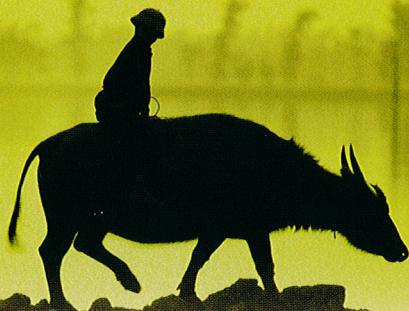
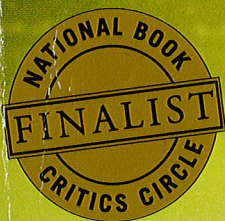


"A work of radiance . . . Vividly told."

—RICHARD EDER, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*

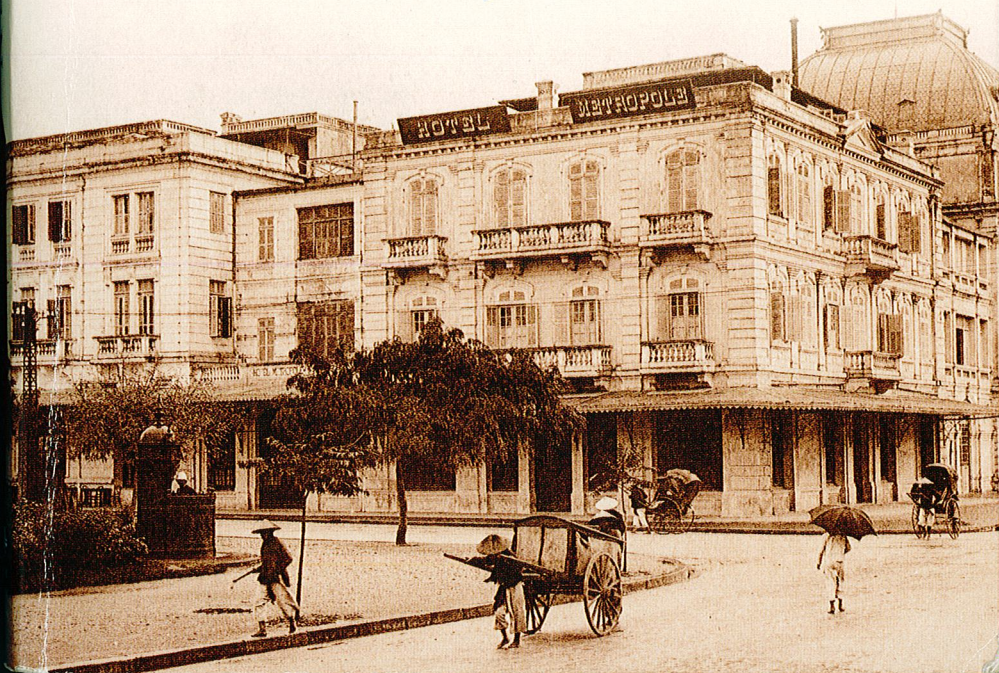


# THE EAVES OF HEAVEN

A Life in Three Wars

ANDREW X. PHAM

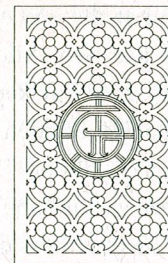
Author of *Catfish and Mandala*





but fell into the depths. My lungs burned. Looking up from below, the sunlight was gentle, the sky luminous, forgiving. I felt Chau's hand on my arm. We were rising. Then I was flopped onto the pier, gasping, vomiting. I blinked the water from my eyes.

Father was already walking away. He couldn't bear to look in my direction.



THE SOUTH

1956

### 3. PHAN THIET

My days in Phan Thiet had fallen into a comfortable rhythm. I lived alone in a second-floor flat as bare and simple as a fresh canvas. Nothing on the walls, no curtains on the windows; only a table, a small dresser, an oil lamp, two chairs, and a narrow divan with a straw mat for a bed. The plank floor was worn smooth, the plastered walls veined with cracks. My apartment was a studio of light: one window opened to the north, the front balcony faced west to the town center three blocks away, and the back balcony looked out to the sea and the sunrise. Two alleys of single-level houses lay between the rear balcony and the beach. From my vantage, most houses were hidden by fruit trees and coconut palms. It was like looking at the sea over a huge garden.

I taught mathematics and physics at three morning classes, four days a week. The subjects were easy, the students docile. I always left school before lunch, and I didn't socialize with the faculty because they were all much older and married. They knew I would



be leaving at the end of the summer. On the home front, my landlady and her two children, who lived below me on the first floor, were very nice but kept their distance, waiting to see if I had any bizarre habits. Suddenly I realized that I hadn't had so much free time since childhood. I found that I spoke very little outside of class since there was no one to talk to. I also discovered that I didn't need to talk. The quietness descended on me as a novelty.

With room and board included with the position, I didn't require much money and sent most of my salary home, keeping just enough pocket cash for small pleasures: fried seafood noodles at a kiosk near the park, an icy pickled lemonade on the beach, excellent dim sum by the movie theater in the town center. There was not much else to spend money on, nothing to buy, and that was the most pleasant thing about my new home. Phan Thiet was quaint, lush with coconut palms and fruit trees, drowsy with the drone of the sea. It had a lackadaisical loveliness that I had never seen before. The whole town was steeped in idyllic lethargy; it could not be bothered to take interest in anything, certainly not in a young teacher wandering aimlessly.

Phan Thiet was a walking town. There were few bicycles. I saw no privately owned cars or motorcycles. There was no pedal-cyclo, only rickshaws. Most everyone walked, and so I developed a habit of strolling for hours from one end of town to the other, moseying down alley after alley, and combing the beach for shells that I never kept. Although I left my camera in Saigon, I couldn't help but search for good shots and imagine how I might have caught them on film. Down near the quay, sun-charred men packed fish into great wooden barrels to make fish sauce, the salt on their arms like snow. Above, a deep blue sky that would have translated into a three-quarter gray on black-and-white prints. By the salt flats, the air stung the nostrils. It was a little difficult to breathe. Small-boned women raked sea salt into gleaming white hills. They wore peasant palm hats with fabric chin-straps pulled up over their noses, looking like bandits, eyes glittering in the blinding glare. I always find myself drawn to the water. I was enamored with the beach, its great

scimitar sweep of sand sown with slender fishing boats, their warlike bowsprits to the trees.

I felt every part a stranger in this exotic land, and so took great pleasure in observing the locals. Phan Thiet people were poor, but they knew how to relax. Being fisher-folk, they also possessed the distracted ease of those who kept one eye on the ocean. They worked mostly during the cool morning, napped in the afternoon, and nibbled like birds all day long.

Their favorite snack was a rice dumpling called *banh cang*—a local specialty. Late in the afternoon, a few houses in each neighborhood set up tiny tea-tables at their front doors. For about an hour or so, at around 4:00 to 5:00 in the afternoon, they steam-baked round dumplings in clay molds over tabletop coal burners. The clam-shaped dumplings were slightly crusty on the outside and creamily gooey on the inside, garnished with a sprinkle of sautéed scallions. They were served with one of two sauces: a fiery garlic-lime-chili fish sauce or a dark gravy made from a pungent and mildly sweet sardine stew.

My neighbors, who had a mom-and-pop sundries store, weren't from Phan Thiet. They were real southerners from the Mekong Delta, even more genial than the local coastal people. Every evening after supper, they invited friends and neighbors to gather on a few wooden benches in front of their home to drink beer and nibble dried squid or fish with bits of pickled vegetables. The women didn't drink, but enjoyed the gathering all the same. It was always a casual affair, often with a guitar present. They took turns singing southern Vietnamese folks songs called *vong co*. The lyrics were composed in six lines that were both sung and read. In the middle, there was one word the singer emphasized by modulating the tone and dragging the syllable out as long as possible. The longer he held the note, the louder the applause. I had seen girls titter and swoon over singers with bottomless lungs.

I often wanted to go down and join them, but I was shy by nature. These were the only times when I felt lonely. It wasn't because I was alone, but rather because I missed Tan. Since we were kids, I



on him to befriend strangers. It was much easier for me to let his lead into any gathering. Sometimes it was still a shock that he left home so soon. I had always expected we would go together.

TAN first showed his unhappiness with our family situation a few years ago, right after the government relocated us from Chinatown to the refugee camp on the outskirts of Saigon. There was no casino to relieve his boredom. In fact, there were no restaurants, cafés, shops, or any other sort of comfort whatsoever at the refugee site. It was a bizarre settlement of canvas tents on a flat field, set back a quarter of a mile from the interprovincial road between Cu Chi and Saigon. The surrounding scrubland was a desolate country I had ever seen. It didn't appear to support more than a few sparrows and finches. The parched air was bright. An errant cigarette would surely be enough for the landscape to burst into flames.

I stayed with Stepmother's parents and her sister, ten people in a small army tent. There were roughly one hundred such tents in the camp. With more than six hundred refugees, the camp quickly became a disarray of filth. Children yelled and shouted, playing from dawn to night. Babies cried all day long. People squabbled over laundry lines were strung up between tents. Foot traffic kicked up a permanent dust fog.

Within a week, several other camps sprung up in the vicinity to accommodate the flood of people pouring in from the North. Folks came back and forth between the camps looking for friends and family. Later arrivals told harrowing tales of being evacuated by rail from the port city Hai Phong and going south by ships. The Communists had organized demonstrations and blockades to prevent people from leaving the North. Strangers pulled refugees from trains and buses as more people tried to flee the North, the Communist government detained whole families on fraudulent charges.

Hearing their stories, Stepmother kept saying how lucky we were to be among the first wave to go south, and to have a decent tent at a camp with bus access into Saigon. Father smiled and quoted an old Viet adage, "Be the first to arrive at a feast, the second to cross a river."

But Saigon, from our sad perspective in the refugee camp, could hardly be called a feast. Among us boys, my cousin Tan was the most depressed. Although he hadn't said a word to the family, his grumpiness spoke volumes about his feelings. We were crammed into the tent so tightly that there was only a small aisle down the middle. At dusk, swarms of mosquitoes descended into the camp, and we spent most of the night sitting inside our nets. During the day, the tents were like ovens. I got dizzy if I stayed inside for longer than five minutes, but outside wasn't much better. There wasn't a single tree to provide relief from the heat. The best we could do was clear a patch of ground beneath some bushes and collapse beneath the paltry shade, panting like dogs through the midday hours.

Weeks went by, each day worse than the last. The few wooden latrines at the back of the camp began to reek so bad, no one could use the cooking and washing area nearby. It became a serious health issue. People had to resort to relieving themselves in the bushes, and it didn't take long before the entire area became a stinking mess. Sewage formed black pools of rot around the compound. People began to fall ill.

Tan bussed into Saigon daily, but couldn't find work. I tried enrolling in several schools in nearby towns without success. Baby Hoang and our little sister Huong fell sick. Father gave up looking for work. Stepmother did her best to keep things going, but we all knew that unless we left the camp soon, someone would become critically ill.

A month after arriving in the camp, Father rented a small shop-house with his brother-in-law Uncle Ty. Our two families of eleven people shared the two-room house, cooking and eating together for four months until Uncle Ty bought a modest house. The influx of



refugees was forcing property prices up steadily, so Father had to buy a house while he could still afford one.

Our new home was a wooden shop-house, twenty feet wide and thirty feet long. It had a clay-tile roof, a packed-dirt floor, and a small kitchen at the center of the house. Being right on the market street, there was always the reek of rotten vegetables, fish, meats, and garbage. On a hot day, it was like living in the middle of a city. Even a light rain would leave the street muddy for a day. And once it was dry, vendors would wash their stalls and plates, and the runoff would return the street to its normal muddy condition during the monsoon, it was a hopeless, knee-deep pond.

Father hired a drunken cook from Hai Phong and turned the front room of the house into a noodle shop. Business was poor at the start, but it worsened continually. Belatedly, he realized that the market was too small, servicing only the local neighborhoods. Father decided to close the shop because street vendors would claim the front of our house, blocking our door and making it difficult to enter the house or reopen another business. The street vendors paid protection money, so it would be impossible to evict them once they were settled in. We could do nothing but continue to live in our smelly house and watch our savings trickle away.

In Hanoi, even our servants had better living quarters. It seemed to me, the distance we had fallen within the span of five years, from living like princes to eking out a living in a mud-brick house selling noodles. Stepmother, who came from a wealthy family, bore the hardship courageously without a single complaint. I debated whether she could bear it, so could I. My little sister Huong was five years old, and baby Hoang was two. My brothers Hung and Thuan were in their early teens, too young to fully comprehend our situation.

The person who fared most poorly was my cousin Tan. "It's a spiraling descent," Tan told me when we were alone. "We're just keeping going down and down. It's time we look out for ourselves and find a way out of here."

Tan's refusal to work created an embarrassing and awkward situation for Father. While the whole family pitched in to make ends meet, Tan left to look for employment downtown. He came home only to eat and sleep, avoiding even the smallest task because he considered the noodle business beneath our station. Tan told me several times that he couldn't believe Father had put us in this dump while he had enough money for a decent house like Uncle Ty's. Tan talked about joining the armed forces like his half-brother Lang, who enlisted in the navy after arriving in Saigon with Aunt Thuan and her children.

"I can't leave my family," I said. "I want to finish high school and go to college."

"I'm going to look for work as a secretary or clerk."

I wished Tan luck, but I thought it was hopeless. He was still thinking like a rich kid. Tan would never stoop to restaurant, construction, or any other manual labor. But in a way, I was thinking like a rich kid as well; I was expecting that I would have the time and leisure to study.

"You still have hope because we haven't hit the bottom yet," Tan said and laughed with a sneer.

I had to turn away to hide the blood rising to my face. It was a controlled staccato laugh filled with disdain. Tan and I were closer than brothers, best friends since we were toddlers, but there were times I could barely keep my fist from smashing into his face.

Two months after we received our *Tu Tai 1* diplomas for graduating from the eleventh grade, a major achievement at the time, Tan successfully enlisted in the air force. He was following in the footsteps of his older half-brother Lang. Tan left immediately for basic training and vanished from our lives.

A LETTER came from Tan one afternoon. My landlady gave it to me when I returned from my classes. I took it down to the beach, where I now swam daily. The evening fishermen hadn't



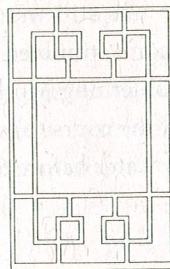
in their naps to prepare their boats. A group of children  
 a wrecked skiff far to the south. I sat on the sand and  
 the letter. There was a photograph of Tan, grinning, the Eiffel  
 the background. Tan said he wasn't tall enough to be a pilot  
 transferred him to Morocco for aircraft mechanic training.  
 time of his life. A virgin when he left home, Tan was now  
 whisky, dancing in clubs, and sleeping with bar girls. Women  
 astic, he wrote; not all of them were like the working girls  
 en up north. He urged me to start dating. He said life was  
 e by. It made me chuckle to imagine Tan carousing in the  
 t-deep in cards, a girl on his arm, behaving like one of the  
 French soldiers we had had to deal with at our inn in Hanoi.  
 n thought of him when I came down to the beach. Before  
 o Phan Thiet, I had seen the sea only once. Tan and I were  
 en and had ridden a bus all the way from Hanoi to Do Son  
 ore of Ha Long Bay. A gray, blustery day of needling rain,  
 on the wind-teased beach and compared the churning,  
 ocean before us against what we had read in *Moby-Dick*  
 ere deeply impressed.

ere is much ugliness, but there is also much beauty in this  
 ny mother had once said, she who spent most of her days in  
 en reading poetry written worlds away.

her had taught me that the eaves of heaven had a way of  
 in cycles, of dealing both blows and recompenses. For every  
 ing flood, there followed a bountiful crop. For every long  
 f flawless days, there waited a mighty storm just below the  
 For every great sorrow, there was a great happiness to come.  
 ipped down to my shorts and walked into the tickling surf.  
 in the calm sea, a vast blue above me, I was filled with a cozy,  
 warmth. It was the same sensation I had as a boy whenever  
 looked at me. She had smiling eyes; it was a pleasure to be  
 er sight. It seemed like only last week. It had been seven  
 nce she passed away after childbirth.

She was still watching over me. This I knew. I had the feeling  
 that I hadn't stumbled upon this place and this peace at all, but rather  
 it was something Mother had guided me to, something good to help  
 me hold the course against what would come; like giving a traveler a  
 drink of water before a long, difficult passage.





THE NORTH  
1942

#### 4. MOTHER

My mother was born one province over to the west. She came from a more prestigious and even wealthier line than my father. Her uncle was a county chief. Her cousin was a senator, and her parents were both scholars. She had a mandarin upbringing, but she was uniquely modern in a time when most girls were limited to a primary education. She was fluent in French and the classic Vietnamese Nom script. Her passions were Vietnamese and French literature, poetry, and theater. When she came of age, her parents were certain that she needed to marry a modern, educated nobleman who wasn't a political fanatic—it could have meant disaster and death in even that relatively peaceful colonial period.

In his early dashing days, Father was very much a man of the city, fluent in French and passionate about French poetry, French cuisine, French wine, Western theaters, Charlie Chaplin movies, and motorcycles. He was a devoted enthusiast of various European pleasures

the colonial French made accessible to their supporters and the rich Vietnamese ruling class. His parents hoped that a wife and family would force their youngest son into maturity and wean him from the city's seductive pleasures. When they told him firmly that it was time for him to marry or have his allowance curtailed, he yielded, but vowed that he would never marry a girl with blackened teeth. It was the one modicum of modernity he required of a wife. His father looked to his mother, who, like most women of her generation, had lacquered her teeth at fifteen with calcium oxide—black onyx-like teeth had long been a vanity of the local women. His mother simply nodded and said, "If he prefers a white rotting smile, so be it."

They were introduced by a professional matchmaker and blessed by monks. The initial contacts between the families went well, and when they actually met, neither found the other repulsive. In fact, they found each other to be intelligent and pleasant. They weren't in love, but as the popular wisdom said, love would come in time. After a few auspicious meetings, they wedded. A year later, I was born. My two brothers followed a few years behind. Having fulfilled his filial obligations of marriage and siring male heirs, Father strayed back to Hanoi and the high life he had enjoyed as a bachelor. Mother was left to raise three boys and manage the estate alone.

For years, Father divided his time between Hanoi and the country estate. Every time he left, Mother was very sad. His return was always an occasion to celebrate. Father always brought gifts for everyone, Mother, aunts, and cousins included. There were French biscuits, cloth, chocolates, and magazines for the women. Father gave my brothers and cousins toys, but he gave me three books that turned me into an avid reader: *Gulliver's Travels*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and *Voyage to the Moon*.

Once he brought Mother a beautiful phonograph. It was a compact, well-crafted machine, housed in a polished wooden box. The lid was embossed with golden letters and had a picture of a dog sitting in front of a phonograph, head canted to the flaring flower-shaped speaker. Inside, the hand-cranked turntable was covered with



dark blue felt. It had a chrome-plated arm with a diamond-tipped needle.

The first day he brought it home, Mother invited all the Aunties, nieces, nephews, and staff to the house for after-dinner tea. Father and Uncle Thuan were considered too serious for such fun. Mother didn't invite them, so everyone else could relax and enjoy the party. We sat on mats on the porch and in the garden. Gardener Cam lit some paper lanterns and hung them on the trees. We stuffed ourselves with cookies, candies, and cakes, and listened to the phonograph. Mother played Vietnamese ballads and French songs one after another. It was one of the finest nights because I remembered Mother smiling and laughing a lot.

Mother was happy whenever Father came home, and she tried her best to make his stay pleasant, hoping that it might keep him there longer. During one of his visits, I overheard them talking in the sitting room. It was right after supper, when Father liked to have his tea.

Mother said, "Things are chaotic all over the country. You should be home helping your big brother."

"He has been governing the domain fine without my help."

"It's not the same anymore. There are robberies everywhere. The roads have become very dangerous since the Japanese invasion. When the soldiers come, it's to requisition our rice and conscript men for the Japanese. Law and order are the least of their concerns. They only care about conquering Asia."

"I know, but Big Brother Thuan hasn't asked for my help."

"He expects you to volunteer. Don't you know the villagers sound the temple bell in the middle of the night, once or twice a week? Big Brother Thuan has to take his gun and guards into the villages to chase off the robbers. Some days, he gets so exhausted he has to cancel half the arbitration cases."

"He should teach the villagers how to fight for themselves."

"They're farmers. They're peaceful people. It's not in them to fight, and Big Brother Thuan can't hold off all the bad elements alone. It would be good to have you here to assist him."

"Why should I? He always treats me as though I'm incompetent."

"He's ten years older than you. You shouldn't feel offended about it."

"I don't like working under him."

"You could stay home and help me manage our own estate."

"What will I do here? You're managing very well, and everybody likes you. You don't need my help."

"Just having a husband at home makes all the difference," she said softly. "It's very hard seeing you only once every other month. The highway is getting more dangerous too. I get very worried thinking about you traveling back and forth like this."

"As you said, this is a time of turmoil. I think it's better if I stayed in the city where I can blend in with the crowd. Here I stand out like a big fish in a small pond. If things turn bad, the big fish will be the first target. Besides, it's not good to leave our villa in Hanoi empty in this unsettled time."

"Cousin Chinh is there; he can look after our villa for me."

"I can't trust that playboy to manage anything."

"Then the children and I will come live with you in the city. We had some good times there, didn't we? Remember our dinner parties?"

"Yes, yes, but it's not a good idea now. You're the manager of our estate. Your sisters-in-law need you."

"Not as much as I need you."

"Let's not talk about this anymore. I want to look into some businesses in Hanoi in case things become too unstable in the countryside. There are many opportunities in Hanoi now that the Germans control the French in Europe, and the Japanese control the French here."

"You prefer the city. There's nothing at home to amuse you."

Father did not reply. He left the following day. There were rumors, of course, that he had a mistress in Hanoi.



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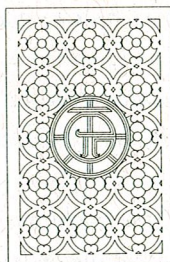
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THE SOUTH  
MARCH 1968

## 25. OLD FRIENDS

In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, Saigon was silent, convalescing beneath a blanket of unseasonably cool air. It had been a harrowing escape. Downtown, the gunfire had quieted, though the occasional pitched whine of Cobra helicopters swooping low over rooftops could be heard. On the outskirts, there was still fighting, but at the city center, the streets looked almost tranquil. The normal hustle and bustle of morning traffic was absent. Very little trade traveled on the interprovincial roads. Merchants and farmers hadn't started bringing their produce into the city yet. Shops stayed shuttered; the sidewalks were devoid of the omnipresent vendors. The shock of bloodshed was still fresh.

I spent the morning mingling with a hundred other recalled officers in a cavernous waiting room at the army headquarters. We paced and milled about in various states of dejection and nervous dishevelment. One by one, our freshly pressed uniforms wilted with streaks of perspiration, despite the cool weather outside. The

creaky ceiling fan mixed the odor of our fear-soured bodies with cigarette smoke and made one dispiriting cocktail.

For the past two weeks, since the first night of the Tet Offensive, I had reported to headquarters and waited for my name to be posted on one of the bulletin boards. Some officers received their assignments earlier than others, but most, like myself, had the pleasure of sulking here for several weeks. The first few days saw a couple of comics trade jokes, but as dangerous posts began appearing on the board, we stopped laughing. A sense of doom straddled the backs of our necks. We chain-smoked, read newspapers, struck up gloomy conversations about the war, and jumped like startled rabbits at every announcement. It was a magnificent and utterly demoralizing waste of time. In the face of such sheer inept organization and bureaucracy, we had little hope our side would win.

If I had had the money to buy an exemption from the first draft, I would have. If I could have avoided this second tour, I certainly would have. Six years of service had shown me too many foolish decisions made by corrupt politicians and inept brass. Good men followed orders and died. Inept men made lousy choices and got promoted. The honest suffered; the corrupt got rich. Putting your life in the hands of brave and intelligent commanders was one thing, but standing up to be cannon fodder for greedy fools was plain stupid. I had no faith in President Thieu, his generals, or even the seemingly well-intentioned Americans—the only people in this whole bloody mess who seemed to believe the South could actually win this war.

After forcing down a plate of fried fish and rice for lunch at the cafeteria, I went outside to wait for an old schoolmate to pick me up. Thu was one of many friends and acquaintances I had contacted in hopes of finding the right connection to keep me from being sent to the front line.

Thu pulled up to the main gate in a brand-new white Toyota Corona. Leaning over, he pushed the passenger door open, grinning as if we had a big night on the town in store. And he was dressed for



it, too: a beige silk shirt, black pleated slacks, European leather shoes, a beautiful gold Omega watch, and a heavy gold necklace to match.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked, worried that I couldn't afford the places he frequented.

"Not many places have reopened yet. You want to go to my house?"

"Let's go for ice cream on Le Loi. My treat." It was difficult enough asking for help; I had no desire to beg in front of his wife.

Thu sped down the road, bubbling with cheerful chitchat. We fell into the rhythm of old chums. I had always liked Thu. Jovial and accommodating, he was one of my closest school friends. We studied together during high school and the first two years of college. Unlike most of our old friends, he was posted in Saigon the whole time and knew all the gossip: who got married, who had the lucrative posts, and who was killed in battle.

He stepped hard on the gas pedal, showing off the car's acceleration. We zigzagged easily through the maze of avenues. Thu honked his horn and blew through the intersections without slowing down. The deserted boulevards were such a joy to drive on, we forgot what unsettling sights they were.

Nguyen Hue and Le Loi Boulevards were built for commerce, laid out in the manner of famed French boulevards with dividing islands of grass and trees lining their entire length. When I first came to Saigon, the boulevards had a park-like atmosphere, their strips of greenery and flowery roundabouts as well tended as gardens. These days, the helter-skelter of unregulated development had taken over much of the city. The former jewel city of the French colonial empire was now a jumbled mess. It made me smile to think that in the French civil engineers' wildest imaginations, they never conceived that their precious garden islands would be paved over and used as parking areas for motorbikes and bicycles. Drive down any major Saigon street and it was the same story, as if the moment the masters had left, the newly freed denizens seized the opportunity to assert their own imprints on the greater design.

One aspect of Le Loi Boulevard remained the same: It was still the heart of Saigon, the favorite street for strolling. The stretch between Ben Thanh Market and the plaza was busy all day. Shady trees kept the extra-wide sidewalks pleasantly cool even in the summer. Restaurants, bars, and cafés spilled tables and chairs onto the sidewalk. The stores sold luxury items, and the kiosks lined against the curbs carried cheap knockoffs and trinkets. Among the dealers, vendors, and agents, shoppers could find household appliances, furniture, motorbikes, European fashions, Vietnamese silk, army surplus items, exotic herbal potions, electronics, and just about everything else.

High school and college students swarmed the shops and eateries. Couples window-shopped. American GIs paraded their young Vietnamese girlfriends decked out in outrageously sexy outfits. It was a peculiar sight. The French never did that in Hanoi or Saigon. They kept their association with Vietnamese girls behind closed doors—even with proper girls from good families. Few Frenchmen wanted to be seen in public holding hands with those from the servant class. It was refreshing and rather sweet to see the GIs and their girlfriends enjoying the city like everyone else.

Normally, it was near impossible to find parking on Le Loi. Today, we could have parked a bus anywhere. Without a single fruit vendor on the sidewalks, it felt like a ghost town. Three or four cafés gamely opened their doors in a futile attempt to lure patrons from their homes. In the absence of its usual exuberance, the boulevard had an air of remorse. I picked the ice cream parlor at the corner of Le Loi and Pasteur because the Hanoian owner had a good collection of music. The sidewalk tables looked vulnerable on the deserted street, so we sat just inside the open shop front.

"How are things going at the Customs Office?"

Thu waved a negligent hand. "Same as always—as if nothing happened. My boss, the minister, believes life will be back to normal soon, since the attack clearly failed."

"Did he say anything about the war in general?"



"He doesn't know if we'll win the war, but he said we will never lose unless the Americans let us lose."

"It could go on like this forever."

"Well, the Americans will put more responsibilities on our shoulders. They'll still finance the war. They can't stop until it's over, and he thinks that will be a very, very long time from now. But they will try to cut down the number of body bags they send home."

"That's my problem! I don't want to be in the army for another six years. My luck won't last. If I get sent to the front, they'll be sending me home in a body bag within a few months."

"I understand. I'll try to help you, old friend."

"I know there is no way I could get back into the Rural Development Program. Is there any chance you could get me a place in personnel or logistics?"

"I don't know anyone in army personnel, but several of the big brass owe me favors. You can afford to pay, right?"

"My wife has a laundry business in Phan Thiet. If it's not an outrageous amount, we'll find a way to manage."

"It's hard to find a good post right now. There are so many recalled guys trying to avoid combat units, you may have to take a mediocre post for now, and then change later."

It was true, but I could not help feeling disappointed. "I understand. Thanks. Just do the best you can."

"Sure, I'll try. I haven't forgotten what you've done for me. I couldn't have gotten through the first year at NIA if it hadn't been for you."

I almost blurted out that I wished I had continued my studies at the National Institute of Administration with him. Thu had pleaded with me to stay. After two years of attending two universities concurrently, I left the school in 1958 to complete the more challenging degree in pedagogy. Pure pride. It was the worst decision in my life. Thu stayed on and graduated to become a department head at the Saigon Customs Office. With plenty of opportunities for dealings and

kickbacks—common practices for civil servants in South Vietnam—he became very wealthy.

The waitress brought Thu his three scoops of vanilla ice cream, his favorite since high school. I had a *crème fraîche*, which was whipped milk served with a preserved strawberry in a wide-mouth goblet. Creamy and mildly sweet, it never fails to bring back Hanoi memories, the cool afternoons I spent rowing alone on West Lake. Good old Johnny Mathis was crooning "A Certain Smile" over the speakers. Those adolescent days before the end of the French colonial era were, perhaps, some of my most peaceful moments. I remembered that I knew it then, even though I didn't know what the future would bring.

Thu noticed a man wearing sunglasses sitting at the rear corner of the shop. "Hey, that's Dung."

"He's too fat to be Dung," I said.

"It's what happens when life's good to you." Thu chuckled and waved the man over to join us.

Dung came, carrying his soda float. He was pale and paunchy like someone averse to physical exertions. He wore a sky blue pullover and dark navy slacks in the current hip style of Saigon, looking every bit the part of a savvy urban professional. Forty extra pounds lent him a sense of respectability. The double chin diminished his pronounced underbite. Faint, striated scars radiated from beneath the dark glasses.

"Dung, remember Thong?" Thu asked, pulling out a chair for Dung.

He sat down before extending his hand to me, as one might to a subordinate. He said, "Thong, you haven't changed much."

"You changed a lot, Dung. I didn't recognize you. You look like a very successful man."

"He's a manager at the Department of Information and Propaganda," Thu chimed in a tone that implied that they were equals.

"That's great. You've really made it big," I said, trying to catch his eye behind the glasses.



"Hmm." He grinned. "You don't look too bad yourself, Thong. You look very handsome in your uniform." Dung chuckled loudly. The waitress and other patrons turned. Thu grimaced, but didn't comment.

I was taken aback. I hadn't said anything to insult him. The backhanded joke caught me off guard. We all knew it was appalling luck for a college graduate to be drafted into the army. He must have known that I was fully aware of my underdog status, sitting in my crumpled army khakis next to two guys sporting fancy garb. More than ever, I loathed the way the uniform felt on me. It branded me as a member of the unprivileged class. I was one who could not avoid the army draft.

Dung smirked. "All that studying didn't pay off as well as you expected, did it?"

I held my tongue, blood rising to my face.

We were good friends once. I wondered how a person could change so much. What I saw before me clashed with my heroic image of him. For years, whenever I thought of him, I remembered a daring Dung wrapped in the red and gold of the South Viet Nam flag leading a charge into a fray of demonstrators, just moments before the bomb exploded and robbed him of his right eye.

THE Nguyen Van Dung I knew was a colorful, charismatic figure, the most popular student in high school, central to the student body as well as the faculty. This was a monumental achievement considering the fact that he was short, bony, and dark skinned—an unflattering combination of attributes that would have relegated anyone else to the bottom rung of the social ladder. He had a thin face and a pugnacious underbite, the sort of tractor jaw that you wouldn't want to crack your knuckles against.

Dung was a single child in a devout Catholic family from the North. Before their migration south, they had a comfortable lower-middle-class life in Hai Phong, the primary seaport city for Hanoi.

His father had been a warehouse clerk, his mother a produce seller at an open-sky farmers' market. In Saigon, their livelihood was reduced to a tiny food stall at the neighborhood market. His father, like many northern or southern Vietnamese, could not find employment in Saigon's trading, shipping, or warehousing industries, which were largely closed to non-ethnic Chinese Vietnamese.

During the summer of 1955, Diem's faction was preparing a referendum to overthrow Bao Dai and establish Diem, a Catholic, as head of state, in a campaign openly endorsed by the church. Dung's father worked as a paid grassroots organizer in Diem's political machine and later recruited his son into the group. Dung quickly became a Diem fanatic and star promoter who brought politics into our high school even though most students weren't old enough to vote.

During the first two months of our senior year, Dung rarely attended a full day of class. He was shuttled in and out of school like an important courier, picked up and dropped off by adult drivers in shiny cars. The teachers frowned, but dared not reprimand him. The rest of us sat miserable in our stifling classroom and thought how sweet it would be to thumb our noses at the teachers the way Dung did. There wasn't a single one of us who wouldn't trade places with him.

He was a natural leader with a talent for winning key figures over to his side. It wasn't difficult since Chu Van An was the most prestigious of the high schools set up for refugee boys. If some of the students and teachers weren't pro-Diem, most of them, being northerners, were certainly anti-Communists. Dung had plenty of money, food, drinks, and even girls—party members from the girls' schools. He made political activism hip, and we scrambled to volunteer in the campaign, march at rallies, and scuffle with Communist sympathizers at every opportunity.

In Saigon, Election Day for an interim government came like a festival. Diem swept up 98 percent of the votes amidst charges of widespread fraud and intimidation. At our school, Dung threw a lavish party at the teachers' lounge one evening and invited the faculty, girls from our sister school, and fifty of us who had contributed



the most to the campaign. In spite of the school's strict ban on alcohol, Dung made sure there was plenty of 33 beer. The schoolmaster had no choice but to turn a blind eye. Many teachers drank and mingled with the students at the swell back-patting event with Dung as the star.

During the celebration, Dung took me aside. We went out and stood in the courtyard to sip our beers, thumbs hooked on our belts like adults. It was a splendid feeling to be on the winning side for once.

"Thong, I wanted to thank you for helping us with the speeches. They were fantastic."

"Oh, it's nothing. Just doing my bit."

"You were a real player at that last rally. Thanks for standing with the team. We gave those Communist sympathizers a good beating, didn't we?" He laughed and patted me on the back.

"You threw the first punch."

"No, I didn't." He grinned. "I smacked that fool over the head with my picket sign."

We chuckled, and he leaned forward conspiratorially. "We can really use a man like you. You're one of the top students in our class. They look up to you. I want you to be one of our core team members."

Schools at the time still practiced the French method of ranking all the students in the same year, from the top scorer to the lowest. The system created competition through segregation and effectively fostered an air of prestige and mystique around the best students. Student body council membership, club presidencies, and sports team captaincies were posts that went naturally, like prizes, to the top academics.

"Thanks, Dung. That's fantastic. You know I'm always there for the rallies. I truly want to join, but I don't think I can take any more time away from my family's noodle shop."

"A core team member must dedicate himself to the work." He nodded solemnly. "You know, there are enough perks to offset your not helping out with your family's restaurant. Think it over."

Dung was referring to each core team member's stipend and share of all the freebies and goodies the government organizers doled

out to grassroots groups. Smiling, he winked and shook my hand like a real politician.

WE all had high expectations for Dung. Even the teachers thought he was on a stellar trajectory to government appointments. Dung had street smarts and was very adept at motivating people. As the political leader at one of the most prestigious schools in Saigon, he was also a *de facto* leader for all the groups from other schools. He had successfully mobilized and led Diem's young but very visible and vociferous support group.

After the referendum to remove emperor Bao Dai from power, Dung quickly fell back into anonymity. The political organizers stopped picking him up from school. Dung's political funds dwindled to nothing. His core team disintegrated. The months passed, and we busied ourselves with exams. Dung was still popular, but without a clear purpose, he grew irrelevant.

Once installed, Diem initiated a swift campaign to eliminate the remnants of the Communist party in the South. Within a few months, tens of thousands of South Vietnamese farmers suspected of being Communist sympathizers were rounded up and interrogated. Many were jailed or sent to re-education camps. Although the U.S. had already signaled to the world that it would renege on the Geneva Accord and cancel the scheduled election to reunite the country, the South Vietnamese still hoped for a miracle, believing the Americans and Diem would yield to international pressure. Public protests cropped up in Saigon and other major cities where Diem couldn't exercise drastic measures due to the presence of international bodies. As the July 20, 1956, deadline for the general election drew near, the political atmosphere in Saigon was intensely charged. Every week there was at least one major demonstration. With the foreign press on hand at every event, Diem couldn't use police force, so groups such as Dung's were summoned to stage counter-protests.

Suddenly Dung was back in the local limelight. This time he



received even stronger support from the student body because we suspected that most South Vietnamese were likely to elect Ho Chi Minh simply because they disliked Diem and his cronies. As refugees and survivors of Communist atrocities, we felt it was our duty to educate the public about the real faces of the Communists. Despite looming graduation exams, we plunged into the campaign. Every time anti-government groups staged a protest, Dung and his organizers sounded the battle cry and we would pile into the waiting convoy of trucks to be transported to the demonstration site. The trucks were always loaded with snacks and drinks, as well as an ample supply of rocks, bottles, and sticks. We were ready to brawl at a moment's notice.

Swollen with pride and purpose, we became messengers of true knowledge. We stormed the town in government cars, loudspeakers blasting slogans, tossing leaflets out the windows, howling with a glee that had nothing to do with politics. We plastered Diem's chubby face on windows and walls. Without realizing it, we became Diem's little henchmen.

Like rival gangs, we clashed with any group that opposed us, fighting in the usual places, Ben Thanh Market or the municipal theater, at either end of Le Loi Boulevard. The casualties were numerous, but that thinned neither our ranks nor theirs. The demonstrations and the ensuing fights intensified as the Geneva Accord deadline neared. Our opponents were desperately appealing to the international media and foreign diplomats. Our mission was to silence them.

We beat each other silly, vying for the world's attention.

I was too young to realize that it would make no difference.

IT was early June when Dung received emergency summons to organize a counter-protest. His political handlers sent a convoy to pick us up from school. We piled onto the flatbed trucks, jammed shoulder to shoulder like cattle, excited at the prospect of a good fight. Thu distributed armbands, strips of fabric torn from a yellow cloth, so we wouldn't mistakenly attack our own members in

the heat of battle. Cam, Dung's second lieutenant, chanted slogans over the loudspeakers. Swaying from side to side, we clung to each other, howling and hooting as the trucks caromed across Saigon to the city center. Above us, a blistering sun.

The trucks dumped us in front of the municipal theater, where several of our associate groups had already gathered. A thousand demonstrators and counter-demonstrators packed the plaza, with twice as many spectators gathering nearby. The cacophony of chants between the two factions sent thrilling shivers down my spine. Dung howled and lobbed a bottle high over the heads of the crowd into the center of the protesters. We poured from the trucks and merged with our faction. Our side began to encircle the protesters. As usual, the police stood far off, pretending not to notice that fighting had broken out.

Our mission, as rehearsed many times, was to neutralize the protesters. When they started moving toward the Hotel Majestic at the corner of Tu Do Street and Ben Bach Dang, Dung led the core teams in an attempt to block their path. With the South Viet Nam flag draped over his shoulders like a cape, he charged the marchers, brandishing a long stick. For a small guy, he had a lot of guts and never failed to lead the paid members into the thick of a fight.

I saw Thu moving away with another group to attack the protesters from the flank. He shouted at me, but his words were drowned out by the cacophony. I waved him onward and joined up with another group. The fight was gaining momentum.

It felt like heat, but a sense of madness had descended over us. Bottles, rocks, shoes, sticks, boxes—anything small enough to be thrown—were hurled in all directions. Nearby spectators were pounded with barrages of debris. Suddenly the gap between our side and theirs closed, and I found myself throwing punches. There were no single opponents; we struck at whoever was in front of us.

A man grabbed the collar of my shirt and I hammered my fist into his face. I had stopped thinking. My fists were fighting all the fights the child-me had been unable to fight. I was defending this last stand



of freedom. An animal of fury rose inside of me. It howled in my ears, sent jolts of energy through my arms, made rocks of my fists.

Something cracked against my back. I turned. A middle-aged man had struck me with his picket sign. A roar rolled from my throat. I smashed my elbow into his face. I pounded him until he fell, then turned to another enemy.

Power surged through me in rapid, violent pulses; I reveled in a chaos that was swathed in yellow and red ribbons.

A rock struck a glancing blow off my head.

I heard a dull hum—a sound that reminded me of the sea. Then I was leaning against a wall, my head throbbing. The fight swept onward; the street was strewn with broken placards and trampled signs. It seemed unfortunate to me that our faction was mostly northerners and theirs was mostly southerners. I liked southerners. They were easygoing and hospitable. They had warmly received us northern refugees with open arms, making us feel welcome in their neighborhoods. I doubted we would have given them the same treatment in the North had the situation been reversed.

A girl slumped down on the curb near me. There was blood on her face. It stained her white *ao dai*. Too bad the dress was ruined, I thought. She had the round dark face of a southern girl. She was sobbing like a child, inconsolable.

I slipped off my armband and let it fall to the ground. I wanted to say something to her, but I didn't know what to say. And I was ashamed, though I did not know why.

A deafening explosion—a bomb. I felt the thump in my chest. Up the street, a clearing appeared in the crowd. Gray smoke permeated the air with the bitter tang of gunpowder. Screams rose and swelled into a long keening crescendo as the crowd turned and fled. They fled empty-handed, dispersing in all directions. Some bolted into stores nearby. A wave of people rolled back toward the theater square. They pushed and shoved, tripping over each other, with terror on their faces. Discarded on the streets were banners, placards, and weapons. Opponents ran shoulder to shoulder, the fight forgotten.

Panicking, I struggled against the instinct to flee along with the crowd. Where were my friends? Torn, I stood still, my back against the concrete wall amid the pandemonium. A young man stumbled past, supported on both sides by friends. His shirt was soaked red.

The street cleared within moments. Blood and bodies marked the blast area. The injured wailed and moaned. Someone raised a bloodied arm beckoning for help. A few managed to get to their feet and limped away. Bystanders lingered at a distance, not daring to approach as if fearing another explosion.

The police finally emerged and walked through the carnage. They didn't offer assistance to the wounded but instead began cordoning off the area.

I recognized Cam staggering out of the blast area and grabbed him by the shoulders. He was covering a wound on his arm with his good hand, blood dribbling down his right side.

"Where's Dung?" I asked.

Cam looked dazedly at me. I repeated the question, and he nodded in the direction of the blast. "Over there."

"Is he alive?"

Cam shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know. The bomb was right on top of him."

"What about Thu and the others?"

"I . . . I have to go." Cam sobbed, his face blanching as he hurried away.

Ambulances arrived, followed by a fire crew. I waited to see if I could recognize Dung when the paramedics carried him to the ambulance. More police came in patrol cars and began grabbing people for questioning. That was when all the bystanders started running.

NO one claimed responsibility for the first-ever bomb to be unleashed on demonstrators. The homemade device had injured more than fifty people.



Dung had shrapnel in his chest, abdomen, arms, and face. He lost one eye and was lucky to be alive. Dung never recovered from his injuries. The Geneva Accord deadline passed while he languished in the hospital. Dung failed his graduation exam and faded from view.

"You want to see my eye?" Dung said.

Before I could decline, he removed his sunglasses. His chubby face swelled over the empty socket like rising dough, narrowing the hole. The lazy eyelid fell down and reduced the opening to an eerie black slit. It was his winking eye.

I must have winced because he laughed.

"Took me a long time to get used to it myself. I was lucky the doctor was able to save my other eye." He ran his tongue over his front teeth, then said, "I only need one eye to see everything I need to see."

I noticed that he had sat down slightly sideways so he had both of us in his good eye.

"That looks painful," Thu said, leaning closer.

"No pain. I don't even miss it anymore."

"Why don't you use a glass eye?" Thu said.

The corner of Dung's mouth curled up marginally. "This is more useful in my line of work."

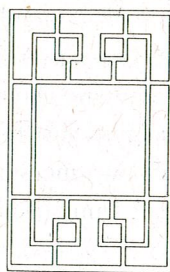
I forced a smile, shuddering to think what a high school dropout must have done to rise into the upper echelons in the Secret Police, whose notoriety surpassed even the Viet Cong's.

Outside, an ambulance siren was approaching. We paused. Everyone in the café turned to the boulevard. Two army Jeeps and a truck full of VN soldiers thundered past, a white ambulance trailing behind. We waited for the sound to recede into another part of the city. You never knew where the Viet Cong could spring up next. They had cells everywhere. Fighting had erupted throughout Saigon.

The war had entered another phase. It was far from over.

I quelled an impulse to reach out and pat Dung on the shoulder. The front line wasn't the worst place I could end up. Yet I found myself still envying Dung—not for what he had become, but for those glorious days when he stood at the center of our world. This cursed war, in its own measure and manner, would eventually claim us all, but at least Dung had his time. I envied his one precious year.





THE NORTH

1949

## 26. THE CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE

When I was fourteen, my mother gave me a bottle of champagne three months before my graduation exam, just before her death. At the time, she had already grown cumbersome and round in the third trimester of her pregnancy. That afternoon, she called me to the koi pond in her private garden. We sat together on the wooden bench, her favorite reading spot. The swell of her belly made her lean back against the support pillow. Mother unwrapped a cloth bundle and showed me a dark green bottle with gold foil wrapping at the top. I knew immediately it was the special bubbly beverage of celebration that called for the delicate glasses Mother kept in the cabinet.

"Is Father coming home?"

Several months ago, we received news that Father, while on his way home from Hanoi to celebrate the New Year with the family, had been captured and conscripted into service as a porter and translator for the

French. Mother had sent two investigators to locate Father and purchase his release, but he had vanished without a trace.

Mother's face fell briefly. She gathered herself, mustered a smile, and tousled my hair. "Do you know what this bottle is?"

"Champagne!" I guffawed. I felt bad for reminding her of Father. We were all pretending that he was well somewhere and would be home any day. I held the bottle up to the light and read from the label. "France, nineteen-forty-six. Father and Uncle Thuan always have a good time when they drink it."

Mother chuckled. "Well, this is for you, for a very special occasion, my dear."

"Father never lets me drink alcohol."

"I think he will if you pass your exam."

"I haven't even started studying for it yet!"

"Yes, I know. And I know you will pass. I'm already proud of you," she said and squinted in that peculiar way of hers. It made her look as if she was smiling at me.

The middle-school exam was a major obstacle. The colonial school system required a majority attrition rate to restrict students from acquiring higher educations, which was seen as a danger to the colonial government. Although the new government under Ho Chi Minh had changed the curriculum, they kept the multiple exam levels. Passing the exam was still enough of an achievement for most families to throw a celebration dinner, but I couldn't imagine how it warranted a whole bottle of champagne, worth several months' wages for a laborer. None of my friends had ever tasted champagne. It was a momentous feeling.

I hugged her. "Thank you, Mother. I won't just pass it, I'll score high marks for you!"

"That's a big promise! You're an extravagant one, aren't you?" She perked up with a small happy laugh that I rarely heard from her. It made me very happy. She gathered me into her arms. "I know you will. You have never disappointed me. We will open this champagne



to celebrate your graduation, and we will have a big cake to go with it. You can invite your cousins and all your friends."

"Even Hoi?"

Besides Tan, Hoi was my best friend, and I knew she was very worried that I might fall under his influence and join the Resistance. Hoi was the leader of the local Uncle Ho's Youth Brigade. His group and the Resistance fighters, in general, had become very popular in our village, since our domain came under the Resistance's control. People were swept up in patriotic zeal. After a year of suffering under the Algerian Mohammed and his marauding band, the peasants credited the Resistance for driving away the legionnaires, even though the legionnaires' retreat was part of the general pullback of French forces to the perimeter of the Red River Delta.

"Yes, son, if you wish." Mother sighed. "I cannot protect you forever. Sooner or later, he will want you to join his group. You must decide for yourself."

I avoided her eyes. Hoi had already asked me many times. I didn't like the awkwardness of making excuses to postpone joining the Resistance. It was difficult for me to concentrate on school when all my friends were doing exciting activities in Uncle Ho's Youth Brigade.

"We're safe as long as we provide the Resistance with everything they request," she said, holding my face in her hands. "I can give them land, livestock, rice, and gold, but I cannot give them my son."

Even though I knew the Resistance had murdered Uncle Thuan, my cousin Quyen, and Uncle Uc, I still wanted to be a member of this great movement that was cleansing our country of foreigners. It was a new and wonderful feeling not having to live in constant fear of a patrol coming to plunder and rape our people. I hated the sight of the legionnaires eating and drinking in our halls, despoiling the sanctity of our temple and home.

"Son, don't be quick to kill or be killed for someone else's rhetoric. A day will come when you and Tan will be responsible for our entire clan. Remember that any decision you make, you make for all

of us, from your ancestors to your family to the folks faithful to our estate—everyone, including this baby in my belly."

It was a bewildering thought. I stared at the ground. It was unimaginable how anything could be in my control. It would be so much easier if I could simply pick up a gun, fall into rank, and fight the enemy.

"I think we all have the duty to fight for our independence," I insisted.

"Oh, my dear son, he who seeds the wind reaps the storm." She sighed again. "I am afraid the time for you to fight will come. When it does, you can contribute more to the fight if you're educated." Mother wiggled to sit up straight, then clapped her hands. "First, you still need to pass your exam so we can drink this champagne."

"We have to hide this! The legionnaires might want it if they come back."

"Don't worry, I doubt the French will patrol our domain again any time soon. Besides, we're going to bury this bottle."

"We can just hide it somewhere. I have a few secret places."

Mother chuckled. "The champagne will taste better after aging awhile under ground."

"Are you sure?"

"The French keep wines in underground chambers to keep them cool and at a constant temperature so they age properly. I read it in a book." She winked at me. "You know I have a whole library of books that you haven't read."

"Yes, Mother. But if you bury it, the water may seep in through the top."

"We'll seal the top with wax and bury it upside down."

"You won't tell my brothers, right?"

"Of course not. This is just between us. It's a reward for your efforts."

Mother brought out a lamp and a lump of wax. We sealed the bottle. She levered herself slowly from the bench and led me to her prized guava tree. We dug a hole and buried the bottle wrapped in



He picked out a large flat black stone from the edge of the koi pond and had me put it over the spot as a marker.

THE day Mother went into labor it rained heavily. An unbearable storm came from nowhere. Dawn cast little light on clouds that quickly burst into torrential rain. Midmorning, Mother told the maid that it was time. Aunt Thuan, Aunt Lang, and Aunt Hoa descended on our house like a gaggle of geese, asking questions and shouting directions at the servants. Mother said the baby was coming earlier than the doctor had predicted, but she wasn't sure as this was her fourth child. Aunt Thuan put her hand on Mother's forehead. Aunt Lang placed her hands on Mother's belly to feel the contraction. The women knew what needed to be done and mobilized the staff to prepare for the delivery.

"Have you sent for my doctor?" Mother gasped. "The roads are blocked. There's been heavy fighting for the last few days outside the district. No one can get through the French lines. Even Aunt Thuan."

Aunt Hoa agreed. "It's a long way. The roads might be washed out."

"I want my doctor," Mother insisted. He was the family doctor who had delivered all the children on the estate.

Aunt Hoa said, "I'll have Noui go with our contact in the Resistance. He will have to go around the blockade."

"We'll send him by horseback," Aunt Thuan said. "In the meantime, I'll fetch Midwife Nga from the village."

A sense of expectancy loomed over the household. With the gathering strength outside, there was little work to be done. Mother stoked the kitchen fire to boil a cauldron of water, and then she began mending tools and milling rice flour. The women brought in linens, ground medicinal herbs, put fresh fruits on the family altar, and lit the prayer incense for a safe delivery. The women took turns sitting with Mother.

It was a Sunday, so there was no school. I studied in the living room, but couldn't concentrate with Mother's muffled groans coming through the wall. Outside, the afternoon had gone dim. The downpour was so thick I couldn't see across the courtyard. Thunder rumbled across the underbelly of the sky. The water was ankle-deep and rising. I grabbed an umbrella and waded across the courtyard to the Ancestral Temple. I lit three incense sticks and prayed to Grandfather's spirit.

A runner arrived with a message that Noui had not found a way across the French line, though his connection expected to get him into the district town during the night. It was bad news, and the Aunties were very worried. Late in the afternoon, a young woman carrying a basket arrived. She took off her hat and shed her raincoat of palm leaves. She was in her early twenties, very young for a midwife.

She bowed to the Aunties and Mother, and said, "Mrs. Nga went to help with the Resistance's hospital. I'm Trang, her apprentice."

"You're the herbalist's youngest daughter," Aunt Thuan noted with raised eyebrows. "I didn't know you started training with the midwife."

"I've been her assistant for five months, but I have never delivered a baby on my own."

The older women glanced at each other. It was bad fortune and dangerous to have such an inexperienced midwife. Perhaps the doctor from the district would arrive in time.

"Isn't there anyone who could help you?" Aunt Hoa asked.

The girl shook her head, looking at the floor. "There are no healers or midwives left in the village. My father went with Midwife Nga to tend wounded Resistance fighters."

Mother's face was flushed and wet with perspiration. "Sister Trang, listen to me," she moaned. "You will have to deliver this baby. It's coming!"

The women closed around Mother and chased all the men and children away from the house.



It was dark when Kim, the cook's daughter, fetched me to the Ancestral Temple where I was hiding from the awful sounds of rain. She said I had a new baby sister. I splashed across the courtyard. In her room, Mother was propped up on cushions. Beads of sweat ran down her flushed face.

"Mother, are you in pain?" I sat on the divan next to her and took her hand.

Mother smiled wanly, too exhausted to talk. She squeezed my hand. Her fingers were soft.

"She's a girl, Mother, so her name is Huong, just like you decided." Mother seemed to want to say something, but her eyes closed. Aunt Thao whispered that Mother needed her rest. Trang stood as she tended Mother. That was when I noticed there was a good smell everywhere. They were wiping it up, but it kept coming. The light of the oil lamp, it looked dark like pitch on the straw mat; the white rags, it was red. They called for more hot water and more incense. Trang gave Mother an herbal concoction, and the Aunties were panicking. The bleeding wouldn't stop. The wind howled through the eaves, struggling to get inside. Within the flickers of the candles, fate shifted. Mother closed her eyes as if to rest, but her head rolled away, slipping over our world, gone from me.

Other women wailed. The storm did not relent, the sky pouring rain into the night.

The day burned white, the sky as clear as blue glass. The sun shone and steamed. A reddish film of dried mud left by the receding floodwater coated the grass and bushes. Along the creek, brown water leaked from the breached dikes. Roads disintegrated into miles of sloping mud. The gravediggers had waited three days for the water to break the ground on her resting plot.

For my firstborn, I led the funeral procession out of the Ancestral

Gate. It was difficult walking backward in the mud. I kept slipping and falling, holding up the whole column of marchers, monks, relatives, friends, and servants. My white mourner's robe was completely brown. I struggled to perform the funeral rites—the same one Tan had done for his father. I walked backward in front of the casket bearers. I stopped, knelt, pressed my forehead into the mud, and cried: *Please, don't leave us, Mother. We are lost without you. Please, stay and watch over us. We love you. We need you. Please, don't leave us, Mother.*

When the coffin reached me, I rose, took ten steps back, knelt down, and repeated the pleas.

Towed by their nannies, Hung and Hong wailed. Cousin Tan was walking next to his stepmother, head down, sobbing into his chest. He was closer to my mother than to his stepmothers, Aunt Thuan and Aunt Lang. The rest of the household followed behind as we went out of the estate. Villagers lined the road to pay their respects. The peasants adored her—the soft-spoken outsider from another province.

I lost my sandals and cap. I was covered in slime, mud in my mouth and the hot smell of earth in my nostrils. A heavy sun. The villagers, my childhood friends, my relatives, the monks, the servants, the heady incense, the mourning chants, the cymbals and tolling bells. Nothing could fill the hollowness within me.

We came to a crossroad. To the left was the dirt path to our Ancestral Cemetery in the village—a modest park enclosed by a low brick wall, with a few trees and stone benches where Uncle Thuan rested with his forefathers. Places for Father and Mother had already been chosen long ago.

If I walked straight ahead, I would come to the interprovincial road that led back to Mother's ancestral home. Her family had a splendid cemetery there, much nicer than my father's family's. It was a beautiful flower garden with statues, gravel footpaths, trees, and a fishpond, all enclosed by a high wall and tended year-round by a caretaker. Former senators and mandarins and village chiefs of her line had been laid to rest there. She would have been among family.



To the right, in the middle of a rice field, lay the plot Aunt Thuan had picked out for Mother. During Mother's wake, the Aunties had a monk augur the family's fortunes. In the tea leaves and chicken bones, he predicted dangers ahead, so the Aunties summoned a feng shui master who said that the estate was exposed to ill elements from the north, and that if they buried Mother in the northern field, the estate would be protected from evil. I protested, but they would not hear of it. Auntie Thuan said Mother's spirit had the duty of safe-keeping the household. As head of the clan, she had the right to decide my mother's resting place.

My knees buckled. I couldn't make the turn. I couldn't lead them to that grave, the lone mound of red earth in a blue paddy-sea of sky. Crumpling in the mud, I was useless. I opened my mouth, but no words came. Dry sobs seized my throat. The bearers stopped, the shadow of her casket falling on me. Guards Canh and Khi pulled me to my feet and walked me backward down the path the Aunties had chosen.

The monks chanted and the bearers lowered her into the ground. Aunties burned paper chariots, fake money, and gold foil to send Mother's spirit to heaven in comfort. I wondered if water would get into her casket. I could not stop shaking.

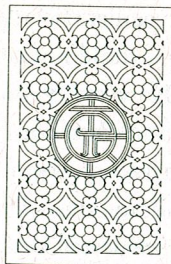
I STUDIED as I had never done before. I bent my entire being into the text, poring over the equations and chapters as if Mother were in her garden, waiting for me to pass the exam. Within the pages, I could pretend that nothing had changed, that Father was safe in Hanoi, and that things would return to normal soon. My escape portal was through literature, history, and mathematics. The tighter my focus, the easier the texts became. In grief, I discovered my mental stride. Learning was transformed into an act of pleasure. It was Mother's last gift, her wish for me to love the quest for knowledge.

Week after week, I stayed in our house, ate meals the cook set out for my brothers and me, and avoided the Aunties. Boyhood

games lost their hold on me. I stopped going into the village. My friend Hoi came and urged me to join the Resistance and avenge my mother. He did not know that I blamed the war for everything and that I loathed both the Resistance and the French. I told him that I had promised my mother I would finish school.

I TOOK the exam. When the results came back, I had the highest score in the district. I told no one and brought my grade card to Mother's garden. Her rosebush had grown wild with blooms. The birds were absent. Mother would have been thirty-two the next month, this poor woman who had shed more tears than laughter in the brief time I had known her. I sat beneath the guava tree and thought of Mother and her smiling eyes. The stone marker was still there, beneath it our secret promise as fresh as the day we had committed it to the earth.





THE SOUTH  
1975

## THE FALL OF SAIGON

Seven years of fighting had reduced the war to a desolate liability. We accepted it like an offshore island that never left. The battles, the bombs, the high-ambushes, the countryside insurgency, the draft calls, and the ever-mounting casualties had become ebbs and flows of a long, long war. We never expected victory—our leaders were too corrupt for that—but defeat never entered our minds. We convinced ourselves that the ever-present, powerful Americans would never desert us. We had become too dependent, blind, and selfish to save ourselves.

The end came swiftly. The cities didn't fall; they fell, one after another in quick, horrific succession. On March 13, 1975, the first to go was Ban Me Thuot, a town in the Central Highlands. Five days later, Pleiku fell. In three more days, the enemy overran Quang Tri, the capital of central Vietnam, was abandoned. Days after that, President Thieu and his staff of inept generals accelerated the downfall with their

order to abandon the 1st and 2nd Corps. The stalemate was over. The tide had turned permanently. Within three weeks, eight provinces were forfeited; 40,000 troops were massacred during the retreats. It was devastating, but no one could predict that the Viet Cong would sack Saigon's presidential palace in another twenty-six days.

My brother Hong was working at the Forestry Service of Phu Bon, a province in the Central Highlands. When the VC took the province seat, he escaped to Bao Loc on an L-19, a two-seater propeller plane; it was sheer luck that he had caught his army pilot friend in time. Had he tried to escape by road, he would have been among the tens of thousands of civilians who perished in the forest on their exodus to the coast. From Bao Loc, he caught a bus into Saigon. Hong walked through the door of my father's house empty-handed. He had lost his home and everything he owned. Days later, my brother Hung, a high school principal, fled Ham Tan, a mere sixty-five miles from Saigon. The news Hong and Hung brought home was terrifying.

Madness had descended on the city. People were in a selling and buying frenzy. Refugees sold whatever they had. Others liquidated assets at a fraction of their cost to raise money for passage out of the country. Former northerners like my family, who had lived under Communist rule, were the most anxious to leave. The majority of southerners, however, did not think that a Communist takeover would be disastrous. They snapped up cars, motorbikes, houses, and staples at bargain prices. I sold my car and was in negotiation to sell our four-story house. The prospective buyer backed out of the sale when the Viet Cong approached Phan Thiet.

A day later, as the Viet Cong began encircling Phan Thiet, my wife's mother, brother, and sister fled on their neighbor's fishing boat and arrived in Saigon the next morning. When they came to stay at our house and gave us the news, I immediately rode out to Vung Tau on my Honda motorbike to see if I could find a fishing boat to take us out to sea. The highway was busy in both directions with refugees from the outer provinces heading to safety and Saigonians fleeing to the coast in search of passage out of the country.



Army trucks rumbled into Vung Tau along with hordes of expensive civilian cars. The wealthy and the powerful were flocking to the coast. Vung Tau's population had tripled in the past month. I scoured the docks, but it was hopeless. Every single vessel, including motorized dinghies, was already booked or bought outright. The hotels and vacation houses were filled with people waiting to board their boats; some were already living on them. Vung Tau officials declared the city closed to new refugees.

The cost of buying passports, tourist visas, and plane tickets out of the country had skyrocketed out of our reach by the time we saw that a collapse was inevitable. It had become the choice of the super-rich with weighty government connections. Many folks lost their savings in passport cons. Saigon was full of scam artists and opportunists offering the gamut of escape options, from airplanes to ferries to overland border crossings via trucks. Every day, my brothers Hung, Hong, Hoang, and I crisscrossed Saigon looking for contacts and deals. The pall of desperation had fallen over us.

My best friend Tat, the handsome buddy from my high school days, came to me with a proposal. His brother Han, who worked at the Ministry of Transportation, had a deal with the captain of a small coastal merchant ship belonging to a Chinese company. The captain, a Vietnamese of Chinese origin, agreed to take twenty passengers at the price of ten gold leaves each. Tat didn't have the money for his family and suggested that if I loaned him the gold, I could take seven members of my own immediate family. We had been close friends for more than twenty years, so I agreed to his terms. I wanted to meet the captain. Han said the captain refused to meet anyone until it was time to go and that the full fee would be due upon embarkation.

Bach Dang pier was near downtown Saigon, and there were many boats and ferries bringing refugees in from other parts of the country. Tat and I found our ship not on the pier but moored off-

shore on the other side of the Saigon River. It was a pathetic sea-going junk. Packed to the gunwales, it might carry thirty passengers. Without any other viable alternatives, I swallowed my misgivings and hoped for the best.

A week before the city's collapse, I went over to Tat's house. Neither of us had a telephone, but we lived only three blocks apart so it was easy stopping by to see each other several times a day to check on the status of the boat. I thought it was very safe and fortunate that Tat lived only two minutes by motorbike from me. It was going to be very close because southerners like our ship captain were complacent and had no idea of the dangers of waiting to the final hours.

Tat said, "The captain announced that he'll go as soon as the Americans start to leave."

"That's very risky. We don't even know for certain if he would take us. We haven't even met him."

"I told Han the same thing. He said the government hasn't allowed ships to take people to sea yet. The chaos must begin before the captain can leave without permission. By then, no one will care."

"Why can't he bribe the officials? Your brother can help him find the right contact in the Ministry."

"I doubt the captain will want to part with any of his gold. Besides, he probably can get more money at the last moment when people will pay anything to leave."

"So we wait for the end."

"Yes, we wait for the Americans."

PRESIDENT Thieu and his cabinet fled well before the Americans. On April 21, 1975, Thieu abandoned his office and country. He flew to Taiwan with his family, taking along fifteen tons of personal luggage, rumored to be the wealth of the country. His disgraceful exit delivered a detrimental blow to the troops' morale, and on the following day, Xuan Loc, a critical defensive point merely thirty-five miles from Saigon, crumbled into the enemy's hand. It



would be remembered as an epic battle, a display of heartbreaking courage against overwhelming odds. Our trusted American allies never came, but the embattled and impoverished ARVN had gallantly fought on alone, outnumbered and outgunned.

Refugees poured into the capital, running from the shelling and fighting in the adjacent towns that formed a defense line around the city. The number of refugees swelled dramatically as the Viet Minh pushed the ARVN back toward Saigon. Reality was fast disintegrating into nightmare.

State-controlled television and radio broadcasts lied to keep citizens calm. Even the Voice of America was no longer trustworthy. Only the BBC remained factual, and none of their reports bore good news. Like everyone else, I spent my days dashing back and forth all over the city, gathering information and rumors wherever I could. The latest and most credible news was the firsthand accounts from the tens of thousands of refugees seeking shelter at pagodas throughout the city.

XA LOI Temple near my house had more refugees than it had celebrants during the New Year prayers. Hundreds of people huddled and slept wherever they found space. Plastic tarps were strung up in the courtyard and along the sides of the temple to shelter the newcomers. They were all in very bad shape. Some were injured. Many were missing family members. Women sobbed, their children crying inconsolably. Old men sat like statues, staring off into space. These people had run for their lives.

At one corner of the yard, a middle-aged man sat alone, calmly smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, oblivious to the chaos around him. His shirt was torn; dried blood stained the sleeves; his pants were caked with mud. I asked him if I could sit next to him. He glanced sideways at me and kept smoking. I sat down and waited for him to talk. Usually, people were anxious to talk about their ordeals, but the man just rolled another smoke. I finally asked him where he came from.

"Nha Trang," he replied without turning.

"Is your family here with you?"

"They didn't make it."

"The VC captured them?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. "They killed them."

Not knowing what to say, I blurted, "Do you think we'll be safe here?"

He ground the cigarette beneath his sandal, stood up, and walked away.

By April 27, 1975, it looked as if the end of the world had arrived. The Communists had surrounded the capital—the final foothold of the South's forces. Artillery shells, rockets, and bombs tore up the outskirts of the city. ARVN jet fighters screamed across the overcast sky and swooped along the edges of the city, trying to turn back the advancing Communist forces. North, south, and west of Saigon, columns of black smoke curled upward, the blazes spreading. Torrents of refugees poured into the city on every road. Terrified, traumatized, and exhausted, they rolled toward the last sanctuary. They came like an undulating human carpet, filling, choking the new Bien Hoa superhighway as far as the eyes could see.

On April 28, Duong Van Minh took over the role of Chief of State. Fully armed South Vietnam troops appeared on Tran Quoc Toan Boulevard, where the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam headquarters was located right around the corner from my father's house. These were the "Red Beret Angels," the South Vietnam elite airborne force. They were our very best men, known for their courage and seen in every parade. They were our heroes, symbolic of South Vietnam's pride and power. Their dedication, ferocity, and sacrifices were legendary. They were the ones who had shown us that we could fight the VC and win. It shook me profoundly to see them sitting on the curb with their heads hung low, their rifles on the sidewalk. Without their confident swagger, they seemed so young, more



boys than men. Had it been fifteen years since I was drafted? I walked up and down the street, trying to catch their eyes. I recognized that look of battle fatigue. Their morale was broken. Hopelessness pulled on their limbs. It was plain on their faces; the war was over.

I got on my motorbike and rushed over to Tat's house, determined to convince the captain that we must not wait any longer. I was prepared to pay a premium to make the captain see reason. The moment I saw Tat sitting outside his house, I knew our hopes were dashed.

Tat wouldn't look at me. He mumbled, "They confiscated the boat."

"Who?"

"The police."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "They have family and need to escape too."

"When did you find out?"

"Yesterday evening."

I was speechless. We were dead. It was as simple as that. I sat with him fifteen, twenty minutes, dumbstruck. I could feel the seconds ticking away. I was angry that he hadn't told me earlier, even though I knew I couldn't change a thing.

I said, "We must not give up. We must keep looking. Let me know immediately if something comes up."

He promised he would, and I left on my motorbike.

I didn't know where I was going, but I needed to go somewhere, anywhere. My stomach was souring. Where to start looking all over again? I revved the engine, and sliced and weaved through the bustling streets. I joined the throngs of tens of thousands looking for an escape route. All of Saigon, including the hundreds of thousands of refugees, was on the road, coursing manically in a dozen different directions. Cars, trucks, motorbikes, bicycles, and cyclos jammed the avenues. Accidents clogged the intersections. No one cared, no one stopped. We were like animals trapped in a burning cage. But there was nowhere to go. Fighting blocked the highway to Tan Son Nhat

Airport. Streets leading to government and military sites were barricaded. I found one dead end after another.

On Mac Dinh Chi Boulevard, a sprawling mob of Vietnamese and foreigners swarmed the American embassy. They surged at the gate, begging to get into the sanctuary. White foreigners pushed through the crowd and were allowed in first. The Vietnamese clamored and shoved each other to get to the guards, waving documents and shouting their qualifications: employees of American companies, contractors, relatives of Americans, wives and children of American soldiers. I watched from a distance, knowing that a decommissioned officer had no priority, regardless of my service. My office had provided a cover for CIA operatives. If the Viet Cong caught me, I expected to be tortured and executed. My wife and children would be sent to live in the jungle.

I had never felt so much envy toward foreigners as I did at that moment. Since I was a teenager, I could never escape the feeling that they glided on some other plane above us; their dignity, living standards, and privileges thriving in another stratum beyond our reach. I had never bothered looking upward until now. Even other Asians—the Filipinos, the Taiwanese, the Koreans, the Japanese—were passing right over us. My people were at the bottom of the hierarchy, and we were about to sink even lower once the Communists took control.

I WENT home, put my arms around Anh, and told her the bad news. Rather than breaking down as I'd feared, she insisted that we see our physician, who was a good friend. We had known Dr. Nguyen Duy Tam for the fourteen years since he opened his first modest clinic. He had become one of the most successful doctors in Saigon and had powerful connections. His clientele consisted of generals, politicians, and business moguls. He was also a prominent congressman.

When we arrived at his modern clinic in an upscale neighborhood, it was nearly deserted. Three patients were attended by two



distracted young nurses who seemed on the verge of bolting out of the office. Dr. Tam took us into his office and confided that he had plans to go to France. He offered to take my family if we had one hundred bars of gold for the fare. The agent would need twenty bars as a deposit. We rushed home and brought back the gold. The flight would leave the next morning. Dr. Tam said he would send a car for us.

In the evening, I went over to my father's house. My brothers were out roaming the city, looking for an escape. Father was sipping tea with his opium cohorts. Father's cousin and confidant, Mr. Tri, droned on about his theory that the Americans would strike a deal with the Viet Cong once the fighting was over. According to Mr. Tri, there was no need to flee the country. Father's two neighbors, both southerners, insisted that at least with the Communists there would be less corruption in the government. They couldn't see why the Communists would want to take revenge on former northerners like us for migrating south twenty-one years ago.

I sat with them as long as I could because I wanted to spend some time with my father. I considered telling him about Dr. Tam's offer, but in the end, I couldn't bring myself to do it. He had become extremely cynical, and he believed solely in Mr. Tri's counsel. My stepmother and sisters could do nothing. Their fates lay squarely with him. Father wanted Hung, Hong, Hoang, and me to escape, because life for us would be very dangerous under the Communist regime. As for himself, Father had decided that he was old enough to die. He had the resigned calm of someone stricken by a terminal illness. He had decided to face the Communists together with his neighbors and Mr. Tri, his most trusted friend.

THAT night of April 28, Anh and I stayed up and watched over our three-year-old son, who was very ill with a high fever. We didn't talk. There was too much to say and nowhere to begin. Our entire life was here in this house, all the years of hard

work, the memories, our families to be left behind. What to bring, what to leave? Too many difficult choices, so we packed nothing, save some warm clothes for the children and one envelope filled with photos. Anh brewed a strong pot of tea and we sat together looking out our second-floor window at the dark street.

It was 7:00 A.M., just after dawn, when the first convoy of military vehicles thundered down Ly Thai To Boulevard in front of our house. Private cars sped after them toward the center of the city. Something was afoot. I had a strong urge to jump on my motorbike and follow them, but I was afraid we might miss Dr. Tam's car. It was nerve-racking to see hordes of people heading toward downtown while we sat still. By 8:00 A.M., I couldn't wait any longer and I took Anh to see the doctor.

A smell of rot permeated Saigon. Trash, clothes, baggage, housewares, blankets, baskets of food, and just about everything else littered the streets. A horse-drawn cart full of luggage and trunks was ditched on the side of the road, the horse gone. A beautiful hardwood chair and sofa were left on the sidewalk. Cars parked crookedly, their doors hanging open. Overnight, the ARVN soldiers had vanished into the alleys and byways, their uniforms and weapons discarded in the gutters. Unlike other surrendering cities, there were no robberies or looting by renegade soldiers or gangsters.

In Dr. Tam's clinic, the head nurse sat alone at the front desk reading a novel. She greeted us with a sad smile and said that Dr. Tam had left with his family at around 3:00 A.M. They had gone to Tan Son Nhat Airport by helicopter and flew out of the country on a civilian plane. I felt the earth drop away from my feet. Anh clutched my arm.

"He promised us," Anh insisted. "He promised to take us with him. There was supposed to be a car. This morning, he said."

"I'm so sorry, Sister Anh. The doctor told me to tell you that he tried, but couldn't negotiate to take anyone else besides his own family. He's very sorry he couldn't help you."

Anh turned to me. "He promised us."



arm around her shoulder and led her out. The nurse  
the door and handed us a small box sealed with tape—  
osit.

AFTER taking Anh home, I was going over to my fa-  
when I saw a helicopter lifting off the MACV headquar-  
ce-busy compound was empty, the main doors closed.  
es were shut, the familiar U.S. MPs gone. Anyone who  
be saved was already inside the main building. On the  
copters were evacuating American personnel and some  
mese who worked for them. Watching them rising away  
I thought I could smell the stink of death seeping into  
as truly over. The Americans weren't just leaving, they  
g, flying, bolting out as fast as possible.

was in the living room drinking tea with a neighbor. He  
ad gone over to my home to tell me that there were fer-  
vacuees out to sea at Ben Bach Dang. Hong was already  
oang had just left. Hien was still at the police academy in  
ther had decided that my stepmother, three sisters, and  
other would stay in Vietnam with him. Escape was too  
or them. I rushed back home, missing Hung by minutes.  
ve to go to the ferries now!" I said to Anh.

n't have a car," she said.

e kids ready. Tell your brother, sister, and mother that if  
o come with us, they must be ready in ten minutes."

o first and find us a place on the ferry. I'll get a car and  
We'll meet you there."

t for you by the pier, at the lamppost next to the banana

THE eight-mile drive to Ben Bach Dang took twice as  
l. Traffic was crazy. I saw half a dozen crashes. Throngs

of people were fleeing to the pier. The military vehicles and cars that  
I had seen early this morning were now parked haphazardly by the  
riverside. The dock was littered with abandoned cars, bicycles, mo-  
torbikes, and luggage. No one even bothered to pick them up. I ar-  
rived just in time to see the last ferry cast off its moorings. The ship  
was dangerously overloaded, every inch of its deck packed. People  
hung onto the railing, calling to friends and relatives who didn't  
make it aboard. Some jumped into the churning water and swam  
after the ship. I pushed my way to the edge of the dock. Hoang was  
on the ferry. I yelled and waved at him, but he didn't see me. I didn't  
see Hung anywhere. If Hoang was on this last ferry, there was little  
chance Hung was on it as well. After telling Hoang about the ferries,  
Hung had wasted more time crossing the city to look for me. My  
heart pounded violently in my chest. What if Hung had gotten into  
an accident on the way back here? I screamed out his name, my voice  
lost in the cacophony. Hung had taken an immense risk trying to  
help his brothers escape. In this desperate panic when everyone was  
solely focused on his own survival, my dear brother Hung did not  
think of himself, but instead jeopardized his last chance of escape to  
save me. I felt nauseous. My single wish then was to see Hung stand-  
ing on that ferry. But it was getting farther and farther from me. I  
kept looking at it until distance fused the passengers into a single  
mass, between us, a stretch of brackish water as dark and forbidding  
as an abyss.

I was drowning on the dock. Another chance to escape had  
slipped through my fingers. If only I hadn't counted on Dr. Tam's  
help. If only he had sent word to us when he knew he couldn't keep  
his promise. If only I had trusted my instincts this morning and fol-  
lowed those cars. If, if, if . . .

I CAME to see Tat. His house was locked. No one was  
home. His neighbor told me that Tat and his brother Han, our Minis-  
try of Transportation insider, had known about the evacuation and



morning with his huge family and relatives—more people. They had boarded one of the first ferries. Tat's blocks from mine. We had seen each other several times the past month. My best friend had left without taking to share the information that would have made a difference for me. I would have had plenty of time to save my family, but also my brothers and in-laws. This was why I had tutored and guided throughout high school. I had seen Tat through the death of his father, performed his duties as though I was a member of his family. When summoned to the draft center, I held his full-time job to keep the school from replacing him. After bribing for another exemption, Tat returned, and I gave him back his entire month's salary that I had earned teaching his son like a brother.

My heart. I couldn't bring myself to tell my wife the

ALL through the darkest night, the most quiet and Saigon ever had, I wrestled with fate. Dawn revealed a book out from my second-story window at the valley. I couldn't eat and hadn't slept in two days. I felt detached, alone.

One day, a convoy of camouflaged trucks roared through the city center. The North Vietnam Army was moving without resistance or a single gunshot. It was chilling, somehow gone bad.

The North entered Saigon in the late morning on a medley of American Jeeps, army trucks, civilian pickups, and sedans. South Vietnam Communist troops, the PAFL, paratroopers, and Saigon's own underground Communists. They wore mismatched uniforms, black pajamas, blue jeans. Pickup trucks with loudspeakers declared

the surrender of the South Vietnam government, announcing that we were now "liberated" from tyranny and capitalism. Cheering packs of Saigon youths followed the convoy with their mopeds and bicycles. People stepped outside timidly. They stood drowsily in front of their homes as if they were just waking up from a long sleep.

Late in the afternoon, my father came riding his creaky bicycle, dressed in a pair of gray slacks and a white shirt. Bent over the handlebars, he looked ghastly thin—as vulnerable as a pauper. I hadn't seen him pedaling his bike for years. I was afraid he was going to fall over. He came to make sure I didn't do something crazy like commit suicide or hike to the Cambodian border. Father knew that sooner or later, the Communist's ax would fall on my neck and he wanted to be there with me when bad things began. He had always said that our family had been extremely blessed compared to all those around us, the countless others who had suffered heartbreaking losses. He believed it was karma. He came to remind me that we had lived with good intentions. He wanted to give me hope.

We climbed to the fourth-story rooftop together. He said he believed Hung had escaped on the ferries along with my cousin Tan and my brothers Hong and Hoang. Father sighed and admitted that his trusted friend and confidant, Mr. Tri, who had advised everyone to stay, had fled without a word of good-bye or warning. I could tell the betrayal wounded him deeply. I felt very sorry for Father. I wanted to comfort him, but it wasn't our way to show weakness or emotion. I was forty years old. Father was an old man entering the last stage of his life. This was the most serene silence we shared, standing shoulder to shoulder in the fading light.

The sun simmered on the skyline. The day was closing, and with it an era. I could feel the city, my city, kneeling down. The vast orange heaven, pillars of smoke, the ragged cityscape. It was a beautiful sight. It was like standing at the helm of a ship. The whole city was sinking.

Father turned and stared at me. The unforgiving years had carved themselves into his gaunt face, deep scars of a life I had known but