to stop him, but he is hell-bent on finding him. He can't find his friend and wanders back to the street, dazed and injured himself, where he sees horrific scenes of blown-off limbs and maimed bodies. He bends down to help a man in severe pain, while foreign reporters take photographs and make notes. A minute later, he meets his assistant, who tells him that the death toll is thirty or forty. Fowler is still shaken when he describes a woman he saw, holding a dead baby, which she covered with her hat out of shame. His assistant says, 'Sooner or later, one has to take sides. If one is to remain human.' Fowler looks out of his window and sees a handcart filled with dead bodies. That is the moment when his detachment crumbles and he begins to take sides, to stop the suffering of innocent people.

Pyle

Character Pyle is a young American aid worker who is not so innocent as he first appears. Although he can be gentle and considerate, he is not completely honest and is driven by a self-righteous belief in his mission to stop communism.

Illustrative moments

Callow Aldon Pyle is young and inexperienced, especially it seems, in the field of love. His gawkiness is on supreme display in the moment when he makes a declaration of love to Phuong in Fowler's flat, which is bound to be awkward because of the cultural and language gap. They all sit down and Pyle looks at her with his earnest eyes and makes his speech. Though slow and stuttering, he manages to say that he has fallen in love with her. She squirms nervously and looks at Fowler for guidance. Then Pyle apologises for being so forward. 'It is abrupt and it is ill-mannered, but I'm in love with you....I'm not a rich man but I do have assets.' When Phuong says 'no,' Pyle again apologises and starts to leave. Phuong tries to soothe his hurt by offering him a pipe, and he says, 'Pipe?' Fowler enlightens him by explaining that she means opium. Pyle is now feeling uncomfortable, shakes his head and says, 'No. Why would I do that?' Pyle is an ingenue, who does not know and cannot share the more sophisticated world of the other two.

Gentleman Pyle is a soft-hearted man, or so he appears, not only to Phuong but also to Fowler, and partly because of Phuong. The two rivals have several heart-to-heart talks, but the one that reveals this aspect of his character occurs when they are trapped for the night in a bunker. When Fowler asks why Pyle has come to a dangerous war zone, up north, Pyle equivocates and then admits that he has come to see her. 'It's about Phuong,' he begins in his schoolboy voice and explains that he is in love with her. 'Look, none of this was planned,' he says, trying to take the sting out of his announcement. Fowler wants to know Phuong's reaction, and Pyle says that he hasn't mentioned it to her because he wanted to speak with Fowler first. 'It wouldn't be right not to,' he explains. All this is said while enemy fire is growing louder and louder above them, which only underlines the soft tone in which Pyle tries to break the news to Fowler. He apologises, he is sorry, he doesn't want to hurt his

friend. He is a gentleman.

Self-righteous All Pyle's politeness and kindness cover a dangerous streak of self-righteousness. Fresh from his Harvard classrooms, he is evangelical about the need to stop Communism. His enthusiasm seems to be harmless, channelled into a medical aid program to treat trachoma, but later its sinister reality emerges. After the horrific bombing on the street, Pyle is questioned by Fowler in the latter's flat. Pinned down by Fowler, Pyle says that the original target had been a military parade. Fowler says that he should cut off any links with General Thé because he is a ruthless killer, but Pyle is adamant that in 'a war you use whatever tools you have' even if more innocent people will die. When Fowler expresses his disapproval, Pyle flies into an impassioned speech about the need to fund a charismatic leader whom the people will support in a fight against communism. 'The French aren't going to stop the Communists,' he screams. 'They haven't got the brains and they haven't got the guts!' Fowler asks if, after the massacre on the street, he has any doubts. He does not. 'We are here to save Vietnam,' he says without any sense of irony.

Phuong

Character Phuong is the young and beautiful Vietnamese lover of an Englishman. She is gentle and dignified, if also immature and powerless. She can be girlish and exuberant, but she is more often soft-spoken and passive. She is the quiet Vietnamese.

Illustrative moments

Powerless Phuong has little if any control over her life. She was a nightclub escort, paid to dance with men, and now she is Fowler's lover. It is a comfortable, even loving, relationship but it is unstable and depends on Fowler's presence in Saigon or, failing that, his ability to obtain a divorce from his wife in London. As it stands, no Vietnamese family would accept Phuong as a daughter-in-law. Pyle appears and offers another life in the US, but Phuong is too used to Fowler, and too afraid of uncertainty, to accept his offer. All this runs under the surface of the scene, in which she listens to Pyle make his declaration of love to her. She squeezes her hands clasped in her lap. She purses her lips and breaks into tight smiles. Initially, she looks at Fowler, like a child to its parent, with excitement at this new prospect, but as she considers Pyle's words, her smile fades in the realisation that she does not want to give up what she has for something unfamiliar. She is controlled by her attachment to Fowler (and her affection for him) and cannot act on her own behalf. A mistress in Saigon or the wife of an American whom she hardly knows—neither is a world of her own making, but the former is safer because it is familiar.

Hopeful Phuong has hopes of a different future, partially fuelled by the glossy magazines she reads. Although we have little idea what those hopes may be, one scene suggests their dreamy quality. It is late afternoon, and Fowler silently enters his flat. Phuong is spinning around, dressed in a diaphanous robe, listening to a symphony on a phonograph. She twirls and twirls, like an ice skater, effortlessly with a wide smile across her face and her eyes closed in ecstasy. It is a brief moment of hopefulness for the young woman who dances with such ease. Whatever she might be thinking or dreaming, it must be pure pleasure.

Proud Although Phuong is powerless, she has her pride. She is happy to be Fowler's mistress because he is kind, warm and supportive. But she decides to leave him, for Pyle, when it is revealed that Fowler has lied to her by saying that his wife had agreed to a divorce. Phuong, flanked by her sister and Pyle, explains to Fowler. 'My sister [who reads English] read the letter from your wife. I showed it to her,' she says, 'because I was so proud. So happy [Fowler had told her that the letter contained his wife's agreement to divorce].' She stands silent as the others read parts of the letter from his wife, which suggest how miserable Phuong would be in England, 'especially when you leave her.' Phuong is nearly in tears but she does not denounce her lover—that would be demeaning. Instead, she turns slowly and leaves without a word.



(Fowler, left, and Pyle in the former's flat)



(Phuong)