

*Trung Dung*

The term "Internet millionaire" fast became a cliché in a society obsessed with the "new economy." Internet millionaires were for a time our hottest business heroes, their youthful image and cutting-edge, casual glamour fueling countless American dreams of avarice. But, like all stereotypes, this one obscured the individuals behind it. In San Francisco, a virtual stone's throw from Silicon Valley, there's an Internet millionaire named Trung Dung (pronounced "Young"), who doesn't at all fit the mold of the Brioni jacket-wearing man-child eternally at play.

Thirty years ago, when Saigon fell and the book closed on America's longest war, Trung Dung was an eight-year-old boy living in Vietnam. The images of those final days, of the last helicopters evacuating Americans and South Vietnamese dependents, are deeply etched into our national consciousness. Trung Dung and his family were not on one of those helicopters.

Trung's family had lived in relative stability in wartime Vietnam. His father had been a politician before the war and had served as an officer in the South Vietnamese army. Once the new regime took over in the south, however, Trung's world crumbled around him. His father was sent to a labor camp. All of the family's property was confiscated. And Trung, his mother, grandmother, and two sisters were left to fend for themselves as pariahs in the new communist state.

There was no work for the wife of a former enemy, but there was the underground economy. Trung's mother bought simple goods, such as clothing and appliances, in Saigon and sold them for a small profit in the family's hometown of Phan Thiet. In Phan Thiet, she in turn bought fish sauce for a fraction of the "official" price in Saigon and was able to sell it there; and so this former housewife gradually became a merchant. "These were very heavy things and the transportation was by bus," Trung remembers. "It was a very tough life for her, and so, being the only son in the house, I had to step up from early on to help out."

This only son was only in the fifth grade, but he still found ways to contribute. Trung caught fish after classes and sold them in the evenings. At school he sold fruit to his classmates in between classes on Marxist

theory. As he got older, he built and repaired bikes with scavenged parts. Trung's small enterprises were thoroughly illegal in the new Vietnam . . . and crucial to his family's survival.

Trung's family was able to get by with a combination of hard work and ingenuity, but Trung wanted something more. He dreamed of pursuing higher education. Looking around him, he began to see that he would not be able to reach his dream in his homeland. "By '78, the height of the boat people escaping Vietnam, we realized that I can never get into school, into university, because of my background," Trung recalls. His father was still in a labor camp, and there was no sign that he would ever be released. "The only way to have a future was to get out."

The family directed its efforts toward saving for Trung's escape. If he could establish himself somewhere else, they thought, maybe the rest of the family could join him later.

In 1982, the day finally came. After selling all their furniture, jewelry, trinkets, extra clothes, and everything else not already confiscated by the government, Trung's family had five ounces of gold—enough to pay a smuggler to take him down the Tien Giang branch of the Mekong River and across the sea to a friendly country. Trung's mother sent him off with a tenth of an ounce of gold—about fifty dollars—to start a new life, and he joined a group in a shack by the river to wait for a boat that never came.

"The boat never showed up, and the local police came in the morning," Trung remembers. "They took me in for a day and questioned me about who was organizing all this stuff. I told them I ran away from home and just saw these people waiting. I didn't want to implicate my mother. They gave me a few slaps and released me."

Today Trung laughs about his unexpected homecoming, but at the time it was deadly serious. "I went back to school and went back home—normal, but now we [had] lost everything." Everything, that is, but the dream of a better life for Trung. A year later, they found a more reliable boat at a cheaper price. The few belongings they hadn't sold for the first attempt they exchanged for gold. And again Trung waited by the river.

The boat left on schedule, but only ten minutes into the voyage, a patrol boat appeared as if from nowhere and opened fire. "They were shooting because they didn't want anyone to jump into the river.

Rather, Dan. The American Dream: Stories from the Heart of a Nation. NY: HarperCollins, 2002. 48-54.

We had to lie on the deck. It was really traumatic." To make matters worse, Trung realized as shots whizzed over his head that he wouldn't get off as easy as he had the first time. "This time I was fifteen, and so they put me in this hard-core jail, where all the hard-core criminals live, and I stayed there for a month. That was a very interesting experience in itself."

By the time he got out, Trung found that his mother had worked her way into the underworld of refugee smugglers. She was now a middleman, connecting families with boat owners. It was an incredibly risky business, as Trung's own experiences had shown. And when such arrangements go wrong, it's generally the middleman who gets caught holding the bag.

Trung's mother wasn't profiting from the risk, though. Her commissions went toward getting another place on another boat for her son. As Trung says now, with considerable gratitude, "She put her life on the line for me."

Her efforts finally paid off in 1984. Trung's third try seemed to be a charm, as he successfully boarded a boat that took him and about forty other escaping Vietnamese to an Indonesian offshore drilling rig, and from there officials took the group to a refugee camp. He was out, and he knew why: "My mother had absolute confidence in me, and I cannot even imagine what she went through. Imagine a housewife raising three young kids in a very hostile environment and then [having] to take care of the grandmother and a husband in jail. How she managed to do all that and make sure we are in school and do well in school. . . . And she's personally responsible for me getting out here. It's mind-boggling to me. I have no idea how she did it."

Once he was out, it was as if the baton had passed to Trung. Responsibility for carving out a place for his family in a new country was entirely on his seventeen-year-old shoulders. Luckily, he wasn't alone. One day, as he bided his time in the refugee camp, his elder sister stepped off a boat of new arrivals. Their mother was still at work.

It took a year for Trung and his sister to gain admittance to the United States as children of former allies. Trung says they picked Louisiana because of the climate—reminiscent of home—but something went wrong down the bureaucratic line. "When I got off the plane," Trung remembers, "I realized I was in Boston." No matter. Trung knew that

there were schools in Boston as well, and that's where he went, just days after his arrival.

Trung had learned some English in Vietnam and in the camp, but not enough to join a class of his contemporaries. A high school counselor told him that he would need to take two to three years of classes to earn a diploma. This was unacceptable. "I knew my mother was in pretty bad shape, so I asked around and a counselor at the University of Massachusetts said he could help me get admitted if I took the GED." He did and passed by the slimmest of margins: "Pure luck. I think I did well enough on the math and science part to pass."

Trung started to learn, slowly, that he could safely raise his expectations in his adopted country. He could work. He could get scholarships and student loans. He could become a college student. Although his situation was bleak—he shared an apartment with other immigrants who slept three to a room and worked as a janitor in a hospital and a dishwasher in a restaurant in order to send money home—he sensed opportunity in the air and breathed deeply. "I took twice the normal load of classes, too. I don't know how I did it, but at the same time there was so much to do."

Just months earlier, Trung had seen a computer for the first time in the refugee camp. He even remembers the model—an old Apple II. He had never even used a pocket calculator before he took his first computer class at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, but he knew as soon as he dove in that his future would be in programming.

Why was this former refugee from an undeveloped country drawn so strongly to computer science? This was, remember, well before the Internet boom. Perhaps it was a matter of control. Programming gave Trung absolute control over a complex and expensive machine—a stark contrast to the helplessness he had felt in a childhood where others determined his fate. But beyond that, he says, programming gave him a way to express himself clearly and unambiguously. In computers, Trung found a bridge across the language barrier. As he puts it, "The way people program is to articulate, as if to a young child. It's very simple stuff, but you can accomplish very complex things. That's why I enjoy it."

Trung graduated in 1988 at the top of his class. In three years he had taken every undergraduate and almost every graduate course in com-

puter science that the university had to offer. He had fulfilled his childhood dream . . . and he was immediately presented with a serious choice.

"I was offered a job and also offered a chance to study for the Ph.D. program at Boston University. A Ph.D. was an unimaginable dream, because when I was in school, people who had the Ph.D. were like gods to me, beyond what I could even think of." A job, on the other hand, would have allowed Trung to send more money home. His mother and his father, still in prison, both wrote Trung urging him to take the scholarship. The slightly better life the extra money would have afforded them was not as important to his mother and father as the opportunity before their son.

Trung's parents didn't realize it at the time, but a better life was just around the corner. In 1990, as relations between the United States and Vietnam warmed, Trung's father was released from prison and the entire family was allowed to immigrate to the United States. A joyous reunion was in the making. "When I left the country, my younger sister was a little girl. Now she was almost twenty. And my father, I didn't even remember what he looked like. It was wonderful. It was the first time since 1975 that the whole family [was] together in one place. For the first few days all we did was talk."

The son they had sent abroad was already a success in his parents' eyes, but the addition of three new family members into Trung's small, run-down Dorchester apartment forced him to reconsider academic life. Just short of completing his thesis, Trung left the Ph.D. program and joined a promising e-commerce company. Before long, he had saved enough to buy his family a house.

Trung's goals were still very modest. He could see his life moving forward methodically, in the risk-free, traditional manner favored by his father. But with the emergence of the Internet as a popular medium, Trung again found himself at a crossroads. Should he enter the high-risk, high-return world of start-ups and IPOs or stay on the steady career path that would guarantee his family's well-being?

By day, Trung dutifully performed his role as company man. But in the evenings, he played with a piece of revolutionary programming. The idea came while he was building a contact list of refugees for a local Vietnamese temple's Web site. After he got tired of searching for com-

mon Vietnamese names, cutting them from various sites, and pasting them onto the list, he automated the process. This meant that a visitor to the temple's Web site could run a complicated search with a few simple clicks, without leaving the Web site.

This technology, now common, had commercial applications that Trung could see even before "e-commerce" was a household word. Businesses don't want viewers to leave their Web site. Trung's application pulls information from other sources and organizes it in a user-friendly manner so they don't have to. That makes it extremely valuable.

But the company Trung worked for, Open Market, couldn't see that far ahead: "It was way too early. The Internet was too young for that kind of idea." Besides, this start-up didn't seem to need it. Their initial public offering in early 1996 was an early success, and Trung's stock options soared to a value of over one million dollars.

This should have been a happy time, but fate had dealt the household a heavy blow. Trung's mother was dying of cancer. "I guess a lot of the hardworking years caught up to her," he says. Her illness brought the family closer together, and Trung spent countless hours by her bed, where he told her about his idea. "She was in a lot of pain. So I kept talking to take her mind away from the pain. I talked to her about all these dreams, about the difficulty I was having persuading the Open Market people to try to adopt my idea. And maybe I should go out on my own and pursue my idea. She was always very supportive, but at the time I didn't believe I could do it."

The day Trung's mother passed away, he knew that he had to start his own company. It really didn't matter that he was leaving a million dollars in stock options behind. "I considered having a hundred thousand dollars very, very rich. But the more I talked to my mother the more she said go and do it. So I made up my mind that I had to do it. All I could think about was that idea."

A former classmate put Trung in touch with a prominent venture capitalist who found him a business partner in technology pioneer Mark Pine. Their instant rapport led to a partnership, with Mark as CEO and Trung as chief technology officer. Trung flew to California and lived in Mark's pool house while he expanded on his initial idea. After four rounds of financing, they raised \$35 million. OnDisplay went public in December 1999, pushing the value of Trung's share

over \$100 million. Trung gave his sisters stock worth more than \$20 million each.

What did \$100 million mean to a man who used to fish for a living? "It's ridiculous. But I think having the money is great because my sisters and father and relatives don't have to worry." His older sister used to be an accountant who took temporary and contract assignments. Trung says, with a smile, that she's in retirement now. His younger sister recently finished optometry school and relocated to the Bay Area to be closer to her brother. And his father couldn't be more pleased. He's director of a federally funded program for Southeast Asian refugees, and will more than likely continue to do social work after his coming retirement.

With the family taken care of, Trung's attention turned to his company: "After the first few weeks of becoming public, I checked the stocks every day to see what's going on. To me right now it's more meaningful to survive, to be one of the companies that survives." Being so focused on survival doesn't give Trung much time to be extravagant. He's working fifteen-hour days, six days a week, and tutoring Vietnamese-American youth on Sundays. He did find the time to fall in love with and marry a medical student from Vietnam. They even squeezed in a honeymoon. But the couple returned to the same modest apartment in southwest San Francisco that she had lived in before she married a multimillionaire.

Every Tet (the Vietnamese New Year) Trung looks back on the year past. This year, he says he'll be asking himself, "How did this happen?" He knows that he owes a great deal to his mother, his teachers, his financial backers, and his team. But most of his fortune, he believes, is due to something larger: "When I look back," he says, his open gaze reflecting the distance of his journey, "what I see is opportunity."

That's what Trung sees when he looks forward as well. Even if it all came crashing down tomorrow, he says he would "take a few days to suffer" and then go on. "The important thing is how do you recover from the mishaps. There's always more opportunity. There's never a lack of opportunity. That's what I love about this country. So many opportunities."

### *Chris Gardner*

The message that Delores Kesler's father gave her, that "you can do it" push, is one that is amplified and multiplied almost beyond measure in the American mass media. Such optimism is a basic part of the American outlook, one that is reflected back to us in our movies, our television programs and plays, and in the rhetoric of our candidates for political office.

But just as a politician's appeals to America's can-do spirit can amount to so much sugar to help the government's medicine go down, our cultural sunniness can carry a dark side for some in our society. Subtle messages have the capacity to tell certain of us that our goals are out of reach. The young Chris Gardner never thought he could be wealthy. No one had ever actually told him otherwise, but he had only seen other African Americans achieve wealth through sports and entertainment. "It never really crystallized in my mind that I could [have money]," he says. "I wasn't a good athlete. I couldn't sing, I couldn't dance."

The right person sent Chris a very personal piece of encouragement, and sometimes—as we saw with Delores—that can make a big difference. Chris's mother was a schoolteacher who raised him on her own. One day, while Chris was watching a college basketball game, he exclaimed, to no one in particular, that one tall and talented player was going to make a million dollars. "My mom was right over there ironing, and she said, 'Son, you know what? If you want to, one day you can make a million dollars.'"

"I believe everything my mom ever told me. If she said I could make a million dollars, damn it, I could do it. But until I *heard her say it*"—Chris raises his voice for these last four words, and claps his hands for emphasis after each passes his lips. He pauses before finishing the thought—"I never thought I could."

Chris Gardner, one learns quickly, makes certain points with force. His deep voice will start to boom, his hands will come together for punctuation, and his eyes will lock in. It only lasts for a second before he leans back, assured that he has made his point. Then, in these more relaxed moments, he'll casually swear or refer to folks as "cats." Somehow, this hipster habit doesn't clash with his taste in clothes—all refinement, no flash—or his fashionably shaved head.