

# - BLACK STEEL -

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## PREFACE

Robert Trando translation of “Black Steel” of Dang Chi Binh has been rendered all the more timely by recent news stories concerning treatment of Muslim prisoners by American troops.

“Black Steel” shines a light on the manner in which the North Vietnamese Communists treated their prisoners of war from South Vietnam. It is a horrifying testimonial to men’s inhumanity to men.

Although “the story” is non-fiction, there is no lack of plot or suspense. Once started the reader will want to find out just how the gripping report winds up.

Bob Trando has done us all a great service. He has taken us behind a dark curtain that would otherwise remain impenetrable. It contains a bit of macabre humor that serves to vouch for its authenticity.

Let us hope that the American military will purchase few copies for those in charge of prisoners to whatever stripe. No one wants to mollycoddle enemy prisoners. Even so, there is no justification for treating fellow human beings like animals.

*Neill A. Gardner*

## FOREWORD

I never thought that some day I would sit down to write the story of my life. In the context of my country, following the ebb and flow of life, I have accepted the small work to penetrate the enemy territory and they caught me. Therefore, in any instance I am dumb, a loser, having nothing worthy to tell others. Moreover, a number of close friends always advised me against writing: “You better take care of your life first, you have suffered so much. If you strive writing it, your piece will share the same fate of others, those who wrote on their life in the re-education camps. People would feel as banal without any urge to read. In this country, the young have to go to school and the adults are struggling with daily living. No one would care about your country of origin and its people. You better look for some job, and that is the most useful thing for you”.

Practically, and thinking of my refugee status, I have to recognize the value of the advice they gave me. I rushed head on out to earn my living. During several sleepless nights, my heavy conscience tied knots to my entrails. I cannot find an inner peace with my country and my life, so many contradictory reflections on the birthplace and existence. All those things kept disturbing my inner self. The sounds of the jail bell ringing still haunt me like some invisible clamp squeezing me:

*Hearing the phone ringing,  
I feel jumpy as if it was the morning jail bell.*

The image of the living skeletons moving about in the jail, the cold desolated tombs amid the jungles; the echo of the lengthy sighs interspersed with the mute screams in a never-ending dark night; and the imploring eyes when I bid farewell to freedom, all is still haunting me. I have the conscientious thought that they all are screaming and supplicating me to write their **living testimony**.

I know that even though I am not that strong and talented. I am still much luckier than the unfortunates who are still in prison. That is why I bear the responsibility, the duty – if I may say it that way – to close the eyelids of the fallen for the grand duty, the people and freedom; I must massage the chest of the ones who are clenching their teeth. Their bloody and contused lives were still in the chains and locks of the communist of Ha Noi.

I hope that this memoir will be a small candle among the other big ones illuminating the darkness of the inhumane system of the Viet communist society. If I can lighten my small candle I would feel very happy to have somewhat fulfilled my responsibility toward the promised **living testament**.

As my last words, I only intend to loosen my pool of thread from start to end. For security reason I must change names and places regarding five or seven persons. Otherwise, everything is real, real occurrences, real names still living in country or overseas. For the sake of truth, please forgive me.

***Dang Chi Binh***

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## ONE

### The First Meeting

On a late spring evening, there was so much wind. The rows of tamarind trees on street 16 swayed back and forth to the blast of strong breeze. I watched clumps of dry leaves quivering in succession on the street like swarms of humming golden bees.

It was a weekday evening. The area around the Tan Sa Chau church next to the tomb of Bishop d'Adran is empty. From afar on Truong Minh Ky Street the flickering lights showed through, giving a hazy sight of a half shadowy half-glittering place. Looking from across the church, I saw in a dark corner some people like me expecting a certain person. Then at 8:16 pm, a civilian Jeep came from down street 16 to pull slowly to a stop under the shade of a tamarind tree farther from the church. The shadow of a man stepped down and moved toward the church. Not saying a word, we all understood that he was the person we were expecting. In the darkness, we saw that he was wearing a grey jacket and a soft woolen hat and he walked slowly to Father Khue's office at the end of the church.

About 10 minutes later a small altar boy came out urging us to enter. After he asked Father Khue the permission to use one of the classrooms upstairs, the man turned to us, and with a thick Hue accent said, "Please go up". In complete silence, we just orderly followed him. In the room, there were eight persons, including my uncle. Now I did not understand why my uncle was here. Most of us were young; my uncle was an exception not only due to his age but also due to his stand out like a politician. His presence seemed causing some uneasiness to the Hue man who watched him, half-quizzical and half-hesitant. I was sure that my uncle was aware of the situation and I saw him follow the Hue man to the balcony for some talk. After that, my uncle left.

I remembered clearly that more than a week ago my young brother came home interjecting me and said "Uncle Thuong needs to see you for some urgent thing". Uncle Thuong is a respectable man not only he has high rank in the family but also for his knowledge's and his extensive social relationship. After a few minutes inquiring about my schoolwork, through his pair of bright eyes he suddenly said, "At present, the presidency office is setting up a special training class for about ten persons vouched by VIP's. If that interests you I can refer your candidacy". The months and years toiling in classrooms added to the practical view of real existence had molded in me a certain concept of life and the world: A boy born in this life, growing up, is married, has children, getting old, sick and ... dies. Therefore, starting zilch, he ends up nothing, just becoming a clothes rack and a pot refilled with rice every day. The grandiose and fiery ideals of Nguyen Cong Tru attracted and impregnated my budding soul vibrating with the adventurous mind of a juvenile. I jumped on the opportunity seeking in a hurry the help of my uncle.

The next day he introduced me to Father Khue. The Father asked many questions on my family, my life and several other things regarding my conception of the society, the country and the people. He seemed very interested when my uncle indicated that since childhood I had practiced for many years martial arts. He nodded while watching me and said:” We have here a total young man with intelligence and strong body. I blushed at his remarks. On my way home, I asked my uncle whether he knew anything about the special class. In reality he is just a close friend of the Father having the opportunity to exchange with him ideas on politics, the present events, but as for this class he would not know any more than what I had heard from the Father.

The man from Hue came back, looked at me with sympathy, while opening his black briefcase he raised his eyes looking at us with solemnity and clearly stated. “You have been referred to this special training class. I feel very pleased and confident. As a start you are required to fill your personal dossier”. Handing out the stack of papers, he explained the contents and showed how to fill the blank spaces accordingly. It is no different from any other personal file document. Out of the personal information, there were two additional things:

- input your thinking and expectation,
- Give the names of your three best friends, clearly indicate their age and address.

Nearly one hour later when we had finished our personal file he very carefully emphasized that. (1) Back home you must tell your family and friends that you are ready to go to the training class of the Republican Youth. (2) You must be on standby, I will get in touch with each individual at the indicated address on file, and in any case, if you need to go somewhere you must let your family know of your whereabouts and the time of your return. (3) An intermediary referred you to us. I formally forbid you to say the result of your acceptance. If the intermediary asks, tell him only that you are still waiting.

It was 10:30 pm when we left. My uncle had also left. Father Khue regained his room for prayers. I saluted the Hue man who walked to me saying, “Binh follow me to my car and we shall talk”. I was a little surprised but I realized at once that, might be my uncle or father Khue had given some recommendations in my favor. When we reached street 16, he walked slowly at my side, put intimately his hand on my shoulder, inquiring about my life, my class works, etc. Finally, he said, “I like you very much and feel very comfortable with you. Therefore I want you to introduce a close friend having the same ideal”. I am a very enthusiastic young man. I felt very proud hearing that. I thought right away of Nguyen Vinh Ly, a very close friend going to Chasseloup Laubat School. He just got his Baccalaureate certificate and nurtured the same expectation and dream. After writing down Ly’s address, he again put his hand on my shoulder and said with a very warm and sincere tone, “I’ll get in touch with Ly. Good bye, see you next time”.

On my way home and before going to bed I kept thinking of the scenario that evening in the church of Tan Sa Chau. Though not knowing a thing yet on the training class, all I have seen and heard during the previous evening plunged me deep in the expectation of a tomorrow. The next morning I rushed to Ly’s home in the Dakao area of Bong Bridge. I recounted to Ly all events of the evening and said that I had referred him to the man. Ly was very happy and asked a series of questions to which I did not have the answer, what is this class, where is the class, what do you study, duration, what will you do when you completed? Ly was all joy. Because he trusted me, he just awaited for the Hue man to come. I added, “You deal with him and try to dig further so that you may know better”.

About ten days later Ly informed me of the meeting and that, he had completed his dossier. Ly had inquired on the man’s name but the man just told to call him Huong (it may be a false name). Ly did not know any more than what I was aware of.

We had to wait for more than a month, maybe the time to make the class ready for the training. In addition, they could have sent agents to investigate secretly each one of us. One day Ly rushed to my house very excited, telling me that Mr. Huong asked me to stay at his place tonight. The next morning (April 28), he will pick us up to class and we must bring along clothes for one-week stay. We were all very tense, speculating at length but still having not a single clue of the situation. We slept next to each other in a tight upstairs room: we talk, talk, and finally sank into a sleep awash with dreams on the outcome of the future.

## TWO

### A Risky Notebook ...

The next day it was so beautiful. A few clouds hung leisurely on a perfect light blue sky. At exactly eight am Mr, Huong parked his car at the street corner and walked towards us (that was his normal cautious way). Each of us, one bag in hands, moved towards the car. A simple handshake, a faint smile, we quietly boarded the car. The car headed towards Bach Dang Quay, turned on Truong Minh Giang Street, on to the Tao Dan Garden to pick up two more boys. With Mr. Huong we were five in total, the car was fully loaded. As the car swiftly headed for Cho Lon, no one would have a clear idea of where we were going. When we reached National Highway 4 to My Tho, one of us showing his cunning muttered. "We must be going to the Cay Mai School". As I was ignorant of what they were teaching in Cay Mai, I glanced at him and he explained in low voice "the training for Police Intelligence".

In reality, things did not work out that way. After reaching the Phu Lam crossing the car slowed down, turned into a closed steel gate with number 365 on it. Somebody waiting behind the gate, dressed in the traditional brown "ba-ba" garb rushed to open it. We went straight to a big building, got out of the car and followed Mr. Huong upstairs. There were already nine others there, among them I focused on a man about thirty five to forty years old while our group was made only of the twenty to twenty five age ranges. In the big house there was a large room, maybe the living room, with 14 military beds complete with orderly arranged mosquito nets, blankets and pillows.

One man about thirty years old, wearing glasses, dressed in a light color pajama, went up. Mr Huong introduced him as Mr. Lam, the supervisor who will be here full time with the group and ready to help in any eventuality. Smiling, Mr. Huong shook hands with all of us, and Lam too, was a Central Viet Nam man. Afterwards three more men also dressed in brown uniforms went up and they introduced them to us as the team in charge of the kitchen. They all talked with the Central accent. According to Huong and Lam, this is a group class needing a set of internal rules to ensure stable and smooth functioning. As a start, we must select a nickname for each of us. I will be J. or John, Ly K. or Karl, and we must address each other accordingly. There is strict limitation to go out. If someone asks, you only say that you are a group of students in economics and politics compelled to understand the doctrine of personalism. We borrowed this villa to study during the few months of summer vacation.

The villa is a two story sturdy construction having several rooms, surrounded by a brick wall, with barbed wire. According to the population in the vicinity, it belonged to the French Second Bureau and is now under the Presidency Office. Mr. Huong gave the suggestion to select a group leader. Being all strangers (Mr Huong certainly knew it and would have some purpose in the back of his head), how could we know the character and ability of each other? At the end, we picked the oldest among us. He was Dao. At meals and in the fridge there were always enough soft drinks, beer, lemons and sugar for us to enjoy at our discretion. We felt confident of a hopeful tomorrow. That night I went down to see the supervisor as instructed. He seemed quite impressed about me. As time went by, through the exchanges of thoughts,

he treated me like his young brother. His name is Cao Dinh Tieu, he was a defrocked priest and had volunteered for the Army. I started to have some clearer information about the training class.

The next morning all fourteen of us boarded a fully covered Dodge 4 truck going to Saigon to no precise direction. We arrived at a colossal castle like building having two huge side gates without guards. In the courtyard, there were some geese noisily quacking on a lawn, amid flowers, as peaceful and tranquil as in a private residence? It is villa no. 2 Jean Jacques Rousseau which I later knew was the house of former General Nguyen Van Hinh, the Chief of Staff of the National Armed Forces of the years prior to 1954. They directed us to a room on the right in where there were already Mr. Huong and a few other well-dressed persons. They got busy setting up table, chairs, and flags. The walls and the doors were sound proofed by thick leather cushioning. On one wall were displayed a big national flag and the framed photo of President Ngo above an urn burning incense exhaling aromatic smokes. All fourteen of us were sitting at the bottom row.

At exactly 9 o'clock, one person came in. We stood up at attention while the person went up the platform. After the traditional flag ceremony, the national anthem and the minute of silence, he watched the audience through his thick pair of glasses displaying bright sparkling eyes. With a heavy and thick Hue accent, he gave advice, at time with very compassionate nuance and at other times delivered orders with a stiff voice. "You are to become the future foundation of the country. You must do your utmost to study and perform, to be worthy the love and confidence the President gives you. The President is tied up in a special inspection tour and is unable to be here today to witness the start of this special training class". 30 minutes later, he left.

That afternoon, the assistant director Minh taught the doctrine of personalism. Then it was Mr. Huong's turn to talk on communism. For the first time we saw two big photos 40x60 of Engels and Karl Marx. He quickly brushed the main traits of the communist doctrine going from the First International through the Fifth with Tito of Yugoslavia (of course from the standpoint of the free world). The chief of office of commerce, Mr. Tao taught Economics and Social Matters, and then Mr. Duc disserted on freedom and individuals...It was just a rough sketch of things. Nevertheless, we have to write essays on topics like

- Men and the society
- Communism and men
- Centralized economy versus free enterprise, etc.

We were free to consult all available publications. I must say that we first wondered why we had to study such subject matters. It took me more than a month to comprehend.

Every day we went to class in a fully covered truck. It came to my attention that the several sedan cars in and out of the place had their license plates covered. The people in those cars were mostly foreigners and they seemed very fast and discreet.

During break times, we wandered in the courtyard. However, when we were close to the gate the instructors waived us in, telling us that we could not go out "because they might take your photos". Those things aroused our curiosity. I guessed this might be the place for international spies coming in and out. I wanted to know the real names of the instructors because they could have used false ones. For example, the teacher of personalism, Mr. Minh wears a belt having the initial K. During break times, Mr. Minh often called Duc as Thai. I wanted to know their real names and true jobs. Besides, I jotted down the license numbers of all cars going in or out of this No 2 address. I thought that if I came across with those vehicles anywhere in Saigon, the riders and the places could certainly suggest some spy activity. My weakness was that I recorded all those things on a small notebook that I carried all the time.

In class as well as for my homework very often they commended my pertinent thoughts. Director Huong showed his appreciation. Every week they permitted us to go home, from Saturday noon until Sunday

night. Through daily conversations and activities, I knew that among the 14 young friends many got certificates of Baccalaureate 1 or 2. The majority was children of prominent persons, province chiefs or bureau chiefs. That is why Ly and I felt fully confident for our future. After about a month, I lost my small notebook. I looked for it everywhere and even asked Ly about it. May be, on the bumpy rides of a crowded truck, I had dropped it somewhere. Then I quickly forgot about it.

One evening, after doing away with my homework, I suddenly remembered about the notebook. I opened my suitcase, shuffling through the whole thing; I found a pack of Dai Quang fireworks stuffed in it. It is a special firework pulverizing into tiny scale like bits when exploded. I bought it at Tet and intended to save it until next Tet. Being a stubborn and rousing person, I picked out one piece. In front of Ly and the whole group, and with a lighted up cigarette dangling on my lips, I ignited it, still holding it in my fingers, I watch it slowly burning and exploding to show off my cool and stamina. They all thought that I was just kidding and no one tried to interfere. The explosion was so loud that everyone, including me was all white. The three cooks rushed up from down stairs, bewildered. They all helped us cleaning up the place. It was 10 pm and the supervisor was out of the place. Glancing down to the street at the Phu Lam corner, I saw one MP and two police officers looking up and one of them took off North on his motorbike. I implored the three kitchen men to not reporting what happened to the management.

Everyone went back to bed. I was fully disturbed, thinking that it would not be that simple. I reached out to Ly, whispering that I had the feeling that the situation could bear from the top down. Ly tried to calm me telling me to go back sleeping. I worried so much but very quickly sank into a profound slumber. Suddenly somebody shook me up. It was Cao Dinh Tieu, haggard, no glasses, hair unkempt, saying with his broken voice that I had to get dressed quickly and go down to see Mr. Huong. It was terrible! I jumped up at once. When I was half way downstairs I saw Mr. Huong and Lam, all ruffled, looking like just out of bed. It was 2 am. I looked at them with apprehension. What made me so sorry and shameful was that up to now the whole management and supervisory team always rated me high and appreciated me. I bowed my head. It is certain Mr. Huong had inquired in detail with the cooks. Mr. Tieu did not know a thing, being absent that night. His first question was “Binh, do you know what is today date”? I thought that his question was to get my acknowledgment of my serious mistake, and I just bowed my head, sitting quiet. May be as a 45 years old man he could have sympathized with the senseless impelling of a young man. He went on, “today is the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, the birthday of Karl Marx (that was why I saw the presence of one MP and two policemen out there). He went on, “Binh, do you know that you alarmed so many places, including the Presidential Palace”?

As it was Karl Marx’s birthday, they had increased security to prevent potential increase of communist activities. If it were at any other location the police would have come in to investigate, and seeing that it was only fireworks, they would have written a ticket for a \$20 fine. Here, the explosion came from # 365, which the MP as well as the police was aware that it was a government property. They would not dare enter to search. As the occurrence was under their jurisdiction, they must report to higher and higher echelon and it finally went back down to the school director. The faces of Huong, Minh and Tieu looked like the wrinkled hand of an old woman. I felt that my face was elongated more than half size. Mr. Huong slowly said, “I cannot use my prerogative to hide it, drawing suspicion from others. Tomorrow the police will be here to write report. We shall tell them that we have a group of student of personalism during their summer vacation. One of them had fun making a paper balloon and crushed it in a big pop which gave out such a loud noise in the building”. Mr. Huong asked Mr. Tieu to make the paper balloon and I had to crush it flat. The noise was loud but how could it sound like a real firework?

Now I wondered why Mr. Huong did not tell the truth. How can the police believe him? May be he was trying to protect me and he was doing his best for his own sake (how had he selected a student with such an erratic behavior?). Next morning, a police jeep with three persons including the police chief came in. They displayed a very polite attitude and showed that it was just a routine matter. They would not believe



the whole story but they had to write a full report accordingly on the duty book. Afterwards Mr. Tieu scolded me so much. He had two mistakes, to have let things happen, and he was out of his post. He also frowned saying that as this location became uncovered we might have to move to another address. The stormy time was over; things became calm again! We went on with our class. Anyhow, I felt shameful and avoided to see Mr. Huong and Minh altogether.

More than one week later, at 6 pm, the cook asked me to go down to see the supervisor. When I entered his office, I saw on his desk a bottle of liquor. His face was all red and he seemed very sad. He nodded toward a chair and casually talked:

- Binh, did you have a small notebook?

My heart squeezed, I nodded yes looking at him with apprehensions.

- Binh, do you know where is it now?

I cautiously said I had lost it more than half month ago and was unable to find it.

He suddenly about-faced and staring straight in my eyes, he firmed his voice "Now, it is at the President Office!"

Ha! Why did so many things happen to me! I was disoriented and scared. He added, "Who had introduced and vouched for you to be admitted to this class?"

- Father Mai Ngoc Khue.

He looked so sad and opened himself up:

"I had no young brothers. Since I knew you, I like you so much and treated you like my young brother. I was in a more than two hours meeting. I used several arguments in your favor but there were limits to my prerogatives. They already decided on your fate. They will send you to Military Security. They will work you out and may be torture you. Now go to see Father Khue, may be he can use his reputation to save you". He also asked whether I have some cash for a taxicab ride. Then he gave me \$50 from his wallet. I had the feeling of sitting on a hot fire. I thanked him profusely saying that I had some cash on hand. When I was about to go, he pulled my arm asking, "Why have you recorded those more than ten license plate numbers, and the real names and titles of all the teachers"?

I displayed a long regretful face telling the truth that it was merely due to my curiosity. He rushed me to go and tell the whole truth to the Father. I thought about Dao, our team leader. They put him there to check on our mind. Thinking furthermore about it, I just said how idiot was I for blaming Dao because it was his job. In the following months and years, I realized that in life, one cannot avoid good or bad luck, but I must recognize that **"one's basic character is the foundation of one's life"**. For some hyperactive one, not being afraid of dangers, liking kick and box, hammer and knife, smuggling or politics and revolutions, in general his life would mean above normal difficulties. On the contrary, for those who are afraid of dangers, are hesitant in front of new situations, generally they would have an uneventful and calm existence. That is why having such a character I must expect a causal result, no need to lament!

I saw Father Khue. He used to be so affable, all smiling with me. Now he becomes aloof his trait cold and distant. He said only a few short words "So you did that!" I felt shameful and gloomy. I would not come to see him again unless in real urgency. I returned, all worrisome to #2 Jean Jacques Rousseau again. At the end of the month, we went to class and they told us to wait. We took turn to enter next room for quite a while. I inquired with those who got out first and they all shook their head without saying a word. When Ly was through I asked him and got only a brief answer "get your pay, sign the paper, being told not to say a word to any other persons". I was the last one to go in. I was not at ease in front of Mr. Huong but he pretended not noticing it. I signed a paper, got the \$2,500 for the month (You go to class, they feed you well and you are paid). I signed a typed form, emphasizing that you cannot tell anyone, even your family of the training class. You will bear total responsibility if you violate the agreement. Then I can go home and wait until somebody will pick me up to school.

I went home thinking that the mishap was over but it was not that way. At times, I went to see Ly for information. That day when I came, they told me in the morning somebody picked Ly up. Did they drop me out? To know the truth, I must venture out riding my bike straight to villa #365. It was noon, very quiet. I went upstairs and saw Ly with nine other boys still sleeping. I shook Ly up and we moved down. Ly said, very concerned, that “when Mr. Huong came I had to leave with him at once, having no time to write you any note”. Having inquired about you, I got only a cold answer, “Just think about your own sake”. Seeing that Ly would not know any better, I told him that we would talk during next weekend. I entered Tieu’s office and he told me “you are eliminated and the class now has only ten students”. Then I understood clearly that the month was just for fully assessing and selecting students. Out of team leader Dao who had a special assignment, they eliminated three of us. I felt hopeless! Seeing my sadness Tieu put his hand on my shoulder and gave a few words of comforting consolation: “In spite of the situation, I still want you to be connected on a man to man basis, but do not come here any more”. He gave me his personal address and promised to see each other during weekends.

On my way home, I felt saddened-heart thinking of what Tieu told me. “The whole team of directors commended me highly on my resourcefulness, alertness, etc., but”. In reality if, the strange words **but** and **if** at times make you so happy, it could in other instances give you misery and pains with blood and tears, and even ruin your whole life.

## THREE

### The Intelligence Work ...

Back home I felt distressed during the many rainy days making the streets foggy. I listened to the raindrops on the rooftop, reverberating like mocking laughter. Anyhow, sometimes it sounded like ovation urging the young man to stand up instead of lying down negatively and face the difficult problems ahead. Then I sat up and my sorrow evaporated like clouds disappearing in the faraway horizon.

A few days later, the Joint General Staff issued a communiqué for candidates to the Reserve Officers Class 11. I applied, attaching the certificate of Superior Military Training with the rank of “aspirant” (during that time undergrad high school students must go through that military training). According to what I knew, notwithstanding Can Tho and Hue, they already had more than 1,000 applicants. Owing to the special political situation, this Thu Duc class 11 will admit 800. I must review all my books and I felt fully confident.

One day during my visit to Tieu, he asked whether I was interested in intelligence work. “With your ability, if you like it, I can refer you to the foreign department where I have some friends”. As they had exposed me to some of that thing lately, I accepted the offer. I gave Tieu my address, expecting to meet my contact. Through exchanges of ideas with Cao Dinh Tieu I understood clearly that it was intelligence work done in North Viet Nam. I had then a simplistic view of things. Fundamentally, I am not afraid of dangers and had always nurtured the intention to do something useful in this life even though I was not quite sure of what it would be. My anti communism was still dormant, and I did not comprehend why a young Viet must go to the North communist area to fight them. The Southern leadership lacked strength to provide good teaching to young school kids on the problems of communism.

The Thu Duc entrance examination came. I did well due to the two math problems, geometry and algebra which I had done before while with teacher Phu at Hung Dao School. As for the Viet essay, I felt quite comfortable because I always had high marks at school. While waiting for the result, I still had to be concerned with other matters. About ten days later one man, thirty-five years old, came to see me. He was a Central man! Why there were so many Central men up there? He was in civilian dress and

introduced himself as Ngoc Can, referred by Lam (the false name of Cao Dinh Tieu). “This is my first contact with you and we shall exchange our views”. The discussions were about points of view, expectation, responsibilities of a young man towards the people and the country. After about two hours, Ngoc Can said he would be back another time.

He came two or three more times and brought an identification paper for me to fill up. Compared to the paper at Father Khue Church this time there were a few more details. Additionally, I must give the names of five close friends. Upon leaving, he looked at me with compassion saying, “While waiting for the decision from higher authority, as I will have some free time, let us go out together”. I agreed and we went sitting at the riverbank or having drinks in some places. One day he came on his Lambretta scooter and took me on the back seat to a few central places of Saigon. He talked of different subjects. One time, while going he suddenly said. “I forgot, I have some business in the Khanh Hoi area”. When we were there, he went into a narrow alley with many left and right crossways. He entered a house for about 5 minutes. On our way back to Saigon, we stopped by Thanh The for a drink. While both of us with glasses in hands, his hat suddenly slid down to the floor. He watched me and I did the same, still holding our glasses. I went on speaking, leisurely extinguished my cigarette and picked up his hat. His hat was already on the floor, there was no need to rush and I just calmly did what I was doing.

I was not aware that he was testing my cool. The second time I fully knew it. We were eating, he poured some beer and by inattention, he put his half-full bottle on the edge of his towel. Suddenly he picked up the towel and the beer bottle flipped. I quickly grabbed it. Another occasion while we sat at Hoa Hung, he suddenly remembered of something and told me. “Binh, I need some help. I stay here and please take my scooter to the Cong Hoa swimming pool to buy for me five packs of Pall Mall and one pack of Capstan. They sell it behind the entrance gate”. I thought it illogical. From Hoa Hung on to Ong Ta market there were so many stores, why do you have to go to the Cong Hoa swimming pool? However, I did what he told me.

Going back, looking preoccupied he asked me “Binh, will you be free tomorrow”? I watched him cautiously and said, “I do not know yet but if you need something, just tell me”. He pulled from his pocket a sealed envelope which was left blank, handed it to me, saying expressly “Binh, take your Solex and deliver this envelope to the place at the Cau Cong market where we had been the other day”. More than half month went by; no one would pay attention anymore to it. However, due to my keen mind I remembered it. That morning I saw Mr. Can go into the house. Thinking that Mr. Can is with intelligence, that house must have some connection with it. At least its owner could be very close to his private life and that is why I remembered it. I did the errand without any difficulty. To sum it up, I was tested several times and I remembered only 4 instances, (1) my cool, (2) my strict execution of instructions, (3) my good memory, (4) my fast and accurate reflex in action. As for buying cigarette, if he wanted to check on it, all he would do is inquiring with the vendor at the swimming pool.

The few checks were not enough to judge the abilities of a person. There will be many more proofs during the training and confirmation. Every few other days Can came and took me out. Until one day, he very friendly told me, “I shall be very busy, so please stay home waiting”

## **FOUR**

### **My Fate**

I lay down and waited at home. Each day I got my books out to study so that this year, at all cost, I will get my Baccalaureate one. I had failed twice due to my immaturity, lacking determination and patience. I

paid the price. I remembered that the partition of the country and the necessity of life had interrupted my school when I emigrated south.

I was a good jeweler when I lived on Silver Street in Hanoi. Down here, with help of my family and relatives I opened jewelry store Bao Tin in Cay Diep market in 1956. My customers were soldiers of the Quang Trung Training Center and the inhabitants of neighboring villages. After about a year, business flourished though the young owner was only nineteen (my parents and siblings lived under the same roof). Money was so easy. From time to time, some friends from Saigon stopped by and talked of school, teachers and social life. Through my very young head, I looked at life very simplistically. Then I fell into the same common mistake of looking down on what you have to aim up to what you do not yet have. It means that it gradually led me to ponder the role of men in the society. My thoughts were so raw. The society and men were continually progressing. Therefore as a young man living in the period, you must have certain knowledge to understand, at least superficially, all fields of your time.

Let us use education as a measurement tool. During the year 50's the level of junior high would be enough. In the 60's one must get a Baccalaureate degree because senior high would be out of round with the general progress of the society at large. For the 70's if one could not meet those requirements, you would be unable to understand what happened around you. Therefore, what does money mean to me while my mind always churned about the country and the world? Moreover, you have to know some famous sights of the world. Would I have to live such a humble eventless life? From those crazy and naïve thoughts, I decided to close my business. My parents and relatives lavishly praised me so much. They now put all the blame on me. I naively thought that being a young man I have to focus on school first and then go traveling to know the world. Wait until you will be 30 or 40 to open that jewelry store. Life is not so simple like what was in the mind of a just grown up young man. Then I went to the student refugee's camp of Phu Tho in Cho Lon (Camp Pavie la Mothe) and pursued my study. (So many souvenirs and friends in that camp, after thirty years I do not know now the fate of so many of them).

I studied hard at home. I had waited for Mr. Can for three or four months and lost my interest in foreign intelligence. I thought that if Thu Duc came first, I would go military. At the end of 1960, I received the call of Thu Duc and went to Cong Hoa hospital for my physical. They admitted me and I spent more than one week in there with new people and new life of a military career. All at a sudden, the commanding office summoned me. I worried but, right after stepping into the office, the sight of Mr. Can in a chair and staring at me gave me a big surprise. Can was in military uniform with the rank of Captain. Perhaps he made special arrangements and took me to another room. As soon as he sat down, he frowned at me and with a sarcastic voice he said: "Why you went to Thu Duc? It's impossible!" He repeated it over and over "it is impossible"! I felt uneasy and answered, "I awaited for you too long. Besides I thought that going to Thu Duc is also for the service of the people and the country". He frenetically waived his hand and spoke at length, "It is not possible! You cannot act that childish! Many people can go to Thu Duc, but for this business, they did not select everyone! Do you know that for more than four months so many persons were involved in it? They made the whole plan, secured the location, and everything was ready. The Presidency had given orders to take you back at all cost".

I was very distressed, not knowing how to answer correctly. Personally, I also like the military career. Finally, I said "Let me go military, it would be all the same". His eyes wide opened, he watched me surprised by my refusal, showing his dissatisfaction and annoyance. Then his eyes mellowed and with an open mind, he said, "So. You want ranks; you will get it in Saigon, it will be like in the Army". I believed that if he softened his attitude it was because he was afraid to foul up the plan and to lose face with his superior. I did not know how he managed, I had to follow him back right away to Saigon. I bid farewell to all new friends lying that I had to go home immediately "for a dying father". Afterwards, through the many months and years of sufferance's and pains, it came to my mind that, if (that horrible if) I were determined to stay with Thu Duc, I would have changed my life completely! That was my destiny.

## FIVE

### Intelligence Training

That evening back to the Capital City, seeing all the city colors, my heart filled with a quasi emptiness, vaguely thinking of so many turns in life. While I let my mind wander in bewilderment, the car stopped at a corner of Vo Tanh Street. Can give me a set of keys. He says that this is the key to room 8 of third floor, Nguyen Van Trang Street. Before leaving, he insisted that I refrain from going home and he will come in the morning for some talk. After some moment, I found the room in where there was a transistor radio and some foreign and local publications. The next day Can came. Roughly, he emphasized that I would play the role of a student of Letters of a well off family emigrating from north to central Viet Nam and presently in Saigon for school. That was vis-à-vis anyone, including the building manager. As far as for my family he advised me to go home only once or twice a month. I should tell them that they discovered my heart problem and transferred me to social work training for a certain time. I should seldom go down town, just for meals. There would be weekend breaks for Saturdays and Sundays.

I will be paid \$2,500 a month during training (the same as when I was in two Jean Jacques Rousseau). At first, Can brought in books and documents to train me. He explained on the secret organizations, their leadership by an individual, a team or a nation. He stressed the definition of friends and foes. Friends are those belonging to the same organization. Otherwise, everybody should be enemies, even your parents, spouse and children, your siblings, friends and other organizations such as police, security, Military security, etc. I wondered about that. Can explained that there are so many twists in intelligence work. In war or peace, there is antagonism between two countries or two groups of countries. Each side employs plenty of agents and assigns them everywhere and in any fields. They could even sometimes penetrate the central government. Their roles are diverse in nature but in general, their common goals are to search and listen to discover in advance the purpose, aims and deceits of one country against the other to counter, take advantage of or liquidate as necessary. Thus, it is very important for an intelligence agent to know the other side agents and most specially the secret ones.

The free world opposed the communist system. Can gave the example of an agent trained to secretly go into the enemy's territory in a special mission, the sabotage of a weapons production plant for example. He is a happy married man. They trained him to not saying anything to anyone, even his wife. Having to get out of home days or nights, his wife becomes suspicious. He tells her all kinds of lies. Thinking that he is changing heart, she makes his life miserable. As they are married a long time, he thinks that by telling her the truth she would not harm him. Besides, she is not a communist agent, is she not? He decides to tell her everything stressing that it is top-secret she must keep her mouth shut. His wife pays a visit to her mother. The old woman is very concerned with her son-in-law's strange behavior. She says you had better watch, he might have an affair. The daughter thinks that mom would not harm us and she could not be communist. Then one day she tells her the truth. She did not forget to say, "Mommy, it is a top secret, don't tell any body". The mother has a best friend who one day inquired about her son-in-law. She feels so proud boasting with her friend that her son-in-law is working in some project at the presidential office. And so on, some day or at some place the counter spy would have smelled things and found out the work and activity of that not so discreet agent. If the latter moves to the other side territory he would end up either be killed or jailed for a long time.

Therefore, the failure started with the wife. We judged the results regardless of the reasons. Whether it was the efficient counter action of the enemy or the weakness of our agent who failed to do it, it would not matter. The result is it was a fiasco. Through the preceding example, your wife is like your enemy. I remembered having watched movies on espionage during World War I and II in which famous agents like

Z-28, etc, trained in the outstanding school of espionage like the Japanese Black Dragon, the German Gestapo, the CIA or the Russian KGB. They were fast draws, rode speedy horses, piloted airplanes or zipped in fast cars with top-notch skill. I was so childish! With the principle of secrecy and compartmentalization, there is no public school training spies. The real things are not like in novels or movies.

Back to Ngoc Can, he explained to me the various types of personnel. We have security guards, middle agents, liaison men, public or semi public agents, the double agents, etc. He was with me daily for about four months. One day, end of April 1960, he came with another person. The man was tall, big and full of stamina. Can looked at the big man and me. He half-introduced and half-recommended. "I will be busy with other things. Mr. Phan here is also from the directorate and he will take over to take care of you". I shook Phan's hand and watched him. Right from the beginning and through our conversations I found in him a likeable and open person. He is a Southerner.

Just Phan and I now, through his eyes and the expressions on his face he seemed to sympathize with me. As from my initial observations, he was a pleasant and broad-minded individual. I had the feeling of having known him for quite a while. He walked to my bookcase, looked at a few items and said: "From today on I will mold and train you Binh". Then he sat down facing me, his voice was so intimate and considerate: "Don't you know Binh that I have heard at the directorate that you are a new recruit having plenty of potentials. I had tried to look at your file but it was not possible. They had better given you another assignment because it would be too much waste in this job. (I had to say that at the time, I did not fully understand the meaning of his statement and I had to wait until I was up north to get it). I shall discuss it with Binh later. Now, you have to study, do research, but it would not be suitable to be in this location too long. Tomorrow, I shall take you to Ky Dong".

In the new place, I continued learning the secret messages, the methods of writing those messages, the secret codes, the personal security and missions, the leaving in dead messages boxes, the covers, propaganda and counter propaganda, how to gather and dig information, principle of compartmentalization, valuation of information. We became closer to each other as days went by. We called each other by first names and opened up our own selves. I knew that Phan had 15 years of experiences and had worked in many years for the French Second Bureau. A communist agent attempted to kill him in Can Tho in 1952. He fired at him from 25 meters and he aimed at his heart. Phan showed me the scar under a pricey cigarettes box in his shirt pocket that saved him. They arrested the man, but Phan saved him from jail and converted him by his magnanimity into a fully devoted and efficient help. In principle, Phan could not have told me those things and specially let me know his private life. Being a Southerner, he is more communicative than the Centrist or the Northerner.

One day at the start of October 1960 Phan told me that now the communist are setting up a front towards the formation of a provisional government. I will make you into a student discontented with the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. You will continue going to classes, stirring up some demonstration to connect with the real communist within the students. Then the authority will surround and hunt and you will break to the resistance zone. Phan wanted my input. I know that it would not be as dangerous as going North. I was not concerned with the level of danger. The thing that strokes my mind was whether it will be as exciting. Therefore, I would leave it to higher authority. Perhaps I did not give a clear-cut response, or there had been changes from the directorate, Phan dropped the subject once for all.

Every day Phan still helped my study and we moved to Ong Tho building. I still reviewed my books for my Baccalaureate 1 to which Phan highly encouraged me. One day he introduced two Americans Brown and Dale to train me in additional matters. Both were dressed in civilian garb, Brown had prescription glasses. They were often together. From now on I had three persons taking turn to teach me the communication equipment, how to follow and to foil being followed, the recruitment and training of

personnel, weapons and land mines, survival method at sea and in jungles, psycho-analysis and determination of ability of each type in the society, the technique of a secret action network. I had a hard time. Phan often did the translation because I could write or read English a bit but talks were a big problem and there were so many technical words.

The communists always tried to con overseas graduates back home for the rebuilding of the country. Therefore, the directorate would give me a scholarship to study electricity or chemistry in Hong Kong or Singapore. Upon graduation, communist agents would contact me. I would follow them back to North Viet Nam as fitting and start working for Saigon. Seeing that it would be too long, may be taking about ten or twelve years I was not so enthusiastic. I did not even think of the opportunity to go overseas and get a diploma. Phan saw my indifference and dropped it off all together.

## **SIX**

### **Mission “Columbus”**

Time flies, we were already in August, the very sunny month of Saigon. I moved to 62 Tran Hung Dao. It was a large apartment with two rooms having all amenities of a rental for foreigners. This is the time to get ready to go to Hanoi.

#### **My mission in Hanoi:**

Mission code name: COLUMBUS

My code name: X20

Duration: short, 25 days

#### **Main goals:**

Deliver document X to Z5 (Hoang Dinh Tho)

Deliver document M to a person (according to convention)

Deliver three blood letters of Father Hoang Quynh to Fathers A, B and C.

Recruiting and training agents

#### **Auxiliary goals:**

Follow up with your maximum ability and condition the following,

6 Cau Go Street, 1 Citadel Street and 28 Sugar Street.

Mig's 15, 19,

Politics, cultural, economics and the military, etc. Assess the general thinking of the people, the cadres and the military.

#### **The covers:**

Twelveth grade student of Vinh Linh going to Hanoi for heart problem,

Black market man,

Carrying letter for Nun Dam Huong of Phuoc Hai Pagoda to Monk Tue Chieu and Tham Hoang Tin,

Documenting Capital Division 308 under the command of Brigadier Vuong Thua Vu.

#### **The preparation:**

A yearlong period up to April 1962 of minute preparations inventing all imaginable eventualities.

Have practice sessions, with Brown, Dale and Phan. We always tried to work it out along the motto “the more you study and practice during the preparatory time, the smoother and wider the way into enemy’s territory.

### **Details of the whole plan:**

Since I worked for the directorate, they assigned to me code name X20. For operation COLUMBUS, I still keep that code name,

My main job was to deliver document X to Z-5 Hoang Dinh Tho. They gave me a 4x6 photo of Hoang Dinh Tho for viewing in a week so that I was fully familiar with his face and had it recorded in my mind. Hoang Dinh Tho was then Doctor in internal medicine at Phu Doan Hospital, which changed to Viet-German Hospital. When in Hanoi they gave me a reference paper for heart test and I had to seek the opportunity to give document X to Dr. Tho. The code words will be, **“Doctor please treating my heart at a beat of one hundred twenty”**, exactly 12 words. His answer should be, **“I only treat your heart beat at one hundred thirty”**, only ten words. Document X: wrapped under waterproof-black nylon, 2mm thick, 4cm long and 2cm wide, they did not authorize me to know the content. If Hoang Dinh Tho does not work there any more, I had to destroy the document.

Document M delivered according to preset conventions.

Day and time: from 8 to 10 am, on the 16<sup>th</sup> or the 18<sup>th</sup> as occurred.

Location: On the The Huc wood bridge of Ngoc Son Temple, Hoan Kiem Lake.

I will wear blue trousers, white shirt with sleeves rolled up, a pair of Thai sandals and the blue worker hat. I will hold in my hands a People Army newspaper.

The counterpart will wear grey kaki pants, brown shirt, Binh Tri Thien sandals holding three notebooks. Upon seeing whomever on the specified day and time on the The Huc Bridge, I have to make sure that he/she sees me and then from my newspaper folded once I must fold it again twice into eight parts. The counterpart will answer by changing the three notebooks from one hand to the other (always be at a distance of at least 10 meters). Then I will keep moving to a convenient spot in a public garden for example, to a public bench at a certain distance (about 50 m) so that he/she can easily watch me. I shall sit down leisurely on the bench, open the newspaper on my lap to read and then, wait until he/she sees me scratch my elbow with one finger pointed at the drop spot. Scratching means that you had dropped the document off. The drop spot would be a crack or a corner that normal eyes would not see but is still convenient for the counterpart to retrieve.

Document M: sealed under waterproof brown nylon, thick 3mm, long 4cm and 3cm wide I have to repeat it repeatedly, practice at length the conventions and the code words to the extent that after 25 years I still remember it.

I used to go out with Phan (according to the regulation they do not want to see me with him but being a new man in the organization, how can I really know it. It was Phan’s mistake). Phan told me that there were two groups in the organization:

Group (a) with the director and the majority had the view of intelligence work in the conservatively rigid method. Take an example, you want to send somebody out to buy one kilo of apples. You instruct him to use his bike, go carefully on the right side, pay attention at cross roads, use arm to signal turning. There you lock your bike, go in to select what kind of apples, how much to pay, etc...

Group (b) under the deputy and a few other persons including Phan, conceived that intelligence work should be lively and encouraging the agents to be creative and flexible in all situations. Using the same example of apples, you just tell him to buy good fruit and be careful on the street. Use his head to buy the best apples at a good price.

According to me, each method has its cons and pros. Therefore, you should pick up the best in the mix to use regardless of where they come from. That was my opinion and I did not dare sharing it with Phan. I asked which one of two methods proved best, to which Phan answered, “The end justifies the means”. During his training Phan had been quite superficial and I often had to seek further explanation. On the contrary, with Can and later on, with Hoang Cong An we went into too many boring details. With Brown and Dale, being CIA men but due to my English limitation I was not quite clear. Through my



observations of their behavior and attitude, I saw that they were right on many things. With situations needing details, they would dig into minute things and would become quite sketchy on unnecessary situations. During the preparation, they provided me a small transistor radio with earplugs. They authorized me to listen to Hanoi broadcast. They gave me all kinds of publications from North Viet Nam so that I would be fully used to the life and the language up there. Around mid September 1961 Phan introduced a spectacled man named Hoang Cong An who will take over from Phan being away from Saigon in a special assignment. An was a central man. The training and my experiences at No. 2 Jean Jacques Rousseau showed me that it is not good to be curious on what did not concern you. I did not even bother knowing about the real names of the instructors and their jobs during their two years with me. From where they came and where did they go to was no concern to me.

Deliver Father Hoang Quynh's letters. It is a very important and complex mission. It had a primordial impact on the northern Christianity. That is why they brought in Hoang Cong An who had been a defrocked priest. I had to deliver the letters to Father A at church X in Hanoi, Father B at church Y in Hanoi and to Father C, at church Y in Hanoi. They showed me three typed documents on the three Fathers, their characters, including their 4X6 photos.

About Father A, he was graduated Ph.D. in France, resourceful, determined and having clear-cut anti communist ideal. Having good reputation with his followers, bound by a past promise with Father Quynh, he now also assumed responsibility at Phuc Xa Thuong and Phuc Xa Ha. The instructions were clear. If after reading Father Quynh's letter, he agrees to cooperate with the free world it would be a total success. Then I shall lie low in a secured area of the Church at the Father's discretion. Everyday, I shall conduct his basic intelligence training and should be able to assess his spirit, ability and his condition, give him the code word and code object which was half of a one north Vietnam bill while the other half will be taken back home. Afterwards if some one gives the right code word and shows the code object to the Father, that one will be the real Saigon man providing him necessary things and instructions for his next assignment.

If the Father, though still anti-communist, would not agree to directly work for Saigon, then seek his introduction to a most confident person having initiative and idealism. Then I will be directly involved with the man and give training as the conditions and situation dictated. In case it would not be suitable, lie low and have the Father assistance to conduct recruiting and training for ten days. There were no limitations on the ages and the sex of the recruits. If they worked in the enemy's administration, it would be for the best. Know their situation, their family relationship, and their living conditions; assess precise circumstances before giving them the two following liaison addresses: In France, Paul Lang, 14 Rue du Four, Paris Sixieme, France. Give them the full details, Paul Lang is 42, mixed blood, wife is also mixed blood and named Marie Nguyen, prior to 1954 lived in Saigon, returned to France aboard the Esperance, presently owner of a big Laundromat at the same address. Second address is in Cambodia, Peck Kim San and Maternity Sokkha at 105 Monivong Street, Phnom Penh. Peck Kim San now 28 works for the Maternity. His wife is Vietnamese with Cambodian citizenship and they have one 4 years old boy. They must have good reason, like social or family relationship to send letters now and then. Sometime later, they could insert questions of security character such as: (1) to the question "how are you today"? If the reply is "we are OK," it means they watched us. In case the answer is we do not feel good then every thing is OK. (2) "Do you like Pham Duy music" yes means they watched and no stands for clear. (3) "Do you wish to have enough money to buy a new bicycle"? No means clear.(4) "do you like chicken"? Yes means being watched and no is for clear.(5) "do you feel at ease with life in the socialist system"? Easy means watched and no is clear.

Besides there are two conventions for letters to the precedent addresses to let Saigon know if the security forced you to write it. (1) If at the heading when you write the date write "day 20 Oct. 1963" it shows they forced you. Just "20 Oct. 1960" is a free writing. (2) In any case, if the year does not show any stop

point, they watched you and in case you use a stop point then things are clear. You must make sure that the recruits know by heart the conventions; logical is for being watched and illogical is clear. There are so many unknown conventions and tricks that one must master and avoid confusion.

Father B. He is a quiet man, hard working and always trying to finish his task even in case of difficulty. He has management ability and is more with religion than social affairs. The Directorate says that Father B is still at church Y. Father C, still at church Y, is rather old but still has high spirit. The Christians of Hanoi and the Vietnamese clergy well respected him. According to the directorate, Father A should be our main target. If he is not anymore at church X, or for any reason he refuses to cooperate then go to Father B. Otherwise, go to Father C. According to Hoang Cong An, just like Father Hoang Quynh they are all good priests in the service of God and the believers. They also were very close to the Father and have made vows with him when he went South with his flock. Anyhow, it had been 8 years under the communist rule; no one would know how their morale is. Besides their health is also a concern.

I was thinking and rethinking very intensively. Seeing that this is a big and important task requiring a much more capable person, I told An about it. He said, "The organization had thought about it very fully, especially from the standpoint of religion. No one could be given this mission which, if failed would give the communists reasons to squeeze more and more on Christians and the clergy. Moreover, several sides of the situation were involved; especially when the scene of action was in the communist capital of Hanoi. Be confident Binh, the directorate had weighed and searched thoroughly and finally decided on you. I still think to myself that capable men would not dare to go since there were plenty of dangers ahead. They had to pick me among the pack of daredevils. However, I was "on the tiger's back". I had to kick him on, whatever the outcome!

One day Hoang Cong An told me that Father Hoang Quynh wanted to see me before he wrote the letters. As we had the approval from higher headquarters, we shall go together in the morning at 9am to Binh An in the Binh Xuyen side. I remembered that long ago, when I was a little boy I used to go with the Father who was the leader of the Dinh Bo Linh Group to many places for martial arts exhibition under his direction. Now that I had grown up, for sure he would not recognize me. We went together to Binh An and we waited in the guest room. After a short while, the Father came in. He had changed so much after 10 years, his face all wrinkled, his hair now with white strands. However, he is still the same agile man whom I have known before. He smiled and shook our hands. He asked me so many questions on my school and family. I refrained from talking of Dinh Bo Linh Group though I almost could not refrain from doing so.

During more than one hour talking, he often looked at me saying, "How brave you are"! When he went with us to the door, he said. "I admire you. Before you go, I would like to have lunch with you to show my admiration when bidding farewell to a knight in the spirit of Pham Hong Thai. Will you"? I did not answer him right away and glanced at An who said, "I acknowledge your words. I shall consult with my superior and call you right away". On the way home An told me that it is not certain the headquarters would agree to it because you still have so many things to do. I knew that the Father's reputation was outstanding. He had at one time made Ho Chi Minh lost face when he was vice-chairman of the Inter Faith anti Communist Front chaired by Monk Tue Chieu, when tricky Ho kneeled down in front of Bishop Le Huu Tu for baptism

About recruiting and training, if due to their enthusiasm and national ideal they would agree to, I will conduct their training. Otherwise, I will ask them to introduce the reliable persons for me to recruit and train. It would not be too difficult. At first, I shall teach the basics of the job. The hard stuff was to find out the character and abilities of each and uncover their strength and weakness. Though Dale, Brown and An trained me for nearly two years, they still stressed that the human character is very complex and diverse. In general, you can have three types: (a) the shallow ones showing right away their feeling, fun

or sadness. You do not have to be concerned much of this type. (b) For the quiet, introvert who never showed their opinion, you must be careful, always be on your guard and ready to react defensively. Still this group is not as dangerous as the last one. (c) They always smile showing friendliness and ready to share or help in case. As soon as they get your confidence, they could give a surprise stab to your heart. They make you subjective and harm you. In conclusion, you must have keen and fast observations. Regardless of what they say and how they appear, you must recognize the real person behind that façade. The recruiter must know the extent of their ability, how wrong or right they are.

## SEVEN

### Intelligence Stories

I had to apply my total ability and energy to the mission. Besides, I must pay attention to the following events while moving around in Hanoi. Houses number 6 Cau Go Street, number 1 Citadel and number 27 Sugar Street where they train spies sent to South Viet Nam. While under training in the South, the directorate informed me on two typical cases as lessons to draw experiences from

Case 1. Around 1957 through information from the people, the South intelligence had set up traps and caught a top agent of the North. After the yearlong work on him using all the technical capability, we surrendered to his stubbornness. If the case were with Northern security, the person would be in jail regardless of what he said, for a long time until he becomes old and rejoin his ancestors. However, we had a different policy. We can incarcerate him only for a duration according to the law. (That was the cases of Nguyen Huu Tho and Nguyen Thi Binh). The man kept maintaining his innocence. We had used all means available, threats, torture, cons, incentives, etc., but to no avail. It was a very difficult problem for the directorate. Finally, the boss offered a plan of execution under his total responsibility. One night of late winter, it rained so hard and it was cold in Hue. A military convoy went out of the central prison led by a Dodge 4 truck having on the front seat the driver, a first lieutenant and one sergeant. The intelligence director was the sergeant. The back seat had four handcuffed prisoners and two armed escorts. The following truck had a half well armed platoon with two second-lieutenants. The convoy was traveling gingerly South when at about 11pm machine guns cracked and ahead on the highway was a felled tree blocking it. The soldiers jumped down, guns pointed out in a firefight. The enemy completely surrounded them. Their commander ordered everyone down, took all dossiers, disarmed them and got the key to open the handcuffs for the four prisoners. He harangued, "You are with the wrong side, cooperating with the imperialist Americans against the people. I am not going to kill you all. The generosity of the party dictates me to reeducate you and free you so that you will repent and serve the people. The two officers having blood-debts with the people will be taken to our area for judgment". On a sudden the stubborn communist spy stood up, taking out from the seam of his shirt and showed to the commander a 4cm square piece of red cloth displaying two yellow stars under a white stripe. He said, "Comrades, I am the chief of K-10 Saigon of Block R; you had an unexpected successful operation with such a miraculous result. Tie the hands of that sergeant who is the director of intelligence". The men were all happy. Their commander ordered anyone to board the vehicles heading back to the city of the Perfume River.

Case 2. Things happened in 1959 at house number 126 Or 128, Phan Dinh Phung Street, Saigon. The house had a seldom-opened iron gate. The owner was a widow about 60 having a brother living with her until after graduation he went to work in the presidential office. No one knew what kind of job he had but he was very close to Ngo Dinh Nhu. They gave him a villa on Cong Ly Street conveniently close to the Palace. So the house became quieter and more desolate. Mrs. Han had only a servant who was also a relative. Everybody around knew perfectly her situation, that she was a good mannered woman eating a meatless diet, going regularly to the pagodas and doing charity. Her husband and she were from a well

off family in Hue. They had only a little son when the big changes came in 1945 and the Viet Minh took control. Being fully aware that the Viet Minh was a group of hoodlums intolerant with other nationalistic parties her husband refused to join the alliance government of the tricky Ho Chi Minh. They liquidated him. During the troubled period with the Japanese, Chinese, French, English and Viet Minh, the population was uprooted and disseminated to all corners. She lost her son who was the unique consolation of her life. She went to Saigon with her brother.

She was still very wealthy but lacked the homeliness of a family. She spent all the money searching the son to no avail. For 14 years, her sorrow kept building up in the depth of her heart and the communist was aware of it, thinking that she would be a perfect case to penetrate the Southern Government. They found and trained a fitting young man making him into a perfect person to play the role of the lost son with the same voice and feature. At the front of Mrs. Han's always closed door, on the side walk a poor woman set up her bench to sell bananas, candies and teas to the rickshaw drivers. The spy was a good-looking young man 19-20 years of age, poorly dressed, healthy but always displaying on his face hints of nostalgic sadness. Everyday after hard work with his cycle, he always stopped at the stall eating a banana or sipping a cup of tea, all quiet and thoughtful. The woman seemed compassionate for a young hardworking man and sometimes asked him a few questions, At first it was vague inquiries on his day income, the weather, his where about, his lateness to come, etc,.. Then gradually she asked about his origin, parents and so forth. He did not want to talk of his family and unfortunate life. Nevertheless, seeing that she was a warm-hearted woman he gradually opened up. He did not know who his parents were. A family adopted him when he was 4-5 years old. At age 9-10, he became servant for many families. Then he drifted to work strenuously in the rubber plantations and finally found his way to Saigon driving rickshaws to make his living. The vendor woman knowing the story of the owner was suspicious and asked further. "Would you remember how your parents were"? His vague reply, "seemingly, I was very happy, well dressed and remembered sitting with my dad on a rickshaw pulled by somebody". She wanted to ask some more and the young man looking sad, paid her and moved off.

When she saw the owner of the house, she related to her the story of the young rickshaw driver. Mrs. Han was all disturbed wishing to meet the man at the earliest and told the woman to bring him in as soon as she saw him. The next day and several other days, he did not show up making the woman and Mrs. Han all upset and agitated. More than one week later, on a rainy afternoon the young man dropped by all wet. The woman excitedly asked why he did not come lately, poured him a hot cup of tea and rushed to push the doorbell. Five minutes later, she hastily told the young man, "Please enter for a short while". He shook his head. The woman warmly urged, "Just come in for a short moment, as it is still raining, Mrs. Han would want to say a few words to you". She finally had to hold his hand, almost dragging him in. Upon seeing the young man, the eyes of Mrs. Han displayed all signs of love even though there was nothing yet to show that he is the lost son. Then as for dampening her feelings, she asked with emotion, "Do you have any close relative at present"? He only shook his head. She went on, "do you know how your family was"? Looking very pensive, he said nothing. She again asked, choking her rising emotion, "do you remember riding the rickshaw with your father"? He nodded and she pressed on, "try to remember when you were a young boy, what did you do, what kind of toy did you play"? He waited until Mrs. Han repeated the question then looking out of the window like going back in time to a faraway past he said, "I do not remember things clearly now but it seems to me that my father gave me a top with a very long tip. Mrs. Han's eyes sparkled and she hastily rushed, "any other things"? His reply was, "my father gave me a color book with the picture of a turtle which I colored with a red pencil". The man bent down his head; the room atmosphere seemed tense and expectant. Then he slowly raised his left thumb with a small scar, "one time in the kitchen I played with a knife and cut my thumb bloody making my mother cry".

Not holding it anymore, she rushed to wrap her arms around the man torso sobbing and eyes teary, "Oh my boy"! The man cried and even the tea-vending woman had tears circling her eyelids. Breathless and

about to pass out Mrs. Han could not hold her emotion anymore. She pulls him at her saying “I still keep your top and color book in the drawer of my bed as the only souvenirs from you”. She right away called the brother who, in the joyful family reunion made plan for the future of the nephew. He will help him with his education teach him driving so that he could take his mother to the pagodas. The whole house became so lively. Northern intelligence had instructed the spy to cultivate relationship with Miss Ngan, the server at a coffee joint in Nga Bay. In case the mother and uncle pressed him to have a family, he then would ask the hands of Ngan who also belongs to the Hanoi spy network in Saigon.

Then things did not stay so smooth when the actor had not played his role very perfectly. Mrs. Han believing that the cyclist was her own son gave him a deep affection. Initially he played his role superbly. Anyhow, in the end he slackened and became cool and detached while the mother felt desperate and she talked to her brother. It alerted the Saigon counter espionage and they used the uncle as a screen to investigate and dig further. Nearly one year later they arrested the whole spy organization.

Dale and Brown brought two models of Mig-15 and Mig-19, about 20cm long, very precisely constructed with insignia and markings. They clearly explained the characteristics and abilities of the planes, emphasizing that during my time in Hanoi if I see them in the sky I should report immediately. They also briefed on the insignias and ranks emblems of all branches of the Armed Forces from marshals down to privates, inclusive of the winter uniforms of Red China and North Korea. Besides, while in Hanoi I must watch closely the street scenes, the media and the small units in training. I had to get in touch with all classes of people to evaluate the hearsay on political, economical, cultural, military, social and the general common views of the populace, the cadres and the military.

## **EIGHT**

### **The Covers**

Cover (1). I will be a junior high student in Vinh Linh under the name of Le Viet Hung with the following story. Due to the famine and problems of 1945, my parents had to move from Nam Dinh and settle in hamlet Vinh Quang of Vinh Linh. My father is Le Van Thong and my mother Vu Thi Sang. There are three of you, one sister Le thi Thu and a young brother Le Tuan. I had to memorize the names of Vinh Linh high school principal, the chief and assistant chief of Vinh Linh district and those of Vinh Quang hamlet. I was member of the youth organization and remembered the names of the leader and assistant leader. Besides, I must be aware of a few important events in Vinh Linh and in my hamlet.

I must act logically and naturally based on the above. I am Le Viet Hung having signs of a gradually deteriorating heart problem and obtained the district permit to go to Hanoi for treatment during summer break. I carry all the necessary documents, reference to the hospital, student certificate, military certificate, youth organization paper and the month pass signed by the chief of security of Vinh Linh. I had to study and know by heart this cover so that I will think and act as a real Le Viet Hung. To practice it I will meet for three or four times one man acting as a tough communist authority, at time at Catinat Hotel and some other time at Majestic Hotel. He screamed at me, asked tortuous and tricky questions to ascertain that I give the appropriate and logical answers. I remembered during one last session, while talking leisurely, he introduced himself as Dang living and working for the communist side for many years, (I know that he is now with espionage directorate). He said, “To say the truth, the main thing is not to arouse suspicion. Once they mistrust and squeeze you, you would dig out your father tomb for them if they told you so”. I thought he should not have said that way because it would disturb the morale of an agent ready to venture into the enemy’s territory. The more I think about it the more I realize that our trainers lack finesse, sense of responsibility and the real idealistic motive.

Cover (2). The communist caught and detained you. They did not believe and had proved that you carried faked papers and you were not Le Viet Hung of Vinh Linh, then you shall tell your story as follows. My parents were very poor. I failed several times my examination, felt tired of it but having a daring character and not concerned with dangers, a friend introduced me to Mr. Lan who helped me in my smuggling and black market business. As Lan was an imaginary person, to prevent from being harassed by security I must remember all details of the person to stay consistent. I took a real person for it. He was my uncle, a big and fat man, the owner of an import business in Saigon. Mr. Lan met me at a coffee stall. After several meetings to determine my intention, he went straight into the subject matter. There was a rarity of high quality high priced medicines in the North. To make plenty of money I had to take risks, cross Ben Hai bringing samples to buy and resell to the influential merchants in Hanoi. He gives an advance of \$10,000 cash and pay for all expenses. He will split the profit 50/50. One day Dale introduced Doctor Harry. He is about 40-50. Dr. Harry brought 20 or so bottles of medicine, explaining their uses and characteristics. Until my departure, Dr. Harry will also take care of my health needs and requirements.

Cover (3). The communists would not buy your story or they had proof of your lies and misrepresentations. They proceeded to tortures. When you could not stand it anymore, you will use cover #3 that is still not political in nature yet. All things stay the same, your origin; the features of cover #2, your boring with unsuccessful examinations, your adventurous character are the realities. Here is the difference: Due to social relationship, a friend introduced you to Nun Dam Huong of Phuoc Hai Pagoda, Vuon Chuoi area of Phan Dinh Phung, Saigon. During the French domination in 1945, Nun Dam Huong and Reverend Tue Chieu were students-patriots having the common feeling of disgrace and hate against the French. They set up among the students community in Hanoi secret movements of discontents compelling the images of past revolutionaries Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chu Trinh, Nguyen Thai Hoc, etc, and were in the most wanted list of the French secret service. Moved by the same ideals they fell in love with each other and became married. To avoid French detection they shaved their heads and went into hiding in pagodas, as Monk Tue Chieu in Quan Thanh Temple and Nun Dam Huong in some pagoda and finally in Phuoc Hai Temple in Saigon.

After the Viet Minh takeover in 1945, they started liquidating religious activities. Behind the front of "religious alliance" against the French, they took advantage of the differences between religions to instigate divisions and dissensions, providing fuel to fire up conflicts. Reverend Tue Chieu with Nun Dam Huong secretly connected with the Christians. They found the Alliance Front of Religions against Communism under his Chairmanship and co-chaired by Father Hoang Quynh. Politically the organization was the headache problem for the Viet Minh seeing it as even more dangerous than French Colonialism. They set up traps to lure and catch Monk Tue Chieu and Father Hoang Quynh along with other high-ranking persons of the Front. As Buddhism was not a cohesive organization, they cold bloodedly assassinated Tue Chieu while under pressure from a unified catholic church they did not dare to kill Father Hoang Quynh. As they still needed the support or at least the non-opposition of the Christians, they put the Father under surveillance at Church Lac Dao and let the believers see and feed him.

For Nun Dam Huong, when she got the tragic news of her husband's death, she got his body and buried it hurriedly in secrecy at the Hop Thien Cemetery. She emigrated South with her son after the partition of the country in 1954. She still stayed very active in her speaking tours encouraging the people to struggle against the communist enemy of the nation. Besides, she nurtured the deep wish to build a dignified tomb for her lover and heroic comrade who sacrificed his life to the country and now had departed to another faraway world amid clouds and winds. That is why when she saw me and knew my expectations she was happy and helped me to get false documents to cross into the enemy territory. She will pay me \$100,000 after the mission and give me an advance payment of \$10,000 to help my parents. I shall cross the Ben Hai River, deliver a message to Mr. Tham Hoang Tin, the owner of a pharmacy and the mayor of Hanoi in 1954. The letter will remind Mr. Tin of their friendship and seek his help to build a proper tomb for

Monk Tue Chieu. Hoang Cong An took me to see Nun Dam Huong several times at Phuoc Hai Pagoda to familiarize me with activities in that temple and see the personality of the nun. I also met the son who was 19 and ready to pass his Baccalaureate II.

Cover (4). At the real end, I shall say that my mission is political. Then I use cover (4) which is the last one and stay with it even if they chop my head off or give me a bullet. In this period, I will be tortured, locked up and investigated extensively. They would have concrete proofs of my false testimonies. Then if I cannot any more bear the atrocious tortures, I should use cover (4). I was with the Intelligence Company of Division 7. Being a man inclined to difficult works and fearless of things that most people abhorred, I made friend with Lieutenant Xuong of Military Security. He introduced me to Intelligence and they transferred me to Saigon for training in a rented house in Hamlet Cau Cong of Khanh Hoi (if it was in a hotel or a building the communist would focus on those localities, giving problems to future training classes). Just disclose the logical classes, their duration and sketchy training method so that the enemy would wrongly value the ability of our intelligence. Tell them only of a sole trainer which I had to memorize exactly. In all cases, do not mention about Americans because at the time there were not many Americans in Saigon. The training was especially on military matters. I must monitor the movement of Division 308 of Hanoi under General Vuong Thua Vu, research names and ages of the commanding officers down to company level. I have to know the weapons in use, locations of artillery and tanks, transportation equipment, garrisons' installation with the surrounding terrain and access, activities of training and indoctrination of the soldiers and officers. Their fighting capabilities and morale are also my interest. To get the information I have to make friends with soldiers in the streets of Hanoi. To sum it up I can tell them everything except the real mission.

## **NINE**

### **A Visit to Ben Hai River**

For the COLUMBUS operation, I am required to learn and practice the proper ways to deal with the priests. In the communist ruthless regime, the population is under very tight control. However, the priests were anti communist. They have been through bloody experiences and become very cautious to avoid engaging hastily into dangerous situations. Therefore, as an intelligence agent of Saigon I am required to be composed and impassible, having all abilities to change with the situation as needed. As the priests have social standing and are well educated it is important that I possess good knowledge of several social facets and display a dignified conduct. As I feel lacking the necessary qualities, I am worrisome. I practiced dealing with a few persons acting like the northern priests. Phan, An and those actors finally said, "Binh, you are ready to do it".

I requested to meet somebody who just returned from the North but the directorate did not satisfy my desire. The directorate arranged for me to see the four latest turncoats now in the Gia Dinh Center for Reception of the Ben Hai crossers. I was with An and we pretended to be from the press office of the presidency and gave to the Major in charge an introductory letter. I was there twice, each time I met two persons, each one at a different time. The first day I saw a military man and a Thang Long School senior high teacher. On the second day, it was an interview with a bus driver and a junior high teacher of Thanh Hoa. No one, even the camp commander was aware of our purpose. To distract, we asked simple vague questions and inserted the necessary fitting ones. It gave me good useful understanding for my trip up North.

On a big military map of assembled thick and shiny 40X60 pieces covering the whole wall under the direction of Dale and Brown, I studied for days National Highway I from Vinh Linh to Hanoi, the DMZ and Hanoi city with all minute details, DMZ North and the district of Vinh Linh. As a precaution, if in

case of mishap, they cannot retrieve me, and I must go back on foot, I went to the Ben Hai south bank to watch closely the focal points at the other side with my pair of binoculars. One thing I could not forget is, one time when An and I landed at Phu Bai the person who met us was Huong. We looked at each other astounded. An also wondered why I knew Huong. Since they discharged me from the class, I heard from Ly that Huong lost his director position due to some financial mistakes. When he shook hand with me he only said, "You still look like before, just gaining weight, but still as handsome". He never reminisced on the old stories at #2 J. J. Rousseau. He took us to a Hue Hotel. During our stay here, I was under guard day and night. From then on to almost the end of my life, I always have guards, and it is funny!

Huong drove us to the DMZ. Among the trees in the south side, I saw a few guards dressed in brown garbs displaying a two fingers wide piece of red cloth on the chest at their sentry post. They might have guns under their shirt. From their look and attitude, I understood that Huong is responsible for the body of guards this side of demarcation. I watched the river that is the testimony of our painful history. The water flows leisurely towards Hien Luong Bridge with here and there some bamboo fishing boats working at both side of the river. They could not be laypeople because according to the Geneva accord, the border between the two sides is the middle of the river and the Hien Luong Bridge. For willful reasons or not if they stray to the other side, the guards will arrest them. I walked along the South bank and saw that at some place the river is about 20-30 meters wide. I witnessed busy girls in brown shirts and black pants watering the patches of vegetables and when they saw me, they waived at me smiling from ear to ear. I directed my eyes to the far away North, my heart racing with emotion. Huong told me that the communist forced every one living in the DMZ area to move out and they brought in secret security agents to live and farm like the natives. If you use your binoculars to watch, you will see moving things under the forest and sentinels on top of trees. Moving my slanting view, I saw farther the all mossy Hai Cu Church totally covered by vegetations. I realized the dark life of the Christians wilting in that atheistic society. Huong told me that further in, during dry seasons at some places one could roll up his pants and cross the river. How could such a narrow and shallow waterway separate a nation for so long while our traditional way calls for goodwill and love?

Back to Saigon, I was very close to my departure and I had several urgent things to do. I had to learn the use of a number of travesty products, the infrared light, etc...When in enemy territory I'd come across with thousands of things I had never known before. One day, about in a couple of months Phan gave me a silver ring engraved with the traditional "tho" character. The difference is that inside there was the number 48 stamped bas-relief. Phan urged me to be used to it and to get it inscribed in my head. He also gave me a 6X9 photo of the one-column-temple in Hanoi having on the back the number 1618 penciled at its corner. I remembered the number 1618 as the days I shall deliver document M. One week later Phan took them back and asked whether I had remembered all the features. He said that in the future, at any place and time if somebody shows me that photo, that one would carry the instructions from Saigon to me. One day Dale and Brown came and trained me on the use of the secret pencil, which was the latest intelligence tool unknown to the enemy. It is about 2/3 the size of the graphite of the normal pencil, 6-7cm long, dark grey and having neither odor nor taste. One end has slanted point looking like a nylon thread and it is very useful for spies going into enemy territory. According to Brown and Dale, the communist would pay a million for it. I practiced its use for many days so that its writing would not leave any faint mark on the paper that would then look as smooth and fine as originally. When I was up North, I knew that the thing was still unknown to them. I had hidden it and only destroyed it when the South capitulated in 1975. This is the most convenient and simple to use tool.

**TEN**

## **Selecting A Landing Spot**



Now I must focus on the ways to infiltrate the North and my expected landing spot. From the beginning both Can and Hoang Cong An said that I had to go through a parachute training. However later on, for some reason, they told me that it would be better and safer by sea. Phan said that with the thousand kilometers of coastline having plenty of natural configurations, it would be very difficult for the enemy to provide continual day and night surveillance. Moreover, at present their weak naval forces would not permit them to venture out to the high sea. The directorate recommended me to make the choice myself. That was a very difficult thing for me because I was too young when I was up there. The spot should be a desolate area away from Hanoi, my working location. I picked up Do Son, remembering that for many summers I went to that seashore with friends to swim. After hearing my choice, all three An, Dale and Brown shook their head because it was close to the seaport of Hai Phong which is guarded very tightly by the communists. Thinking intently, I remembered having a camping trip with my school when I was 10 to Con Van. We crossed River Day to a place with many pine trees. Looking at the map, I was able to pinpoint the area, Brown and Dale promised to bring the answer after thorough research. Three days later, they were back saying that it is not a good spot since out in the sea is an alluvium extending 5-6 km out with swampy areas. Besides, under the pines were either present or future agro-communes. I said I rather leave it to the decision of the authority, maybe, a certain spot about 30km from Hanoi and I shall find my way along Highway 1.

A few days later Brown and Dale came pointing on the big map an area further south: "We had studied it carefully, located 30km from what you were familiar with, sandwiched in between District Kim Son of Ninh Binh and district Nga Son of Thanh Hoa". As I was perusing with care on various roadways and points of note on the map, Brown added that it was an area of green forest, having many kilometers of thick reeds as a safe area for rest after the debarkation. I felt somewhat comfortable. Nevertheless, looking at the way to highway 1 I was concerned with a medium size river, I wondered whether there was any bridge. For me a plan would have covered so many aspects. Sometimes, it was prepared in details for the big things it could fail by those minor ones. For example, in this case if there were no bridge and the spy had to look around for the way, they might catch him and all the elaborate preparations for the work in Hanoi would mean nothing. Brown nodded looking at me saying that it was a worthy question. They will give me the answer later.

Just three days later Brown and Dale presented 16 enlarged aerial photos of the area. They show a bridge and various boats on the river and Highway 1 with the rail track to Hanoi. I felt at ease, having confidence on the technical ability of aerial photo unavailable to Hanoi yet and the minute attention of the directorate and the Americans. The closer to the risky day the more anxious I became, especially when I looked at the busy streets of Saigon. I watched the colorful stream of people moving, the rooftops and familiar street corners as a promise to return or saying farewell. I had the mind of a person ready to leave everything behind and go into the enemy territory where things were strange and dangers at every step, without the knowledge of all my friends. I kept thinking of my parents and siblings. If in the future I will not be back, please take care of our parents on my behalf. If somebody asked about me, tell him or her that I had gone very far to repay my debt to the motherland. That afternoon, though I was busy to get ready for the trip, I had to set aside 2 hours to visit my parents and siblings. At home, there was only my father, my mother being to her prayer at the church. My brothers and sister had permission to go either to their friend's house or to the movies. My father was still strong and agile even though he was 50. Thinking of my usual visit, he gave me his normal reminder like when I was a young boy: "**Review your books, practice your martial arts, you must at all time do it to keep your muscles strong and your head clear**".

Now I had to say a few things on my father. When we were still in North Viet Nam, my father was a reputable martial arts master. Perhaps during his career a few times he had to bow his head in front of his adversaries. He bet all his hope on his oldest son, wishing that he would do things that he could not achieve. According to what he told me, when I was born he bathed me in special Chinese medicinal

concoctions of his choice. At 3-4 years, he had me standing and bending in various martial arts postures and trained me strenuously from winter to summer. At 10 he referred me to famous masters, the last one being La Giang Son nicknamed “White Elephant”, the top master in the Chinese arts. That was my luck giving me strength to deal with the atrocities in the next period of my life.

Looking at the clock, more than two hours had passed and my mother was not there yet. Not knowing how to say to my father, as the old man went upstairs, I rushed to ask his permission to go to the church to see my mother. On my way, I thought profoundly of mother, wondering why her image was still deeper in my heart. In the church, I saw her prostrating in front of the altar, silently reciting prayers while her fingers kept counting the beads of her rosary. A transcendental emotion rises in me; I went up and kneeled down next to her. She raised her surprised eyes at me, the pair of motherly eyes, which are as immense as the vast ocean. I felt shrinking back to my babyhood. Down in this world there was nothing as sacred as the mother-child relationship! Feeling that I had something for her, she made the cross sign and went out of the church with me, asking the reason of my coming. Watching her hand still holding the rosary, my heart squeezing, how could I tell her that her son is venturing into very dangerous places and may be he will not have any chance to see her anymore. May be she sensed something out of the ordinary, she put her hand over my shoulder and said affectionately: “Please tell me the truth”. In a short minute of weakness, I had given her all the worries. I changed attitude, smiling happily. “There is nothing important mother. I did not see you at home and come here to see you”. The anxiety disappeared from her face as she kidded, “My golly you made me so fussy”! Then she continued, “This Sunday, come and take me out to Ban Co to visit my friend”. I understood immediately that it was about Miss Nga. My parents had always pressed me to be married to that girl. Each time I answered, it is not appropriate yet for a young man without a stable situation. My reasoning was in the present situation while the country split in two and half of the people still lived under a ruthless society it would not make any sense for me to think of the comfort of a family. Besides, being inclined to an adventurous and dangerous life I would not want to trouble another person’s existence. I had always liked the following poem of Luu Trong Lu:

*I am the girl behind the window screen,  
You are the wandering cloud in the sky,  
You ride the wings of fluttering breeze,  
Here I am still amid velvet and silk.*

I do not have any valid reason to refuse my mother request for that Sunday. Moreover, before leaving I would not like to do anything to annoy her. I gave her a faint yes sounding like buried in my throat. My mother did not notice the hesitant tone in my voice. May be she was thinking that just mentioning Miss Nga made me shy. She cannot understand that I would not forever fulfill her wish while her son will never return. Many years from now if he was lucky enough to be back, everything would completely change, from the country to the people, the swamp would have become hills. The sunset light from the West is fading, the scenery turns gradually to dark purple. Finally, I bid her farewell. In a sudden, my voice choked. I turned my head back several times seeing the shadow of my dearest mom receding gradually behind the shadowy corner of the church.

## **ELEVEN**

### **Preparations to Launch**

I was required to complete a few procedural papers. I must sign a power of attorney to my next of kin. My pay was \$5,000., excluding rental and transportation expenses. In any case, if I was lost, arrested or killed the government will pay 12 months salary equal to \$60,000. So, if you go for money, then \$60,000 is the value of your life. In reality, everyone in the organization would have understood that, if not for

any inspiring reason, that money would not suffice to buy you. They also promised so many things like when you were successful and went back, they will give you several months R and R in Japan. Then if you will not be back, would you just disappear?

I knew that it was only administrative procedures. However, to hear about it and to do things consequently made my face blush. Frankly speaking, I would feel better and happier if there were no such kind of things. Many times I had wanted to say bluntly to An, "No need to sign anything. If I was lost or killed in enemy territory, the organization could just consider me as non-existent". Certainly An was aware of my thoughts and he put carefully his hand on my shoulder saying, "I fully hear your heart and the directorate also sees clearly your personality. Everyone respects you. Please just write a few words of delegation to any one, your parents, friends, relatives, etc. This is just a preventative procedure. People are going back and forth like going to the market. There is nothing to be fussy, Binh". Not saying a word, I just jotted down a few sentences delegating the right to my father, thinking to myself that if something happens to me, it would be a bit of my repayment to them.

They delivered a big Japanese made bag holding one pair of boots for wading in muddy and forest terrain and some clothing plus miscellaneous items also Japanese made. The only thing made in North Vietnam was a small blue side bag (maybe from some northern border jumper). They will be useful when I come from the sea and live in the jungle. As for the clothing for various covers and the pair of sandals, I shall provide them myself. The Binh Tri Thien sandals gave me problems. I went to all places, at Tan Dinh, Ong Ta and Cau Ong Lanh to no avail. Even when I described them to the shoemakers, they could not make it and did not have the proper material. Finally, I came across with a newly emigrated shoemaker who had been in the Viet Minh area for many years and he made it for me raising whimsical eyes. I explained that it was a new fashionable thing for the showy students. Riding your scooter or Solex with that kind of sandals would be most gaudy. He believed me but how could he understand it? Then I had to get my haircut north peasant style and go to Vung Tau a few days to get my tan. My thoughts wandered piecemeal. As a spy up North, I expect living a miserable life. The communist spies in the South would on the contrary have a good life under suit and ties, wearing clear glasses to appear intellectuals. It showed the difference of living conditions and the contrasted situations between the two regimes

When I was in Vung Tau with Hoang Cong An we sat on the sand beach looking at the immense ocean and the faraway horizon. I was listening to the Hanoi broadcast when I heard the strident voice of a female announcing the tribunal session judging the case of a spy C-47. They shot it down on July 1961 at Con Thoi, Ninh Binh. Among the survivors, spy Dinh Nhu Khoa was condemned to 15 years in prison and co-pilot Phan Thanh Van got 7 years. The name Phan Thanh Van sounded very familiar but I was so preoccupied listening to the judgment that I did not remember him.

Being by myself in the enemy territory, I must take all decisions on the spot according to the requirements of the time. Then I must visualize a number of circumstances and problematic situations to seek input and solutions from the directorate. I gave my ideas to Hoang Cong An who enthusiastically endorsed it and requested me to brainstorm for the directorate to study and answer. At the end, I wrote down 30 questions for that purpose. If on the two days 16 and 18, I could not meet my counterpart to remit document M do I have to destroy it immediately, should I destroy document to Z-5 Hoang Dinh Tho if the similar situation happens? On my return if I fell sick or in case I shall be stuck while the enemy hunt me, what would be the recourse? Alternatively, if for any reason I was not at the rendezvous at the set time, what could happen? If taken prisoner and in 2 or 3 years I jumped jail to return South, what will be the action? After my questions were forwarded to the directorate, a few days later Hoang Cong An came with Dr. Harry bringing the answers. However, they gave reply to a few questions leaving the rest for me to decide on the spot according to the situation and my own judgments.

Then they gave me all the needed papers I had to bring with me. I looked at the new pass with the signature of Vinh Linh security, validity one month (the duration of my mission was 25 days). The paper looked authentic, the seal as well as the signature were sharp. The counterfeiting of the CIA was so outstanding! Out of a few pack of Dai Tien Mon cigarettes with Chinese book matches (here is the shortcoming of CIA and our intelligence) An gave me \$400 in denominations of \$5, \$2, \$1 and 50 cents of northern currency. I looked at the pity sum and An explained that over there it will be more than enough to cover for everything in a month time. The largest denomination is only \$5 and they count in the cents figure. Dr. Harry gave a number of medicines, inclusive of water treatment and anti mosquito tablets. Before leaving An made sure that I fully remembered code words, conventions, signals, etc.

On 20 April 1962, I left the sweet and loving capital city for a new roadmap. At 2 pm, I shall board the airplane to Hue where I shall stay two days to study and ascertain on a number of main points on the DMZ. Then back to Da Nang, the starting point for Nga Son of Thanh Hoa. The same morning, at 62 Tran Hung Dao Street, Dale and Brown announced the visit of a high-ranking American intelligence man from Saigon to send me off. At noon a big American escorted by Dr. Harry came. He never stopped staring at me while with Dale and Brown we were busy putting our hands to the last preparation for the ramble. Through his huge pair of clear glasses, his eyes showed curiosity and an expression of pleasing gratefulness. I did not know how he was thinking of me. It was certain that if he were aware that the young man ready to confront the enemy of the free world and may be to sacrifice his life had been owner of a jewelry business awash with cash, he would fully value the meaning of my trip. He pressed my hand and said, "Have a successful jaunt and see you later"! Dale, Brown and Harry took turn shaking my hand, saying that appropriately they were unable to send me off at the airport. As my English was poor, I could not express what I wanted to say and used mostly my sign language to express myself.

All my things were carried to the airport ahead of time and at 1:30 pm An and I went together. On the way I watched the street scene (may be for the last time), pensive mood and a laden heart. On Cong Ly Street, I happened to see my friend and his girl on their Solex bikes turning to Yen Do Street. The sound of a well-known song seemed echoing and enveloping me in its lyrics:

*Then, if tomorrow somebody inquire his name,  
My friend, please tell them that he has gone faraway.*

Was it the advance sign of a no return venture? I knew so many songs but I was not so sure of why that one came to haunt me. On the way to the airport, I did not say a word, my heart laden in the oppressing heat of Saigon. Behind his pairs of glasses An was also deeply contemplative. At the airport, I saw Ly and the director there. This is the third time I saw him. People always say "no more than three times", would it be then the last time for me to see him? Looking at his thick mustache and his very dark and shiny sunglass, his sharp eyesight still showed through making his opponent insecure. He walked fast shaking my hand warmly saying, "Do you have any request"? What should I need? If I were successful, there would be nothing to say. If they caught or killed me, then I need nothing. The whole government would not be able to do anything for me, to free me if they arrested me. When I was ready to board the airplane, he put his hand on my shoulder and very softly said; "Binh, you are going to confront reality. May be, no one knows, when you will be back in success you will bring along living experiences to help completing our training background". I looked up on him, fixing his eyes with my softened stare, smiling lightly. I was only worthy if I succeeded. "C'est la vie"! The send off was then routine matters. I laughed and pressed the director's hand to bid him farewell.

When I landed at Phu Bai with Hoang Cong An, the same Mr. Huong met us with his civilian Jeep to take us to a Hue Hotel. The next day we went to Ben Hai but this time we went close to the Hien Luong Bridge. I thoughtfully watched the two flags, the bloody one smelling death and on this side, the more humane yellow one with three red stripes. The two flags were flying in the wind under the same sky,

unable to live together. One of them always wanted to be the sole color in the whole world. There was no misunderstanding what that flag was. On 22 April Mr. Huong took An and I to Da Nang.

Da Nang has the four season's atmosphere of my Hanoi gone by. The light chill of a late spring increased its display of colors. When the jeep stopped on Doc Lap Avenue I saw obliquely on the other side of the street a bar with the nice name Hanoi, Mr. Huong and Hoang Cong An both shook my hand good bye with promise to see me again when I will be back from the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Mr. Huong pointed to the bar telling me to take my luggage over and expect somebody to pick me up. Now I shall be under another person's care. With the big Japanese bag hooked to my shoulder and carrying my heavy suitcase, I walked to Hanoi Bar. In there, behind the many green potted plants I saw at one table several Marines officers and at another some Army men with Air Force officers and a few civilians. At the bar several airborne men displaying sparkling golden cherry blossoms on their collars, at another end three civilian dressed men wearing glasses looked pensive in front of their shiny coffee cups. The most worthy sight was the delicate shapes of the three beauties under their tightly fit tunics. Feeling a bit uneasy, I sat at a table in the corner. My strange appearance attracted the attention of everyone. I merely put down my stuffs and realized this is the joint for all the talented youth of the Da City, moved by the romantic sound of music and the colorful surrounding. One elegant miss wearing a star fruit flower color dress approached and with her soft voice of the capital asked what she could serve me. Hearing the voice of a beautiful girl in her twenties within the environment of the little inn, I suddenly got the urge to order a dry Martell and a pack of Capstan. When she brought the drink to my table, I watched her delicate fingers and raised my eyes. Her eyes were an abyss. She was inquisitive, "do you just come to Da Nang"? Smiling faintly as a sign of agreement, I retorted, "Can you guess what kind of person am I"? Smiling and glancing at my big bag and suitcase she said, "You must be a mining expert going to the coal mine of Nong Son". I nodded in appreciation, remembering that my friend Le Duc Binh is a supervisor of the mine and think of a future occasion to visit him. I distractively exhale the smoke and thank her. I had known after that her name is Hieu and she had been the cause for a Marine Lieutenant to slap the face of a known songstress of Saigon right at this bar.

When I stepped into this bar, I wondered why somebody in the directorate had arranged for some one to meet me here. I got the answer one hour later when I saw Phan stopping obliquely farther at the other side of the street. He stepped down and I was astonished to know that when Phan told me four or five months ago that he had a special faraway mission. Da Nang should be that mission now. I leisurely paid my check, got my luggage and walked out. As soon as I was farther from the place, the jeep closed in, hands shaking and eyes staring with joy. After a few minutes of conversation, Phan stressed. "I am taking you to a hotel owned by my friend. I will introduce you as the son of a jeweler in Saigon and you are looking for a location to open a branch here. As you are aware of, they guess that the Americans will be here in force and the merchants especially the Chinese are flocking in for business". Knowing Phan for a long time, I understand his sketchier character, sometimes expedient, lacking completely research and study. Perhaps he thought that he had to play that kind of personage role to be fitting. Anyhow, he is at present time my immediate superior.

The jeep stopped in front of Hong Phat Hotel, a brand new six-story construction. Phan rushed in and came out with a well-dressed man about 40, wearing glasses and introducing him to me as Yen, the owner and he owns a bigger hotel in Saigon. He smiled raising his face at me as a friend from Saigon needing a well-furnished room. Mr. Hong Phat warmly welcomes me. He gave some instructions to his manager. He said to feel honored to have known me, stating that room 5 is the most comfortable but is now occupied by an American colonel who will leave in a couple of days. Now he will give me room 8 on floor 3 and will transfer me to five. While the two hotel valets took my suitcases up, Mr. Yen got the key from the manager and took me up. I wondered why Mr. Yen wanted to befriend me, and even offered to steer me around sight seeing.

After the American Colonel checked out, I moved to Room 5. During my relationship with Phan and Yen, I fully understood them. Phan is now in charge of sending men up North, Special Forces men, frogmen and some singletons like me. Da Nang is the starting point. Phan drive a brand new Cadillac and is the most powerful man in this little city. Everyone, from the province chief down respected him. That was the feeling of Mr. Yen or Luong Hong Yen, a wealthy Chinese, married to Thai Le Chi, the beauty of the Capital. Through his beautiful wife, he got access through many doors and steadily advanced up the ladder of fortune. Seeing that I was Phan's friend, he would think that I am not only rich but I was also powerful and gave me the best of his hospitality. He often confided with me that "the communist always look at us as their enemy to be liquidated." Chuckling, I think to myself that belonging to the poorest stratum of the society, how can I expect to be in a par with you, rich man?

After 3 days, Phan drove me to a house near the Han Bridge. I met again with Brown and Dale there. They came up to give me information on new developments. I sat down listening and discussed on a number of things about intelligence and the situation. Besides, they informed me that a Seventh Fleet ship on the high seas would protect my boat. In addition, they were looking at the possibility of future use of a submarine unloading a rubber raft silently going ashore. I did not believe in those things, which might be to raise the morale and the spirit of the departing one. Two days later Phan took me to the Navy restricted area to use a speedboat to practice landing at Son Tra. As at night and under high wind and choppy water and besides due to an irresponsible way of doing things the all wet and frigid Phan rushed me back even when I did not complete my work. I had practiced the use of infrared equipments before, but now was just halfway through superficial exercises.

During my week stay in Da Nang I had wanted to visit my friend Le Duc Binh at Nong Son Mine. However, I was so busy until the end and could not do it. Phan always stressed that I should avoid the end of Bach Dang Street from Grand Hotel up due to possible dangers. He said there are many Americans in that area attracting hand grenades and mine traps. Nevertheless, I knew that it was the working location of our intelligence setup and Phan did not want me to venture out there. During that time, the many newly erected buildings and even Hong Phat and Grand Hotels were already full of Americans in civilian clothing from the Seventh Fleet

## TWELVE

### Out in A Stormy Sea

According to the plan, the next day on 28 April, at 7 pm, I shall board a boat anchored at a special berth of the restricted Navy area. It was raining and stormy. The sea surrounds Da Nang and the city is always windy. The air was humid and all was grey. Whips of wind through the window brought droplets of rain to my bed. I wondered why I did not close the window. I was just lying there with the wet rush of air, my heart burdened with the bobbing of life. It was more than 10 pm, I cannot sleep and worry about all the things I must carry with me. I will leave behind the big suitcase with all the memories of a single young man, the watch (they gave another Russian made waterproof watch), the gold chain that I have never worn, the cash, my wallet and all the photos of my family and friends. I had the feeling to have stripped off my skin into a Le Viet Hung amid a world of misery devoid of all the amenities and colors of the present life. As I was deep in my thoughts about the expected life in the North a soft voice sang a familiar tune, "*you will be gone tomorrow, how could I oppose you. Let us enjoy it fully tonight...*" I was astounded that the song was so appropriate and wondered whom was that person singing at this late time. I approached the window and listened, and localized it coming from upstairs. I walked out and silently went up, leaning my back to the wall listening. The singing sounded like lamenting and rose up, in a stream of clear expression of dream and hope.

It was already 11 pm. I walked downstairs to see the manager and the room servant talking together. Hesitantly I asked about the person singing. The room boy turned his sparkling eyes at me and said in his Quang Nam accent; “My golly she is my adoptive sister named Da Ly Huong, an amateur songstress. If you want to meet her, I can arrange for that. Though she had the reputation of a difficult person but my feeling is that both of you can accommodate”. Thinking that my situation and condition would not be fitting and as I am ready to venture into the tempest, I could not bother with romance. Then I firmed my voice to say that, I appreciate his offer but she troubles my sleep in the middle of the night, and I went back to my room in front of the surprised wide eyes. The song died down but it still haunted me in the months and years I was up North, especially during rainy and stormy times.

The next day at 5 pm, Phan took me to the restricted Navy area. I saw a boat at a desolate spot and understood it was my boat. From the outside, it was equipped like an angler boat working along the seashore. Phan told me that it has very good motor pushing it up to 10-12 nautical miles per hour. In the boat, I saw 5-6 mostly young persons dressed in brown uniforms. I paid especial attention to two of them, an old man about 50-55, tanned face and looking very healthy. The second man, about 40 wearing a T-shirt hold a wrench in his hand. He is a strong muscled athlete like. When everyone was on board, Phan introduced the old man as the captain and the muscled man as the mechanic and all others as sailors. Phan instructed one of them to race to his jeep and take down all my stuff. I looked at those healthy and tanned men, wearing the cross, being all Christians. At the starboard hang the trembling rosaries. They were from Central Vietnam. When everyone went under the canopy, Phan about faced and asked whether all preparations were ready. The boat captain raised his voice, “ready”! Phan nodded at the mechanic inquiring on the condition of the machinery and got a solid Quang Binh answer, “Normal”! Then he turned to me and introduced me to the whole crew, “Here is the cadre on a special mission. You have the responsibility to take him to the selected landing spot. He has the right to decide to return along the way. You must always follow his order”.

Hearing Phan’s words, I understood that facing the cruel reality if I started to be afraid, then going back would be the best recourse. Otherwise, the result would be much more devastating. If you are fearful and return you would not complete your work and you will be simply penalized while the enemy would not know anything about it. On the contrary, if you continue, it would be certain that you will not finish the mission and be easily uncovered and the enemy will find out all your secrets. The result would be far weightier. I followed Phan on shore. Putting his hand on my shoulder, he asked, “How is your morale my friend”? Smiling I gave him a five, kidding, “That was my morale”. Phan pressed my hand and suddenly embraced me without any work of safe return or good success. It was Phan’s character when departing.

The boat left when it became almost dark. Farther in Da Nang, lights flickered. I had not known much of Da Nang. Anyhow, I had the feeling of uneasy relinquishment. I felt leaving a bright place and moving deeper into darkness. In truth, the boat left the shore at 7 pm while it was still clear to go smoothly into the veil of the night. From a tranquil area of the Han River, it ventured out into the choppy and windy waters of the sea. Leaning to the canopy, I watched the firmament filled with scintillating stars. I had the feeling to be under a huge lid pressing on the tiny boat amid the grayish expanse of water among white crested waves, giving solid lapping sounds as it was bobbing. I took two seasickness pills Phan gave me. Nevertheless, I still had the squirm feeling of uneasiness. I went into the cabin and lay down resting while I suddenly heard the heavy loud voice of the captain, “hoist up the yellow black flag”! Though I felt very tired, having thrown up twice I still crawled out to see. It was daylight and every one was looking at the sun rising. A white Navy ship at 5 km farther out was heading toward our boat. The mechanic was peering through the binoculars. I put my hand on his shoulder. When he saw me, he was all smiling saying it was our Navy and gave me the binoculars. I saw clearly the yellow flag with three red stripes. I remembered before leaving Phan gave to the captain all the required papers of special

mission ordered by the government for checking by our Navy. Then why he had to hoist the yellow black flag? As he explained, the flag was also a special code word that changes every week or day as needed.

The sun was high up in a clear blue sky and the sea was calm. As I have vomited a few times and since I had eaten or drunk nothing, I felt so tired. I crawled into the cabin and rested. Even though I was half-awake, I still monitored the progress of the trip. Around noon, they seemed more cautious. Every 5 or 10 minutes they took turns watching all around with the binoculars. From the captain down to the sailors, everybody stayed quiet and tense. I knew that we were now within the North area. The sunlight was gradually fading and another day was gone. The whole crew from the captain down to the youngest sailor was ordinary anglers making their living in the Nghe An area. They refused to live under the inhumane totalitarian communist regime and emigrated south. They felt compelled to do this work for the sake of their relatives still under the bloody hands of the ruthless people. Seeing that I suffered from seasickness they all took turns helping me in the plain and sincere gesture of brotherly goodwill. They cooked and served rice porridge and gave me hot rub massage. It was so moving! Another uneventful night was gone.

The next morning the eastern sky flared up for about one hour when clumps of dark clouds appeared in the north-west sky and it became so suffocating hot. The sea turned into a faint gold sheen. Suddenly one sailor showing traits of disarray on his face, the binoculars in his hands, his voice masked by the engine noise, pointed his fingers to the faraway horizon. We all had the feeling of some unusual happening. Though I was dead tired, I made the extra effort to go out to the deck and watch. Very far from the coast, two black dots were moving towards our boat. No doubt, they were communist coast guards. We all worried, feeling like fish on a cutting board. I glanced quickly at all my things, fingering my small bag of documents with decision to dispose of them in the sea. At all cost I would not let them in the hands of the enemy. Stampedes on the boat floor, the sounds of loud voices were heard, “maximum speed, rudder to the right, display the fishnet on top of canopy...!” The two black dots became bigger and bigger. The heartbeat increased with the racing engine. The mechanic hung the Virgin Mary painting higher on the wall. Like in mutual consent, notwithstanding the captain, everyone sat cross-legged and recited prayers. I also joined them to pray, turning at time at the black dots that became as big as two water buffaloes.

Clouds were building up and the sky turned darker. The four “pang... pang... pang... pang” staccato sounds of gunfire covered our more pressing prayers. The enemy coast guards were closing in giving the impression of a chicken under the pursuit of two hungry wolves. All at a sudden lightning illuminated the sky and thunder bolts stroke like cannons. Raindrops fell on the boat canopy, winds blew and the sea became suddenly so rough sending our boat up and down amid a completely darkened atmosphere. The two enemy coastguards boat were completely out of sight. Liberated from the enemy, we were now under the hand of nature. The big storm and high wind were trying to crush our boat with pressing prayers for salvation. Everything was wet; I was thrown from one corner to the other. The grim captain with his funnily pulled out of shape mouth under the effort to control the rudder was swept off the steering, Two young sailors jumped up helping and the old man swung up at once to put his hands to the shaking steering. I was cold and run down thinking that I would go down to the bottom of the ocean ending once for all my bobbing life.

After a half hour nature anger passed, the wind died down and the sea stopped its fury. The veil of night started to fall. Everywhere around me was a gloomy grey. Those two maddened buffaloes were not there anymore. May be they had thought that we too were the prey of the bottom of the sea. In between life and death, I saw the old captain raising his hand calling me. Feeling that it must be an important matter, I gathered all my strength to move up. Anyhow, being so weak for not eating anything, I slipped and almost fell in the water if I could not have grabbed a post while two sailors speedily caught my legs and pulled me in. He told two sailors to help at the rudder and crawled under the canopy with me. With an



interrupted voice under stress and coldness, he said, “we are now at the landing spot. With experience, I know that during stormy weather if we approach the shore the boat might sink as normally about at 5-10 km off shore the stormy sea will be much more violent. No one knew when it would stop. The decision is yours, proceed on or go back”?

It was a hard decision. After so much effort to be here, would it make sense to go back now? To come up with an appropriate decision, I asked, “could we drop anchor here pending the end of the storm”? He displayed a strange scorn while the two sailors looked at me like a strange monster. Finally, he said in his harsh voice, “You cannot drop anchors at the middle of the sea. Moreover if you stopped here, when the storm was over and in plain daylight you would be like a ready bait for the security boats to come and tow you back”! He had given me all the possible solutions and I said with confidence, “let’s return”! My mind glided fast; if it would be for me alone, I would go on, whatever the outcome! However, we had six more persons involved, each one of them with a string of related family members, I do not have the right to be so daring. The three sailors inside the cabin felt like the oppression on their chest deflated while the old man shouted, “rudder left to the South, be careful with the wind and waves direction”!

The boat slowly veered heading south. The wind and waves were favorable. I was so tired and anxious that I lay down in the cabin unconcerned of what happened around. I gradually sunk into a deep nightmarish rest. The sea became calm and I dreamed to fall again into sleep until the mechanic shook me up with his very difficult Nghe accent, offering a steamy bowl of hot rice soup. His caring attitude had somewhat alleviated my sorrow. I leaned up, acknowledging his affectionate gesture through the faint light of my eyesight and drank the hot soup. I felt having more energy, crawled out and leaning to the side of the boat I witnessed the oblique sunrays of the sun setting and farther south, my beloved country. I had left my unachieved mission, not feeling right although it was not due to me. Still, it was like a cloud of sadness hanging in front of me. Anyhow, it was still in enemy territory and I went back into the cabin. One more day and night went by and we crossed the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel to the free world. In a gloomy mindset and very tired I lay there all the time until in the morning one of our Navy vessel closed in for control. I did not want them to see me and covered my face under a thin blanket. Very early in the morning the boat moored to the Navy restricted area.

## **THIRTEEN**

### **Preparations for The Next Trip**

Two hours later, at 8 am the red sun disk looked like a big plate of coagulated beef blood. It slowly rose from the water giving the whole scenery a sparkling reddish color. Phan was already there talking with the boat captain. I got out of the cabin. He looked at me and could not have realized how I had become so frail. I had of course, during the last four days and five nights drunk only a few bowls of rice soup, in a very tense and strenuous situation. Phan came to me. He held lightly my hand and only said, “Are you too tired”? When I boarded his vehicle, I was so quiet. Someone would have thought that my morale had dropped to the lowest. Nevertheless, Phan could have understood my thoughtful mood and he tapped lightly my shoulder saying, “Don’t worry my friend, men proposed and God disposed”! I went to the back seat, opened the suitcase that Phan brought from the office and changed from the funny north garb. Phan said he checked in at a quiet place. I could take a shower, a shave and gobbled up something to recover. Next afternoon he shall take me back to Hong Phat.

I landed at a newly built complex. There were only a few Americans around and no one would pay attention to me. In the room, I glanced in the mirror kidding myself on the appearance of a stupid China man. Yet, in no time, I completely changed into an intellectual with glasses and looking as easy and wealthy. Phan picked me up for Hong Phat in the evening. Room 5 had already an American staying for

five days and I took room 14 of floor four. There were also a few Americans around and seeing each other from time to time, we just exchanged a few smiles. Phan informed me that the next try would be on 28 May. Then I get nearly one month to relax and gather my strength and morale. As the convened day should be around the month end, I wondered with An why our weather service did not foresee that kind of sudden storm? According to him, we had only the ability to forecast in a 30 hours window and that within a radius of 300 km. Our landing spot being too far and the time involved 50-60 hours frame it would be too difficult to predict.

After submitting my report with basic details of my failed trip, it seemed that the Saigon office would think that I needed to be uplifted. Phan told me that some high-ranking man from Saigon would like to see me. Phan took me to bar Diep Hai Dung but dropped me off at a distance telling me to go in and sit down and order whatever I want expecting that person. A moment later I saw at a farther street corner one man in white shirt, about forty, driving his new civilian jeep and at his side was Mr. Ly, a northern man I had met before in Saigon. He parked and walked to the bar followed by Ly with a black briefcase in hand. The bar had already a good crowd, mostly young men. Ly steered the other man to my table. For not drawing attention from others, they just smiled a bit. After getting the drinks, they sat down and Ly bent lightly to the middle of the table muttering solemnly, "Here is the Deputy Chief coming to meet you. If you have any idea or suggestions please speak out".

It reminds me that while in Saigon I have known through Phan that he is Nguyen Khac Binh. I nodded slightly showing my honor to meet him. Displaying a well-trimmed mustache, his deep sparkling sharp eyes above a set of tight lips emanate an air of straight decisiveness. Smiling amiably, he inquired about my health to which I replied that I am feeling very good. Then his face hardened, his eyes sparkling, he clearly stated, "I have read your report. Your decision to go back was a good one showing you as a cautious and cogent man. Would you have any feeling and impression now"? Looking at him, I said, "Sir, I had plenty of impressions. But so far the only one that overburdened me was that I still feel it as an oppression not a fun situation". He nodded somewhat, tapping his fingers lightly on the table and turned his face towards Ly as for sharing; "It is exactly the indication of your straightforwardness! We were not wrong in our opinion of you. Now, if you need anything we are ready to provide". After hearing it, Ly rushed to remind me that in front of the deputy-chief I had better profited of the opportunity to say whatever my desires are to be satisfied on the spot.

I was not shy; I was somewhat hesitant to give an answer right away. Then I stated, "I appreciate your concern but personally I do not see any need. Anyhow on the mission I am having one suggestion". His eyes became brighter, the muscles on both sides of his jaw suddenly stiffened as he said, "tell me about it, Binh". I remained silent a short while and looked straight in his face declaring, "Through my direct experience with the trip I realized that with our limited weather prediction while the landing spot was beyond our capability space and time wise, the mission failed due to not only enemy's action but also nature. I am suggesting to have the landing further South, at Nghe An or Ha Tinh. I would have more problems at those uncharted locations, but I can possibly face them. I would find my way to Highway 1 and proceed to Hanoi". I had gleaned all the future consequences of my proposal stemming from my nascent subjective way of thinking.

While listening to me his fingers kept tapping the table in a light staccato. He nodded, swiping them on it as a sign of decisive persuasion, "It is a very concrete and practical idea. Please write a concise and clear report for Phan or Ly to transmit to us for study and an appropriate solution to such a reasonable suggestion". Fixing his eyes on me for a while, he then retorted, "Any proposal for you"? I slightly shook my head, "Until I am back, Sir". To show the concern and good feeling he and the directorate had for me he added, "I had directed Mr. Ly to resolve any problems you encounter, whatever they would be". While Mr. Ly went to pay the bill he held my hand tight and whispered in a very friendly voice, "I will be up here greeting you"! Smiling softly, I thought about the similarity of the situations when 20 days ago at

Tan Son Nhat airport the Director sending me off promised to greet me at the boat launch. A feeling of gloominess suddenly infiltrated me.

Back to Hong Phat Hotel, my whole night filled in pensive mood on men and my country. As a relief, my mind turned to my friend Le Duc Binh. In the morning, I went to the Nong Son Mine office to give a note to Binh. He will come to Da Nang that weekend with his friend Xuan and Sy. As Binh also has the same name, at Camp Pavie la Mothe they called me Binh Follis (I had the Follis motor bike), the other Binh as Frizzy Binh due to his wavy hair. Binh wanted to take me home to see his wife and family as he had only one-day leave. How could I tell him of my stormy days ahead? I just gave him the promise for a “Congo Tet”! With Xuan and Sy having a Vespa scooter and a Peugeot 203, we went together visiting the many scenic spots all around. Both of them belonged to the cream of the Da City young crop and they loved nature. We were out to see the Marble Mountains, the beaches of My Khe, Lang Co, Cua Dai and Thang Binh to watch the immense ocean and the splendid sunset, the awe-inspiring mountains, all the spectacular views of the Pearl of Central Vietnam! **Hah! My native poor land imprinting forever in my mind an image of eternal beauties!**

I have submitted my report. Phan came telling me that they had agreed with it. It reduced greatly the problems. I will have to spend only one and half day and one and half night for a total of 36 hours at sea. Seeing that I was somewhat apprehensive, he touched my shoulder and said clearly that it will be in between Nghe An and Ha Tinh, the native places of our sailors who are familiar with it to the bottom. “They will take you to a safe spot for you to rest fully before finding your way to Highway 1”. Due to Phan sketchy way of doing things and to my becoming subjective, I did not investigate in detail the district and village with information on surrounding terrain. I steered instead to another point, saying that the sailors are plain folks, serving the ideals as simple as their own life, without any noisy shouting. Phan burst into laughter and stood up solemnly going to my cabinet to pick up one bottle of tonic pills inquiring on my feeling about it. When I nodded, he said he would buy one hundred tablets for a try. Afterwards the conversation was on insignificant things unrelated to the mission. The sailors were still in my mind and I pulled Phan back to them. “That mechanic looks like an athlete with his muscled arms and legs”? Phan laughed and gave a thumb-up sign, “He is number one. I always nicknamed him Tarzan. Whether it was day or night in any dangerous situation, he will rush head-on in”.

## FOURTEEN

### The Fatal Jaunt

After a showery night, the sky was all clear with not a single strand of cloud. The whole city washed clean and the start of summer was as pleasant as in autumn. At 11 am Phan came. Again, from a Dang Chi Binh of a richly colorful South I had metamorphosed into Le Viet Hung, a 10-grade student of a scorched Vinh Linh, the vanguard frontier of the socialist country. It was my departure day, bidding farewell to Da Nang, leaving behind the gentle South for a horizon full of risky dangers. It was my second venture without the same feeling of apprehension. The night before, listening to the raindrops, I recollected on my life in Saigon, the images of my next of kin, my dearest friends and all my colleagues at the directorate. Everything was crystal-clear just like a fast movie unwinding in front of my eyes. Impetuously, I had taken the decision to do something to deserve their wish instead of feeling sorry for a divided country. At any price, I must succeed.

When we came to the restricted Navy area, the sun was already high in the sky. The boat was there at the lone berth. The sailors were all fresh-looking under their brown uniforms. As usual, they rushed up to take my bag and equipment down. We had shared dangers once and the esprit-de-corps had already become real. The tight handshakes, the bright eyesights all were a clear mark of brotherly closeness. In

the morning, I gave my decision on the dates of 22, 23 and 24 of June (I wrote the decision as requested by the organization so that it anchored in my mind), two hours each night from 1 to 3 am. The disembarking point will be also the pickup spot. We had to give three nights in cases of mishap from my part (missing transportation or if they followed me, meaning hundreds of unforeseeable situations). Each determined night. I shall use a small infrared instrument, battery operated to focus out to the sea. At each 30-second interval, the tool will emit a very thin pinky-green light ray that is invisible at night to people even from 10m away. Out there from the boat at 10 km from shore, the use of the same equipment will permit them to catch my light flaring up like a lightning and they just followed the bright dot to come for me. I had the impression of a couple of fireflies in their love rendezvous.

I was nonchalantly watching the sailors busy at their specified jobs to make things ready for the departure. Phan was talking with the boat captain when he turned back tapping lightly my shoulder asking, “How come you looked so distracted?”. I replied smiling that I had the presentiment that it should be a clear-cut success and I will land on shore. They all smiled and looking at the sky, they nodded acknowledging the validity of my statement. I did not know whether it was forgetfulness or his positive attitude, Phan did not shake my hand but waved while the boat slowly sailed out. Human psychology is strange! I just felt so absolved and light hearted. Now as the boat was moving out I saw Phan next to his jeep dressed white amid the green lawn and trees. I had the feeling of losing gradually my south country, especially when a romantic song from a girl emanating from a radio somewhere, wailing above the water in the summer. I did not know the song; I did not listen with my ears but my subconscious dragged me back to an old tune,

*“That berth of the bygone days...you left...nostalgia...farewell*

*“Going away...old berth...that day*

*“You are alike...clouds shadow...pinky floats*

*“To the faraway horizon...my heart laden...longing*

The boat was far out. The song from that radio was only a faraway echo mixed with the engine noise. I closed my eyes, gripping the canopy. Suddenly I heard a song mounting from the depth of my heart

*“Let us forget... sadness of separation...I have to go with the wind*

*“Why singing... in sorrow... remembering...your sweetheart.*

The sun was setting. A few white seagulls floated on a blue sky. One of them dived down, shaking its beak as for landing or for saying good-bye to the sailed away boat. Looking to the south, vaguely a few swash of gilded clouds hung over the ocean. The summer air was thick and wet, salty and spongy. The elongated shadow of the boat is like a knife blade cutting through the foamy white head of the waves. The late afternoon breeze pushed the boat bobbing up and down. The twilight scenery on the high sea was a wonderful sight. I started feeling uneasy and had to abandon that once in a lifetime view to move under the canopy and lay down. While I was trying to adjust my body to a more comfortable position, the mechanic with his hands blackened with grease climbed up. Looking at his strong back and big hands, I was ready to offer him a big smile saluting my nice “Tarzan”. To my big surprise, he looked so young over a muscular body full of energy. He became hesitant losing his composure. Another sailor seeing my surprise expression nodded towards the mechanic saying in a singing Nghe accent, “The last one was tied up with some family affairs and here is his younger brother”. They looked alike as stamped from the same mold, their bodies were the same strong built and the plain honest feature on their faces was similar. I had wanted to talk more with him but a wave knocked me down. Another day and a night had passed. I still lay there like a shred, seasick, my stomach empty because I had only two glasses of milk. I only remembered that at noon it was so hot and humid. I perspired much and was very uncomfortable.

The shouting and screaming sent me up, I attempted to crawl out but I felt dizzy. One sailor rushed to help me and I asked him. “What happened”? He said there was a stranger boat going in the same

direction. It was closer to shore but had followed us for more than two hours”. Then I asked, “Could we see it with naked eyes”? His reply was, “If you strained your eyes you could see only a whitish dot among the waves but through the binoculars it was clearly some bigger vessel”. “What was the captain shouting about”? He replied, “The mechanic wanted to veer to the high sea but the captain decided to stay on course”! If I were not dead tired, I would have sat up to assess the situation and give my suggestion. However, during the night I kept vomiting bitter liquid and passed out, my only desire was to arrive at the destination the soonest, regardless of dangers. I still lay down there listening to what happened and watching the attitude of the captain and the sailors.

It was close to 1 am, there was nothing abnormal. The sound of the engine regularly mixed to the rush of seawater against the boat. To assuage my nervousness I tried sitting up and make sign to some sailors close by. Thinking that I needed some food one of them approached and asked, “Would you like some milk”? Shaking my head, I asked about that stranger boat. With bright eyes, he said. “It disappeared in land”! Appeased, I threw myself flat down again. It was 9 pm and pitch dark. My mind kept churning on the stranger boat at noon, my whole body swinging like on a hammock. It is funny that though I liked horse riding I did not appreciate the hammock. May be during my childhood my parents did not expose me to it? The regular humming of the engine gradually took me to a deep sleep induced by weariness. Then someone shook my leg. It was the boat captain under a pressing mask saying, “We arrived, Mr. Cadre, let’s get up and be prepared for landing”! I awakened fast, the sky was grey and all around it was a blur. The boat bobbed, waves lapped on its sides in a rhythmic solid sound. At the stern, 4-5 sailors were busy inflating the rubber raft and installing its motor. The solemn time was here. I wanted to stand up and exit but my whole body vacillated. The old captain braced me up while the mechanic and the other sailors lowered the rubber raft down to the water. Amid a boundless sea, the light was only dreary. Everyone was rushing with traits of tension and worries on their faces.

The three sailors were already in the rubber raft with the mechanic. They all helped me down with my equipment. I still felt very exhausted and when the old man and the remaining sailor assisted me holding my hand saying “May God protect you” I did not respond to their compassionate gesture. The rubber raft approached gradually the shore. Its motor hummed, buried in the sound of waves, pushing the raft swiftly in. As the decisive moment arrived and as the drops of salty water splashed on my face, I felt fully awake and ready. I asked the sailor next to me “how far from the shore”? They all made frenetic sign for me to keep quiet and the next man whispered to my ear that it was around 5 km off. Looking at all of them, I did not see clearly their face. I recognized the mechanic with his big built body. The water sparkled like thousands of fireflies dancing on top of the white waves giving me the feeling of enormous diamond gems.

Farther inland was only pitch darkness. Wondering what would be those things expecting me, hundreds of thousands, may be? There was no possible answer? I looked at my watch; it was 01:15 am. The sailors were truly experienced with night work. They turned the engine off and two at each side with oars they silently paddled. Ten minutes later, I already saw ahead a vague white stretch. The boat was now on the sandy beach. Two sailors waded down. I also disembarked with a heavy big bag on one hand and my sandals at the other. Very swiftly the man behind grabbed the bag and the other two carried me to the dry sand so that I did not have to walk a few meters in water. After giving me the bag, one boy grabbed my hand tight whispering, “You are on your way and now we go back”! They hurriedly boarded the raft and paddled out to disappear in the mighty ocean.

## **FIFTEEN**

### **In The Enemy Territory**

Stepping on shore, I felt hazy and run down. I lay down on the white sand for a few minutes to recover. Now I was all by myself. Looking in I saw only blackness and no sign of houses or trees. Moved by my instinct of survival I grabbed my bag and sandals I hushed forward toward the darkness finding a spot to lie down and rest. After running for a short distance, I saw a few black spots on the sand. It was grass, some kind with thorns pricking me painfully. I hurriedly slipped on my sandals and ran through a pebbly spot sloping up. I tumbled into a hole filled with leaves and dry branches, my flank hitting hard a rock. Though I was stunned, I hastily climbed up with the feeling to be in a mined pit about to explode.

Clutching my bag, I kept going until I felt so tired that I squatted down staring into darkness. Looking up to a grey sky I saw the vague shadow of a big tree ahead and slowly proceeded toward it. I gradually awakened, my watch showed past 2 am. It was still very dark. Raising my hand ahead of me, I saw it faintly. I strained my ears, listening to leaves rubbing mixed with the faraway sound of waves from the sea. Leaning on the tree for a few minutes, I started probing the soil around looking for a spot to bury the non-needed things. The sandy soil was soft enough. I got out my small shovel and dug, putting all newly dugout dirt in a small cloth sack. While toiling, my mind turned to the covers to use with the enemy if they caught me. I realized that the south intelligence had valued so naively the enemy. How could the communist believe covers 2 and 3? I buried all together the bottles of medicine with the dry ration, the water canister, the infrared tool, the 200 northern cash, the cigarettes and book matches. Those things were not practical and the enemy would easily discover them. I carry along only 200 cash and a few old underwear things in a small sack. As for the secret documents, the essence of the mission, I had sewn them inside my brief. I always had them with me since Da Nang and kept feeling them with my fingers. Having previous experience, I finished the work in more than one hour. I probed the thickness of the layer of dry leaves next to it and leveled the spot back to its usual appearance.

My watch displayed 3:30 am. Too anxious and tense I did not notice that now my flank felt painful. Touching at it, I did not feel any bump and said to myself that it will go away. Now I felt hungry and exhausted. My head on my bag as a pillow for a quick recovery rest, I fell fast into a deep slumber. I suddenly heard people calling each other and jumped up. I strained my ears and looked in the direction of the voices. My watch was only at 04:30 am and it was still very dark. Maybe I was dreaming. Mr. Phan told me that it was a place for rest one whole week, which means that it is uninhabited. With my acute hearing, I thought I was not wrong and kept on monitoring. Nothing except for the wind humming and the soft sound of leaves drop from branches. Everything was just the silence of night. From somewhere an owl sounded like the sigh for a human fate in an unforgiving life. I lay down again. Nearly ten minutes later a clear female laughter in the wind made my heart pumping. I sat up instantly to hear the voice of a man, "Leave me that sickle". I grabbed my bag and moved farther from where was the voice.

The day came slowly. I already saw somewhat the surrounding. Where I sat was a cemetery with a few tombs among stunted bushes lacking water. The sole tree was where last night I had been. Farther in there were bamboos hedges meaning that villages were in the vicinity. At 6 am, from afar a group of men and females, scythes and sickles in hands were approaching me. Next to my location, there was only one bush about 2 m high and 2 m in diameter. In urgency, I crawled under it. The small pathway was only 6 m from the bush. In the bush, there was a fire ants nest, and they crawled up my leg biting me. I merely used my hands to wipe them off carefully so that I would not shake the branches. When the group went by, I hold my breath fast, fearful of in case somebody went to the bush to pee my life would be doomed. The thing that made me disoriented was that they talked like birdies and I did not understand some of their words. I was fully aware that it was not Nghe An accent. Therefore, it should be Ha Tinh. I was just guessing because according to Phan the landing point was in between Nghe An and Ha Tinh and since our sailors were native here they would have known it from top to bottom.

Another thing was the lack of responsibility of Phan and my subjective way of thinking that my ability would help me bypass the enemy, I did not inquire on the details of the localities, which district, which

village when we decided the change to another landing spot. That was my major mistake. Anyhow, in the practical situation I would fall into the same dismal, thinking that the boat did not take me to the right location as promised. Sitting in the bush I felt in disarray, a strange young man alien in a region he did not have a single knowledge of the province notwithstanding its district or village. The group of farmers went down to a rice field 200 m away. They laughed and talked noisily, seven and now 8 am. The sun was high in the sky and it became so hot while I missed my hat, forgetting it in the boat during the hectic moment of disembarkation. I could not stay long in this bush. When they finish their work, the farmers would look for a shade to rest. There would be no place to hide and with the attacks from the fire ants, if I could bury myself into the ground I would do it. I was scared and numb. Looking at the base of the big tree where I buried my things last night, I realized that I did not do a perfect job, the surface was not as smooth and there were a few lumps of soil scattered around which could be visible to a pair of keen eyes. I had to fix it. Leaving my sack in the bush, I crawled to the tree rearranging the spot and putting the few lumps of soil in my pocket I crawled back to dispose under the bush.

It was 9 am, it was very hot and the westerly wind was like in a furnace. I must get out from this bush even if they caught me. Moreover, out of the terrible fire ants looking up I saw those hairy worms, which I always abhorred. I straightened my clothing's, a towel on my shoulder and the small sack hooked to the other, I walked out with composure. I was determined to go to the village, not being sure of where was Highway one over there. It was 9:30 am, seeing the farmers; I raised my hand up smiling and went to them. Some girls burst into natural laughter interjecting me, "Brother, get down here to cut rice with us"! The young men also laughed. I kept moving steadily towards the group, waving my hand and said, "Good morning comrades, how is the crop this year?" Then watching at my watch I said, "My golly it is 9:30 I must go see the village chief first". I about faced and waving I walked off, "I promise to be back this afternoon". The way to the village was a reddish soil tract of about 700 m long.

At the village, a bare torso man about 50, in black shorts was sitting on the grass edge. He whipped lightly the taro plant in the field, just having fun. From 200 m away, I was sure that he saw me. Now he pretended looking the other way. I worried with his attitude. Usually when you see a stranger in your village, you should have stared at him. When I was just 2 or 3 meters from him, I raised my voice to see his reaction. "Good morning uncle! I was with the group out there and it was fun. I had a drink with them and now I am thirsty again. May I get another one, uncle". I saw a tiny thatched hut with a water jar next to a bamboo step on a small pond. He did not even mutter. He stood up staring at me and went to the village saying very briefly, "Follow me for the drink". I had thought that he was dumb and he should be someone to be dreaded. Tight lipped he moved forward whipping the air with the bamboo reed in his hand. Trying to break that uneasy silence, I said, "Is this year crop any better that last year uncle? I came here last year; I see that it is kind of relative"! After a while, he replied choppily, "It's all right"! It is hard maintaining the talk. The best way was to keep following him. I would manage the situation as it came up. It was a long walk! When we were at almost the center of the village, I saw a large brickyard where a few persons were pulling a stone rice roller. Huge piles of sweet potatoes were next to the yard and several young men and females were shuffling the tubers from one stack to the other one.

I thought he is leading me to death. I hastily rushed to the potatoes admiring the big tubers and engaged in conversation with the group while I kept my eyes on that pernicious old man. He entered the small hut across from the yard in which I noticed a few young men dressed in brown next to the CKC guns leaned to the wall. I guessed they were local militia. He whispered to the ear of one man and the man looked at me. I must be on top of the situation. I saluted the potatoes group and proceeded to the guerilla post. When I crossed the rice yard, I bent down picking up one rice stem and chewed the grain in my teeth. I knew they were all monitoring me closely, not missing any movement. I kept acting leisurely in the yard kidding with the group that they were jumpstarting things. We all burst into laughter. I entered the hut nodding to the guerilla men. Seeing my easy attitude, one of them may be the chief picked up a ceramic teapot with a nicked spout and pour tea into three crassly cups saying, "Comrade, have a drink". I raised

the cup and grabbed the teapot pouring another one after gulping the first cup, mumbling to myself, “It was the fault of Dat. I did say that I could not take it any more and he went on pressing me. Now I am so thirsty and I even missed my appointment”.

The militia chief (my guess, he was the one who spoke in the group), about 25, looked at me hesitantly and said, “I did not feel it right, but please comrade let us verify your papers”. Displaying a jovial face I got the wallet from my back pocket saying, “I praise your alertness comrades”. I pulled the pass out, leisurely, just to let them perceive the cover of my military service certificate and other papers. He took my pass and checked it while I distractively pointed my finger out saying to the other two, “This year it looks like our area is much better off than last year”. The other man seemed indecisive. To say the truth my entrails were all knotty, not feeling sure of whether the fabricated papers looked quite authentic. Not missing any indication of their attitude, I looked out to the yard. I saw him talking in mute voice to another militiaman about something like the hamlet chief to which the answer sounded like he is not home. Then I heard the words out of his office and Sunday and very scantily the name Phong. When I about faced he smiled looking uneasy and saying, “Now comrade, I suggest you to follow this man to see the Commissioner”. With bright eyes, I stared asking him whether I shall go seeing Mr. Phong? He also opened widely his eyes and nodded, somewhat perplexed. I turned to the militiaman grabbing his hand and pulled him out saying loud, “Let us go now, I had planned to see him”. My attitude loosened the tension. The man with my paper in hand walked in front of me with no weapon. So the situation became less critical. I managed to keep talking friendly with him with the aim to inquire on the exact localities, village, district and province names. At times the ready question stayed buried in my throat because I was so afraid to expose my butt. The footways in the village were desert and forlorn with here and there some shaky and grim thatched huts among the bamboo hedges. My heart was beating up like drumbeat in a village festival.

The man entered a wooden gate. I saw a brickyard and an old woman in brown skirt sweeping with a rice broom. Two nice looking thatched houses adjoined in L shape were neat with bricks edged verandah, completely different from the other huts. A tiny black dog, tail wagging raced out barking. The elderly woman raised her face looking at us through her blinking eyes while silencing the dog. I rushed to her putting my hand on her shoulder and I talked to her in a very warm tone, “Ma’am do you remember me, are you fine this time”? I talked loud to let the militiaman hear. The old woman directed her bleary-eyes towards me unsteadily saying, “Hi, I am greeting you coming for a visit”! During that time, all my attention focused on the attitude and gesture of the guerilla man, saying to myself that he was keeping my life in his own hands. He walked up and entered the room. I asked her whether Mr. Phong was still asleep? Slowly and stressfully she said, “He had a long meeting last night and was home only very late”.

I went in immediately to be on top of the situation. Seeing a tobacco pipe I rushed to it and pulling out the pipe reed tube, I was rolling in my fingers a pinch of tobacco when I saw a man coming out. He was about 35 with off pale complexion wearing an off gray military short, bare footed, under an off-white shirt. Half awaked he was holding my pass. I turned to him, and gleefully stated, “So, you are still asleep comrade? Yesterday I was with Dat and drank too much, that is why I am here now”! Phong awakened fully, opened his eyes, his lips suddenly opened in a big smile and he shook my hand. His eyesight showed a faint mark of hesitation. May be he was wondering where I met this guy before, and realizing that his memory was failing, he displayed his natural composure saying, “I had such a lengthy meeting last night”! He put my pass on his desk and then went up squatting on the chair. The militiaman hearing our friendly attitude saluted him and went back to his post. Still holding the pinch of tobacco in my fingers, I pulled the pipe to me and tried to lightly sucking the reed tube, inhaling the smoke. I refrained from coughing and started feeling dizzy. Phong also started smoking. Feeling better, I displayed a drowsy face and complained of my deteriorating health so that I became dizzy so often now. Looking at Phong pensive expression, I went on with my so damned heart making me so forgetful that in spite of studying hard I did not remember zilch. I do not like to live any more! Hearing my gripe, Phong’s face



turned compassionate consoling that the advance of medical field at present would certainly take care of my malady and that I do not have to be so pessimistic. I smiled with constraint, “To tell the truth, at the bus stop this morning I almost passed out and fell if someone did not help me out. I even forgot and left my hat onboard. Chi, the vice secretary of my group rushed me and even had taken the initiative to get a reference for treatment in Hanoi during this summer break”. After smoking Phong forgot on my pass still on top of the desk and putting his feet down, he said, “I have to give you some money to buy for me 3 batteries!” Patting gently his hand I said, “No sweat comrade! I have cash and I shall buy them for you. You repay me on my return. If you can think of any other things I shall do it in the same time for you”. Phong slowly pondered and shook his head. I very leisurely said with the sincerity of old chums, “On my return I cannot miss here”. In the same time, I grabbed my pass and stuffed it tight in my wallet. Really, I did not even know where this damned place is. Phong sent me off on his verandah. I rushed to the old woman and held her hand, “I am leaving grand-ma!” “Bye, son!” In the future several times thinking of the hilarious comedy, I chuckled, that man Phong was waiting for thousands years to see that “dead-dog” bringing him the batteries.

It is almost noon now. The sun was blinding bright like an incinerator. It was so hot with not a single whip of breeze but I got the feeling of freshness. Just in a narrow time, I would have left my skin there. Even now when I am writing this memoir I do not know clearly which locality it was. On the whitish pathway with no rain for a long time, I looked at all the surrounding scorched rice fields all cracked in a web pattern. From afar, an old woman with a bundle of dry wood on her head was moving towards me. Seeing that there was no soul around, I very warmly saluted her, “My God it is so hot! Where are all the kids for not helping you out in such a strenuous work”? The old woman was even older than the one at the village chief place. Breathless, she complained that all the kids were gone and that everyday she must go to the hill to gather wood for cooking. I took my chance asking whether going this way would take me to the highway, she nodded and I stopped short being afraid that if Phong or the guerilla man inquired on what I asked and if she said it I would be dead. I helped the bundle of branches on her head and very quickly walked off.

Now I saw clearly vehicles going on the road. In the boundless field ahead, a few people crossing to the highway, some carried reddish trunks on their head. They were taking the shortcut to the road. I did the same, thinking at random at the village commissar Phong. Certainly, he was striving to dig out from his brain where he met me before. It could not be possible because there had been no such thing. May be he was blaming his failing memory, perhaps in meetings, festivals, etc, so many occasions he could not remember?

## **SIXTEEN**

### **On My Way to Hanoi**

The sky was clear and blue. Some hints of clouds were floating slowly to the south, seemingly talking that we are going south and we will tell everybody that you had escaped a very special occurrence. Two white storks dived down landing on the field ahead. At some places, there was puddle of vapid water. I put my hands onto it and found a few small fishes and minuscule jumpy shrimps. If I lived around, I could have got plenty for a tasty shrimp stew. Under my agile feet was the empty field exhaling an acrid odor mixed in the aroma of the remaining rice stalks. My heart fully open like the immense field, I walked rhythmically and my head turning back to the water treatment tablets and the canister that Harry provided me. I did not really need them being too clumsy. I started feeling thirsty but I could do away with it!

I came closer to the highway and started seeing some rooftops scattered along it. From time to time, a cloud of dust was like pushing a truck ahead. The road surface was full of potholes. I had to take a detour around on a narrow path in the back of those houses, which were as shabby as the one in the village. Several huts were vacant having a bamboo screen covering the entrance. The few stunted eggplants and water spinach in the mini gardens in the backyard shouted on the pity life of the locals. Right nearby I saw the red and white concrete marking showing on one side Ky Anh 18 km and on the other side Quang Binh 32 km. Oh! Highway 1 now! It had been a near disaster. May be during nighttime they fouled up and threw me in the wrong place? Alternatively, perhaps they were so scared and just dumped me off quick? I had to go off on my own, facing all kinds of risks. Was that my own business facing all that danger?

Seeing a tiny stall with a 11-12 year old girl selling tea and a few bananas with some peasants putting their baskets at the front, I naturally walked in. I bought one sugar cane portion and two bananas. I leisurely peeled the fruits and quickly disposed of them. Having not eaten for many days I wanted to eat all of them. Anyhow, I did not want to arouse the curiosity of everybody. Besides I looked up and saw the all cracked wood sign on the wall displaying the red slogan, "Beware of dishonest people, spies and protect the national integrity". While chewing my sugar cane I contemplated the sign. For the first time I had shopped in the communist land! At time, one car passed by and went through. I remembered that during an interview with a new border crosser in the Gia Dinh refugee's camp he told me that trucks would not take customers on the way. Then if you waved for a stop, it would show you were not from the North. Out of a few rickety busses, all others were Army, either GMC, Molotova or command cars.

It was 02:00 pm, I moved on and it was so hot. There was not a single shade tree along. Both sides were a few bushes covered with grey dust. Heat went up from the road surface. I just walked with no hat to the direction of Ky Anh. The little bleary-eyes girl told me that I would have to stay in Ky Anh for the bus to Vinh the next morning. Still I had 18 km ahead under a terrible heat drying me out. I covered my head with my towel striving ahead in that flesh and skin-burning furnace. I recollected now that in my geography class I had learned that in the region of Ha Tinh, Quang Binh and Quang Tri, from May to August each year the Laotian wind from the Annamitic Mountain Range would be so hot to dry out all leaves. After 2 km, I saw a lone big tree shading a large area on the roadside. Its shade swung back and forth like welcoming weary travelers. There was already one woman, 25-30 years old, resting next to her two empty baskets and the carrying pole. Her square black shawl holding her long hair made her complexion still darker. Taking out my towel to wipe off my sweat, I sat down on my sandals about 2 m from her. I was quiet waving my towel staring at the vine hedge at the front of the house cross street. There were quasi no leaves left leaving the thin reddish twirling vine in an agonizing posture.

The woman seemed looking at me saying, "It is too hot"! Then I turned to her and watched her tanned hand caressing her hair lock. Her lips seemed hesitantly smiling like saying welcome to a stranger. Looking ahead, I impersonally said, "that heat is desiccating your body"! Just the two of us, the road all desolate and may be she felt that I was some what open minded, she shyly looked at me and went on, "Life is so hard and strenuous"! A little surprised I stared at her. She bent down lightly to grab her small dirt brown towel from her bamboo pole to wipe off her perspiration and faced me, as for probing, "When will the people be off hardship? All the crops must be given to the co-op while we eat dirt"!

The conversation put me in the cadre role to explain, "Our living is hard now because we are going through a period of belt tightening to build up socialism. So everyone must bear the hardship". However, she still displayed anxiety in her eyes and added, "Then where does all the rice go"? There was no way to back out and I followed the same path, "Ha! We do not have capability to make machines and must exchange rice for them. Besides, we must fulfill our international duty helping the people of our brotherly nations, do we"?

Then a man riding his beaten up bicycle from the direction of Quang Binh came by, miscellaneous rusty parts hung in the back of the cycle. His attitude and appearance did not indicate him as a communist member. I still sat motionless distractively gazing to the faraway horizon. He stopped and took a while to park his old bike. He took off his jockey hat all blackened with grease and dirt and perhaps as old as his bicycle, to use as a fan while exclaiming “too hot”! His accent was heavy and unintelligible. The woman raised her voice asking whether he is from Quang Binh. Nodding in agreement he said, “I am going to Vinh”. Hearing that I quickly asked, “So will you bike all the way”? Not even looking at me, he just inspected his nicked paint and rusty means all dusty and having only one brake pad left he shook his head and slowly said, “No, I will stay overnight in Ky Anh and shall board the morning bus to Vinh”. Feeling glad to have a company, I hurriedly told him that I am on my way for treatment in Hanoi and shall transit in Vinh too. The woman stood up saluted the cycle man and me and gingerly walked away. After a long distance she turned into a small path balancing the baskets up and down, the man also was up on his feet. He said briefly to me, “I am going ahead, may be we shall see in Ky Anh” If it was in Saigon I would have asked him to give me a ride or I could bike for him. Nevertheless, looking at his antiquated machine, which would be barely enough to take him, I smiled and said, “Of course, it would be fun to see again in Ky Anh”. Curbing his back, he paddled away on the extra hot and bumpy highway, just the image of the “socialist country in the plenipotentiary life of all mankind”!

Now by myself, there was not a single soul on the roadway. I did not want to go on since constant rubbing of my sandals gave blisters to my feet. I kept looking at the two sides of the road. Ha Tinh is really poor and hard. The rice plants were only 30 cm high due to scarcity of water and the sandy soil. Each plant had only about four to five grain stalks. The farmers here shed one bowl of sweat for each bowl of rice. Anyhow, they could only get one tenth of that bowl under the devilish supervision of the communists. There was not a single tree along, solely here and there a few dwarf bushes. I kept crawling in them to shelter from the harsh sun. It is such a terrifying land where even grass and wild vegetation would not grow! While I was resting under a bush, I heard a rubbing noise like someone was throwing a small pebble into the next bush. I stared out watching around. In this scorching heat, there was no one but I had to find the source of the noise. I crawled to the next bush and probed in with my hand. Suddenly a brown bird the size of small squab sprung out shakily flipping its wings. I jumped on it and caught the bird breathing quaintly and its beak bleeding. Seeing that it was not injured and perhaps under the dreadful heat it was unable to fly on to a water spot, I wrapped it in my towel and took it along.

Two more kilometers, I came to a bridge and looked down to see what looked like a small stream. Both the bird and I needed water; I carefully waded down looking up to the bridge. Perhaps during the rainy season this would be a full size river. I washed my face, took a gulp and gave the bird a drink. The more it drank the livelier it became. Anyhow, I did not know why it did not fly away and I had to take it along until almost close to Ky Anh. The sun was setting behind the mountain range. At random, I saw a few people out. I came across with a young child 9-10 years old, his feet all caked with mud and holding in his hand the rope to a skinny buffalo. I hollered and showed him the bird. He looked for a little while and shook his head. It was strange to witness the attitude of such a young poor kid. I had to take it along for a short while when I came across with a farmer carrying his two empty and covered baskets walking gently from the opposite direction. I showed him the bird asking whether he would want it. Looking at me to make sure of my sincere gesture, he nodded and accepted the gift.

I did not have any thought of the bird. I was always a nature buff and having an innate tendency for fun and kidding I ran after the bird and caught it even though I was still on enemy territory. Later on while in prison, my friends said it was a good omen that you gave it away. If you ate it, you would have been dead. People always said stay away from “fallen birds and jumping off fishes”! Personally, I never believed in that superstition. With my practical way, I always looked at things from a scientific standpoint. Nevertheless, human psychology is very complex. Having sustained a lengthy time in jail through months and years of atrocious misery and pains I never stopped thinking of that poor bird.

Farther I started seeing a few very poor looking thatched huts and a big wooden board nailed to two posts. On the board painted in white over a red chipped and faded background DISTRICT KY ANH. Here and there, a few persons went back and forth on the district street.

6 pm now, there was no more sunlight and the street became busier. I looked around for a boarding house and luckily, I came across with the cyclist I met at the tree close to hamlet Ky Phuong. I felt relaxed walking to him jovially laughing, "Where do you come from"? His eyes looked lost and surprised. Then he suddenly remembered and with both hands on my shoulders, he asked, "So you are here now"? I replied that as it was too hot I had to wait until it cooled down a bit too slowly walk up here. His attitude showed that he is plain honest and a forgetful man. I repeated my question about where he came out from, where his bike is and where he will board tonight. He opened big his sparkling eyes and opened his mouth in a succession of words, "I left my bike at the boarding house. Please wait here a little bit, I am going to the latrine now. I will buy some tobacco for us two. We go to the same boarding place and tonight we shall have fun talking". As a new man in this stranger locality, I felt dumb struck. Being completely ignorant of where to board and the required formality, it was a God given luck to have met this man. After five minutes, he was out and pulled my hand into a small store with the sign "general merchandises store". He paid ten cents for six Truong Son cigarettes. The cost of a full pack was 20 cents. He offered me one, tapping lightly my shoulder granting me a special friendship. I had not eaten in the last few days and after a long strenuous walk, I felt very hungry and tired. I asked whether he had any dinner to that he shook his head pointing his finger at a place inward and said, "I haven't eaten. Later on we shall go there for some meal together". I dragged him back to the store saying, "Can I profit to buy also ten cents of cigarettes".

The boarder-house was two thatched huts having in each one two rows of beds made by assembled pieces of split bamboo. The beds had old torn reed mats and lying on it gave you the feeling of sleeping on a stack of crackling firewood. We tendered our papers to the owner, 4 dimes with mosquito net and two dimes without. Tri said (now I know his name), "let's have one net for both, and save some cash". We went to the state restaurant, the only eating joint for the whole district; I wanted to pay for his meal too. I was still indecisive when Tri asked whether I wanted four or two dimes meals and told me to be in line behind him. Having no knowledge of anything here, I just said to Tri that whatever he eats I would do the same for fun. Seeing that he took four dimes out, I also got my dimes out. Being hungry, I thought that two rations would fill me up. This was my first taste of the food in the socialist world, the uppermost intelligentsia of the human race. While holding the plate following Tri to a vacant table I looked at it and saw three parts of rice and the other part of dried blackened slices of cassava tubers. They cooked them together for a grayish kind of rice with a piece of dry fish about two fingers wide and on top one lettuce leaf. One aluminum spoon was anchored on it and I followed Tri to a corner where on the wall was a big bamboo holder with chopsticks. On the bare tables, there were neither fish nor hot sauce. Very carefully, I spooned rice in my mouth. It was bitter and sharp. Looking around everybody chewed to their content even though most of them had only the two-dime plate. I was on a higher level having fish. Though I was hungry, I still stuffed it in to be in tune with the crowd. My thoughts went back to the other side of the divide where people were awash in excellent and exotic food. Do they realize how the true worth of life is? We have two atmospheres, two life aspects and one common matrimonial heritage! I tried my best to finish the food but I quit half way. I did not want to arouse curiosity, I grimaced holding my belly and told Tri that I do not know why I had such a bellyache. Massaging my stomach, I saw Tri anxious telling me to make an effort. Pushing my half-eaten plate to Tri while shaking my head I said, "I am so sick. If I continue eating, it will become more severe. Please help me out with the rest". After a minute Tri did it. I kept on frowning with my bellyache.

It was dark when we went back to the boarding place and the heat was overwhelming. Tri took me to the general store to buy two paper fans at a dime each. I paid for mine to be square with Tri. We started to become very friendly and when we were in the mosquito net, Tri complained of the jarring life. He took

out from his wallet the photo of his wife carrying two babies. Lying side by side Tri opened up. I knew then they came from Thailand with his parents in 1956. The government relocated them in Ben Thuy, his parents are now anglers and he repairs bicycles for a living. While in Thailand, they had a very good life never concerned with food and had friends visiting and chatting joyfully. On weekends, they often went out taking pictures and had fun. Now, they are dirt poor in a stressful life, having sold gradually whatever they possessed for eating. Additionally they bought a small thatched hut over their head. Tri stated that he likes me very much and stressed that when I will be back from Hanoi he would like to see me so that he can introduce his parents and wife. Then he will kill a chicken to entertain me (in seven years he had incurred the custom of the communist society, to kill a chicken for guest is a very special and terrific thing).

In the morning, we got back our papers and went to the bus stop. Tri wanted to board the bus with me but the ones having bicycles decided to go ahead together after waiting for the bus, which did not show up even at 8 am. The distance from Ky Anh to Ha Tinh is 52 km. Tri followed the cycling group and said good-bye making sure to describe his house so that I would stop over next time. At 10 am the bus came. It was a very old "Dodge 4", shaky, obsolete, may be of the 1954 vintage. It had a beaten up chassis, variegated-mended, no seat and no canopy. We stood next to each other while females squatted down. The ride was so bumpy and people thrown at each other, I was standing next to a Navy man of 23-24 and at times, I had to grab him to avoid falling.

Ha Tinh was such a tiny city alike a district center heretofore, with all thatched huts and here and there a few rat-gnawed brick constructions all blackened for years wanting repair. The Navy man became friendly with me. As I was steady in my role of a sick student of Vinh Linh he would make a perfect companion. In his company Hao (that is his name), wearing a Navy uniform helped me in a strange place and environment and was an outstanding cover. He gave his address in Vinh saying that it is the address of a relative since the military address is a strict confidential thing. I want to be your friend. I would like receiving your letter when you will be back from the treatment. From Ha Tinh to Vinh we became a team and felt relaxed. One time he confided with me that his unit is at Ben Thuy and got instructions to increase awareness on spy activities; the South is spreading spy activities in our country. I asked whether we had arrested some?, He then said, did you hear on the shoot down of the C-47 at Con Co? Nodding, I added, "I am asking about the arrest inside our territory". He shook his head, "how can we know of those things"?

We were at Ben Thuy, I vaguely saw Tri in the small house he described to me. Tri was looking out for me but I sheltered myself in a corner. Hao shook my hand off when we arrived at the Ben Thuy ferryboat. I went on to Vinh at about 7:30 pm when it was half-dark along with a group going to a public boarding house waiting to buy ticket for Hanoi in the morning. Vinh looked so rural. Save a few factories in the surrounding, the city had all thatched houses, all passer bys if not with rubber sandals were barefooted. I queued up behind an Army Sergeant carrying a duffel bag. Behind a small table with a bottle lamp sat a young boy in the 15's checking papers to each and everyone before issuing tickets. He kept squeezing, "You go to Vinh for what purpose; how many times have you been in Vinh; where is your native place; any more papers, etc". People became impatient. It was almost the sergeant turn. Seeing that the boy kept pressing the person ahead with all kinds of questions, the sergeant shouted, "Kid, why you keep squeezing people like that? Are you pretending that it's all spies around here"! I chuckled to myself, "I am just behind you guys".

Then the questioning was less intense. The Vinh station boarding house was also a thatched house with two longer constructions and charging the same prices, 2 dimes no mosquito net and 4 dimes with net. We had the same kind of beds with uneven and shaky bamboo mat. The dirty and full of holes mosquito nets gave out a strange odor from many uses without washing. I was bitten whole night by a swarm of bed bugs and sleep did not come as easy. Suddenly around midnight I heard shouting of thief stealing

things. I probed the small sack under my head as pillow and chuckled, “As a spy surviving in enemy land it would be funny if the sack containing all my needed things would be stolen”! In the morning, they called for passengers to go get papers and board the bus. I was so used to it now and boarded the bus having rag torn upholstery seating. From Vinh to Hanoi we had to get down and walk on foot through the old bridges unable to withstand the loaded busses like the Len Bridge at Thanh Hoa and the Quat Bridge at Ninh Binh. The roadway was beyond comment. It was so bumpy throwing passengers’ heads to the ceiling. I praised the mechanic tightening all the nuts and screws of the vehicle.

## SEVENTEEN

### Meeting Z-5

At 6 pm of 31 May 1962, I arrived in Hanoi. The summer sun just set when our bus was 10 km from the capital. The scene of familiar persons in the “intellectual thousand years” city was there when the bus entered the Kim Lien stop. All the images and souvenirs of my youth rushed out to envelop my soul during the first minutes of interaction. I stepped down and mixed in with the crowd streaming into Hanoi. The sights, the people, the vehicles and banners were very alien. They fretted my curiosity and at the same time pulled me to awareness of my mission. It was true that here in the land of the enemy I must be careful for my own security. Going toward the central train station to exert a few professional observations I turned in the direction of Halais Lake while night was coming down slowly. I tried to go to deserted places to ascertain security conditions. Now I must talk of an innate physical ability that God gave me. The normal span of view of a person is 160 degrees, meaning that on both sides there are 10 degrees blind zones. Therefore, if you look ahead you will see whatever moves in an angle of 80 degrees both sides. Only those having a pair of protruding eyes could do better. My eyes are not protruding and even somewhat deep in as people used to say. Regardless, I have a vision span of 170 degrees, which translates into 5 degrees blind zones. That is why on the streets I always perceived my friends first. During the exercises in Saigon on following and avoiding followers, Brown, Dale and Phan often praised me on that ability.

After ascertaining that there were no suspicious signs I started to be subjective, thinking that from the landing point at Ky Phuong to Ha Tinh I had foiled so many dangers and went through all the risky situations. Phan had suggested avoiding the former streets because I could come across with some former acquaintances or relatives, etc. They would wonder why Binh had gone south in 1954 and now why he is here. Nevertheless, I was too subjective and underestimated the enemy thinking that our staff was too rigidly principled. I had left town when I was a young boy sixteen and now I am an adult 23-24. My face and traits had changed how anyone could recall me. Besides Hanoi has now all the new comers from the rural areas. The sight of old places moved me so deeply that I felt like being sucked and cuddled. From the Halais Lake, I just went on, looking at each house, each tree and each narrow side street. The old sceneries were still here. Where were those familiar faces? Light-hearted, I pushed on to Trang Thi and Trang Tien streets. Then, the Lake of the Returned Sword with the eternal Turtle Tower reflected on the water amid the scintillating images of streetlights around. I turned to Godard, on to Chi Linh Garden and the Temples of Ngoc Son and Ba Kieu. When I passed Philharmonique Theater, I saw farther ahead the sign, “**Boarding House 5 Hang Dau**”.

Being tired after a long walk, I went in for a night’s rest. It was 07:30 pm. The place was a one-story masonry construction with tile roof, walls all cracked and blackened with time. The weak light bulb all covered with dust and cobweb gave a yellowish light. In a corner was a small desk. Behind it was an old man, his reading glass hanging on the tip of his nose, scribbling on a notebook. I talked using the non-polished tone of the communist, “I want one night here”. He answered in a choppy way, “One dong, give me your paper”. I gave it to him at once. He recorded and gave a square 5X5 piece of yellow paper

bearing number 4. He kept my pass for the street security office as required. I went in with the card. Under the yellowish weak light due to cobwebs, there were two rows of eight single beds. Only three persons were there, two soldiers and a rustic looking man. I found my bed and lie down, belly up stretching my legs to assuage my tiredness. I had not taken a bath in the last few days. I took a bath and brushed my teeth to freshen me up. After going to the latrine, I found the bathroom. I took the sack along going down street to buy a toothbrush one dental cream tube and something for my craving stomach. Walking toward the lake, I turned to Hang Dao Street. They sold things on the sidewalk. I bought one loaf of stale bread from the basket of a little girl for five dimes, one T-shirt and a hat. I also got half a pack of Truong Son cigarettes, all the authentic goods of the country of socialism.

Back at the boarding house, some people were already sleeping. I rushed to brush my teeth and I chewed my three-day-old bread. After eating, I gargled, rinsing my mouth and gulped from the faucet. Then I lay down face up puffing a Truong Son cigarette, relaxed and enjoying an exalted moment in life. Under the mosquito net, while everyone was asleep I kept thinking and making plans. The time in Hanoi was so limited with so many things to do. In the morning, I shall go straight to the Viet-German Hospital to see and to act my role of a patient going for treatment. The other thing was that when I was a young kid living on Silver Street in Hanoi we always went to the Savior Lady Church. I do not have a single knowledge of where is Church X at Phuc Xa Thuong. I had a vague recollection of the Phuc Xa riverbank under the Long Bien Bridge where I used to play soccer with my friends. Therefore, I needed to investigate.

The morning after, on 1 June I went to the tramway lake station and bought a copy of the Capital News. I sat down reading my paper and people watching. Almost everyone, from the school kids to the rickshaw drivers displayed color paper armbands with the slogan “down with Ngo Dinh Diem the traitor”. It showed they were stepping up propaganda against South Vietnam aiming directly at Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem. The morning clear blue sky with the bright sun lighting the whole scenery did not erase in me my first impression of Hanoi as an all grey city. From the big crowd streaming in and out with hats and shirts, which were blue, black or brown and their awkward rubber sandals to the dirty mossy houses in need of a new coat of paint, it was just a uniform grey. As for its sounds, it was a deadly silent city. I saw bicycles everywhere and just a few military vehicles here and there, the Dodge-4 trucks or the Molotovs. It was quite different from Saigon where private automobiles and the humming from factories give it a lively atmosphere.

I followed on to Silk Street and witnessed a security man dragging one 12-year-old kid on Cotton Street. People were looking and telling that the kid was a thief. I saw an official convoy of Simca, Citroen and Peugeot cars, the car ahead having Vietnam and Laos flagstuffs They moved slowly through the narrow streets and I clearly saw Kongle sitting next to Vo Nguyen Giap. The Defense Minister of Vietnam was escorting his counterpart of Laos. The following cars had several bombastic generals and high-ranking officers. I thought, “The naïve Kongle was being wooed and caressed by the old fox”. Sooner or later, they would shove down his throat all the salted frog preserves”!

Right the night when I was in Oil Street I had set the principle to assess and review every day my security situation. I pretended buying a lock set so that I could watch left and right and bringing it up to my eyes to look through I was able to observe the 30 to 50 m around. Then I turned in a back alley going to Fan Street. On that deserted street there was a stall selling tea drinks on the sidewalk. I passed it then about faced sitting down on the bench and turned up a cup for a tea. I did not see any face I encountered on Silk Street. I felt easy paying 5 cents for the drink and proceeded on to the Viet-German Hospital. When I came close to the Hospital, I saw from afar patients presenting papers to the hospital guard. I came up giving my pass and the reference paper then said with my long and saddened face of a sick man, “I am a student in Vinh Linh coming for treatment”. He checked my papers and looking up at me with compassion he showed me the way to the internal medicine ward at 50 m on my left.

Very calm, I entered but was still defensively alert. When I turned left, I quickly glanced to the gate for any abnormal things. Then when I saw the board “INTERNAL MEDICINE” at the front of a big building I walked in to the waiting area with 40-50 persons there. Inquiring with the waiting persons, I gave to the nurse on duty my reference paper. She asked for my student card, which I took out from my wallet and handed to her. She looked at the card and then scrutinized me and I stared back with composure. A moment later, she said that for heart treatment I must go to area B across. She made me nervous, why did not she tell me right away instead of checking my student card? Holding my paper, I went sitting down in the back rows. I did not plan to remit the document today. My main purpose was to observe the situation and the activities in a consultation clinic. Besides, all I knew was Z-5 is an internal medicine physician here but I was not aware of his specialist status, intestinal, liver, heart or lungs. While I was thinking disorderly, I suddenly heard faintly, “Is Doctor Tho in here”? It was a physician asking the nurse who nodded yes. Quick reflexes, I mixed in with the crowd in the corner and followed the doctor through a long corridor with so many doors. When he opened door 8 I quickly glanced in and like having an electrical shock, I saw the face of a man under a white gown, wearing prescription glasses, sitting behind a big desk. Though his hair is white now he was just the person in that 4X6 photo they gave me for one-week observation in Saigon.

The opportunity came and I had to act fast. With the sack still on my shoulder, I walked to the end of the corridor. Sometime one white blouse man passed by, no one paid any attention to me. I tried to find a rest room to no avail. I kept walking and carefully slipped my hand into my underwear to touch document X. I finally found it and pulled it out. When I walked back, the other physician exited the door of room 8. I took a bold decision and opened that door entering. The spectacled man looked up surprised. In the room there were three more desks, two of them occupied while the third one was not. The two persons looked up and I said clearly so that they could hear, “Doctor, my mom is till feverish and that is why...”. And as the two returned to their papers I lowered my voice, “**Doctor, please treat my heart at a beat of one hundred twenty**”. I was so emotional that I did not remember how many words were in there. He opened wide his eyes and looked at me, his hand holding a pen shaking. He did not say the code words. I right away knew that it was a shock to him. He waited for so long and now after a peaceful life the thing could have been too sudden for him to hear. I thanked him, got out and faced back to close the door watching him quickly. While he still displayed surprise looking out distractively, I made a discreet sign with my hand and eyes for him to go out with me.

I walked along the corridor to the end because if I went to the waiting area they might not let me in again. There were two alternatives. The first one was that he was not Z-5 or if for any reason the man would not be involved any more with a compromising situation and therefore he would not go out for me. The second one was in case he did not give the right code word; then I would manage the situation and quickly disappear. When I was at the end of the corridor door 8 opened and he came out walking towards me. I about faced, he looked relaxed now his eyes glued to mine. I just walked to him with a more contented face. I put my hand on one of his arms and I lightly repeated the code words, “**Doctor, please treat my heart at a beat of one hundred twenty**”. He smiled saying, “**I only treat your heart beat at one hundred thirty**”. Very relieved, I quickly glanced at the two ends of the corridor, got the document from my pocket and slipped into his hand fast. Looking like he would want to ask something, I left right away without saying anything. When I was close to the waiting room, I grimaced putting my hand to my heart and went straight to the gate. The guard smiled and I responded the same before going to the lakeshore.

I felt mirthful at the surprising success. If when the nurse verified my paper and I did not have to wait, how could I hear the other physician asking about Doctor Tho. Instant luck helps you out in life. A light breeze caressed my cheeks like the hands of a fairy congratulating me. Here on the lakeshore I watched the small waves regularly racing on the emerald water to the shore under the bright red flowers of the



flame trees with the singing of cicadas, flowers and leaves swinging to the summer breeze from the Red River. It was 11 pm. I returned to the Wood Bridge looking for a restaurant for my first Hanoi dinner. Next to the Water Palace, I saw one small kiosk selling beer and sodas with a few empty tables near the water. I felt high-spirited seeing the bottles of Hanoi beer and swooped down on a table. One girl from inside the kiosk smiled and approached my table asking, "What would you like to have"? I answered steeply, "One Hanoi beer". A few minutes later, she was back with an uncapped bottle and a glass having two tiny ice cubes. I murmured to myself, "Today I am rewarding you with this special fare"! Why is the Hanoi beer so flat! I sipped a little more and there was no hint of gas with an off taste. I had the impression that if you mix with water to double it, the Saigon 33 Beer would fare much better. In addition, the cost was 6 dimes with ice (5 dimes without). Anyhow, I just got a little alcohol in my body to ferment it.

I leisurely went to the Wood Bridge and then Ta Hien Street. There were a number of women at a corner. They displayed a smiling face asking whether I had anything for sale. One girl grabbed my sack trying to pull it away. There are no such scenes in Saigon. Perhaps paucity forced people to sell gradually their possessions and created this kind of mini exchange joint at street corners. I said, "Nothing" and then walked straight to the Hang Be Market. It looked just like a rural market, a few wooden flats with scarcely a few bunch of water spinach, celery and potato vines. There was no meat, no fish except dry fishes. Crossing the market, I reached Market Street and saw a small food joint with three or four rickshaws parked in front. While in Saigon, I had the naïve thought about communism. Hanoi used to have so many rich and poor people, the rich being too rich. The poor toiled their whole life for not enough in their mouths. With the communist, they eliminated the rich, and the poor class of servants, rickshaw drivers, laborers trading their bowl of sweat for food would have their fate reversed. The working class and the farmers now must have a better life, emerging from the dark days to the dawn of a socialist era. I had to go in this restaurant to witness the life change of the rickshaw drivers. From outside I saw behind a glass display case five or six tiny plates with either a few pieces of fried tofu or sautéed pineapple slices. I walked in. Along the walls were two rows of empty tables with benches along them. Here is one driver holding his chopsticks, there another one squatting on the bench showing a protruding thing on his short. At the other side tables were three other drivers crowding together with chopsticks on the table asking each other, "How much did you make this morning"? The answer, "Shit! 7 dimes, not enough to pay tax, let's fill the stomach first and manage later". Another man said, "I got a shot to Pha Den for 1.20. It is too hot; I had to buy a drink for .20. I ate two potatoes and now they are gone. Fuck it! Must find something for my stomach and we shall see later". The third man was all upbeat, "For God sake! I hit the jackpot today with two rounds for 1.80. I set aside 1.50 to pay tax. I still have .30 so eating first. Until this evening, I try making 2.50. I will set aside 1.00 to buy rice and sacrifice 1.50 to buy a Hong Ha fountain pen as my wife had wished". One guy gave him a bang on his shoulder shouting, "Aha! He has a new wife! That is the push"!

I went to the bamboo holder, got my chopsticks and sat down in the corner. A woman with a turban went up holding a big basket having a huge steaming rice pot surrounded by old rice sacks to keep hot. All five men stood up at the same time to take one plate each from the stack and moved to where the woman loosened the rice with a pair of big flat sticks. One kid brought out a bottle of fish sauce and a few aluminum spoons next to her. She served each plate about two small bowls of rice with a few slices of dried cassava looking much better than in Ha Tinh. She lifted the bottle of fish sauce, shook the sauce on top of the rice and speared the spoon on it. She served three men while the last two still waited holding the empty plates in their hands. Two other drivers came in and there were noisy squabbling. The woman raised her voice, "What are you doing there men? It is not a treasure pit here! Pay and get out of the way"! I was looking and saw the two men holding their plates full of pieces of bottom-crust rice, eyes rolling and stuffing those pieces in their mouth chewing the noisy cracklings. Therefore, they waited to buy the crusty rice, which was more substantial.

Two men went to where I was sitting hands picking rice to their mouth as if they were starving, their eyes darting to every corner. I kept looking at the glass case displaying some food dishes. I had wanted them. Anyhow, I was hesitant because everyone had only rice with fish sauce. The woman scooped rice into my plate. Then I inquired, "How about those food dishes in there"? She looked at me like assessing what kind of man I was to dare looking for that food. She said five dimes each. "Then give me one". She opened the case and I pointed at the chicken viscera sautéed with pineapple. She saved one portion of fish sauce. The two drivers holding the plates of crusted cracklings stared intensively at my food dish. Perhaps I had a beer before or because of the bitter cassava rice, it was difficult to swallow. I kept scooping it to my mouth because I was hungry and I did not want to be out of tune. I chewed feeling strange watching the others eating with appetite. It was true that I just left a place with all the goodies. If I lived here for a long time, gradually I would be like them! After finishing two third of my plate I was about to vomit. The chicken plate was cold and there were a few chick feathers in the intestinal pieces. I pretended squeezing my tummy; the two crackling eaters watched my rice plate and my chicken dish. When I drop down the chopsticks and the spoon their sparkled eyes looked at me smiling. I also smiled and said loudly, "I do not know why I get stomach ache while eating". The two rush swiftly to my table, one got my half-eaten rice plate and the other grabbed my chicken dish.

## **EIGHTEEN**

### **Father A and Church X**

Getting out of the food joint I felt uneasy thinking of the fate of human life in the uppermost socialist country. I remembered the image of my neighbor cycle man in Saigon. Looking through my window I saw in an early evening the man going home with a piece of pork meat and one fresh fish hanging on the frame of his cycle. He hollered to his wife and his kids who came out joyful and instructed her to prepare right now appetizers while his kid had to go to Mrs. Bay to buy one bottle of rice wine. It was life scenes in two separate environments.

I turned on Oil Street and went along Rattan Street to Reed Mat Street. I avoided Silver Street although my earnest desire was to see the dear old street. Then I continued up to Beans Street and I reached Long Bien Bridge. My goal was to investigate on Phuc Xa Thuong and Phuc Xa Ha. Before going up Long Bien Bridge, I again reassessed my security situation. After being sure that I had no "tails," I gingerly proceeded on. The historical bridge went through so many upheavals in time. It had become so old and crippled through use without upkeep. It used to have two-way traffic. Now only one way went through while the other side waited its turn creating monumental jams both ends. Watching the various type vehicles filing huffing puffing through a bridge as antiquated as them, my mind went to the reddish water of the Red River down under in testimony of our past victory over the powerful Manchurian Army. Passed the Bridge I was in Gia Lam, an active and prosperous city and now as desolate as a district center during winter.

I came to the Gia Lam Church at the center of the city. In the churchyard was corn on one side and rice at the other side with two persons raking back and forth. The all mossy Church had the three doors closed with a diagonally nailed down board on it. I felt sorry and flabbergasted for the Northern Christians. I entered stooping down to scoop a handful of corn under the stare of a 50 years old man. I asked him whether it was this year or last year crop to it, he answered, two year old. After this dries out, we will spread out the new crop for drying. The old man was so open and likeable. He continued, "After finishing raking I'll invite you in for a drink". Five minutes later, he took out a towel, wiped off the perspiration on his face then walked to an open-door house, saying courteously, "Please come in"! Inside there were many religious paintings of the Virgin Mary and the Saints. Looking at him, I inquired, "So you are Christian"? He answered "Yes I am the congregation Chief here". I hurriedly told him I am also

Christian and coined my opportune question on the Father here. He shook his head, “For long we have no Father. The Church now becomes a co-op storage and I am the warehouse ward”. All smiling, I said, “Then it is for the best, as people said *warehouse rich, stomach full kitchen*”! He laughed with me. Seeing that he was affable and plain honest I talked with him on many things and finally I carefully inquired about Father A. He told me that the Father is now with Church X and once every week he will come here in the morning for the mass service. Having the needed information I left at once, to stay longer would not be advisable.

It was 03:00 pm now. On my way back, after the Bamboo Quay I saw one 12-year-old girl clean looking in her white shirt. I asked her on the location of Church X. Pointing her finger out she said, “If you turn to the direction of Quan Thanh you shall see it”. As it was Wednesday the Church deserted, I just passed by to see. I saw flowers planted in the courtyard and they closed all three doors in the back. There were a few young students around reading their class books. I went in to see in one corner of the flowerbed an old man dressed brown. He meticulously picked weeds under the laurels and roses. I approached one boy stooping down looking at his math book and said, “You work hard, don’t you”? They all smiled responding, “Because it is close to examination”! They were ten grade students. Looking at their geometry and algebra books, I realized that they were one year behind our southern schools. I said goodbye and went out. Seeing the gardener, I raised my voice asking, “Are you weeding”? He smiled at me; I squatted down holding up one rose saying, “This flower is so beautiful”! He responded that next spring, under the spring mist they would be truly astounding. Right on, I asked, “Is Father X in”? Shaking his head, he told me that the Father went out since this morning and might be back any time now.

Glancing to the deep alleyway, I reversed distractively to other matters. About five minutes later, I heard the sound of a motorbike roaring through the gate. I asked the gardener whether he was Father A and got his nod. The Father in his black robe, with a crew cut, displaying his rosy healthy complexion was slowly riding in. There were few motorbikes on the streets save the military or security ones. Therefore, the Father must have some connection to secure gas for his 2-cylinder motorcycle. I asked the gardener a few more questions on flowers and plants and then filed out until next time. I turned to Dong Xuan Market when it was six. Along Sugar and Paper Streets, there was a crowd of busy pedestrians. I stopped at the People Bookstore. Since my school days, I always admired the poets and the writers with the conception that they are vanguard thinkers shaping to perfection the mind of the people. The foremost symbols of an era prior to my time were the writers of the Tu Luc Literary Group, the names like Le Van Truong, Nguyen Tuan, Nguyen Cong Hoan, Xuan Dieu, Nguyen Binh, Che Lan Vien, Huy Can, Luu Trong Lu, Tu Mo, The Lu, Tchia, etc. Some of them stayed behind with the communists. What had their writing become now? To find it out I went into the store. It is my alternate mission to find out the trend of northern culture. Through that big bookstore, I found only little new works of the pre-war writers whom I have read before like “Doi Co Luu” and “Bao Bien”. All the remaining mountain of books was about cooperatives, youth organizations, agro-communes...or Karl Marx, Lenin, Mao Tse Tong, Luu Thieu Ky, etc. I just fingered through a few pages and quit. The culture was so poor in thinking, flat and dull. I bought only “Bao Bien” and “Doi Co Luu” plus the one written by Vo Nguyen Giap “Truong Ky Khang Chien Nhat Dinh Thang Loi”. They served my cover and fed my curiosity. With my secret pencil, I will write down the necessary details. Then I went to Fan Street for dinner. I stayed overnight at Fan Street Boarding House.

The next morning it was June 3. I had spent three and half days in Hanoi and had completed one quarter of the mission. As usual, I went to the lakeshore, bought a small bread and the Capital News to read sitting on a cement bench. I learned from the old gardener in Church X that at 5pm the Father would be at the Church to conduct his weekly confessional. There was plenty of time left. Thinking of the Opera House and the elegant Trang Tien Street where stores have European style, I stood up watching all faces in a 100m radius around for security purpose. Going to the direction of the former Information Office I turned in a narrow alley then to the Toad Garden where I sat down on a stone bench. With my

professional ability, I again watched out for any unusual elements. Relaxed, I returned to the lakeshore, passed the Post Office and back to the elegant Trang Tien. Suddenly I witnessed some unusual events. On the street a few young girls riding their bikes and wearing long color dresses, kidding and chuckling. A few old sedan cars just kept churning around and around. On the sidewalk, several girls walking back and forth dressed in their traditional red or blue “ao-dai” still showing the fold creases as if taken out of a long storage for a Sunday stroll. What were they doing here? Then I saw from afar, on the steps of the Opera House several persons shooting with a camera. Aha! Another communist deception was in the making! If that reel will be shown on the screens in Saigon, Bangkok, their “liberated zone”, or New Zealand, people would believe that Hanoi, the capital of socialism was joyful and prosperous.

It would not be convenient for me to venture out there. Therefore, I leisurely walked to Hue Street, changed to Trang Thi back to the lakeshore to move up to District Street, Drum Street and Jute Street. Hanoi did not have a single privately owned photo shop. Out of the pre 1954 big shops, they had now just a few with the sign “WE DEVELOP FILMS AND COLOR YOUR PHOTOS”. They converted the others into craft shops. The whole Hanoi had only two photo shops, one in Trang Tien and the second one in a corner of the lake next to where was the Fat Lady Food Joint. There was scarcely any tailor shop left. The few existing ones displayed signs “COUTURIER WITH MANY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN MARSEILLE”, or “TAILOR WITH PARIS DIPLOME”. Usually they showed on their glass case “WE DO MENDING AND TURNING COLLARS”. They do not have any more material for suit making, all indications of the dire standard of living of the people of North Vietnam.

As planned, at 04:30 pm I had to go see Father A. I would have to stay there for ten days for recruiting and training until the 16<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> when I will remit document M according to the conventions. I walked to Church X and saw an open side door at the end of the church with a few elderly persons going in. I walked in to see 15 or 17 elderly persons kneeling down among several benches in a large church. I also went up and kneeled next to a white haired old man, murmuring to his ear, “Will the Father give confessions today”? He breathlessly whispered back, “Yes the Father will be out soon”. Ten minutes later the Father went to the altar and kneeled down reciting prayers. Then he stepped down while the elderly moved to the confessional and stood in line. I also joined in line. When I came up, I kneeled down and made the few traditional rites prior to the confession. Then I said at once, “Father, your son just came from Saigon and has a letter from Father Hoang Quynh to you. How could I conveniently deliver it”? After a minute of silence he replied, “After the confession I will be out kneeling in front of the altar then you may remit it to me”. Feeling concerned I wondered with him whether it would be convenient. He replied, “It would not matter, from time to time my flock gives me written requests for special mass”. I saw that the Father was a calm and composed person. I continued, “Father, I would like to talk of many things with you. I would like you to read Father Hoang Quynh’s letter first. Then do you conduct mass early mornings”? He said that tomorrow morning he will give a 5am mass and I might see him after that. I then said, “Father I am afraid that after giving you the letter I could not say anything to you. Therefore, would it be more convenient in Phuc Xa Thuong or Ha”? His reply was, “It is more convenient here”. I recited the absolve prayer and went kneeling at the back row. After the confessions, Father got to the altar front and kneeled down five or six rows ahead. When he finished the rite and made the cross sign, I went up giving him the letter and whispered, “I shall see you in the morning”.

I exited through the portal on the sidewalk. There were no doors and it was an open gate for cars in and out in between two walls along the city sidewalk. I perceived quickly on the right something receding behind one wall 10m from where I was. With my natural professional reflex, I did not turn left going to Coal Street. Instead, I crossed the street and turning back, following a car passing by, I saw a man about 30 wearing a grey golfer beret and a pair of sunglasses. He looked to the right to hide his face from me. Tension started! I pretended not being aware of anything, walking leisurely to the direction of Coal Street, my head calculating and guessing. To be to the point in my judgment I walked to Dong Xuan Market. It looked a bit busier in this early hour. I entered the bookstore again selecting a few volumes.

When I reached for a book in the upper shelf, I saw in a blink the face of that man across from the Market. From my vantage, I could observe all the faces around. Afterwards I followed Paper Street down to Sugar Street, turned off to Basket Street and then to Rattan Street. I entered again the restaurant at Raft Street. How could I have appetite in the circumstance! All my senses strained for hearing and watching and my brain preoccupied by the dark glass man I tried to shove the food into my mouth without any feeling of taste. Glancing out I saw him walking into the restaurant and then another man about 25 wearing a blue worker shirt and riding a bike whom I have encountered in Dong Xuan. Therefore, I had two tails.

I returned to the Boarding House of Fan Street. My bed was in between two others with the two men I have known. There were nine beds with three vacant, numbers 1, 2 and 5 and my bed is 4. Before I took my shower, I had rearranged all my necessary things. I had on me only three documents left, the two for Fathers B and C and document M. After the shower, I saw that bed 5 had a new guest having a military bag. I returned to my bed smiling slightly to him and he nodded smiling back. He is around 26, 27, light skinned. While I was busy arranging my sack and my bed he also was lying down to a comfortable position. I raised my voice, "I do not know why it is so difficult to get a bed in the hospital for treatment"? He said, "It depends on your malady. I also came from Bac Ninh for treatment". I asked, "What is your sickness"? He slowly replied, "Stomach problem". The whole night I was not able to sleep. I just closed my eyes, trying to rest and my mind all-tense with plenty of questions, thoughts and calculations. The enemy or the counter espionage of Hanoi had uncovered me, was it only their internal criminal security trying to foil black marketers and hoodlums? Where, why and when did they discover me?

I remembered that I did not see any tails when I was at the lake tram station at 9am this morning. Then there was the possibility that they discovered me at Church X. It could be from the old gardener whom they assigned there to check on Father A. Second reason was as Father A is a straightforward and capable man they must have assigned agents to watch him. It would be logical for counter espionage to monitor the churches as the possible liaison points for any spy activities. Especially Hanoi being the central brain of the party the problem should be the utmost priority. I had been at the church twice. The first time might be in a moment of distraction of counter espionage. The second time I could have mixed in well with the students working for the examination and easily avoided their attention. This time, in church there were only a number of elderly people. The young must be busy in factories, construction sites or various youth organizations. There would be no time left for them to attend church; so many problems churning in my brain throughout the night without any clear-cut solutions. I realized that to oppose the enemy I must keep my head square and clear. Therefore, I must be strong to fight back and I had to sleep at least one hour for tomorrow.

## **NINETEEN**

### **I Had Tails!**

I got up at 7am. The sick-stomach man was up at the same time. I grimaced, "I thought I had died last night. Several times my heart was blocked and I passed out. It had happened to me at home. I must go to the hospital today. Very often I did not want anymore to live"! He consoled me saying, "Be courageous, Viet-German Hospital will take care of it. Progress in health care has cured so many diseases now". When I asked on his hospital he said, "Being busy visiting a relative I will not go yet". I went doing my morning cleanup chores. I checked the contents of my sack and there was nothing to be worried. Before closing my sack, I used my brief to wrap around the toothbrush and the toothpaste tube with the brush handle surpassing the end of the tube exactly 1/2cm. Between the books Doi Co Luu and Vo Nguyen Giap I inserted one piece of paper the size of a phalange. I tied up the opening of my sack with a flat knot, the long end being three times the length of the short end. All done I gave the sack to the duty desk

and went out. As usual, I went to the tram station to buy a loaf of bread and checked all the possible areas around me. I did not see the two men of yesterday but I suspected a few faces. Then I walked to the Viet-German Hospital. I decided not to return to the church.

I turned on to Truong Thi, through a back alley and a narrow street and sat down on a stone bench in Truong Thi. From time to time I put my hand on my chest grimacing. Right away, I saw the two-suspected young man I encountered at the lake. Aha! There was also a young girl about 18, baby face with two long hair braids at each side sitting at a tea stall about 250m from my location. I had vaguely seen her at the tram station. She kept facing down, knitting. Therefore, they were three in total. I walked into a state store to buy a towel for five dimes and proceeded straight to the Viet German Hospital. I behave like a newcomer, inquiring with the remittance of papers and the way into the place. I understood clearly that there were three pairs of vulture eyes watching any of my moves. I avoided the building of Z-5. I asked the nurses on the location of the heart department. Not having any cardiac problems, I merely sat at the waiting room. I inquired on various things on the heart. I also asked whether it would be possible for me to get a room, etc. When they asked about my reference paper, I shook my head. It took a while and the little girl had found her way in with another man. When I got out of the hospital, as soon as I reached the gate I noticed the man in brown shirt in Truong Tien standing 300m from me behind a hedge. Diagonally across the street there was one rickshaw driver wearing a worker hat and making busy pressing his cycle tires. I had met him in Truong Thi. I have known you man, do not pretend any more! Therefore, they were four now. The situation had become very tense and I could not anymore relax or daydream!

I returned to the lakeshore in the direction of Ngoc Son Temple, sat down on a table of the refreshments joint and bought a bottle of soda watching the lake. It was a deserted place for a relaxed mood to ponder. I did not need anymore to pay attention to my followers. I was fully aware of them and the level of tension was already there. There was only one way, to dig deep, calculate in details and act consequently. The light breeze still caressed the surface of the lake with the red flowers around. Today I had no urge to watch. Without any factual conclusion, I already knew that 90% of chance the Hanoi counter spy had already uncovered me. They just needed to lift their telephone to verify because my name was not in the master registry. As counter spy by principle, they would not arrest me yet. They need tracking me to see where I go, what I do and whom I see, etc. On my side, at all cost I should not let them know that I knew them. I must make them lose alertness and try cutting off my tails. I shall catch the loophole going back to Father A. Being certain that they would not arrest me now, I profited of the opportunity to buy time, create confusion and deliver document M. I shall lure them to another direction. I analyzed and weighed the possible directions and changed them as the real situation came up. One very painful thing for me was I had left behind the box of disguise tools. I had practiced its use for more than one half month. It was not my mistake but my trainer's. They had sent my things ahead of time. I trusted and did not check. It showed lack of sense of responsibility of our personnel back home.

I fully realized how crucial it was at present time. Go working inside the enemy and be discovered is similar to a fish on the cutting board. Having an innate daredevil character, I still felt relatively calm and stable. I went back to the tram station to board the tram to Ha Dong. My goal was to test the level of my followers and to see the scenes of change of a socialist country building after 8 years under their hegemony. I had to show myself as a slow mover being sometimes quite shy. At the station, I pretended reading the newspaper until when the train started out then run after it, clumsy, and looking lost. The purpose was to show to my followers that they had a slow and timid man. It was one pm of June 4. I do not know where the girl had lunch when I saw her standing at the end of the car following me to Ha Dong. Two persons boarded the train, where were the other ones? When the tram was out of the city, I watched in the back to see whether there was any car on the pursuit. My eyes seemed focused on a person carrying straw on the road. When the tram passed, I followed that person receding to the back and

noticed two men straining on a motorbike to catch the moving train. There was another Command car in the back and through the windshield, I saw vaguely the driver. I shall figure out in Ha Dong.

Oh! Here is zone Cao-Xa-La that, according to radio and newspaper reports is a giant development assisted by China. Looking at the whole area it was about a medium size private owned South Vietnam firm. In addition, they called it the Complex Chinese Associated Enterprise! I had seen the license plate number of the command car HN5037. In the vehicle, I saw three suspicious faces. The car passed the tramway. At Ha Dong, I alighted with the passengers. The place now looked like a rural region. Before 1954 I used to come here with my cousin Phan Gia An to visit Tram Pagoda on a Vespa scooter. Ha Dong was then like a beautiful 18-20 young girl full of romantic expectations. Now it was a toothless elderly woman 60-70. How could the ups-and-downs of history have degraded it to such an extent? Going around I saw the vehicle HN5037 parked motionless. I went back to the station to return to Hanoi. Halfway back, at a small station that vehicle passed. I identified three more faces and was certain 100% that they belonged to Hanoi counter espionage. Anyhow, I did not know yet to what extent they evaluated me. How could they mobilize a whole team of seven persons everyday, including one Command car to monitor a shy pupil from Vinh Linh? They had known who I am. The only thing they did not know was what am I doing up here? They would still have to spend much energy and thinking for me. I was back to the lake station in the afternoon. I ate my dinner and went back to the boarding place presenting my receipt for my sack. No need to open it I already knew that somebody had done it. No sweat! Even when I got out of the restaurant, I already noticed that somebody across street was photographing me. There was no need to worry! I had the fun sightseeing while riding a tiger!

I passed my night at the Fan Street Boarding House. The sick-stomach man was still there. I clearly knew about him, having seen him talking with one of my followers. I took my shower and went to bed. He did not ask me and so did I though we just nodded with a faint smile. As I had things completely squared away and settled, I must sleep to recover. It was ten days before the dates of 16 or 18 for remittance of document M. In the mean time, I must roll out my smoke screens. I would lead them to every corners of Hanoi to gather many useful elements on my return home. In addition, I might find the occasions to cut off the tails. Besides, I also showed them that I am a fundamentally romantic bourgeois, nostalgic with the past, profiting to go back to Hanoi for a pilgrimage and not being interested at all with any military activities. With such a diverse plan, I should find an appropriate terrain to cut off the tails. With all the calculations in my mind, sleep was hard to come. When I was in Saigon, I always kept in my mind that to venture out and return with my mission accomplished would be the most beautiful thing. On the contrary, if it failed and I was dead then there would be nothing to say. The worst-case scenario would be if they arrested me and I suffered lengthily loss of freedom and torture and ended up with death. Anyhow, I would get the opportunity to be close to the great men with knowledgeable mind intent to do extraordinary things to no success. The reflections kept churning around leading me to a very late sleep.

The next morning it rained at length in Hanoi. The summer rain poured down. Sitting up and listening to the rain and wind, I suddenly remembered Paul Verlaine's verses "Il pleut sur la ville, comme il pleut dans mon coeur" (it rains in the city, it rains in my heart). I caught the sight of a familiar face on bed 9. Oh! Two guys sleeping next to me! I went brushing my teeth thinking, "They cling tight to me, where shall I go in this rain"? Per principle, they would not arrest me yet. Anyhow, there was nothing sure that they did not do it yet. I must prepare for things off the rule. The letters to Fathers B and C could not be delivered and they did not belong to my top priority listing. I had to destroy them. They would follow me if I stayed too long at the washing area. Therefore, I returned my brush and dental cream to their place and looked for toilet paper so that they knew that I am going to the toilet. Inside the toilet, I probed every corner for possible cracks. The only thing was the keyhole, which I masked with my pants hung on the knob. I took out the two letters, reading them one more time, stroke a match to burn them and threw the ashes down the hole. I had only document M on me, which I secured in a way so that I could take it

out quickly rolling in a tiny ball and flicking out from my thumb in a surprise move. As for the secret pencil, I was quite certain that they would never find it out.

The rain had almost stopped. I took the paper from the duty desk and went out, the sack on my shoulder. I glanced quickly to the window of a house across street to see two new faces of a man and a woman about 30. I walked up to Lan Ong Street, turned to Sail Street and on to Shoes Alley. It was a nerve raking time lately and I had not eaten much. I looked for a bowl of soup. Here is a reputable soup spot of the elegant Hanoi with famous names like Sinh Ky and Tu Ky. When they had not discovered me yet, I played the role of a peasant boy, tight with money. Now as I did not have any more to watch my spending I could go into Sinh Ky for a bowl of beef soup. Nevertheless, the beef soup now tasted flat and insipid. Maybe they used buffalo meat with a few roguish pieces in a concoction of soup made from days old cooked rice. The twisted deep fried bread looked like two crossed fingers. It was so hard possibly made with corn meal. I watched everywhere and did not see any familiar faces. On a slanting direction close to the crossroad of Ta Hien-Luong Ngoc Quyen were two faces of a man and a female I had seen in the window across from the Fan Street Boarding House. They were discussing something. They still furtively glanced to my direction from 200m away. Across street, a man about 40 wearing a military grey short sleeves shirt was busily fixing the brake of his bike. He too never forgot darting his eyes towards me. In the soup restaurant there were already about ten customers before I came in. I eliminated them. Three persons came in after me, one young man about 20 looking like a student wearing a casque. I looked at him through my vision span and noticed that he had an unusual stare at me. On the sidewalk, a woman having a reed bag was bargaining for some ears of corn also watched me from the corner of her eye. According to my professional nose, I saw three persons, two of them certain and the third one was just suspicious.

I got out of the Soup Joint and went up to Basket Street. Then I followed Rattan Street, down on Oil Street onto Ba Kieu Temple. Today I walked up the The Huc Bridge paying visit to Ngoc Son Temple. The temple was forlorn having scantily a few persons with a group of six or seven kiddies running after one another. Looking at the all chipped Ba Dinh Fort standing lonely there in testimony of the dark lives of the inhabitants of the North I turned contemplative. Suddenly I heard those kids swearing and hurling dirty words. Why a twelve or thirteen kid could use that kind of garbage language? One woman looking like a teacher or the secretary of an agro co-op about 26-27 years old interfered, "Please kids, boys may not use that kind of language. Children of the Capital are beloved nephews of Uncle Ho. I just came from the country and I read in the newspapers that the children of the Capital are always the symbol of the vanguard flag of the whole country". I realized that she was sincere and tactful. Nevertheless, at first the kids looked at her and listened when mid course one and then two three of them hurled obscenities, "Fuck it! Shut up" and, "That bleary-eyes whore, what does she know, shit"! Then two of them took handful of mud from the lake and threw at her screaming, "Symbol and vanguard, fuck it, here is my penis suck it"! I too was astounded and walked up scolding, "You boys beware. You have to be polite". Seeing my attitude, they ran away still throwing back monstrosities.

Out of the Temple, I turned on again to Trang Tien. It was 11 when I sat down at Chi Linh Garden and read the Popular Army News. A while after I stood up twisting my body to loosen my back and also to look around and see everything. The woman having a reed bag sat three benches away turning her back to me. The 40 years old man behind a bush watched 200m farther. The couple sitting on a stone bench on Dinh Tien Hoang Street looked at the Lake 300m from me. Additionally, the student looking young man, wearing a casque read his book sitting at the base of the water-jet statue at a distance of 100m. Therefore, they were five in total and they changed agents everyday, they had so many agents! During the last four days, I recognized twenty faces among them the man wearing a golf beret and sunglasses was the easiest one to identify. As for the rest, they did not look like either secret police or information agents. This pack was the most dangerous one, appearing like normal folks on the streets even though they might have only lower standing. To test their ability I walked leisurely around distractively looking



at the plants and leaves. When I was at the student's bench, I suddenly sat down next to him fixing my eyes on the water jet. He seemed uncomfortable and turned around presenting his back to me. Ten minutes later, I went to the former Eden Theater, now changed to Workers Theater. They showed "The Snake of Creba", a Russian movie. I bought a 4 dimes ticket to enjoy for the first time a film produced by the Russian communists. It was Saturday afternoon with quite a crowd. The woman carrying her reed bag was there fighting her way in to buy ticket. I quickly saw the couple entering without buying tickets. They presented something like a card to the entrance supervisor who let them in. The theater was pitch-dark and they would have a hard time watching me. They could have three more persons on guard outside. With a good movie and the big crowd of moviegoers, it would be a propitious occasion to cut off my tails if I had the travesty box with me. If I had that can of cream I would go to the restroom a few times applying on my face and before the end of the film changed my clothes, doing away with my headdress and my baggy putting on my false whiskers and lo and behold I would metamorphose into an old wrinkled different man. At the end of the movie, I would commingle with crowd going to the other direction of my followers and disappear.

This time as I did not have my travesty box and due to my desire to stretch to the dates of 16 or 18 for remittance of document M, it resulted in a miscalculation, which I will only understand in the future. The movie was about a German spy organization inside Poland. The people helped counter espionage of Poland and Russia to set up traps and ruses and catch the whole network. The screen was a bitty 2x1.2 m and did not show any Vietnamese caption. They had one woman's interpretation through a loud speaker. It was insipid showing the German spies naively falling into crude traps. The audience was all-ecstatic praising the film story. After the movie, I went to Nga Tu So pulling all my tails along. Seeing a better-looking boarding house, I presented my pass to rent a 1.50 a day room. Perhaps they got the instruction to let me in without any pertinent inquiries even though my paper was false. I slept better and my tails must have spent more energy and resources. I had bought a blue worker cap and a Thai sandal as the signs when I would deliver document M. I had to wear them ahead as usual and besides, I was tired of the white barbed rubber blackened sandal giving me painful blisters.

After taking a bath, I felt gladdened lying alone in the room, reading the book for a while and then reflecting and calculating. In the morning, perhaps I should go to the Big Church to attend mass. Should I pass by Silver Street to see the changes? Otherwise, I might go by Luong Ngoc Quyen Street to see about my aunt (without entering). I knew that all my followers must submit detailed written reports at the end of their duty. They must also include a conclusive remark whether they had suspicions that their bait uncovered them. Their boss in the office then compared all reports to determine the common points and determine the next course of action.

## **TWENTY**

### **Human Destiny, Animal Fate**

The next morning still with my casque, I left my barbed rubber sandal and donned my Thai sandal. Certainly counter espionage would examine that white sandal but there was not a zilch in it. After exiting the place, I started memorizing all faces or attitudes, not missing any tails. To make sure I just turned in a narrow alley. Then I was certain reckoning all of them. When I came to District Alley, I went into a restaurant for a bowl of "pho" soup. Then I pretended forgetting my casque, which would fall in the hand of one of my tails for the Hanoi Office.

When I reached the Cathedral, I touched my head seemingly remembering the casque, I returned to the restaurant. I would pretend regretting my loss and went back to the Church. It would be a small part from my game as an absent-minded man. It was Sunday and the Cathedral had only a few persons. At

the end of the church, only one side door was open. Inside there were about sixty, seventy people mostly elderly plus sixteen or seventeen young persons and children. In a desert Church under a dim light with most of the doors close, I recollected my childhood with emotion when I also went here for religious services. The scene was alive with drum beating and bell ringing in the prosperity of the Northern Christians. Looking at the people curbing their head and murmuring their prayers my mind turned suddenly to the poem “Remembering the Old Thang Long” of Ba Huyen Thanh Quan.

*The old path with the horse drawn carriage amid the soul of the autumn grass,  
The ancient foundation of the Palace under a dying shadow of sunset,*

.....  
*The stone still shows its hardness with the years and moon,  
The face of the water frowns with the painful changes,  
Thousands years looking through the antique mirror for past and present,  
That scenery and the people of present dragged in a long journey.*

Looking at it I also felt my heart broken like you Madam in the old time, the scenery, two periods and one soul. After the mass, I leaned on the iron fence at the statue of the Madonna in the center of the churchyard. Among the elderly, silently filing out I perceived my aunt, Mrs. Doc Can. She was a widow when I was not born and she adopted a child. She stayed behind with a few houses in Silver Street and Luong Ngoc Quyen by power of attorney from her siblings. Anyhow, at present the communists let her live in a small house on Luong Ngoc Quyen while all other constructions fell under the authority of the Housing Directorate. My aunt still looked fat though her hair had changed color and her skin wrinkled. When she passed me she saw me just like all others passersby. I looked at her in a long stare and suppressed my emotion.

I followed Ly Quoc Su Street to Cotton Street and then to Jute Street. I saw a militia girl wearing a brown shirt and a black pantaloons tied to her ankles. A CKC gun hanging on her shoulder she was dragging a boy 10-12 years old to the police post. When people asked the reason she replied, “This boy and several others ambushed from an alley to squeeze the breast of little girls their age”. I could not comprehend why the morality of a society could have dropped so low. At the beginning of Silk Street, I saw women having baskets with a few bananas or a couple of pineapples running their butts off pursued by a young police agent 22 or 23 years old. That police officer grabbed the carriage of one 40-45 woman who breathlessly begged with her hands twisted together, “Brother please forgive me. I had only a banana hand and two ripe pineapples for sale to buy rice for my kids. I will not dare to commit the same next time”. My entrails felt knotty hearing the supplication and I now understood the sad fate of human beings. I left the scene following Silk Street then to Silver Street. Ah! My Silver Street is here, reminding me of the verses,

*“Be the old scenes attracting old friends”!  
“Whoever saw it and not feeling emotional”.*

I felt disarrayed watching my old street. The same place with the same houses of yesteryear and it looks miniscule with houses like pigeonholes. The streets are so short and narrow! I kept walking, my heart laden. I was close to Tan Hung the sign was removed and the two words Tan Hung painted on the wall had faded. Glancing inside I saw bamboo screens dividing it into separate compartments with strange peasant women. Therein I perceived sister Thuan the former 1952 Beauty Queen of Silver Street attracting so many talented beaux of Hanoi. The girls of Silver Street always had the reputation of beauty, riches, as from “golden branches and emerald leaves” stock. In 1953, they elected Miss Mi of Ngoc Chuong as Beauty Queen. Though I was very young, I admired them as beautiful as the fairies. Now sister Thuan looked like a matron mi-city mi-rural hand feeding her baby. In the meantime, Ky her old and bony husband on a pair of wooden clogs were escorting the two daughters back home. After eight

years, here are the rich and famous of the past. I saw clearly that under the socialist regime, the rich became poor and the poor became the destitute.

I came to Bac Qua Market and saw a crowd cluttered in the presence of a police officer. One young woman about 22 to 26, red eyed, was crying and sobbing next to a basket of rice and sand. A peasant farmer hauling a heavy basket of rice furtively sold her the basket of rice covered under a piece of burlap at a very good price and moved away fast, being afraid of the police. The woman having a bargain, getting 15kg while paying only the cost of 10kg plus 2.00 for the basket which the man did not dare to take back under the control of the police. Police was everywhere and it was risky to check the content. She rushed to pay for the basket and put it on her head to go home. When she reached Reed Mat Street, she poked her finger into it and found it funny. The basket had only the top rice layer and the bottom was all sand. In a dirt-poor society swindler of that caliber is common. It can give you a good idea of the level of paucity and the standard of living of its people.

I entered a restaurant on Reed Mat Street. It was a busy place with about twenty customers eating. I was surprised to see two good-looking young men smiling at me. I faced down to my plate with my lunch thinking why because I had not met them before. My curiosity was satisfied right after. When I stood up, they rushed to my plates scraping off the left over rice and food. I pulled my tails into Dong Xuan Market. This is a well-known market of Hanoi just like the Ben Thanh Market in Saigon. At the entrance there was a co-op stall selling flowers. Other vendors carrying their baskets were hawking flowers, fruits and miscellaneous items. They looked back and forth and ran their butts off at the sight of police. It was illegal to do business. The state had set up in every corner and at busy places official stores selling salt, fish sauce, onion, etc., for ration cards holders at a certain time and day. When I glanced at my watch, it was 2pm. Thinking of the Nga Tu So boarding house having a balcony I suddenly thought that for two days I did not have any bath and that my clothes were all dirty. I bought two bars of soap. When I was back at the place, the manager said that he rented my old room and there was only room 10 left. It was OK for me but I saw it as a pre-arrangement. I entered and closed the door and suddenly when I opened it, I saw along the corridor two shadows quickly receding in room 4. I was already familiar with one face of the two young men. I pretended going to the balcony feeling the drying rope.

In the room, I inspected every corner, rolling off the mat, looking under the bed, checking the chair and the table. In this backward country, they would not have any automatic camera or recording means. The most was a crack through which they could watch or a secret location to take pictures. I had only document M sawn on my underwear and I did not have to look at. I merely, from time to time feel it, pretending to scratch. I searched all the nails marks and keyhole. Aha! Here it is! They were diabolically gluing a 12x8x1.5 recorder under the table without drawer. I felt pacified now. I went to my bath as usual. While bathing and washing my stuff I slowly thought that they valued me too high. I had no equipment and no one visited me. Well if I was for sex, I would have got one of those girls I met at Trang Tien or Paper Bridge for a sexy recording. After the bath, I washed all my clothes and stood up on the balcony under my brief for a few exercise movements. Watching closely I saw the familiar face of the sunglass man wearing a golfer beret. I had uncovered him at Church X. I was indecisive seeing him without his paraphernalia. I wondered why they could go into any house they want to? Therefore, I felt an atmosphere of ambush and scrutiny all around. I distractively watched those sparrows chirping and even the rows of immobile trees seemed having communist substances, the substance of dishonesty, falsehood and deceit. We had the same atmosphere of a nation with a different kind of people and all the things not suitable to me.

I saw somewhat one person behind the window taking my photo. They had taken my photo five times. When I was at the Viet-German Hospital for the second time, they also did it. Why so many photos, perhaps they wanted to compile a file as proofs for future use? Let us go to bed now. If not for my plan, I would have recorded for them my fart or my insults. I was thinking of so many things that I fell sleeping

in no time. The next day I boarded the tram to the lake. When at Leather Street I saw “Pharmacy Tham Hoang Tin” in big type already faded with time and it reminded me of Nun Dam Huong. The pharmacy had ceased operation, the window upstairs boarded. At the lake, I bought a copy of the Capital News, which, as a local paper reported on several small events that the People News or the Popular Army News did not publish. On the streets, I witnessed so many cases of thievery or swindles that you never saw published. The radio broadcast never talked of crimes or the bad sides of the society.

Another typical thing of Hanoi was the presence of loudspeakers at street corners or crowded places such as bus stations or in front of general stores. Those worked only at a specific time when they switched them to the radio station. Radio sets as well as cameras were quasi inexistent. In addition, they must register them every month. If you wanted a roll of film, you must submit an application indicating the purpose or the endorsement of an official bureau. One thing worth mentioning was the presence throughout Hanoi of bamboo rods pointing up like spines of a porcupine. Those are the antennas linked to the tiny galena receivers, giving access to the Hanoi station. At the lake, though it was not a necessity, I still had the professional habit of checking all faces around. I saw again obliquely at the ice cream joint in front of the Water Palace the 18-year-old girl with two hair braids. I looked at her round rosy face. I did not understand why she ventured into counter spy work; I will lead her to the zoo now. Through her, I knew how the Hanoi counter spy conducted their operation. They scheduled their agents so that the one following me now will not be back until at least one week later. That was to avoid the bait suspicion. Up to present time, I encountered in total forty persons.

I boarded the tram to the Zoo. I slowly walked around like an easy man sightseeing. I intended to visit Nung Hill, supposedly the burying site of the Manchurian barbarian pirates like the Dong Da Hill in Thai Ha Ap. Scattered around were a few merchants selling goodies. The whole Zoo had only five or six cages. I went to the tiger cage, the busiest place where about ten persons with children were watching the King of the Jungle sleeping. It drew me back to the famous poem of The Lu titled “The nostalgic Tiger”. Suddenly a big roar shook leaves and branches, the tiger sprung up, mouth panting. The kids cried and the 18 years-old braided girl, became all white with fear. The tiger smelled a horse fighting with the man holding the harness. I looked at the braided girl and she blushed turning her face away. When I directed my eyes at the horse, I saw two lovers in a romantic embrace but still glancing at me susceptibly. In a small house next to a refreshment joint, at a table in the corner, I saw the man with sunglasses and golfer beret sitting smoking his cigarettes in front of a full glass; in addition, there was a man under the grey Army uniform, leaning his leg on his bike, looking at the lake 100m from me. I climbed the Nung Hill facing the Buoi Lycee thinking of all my friends, my relatives and the other members of the Directorate. Did not they know that I was on the enemy cutting board, being tense to the minute confronting them? Did they forget about me advancing lonely on the road to darkness? My subconscious laden, I sat down on the lawn edge, listening to the murmuring breeze through branches.

I went back at 3pm and did not bother to take the tram. I slowly ambled along Quan Thanh Boulevard, hearing the staccato of the braided girl’s clog. It came to me kidding, trying the ability of the girl. I walked slowly on a deserted street while her staccato walk still followed. At a location with a wall built along the sidewalk and about 30m there was a cross street. I walked close to the wall and suddenly sped up hearing the more pressing sounds of the clog. At the street corner, I turned and hid myself behind the wall column, leaning to it, one hand on my chest and the other covering my eyes as if I were dizzy. Too surprised the girl ran up to the corner believing that I turned that way. Now as I disappeared completely she was flabbergasted stepping out to the road, her eyes wide opened and she spanned up and down street. It was enough for me to judge her ability; I emerged a little bit to be natural, my face still grimacing and my hand still massaging my chest. When she saw me, her eyes turned sparkling like rejoicing. I slackened dragging my feet along that street and sat down on the bench of a tea-vending joint, turning up a cup for the vendor to pour me some tea. I drank slowly, my head down like a sick man. I pulled one of my legs out of the bench and about faced in a sudden, leaning my back against the table. In the door of

the opposite house, the braided girl was watching me. On a hurry, she raised the newspaper to read, hiding her face. The sorry thing was that no one knew how she read, the paper being upside down. I regretted my action, being so fast while acting sick man. I wondered why they could go into any house, did everyone know that they were secret agents; did they have a special sign so that they could enter any place?

I turned to the direction of Dong Xuan Market. As I was close to the day for document M, I must visit Ngoc Son Temple and The Huc Bridge as a habitual visitor. Moreover, I had to check the location to see the convenient place to remit the document. It was 4:30 when I was at Dong Xuan Market. I did not see any police officer; I saw a group of people pointing fingers at six brand new cans of Nestle Condensed milk each can slightly split open containing muddy liquid. One man all ruddy directed his voice at the crowd shouting, "If I caught you I will break your neck"! I heard vaguely that the thief wetted the can, peeled off the label, punctured two small holes and got milk out to refill it with mud. He afterwards plugged the holes with wax and reapplied the labels. It was common a thing in Hanoi.

When I reached lakeshore, the sun setting already spread its elongated rays on the crest of the trees in the West. The slanting golden darts went deep into the dark holes at the base of the banyan tree at Ba Kieu Temple. A strong breeze blew after a long day of heat. There was a big crowd on the shore. The workers after long hours toiling also stopped by for ten minutes, taking advantage of the evening breeze assuaging their tired bodies. I entered the Lake General Store. This was a big three-story building formerly belonging to a family going south. They remodeled it into the largest department store of Hanoi. I wondered why so much good merchandise displayed in the showcase had price stickers but included a small sign saying not for sale. I went up the staircases to Floor 2 and 3 and came across with a few foreigners, may be from the USSR or the European Socialist States. Perhaps the communists had shared the good things between themselves and the display was just a propaganda ploy, miscellaneous merchandises were plentiful. A loudspeaker always reminded customers of thievery. In one half hour, I saw a person screaming for a stolen wallet. On the second floor, there was a run for a pickpocket. I also touched at my wallet; a spy having his wallet stolen, would that be funny! I was quite tired and stopped by Wood Bridge for dinner before going back to the boarding house. Before going to bed, I probed under the table. The recorder was still there. Had they changed the tape yet? I shall know in the morning.

## **TWENTY-ONE**

### **Document "M." - Who Is The Contact?**

The next morning was 14 June. I had one day left before the rendezvous. I shall go to the lakeshore again and before going out I checked that recorder. They were so subjective thinking that I was not aware of it. They repositioned it with new tape and glued it 3cm off the last mark. Out on the streets, Hanoi had a very nice day, no rain, not too sunny. The air was so mild whetting you up. It was so nice having such a day in the very torrid summer. I again walked to the lakeshore to feel near with nature. The light breeze of the early summer morning caressed my skin. I knew that Hanoi counter espionage was pondering all kinds of questions about me. All they were aware of was that spy was ambling all days, not seeing anyone, not entering any office, just like a sightseeing tourist. To further my well-planned future, I rhythmically walked from the Water Palace, along Le Thai To Street to Truong Thi, my eyes spanning the scenery dreaming like. When I came to a flame tree on the shore, I saw two big rounded stones on which I used to sit fishing shrimps. Standing in front of them I meditated for a while as if I was longing for a cherished past and then stooped down touching the stones. I directed my eyes from the base of the tree to the clutters of red flowers, the flowers of my school days reminding me of two verses of an unknown poet:

*“Here comes the far-fetched season of flame trees flowers”,  
“Here is the young love, my love tender for you”.*

I picked up one petal flying down with the wind and opened my book to press it between pages. I knew that there were 10 eyes watching the minutest of my gestures and submitting their report. On his desk, the boss would feel crazy on a spy risking his life to penetrate Hanoi for preserving a flower petal in his book! After Truong Thi I walked slowly to the Post Office. Two girls sitting on a stone bench smiled and made sign with me. I knew they were prostitutes seeking patrons. Anyhow, they did not know that I harbored pestilential germs putting them into jail farms if they ever connected with me! To save them from that risky venture, I took on a rigidly serious face and went straight on. I went up the The Huc Bridge, entered the Pagoda onto the base of an old ficus tree and climbed out to a big branch over the water surface.

I remembered that on 14 July 1953 the French and the National Army (under French Union) celebrated the French Bastille Day in Hanoi with an exhibit of several weapons and ten brand new Molotova trucks. On the water there were ten landing craft noisily slicing the water while airborne parachutists dropped from the sky. The scared off old turtles rushed to the old trees behind the Pagoda. Old and young alike emerged their rounded head, bare black with yellow lips. All the kids of Hanoi ran to the lake to touch the head of the turtles. On my way out I stood on the bridge for a while looking at the waves on the surface of an emerald water as if they were angry to see the country in the hands of a bunch of hoodlums. I had wondered why the lake water was that green? The answer was that under the lake was a big copper ore mine and if you mined it half of Hanoi would be no more. Out to the start of the bridge I looked at the T shape space between the bridge and the Ba Kieu Pagoda where old erudite men used to write calligraphic characters banners and chess masters set up their chess tricks challenging passersby. The old scenes were here but there were no more old faces. The only familiar image was the sight of the lover’s couple I have seen before in Leather Alley, still interlaced in an intimate posture on a cement bench.

Not caring about them, I turned to the Toad Garden looking for a convenient location for the remittance of document M on the agreed upon days. After a while, staring around I found the handy place. Then I walked to Dinh Tien Hoang Street and rode the tram to Bach Mai. I passed the former Majestic Theater now renamed August Movie House showing “The Dirty Face Girl” of Romania. I had seen the French produced version in Saigon. I thought about viewing it to compare. Anyhow, I stayed in the tram straight to the Evening Market. The streets here were dusty and full of potholes and garbage. The sad sight, the Hanoi Movie House was even more desolate with a few old torn posters on the wall and a few kids playing at the front. I turned into the Flea Market to witness complete chaos with all kinds of people commingled disorderly while a number of yellow uniformed police agents and several wearing red armband persons busying in the mix. Regardless, thievery and swindles still abounded. Here a police officer was writing a report on a stolen bicycle that a co-op Chief had bought by mistake. There a militiaman was dragging through the crowd one handcuffed 20 years old thief. During my struggle through the crowd, I suddenly clasped the shoulders of one of my tails who took off much discomforted. I was certain that when he submitted the report to his superior he would give him a real headache.

Back to Sail Street for dinner, I saw a boarding house close by and rented a room for 1.20. The next day, on 15 June I did not feel good and decided to take one-day break. Anyhow thinking of the next day as the conventional day for document M, I must go out as usual so not arousing my tails attention. I then boarded the tram to Paper Bridge and ambled in Lang Pagoda. It had become a desolate place while in the past it pulled in all the cream of the Capital City during festivities amid convoluted smoke of incenses burning. Anyhow, at the base of an old mango tree or behind the hibiscus hedges were the despised faces of the communist enemy. It suddenly reminded me of a poem titled “wise and stupid” of Nguyen Binh Khiem. I must ask the permission of the author to change some of the wording to suit my present consciousness:

*“In life who knows who is stupid, who is wise”?*  
*“The wise now will be stupid at the end of his time,”*  
*“The stupid on his time will turn wise,”*  
*“I bet you know who are stupid who is wise,”*  
*“Then you can be called stupid or wise”.*

Close to noon, I went to the Temple of the Stopped Elephants, listening to the echo from my childhood. At the entrance, there were the two stone elephants, one having a broken trunk, still lying there, moss covered with the passing moons and centuries. Looking in, the Temple's blackened rooftop was next to the old banyan trees. Their twisted branches bent under the strenuous exposure to the months and the years. On the left side here and there was new red clay soil amid the vast green of the vegetation. It was the future Thu Le Public Park. Thousands of young boys and girls from Hanoi were pitching their hands building it. In the Temple, there were only a few visitors. Some of them were nature lovers, others sightseeing the beauties of the nation. In addition, we had the seekers of freshness on a torrid summer.

Normally when visiting an ancient Temple I would pay respect to the Venerable or the Temple supervisor after having toured and admired its beauties. Nevertheless, I refrained from doing it due to my sense of responsibility and my concern of harming them. I simply went to the fork of an old banyan tree leaning to the ground like inviting a traveler weary in spirit as well as body due to the difficulties of life. I sat there thinking about tomorrow, my mission penetrating Hanoi achieved almost half way. I wished that I could deliver document M as planned. I prayed all the guardians of the nation, the sanctified spirits of our rivers and mountains to grant me their protection so that I could finish my work. When done if my body would reduce into dust spread to all corners of the horizon I would feel happy to sacrifice for the nation and our people under the barbarous hands of the communists.

The day was ending. I went back to the boarding house on Sail Street to take a bath and rest until the next day. I would dress like today, blue pants, white shirt and head dressed with a blue worker hat and wearing a red traps Thai sandal, a sack on my shoulder as per the conventions. I must apply all my professional ability to ascertain all my tails. In the crowded Sail Street, I checked all faces and attitudes of persons around me. I only recognized two familiar faces among the several suspicious persons. I led them to Shoes Alley, out to Ta Hien, down to Silver Street, crossing Basket Street, turning on Fan Street arriving at Jute Street and ending at the Water Palace on lakeshore. It was a zigzagging route with the purpose to uncover all of them. I bought a copy of the Popular Army News and a loaf of bread, finally sitting down on a cement bench facing the Philharmonique Movie Theater. From this bench I could span the whole area of The Huc Bridge at 300m away.

It was fifteen minutes before eight. Chewing my bread I stretched, turned my head left and right and twisted my torso relieving tiredness, I saw two old faces and the two others I have seen on Sail Street when I just walked out of the Boarding House. A clever one stood behind the movie advertisement board behind the entry gate. He could not avoid my scrutiny. I worried somewhat, they used to be at least five, why they were only four today? I rechecked in the crowded street but to no avail, they were only four. Perhaps their office had seen me roaming at random without connecting with some one or without any purpose and reduced the personnel. If during my irregular roaming, I met one, two or three individuals they must have enough agents going after each of the persons. It was only my supposition and not any factual conclusion. Therefore, I still had to be at a maximum state of alertness.

It was eight o'clock; I strained my eyes towards The Huc Bridge. I was anxious and my heartbeat speeded up. Who was my counterpart? Was he an old or young person, male or female? 8:15 I still did not see anything. Now it was 8:30 and I started to be nervous. As per conventions, the period was fixed from 8 to 10. I wanted to be quite far and come up only when I saw the counterpart. Therefore, I would

be on top of the game and observe his/her security condition to act; I also thought if the opponent had the same thinking, then how would it be? In case, the counterpart sat somewhere watching for me on the bridge, then what will happen? With that in mind, I decided to stand up walking to the bridge then along the lakeshore for about 300m. No one was dressed accordingly. Then I sat down on a cement bench. This bench was somewhat inconvenient as a tree trunk masked me from the bridge. Nevertheless, by bending a little I still had the whole picture. I felt so anxious as if waiting for my sweetheart. I read before a poem of which I did not remember who the author was, either Ho Dzenh or Luu Trong Lu?

*“Set me a date but do not come”*

*“I will blame you but just lightly”*

*“Looking at my finger the cigarette is burning away”*

*“I shall say, how much I long for you”*

I was in the same frame of mind anxiously looking at the Bridge, a half burned out cigarette in my fingers. It was nine precise. A sudden sadness invaded me. Had the counterpart met some problem, some mishap? If for any reason, I could not deliver the document I would feel sorry for all my life. Through so many risky situations flirting with death and I was sitting here waiting for somebody who never came. I could not move back to my past location being afraid to arouse my tails attention. May be I should wait until the coming 18.

Suddenly here it is. The counterpart was a girl exactly dressed in the agreed upon way, brown shirt, grey kaki pants and holding the copybooks. I did not see clearly the sandals because I was at almost 300m away. I sat still. She crossed the bridge stopped at close to Ngoc Son Pagoda, leaned to the bridge rails looking down to something. It came to my mind if she had tails then what would the situation be. Our intelligence and the Americans had not thought about the problem. I supposed that she had tails and that if we saw each other then we would untie a knot for Hanoi. The only right solution was to be highly meticulous, not showing anything, be them the blinking of an eye or a certain gesture to let the tails determine that we were having some connection. I pretended not looking at the Bridge, turning my back to it, watching distractively the flow of bicycles on the street. When I passed by the bridge, as if I did not have a pre set decision I just went on looking at the kids fishing shrimps below. I walked down talking with kids and picking up one shrimp, I quickly glanced to the direction of my counterpart. She did not see me yet as she was 50m from me, being at the entrance of the Temple while I was down on the shore. Now I saw clearly her barbed sandals and the three copybooks on her hands. She was about twenty-two; her nice complexion oval face contrasting her black jet eyes, such a nice girl in connection with Saigon was somewhat unreal. May be she was only one mesh of the net secretly sent out to connect with me. Once at a sudden, a man appearing like a city dweller approached flirting. She was upset and turned into the Temple. Watching all my four tails, I calmly walked on the bridge among a few young school kids carrying backpacks. At the middle of the bridge, I stood looking down to the lake. Then I rolled up my sleeves due to the heat holding the half-folded Popular Army News. I was somewhat apprehensive since the counterpart had a grey sack, which had not been according to the conventions. Anyhow, I realized that my sack was also not as convened and there were still the secret signs to answer. Then, I felt easy. As convened, the meeting should be on the bridge. The presence of that flirting man changed the situation. I must be flexible. I also walked to the Temple when at the exact moment she left the corner of the Ba Dinh Fort to go towards the Bridge.

Glancing quickly at me, she opened her wide eyes with surprise and a hint of joy. I only remarked that she became somewhat nervous, her face blushed. Pretending not seeing anything, I focused on the wooden green sign with white characters, *“Here is a classified historical vestige”*. Knowing that she was looking, I folded my newspaper in four and then in eight. One and two minutes later, I saw through the corner of my eyes her slowly switching the copybooks from one hand to the other. I was uplifted seeing that she acted very cool. Here I had a capable comrade and fighter perfectly facing the enemy.



I leisurely ambled out. Two tails were still at the same place. The two others were now moving to the bridge. In addition, there was another one that I did not see since this morning, the student looking man I had seen at the Sinh Ky soup restaurant. Thinking that I would be in the Temple for a while as usual, they moved in and ended up leaning to the bridge rails when I walked out. In reality, in just two minutes, I could discretely show the document. Then I could drop it inadvertently for her to pick up and it would make it easier. Anyhow, I was afraid of her timely reflex leading to more troubled situations and I did away with the idea. I slowly walked to the Toad Garden about 700m away, swooped down to the cement platform where one toad was jetting water. I examined that spot yesterday. It had pebbles with dry leaves of the same color than my document. Moreover, it had a bush with very handy surface roots and the bush hid a dead corner. I leisurely sat down and opened fully the paper on my lap reading and hiding where I dropped my document. I saw her on a stone bench 150m from me with a woman having a long broom. I kept reading, from one page to another. When she looked to my direction, I scratched my elbow where I put the document and with a crooked finger, I indicated the spot. She was very calm. She waited for two or three minutes before she slowly scratched her scalp. How could the tails guess those two random gestures?

At the time, I had an indescribable feeling. I had repaid my debt to my country and I was regretting for something very close and faraway. I also felt sorry with a life on the cutting board of the enemy, dead or alive, I did not know. I am walking out without saying farewell. I wondered whether my counterpart could comprehend my inner thoughts. I was like in boiling water or on a burning fire. A sudden idea came to my mind, what would happen if I did not have tails? I always hated that word "if". I went along to Trang Tien and sitting on a stone bench facing the lake I could obliquely see my counterpart at about half kilometer away. I saw only her shape sitting still at the same place. Had she seen the document? According to my judgment, she had not. Through my observation of her attitude, I knew that she was very cool. Besides, she would never naively go get it and go back to her old place. Therefore, I was certain that she did not yet retrieve the document. I felt pacified and directed my eyes to clumps of white clouds sailing southward on a dark blue firmament. Fifteen minutes later she slowly walked to where I was before, watching the jet from the mouth of a toad and sat down. I was still facing in a 40-degree angle with the purpose to see whether she had any tail. Why it took her so long sitting there? I was upset, wanting her to move on and regretting if she did. Perhaps she nurtured the same feeling.

In the stringent situation when I was in the enemy trap, an idea surfaced in my mind that I wished to say a few words to her. During the passed 20 days, I was so lonely on this cherished land. Only you as my comrade, a co-fighter, though breathing the same air and enjoying the same sight and you were so far away! I wanted to wish that you encountered handy conditions, good luck to glean all the best results in the service of the nation. That would suffice for this unfortunate man to remember during his long atrocious days ahead. It was almost noon; the very bright sun was drying everything. Then she got up looking once more at the lake and walked away scratching her head. She had no tails, I was happy for her.

The summer sky was very blue with a few specks of cloud, the air was clear and the whole scenery was under a vibrant light. I looked straight to the Turtle Tower standing alone like a miniature Bonsai hill projecting its trembling image on the water. I saw two turtles enjoying sunlight at the base of the tower. The clumps of red flame tree flowers reflected on the water creating a beautiful lacquer painting with the green of leaves and the blue sky. Standing up, I felt ecstatic, my heart relieved. I shall award me \$3.00 for fried crab rolls in Leather Alley.

## TWENTY-TWO

### Evasion

While waiting for the woman to cut the crab rolls, my mind went back to Father A. I was sure that he waited for me since that day and I did not show up. If he understood that my quick thinking had saved him from quandary. I thought and weighed all possibilities to go back seeing him. Nevertheless, it was impossible under the tight surveillance of the enemy.

That night I went back to the Sail Street boarding house. I thought randomly on the remitting of document M that Saigon had exactly figured out all eventualities. Otherwise, I would not be able to do it with five or six clinging tails. Now how could I cut off those tails? When in Saigon I successfully demonstrated my ability witnessed by Dale, Brown and Phan. Nevertheless, with all transportation means available while the people just minded their own business it was an easy game. Here in Hanoi the conditions were just opposite. On the streets there were only bicycles, where could you hide, how could you jump up and down? As for the people, the majority of them were still very vague on the painted luscious cake promised by the communist. Besides, everyone should belong to groups or organizations. They were fully brainwashed. In addition, with their launched campaign of spy prevention they all submitted to a volunteer network of watching and reporting on strangers. I thought of taking a trip out to test the reaction of Hanoi counter espionage and perhaps getting rid of my tails. With those ideas in mind, I quickly went into a deep slumber.

In the morning, I got up early and went to the Kim Lien station at 5 o'clock. I found four tails, two on the tram and two others, one riding a Mobilette and the other pulling his rickshaw. Nevertheless, fifteen minutes later I found two other tails very familiar to me. At the window for tickets to Vinh, there was a line of about thirty persons. I estimated that my turn will come at around 10 or 11 am because each person had to record their name and age, present their pass and answer questions. I went in line to know it was for tomorrow trip because if you want to go to Vinh you must register one day ahead. I was dismayed! While in line, one single leg Army veteran with crutches shouted his ticket for sale. "I have one excess ticket that I cannot use due to my gravely sick brother and would resell it". Thinking that it was a preset thing of counter espionage giving me the appropriate conditions to go as planned and know fully my rendezvous it would not matter. I went to the amputee while in the same time another person also left the line coming up. The amputee pointed his finger at me saying, "He is the first one, I sell to him". I knew that in any case I could buy that ticket. The bus came and the helper opened the door shouting, "Everyone on board the bus to Vinh".

More than thirty persons with all kinds of baggage were filing on. The amputee also went and made sign for me to climb up. Among passengers, I caught two familiar faces, one sitting up front and the other behind me. The bus rolled out on the street, which was also National Highway One. A police officer stopped the bus for inspection. He checked all papers, verified the number of travelers according to the number of tickets sold. He also squeezed the driver on so many things. I was fully aware that my travel was too unexpected that Hanoi counter spy had the bus stopped for as long as they could get things caught up. The bus started moving again after twenty minutes. When at the Unification Garden it stopped again and the helper ran with a can to the garden perhaps for water. Five minutes later, he ran out and the driver lifted the bus canopy to fill the water tank. Again, the helper ran back to the Garden. I quickly glanced through a low bush the face of the "Mobilette man" taking notes on a small pocketbook and looking at the back of the bus with the license plate. The amputee man next to me also did not miss any of my gestures. As for the man sitting behind me, I pretended following a bus going from the other direction to look back. I also saw far behind Command car HN5037 that had followed me to Ha Dong, parked behind two rickshaws. I did not know why the bus still did not go. Perhaps they did not have the time to catch up, was the driver also from the organization? Glancing in the Garden I saw the bus helper and the Mobilette

man talking. That helper might also be a secret agent, political, economical and criminal. Why they took so long to refill the water tank? Passengers protested without any result. Finally, the helper was out and the bus rolled again.

When the bus neared Phu Ly the Command car HN5037 passed it. I quickly saw in it four men, all motionless and stranger faces with one man about forty. I pretended watching the rice field along the road and when the bus passed, I followed the sight to the back to see about 300m behind a black suspicious Citroen 15. The bus had a stopover in Phu Ly to take a few more passengers. The vehicle HN5037 parked head out. The black sedan passed. I saw in it four men including the driver and the man wearing sunglasses with a golfer beret. He was exactly like when I encountered him for the first time at Church X. Oh! What a strong display it was? They were eleven agents in total, three on the bus and eight in the two small vehicles. Certainly, they were thinking of the pick up rendezvous to go back South. Therefore, they must mobilize enough hands to catch the whole group. When we came to Quat, Ninh Binh every one had to get down and cross the bridge. A long convoy of twenty vehicles waited to cross. I suspected another Command car, seeing one man of the Citroen talking with its man.

We passed the Skate Mountain, through Ninh Binh and arrived at Thanh Hoa where the bus stopped. While in the bus, I kept pretending dormant with my half closed eyelids, listening to conversations between travelers and knowing that the amputee was also on his way to Vinh. Passengers went up and down for about half an hour. Then the bus rolled again out of Thanh Hoa when the black sedan passed it. I guessed that after about ten kilometers Command car HN5037 would catch up. Then, the third Command car I saw in Quat passing, with three persons including the driver and one man I could not forget. He was around 50 with sparsely white hair, wearing glasses and giving the impression of somebody in a commanding position. Suddenly one plan came to my mind. There were rice fields all along the roadway and there were small paths leading to hamlets farther in. If at a sudden I called for a stop to get down there would be no logical reason for the three tails to alight in the same time. They must keep going another ten kilometers to report to the three small cars ahead. I therefore would have at least twenty minutes to evade. If I wanted going to the sea on my left I would pretend going right and await a few minutes until the bus would be farther out of sight to use all my strength crawling and running my butt off to the East. Alternatively, if I desired going to the mountain to reach Laos I would do the same thing reversely. I did not follow my plan, because I did not fully understand the demoniac communist. I naively thought that they had to believe that I was a person who solely went about aimlessly to sightsee revisiting Hanoi without doing anything as reported by all their informants. Therefore, when caught I would only get a maximum of two to three years incarceration. Moreover, I was still afraid of the hardship of a life hiding in bushes or through jungles, hungry and miserable as a hunted animal. I did not do as I planned and I still regret it to this day.

The bus arrived at Vinh when it was almost three in the afternoon. I descended and went into a state restaurant for food. The city had only little traffic and the troop following me was two Command cars and the old black Citroen 15 with fourteen agents. While on my way to the boarding house, I perceived Tri along with perhaps his wife holding a young child. I pretended to be a stranger turning into another street. It was too late, Tri caught on with me. He tapped my shoulder shouting, "Hi Hung, so you are back from Hanoi, where are you going now?". I was very uneasy, knowing that I would put him in a very dangerous situation. I laughed heartily to let the Hanoi spies hear while Tri's wife approached with the kid and Tri introduced her saying, "That day when I returned home I talked about Hung with my parents and wife. Now go to my place to spend the night. I shall introduce my parents who would be very pleased meeting you". I loudly laughed, "Where did you two intend to go now"? Tri raised his bag having two pumpkins and one bicycle tire on his shoulder, "I had bought those things and in the same time brought my wife to the market. Have you eaten anything yet"? Showing him the restaurant I said, "I just filled up my belly"! On my way to his home, I bought some peanuts and a pack of candies for his kid.

After crossing the Ben Thuy barge, we came to a small house next to Highway 1, which I had seen, on my bus from Ha tinh. Tri opened a small lockset, pulled aside a bamboo screen and rushed me in. Tri looked for the lamp to light it up, a dusty lamp giving a very low light. It was dirt poor with an all nicked wooden platform bed. There were two to three old rusty bicycle chains hung from the ceiling, one broken cycle frame and several pedals scattered. In a corner was a small rat gnawed cabinet holding his tools. Tri took out a broom sweeping the place and got out a torn reed mat for the bed saying, "Tonight we shall sleep here smoking cigarettes and we shall talk". I pulled his arm saying that as it is not yet dark we shall go out for a conversation before going to bed. His wife saluted to go to the parents' house. Tri told his wife, "You go in and I shall stay out here". Turning to me he added, "In there is my parents' place. I must be here every night. One month ago, they pried open my door and stole all my bicycle repair accessories, worth about \$100". I glanced at Tri, very concerned; he was so poor and they robbed him. I handed out to Tri my pass for Security. He said it was not necessary since the assistant chief of the hamlet was a good friend and there was nothing to bother. I insisted for him to go giving it to the office.

When Tri went, I entered the house. It was dark and there were no city lights. I understood that tonight there will be many scrutinizing eyes around and they would mount a round the clock guard. Anyhow, since I did not have any decided plan I did not pay any attention to it. My only concern was about Tri. With the present situation, if they caught me I would have to say all details of the truth, where and how I met Tri from Ky Anh. Besides, in the morning I should visit Tri's parents as normally. One spy would not let the family of his counterpart know him. Perhaps Hanoi counter spy would not suspect him. A while after Tri came back and took out a blackened mosquito net for us to crawl in smoking our cigarettes and talking. I was asleep fast. Through the night, sometimes I awakened to hear vehicles running around projecting their headlights beams. Tri also wondered and I asked whether it would be common here.

I guessed that Hanoi believed that tonight boats would come to take me back to Saigon. They alerted the Navy and the local guerilla forces of Ben Thuy. Regardless, I had not intended to do anything here and I shall go back to Hanoi tomorrow. Tri led me to his parents' house, a three pieces dwelling after a walk on zigzagging dirt paths. Each part was bare and only one had a bamboo screen under a variegated thatched roof. His parents were old, the father squatting mending the fishnet and his mother looking nice and honest. Through the conversation, I knew that they had a very comfortable life in Thailand fishing, but having a motorized boat. Believing the communist propaganda that the country was independent and the people was having a happy life they repatriated. They also had viewed the movie reels showing a prosperous living with people displaying smiles. Besides, during their clandestine activities in Thailand the high-ranking communist men received warm support from them. All the displaced Vietnamese nurtured the same longing for the native country and those who had sold their properties to go home always wrote back praising the good omen in the nation. Therefore, they liquidated everything plus their saving of more than ten ounces of gold they arrived in Hai Phong to a welcome mat of flags and cymbals sounds. They directed more than 400 expatriate Vietnamese to a reception house awash with banners "Welcome home, dearest sons of the country back to the motherland". In the ensuing training for integration into the new socialist society, they had to register all their gold saving against receipts issued. It will be under the custody of the government and the owners could withdraw as needs arrived. In Vinh, they provided gifts to relatives, all happy. Then when they were half way on their saving they required them to give justifications of request for withdrawals for a worthy purpose. Finally, they withdrew the last ounce to buy the house and a small fishing boat.

They now lived a hard life struggling day in day out for their living with a meager soup or rice mixed with cassava, complaining of their stupid decision. They invited me to lunch with them. I refused saying that being far from home for long I needed going back to Vinh Linh. They pressed me so much that I finally accepted. Tri had to race through the whole hamlet to come up with an omelet with one duck egg, a dish with a few tiny fishes and one plate of boiled spinach dipped in preserved crawfish sauce. The big heart

of his parents moved me so much. Tri accompanied me to the bus station. I slipped in his hand \$20., saying that while in Hanoi my aunt gave me \$50 and would like him to buy a few candies for his kid. Tri refused to take it. I told him to save it for me until I will be back being afraid that I would squander all. Back to the boarding house on Sail Street, I was tired, my mind tense and confused. I thought of the risk I gave Tri and of my fate flirting with death, rolling down a deep hole without return. I could not close my eyes.

## **TWENTY-THREE**

### **Que sera sera?**

Worries and sadness enveloped me. I went into a troubled sleep for the whole night. In the morning when I opened my eyes, the sun already rose sending the dawn bright rays through the windows like a transfusion of energy to my body. It was true that a young body could not lie saddened and worrisome. I got up quickly, took my bath and went to the lakeshore on the side of Ly Thai To Boulevard across from the Water Palace. I walked along to the row of refreshment kiosks and bought a bottle of Truc Bach Beer which should be of better taste than Hanoi Beer though still flat compared to 33 Beer of Saigon. At a table next to the lake, I sat down with cigarette and beer looking pensive at the water surface. At times, a light breeze from the lake increased the sweetness of an early summer morning. I felt exalted and clear minded to think, weigh and calculate. Sooner or later they would arrest me and what would I say? Reviewing the whole picture, I decided on what to say and what to hide. What Hanoi had known and what it will know of me? Gradually I built up my case as follows. I did away completely with the childish covers 2 and 3. If I told them, I came by sea they would get me to the rendezvous point and make secret signals for the boat to meet me. I decided not to divulge it for it would throw some of my comrades-of-arms in the hands of those barbarous hands creating pains to so many families losing their father, brothers and husbands. Therefore, I will say that I came by land. Very luckily, I studied in details Highway 1 from Vinh Linh to Hanoi through my Ben Hai observation trip. To prevent any future mishap, when I was back to the boarding house, I got out the small pocket of documents I had sewn on my brief.

The use of cover 4 should be the best, to monitor Division 308 under General Vuong Thua Vu. Being tired with my school education, having missed several examinations and feeling fed up with southern society, I volunteered when referred by a person. Though I was scared, I still accepted the offer to help my old and weak parents with some cash. That was why I did not do a thing while in Hanoi and just going around looking at the old sceneries of my childhood. I would tell them all truth, why I met Phung Van Tri in Ky Anh, etc., what I did in Hanoi, where I went, that is to say the whole thing save the details regarding documents M X and the letter of Father Hoang Quynh. In any case, I must say that I never knew there were tails following me. I naively thought that at the maximum, I would get three or four years in jail and when free I would find my way home.

With such a crude conception of the communist of a young 24-year-old man, I became pacified and began going out sightseeing. I took the tram to visit West Lake, Truc Bach Lake and the lovely Co Ngu Road. I got off the tram at the start of Quan Thanh and visited Quan Thanh Temple. The antique bricks paving the Temple yard were mostly cracked or broken with spaces in between covered with moss and weed. The big desolate yard had the footprints of Bonze Tue Chieu, the patriot whose body now reversed to dust and ashes. Leaving the Temple I turned on to Co Ngu Road, now renamed Youth Road. In the old time, here was the choice rendezvous for young lovers or the relaxing pathway for the easy strollers. It was very crowded in weekends with vendors of the famous shrimp pancakes and beef jerky with julienne green papaya. Nowadays it had become forlorn with a couple of bicycles and from time to time a laden oxen cart pulled by an old peasant.

I slowly walked listening to the sounds of water rushing to the Truc Bach Lakeshore on my right and West Lake on my left. There was still the row of red flame trees amid the song of cicadas. Beyond was Tran Vo Pagoda, reminding me of Madame Huyen Thanh Quan and Cao Ba Quat.

*“The Palace of Tran Quoc amid the tired green grass”*  
*“Reminiscing the old country with pains laden heart”*

A few steps up were Little Do Son with all the souvenirs from the innocent days. Farther, was Nghi Tam, Quang Ba with the familiar guava trees, the native place of the beautiful Thi Lo. The scenery of West Lake attracted the soul of the travelers. I did not know whether my tails admired the natural beauties of the brocade weaved scenery of the national patrimony, the vast expanse of the shiny West Lake surface creating in me a deep sense of solitude and loss.

*“Randomly a barge crossing the river”*  
*“Sparsely the evening clouds atop the silvery summit”*

Dusk was setting gradually, the sun disappeared and a few white storks took off to the faraway horizon. I returned with my heart burdened.

I kept going through Hanoi from one corner to the other and witnessed so many sad social problems, which I did not anymore bother to enumerate. Anyhow, a small thing still engraved in my mind. I was on my way to Van Dien on the tram. At a stop while passengers were climbing up and down, a barefoot peasant with patches on his clothing was hauling his two bunches of dry branches up and set them neatly in one corner. When the tram moved on the 20-year-old ticket controller came making sign for him to pay the ticket, only five cents since it was almost at the end of the line. The bleary-eyed peasant looked at him scary, his hand touching his pocket and supplicated, “Please help me for a short trip; it is too heavy and it is almost dark; I do not have a penny now”. The young ticket man opened wide his threatening eyes shouting, “down now”. At the next small stop he kicked the dry wood bunches out while the poor peasant still supplicated, “I begged you brother, please comprehend me”! Everyone in the tram looked on motionless, The 5 cents was bitty; I was almost ready to pay for him against my purpose. When the tram stopped at another auxiliary station, he descended and I was about to follow him when remembering that I still had tails, I just quickly slipped in his pocket a \$5 bill I had neatly folded up.

## **TWENTY-FOUR**

### **Into The Enemy’s Hands**

Three days later, it was Sunday. As usual, I went to the Lake Tram Station to buy a loaf of bread and a newspaper. After eating my bread, I walked to Drum Street. I went to the Cathedral to attend Sunday Mass. When I was close to the beef soup joint on Ly Quoc Su I watched two rickshaw drivers squabbling on a disputed customer. I quickly glanced at two yellow uniformed police agents walking towards me. My heart squeezed. They were the tails following me when I visited Lang Temple. If they displayed uniforms today, I would have problems. I still pretended watching the two quarrelling drivers. As I had guessed, one man went to me saying, “Please let me see your papers”. I acted surprised and asked back, “What kind of paper do you want officer”? Very polite he answered, “Whatever kind you have”. I got out of my wallet my pass and gave to him. He then said, “It would not be too opportune, but please follow me to the post”.

It was really polite and civilized. I witnessed several cases of police control in Hanoi shouting dryly and abruptly their orders. Perhaps they were not professional police officers and I belonged to another system during the initial approach. I walked ahead, they escorted close behind. Passersby on the streets watched. The other tails looked on with the pleasure of having completed their job of tailing that stupid man and perhaps, the curiosity to see the bait trapped. They escorted me to District Alley where was parked the black Citroen 15 sedan seen on the road to Vinh. I saw next to the driver a man about 40 wearing a grey jacket and dark sunglasses. One police agent opened the door to step in, the other one made sign for me to follow before he went in. Therefore, I was sandwiched between two police agents. I understood that as they saw me rambling here and there without doing anything they decided to jump on me. Anyhow, to act as planned I showed astonishment and asked, "Where are you taking me, I had all necessary papers"? The jacketed man on the front seat turned back and dryly said, "Keep going and you will know"! There was no more courtesy! The car zigzagged through many streets and turned onto a small alley with the sign Hoa Lo Street. Across obliquely was a stonewall seven to eight meters high topped with encrusted broken glass pieces and bare-stripped electric wires. The car stopped at an enormous gate with two massive doors looking like an ancient fortress. From the two small side doors, a soldier-holding gun ran out, checking the paper from the jacketed man and slowly opened the big door after giving a stiff military salute. The Citroen rolled in; the two police agents escorted me through a big yard having flowers and under a canopy of green grape vines.

They led me into a bare room with only a desk and one chair in presence of four brutish men. Two minutes later the jacketed man came in, putting his briefcase on the desk and made sign for me to sit down. He read, "Order of incarceration from the Ministry of Security regarding Le Viet Hung, age..., origin ..., according to the false pass...". One of the four brutish men shouted, "Get all your clothes off". I protested, "What are you arresting me for"? The jacketed man frowned shrieking, "Do not pretend and do according to orders"! The four brutish men rushed on, searching my sack and stripped me down. The jacketed man pointed his finger to my face shouting, "Be reasonable to survive, in the contrary you will die"! Having things pre-planned, I kept quiet. In the small room, they used four very bright lights. They valued me too high, treating me like a top spy. They scrutinized all my things, the seam, the thread, all the buttons of my shirt and my pants with magnifying lens. One of the guys shouted, "Where is the camera"? I asked naively; "Which camera"? They thought that I had minuscule cameras hidden in shirt or pants buttons and they checked them all. The jacketed man recorded each item. I had only a brief on and they told me to get it off; I felt uncomfortable and hesitated. The man pointed his finger to my face shouting, "Take it off before I beat you up"! They all surrounded me looking in my ears, my nostril and my mouth and checked every one of my teeth. It was good that I had thought about my secret pencil. When in Vinh I bought tooth picks and inserted the secret pencil in the middle tiding the whole pack with a nylon thread and the thing just looked like a small nylon thread forgotten in there. The pack of toothpicks was about the size of a thumb and they did not bother. They all looked angry, checking closely everything, watch, fountain pen and my Thai sandal. Finally, one man forced me to curb down, stretching legs while one of them pressed my anus open for the other guy to introduce a steel rod into it. Being so tense lately, I became constipated to go potty only once every few days and my feces became hard like goats droppings. Therefore, when they probe with that steel rod and heard a pebbly sound their faces brightened up, perhaps thinking that they discovered a hidden secret. Anyhow, they withdrew their rod. All the marble like balls of feces dropped to the floor. Being in my curbed posture, I could not see their disenchanted faces when the man threw the steel rod to the corner of the room and gave my butt a violent flog shouting "stand up".

After two hours checking, they found nothing. They threw back to my face a towel, the small comb and my brief. Pointing to my watch on the desk, I requested having it back. The jacketed man stood up and banging on the desk he said with anger, "It is not your watch; it is the proof of spy activity". Pretending to be astonished, I asked, "So am I a spy"? He shouted back, "Shut up"! They threw to me one striped uniform and told me to put it on. I must manage to get back my pack of toothpicks. I acted begging, "I

have very painful tooth cavity, please give me the tooth brush and the dental cream tube". They opened the cream tube to inspect and trashed it, just returning to me my brush. Pointing to my inside molars, I went on, "with my tooth cavity, I must use my brush and cream after meals. Without the cream, please give me that pack of toothpicks". One man threw the pack of toothpicks to my face. Therefore, things were squared away! At about 11am one operative wearing a police uniform with Sergeant Rank, no headdress, about 35 made sign for me to follow him. He walked ahead of me through five or six steel doors. When crossing a small yard I saw under a tree a bare torso man facing down as if he curbed under the burden of sadness. He turned his face up and I saw that he lost one eye. It just came to my mind that I had seen in a Hanoi bookstore a book about the downing of a C-47 spy aircraft showing the photo of the one eyed pilot Phan Thanh Van. He looked at me and thought that I was just one among the hundreds of admitted prisoners of Hanoi.

He led me to a narrow corridor through another steel door with a row of numbered rooms and delivered me to another uniformed Sergeant. This man looked wicked with a tomato like nose on the middle of his face, the two men talked with each other in a very low voice. The tomato-nose man with a stony face made sign for me to follow him. He got his set of big rattling keys from his belt and opened cell number 6, a dark room about 2m square, with two cement platforms about approximate 60cm to 75cm and 60cm high above an empty and blackened floor. In between the two platforms was a 60cm to 70cm space wide and there was a huge steel leg-cuff embedded onto the platform. I was staring in that sinister place when he stroke hard on my neck pushing and shouting, "In"! I turned back saying that as per the Constitution of the Vietnam Democratic Republic, you cannot strike me and therefore if you beat me I will strike back. Seeing my determination he softened his voice and said, "I only told you to enter"! He went out pulling the leg-cuff strut and back in he raised the upper jaw ordering me to put my legs in it. I sat on the platform, slipping one of my ankles in and he slowly said, "The second leg too"! I turned my body aside and slipped my second ankle into it; he slammed the jaw down with a big bang, got out to slide the strut back and banged the door close.

Ten minutes later, they opened the door and he entered with a wooden staff the size of the handle of a shovel. As soon as he saw me he raised the big stick and, opening his big eyes with an even redder tomato-nose, he beat me shouting, "Fuck you, stubborn head; fuck you spy; fuck your mother sending the miserable up North to sabotage". He hit me with the truncheon and I had to shield with my arms, which became all bloody and bruised. I boiled with anger and shouted back, "Fuck you animals to slam me after tying me up"! He still banged me ten more times before going out, pointing the staff at my face threatening me with death. Then he closed the door and latched it. My arms and hand all contused with painful bruises and bumps everywhere, my body hurt, my ankles cut bleeding when I twisted avoiding the atrocious beating, I was so angry not wanting to live anymore. Through the communist publications, I knew that they considered Ho Chi Minh as their untouchable saint and they would kill whoever daring to blaspheme their leader. So thinking and with such an anger seeing my blood and bruise everywhere I bellowed, "Fuck you son-of-a-bitch Ho Chi Minh! Down with Ho Chi Minh bringing misery to the whole people and nation"! I had the intention to see them giving me a few bullets ending such a painful and degrading life. I kept roaring obscenities. One of them guys opened the tiny window on the main door and got his mouth through it shouting, "Shut up son of the bitch otherwise you will die soon"! I Just screamed, "Down with the miserable Ho Chi Minh"!

A short while after, the door opened and three men including the tomato-nose man who had beaten me entered. They brought in a sturdy steel frame made with one-and-half-centimeter diameter rod. Without saying a word, one of them twisted my arms to my back and tied them with a number 8 lock. The two other men slipped the steel frame over my head and jaw and turned the bolts and screws pressing my teeth together so that I could only give out hissing sounds. After they got out they threatened me, "You will die, soon"! My legs were still bleeding. I was not able to lie down and to move my body, my two arms being locked in the back, my two legs locked to the cement platform, the contused spots on the body



starting to be itchy without any possibility to scratch and they became itchier. I felt my temples twinging endlessly, a heat wave swarming through my body and I passed out. When I wakened, it was daylight. I passed out all night. I felt my body like lead, hurting everywhere and my two shoulders shaking due to itches. After a long while, the small window opened and a sarcastic voice sounded, “Are you still badmouthing, son-of-the-bitch”?

I opened my eyes and sat leaned to the wall motionless. I was not able any more to hurl my insults. The small window closed. My body was terrible. My arms and legs twitched in spasms. If somebody killed me now he would give me deliverance. While writing my story I am still horrified and my hatred is still mounting sky high. I passed out again to be happy during that moment. Anyhow, when I came back it was again horror. I cannot comprehend how they could be that cruel. I had insulted them with the hope that they would give me a few bullets and I would not know anything more. Oh! How could humankind be so barbarous! Now if I wanted to commit suicide by biting off my tongue it was impossible. A long while after, they opened the small window and the same voice intoned, “Are you still insulting”? Thinking that I better submitted instead of having such an unbearable treatment, I shook my head a little bit. Two men entered in late afternoon. I did not see the tomato-nose man. One of the two tapped my shoulder and mockingly said, “Are you still pugnacious or are you scared now”? I shook my head. They unlocked my mouth and arms saying, “In here if you are not reasonable there will be one way, to die with misery. So many monsters with three heads and six arms, the more horns they grow we twist them off all. From now on be reasonable son“!

I did not say a word. I could not lift up my paralyzed arms. I was dead tired feeling like a boneless body. I felt feverish and lay down motionless. I vaguely saw them bringing in something, perhaps rice put at the head of my bed. One voice said, “Here is rice, eat it and I will take the bowl away”. That night I had a high fever, screaming the whole time, my body all hurting, passing out often and while coming back I kept crying “Mommy”. I prayed God to deliver me from the suffering. I was feverish and painful, my legs and arms numb and distressed. The bowl of rice at the head of my bed was still there untouched though since two days I had not a thing in my stomach save that small loaf of bread at the lakeshore before they arrested me. My mouth was bitter and dry.

It was Tuesday. I heard vaguely female voices and the sound of water running, Perhaps people bathing and washing behind the wall. According to their voices, I knew that they were also prisoners and right behind my room was a water tank for bathing and washing. The small window opened lightly and I heard the rattling of keys opening the door. One man about sixty, white hair in civilian dress, wearing clear glasses walked in followed by several others. He asked with a southern accent, “You did not eat”. Shaking my head I replied, “I had fever”. Turning back to a man behind him, he said something. I heard the sound of the strut pulled out and one man told me to pull my leg out; I sat up painfully lifted up the upper jaw and pulled my two legs out. Dry blood under it and on my pants sleeves had blackened. The old spectacled man advised, “As you are in here do not be stubborn. Being reasonable and well behaving would be to your benefit. Otherwise it would only harm you”. A moment later one man threw to me another old striped uniform saying, “We give you another one. Change it and take the old one for washing”. They all saw my clothes with black caked blood. I did not know what his position was but he seemed sympathetic. Then the door opened again and another yellow dressed man with Corporal rank came in asking, “What is your name”? “Le Viet Hung” was my reply. He said “I only asked your real name”. I said, “Dang Chi Binh”. He firmed his voice, “I am in charge of these cells. From now on, you must abide to all regulations here. You cannot shout or sing. You must not communicate with the neighboring rooms. There is no permission to bring any metallic things into the room. Every morning there is a five minutes allowance to take the potty to the outhouse emptying in the hole and rinse it. If we locked you in for disciplinary measures, you can only do it once a week on Friday. We authorize bathing and washing only on Monday and Friday for fifteen minutes each time. Any infraction depending on its severity, you will have one leg or two legs locked up or we will send you to the confinement cell.

I was so tired that I almost passed out, leaning to the wall not hearing whatever he said. Then he walked out saying loudly, "I will get the nurse in to give you medicine". Then he closed the door. I heard him opening the next door, one person going out perhaps to empty his potty and went back after five minutes. They opened another room. I heard the sounds of heavy steps out, water running and the steps in. After six or seven times they opened my room, "Go empty your pot". I got down checking under my cement bed and saw the sheet-metal pot with a wooden lid. I had excreted nothing since yesterday and stood there perplexed. He poked his head in, "Why don't you go empty your pot"? I answered; "I haven't yet...". He slammed the door shut and latched with a steel bar. A moment later, the door opened again. A female nurse of about 28, 30, under white robe, carrying a tray of medicines came in. Her name was Mrs. Dau. She looked at my wounds, gave me half can of Gold Star Balm to put on the wounds and smeared the bloody spot with a red liquid. I told her that I had fever and she gave me two white tablets to swallow.

When the nurse went out the jail warden came in and told me to take the bowl with the coconut scoop out for rice and water. I walked out with the bowl and limped, my legs were still hurting so much. He told me to put the old bowl on the floor, picking the rice bowl and getting a scoop of water and regain my cell. On the platform, there were still eight or nine bowls of rice. He shut the door and shouted, "Eat fast and return your bowl in fifteen minutes". I was hungry having eaten nothing since yesterday. Anyhow, when I put rice in my mouth I was not able to chew and get it down, either my mouth or the rice was bitter. Thinking if I did not eat, I would only die, I made an extra effort to eat while looking at the stale rice. However, it looked better without cassava like at state restaurant in Hanoi. The rice was in a big bowl made of hard antimony-aluminum, and soup of boiled old water spinach with salt in a smaller bowl atop the rice bowl. When they opened the door, the prisoner walked out scooping some black liquid (boiled black roasted rice) and picked up the rice bowl to regain his cell. After having shut the cell door and latched it with a steel bar, the warden will go on open another door and so on. After about fifteen minutes, he opened the doors in succession for prisoners to go one by one put the utensils at the former location and get another scoop of water. I put my chopsticks on top of the leg-lock strut.

Back in I was somewhat better though I still felt pains and lame. Now I could examine the legs lock. They made it in two parts; both of them were of 2.5cm thick and 8cm wide steel bars. They embedded the lower part in a concrete block built onto the end of the platform bed. They formed the lower bar into two faced up half cylinders next to each other on the central part. The upper part also had two similar half cylinders faced down to make two tubes the size of a small wine bottle. They joined the two parts on one end with a built-in hinge. The upper part prolonged into a duckbill shape piece with a rectangular cutout engaging a cuff welded to the lower part. From outside the warden could slide in the strut through the cuff and lock shut. The end of the strut also had another lockset. The cubicle had a four-meter high ceiling with a cutout 60x25cm having five 2.5 cm steel bars behind steel wire net giving in only a very dim light. They made the cell door of 4cm thick massive hardwood reinforced with steel bars. It had a small window 20x15cm with six 1.5cm steel bars just letting only one finger through. The outside of the window was closed with a steel latched plate. The wall of the jail was 50cm thick. The French colonialist built the whole construction and now the communists used it to incarcerate those who did not agree with them.

## **TWENTY-FIVE**

### **Showing of Power at Hoa Lo**

About 8am of the next day, the small window opened and the jail warden showed up with his rattling set of keys bellowing, "Get dressed for deposition". Last night I could not have a good sleep because there

were mosquitoes and it was so hot. I was getting dressed when the door opened. Another yellow dressed man waited at the door making sign with his fingers for me to walk in front of him. He followed me and asked, "Are you Dang Chi Binh alias Le Viet Hung"? I nodded "Yes". This man, a Sergeant had two protruding eyes and a set of muzzled lips. They arrested me on Sunday. That was why I did not see any prisoners when they led me through the prison yard. Today while crossing a small yard next to a water tank six or seven female prisoners cleaned pots and pans. In a close by house, a few other females were sawing the striped uniforms. They looked at me passing by. Going on I came to the yard with a grape vine canopy and when arriving at a room he opened the door to rush me in. I saw two persons sitting behind a desk with a stack of thick dossiers, one man about 30 wearing a four pockets military shirt and the other having a short sleeves white shirt.

Seeing me limping with bandages all over arms and legs the white shirt man wondered, "What happened with your limbs"? Thinking that he pretended not knowing I stated, "The other day the cadre beat me in my cell". Both of them acted surprised, "Why, was it very painful"? It showed clearly their acting and I slowly said, "I am better now". The military man pointed his finger at the stool for me to sit down and introduced, "I am Thanh, my friend here is Duc. We are investigators of the Ministry of Security. We have the responsibility to question and assist you on what you have done. We are aware that you are still very young and naive and the Diem-Americans lackeys wooed you to go north and harm the revolution. With the vast network of the revolutionary people, we crushed any one and any ruse of the Diem-Americans. You have to understand that in the rank of the henchman government of Diem-Americans we have infiltrated revolutionary agents. We precisely knew your work and have a complete file about it". He moved his chin towards the brief case and continued, "With the generosity and forgiveness of the Party and the People, we want you to use your responsibility uncovering their crimes sending you up here to commit all the wickedness against the people and the country. The Party and the Government will value your sincerity and remorse. You are the only one who can save you. This is our initial contact with you. We saw that you are smart and have a good education. You can benefit from our assistance. As for when they maltreated you in jail, we did not have any information yet even though it is something we do not condone. We shall refer to higher echelon for appropriate measures. Now we want you to answer all our questions regarding your identity".

I just lowered my head listening. I had things prepared in my mind and when they asked about my identity, I told them the truth. After recording my deposition, Duc very sternly stated, "Now we will let you talk freely on these things in succession; who recruited you; who trained you; what did they train, where, the goal; how did you go North, etc. Just keep talking". I kept curbing my head down listening to their harangue showing my sincerity. After they insisted two or three times, I turned my face up and talked. "I believed that the revolutionary government had known in details what I did in the South as well as since I came here. Due to the necessity of life and the poor living condition of my family, I failed my examination several times and had to join the Army. Then somebody referred me and I wanted to get cash assisting my elderly parents. I belonged to the children organization in my village and got my Primary Certificate with top honor under the Socialist Democratic Republic of Vietnam. I had always admired the military. That is why with my situation I had accepted to go with them, thinking to myself that if I could not do anything good to the socialist doctrine I will not do anything detrimental to it. That is why when I came to Hanoi I did not do a thing. I long for Hanoi and I only visited all the beautiful sceneries, the historical sites where I was when I was young. At times, I felt scared. I had wanted to see any police officer to tell him the truth that I came from South. Anyhow, the years I was down there they brainwashed me saying that the communists are very cruel and ready killers and that made me cautious and hesitating. My mind became so confused that I did not know how to act. Now in front of you I give you the whole truth and I will do anything that the State wants me to do". After hearing, they looked happy, nodding their head and said, "Good, now let's start working"!

I looked disarranged, “Where should I start, when I started school or when I came here”? They looked at me with their pairs of menacing eyes, “Since the day the Saigon spy organization recruited you, what did they train you, where and by whom? Do it quick and in rough sketches”! Slowly I talked while thinking, “I was with Intelligence Battalion of Army Division 7. I made friends with Lieutenant Xuong of the Directorate of Military Security. He introduced me to a civilian named Hoa who recruited me at the start of 1962. He trained me for three months on secret spy activities, the characteristics of weapons in use in North Vietnam like the land mines and the various guns, artillery. Then they exposed me to map reading and the determination of coordinates, etc. Finally, I was ready to penetrate North Vietnam with the mission to monitor the activities of Division 308 under General Vuong Thua Vu. On 20 May, Hoa took me to Tan Son Nhut for a flight to Hue and then to the DMZ. In a very stormy night I crossed the river and took the bus from Vinh Linh”. I kept talking while they kept writing notes. They often urged me to be brief while my intention was to go into every detail and then I became sketchy. When they saw that I stopped, Thanh rushed me to continue.

I went on. “I came to Ron and as there was no transportation I had to walk to Ky Anh, Ha Tinh. On the road, I met Tri (I had to say it clearly here because they knew that when I was back in Vinh I passed the night at Tri’s home). From Ha Tinh I went to Vinh then to Hanoi. I arrived in Hanoi on 31 May, boarded at 5 Oil Street then Fan Street, etc”. I recounted every detail. Anyhow, I only said that I was at the Viet-German Hospital one time only when they were aware of. Otherwise, I related to them precisely all the times and places of occurrence until the day of my arrest. The deposition lasted until twelve and half when a female police sergeant made sign for me to follow her. Passing by where female prisoners worked some of them rushed out to eagerly say, “we reported to you Mrs. Hoa that your bag is done”. She nodded, “Good”. Hoa had a Southern accent, perhaps she was from the group sent up North after the Truce Agreement. She led me to the gate with a dangling set of keys and opened the cell door for me. The cadre on duty was gone and there was my rice bowl, which somebody had put in. I was able to finish two third of rice and gulp the old cabbage leaves soup. There was some water left over in my scoop and I drank it. I lay down to rest for a while, my mind churning on why they told me to talk fast, why they did not need any details? My brain was completely confused. There is one thing I had to keep in mind. It was to remember what I said.

After about five minutes, the ball-eyed man opened the door and called me out for deposition. Thanh and Duc were at the desk with the thick dossier. They showed me the stool and I sat down. Duc opened the file and said, “Now you tell all details since your childhood according to what we ask”. Both of them took turn questioning on the things they did not feel clear or those they did not see as logical. This time they really went into details, even those I did not see as important such as when I played with friends, who were your friends, your parents characters, the teachers’, things since I was 6-7 years old. It was different from the previous session. Now they pressed me tightly on the parts I had roughly told them. At 5pm, Duc read the deposition for me to hear and sign. They let me go to call me back again at six to work until nine. The thing kept going three times a day. I felt dead tired, the wounds on my legs became infected and there was no medication except the red mercurio-chrome.

I did it for sixteen days, three times a day except Saturdays and Sundays. It was mid July 1962, and from the day they arrested me, it was twenty days in prison. I became skinny though I ate all my daily rice and still felt hungry. The cell was small and hot and filled with mosquitoes. I had to strip bare at night, all sweating, and the wet platform white caked with my dried out perspiration. My sweat wetted my waistband and I must cover my torso with the shirt to avoid mosquitoes. I did not have a good sleep using the shirt to chase away mosquitoes and to cover me while my mind was so tense with the daily questioning.

One day after the deposition session, Corporal Nhiem, the jail warden opened the door and said, “Take all your stuffs out”! I had nothing save the old striped uniform, the small washcloth and my horn comb. I

got my things on my arms and he directed me to cell five rushing me in and locked the door. In there was another man, bare-torso, about 45 and wearing a black short. I looked at him, also one-eyed like Phan Thanh Van. With an intimate voice, he said, "How long did they put you in here"? My sympathetic answer was, "More than twenty days, and how about you uncle"? He slowly replied, "Almost two months". Then I went on, "For what crime"? "I crossed the border going south, how about you"? "I crossed the border going north". Both of us laughed and I asked flatly, "And we meet at a common point"? I looked at a big bag at the head of his bed and softly pushed on, "Where do you come from"? He carefully said, "MoMarket". In the mean time, the door opened for meal. My coconut scoop was too small, just 2/3 of the previous one. Having no chopsticks I asked Nhiem to let me get mine on the strut of room 6.

I knew the name of the one-eyed man as Le Van Hoan. After they closed the door, we put the bowl of rice on the leg-lock bar and ate. Hoan took out from his bag a sack of dried bread pieces and ate with his rice. As we were two in the cell, we naturally would communicate. I was always alert owing to my professional background. I set the principle that whether they were true or fake prisoners I would not say anything that I did not tell those legal men. I must assess the real Hoan. Through our exchanges, I knew that he was a retained veterinarian having several acquaintances in the former regime going south. He had secondary education and his French knowledge was fair. He has his wife and kids living in a house near Mo Market. Due to discrimination in his branch, he became negative and they laid him off. He withstood a poor life; anyhow, things went from bad to worsen. Thinking of his friends now living in Saigon the idea of evasion became strong. One day one of his old friends with a subsistence living in Hai Phong dropped by and they made plans to cross the border. He had the last dinner with his family and gave a few advices to his folks. His ten years old son inadvertently talked to his friend and Security knew and followed him. When they were at Thanh Hoa, they caught them.

Upon hearing his story, I did not have any opinion on its veracity. I simply applied my set principle to tell him my story, which I had told in my deposition with interrogators. I was in Hanoi with a military mission, and as I am sympathetic with the socialist regime, I did not do any thing detrimental. I just profited to tour all over Hanoi. In case Hoan was an agent for Hanoi to dig information from me, I seized the opportunity to open to him my sincerity and genuine admiration of the socialist regime. I talked about the equality up here while everyone is alike, no rich and no poor not like in Saigon. Then uncle Ho had a very simple life with an outstanding reputation and they listed his name in English and French dictionaries. Most of the intellectuals, writers and poets had joined the resistance showing that the Northern system is right, etc. To know precisely about Hoan one time on purpose, I inadvertently told him my connection with Lieutenant Nghia of Binh Xuyen in 1954. As for those investigators, I was sure that they did not know a zilch about me. They tried to look into the smallest details, the differences in my words, the holes I left to get my real picture.

The most important thing for me was to remember what I told them in my deposition and what I did not divulge yet. Things have to be logical. Sometimes you must pretend forgetting one thing to mask another point or act naïve or immature. To sum it up, this is a nerves battle. I was alone and their side had the whole bureau 44 of the political legal team of Hanoi. I felt my weakness like birds in cage they fed or starved at their own discretion. Besides, I was still young and immature and my professional experiences were too short. I brainstormed for my plusses, improve them and minimize the weakness. I used my Christian belief and the principle of freedom to sustain me in my struggle with atrocious and cruel treatment during the upcoming long days.

One day at the end of July, they called me in. This time there were only Duc and a police officer. Duc showed me the stool and I sat down. Duc then said, "Now you come here twice a day and write your account in details. How you went to school in your village, in Hanoi what you did with whom, where, why you went south and what you did, etc. Any event until you joined the Army, went with intelligence

and came here. While in Hanoi where did you go, connect with whom and what you did until your arrest”. Then he raised his voice, “You live or die, will be joyful or sorry stem from this written document. Therefore, you must strive to benefit from the generous forgiveness of the Party and the State. The Party and the Government are opening the door for you. You have full right to write differently than when you made oral deposition. Perhaps you might add things you forgot or skipped. This comrade police officer will stay here with you all the time. He will help if you need additional blank papers or ink. You must expedite although there is no time limit”.

I always said yes sir showing my willingness and submission. From that day on, I had to go twice, eight in the morning until 12 noon and in the afternoon from 1pm to 5pm, eight hours per day save Saturdays and Sundays. There was always either the ball-eyed man (whom I knew his name is Bang) or the woman Hoa taking me out and back. At times, it was another female Sergeant of the female ward named Tho who took turns. I felt somewhat more relaxed though my brain was tense thinking and weighing on what I have said to be in line with it or to mask the events and times I withheld. Each night I must recollect all my written things during the day.

My legs healed after nearly one month. I took advantage of Hoan to help curing my wounds. After several attempts and trials, I was quite sure that they assigned him to dig my secrets. I used the pains of my infected legs to nightly complain and interact with him. “Uncle, several times I wanted to write all they taught me, their ruses and tricks. Anyhow, the infection kept shooting unbearable pains to my brain and I had to quit”. A few days later, he told me to shout through the window that there was need for a nurse. I did as he told me, and Mrs. Dau the nurse gave me a shot and some powder for my infected spots. My infection was gone.

Every week or so Hoan got bananas and he confided to me that his teacher daughter befriended with a security man and they permitted her to bring him things twice a month. Even though I did not have any positive conclusion, I guessed that eventually they would move him out. The reason was that he did not know any better than what they already knew and even less. One day around the start of August, he did an illogical thing that uncovered him. That evening after returning from my written deposition, he turned his mouth to the window and shouted, “Are you well cell No 6”? Warden Nhiem opened the window and shouted, “Who hollered, between you two”? Hoan looked scared and he said timidly it was he. The main door opened, Nhiem came in and screamed, “Put your leg in the lock. You dared to communicate with your neighbor”? Hoan asked for forgiveness while Nhiem firmed his expression and ordered, “Put your leg in”? Nhiem snapped the upper jaw down when Hoan thrust his leg deep into it and screamed that his leg would be broken. Nhiem managed back and forth for a while and finally shouted, “Take your stuff out of here”. Hoan awkwardly got his bag out and forgot his scoop.

The door closed, I was by myself again. It was funny I got the big scoop. Almost one month with me, and he was 46 and mature why he behaved so childishly against the very strict discipline of the prison? I did not see him again. Perhaps the communists had calculated that Hoan would fit me, acting as an intellectual wanting to evade south and meeting an operative working for Saigon. They thought a good pairing, using Hoan to understand my thinking and action. No way! If they read Hoan’s report I would be a fan of socialism, would not I?

## **TWENTY-SIX**

### **Psychological Tricts...**

It changed to autumn and the air became nicer. I felt better with the milder heat and the less smelly odor of my body. However, the mosquitoes still abounded. Every night I still was half sleep to chase them away. The parts of my uncovered body had all the scars of mosquito bites, which never went away, the new ones came, while the old ones faded out. I had no mirror to look at my face. I completed my writing in twenty days covering 90 pages. They called me in again for questioning.

There was Duc and another dark skin man Nhuan, about thirty. They looked at me like their enemy. I sat down on the stool as usual, turned my face down waiting. Duc slammed my papers on the desk shouting, "You wrote like that. Are you considering Security kiddies and making fun of us"? Nhuan banged on the desk and loudly bellowed, "You want to live or die. We gave you a chance and you produce such a childish thing to bypass Security". They banged on the table, threw the chairs, shouted epithets, jeered and reprimanded loudly. Then they said, "Are you dumb, answer now". I turned my face up, scared, sorrow and said, "I wrote everything on my life. I reported on what My-Diem trained me and what I did up here". Duc slammed the papers on the desk to my face and went on, "Stop thinking that we do not know anything on you in Saigon. We were aware of your mission when they prepared you for it. You made a completely false deposition".

I showed them my sincerity, "I fully understand the revolution. I was aware that you had so many infiltrators in the Southern Government. I believed that even in the intelligence structure of the South you had planted your agents. That is why I had sincerely written all the truth. Besides I was not a fan of the Diem-American regime and that was the reason why I did not do a thing in Hanoi and kept going around and having fun". Nhuan pointed his finger to my face and said, "Shut up, do not try to bluff. When you just went south, we had full information on you. Do not believe that you could hide it. I ask you about the named Nghia'. I opened my eyes wide, "Was he Nghia at the refugee camp of Phu Tho and attending fourth grade of Chu Van An"? He banged again on the desk and shouted, "Do not pretend. Nghia, the Binh Xuyen Lieutenant do you know him or not"? I acted jumpy and scared, "Yes sir I do"! Thinking to my self this is from that dead-dog man Le Van Hoan and now I can have a positive conclusion on him! Duc looked very mirthful saying, "See how you could lie to us. In addition to many other things too, we give you permission to write again your deposition. You could die of a painful miserable death"! I acted disarrayed and frightful. I frowned as if I remembered something and just realizing it, my face turned blissful and I said, "I never knew that you can be so well informed. Frankly I did not mention that Nghia of Binh Xuyen because truly I was with Binh Xuyen for just ten days. Besides, they did not relate to Ngo Dinh Diem and that was why I did not talk of him. I had sincerely told you everything and worried whether the revolution understands it. Anyhow, now I am certain that the revolution fully comprehends me I am pacified". They stared at me frowning and their lips opened in a half smile saying, "Do not tattle and listen to our questions".

They opened my papers and their dossiers. One man squeezed on my stay at the resettlement camp of Ho Nai and my relationship with the camp chief Father Loan. Another man pressed on Hoa, whether he is Northerner or Southerner, how he looked like and his vestments (I took my uncle now in France to describe). Then they question on the Dinh Bo Linh group. They also asked on the teachers at second class of Hung Dao School at Cong Quynh. They asked at random. I went back to my cell at noon to continue at 1 pm until five and on again from six to 9 pm. My mind was completely out of round. Sometimes they were three questioners shouting and threatening, Once they were four taking turn to squeeze me. They treated me badly during the days while at night the swarm of bloodthirsty mosquitoes sucked my body. In just a short time, my legs and arms became skinny and pale. Moreover, I was feeling hungry all the time; the reserves of my body were gone. I remembered when I first came here I could not finish my ration. Two weeks later, I ate it with appetite. Now I wish I could have double ration. It was the same everyday. With a distended mind back from the questioning when I saw the bowl of rice I jumped on it and devoured in no time. There was not a single grain left and I gulped dry the soup, though I still looked at the empty bowls with contention.

Every time I stood up, I felt dizzy. The unforgiving mosquitoes just swarmed around me sucking my blood. Perhaps they were conniving with the cruel communist torturing my bony and skinny body to my death. My nails became long and there was no way to trim them. On my way to the deposition room, I noticed on the ground one 4cm long nail and intended to pick it up when possible. One day Hoa the woman in charge escorted me back. At the female prisoner's area, she stopped to hear some girl reporting. I very quickly stooped down to retrieve the nail in a quick hand swipe. Every night I kept sharpening the nail on the cement floor until it became a tiny sharp knife to take care of my nails. I used it to clean my ears too. All at a sudden, while I was trimming my nails the window opened and Nhiem shouted to give it to him. He confiscated my knife and searched my body even the leg-lock. Twenty minutes later, I heard the sounds of his sandals and the lock strut pulled out. He came back reading the order of the prison disciplinary supervision, "The named Dang Chi Binh having committed the infraction of bringing metallic objects into his room is given seven days punishment of legs locked from ... to ...". He ogled and instructed, "Follow the disciplinary order".

I lifted my two legs into the jaw hating that dead-dog Nhiem. That night was the start of a most bitter life. My knees were completely stiff-tired. If I wanted to change my position I must slowly pull me down to carefully stretch up to avoid cutting by the sharp edges of the jaws. Very luckily, I had become so skinny that the jaws did not compress too tight. Anyhow, while sleeping I jerked my legs and they bled again. In the middle of the night, under the weak light bulb I just kept wiping off the non-stop bleeding and lamenting on the cruelty of men with men. I heard the mournful cry of somebody and the interrupted sound of a gecko crushing the unending night like sharing in the suffering of the miserable lots. I sat all night, one hand kept wiping away my non-stop bleeding while the other hand chasing the mosquitoes and my stomach squeamish. I suddenly realized that perhaps I harbored one or a few intestinal worms and they were clamoring starvation like me. A sense of communion and consolation arising amid a gloomy environment when the small window opened and a voice intoned, "Why you did not sleep, what are you sitting up for"? I did not see the face but the voice seemed more compassionate like masking a certain sadness of a human. Whispering I pointed at my wounds and said that my legs were bleeding and it would not stop. Then a few minutes later the same voice said, "Patch it with this", while a finger with a tat of tobacco poked in. I made an extra effort to retrieve it and put the tobacco on my bleeding spots. The window closed and the sound of sandals moving out echoing in the long night. Somebody on night duty showed that at the bottom of his heart there was still some reminiscence of a human. I felt confident believing that the communist did not succeed in their attempt of tainting red the whole soul of human kind.

I had to be in deposition as usual. I must say that I was afraid of it now and I would like them to leave me alone. Anyhow, though insulted and assaulted my legs were free and between the two bad things, I had to like the least. In the room, there were always the lead-skin Nhuan and Duc. I did not believe why they squeezed me so much making me lost sometimes. For example, they asked, "you said you went to Church X, who did you see"? I replied that I saw only some old persons. They went on asking what I did. I rambled that I am Christian and the requirements of circumstances got me there. I was all by myself walking around not being certain of tomorrow and looked for a Church to avow my sins so that I would die sinless. Duc banged violently on the desk and menacingly stood up, "Liar, do not try to bluff! You profited to tell what to the priest. We knew it all, everything! Now say it out to let us know your thoughts and sincerity. We shall let you hear the whole conversation that we recorded". My heart sped up did they know all? Then I thought to myself if they knew that why did not they ask about the letter I hand delivered to the Father? To feel the situation, I pretended perplexed asking, "I did not know who he was. I did not pay any attention to him and then what did I say"? They just kept insisting I said something to that priest. Then finally, they told me to write down in details my confession. First, I was afraid that they would use my deposition to bluff Father A. Secondly, I was certain of their bluff about



the recording. I emphasized that the confession for a Christian is something of a routine affair and I did not bother remembering all my miscellaneous sins.

Now I fully knew that it was their bluster and to save it for future use I did not request to hear their recording. Finally, Duc firmed his voice, "Who did you meet when you got out of the Church"? I gave the laconic answer that I saw only vehicles and persons going by. He recast, "How were they dressed"? When I said that I did not pay attention and did not know, he again banged hard on the desk, "are you blind"? Then he asked where was my intelligence office, where is Hoa's house, what car did he ride on, whom he normally went with, off class where he usually went, etc. To my answers, that I did not know anything at all and he again shouted at me as liar. They pressed on all details of my life and led me through a smokescreen. Moreover, as I had my two legs locked up sometimes I passed out and they dismissed me. One day I asked the jail warden, "You read the disciplinary order for a seven day penalty. Now fifteen days passed. Please reexamine it". He laughed advising to think about it. I asked back what I should think about. He went on you should know, do not ask me. Then he slammed shut the door. I was sure that the interrogators ordered them to lock me. I was so angry and decided to make the matter clarified. When I went for deposition I asked, "Did you order to lock my legs because I did not give you the right deposition"? They asked, "What was your question"? I replied, "To ascertain the problem". "What kind of problem, we did not know it. It came from the prison". I looked straight in their eyes and rambled, "I like the socialist regime. All my deposition came from the depth of my heart. It would be worthless if I did it for fear of the lock. In that case, I would rather die instead of suffering as a wretched miserable. They stared their menacing eyes and said that they did not lock me and they will check with the prison.

Days and months passed. My body gradually withered out. I could barely stand up and my feet swelled. The most despicable time was for excretion. I was constipated for not eating enough and lack of activities. Every time I went potty, I had to get down and pull the pot from under the bed, remove the lid and manage it to a suitable position. Then I switched my body side wards and presented my butt out straining. If in the mean time I needed peeing then I let it go wetting my thighs flowing to the floor. My pants were all wet and I would not care. My legs were all painful; I did not have the strength to move my body. It could last a few hours and I managed to do it at night. Life and death were so close and I did not feel distasted any more with the dirty things. I did not care in the presence of other people. Even when one piece of feces did not fall into the pot, I would leave it there until when they called me out for deposition or for emptying the pot then I picked it up with my fingers. When done I manage to pour the water from the scoop to wash. One arm being pressed under the body with the fingers wagging sometimes I poured water to one spot and my fingers tending to another place. If there was no more water and my fingers were still full of feces, I had to stretch to under the bed to scrape it off as best as I could.

One night while I was still sleeping I heard the sound of weeping and wailing coming from cell number 7. In the silence of the night, I strained my ears to a choked sound of somebody perhaps committing suicide by self-strangulation. They punished the person in cell 7 to one leg locked due to infraction of jail regulations. I listened due to my curiosity and my desire to finish with a life not worth living. It made me fully awake, listening to the mosquitoes buzzing and the choking sound becoming weaker and weaker. The geckos from time to time sounded their long staccato din. The choked throat noise stopped quite a long time ago and I did not notice it. Then I heard the sliding sounds of sandals, the opening of windows. When they came to my window, I closed my eyes pretending to sleep. They came to cell seven. I heard the rushing of steps with three or four persons entering, the sliding of strut, the din of the leg-lock and a voice asking, "Is he still alive" followed by the reply "he died a long time ago, the blood had coagulated". Then I heard them hauling a body past my cell, the opening of faucet into the pot and the sound of a broom cleaning. The next morning when I went to deposition, I saw some reddish liquid at the front of

cell seven. Therefore, one person luckily evaded this bottomless hole of misery. I must say farewell to you and praise your courage. In the future, I might follow suit.

## **TWENTY-SEVEN**

### **Striving to Survive**

Today they pressed me again. “In 1953 when you went back to your village from Hanoi you spread the news that you were demented, why? Did the colonialist spread it out? And in 1954 in Saigon there was news that you died crushed by a car, was it from the Diem-Americans”? I was flabbergasted. I remembered when I was back to my village I was only fifteen. Loving nature, everyday I went out to the rice field, watching the golden rice stalks swaying in the breeze, listening to the humming of the kites amid the sound of the rice thrasher, the barking of the dogs and the noise of bamboo trees rubbing together. I always rambled lonely in a dying day while the sun was setting. The kids of the village could not comprehend my attitude and they thought I was crazy. As for the accident, one newspaper gave account of a car accident, while another Binh was victim. My aunt Bao Think, the owner of a very rich gold and jewelry store at Ben Thanh Market wrote to my parents who were still in Hanoi during the 300 days limit. They became crazy and cried all day.

I told them the stories and they did not believe it stating that the colonialist had prepared the public opinion about me. I admired their crooked mind. Anyhow, I knew that they went to my village to investigate on my parents and me. As for the events in Saigon, I did not yet see that they were capable to have any good information. However, I was somewhat scary with their method of digging deep into minute details of everything. They could ask back and forth seven and eight times to do it again eight or nine months later.

I had my legs locked for more than a month. The strange thing was no one took responsibility of it while my legs were still locked. When I asked the legal people, they said it was the prison responsibility. I came across with Tri the jail assistant Director when I went back to my cell. I boldly rushed to him and asked’ “I had to report that they locked my two legs for a long time and I did not know why. I submit it to you for a solution”. After looking at me, he asked my name and then said the prison did not lock your legs. It came from higher authority and he took off.

It was the end of autumn and there were some early North Eastern winter winds. There were fewer mosquitoes. Anyhow, the cold of the lock and the cement platform started to hurt my legs and my back. I slept intermittently at night. One morning Nhiem opened the door and told me to get dressed and go for deposition. When he opened the lock, I was not able to pull out my legs. I used my hands to lift them slowly out. Anyhow, they lost sensation, wobbling and flagging and I had to sit down. The escort woman Hoa rushed me but I could not stand even though I used my arms to brace me up. Nhiem frowned jerking me out and I fell flat my head hitting the door. He helped me to the bed and shut the door. Hoa left, Nhiem came back half an hour later and opened the door saying, “Order from the administration, you will have one day respite. Starting from tomorrow you will have only one leg locked”! I thanked him incessantly and looking at him today, he did not seem as cruel. I really hated him before. Now I knew that it was not from him but from higher authority looking for a reason to lock me and to keep it always.

The door closed. Looking at my legs, I felt an infinite sadness. I remembered the Athletic Events of Nguyen Ba Tong School when I was famous for my Track and Field records, swimming, rope climbing, high jumping, etc. Now look at the distressing sight of my legs! I told myself, “YOU MUST STRIVE! ONLY YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF!” I put the slogan to execution right away. At first, I sat on the

platform letting my legs dangling down. I shook them with my hands and then gradually they could do it themselves. After many patient attempts, I was able to stand up. Then I slowly walked back and forth in the confine of the cell taking a break when tired and walking again. The window opened. Nhiem seeing me practicing my steps opened the door and loudly said, "Go out for your rice"!

I grabbed my coconut scoop and walked out, slowly but I did it. I scooped some water and pick up my bowl of rice going back. Glancing at his face I quickly perceived a hint of communion and encouragement for my effort to survive. The practical aspects of life had molded in me a principle, "Be self confident! Do your best with what you have! Be self-reliant! Do not expect! Even if you cannot achieve, at least spiritually you will not be ashamed looking down"! After eating when I walked out to return the utensils, I still felt the numbness in my legs. I returned to my platform and patiently exercised because tomorrow they locked me again. Now I started to realize that my cell was so smelly and it was why when Nhiem entered he always grimaced. After the afternoon meal, Nhiem pulled out the strut and I understood that freedom time was over. As he told me to put my leg in, I very politely told him, as the cell was so smelly, I would like him to grant me two minutes so I could get water to rinse it. Looking at me with his pair of sludgy eyes he shouted, "Quick"! I did my best moving to the water tank, get a pot of water and pour on the floor. I used my hands and the broom to push the water to the drain hole. Then I lifted the lockjaw and put my leg in under his cold stare while he shook his set of clanking keys. He closed and locked the door and another day was gone. With only one leg locked, I felt very easy. I could sit up to fold my leg and I was able to stand up on the free leg to exercise. I was able to pull the potty out and had the pleasure peeing upright with contentment.

The next day the window opened and matron Hoa pointing her finger in, ordered me to get dressed for going. At the deposition room, out of the usual Nhuan and Duc there was a Hue man about 40. I saw right away a black box with all kinds of wiring set on a table at the corner. I understood that today I would taste "submarine" or "airplane" ride. The French colonialist used that kind of torture tool in the past. I pretended not seeing it and sat down on the stool as usual. They went on with their threatening ways, banging the desk and chairs saying the same things like "you are a reactionary in blood, you ate all the leftover butter and drank the milk at the bottom of the glasses of Diem-Americans, you cannot hide the truth with a cheesecloth, etc". I listened and was certain that they did not have any precise details of me. They were simply trying to pry open the seam or poke for the leaks to enlarge them and destroy the whole dike. At times, I said the truth like my pay was \$5,000 per month or the duration of my mission was 25 days. They did not believe it and pressed me back and forth. It gave me the conviction that they really did not know anything at all. Anyhow, I came to realize that they did everything with group research and study and that was their strength. However, I had my own advantage. My only requirement was to have a clear mind, a relative understanding of the situation plus my determination to accept wretchedness and brutality.

Shouting and threatening to no avail seeing that I was still sitting with my head down, the Hue man called me by name, "Binh, do you want to live or die"? I turned my face up and said in a very sincere tone, "Sirs, I do not know what to do to gain your confidence. I had told you everything I knew. I beg the generosity of the revolution to judge me as fitting". Perhaps it was too long for them and Nhuan pointed his finger at the black box asking, "Do you know what that was"? I pretended seeing it for the first time. Anyhow, thinking that they would not spare me if I begged, the acceptance of all results is the only recourse, I very calmly answered, "Gentlemen I fully know of that tool. I was stupid to engage in this work. Arrested I am ready for tortures and cruel treatments. It is your prerogative. Anyhow, there is one thing I wrongly thought about you"! The Hue man frowned, "What do you think that we were not right"? I acted pensive, "I am a young man living under what you call faked Army, false regime, the lackey of American colonialism. In Saigon, I have heard the use of torture equipments to exploit the victims. I thought it is different here ...". Duc menacingly stood up, "What is the difference"? I went on, "I had thought of you as revolutionaries. You represent the regime of the people, a true democracy using its real

appeal and not cruelty to attract people to your righteous cause. That is why I did not do a thing as they told me when I came here. Then after my arrest, I had divulged sincerely everything. Moreover, according to my own principle in life whether people like me or hate me, I never let them despise me. If I were afraid of tortures to submit to you, I would be a despicable coward for life. Both Nhuan and the Hue man shouted, "Shut up, we are not children. Now we let you go and until this afternoon we shall have a solution"!

I stood up when it was noon not knowing what their solution would be. Bang took me back to the cell. I did not see warden Nhiem. He forgot to lock my leg. I sat down eating leisurely when mid way Nhiem opened the window, pulled the strut and shouted "your leg in the lock". That son of the bitch, he did not even give you a few minutes to finish your lunch. Ten minutes after the strut again pulled out, I lifted the jaw and got my leg off. I took my scoop and my bowl out. I saved the scoop of water for washing and that was why I gulped dry the first scoop. They locked my leg and closed the door. I lay down thinking at random of the next occurrence. I was in jail for nearly four months. My hairs grew wild. With my fingers, I kept pulling my chin hairs. It hurt but I kept jerking them out with no reason.

At the deposition room, three men were already there and the black box was still on a corner table. They harassed me on crossing the Ben Hai River, going into details, how did I swim, how did I hide, the sceneries and the routes followed. It was not so difficult because I was at the DMZ twice and had used a high power binocular to watch. I saw their purpose behind their desire to ask me the details from Vinh Linh to Ha Tinh. I smelled problems. In reality, I only went from Ky Anh to Hanoi but not from Vinh Linh to Ky Anh. Therefore, they discovered my crack. The Hue man asked me, "You were on a bus from Vinh Linh to Ha Tinh. Did you ever descend the bus". Guessing that the bus would stop at Quang Binh, I replied, "Yes, at Quang Binh I had to look for a place to pee". Then he went on, "Did you descend anytime from Vinh Linh to Quang Binh". I pretended trying to remember something not worthy but in truth, I was completely in disarray. I had examined the map with Dale and Brown. However, there could be changes in a pre 1954 military map. Besides I did not really pay attention to the details I considered unimportant. Therefore, I was disturbed. After a minute or so thinking, I decided to say, "Sir I just crossed to your territory, I was so scared that I forgot many things and at present I do not remember having descended or not". He gave a heavy blow to the desk, "You lie. Riding a bus and forgetting to have descended or not, are you playing the game with us"? Thinking that I have to take a chance, I answered, "Yes I remember now that I did not get down". The Hue man suddenly rose vociferating, "Complete lie! We wanted your frankness and now we realize that you are a stupid stubborn head. I tell you that even if you were sleeping they would jerk you up to get down"!

Oh my God! Gianh River does not have bridge and everybody had to descend to cross by barge. I thought quickly that if I do not show goodwill with this minor thing I would be dead by the more important ones. Therefore, I begged earnestly, "Sirs, I was inconsequent in my thinking. Several times, I wanted to tell you of my rendezvous point but I was afraid that you would force me to signal the people to pick me up. Then you will arrest them all and Saigon would know that I betrayed them. The certain thing is they would be retributive with my parents and siblings. Up to now, I was not able to help in any way my folks. Now if I give them hardship I think the best way for me is to submit myself to pains and destruction. That is why I did not give you my true avowal on my way going north". His question came fast, "Then you went north by which means"?

Several days ago, I felt that I had holes in my deposition on the leg Vinh Linh-Ky Anh. Therefore, in the worst-case scenario I would tell them I went by boat. I realized that by so saying I would create a series of problems like, my starting point, the kind of boat, number of crew men, who are they, timing of pick-up, etc. Thinking that our men would have to do more mission like that, no one would know if they could not fall into trap in the future. In that case, under investigation perhaps they would avow that sometime ago they had brought such a man up. Therefore, one or two years later the communists could use proof of

my lies to squeeze me to death. That led to my decision to tell them that I came by boat from Da Nang in the simplest account. The simpler would be the better. There was only one man involved Hoa. I would recount only one attempt, skipping the first aborted trip. The starting point would be at some desolate fishing area in Son Tra. I also told them of my only one visit to the Ben Hai River to be in line with my knowledge of the details in the area. I would skip my encounter with Phong in Ky Anh to tell only of my debarkation and the burying of my things on the beach before finding the highway to Hanoi. I also would mention meeting Phung Van Tri.

With all my mental calculation, I faced up saying, "I came by boat". They clearly showed brighter faces. They rushed me to give my deposition quickly for them to record. At present, I understood their method to get roughly all events then afterwards go into minute details. Then they asked you to make written deposition to squeeze you methodically on the suspected points and even on the true things, they would keep on asking until they broke you down. After they find a hole, I must try the best to stem it or to plug it. I must be very logical for everything related to the boat ride until the landing spot. Anyhow, things that occurred from the National Highway 1 at Ky Phuong Hamlet to the day they arrested me were immovable regardless of the atrocities imposed. During this period, they called me for unending questioning three times a day for the whole week. A very intense moment came when they pressed me on everything in the South and up North. Several instances they roared insults and obscenities to my face and even almost slapped it. I became so weak, my whole body shaking while I went from my cell to the deposition room due to lack of food and water and above all the round the clock tension. I almost passed out. Seeing that my body completely drained and I was about to die with exhaustion from time to time they gave me a loaf of bread or a Chinese bun. Then that night I felt a new surge of energy and I had even a smoother excretion at potty

## **TWENTY-EIGHT**

### **New Problems**

It was a continual harassment; they squeezed me so hard that I lost my essence and felt completely drained. At times, I was just numb not knowing what to say or answer. Then I reran my litany, "I had told you everything from my childhood to nowadays and you did not trust me. At night I kept thinking if I could open up completely my inner self to you my life would not be this miserable". They struck violently on the desk and shouted, "Do not babble, we clearly see that you are the worst reactionary trying to hide the ruses and deviled perfidy of the Diem-Americans. Your mind keeps calculating traitorous ways to bypass the eyes and ears of our surveillance. Let me tell you that you will die a slow death in pain and humiliation. The only salvation is in your own hand. There is no power or influence on earth to reclaim you from the abyss".

I acted very sincere and said, "I feel uplifted hearing what you said. I was right in my thinking and action when I did not do anything for the enemy and I had told you all the truth. I have heard that nowadays there are lie detectors or the chemicals forcing you to divulge your secrets. If the government had them, I would volunteer to submit to it. I would be forever grateful to the revolution". Nhuan broke into laughter's, "We do not need those artifices to break you down. We know that there is something keeping you from saying the whole truth to us. Sooner or later you will realize that the best thing for you is to avow all stratagems that our enemy wants you to do against us".

I am fully aware that they did not have that kind of tool and even if they get it, it would not be so easy to solve the problem. Therefore, I boldly stroke another hit, "Sirs, I can guarantee with you that if you can in the future show me the concrete proof of an essential event that I lie, I will bear total responsibility and

accept all the punishments that the revolutionary administration reserves me”. I coined the word “essential” because the most for me is they had infiltrators in the directorate, they arrested Z-5 or Priest A or they caught document M. I was certain that if they caught them either Z-5 or Father A would never avow. In case they did, there was no proof against me. As for the infiltration in our service, I knew that if not doing the same thing no one could know the other person. Besides, this was the last resort and I did not care anymore.

Nhuan frowned, “Now look at me and listen clearly; where is the spot you buried your sack”. After I gave them in details the location, Dang added, “Did you forget any other things”? Duc gave me a piece of paper to make a sketch of the place, listing everything I had buried in there. Five months had evolved I must make a great effort to remember all the details, the distance from Highway One, the big tree, the bush, the small pathway, etc. They asked very small details and wondered whether if I gave the information to a person he could easily find it. I very eagerly told them that with all details indicated on my sketch anyone could do it. Suddenly I felt dizzy and weak, a surge of chill going through my spine and I became breathless saying that I got fever. They dismissed me right away.

Back to my cell, Nhiem shouted to put my leg into the lock. With great effort, I engaged my foot into the lock and I trembled terribly, chill swarmed from my spine to my entire body. Normally when back from deposition and seeing the bowl of rice I would swoop down immediately and chew my rice in no time. Anyhow, today I left it there shaking and feeling so cold without any other protection than the old striped uniform I used as my pillow. I got it out and it was only enough for my neck and my belly. My whole body trembled uncontrollably. I had never felt like that since my childhood and the only thing that kept me going was to burst into crying “Mommy” as for calling the perennial maternal love for protection and forgiveness. The window opened and Nhiem showed his face, pulled the strut out. He opened the door asking why I did not take the empty bowl out to get rice and water. With a trembling voice, I said that I had fever and needed a blanket. He vociferated, “There is no blanket. Three more days will be 15 October; the official start of winter and blanket will be issued”. Oh my God! I was so cold, my butt touching the cement platform felt frozen. My shoulders leaning to the wall and my leg touching the steel of the lock, the cold from my inside and from the outside became unbearable. I did not eat my rice while medicine was not available. My legs were all bony and my knees looked like two clumps of bones.

Nhiem looked for a short while and left after closing the door and sliding in the lock strut. Ten minutes later nurse Dau came in with a tray. She asked, “What is your problem”? Trembling with my two arms crossed pressing on my chest I replied in a halting voice, “I have fever”. She gave me a thermometer and read it. She gave me a shot. She looked around to see that I had nothing save the striped jail uniform and the cold bowl of rice still in the corner. Nhiem stood at the door looking in. Perhaps he did not even trust the nurse. I told her that I felt too cold and asked for a blanket. Looking at me and turning to Nhiem she said, ask the Cadre here. The door slammed shut, the sliding sound of the steel bar was like the signal of my hopelessness.

Being so tired I lay down to rest. Anyhow, as soon as my back touched the bare cement I must crawl back up again. I sat up like that all night to lie down when I was too tired and then sat up again. I had to lean on the wall to pass out at times. My fever subsided; my mouth was bitter and dry. I spent the night half awake half dreaming, my thoughts vaguely directed at humaneness, charity and the sense of goodwill. In the silence of night, I heard the interrupted sound of the gecko and I passed out to waken up with the noise of water rushing and quarrelling of the female prisoners in the back. Looking at the cold bowl of rice left there since yesterday I made an extra effort to eat fast being afraid that soon they opened the door for the routine potty job and remittance of the bowl to the designated place. At the turn of my cell, after finishing my duty and putting again my leg into the lock, matron Hoa called me out for deposition.

I saw only two men Thanh and Duc. I remembered Thanh as the only one among six or seven of them who showed in his eyesight and the tone of his voice some sympathy. He seemed sentimental. I had seen him holding the novel Doan Tuyet of the literary group Tu Luc. I understood that he could read such a book because he belonged to the political-legal team. Moreover, he was following a course on economics by correspondence. Thanh showed me the stool to sit down and talked with an amiable voice, "Please sit down. Are you well lately? I have been busy for a while and it has been such a long time since I saw you". I also gave my favorable reply, "Thank you so much, I have not felt very well lately". He acted caring, "How is your sickness? Can you eat? Did you finish your ration? How come you look so skinny"? According to them if the prisoner eats his ration, there is no problem at all. Anyhow, they did not know that the continual pang of hunger leading to a daily want of food made the prisoner's food crave so strong. I then answered slowly, "I had fever yesterday and still ate my rice". Duc also displayed a more smiling face, "Binh, we ask for you today not for your deposition but to talk leisurely with you. Frankly when you were in Saigon did you often go to the dancing halls, did you enjoy sex"? I was somewhat surprised seeing him chuckling and winking his eyes. I firmed my voice and answered, "I do not know dancing. As for sex, first, I do not like it and secondly I was all in my education. I consider it as the beautiful side of humankind. To spend your money that way is despicable and unreasonable. You would better go to the movies, read your books or enjoy the marvels of nature". Both of them heartily laughed looking at me. Thanh showed his compassion, "When you went, were your parents and siblings well. Were they aware of it"? That made my emotion mounting. My answer came with a strong emotional surge, "My parents were well and they did not know anything of my venture". Thanh went on screwing into my emotion, "Do you long for your parents and siblings? Think about their life long work providing you an education. What have you done to repay their immense sacrifice"?

My emotion overflowed. I remembered a long forgotten image. That night my young brother went to the Phu Tho refugee student's camp. He insisted me to be at Tan Dinh Church to meet my mother at the end of service. I did not go home for two weeks after my father reprimanded me for missing my Baccalaureate I due to study lapse. I went and waited in the rain soaked yard of the Church. My mother with her head covered by a shawl and her hands in the fold of her dress urged me to go home this Sunday because my daddy's irk is over. She slipped in my hand a 100-piaster bill. Now in the jail environment, the image of my beloved mother rushed my tears out like in a dike break. I sobbed and cried like a child catching the legal people by surprise making them silent as a concern for the solemnity of that minute. It is true that they could torture me and lock me up. They never could force me to shed a tear

From then on, they discovered my weakness. I understood that they would take advantage of that weakness to oppress you. They overpowered you when they found your cracks. Waiting for the end of my emotion, they compelled, "Now you see what leads you to this situation. The Diem-American lackeys took advantage of the ardor of the young people like you to throw you in a death trap while they still enjoy a good life with nice cars, villas and relaxed parties. They would not know or they did not care to know or to remember where you are now, whether you are still alive or dead. Uncover to the revolution their tactics abusing your naivete. That is the only way to your salvation. You are the one who can make the decision to benefit from the generosity and humaneness of the party and the revolution". I listened to them faced down. They were using my weakness about my family to orient into political things. The best method is to use their purpose to my advantage.

I then displayed a rejoicing face emanating confidence, "Gentlemen, you were right on the nose. The more I think about it the more hateful of them I feel. If I did not go south in 1954 I would have become a valiant soldier of Uncle Ho fighting the despicable Diem-Americans". They all laughed showing behind deception and maniacal maneuverings. They stood up and Thanh looked at me saying, "We let you go back to relax. Tomorrow we shall escort you to the place where you buried your stuffs".

Back to the cell I tried to remember all the things I buried after debarkation to see whether I have forgotten anything. I had given them all details with a good sketch of the spot. Perhaps they tried but did not find it and needed to get me along. Nhiem opened the door and told me to go get a haircut. I went to the outhouse where I used to empty my toilet pot. I saw a barefooted staff dressed brown, somewhat chubby but displaying a sick grayish complexion holding a hair clipper in his hand. I sat down on the brick sidewalk still having Nhiem close by. It took him three minutes to cut my hair and my beard and report to Nhiem that the job was completed. Today Nhiem had ordered a haircut and a head rinse for me, under the faucet with a few hand swipes. Perhaps I shall go to Ha Tinh and benefit of that treatment. I had my hairs unkempt for four months and it did not bother me at all. I did not know what kind of cut they gave me. By touching my head, I felt it too short and varied, but who cared?

## TWENTY-NINE

### Back to The Debarkation Spot

This morning the door opened while it was still dark. When they led me to the deposition room, I saw a Command Car parked heading out to the Hoa Lo main gate. It was 15 October, meaning that they arrested me nearly four month ago. In the room were three men, Thanh, Duc and Nhuan. Duc showed me the stool and then talked with an earnest voice, “We got the order to take you where you buried your things. During the trip, you must strictly abide our orders. Any deviation will bring terrible consequences. If you show total cooperation it will reflect well in your future”. Thanh took from the desk something wrapped under a newspaper, opened it and gave to me. It was a ball of gluey rice and a banana, which he told me to eat and be ready to leave. After eating, I wanted some drink. Looking around and seeing nothing, he went next door to bring back a teapot with leftover stale tea and I drank it all. Nhuan walked out and came back a few minutes later with two uniformed and armed police officers. Looking at me, he stated that according to regulations I must let these comrades do accordingly for my own safety. They had me standing with my arms behind my back. They locked my wrists together with lock number eight linked to a big chain wrapped over my shoulders and connected with another lock. Thanh, Duc and Nhuan wore pistols. I did not know why they were so cautious with me to lock me up twice and give me an escort of five armed persons. Perhaps they knew that I had some martial arts and they had to be extra defensive. Before boarding the driver, also in Army uniform, turned to them and said that they should bind my arms in the front to avoid breaking them in case of accident. Nevertheless, no one paid any attention and the police escorts helped me climbing up.

The car rolled out of Hoa Lo through the city and reached Highway 1. After nearly four month in jail, I felt it so endless with so many pains and misery in locks as well as so much humiliation at the depositions. My own thoughts and reflections had completely changed. Still the same sky and scenes of my beloved Hanoi, I now saw everywhere the faded color of grievance and sorrow. The vehicles and the sceneries looked alien in a world in which I did not belong anymore. I was going lonely on the shaky roadway to hell. The bumpy ride was terrible. I felt like a rolling pumpkin unable to brace myself up through potholes. My body entirely ached and my heart laden, I stayed quiet during the trip, my lips pressed closed under the anguish. At the ferry, everybody descended but my four escorts and me under the curious stares of passersby. A police officer had another chain linked to mine when crossing rivers to prevent me from jumping down for evasion or suicide. Arriving at Thanh Hoa the security men and the driver went out for lunch. They left the two police agents in the car with me. Half an hour later they came back and Thanh gave me two packets of gluey rice. Having my arms locked in my back, I was not able to eat. After discussion Thanh said, “We will lock your arms at the front now. Anyhow, we caution you to behave otherwise we shall act consequently. We should have chained your legs but we gave you some leeway. So be reasonable”!



After eating Thanh asked whether I would like a cigarette. My Golly, since this morning seeing them puffing I had such a rapture but I avoided begging them. Now hearing Thanh, my eyes brightened. I was high and ecstatic. Only in my situation, could you comprehend my feeling. They again locked my arms in the back and the two police officers went to lunch. We arrived at Ha Tinh in the evening. It was around six or seven when they took me to the city prison. The jail yard was deserted, all prisoners being in their cells. The police agents led me to the kitchen and unlocked me while saying something to the cadres in charge. Two female cadres dressed in peasant garb took me to the kitchen. There was no more food. After discussions, they took out a small pot containing some remaining cold rice and a small pot of pork stew with some leftover sauce and a few bits of pork. They put them on the floor, urging me to eat. How in my unfortunate life could I enjoy such a lucky time? I had never tasted such an appetizing meal. I ate the whole pot of left over four or five bowls of rice doused in the pork stew sauce. I was thankful of life and of the humankind. After my fulfilling dinner, a male cadre took me to a rural cell, very dank and dark with a small wooden bed with a steel cuff having two ring-locks made of 2.5cm rod. He told me to put my legs in the rings and locked it.

It was a very comfortable lock leaving me freedom to standup moving my feet back and forth. I could stand on the floor, twisting my body for exercises breathing air. Sitting all day under locks, now I could lie down to relax and enjoy the aftertaste of a good meal still savoring its sweetness. My belly full, my arms and legs rested I expected to have a good sleep when at a sudden I felt all itchy. I crawled up and scratched. I did not see anything under the very dim light but I smelled the acrid odor of bed bugs. My back swelled with the bug's bites. I removed my shirt and saw twenty of them all bloated with blood. My butts and thighs were itchy. I sat up swiping them off and lay down when too tired and so on during the night. Those miserable bloodthirsty bugs, they must be the comrades of those miserable communists. Suddenly a female with Ha Tinh singing voice echoed in the silence of the night, "Hello brother Thoi"! The answer from a Ha Tinh man sounded from another room, "Hi Nguyet! A new man, how old is he"? Nguyet's voice sounded back, "Around 23 or 24 maybe he is an arrested cadre"! For sure, she watched me through some crack. A few minute of silence then the male voice was heard, "Hi my friend. They just arrested you, did they? For what crime"? Being too tired, I kept quiet to make them believe that I was sleeping. Whether standing up or sitting down, I still had to chase away mosquitoes. Ha Tinh had too many of them. Past midnight, I was so tired and exhausted that I slept just offering my blood to those kinsfolk of the communist.

The next day, they opened the door and the lock to call me out even before jail working time. I noticed that those were local security agents. The Hanoi men gave me to those locals who remitted me to them the next day. At their office, I saw Thanh, Duc, Nhuan and the police officers talking with a First Lieutenant. Thanh told me to let the local men work before going. It was the same kind of work, chaining and locking me like yesterday. They escorted me to the car parked behind the front gate to help me up. The highway became bumpier rocking and rolling me right and left braced by the two police agents. The bed bugs bites of last night became so itchy and there was no way to scratch. I was so desperate with the hardship of life amid the beloved humankind! We arrived at Ky Anh and then Ky Phuong. They escorted me to a house of the hamlet. It had thatched roof and mud wall but looked much better than the surroundings looked. It could be the hamlet security office. They helped me down and guided me to the base of a Japanese lilac tree to squat down, sandwiched between the two police agents. In a little while, a number of children and some local people looked at me with curiosity. Suddenly some kiddies about 13 or 14 picked up gravels to throw at me while the peasant women among them one old female rushed pointing their fingers to my face and vociferated, "You blood-sucking-and-liver-eating spy, the henchman of Diem-Americans, the traitor of the country, the people and the revolution". Another woman hoisted her bamboo pole and assaulted me screaming, "Killer of my husband making me a widow and my children orphans, I am splitting your head now"!

I had witnessed the life of the southern people in the cities and the villages. I also knew their life in the north. The comparison between the two gave me the conclusion that I am on the right track bringing food and clothing to the people. Therefore, though I was under locks I still raised my face high up, my eyes staring calmly at their hatred and rancor. We should give praise to the leadership of the communist north for using their obscurantist policy bringing paucity to the people and using it as an advantage to foment hate and animosity. My wish was to see all the wealthy countries use their riches and talents so that the people could know the truth and differentiate between black and white. Communism has and is still bringing havoc to the people of several nations with their Machiavellian obscurantism and their lies.

Half an hour later Thanh, Nhuan and Duc told me to go. The rice fields were still dry and they took the short cut going through the field. From afar I already saw the big tree where I sat down to rest and on the right was the hamlet where was the house of hamlet chief Phong. On purpose, I did not lead them through the village and pretended rambling here and there with the goal to see whether somebody had tried to look for the spot. Finally, Nhuan and Thanh made sign to me that according to my sketch it should be in that direction. Several spots showed that for ten or fifteen days there were people digging and probing without results. It showed that I did a perfect job.

All of them waited for my reaction. In reality, I had recognized the location right away. Nevertheless, I did not want them to see my good mind. Besides, I was preoccupied looking at the fire ants and hairy worms bush. I took refuge there and now ended up in the hands of the enemy. I had the feeling of shame looking at that bush which had become greener. I still remembered clearly the group of farmers going out to work. A feeling of bitterness swarmed in me for my stormy life. My memory also went back to the night when I disembarked here and the sailors who hauled me to the sandy beach. Where are you now? Did you ever remember that fateful night which was the start of destruction of my youthful life? A soft sigh instinctively came out to dislodge my inner thoughts of regret.

I was looking back and forth trying to ascertain the burying place. I saw about 200m from where I stood several heads hidden in bushes and a few gun muzzles here and there. They really were on a well-coordinated state of alertness. Perhaps they thought of some possible evasion by which some helicopters might swoop down to snatch me out of their hands. That was why they had the armed local guerillas on the ready. You must recognize that the communists were suspicious and that they always do things overly with meticulous preparation. After a moment of intense brainstorming scrutiny, I indicated to them the spot to dig out. With an Army shovel, they dug to about 20cm when they found the big yellow Japanese bag and my small shovel. The material had rotten spots and all the small roots crossed and penetrated the darkened bag. The medicine vials and my small pistol under nylon wrapping were there. They collected everything as listed and stuffed them in a bag. Satisfaction was on their faces. When back in the car, I asked them in my soft voice to give me back the \$200. They frowned and Duc raised his voice saying, "It was the money the Diem-Americans provided you for spy activities and not yours. It will be the proof of that".

On the way back, they became somewhat subjective. The three Thanh, Duc and Nhuan went their way and I had only the two police agents as escorts. Right after the successful dig out, they were more relaxed. When I complained of tiredness and itchiness, they were easier and locked my arms to my front using only one lockset No 8. When the two police agents escorted me through the dry field with here and there some places still having swaying rice plants they became more careless and walked 7 or 8 meters ahead. I enjoyed the expanse, the odor and air and felt completely uplifted. I thought it was a good opportunity if I had some soap I could slide out my skinny hands; I could take care of them easily in a few minutes even with their pistols. Besides, I was in a do or die situation quite different from when they had not yet captured me. That was the sad fate that life reserved me.

We arrived at Ha Tinh at 5pm and they led me again to the kitchen to see the same two women. There was still the left over pot of rice and even two small stewed carp with a bowl of boiled water spinach. The boiled spinach dipped in the sauce of stewed fishes was a paradise rediscovered. I ate with eagerness while the two women sat next to me, one of them sewing and the other reading. No one said anything and the only noise was from my chopsticks hitting the bowl. I stood up looking at the two women with the feeling of gratitude and compassion. The jail warden came, making sign for me to follow him. I remembered the bedbugs and complained to him but he locked me, closed the door and left. I sat up on the bed to avoid those despicable insects thinking of the situation in which powerful men must surrender to those tiny things. My mind went randomly to all kinds of reflections when I heard the voice of a girl sounding like murmuring close by, "Why you did not lie down to rest"? I strained my ears listening, it was clear that she addressed me, perhaps through some crack of the wall. Again, the same voice intoned, "Why you did not answer me"? Then with a very low voice, I asked, "Excuse me, are you Miss Nguyet"? With astonishment she sounded back, "Why did you know my name"? I softly laughed saying that I also know Thoi, and to dissipate the hesitant situation, I added, "Yesterday I heard you talking to each other. How long ago did they arrest you and for what"? The reply came, "More than a month; I was in charge of the Catholic Youth Workers of the congregation. They wanted me to quit and join the Communist Youth Worker Group and I refused. They arrested me as reactionary and incarcerated me". Seeing that she showed open-mindedness and confidence in others, I went on, "As for Thoi"? She said she did not have a clear knowledge of him. I raised my voice a bit saying, "Hi Thoi, how are you"? Then I heard Nguyet's voice again, "What did they arrest you for, you looked so skinny"? I lowered my voice, "I appreciate your care. Do you see me clearly, I cannot see you". After a mute chuckle she said, "I ask you and you keep pretending". This girl seemed very clever and tricky. To prevent any future useless mishaps I slowly replied, "I am the teacher of second grade in Hanoi and I crossed the border". One-minute of silence and she asked again, "Why they locked both your legs for crossing the border". Then she sounded like a quizzical person and I answered with a detached manner, "When they arrested me I attacked the cadres". She chuckled again, "How terrible, you like to strike people"! To skip the subject I asked her how many cells are there in here. Would they catch this communication and lock you up? She replied that they had eight cells and talking in low voice from ten evening on is safe. Besides, from time to time hearing the steps of the cadre you just shut up. I complained of so many bed bugs that I could not lie down. She chuckled and advised me to ask for kerosene to pour in the cracks of the bed.

It was past midnight and keeping up and down all the time made me so tired. I finally resigned to offer my body to all the bugs as a good fare for them to enjoy. Miserable creature, you can only suck the thin blood of the poor people like me. You could never suck the good blood of the rich who had clean blankets and nets. Besides, they could kill you with their chemicals just like your comrades sucking blood and pus of the poor and the desperate. Very early, the on duty security man opened the cell and the leg lock to let me out. I knocked lightly twice to say bye to the new warm-hearted friend. In the bumpy ride back, though I had my arms locked at the front I still rocked to all directions like the yellow leaves buffeted by the autumn wind. The farther I went the knottier I felt as I was farther from my beloved south. Through the small opening in the car canopy, I saw a triangular piece of the southern sky. On that hazy blue firmament, I perceived the image of my mother directing her sorrowful teary eyes to me. I heard the echo of the song,

*"O mother! One thousand eternity of separation",  
"Facing to my mother direction, my tear drops at times fell".*

I closed my eyes to stem the tear drops, my anger went deep into my mournful heart. On the way to Thanh Hoa both sides were golden rice fields undulating exhaling the fresh aroma of the country. Anyhow, it still was not able to assuage my sadness.

The car slowly stopped at the side of the road and Nhuan and Thanh descended. Farther in for about 200m I saw three or four young men and several children with undershorts and barefooted running to where the car parked. According to their talk, I understood that this was the native place of Thanh. Perhaps Thanh had written ahead to meet his relatives and show off his importance. They related noisily, giving news of brother A, brother B or sister going to this front or that. Suddenly a young man with pride announced that Brother Luong had purchased one bicycle at the official price of \$280. The bike had two bright brake handles and he let him try a ride the other day. I thought to myself why such a bagatelle could take so much time in a short fifteen minutes of family reunion. In the south, even the purchase of an automobile would not interfere with so many things that a family would need to exchange. The spectacle permitted to understand the life of the people in the north. The young and the kids kept touching the auto like something out of the magic world. Anyhow, going to the bottom of things if I had to live like them I would not have behaved any differently. In conclusion, it was not their fault!

## THIRTY

### **The One Expected But Not See, The One Seen But Not Expected...**

We were back in Hanoi at five or six pm. It was a little cool now at the beginning of winter. When the car entered the gate, it was almost dark. In the room, Thanh opened my locks and took out of his brief case one pack of Truong Son Cigarettes and a book match. He handed them to me saying that my two-day trip allowance had a leftover of five dimes. He put out from his pocket two more dimes to buy those things for me. I opened my bright eyes and thanked him lavishly. I felt rejoiced, visualizing that in the days ahead I would have a good friend to understand my misery and hardship as a prisoner. Bang took me back to my cell. Nhiem the duty warden was off and Bang opened the door. Out of my old striped uniform, there were also reed mat and a blanket. I was happy, it was end of November and the prison cadres already had their winter uniforms. After he locked my leg, Bang walked out and locked the door.

Being high spirited with cigarettes and blankets, I forgot completely that I did not have my meal. Since this morning with two packs of 2-dimes gluey rice in Vinh, my stomach was completely empty. I covered my bed with the mat and felt the freezing cold of the lock. Being hungry and cold, I could not sleep. Standing up on one leg I strained my mouth towards the window and bellowed, "Cell 5 reporting to the cadre". First time then second time and third time, there was still no answer. The empty belly pushed me to be daring and this time, mid shouting, the window opened, one unfamiliar voice loudly uttered, "What do you report"? My quick answer, "I had to report that I did not get my food this evening". He retorted, "Why you did not eat". "I came back from Ha Tinh and had eaten nothing since this morning". The small window closed. It reopened fifteen minutes later. It was Bang asking again about me missing my meal. He went to the kitchen to bring back one full bowl with a small container of white salt. He said nicely, "there was no more soup so eat rice with salt" That ball-eyed man looking so brutal but was somewhat nice. I ate a plus-ration with my God given fingers thinking that without daring you will not get anything in life. My morale shot high; today I got cigarettes, mat, blankets and a full bowl of rice. It showed that in life there was no yardstick to measure happiness. The communist used this principle to manipulate human heart.

After fifteen minutes, Bang returned to open the door and I took the empty bowl out taking a scoop of water. After he locked me up, I managed to take care of the cold of my leg under the freezing leg-lock. I slipped my two old pant legs together to double it up and slid it through the lock over my leg to insulate it from the steel. I doubled and then quadrupled my reed mat cushioning from my butts to my shoulders. I wore double shirts and rolled up my blanket under my two crossed legs. I felt much comfortable now

though I still felt cold from my thighs down. I did not have any pillow and thought of inventing one with the broom used to clean the potty next to the water tank. In the morning, I will skip washing my face, rushing out to empty my potty and scraping it off with the broom. The broom still had some dried excrement on it. Anyhow, I did not care, just rinsing it as I could to put it in my potty and rushed my booty back to my cell. I took the twines off and reassembled it into a round 5 cm diameter headrest. As the thing was still wet, I left it upright against the wall to dry overnight. Necessity created invention!

Matron Hoa called me out for deposition. I saw Nhuan and an unknown face. Nhuan opened his briefcase and started, "Today making sure of your sincerity with the revolution we shall ask you a few matters". He took out twenty 4x6 black and white photos and showed me one at a time asking whether I recognized any. Both of them followed the expressions on my face and eyes. I did not recognize any of those skinny ones. I smelled the problems. Certainly there would be in there some spies from Saigon mixed with other ordinary criminals. Those spies they caught were in jail somewhere and they would like to investigate and corroborate. It could happen that by thoughtfulness or inadvertence you said that the person looked familiar. They will then conduct additional research and comparisons to discover true or false. They will use one against the other or vice versa. They could not use that method with me and I could take advantage of their ruse to fight back, leading them to a spool of entangled thread for them to unwind.

It was December, very cold and damp. With mat and blanket but lying on stone and steel, I felt so hungry. There were not enough calories against the inclement weather, I spent the nights sitting recoiled always thinking about food and salivating. I thought of a close friend Nguyen Van Nhuong of class 10, Thu Duc ROTC whom I brought in weekends to Ong Ta Market for a fare of barbecued pork with noodles. I also remembered biking to Tram Pagoda in Ha Dong and eating black beans with gluey rice in a roadside stall. The remembrances filled my mouth with saliva. I saluted Marx to have discovered the weakness of the world, the weak spot of men and his disciples needed only to experiment and refine it to perfection so that when they poked into it, men would shrink pathetically. If they had not exposed you to hunger, you would never feel the craving of food. Those who were always hungry and never hoped for a full belly from anywhere really felt the full meaning of starvation.

During winter, it was misty all day. In the cell, I could not clearly see the lock and out there, it should be as grey and gloomy as my spirit. The northerly wind through the cracks in the roof and filtering down through the small window of the ceiling sounded strident and wailing in the distressing solitude of the jail. The tips of my fingers and toes swelled itching and hurting at night, keeping me awake. I massaged them continually hearing from time to time the opening and closing of the windows for checking by the cadre on duty. About two or three in the morning the window opened again. Looking up, I saw through the hazy dim light of the electric bulb a nose and two bright eyes. This time the window did not close immediately and I heard a female voice, "Why you did not lie down to rest"? In the mid of silence and solitude it came like a warm inquiry imbued with commiserate humaneness. I answered with emotion, "I do not know why my fingers and toes were reddened and swollen. It was so painful that I could not sleep". I raised my ten fingers near the window. The voice was a soft murmur sounding like whispering, "You have infection". The window still stayed open with two scintillating eyes and a nose at times clears at times ethereal. The silence was oppressive; there were two opposing poles in two different front lines. Anyhow, there was one common stock, humanity. The soft voice again was heard, "Tomorrow you report to the nurse for some salted water bath".

The girl should not be a steady person of the jail. Salt was something strictly forbidden and perhaps she just talked without any conviction. Anyhow, that voice and those eyes were the real meaning of humaneness, caressing the solitude and loneliness in my poor ego. The window closed and she was gone. I suddenly remembered this song,

*Winter wind, coldness, cold wind,”*  
*The birds stop flying, out in the stormy time ... threatening,”*  
*“Why the wind howls hurting the soul of soldiers”*  
*“In the lengthy night...”*

The winter winds were still howling, the prison cell still dark and solitary. I gradually passed out in a night of horror.

There was no deposition during the ensuing five or six days. Today the ball-eyed Bang called again. When he opened the lock, my feet were all swollen and painful. I stood up and limped out with difficulty. Bang inquired in a flat voice. I had the feeling of walking on a bed of broken glass. Perhaps the circulation improved with movement I felt gradually better. Bang showed me to a building across from the grape canopy. I entered a large room and saw six or seven men there. This was the office of the prison because I saw Captain Tri, the assistant Director, behind a big desk with many dossiers and a golden star flag. Sitting in the middle was a man in a jacket about 45 and next to him was Duc with several other civilians. There was one big photo of Ho Chi Minh on the wall and several banners on Party, Country and Revolution, etc, making the room awash in red. Duc pointed to the lone stool in front of the desk and I sat down. Then with solemnity he turned his eyes to the jacket man and said, "Here is comrade Hong, Chief of Office 44, the Legal Political Executive Office. The comrade is pleased to see you, if you have anything you need you may refer to him for discussion". Hong displayed a diplomatic smile saying, "Hi! How are you? If you need anything you may speak it out"!

Thinking to me, if I fulfilled my need you will not have anymore a seat in here! I directed my eyes to the photo of Ho Chi Minh displaying two werewolf eyes. The pupils were like changing colors watching me. On a sudden my eyes heated up like fire making those pupils retrogressive looking down. A quick and simple desire, "I need the head of that man"! I finally said, "Thank you Sir, I do not need anything. I just desire you to resolve soon my case". He smiled half way, "How can I resolve it if you did not tell all the truth. You did not give a good deposition, how can I give an early conclusion"? I understood that he just wanted to know my face. In the meantime, I perceived the shadow of someone going in behind my back. I turned back and saw a man dressed in brown garb escorted by a security man. Duc directed him to a chair facing the desk and me. The man looked big and healthy, displaying a pale grey complexion, barefooted and wearing pants with the hem all torn like fringe border. When I glanced at him, my heart squeezed a little bit. In an instant reflex, it seemed to me that his face was familiar. Then I recognized Lieutenant Nghia, a once handsome and powerful man of the Binh Xuyen 1954-1966. I could not relate him to this very humble and shy man looking so furtive and scared. The atmosphere was totally at a standstill. I was aware that they were scrutinizing the attitudes of Nghia and I. Duc made sign to the security to escort Nghia out. I lowered my head pensive with so many questions in my head.

Eight years ago, I hated Nghia so much. During those eight years after the defeat of the Binh Xuyen, I kept looking for revenge. By chance, due to a test with Le Van Hoan, I now came across him and I was sure that Nghia had not ever expected this encounter in this torturing minute. I felt knots in my entrails because whatever it was, Nghia is now my comrade-in-arms, a brother befalling in this tragic and humiliating situation. The more I saw the degrading Nghia the more I was troubled with the compassion for a defeated partner erasing all my hatred. Seeing that I kept my head down, Duc raised his voice, "Now, did you remember who is he"? I slowly answered, "Yes, Nghia Binh Xuyen". With a faint smile Duc continued, "How is your thinking"? I rushed my answer showing my easy contentment, "It is such a surprise"! Duc stated half threatening, "You will see many more surprises! Now I let you go". Matron Hoa came in and I followed her back to the cell. My heart was laden with so many entangled things in my mind and I forgot my foot pains.

I thought Nghia belonged to a special operation team or was a singleton like I. They arrested him a long time ago and put him to re-education in some camp far from Hanoi. Perhaps he had never talked of his time with the Binh Xuyen. Now by a mishap I mentioned his name leading them to believe that he still hid many things and take him back to Hoa Lo for further investigation. They now threatened both Nghia and I. I thought that Nghia worried and perhaps was putting all the blame on me. For my side I would not have anything to be concerned because Nghia did not know anything about me and I had given them everything on my time with the Binh Xuyen.

## **THIRTY-ONE**

### **Nghia “Binh Xuyen”**

To give details on Nghia’s life, I must recount a period of my life in one troubled period of our country. The story started at the just built Binh Dan Hospital in Saigon, which they used as a temporary shelter for the refugees coming from the North. I was then a sixteen- year-old healthy boy having with me one ounce of gold hidden in my brief. I made friends with three other boys of the same age range who made their way to Saigon without any family connections. One day we came across with a healthy looking and handsome Lieutenant under well-pressed and creased uniform. I recognized him as a ticket controller for the Kim Chung Theater Group in Hanoi and he remembered to having let me enter free. We shook hands and he let me know that he had a Colonel Uncle with Binh Xuyen, a big party having total control of Saigon and Cholon. Being Northerner, “I can refer you and talk to my uncle to give you the rank of Second Lieutenant; you will be given the party emblem which is the head of a tiger”. I followed with my new friends to the Binh Xuyen area on a Dodge 4 across from the Y Bridge. I saw the garrison housed in the Japanese military installations with a flagpole hoisting the national flag and the Binh Xuyen flag as a red star Viet Minh flag surrounded by a green border. Two brand new Howitzer cannons and a row of GMC trucks were present among soldiers in uniforms going here and there.

We rambled inside the encampment and they did not authorize us to go out of the guarded gate. Nghia came back late, being busy enrolling new recruits from the refugees. I witnessed the killing of dissenters and the respect given to Bay Vien whom everyone addressed with the title His Excellency Bay Vien. I was determined to get out of this bandit mess, which was the by-product of the French Administration taking advantage of it in the fight against the Viet Minh. With the accession of the Viet Minh, the viper Ho Chi Minh attracted Bay Vien with two regiments of well-armed men to rally to the cause of independence, freedom and happiness to the people. Tricky Ho used that transitional means as if he had taken advantage of the patriotism of the intelligentsia in the war to establish communism and liquidate them afterwards.

Now let me go back to my problem with Nghia. That morning we had to be at the Headquarters for physical check-up. In the big crowd, I met Hieu whom Nghia wooed to evade from Thu Duc ROTC and he now felt discontented. I winked to Hieu to follow me to the gate where there was a sentinel. Across street, there was a vendor with some sugar canes and candies. I gave Hieu a \$5 bill and raised my voice telling him to go buy two pieces of sugar cane because I was hungry so that the guard was aware of our intention. Hieu took the bill and ran out saying that there was another man behind waiting to prevent him from checking the paper. When Hieu picked up the second piece, I pretended shouting back and forth for a different piece to run out finally getting my cane. The two of us looked furtively when by chance a motorized cycle unloaded its passenger close by. Glancing at the guard post and seeing that the sentinel was distractedly looking in another direction we jumped, on the cycle for a ride to ChoLon, paying \$15 for a quick drive away from the Y Bridge Control. Not knowing where to go, I went back to Binh Dan Hospital and saw Nghia with shiny boots and well-creased pants standing when I was still lying there. He

told me to walk out first while he was close behind. Out of the Hospital there was a beautiful sexy girl sitting on a canvas chair combing her long jade black hair. Nghia smiled at her and she responded. Nghia told me to wait for him a bit and I winked at him and ran away quick. The beauty had saved me from a bad turn of my life.

From then on, I did not have any news from Nghia. In 1960 a friend investigator in Binh Duong told me that they promoted him to captain. After they dismantled Binh Xuyen, Nghia disappeared. From the day, I saw Nghia at the deposition room to when they transferred me to the Central Re-education Camp; I did not stop inquiring about him. In 1976 when I was in the Central Camp of Phong Quang, Yen Bai I met two young ordinary criminal men who informed me that they were with Nghia for three years during which Nghia had the reputation of an outstanding worker of the camp. Nghia hauled each time on each side 40 raw bricks weighing about 90 kg each. They rushed him into the maze of competition of the communists. In 1972, Nghia had tuberculosis without any treatment and he vomited blood to die.

## **THIRTY-TWO**

### **Phung Van Tri, the Counter Espionage Trick**

It had become colder and colder. With two old striped uniforms, one small reed mat and a thin blanket I could not sleep at night on the freezing cement bed. Only during day when I was dead tired, I passed out for a while. My fingers and toes were swollen and painful. I was unable to walk; each step was like dozens of needles pushing into my heels. I thought being near death. Any time I lay down, I always thought of all the worries and sufferings of this life. I was not afraid of dying because death was the end, the deliverance from all pains of this existence. Day and night, I kept thinking of those who were not anymore, my grandfather my grandmother, my uncle Hanh who passed away in 1948, even my young friend killed by a stray French bullet. My mind went to the cemetery, and to the unmarked tombs, I saw at the roadsides. If I died, I would have nothing except a torn reed mat or old burlap and they will bury me in a shallow ditch. Rain and winter would erase it and I would disappear in the dark eternity.

Perhaps jail warden Nhiem foresaw my possible death and reported to higher authority. Seeing that they still needed me for unfinished work they could not let me die Nhiem gave me an additional blanket and a striped blouson. It showed their cruelty using the wickedness of nature to torture men. Besides, they gave me a bucket of hot salted water bath. Nhiem stated that they dispensed me of leg-lock for two days. Twice each day the nurse gave me that bucket of footbath. Having additional warm clothing and more blanket, with salt bath for my feet and hands I felt better and slept well. I was able to go out and empty my potty though I was not as steady on my feet. Anyhow, a few days later I felt cold again, quivering under the thick blankets and feeling like lying next to a big ice block. My feet and hands were less painful with the water-bath but still as swollen and itchy. May be the weather had become more inclement. Without call for deposition, I did not know the current days and months. It seemed like we were close to the end of December. I recollected Christmas of last year when I was on a Vespa Scooter with my friend Nguyen Huu Loi, all dressed up throughout the completely joyful Saigon. At present, I was by myself on this bumpy road of dark penitence.

This morning matron Tho called me early to deposition, and I worried. In the room were Thanh and Nhuan. After a few words of civility, Nhuan opened his briefcase and frowned at me, "Today you tell us on your training in the use of the secret inks, the usual and the special ones". I talked on the usual method using lemon, onion, alum, salt, urine that you read under heat and the special use of blood, chemical tablets, etc. It took two hours, one of them asked while the other took notes. Suddenly the door to the adjoined room opened and they led Phung Van Tri through. My God, why they arrested Tri? He looked



pale, his eyes haggard and lifeless. I was completely in turmoil while Tri looked back at me when they escorted him through the other door. I looked at Nhuan and Thanh screaming, "I vouch that Tri has no connection with me. He and his parents are plain folks. I had met him on my way like I said several times in my deposition". Nhuan chuckled ironically, "Are you crazy? Tri was arrested for another crime and not because of you". They went on pressing me and I did not care anymore, telling them to stop asking and go ahead killing me because to live with a tortured conscience is not worthwhile anymore. They kept laughing and finally Nhuan banged on the desk shouting, "You were arrested for your crime and Tri was caught for his crime. We forbid you to mention Tri's name". Regardless I kept rambling on Tri and finally they dismissed me until tomorrow.

Back to the cell, eating choked me. During night, I thought of how to save Tri. They did not believe what I told them. Perhaps I would tell them that I was aware having been followed otherwise I would not be foolish to go to Tri's house. Anyhow, by so doing I would destruct my whole story. All my deposition during the last six months would crumble. At the deposition as soon as I set foot into the room both Duc and Nhuan went into a tantrum, "You are a perfect liar, your mission was to monitor on Division 308. Why did they train you the use of secret inks? We know that you came here with another goal. If you do not tell us the truth, we will produce witnesses and then you will die". I kept telling them that I gave them all truth. I went on saying that I kept thinking of Tri and his folks, imploring them to clear Tri's case. They again squeezed on the secret ink during the afternoon session. I told them that I did not know why Hoa gave me that training, perhaps it was the initial training of a spy. They had deduced logically that the use of secret inks would be necessary to set up a spy network. I was stupid to have talked of secret inks.

Late that afternoon Nhuan took out from his briefcase one hand written piece of paper of the same genre I wrote my deposition. It was Tri handwriting avowing that he attempted to cross the border to Laos going to Thailand. I felt better. Anyhow, I thought they suspected connivance between us two and they had let Tri seeing me as a bluff to exert pressure on both sides. Perhaps they thought that I gave Tri the task of going to Saigon through Thailand for reporting. Thinking of the situation, I told them I was glad to see the paper, which pacified my conscience. Nhuan laughed and said. "I have told you but you did not believe me". Then he displayed a stern face, "What mission did you give to Tri and what did he tell you? Tri had avowed all, and I can let you see his deposition". Aha! He is bluffing. I shall not be caught. I smiled responding, "There is no such thing, I had told you that the only thing Tri knew of me was I am a 10 grade student of Vinh Linh going for heart treatment in Hanoi".

They did not believe and thought that the attempted border crossing of Tri related to me. I did not worry because regardless of the situation I will still be in prison. What bothered me was if they incarcerated Tri for a long time, it would bring a complete misery to his folks and I would not feel at peace. Then I boldly said, "Gentlemen, I tell you that when I was on my way to Vinh at the Kim Lien station there was an amputee selling me a ticket and I suspected he was a security agent, Then on the road there was a Command car following. Because of that, I would never go to Tri's house. Besides, Tri capability seemed limited as he was plain honest and his education was no better than reading and writing. So how could he be a spy"? Due to my stupid emotional character, I completely forgot my principle to hide the fact that I knew they followed me. That is why when hearing me they opened their bright eyes to ask, "What did you see, why did you suspect, give the description of the suspected, the suspected cars, since when did you suspect?" I told them only of the amputee and the Command car since the Kim Lien Station. They let me go.

They called me back very early. There were Duc, Nhuan and Dang the Hue man. It was thunder and storm. They all displayed frozen steel faces. They offensively pressed me, rolling up their sleeves shouting and I was completely off guard. They accused me to have known they followed me for a long time and trying to create confusion to security. I could not have believed that thing could turn out that

way. The deposition sessions went on days and nights. I felt so tired, my mind completely beset. Everyday they behaved as if I was their mortal enemy. One time out of anger Dang shouted and gave me a kick and I fell, "Miserable, you will die. Do you know that the fate of a spy is death eventually? The socialist regime had opened a road to salvation and you are stubbornly going your way. So let be it"! Then he exited the room. I felt sorry to have acted against my reason, letting the emotion overpower my thinking. Duc and Nhuan stayed wringing me with all kinds of questions. My ears buzzed, I felt dizzy and almost fell to the floor. They still questioned and I answered with an interrupted voice, "Sirs, I am dizzy, please let me go". Standing and threatening they said, "OK go! Tomorrow if you are not frank you will sleep with the earthworms soon"! Back in the cell, I was hungry but could not swallow my rice. Their attitude was so terrible, this time I could not survive.

One week later, I was like on a burning fire all day, morning, afternoon and night. I saw in Thanh's eyes some hint of humaneness. He seemed sad and talked less. From time to time, he took turn questioning me. I caught from his eyesight the deep commiseration when the unforgiving hands of three torturers buffeted me like a rag. One day Duc asked me, "How old are you now"? I looked at him and cautiously answered, "Sir, I am 24". Coldly he went on. "Did you have a sweetheart? Did you give a promise to anyone"? I wondered why he went into my personal things and looked at him to ponder, "When I was in school I had secret loves but had never promised or rendezvoused with anyone". More question, "Are you the only boy in the family"? My reply, "I have a younger brother now in third grade" Nodding, he coldly said, "You are determined to keep quiet, aren't you"? While Duc asked questions, Nhuan took notes. I said, "Sirs, I have said everything. If you find any unclear thing, please ask. I swear that I will try the best I can". Then he asked at once, "So what is your mission up North"? After I said I had given clearly all facts, he gave a violent blow to the desk and shouted, "I let you go, I do not have anymore business with you".

On my way back to the cell, I worried. The attitudes of the interrogators seemed out of the ordinary. I did not know what would be the outcome. The next day in the deposition room there was only Nhuan who showed me the stool to sit down and said, "Today is my last day with you and I would like to hear from you some true accounts. From the day you came here, through your own eyes, can you tell me the weak points of socialism and what you do not agree with". He stopped a few minutes to continue like sharing common concerns, "Certainly we still have imperfections. Anyhow, I would like to hear from you, a person from another society who could give a more objective opinion. You have the right to state the truth whatever it could be. I guarantee you that there will not be any influence on your case". Looking at him I cautiously replied, "Sir, though I went to Hanoi with an assigned mission. I do not like the regime in the South and I did not do anything, as they desired. My only purpose is to visit all the old sights of my childhood and therefore I did not pay any attention to the social problems and it would be difficult for me to be precise". He said like encouraging, "It does matter, just say it out even not precisely. You may show your sincerity"! I rambled, "Sir to say the truth, I am a just grown up man. Besides, I do not have a good education and do not understand politics to know right or wrong. In the streets, I saw that everywhere people are giving their best. They work with a real sense of responsibility not like in Saigon. One thing I like to mention is that we are still poor up here with men pulling carts. Nevertheless in a few years things will change".

He asked again, "Any other things"? I answered that was what I saw. He retorted, "Any thing you do not agree with socialism"? My answer, "I saw that everything is good. Perhaps, I have a shallow understanding". He displayed a flat smile, took note of everything I said and asked, "Then practically you agree with socialism in what points"? I thought that I should give him some concrete facts. Therefore, I turned up my face and said with conviction, "I did not like the rich who became richer while the poor are poorer. That is why when I was at Silver Street I was pleased to see Mr. Ky, the husband of my aunt Thuan walking down street with his wooden clogs. In the past, they were very rich and condescending. We never saw him at the front of his store with sandals". He softened his voice, "Frankly, why you are

determined to not telling the truth? Do you think that we do not have any means to force you”? My answer, “I never dared thinking that way. I fully trusted that the revolution knows best. I had avowed everything from the start. I feel painful that the revolution does not trust me. I do not know what to do to gain that trust”. He stood up with an ironical smile, “I let you go. You save that determination and stubbornness to the world beyond and Diem-Americans will reward you”.

## **THIRTY-THREE**

### **Execution at Night**

Matron Hoa took me back to the cell. It was raining and dark grey and I felt even darker. I looked at a small lone sparrow coiled up under the eave of the kitchen and remembered the cold-blooded communist liquidations in the past. The sight of two rotten bodies of one Christian congregation chief and a young Christian on the Day River with arms tied in 1952 was still vivid in my mind. Then there was the case of Colonel Hoang Thuy Nam, the head of the Republic of Vietnam Military Delegation after the Geneva Accord. Colonel Nam also had his arms bound, his tongue cut off and nails driven into his head and knees and dumped into Dong Nai River. I had seen with my own eyes those victims of communism. There were so many other cold-blooded killings. At present time, I had no other alternative than to follow the footsteps of my predecessors. In my nightmare, I saw two black dressed men binding my arms and blindfolding me to stab me ten times and dump me at the Pha Den Barge. It was only a bad dream but I had cold sweat.

Two days of apprehension went by. On the third day, the ball-eyed man Bang called me again for deposition. In the room there was only Thanh looking sad and ruddy as if he just had some alcohol. He talked to me with a gloomy tone, “Please sit down Binh”. Then he stayed quiet looking at the window like weighing, “I had tried to see you this time. I had a special affection for you Binh and considered you like my young brother. Today I am telling you with sincerity that I do not have any judgment on your opinion and I want to give you this advice: The wisest thing is to save your head. If you die, everything will become meaningless. Life has millions of facets and you are young seeing only one of them. I like you, if you help me I will help you and I will vouch for you”.

I felt emotional, what Thanh offered was practical. I said, “I appreciate your feeling and I had sensed your good disposition with me. Now how can I help you”? He waived his hand saying, “No I do not want to hear anything from you now. I urge you to think about it tonight and ponder all aspects. In the morning if you want to see me, just tell the warden. In case I do not hear from you then I know that you are not cooperative and I will drop it. My ability and authority have limits”. On my way back to the cell, I had a laden heart and I understood clearly that it boiled down to live or die. If I die, I will save my honor and in case I live, it will be in humiliation. I kept thinking of the examples of steadfastness of the past generations in history. I thought of Christianity, God and the Fathers like Hoang Quynh. I thought of two alternatives. If they already knew, and you avowed it you would show your despicable weakness. As they knew nothing, and you rushed to tell them you will be so low and you betrayed your teachers and friends notwithstanding your ideals. With commies, after using you up they would savage or kill you. The communist never trust anyone except those they brought up. As for Thanh, it is clear that he is a communist applying the principle “goals justify means”. They will never honor promises or contracts. Then I decided to go my way and I slept well under my thick blanket.

Several calm days passed while my inner self was all stormy. It was the start of spring. In the darkness of jail, I could not see Dame Spring. Three days and then five days passed without any new events and my worries faded away. Tonight I could not close my eyes, getting up to pee so often perhaps foreseeing

mishaps ahead. Past midnight, I finally sank into slumber. Suddenly I heard thunderous noise. At the door, there were several persons with unfamiliar faces. They looked especially cold and displayed pistols at their sides. One man jerked my blanket off shouting, "Crawl up"! I was in complete disarray when a heavy centrist voice sounded, "We got order to take you out, execute the order"! One man locked my arms in the back while the other put the chain over my shoulder and locked it. They put a black bandana over my eyes and opened the leg-lock. They lifted me up under my armpits and bellowed, "Stand up"! I was appalled. Some day I would be in this situation but it came so suddenly since I thought they still needed more time investigating me? My body lost its feel, my heart dismal while they dragged me barefooted. I shuffled along up and down to perhaps the prison gate. Then I heard the roaring sound of a starting Command car. They grabbed me up and pushed me into it as I had become so skinny. On the quiet roadway, there was only the noise of the engine. My brain was completely frozen thinking of the upcoming death. My soul seemed floating away out of my body. After more than half an hour the car stopped. Two men jerked me up and I heard an ice-cold shout "Down"! I stood up and they had to hoist me down, my feet touching the wet grass, scraping the uneven surface. I listened to the croaking of frogs and the monotonous humming of insects. It must be in an open field. A northern strident voice sounded at a sudden, "Comrade, I have completed the dig-out". The centrist voice softly asked whether we had lime.

They dragged me along and tied both arms to a column feeling like a tree bark. After a few minutes the heavy centrist voice intoned,

*"Hear you! The named Binh"!  
The Democratic Republic of Vietnam  
Independence, Freedom, Happiness  
By order, the Ministry of Security  
Decides that the named Dang Chi Binh, 24 is spy for Diem-Americans. He entered the country to commit sabotage of the revolution. Being stubborn to hide his actions detrimental to the country and the people, we hereby impose death penalty.  
Along with the humanitarian principles of the revolution, the Ministry grants him five minutes of reprieve to urgently confess and save his own life.  
The Ministry of Security of the People,  
Signed on this 27 of the month of January of 1963*

In a silent night, the only noises were from the mourning wail of the insects and the dry arming of the CKC guns. The voice of the central man intoned solemnly, "Between life and death you are given five minutes, starting now"! My ears hummed, my brain seemed solidified and my heart like stop beating. An instant image of my mother and the regret for Tri appeared and receded faraway. The feeling of water running down my spine and my hands were all wet with perspiration. I heard the loud shout and my heart squeezed, "Four minutes had elapsed, one minute left"! I strained to hear the detonation, my body was all numb senseless. My legs were flaggy unable to support me without the column. I was breathless when the work "execution" echoed in the air. I thought hearing the gun firing; a burning sensation was on my chest sides. Then, complete silence, some mute voices and some hands untying me followed by the strident northern voice, "Fate gives you a few more days to live, we get the order to stop the execution now"! They again lifted me up by my armpits to the vehicle. I was soulless, my body completely lifeless, unable to react to their pushing and dragging. In the car, I heard a familiar voice, "Due to a special circumstance you are given a few more days". My soul was like bobbing away and my lips shut tight without a word.

I was back to the cell again. They locked my leg, freed my arms and finally took off my bandana. My eyes did not see clear save the multiple circles flying in front of my face and until I could see clearly, they shut the door. It was not daylight yet. I tried to pick up the blanket and felt cold thighs, my pants were all

wet, I urinated in them without knowing it. Tired and tense I lay down under the blanket. My soul was sailing here and there like in a nightmare after returning from the death domain. I inadvertently touched my chest sides under my shirt, a state of sorrow enveloping me. I was only a coward being afraid of dying!

## **THIRTY-FOUR**

### **Changing Cell, Making New Friends**

Three days passed and I had just recovered my strength and my composure when at 5pm the ball-eyed warden opened the small window telling me to take out everything. He slid the strut out, and I freed my leg and I hurried to bundle my blankets and mat not forgetting my broom-pillow and my coconut scoop. Today I turned left, crossed a door through a big yard with rows of houses surrounding. There were five or six “badamier” trees having bare branches with new green buds. He led me around the yard, unlocked several doors and got me to an area of cells, having the red marking “Jail II”. The place was located next to the duty gate of the camp having a very good loudspeaker. Coming to cell four, he opened it and rushed me in. I saw another inmate under a cotton blanket. I got my leg into the lock and I nodded at the new inmate who was about 27, 29, looking healthy though displaying a pale greenish skin. I kept busy arranging my things; in here, I had a more open surrounding with more light. At the top of my bed there was a window 1mX60cm having 2cm steel bars under a steel netting, the windowsill was about two and half meters above the floor. The other side next to the main entry was a smaller window 50x30cm also with steel bars and steel net. It was not as quiet as in jail III. A loudspeaker on the main gate to the common camp facing the grape canopy let me hear clearly the broadcast,

During the following evening, I roughly knew of my cellmate through our conversation. His name is Pham Huy Tan working as a nurse in a hamlet of Ha Nam; He was married and had one child. He secretly partook in a political party named Tan Phong under chair Chuong who was at the same time Hamlet Chief. They founded Tan Phong Party three years ago under a flag of golden background and a red star in the middle. The membership counted about a few dozens and their activities spread to the hilly area of Hoa Binh and Tuyen Quang. The communists infiltrated its rank and trapped the whole bunch during a wedding celebration six months ago. I frankly told Tan that I came from the south, letting him know roughly, what I had confessed in my deposition.

During several days, I knew that his story of the political party was real. Anyhow, he was a small player. To save his skin he showed his desire to be “progressive” and I considered him more dangerous than a cadre trick playing turncoat. Anyhow, he was still immature showing satisfaction each time back from deposition. At times, he could not refrain from saying that the interrogators trusted him or they behaved brotherly with him. The warden named Tu showed his appreciations. He gave him menial work like cleaning the outhouse or sweeping the alley between the two rows of cells. Whoever being in jail for a few months is given work outside of the cell would feel gratified, You will be relaxed in the open environment different from the confined status. Besides, you got the trust of the cadres for not taking advantage to communicate with whatever purpose. However, there was still cadre around to watch you. I tested Tan asking whether they will judge him soon, and what could he expect? With some hesitation he replied, “According to a few facts and interaction with the legal people, it looked like I will be in tribunal in about a month. Leader Chuong will get 12 or 15 years. I will get around two to three years and there is chance that I would not be sentenced”. I felt that they wooed this man and he had certainly betrayed several of his partisans. I told him everything I had said in my deposition and would never confide to such an opportunist. However, I was not pleased to see a political member in charge of liaison and propaganda with such an unstable mind.

Jail II had eight cells in two opposing rows. If they did not lock your leg, by standing on the lock you could see the other inmate from his forehead up. Room 8 had a faucet for use as a bathroom and the place to clean your potty. As I was under lock, gradually my hearing became more precise and accurate. That was why I knew who-is-who around. Room 1 had one person with one leg locked; room 2 had two free-legs persons; room 3 uninhabited; room 4 was ours; room 5 opposite ours had one person; room 6 one person; room 7 next to the bathroom had two leg locked female inmates, crying and sobbing tragically at night. According to Tan, male curiosity pushed him to dare standing on a rolled up blanket to look. He said that one of the girls was about twenty and appeared to be a nun. I pitied the female prisoners for their sanitary needs, which were very inconvenient even for men. Besides, the jail warden watched closely through the window and through cracks all night.

Tan showed his surprising understanding on the prison cadres. When arrested he was put in the common camp with hundreds of all various criminals. Due to his colleagues confessions they incarcerated him in cell. Through our conversation, I knew that the Director of Hoa Lo was a southern man named Vo. He had Major rank but being old and knowing many high-ranking members of the Central Committee, they gave him this position. I guessed that the day when they beat and locked my mouth he was the old spectacled man who came and saved me. His two assistants were Lt. Tri a central man and Lt. Le of Hung Yen. There were two nurses, female nurse Dau giving me shots, re-employed as her husband was a planted city cadre. The male nurse named Hue supervised the dispensary. The tree office cadres who often called you to deposition were Bang, matron Hoa and the old spectacled Adjutant Kim. Old Kim was a retained cadre being a communist planted element as jail guard prior to 1954. As for matron Hoa, here was her story. She was native of Quang Tri. Prior to 1954 on order from the party, she sold gluey rice and sweet soup to the soldiers around the military post at Quang Tri. She fell in love and married a soldier of the post. She became an insider and when attacked, the post surrendered. After the truce agreement, she became security at Hoa Lo. In 1961, the twist of event sent her husband as special operative in North Vietnam. When they arrested him, he surprisingly met her again. She gave him a cake and a loaf of bread and delivered a long tirade of indoctrination making him mad throwing the food out in spite of hunger. I pitied matron Hoa when I walked behind her to deposition looking at her sway walking and her dark grey lips. She was a stupid ignorant peasant whom the commies had used to kill our people.

On that Saturday, they called Tan out to receive supplies from his wife. He brought back a slew of foodstuffs and two packs of Truong Son cigarettes. He was a glutton devouring the leftover rice from the other inmates that the warden gave him. He ate the peel of his bananas first before savoring the inside and enjoyed his cigarettes. He whetted my craving and offered to exchange his cigarettes against my half ration. I agreed only half way making him proposing other solutions to no avail. I did not understand why he ate so much and was somewhat fatter than my skinny body. He could not be as muscled and strong as I could before my arrest. The prisoner in room 6 went on a hunger strike. According to Tan, warden Tu told him that supplied with drink he would last five to seven days and without water he could last more than twenty days. Therefore, the cadre would not give any water if the prisoner refused to eat. They called Tan out to clean cell 6. He told me that the room had feces and urines mixed with food and smeared on walls and smelled so bad. The inmate covered his face under blanket and looked about thirty with a fine complexion. It lasted for six days during which you could hear the knocks on the door for water. Then it became silent and on day nine, they opened door 6, slid out the strut hearing the steps hauling him out, dead or alive. Tan had again the cleaning work. He grimaced complaining of the fetid blankets that the warden forced him to wash. Tan also said that now Hoa Lo had so many prisoners crowding the whole yard. According to what he heard from his relative, the Ministry of Security ordered to anyone of the former regime, from private to Adjutant whom they reeducated for a short time in local areas to be in labor camp building socialism.

Those soldiers and NCO's being somewhat connected with the old regime had always strived their best in the new system. They gained the trust everywhere, in co-operatives, factories and labor unions. After nine years of unflinching efforts, they became members or even leaders of field workers organizations of the socialist system. Some of them were commissars or secretaries of co-ops or labor federations. Now they called them to re-education, regardless of their present assignment because the socialist country was under threat. The people on the street had the fun expression of "putting your foot in the wrong shoe". If using the wrong shoe for only one day you should be re-educated. The facts showed that after 1975 if the communist left you untouched because they were still busy with matters that were more important, eventually they will get you with so many plausible reasons like, the Seven Fleet was active on the Eastern Pacific, The Chinese were maneuvering or the Thai were moving.

## THIRTY-FIVE

### The Female Prisoners of Cell Number 2

End of spring, nature was ready for summer. The air was nice with some scattered late spring showers foretelling the dry hot days ahead. I was sitting considering the ebbs and flows of life when the loudspeaker was turned off at 9pm. Suddenly, from a cell at the corner with the grape canopy a southern voice intoned forcefully,

*"To all the fighters of the Vietnam Air Force, I am Lieutenant Pilot of Squadron 33 of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam. I have heeded the false promise of the Diem-Americans to pilot my C-47 invading the sky of the northern socialist country to drop spies and special operatives. Antiaircraft fire of the revolutionary government downed my plane at Con Thoi, Ninh Binh. They gravely wounded me and owing to care given by the revolutionary state, I am well now. The reeducation and generous protection given me opened my eyes to my treason and the humanitarian policy of the party and the government. I am calling my friends of the Vietnam Air Force to stand up for the happiness of our people and the independence of our country. I want you to fly your aircraft to the liberated areas where you will be welcome as heroes and join your hands in the fight against our Diem-Americans enemy".*

I did not remember the full text but the above was roughly its content. I wondered with Tan of the text writing and broadcasting. He told me that every time you read it they give you \$5. Either they forced you to read or you did it showing your improvement and progress. As for the text, they input for you to write and they edited. I deeply meditated on the broadcast. If they recorded Van's voice and spread it in the south, it would create havoc in the ranks of our combatants and devastate the morale of those who did not have solid understanding of the communist. They now assigned him in work camp for his progress and the cadres treated him well. I remembered seeing him sitting under a tree when they escorted me for the first time through Hoa Lo. Everyday the loudspeaker at the gate gave the news of turmoil in the south, the Buddhist instigated by the bloody hands of the communist agitators and the lack of sense of responsibility of the southern administration. I was in the miserable life in prison and now I worried on the situation at home.

The next day the loudspeaker had stopped, meaning that it was 8 am the start of the workday. We did not see the duty man letting us out to empty our potty. Tan kept walking back and forth and stood up glancing at the gate. He looked happy saying that they still had the gate closed. He was smart knowing that it was safe to communicate and called in low voice, "Number 7, number 7"! Again, he repeated "Number 7"! A very clear female voice answered, "Who called"? Tan said, "This is number 4, how are you lately"? The same voice answered, "Thank you, I am OK". Tan went on, "what were you arrested for"? After one minute of silence, we again heard the clear voice, "Sounding the church bell to let the

Christians know that security came to arrest Father”. Tan suddenly jumped down with exorbitant eyes and the small window opened when warden Tu shouted, “Who just stood up to communicate from this cell”? It was just a question because he knew that as I had my legs locked there was no doubt. Tan clasped his hands twisting them together while Tu pulled the strut out followed by a dry order, “Put your legs in”. Sympathy or not, if you committed infraction you still got your locks!

When I first came to prison II, I knew that there were two leg-locked girls in cell 7. It could not be for criminal offense. These two girls must be serious political detainees. Perhaps she was my counterpart with document M. With Tan description as a nun looking person about twenty years old, I felt relaxed. I speculated that if the two belonged to the same organization they would not put them in the same cell. I concluded that one of the two was feigned. I must find a way to inform the other one. Anyhow, it was not possible due to my immobilized leg.

That afternoon while I lay down with random thoughts, warden Bang called me to deposition. Was there any change since I had waited for one week? From the night, they took me out to the firing squad, during those three months they had called me for that duty two or three times per week with same tactics, wooing, threatening and sentimentality. Now I had more experiences to know their ruses and acting, I just stayed put with my confession, at time, pretending to be stupid or acting troubled and lost to deflect their judgment. One day all three of them vehemently banged on the desk, hustling chairs. They had asked clemency avoiding my execution so that I comprehended the generosity of the party and truthfully confess. They spared a man life to make him into a better citizen. If he kept acting vile, it would be better off shooting all of them dead. I must say that I was not afraid anymore since the day they wanted to shoot me. Anyhow, I acted scared and apprehensive begging them to understand my truthful confession. In the room, I saw the three Nhuan, Duc and Dang displaying ice-cold visages with on the desk a very thick briefcase. After looking at me for a while, Nhuan solemnly asked me, “How long have you been in here”? With caution I replied, “Sir, more than ten months”. “Do you know that your people had sent up here how many acolytes looking for you”? I was anxious but acted like hearing a joke, “They were looking for me for what? I was a no-name guy whom they paid a few month salaries and threw up here for propaganda. They would not care if I was arrested, alive or dead”. Dang sitting quiet until he gave a big blow to the desk and pointed his finger at me, “Shut up! We let you know that our people coming back from the south had fully reported on you. You are an inveterate stubborn daring to “fight stone with eggs” and fool the Ministry of Security”! He took out from the briefcase a thick envelope sliding out a 6x9 photo among the stack and threw it on the desk, “Look at it and confess now. We shall not give you any more leeway”! A quick glance squeezed my heart. They took the photo at the corner of Nguyen Hue Boulevard across from Rex Movie showing the tall Phan having sunglasses and wearing a checkered shirt next to me in white shirt and clear glasses. I was stunned and in a quick reflex, thinking of the principle of compartmentalization in the espionage department I put out a feeler stating forcefully that it is Hoa my trainer. I added that I trust more the revolution to clarify my situation. Duc stood up at once, pointed his finger to my face and vociferated, “Do not utter falsehood! Was he Hoa”? I answered right away, “Sir he is Hoa my trainer who went out with me daily. I cannot make mistake about him”.

It was a chanced happening. I had always selected my uncle owner of Import Export Business, a big and light complexioned man to describe my trainer. Phan is also tall with the difference in his tanned skin. Anyhow, in the photo how could you differentiate? That was why I kept ascertaining that it was Hoa. They seemed very mad and angry. Through their attitude, I felt surer and gave back the photo confiding that, “It is undeniable that the party had arrested Hoa and will clarify my situation. I hope that I would confront him to throw to his face my hatred. Dang gave out a flat smile while Nhuan mockingly said that I looked handsome and dignified wearing clear glasses. I laughed saying, “You are fully aware of the society in south Vietnam where everything is artificial. A stupid man would always pretend to be intellectual wearing reading glasses and carrying all kinds of foreign languages books. It contaminated



me with that way of life; I wore clear glasses with golden rim. I am shameful of my artificial behavior”. Dang dryly shouted, “Get out of here”!

Back to the cell, I felt relieved still knowing those things would not end there. Many nights I reexamined many points and came up with the facts that I was uncovered probably at Father A under constant surveillance or from Paul Lang in Paris being paid by Hanoi counter espionage. Now the photo of Phan and I makes me more dubious.

They locked Tan for four days when matron Hoa called him out for deposition. He had only one legal man named Chau from the political section of office 44. Why I had so many of them and each time I had two to three interrogators. Perhaps as a spy, they must devote more time and effort. After nearly two hours, Tan was back to gather his things and quickly told me that they transferred him to the common camp waiting for the tribunal. I felt easier by myself not bothering anyone. The next day the left side girl of cell 7 went to the common camp and then came the turn of the other girl who silently left. I could be certain that she was the bait prisoner. I had the feeling to be solitary with only one leg-locked man of cell one, one free-leg of cell 2 and another free-leg of cell five.

## **THIRTY-SIX**

### **Hatred Beating by The Interrogators Bitterness in Prison Life**

I remembered clearly the date of 9 April, five days after my deposition. After emptying and cleaning my potty, I filed my nails on the cement floor expecting the lunch when the window opened suddenly. To the sound and way of opening it, I knew that it was an unfamiliar person. I looked up when the door opened and saw deputy chief Lt. Le in front with warden Tu behind him. Looking at me Le rigidly said, “By order of higher authority we will lock your two legs. Follow the orders”! I felt dizzy and asked the reason to which he answered that it was by order of high authority and I must execute. A veil of darkness seemed dropping over me. They were again torturing my miserable body. I got my legs into the jaws like going gradually into a tomb. After securing the lock Le turned back to say, “You must think well otherwise you will not live”! The door slammed shut. It was clear that they locked me up due to my stubbornness. Up to now, they stayed behind their “democracy mask”, winning the people to their righteous cause and educating the culprit by forgiveness. Now they removed their mask appearing fully as a red devil with fangs and bloody claws.

Having two legs in lock was the worst torture for your excretion needs. For discharge of excrements, I must try to do it every other day. To urinate, even drinking less I must do it every three or four times during day. As for nighttime, if I cannot sleep well two or three times were required. And with all my efforts I could not prevent from spraying all over the floor and my bed since I had only one position, to move side way on the bed and aim hit-and-miss to the pot on the floor. Necessity is the mother of invention. I thought of having my legs cross-locked. Then I had to lie belly down and I could only face to one side. Anyhow, I could kneel, fold fully my legs and sit down on the lock giving relief to my tired legs. There was an inconvenience. I could kneel and aim my jet to the potty on the floor spraying somewhat on the bed. Anyhow, for pooping there was no way bringing my butt out to the edge of the bed; I could use the trick only during day and I must reverse to the classical way at night. One day I sat comfortably on the lock staring at the small piece of sky with a few grape leaves moving slowly in the breeze and giving me some poetic enjoyment. The window opened suddenly and I quickly glanced at the face of warden Tu. He checked and understood why I crossed my leg into the lock but could not do anything, as it was not against regulations.

Again, they took many people into jail and every cell had inmates. About noon, I heard the opening of a cell and the voice of a Chinese speaking Vietnamese with a queer accent, "Fuck you! Why did you arrest me" I heard the opening of cell 6, the clicking of the leg-lock and the loud voice of warden Tu, "Shut up and put your legs in the lock"! Then the shuffling noise, the pushing, struggling and silence came again. I heard a coarse voice, "What I did to lock me? You did not let me doing business. My wife and my kids had to eat cassava and they did not have enough. To buy beans, salt you must be in long line and they were in short supply. Kill me, kill my wife and children! Fuck communism! Fuck revolution"! It became louder and louder, the window opened and Tu shouted steely, "Shut up, don't you want to die"? Again the Chinese roared, "Kill me, fuck your mother, I do not want to live anymore. You deprived rice to the people. Fuck your mother, comrades, fuck communism"! Several cadres ran to the cell and an unfamiliar voice ordered, "Lock up his mouth and if he does not submit get him to the solitary cubicle". The Chinese became enraged and kept insulting followed by the door opening, the struggle and finally the mute sound of his locked mouth. If they locked up your mouth, they also must tie your hands in the back to prevent you from unscrewing the mouth-lock. I still had cold sweat when thinking of my days with bloody body and locked mouth.

On 16 April, Tu opened the room to gather blankets, blouson and mat. I supplicated him to let me have a blanket and he sternly said that principle was principle. I took off my jacket, roll up my blankets and he threw them outside the door for a common criminal prisoner to pick up for wash and storage until next winter. They turned on the gate loudspeaker at 5am with the high pitch voice of a girl counting the exercise movements followed by news of youth activities, workers camps, factories and People Army news until 8am. Every week, Monday and Friday are "in-and-out merchandises days" according to their parlance. Starting at three or 4 am, they assembled prisoners in the yard at the grape canopy. The voices of prisoners mixed with the shouting of guards on food supply, locks and chains before going to the Central Camp. I heard clearly, which groups, common penal or political would go to which prison, chained together by pairs. They assembled everyone the night before in a transit house and they divided them to the camps of Vinh Quang, Phu Son, Vinh Tien, Pho Lu, Camp 5, etc. I was able to hear the cadres talking and discussing and get an understanding on the situation of the North Country.

In the afternoon, the warden asked cell 6 whether the Chinese prisoner was still screaming or not. A moment of silence, then the warden opened the cell with stern voice, "From now on if I hear one screaming from you I will lock your mouth and your two legs for a few days and you will die"! After a short moment of shuffling came the sound of unlocking. Then you heard the steps sliding out for rice and water and the shutting of cell door. The Chinese man was fully subdued and in line. You should be scared. I had tasted it for two days and I still had fears. The next day I heard again the opening of cell 6 and the shout of the warden rushing the inmate to take his stuffs out to the common camp. I understood that they did not incriminate the Chinese for any serious offense. He was discontented and badmouthed in the street so security arrested him. In the common camp, he kept insulting and they locked him in cell. Now coming to reason after punishment, they sent him back to the central camp.

On one Friday morning while I was dead tired lacking sleep and food in a restricted position all night the outside female quarrelling noises woke me up. They shipped those female prisoners to the Mo Chen Camp, which I did not know where it was. I heard ration counting, handcuffing and the two girls squabbling, for the 43 position, an odd number when you were by yourself unchained. Then the sobbing of the girl followed by a scream, "Pick your rice, whore and stop crying"! Another voice clearly sounded, "Damn your ancestors whore, you eat so many dry fish heads and now you sit there crying to make our entrails rotten"! I remembered my days in the streets of Hanoi when I was fifteen seeing the gracious and elegant girls of Trung Vuong School. Then after I went to Saigon, I contemplated with rapture the girls of Trung Vuong and Gia Long schools with jade black eyes, eggshell complexions, pinkish heels and the

three beautiful measurements wearing long white gloves on their black VeloSolex. They created beautiful paintings.

Now I am back in Hanoi, the thousand-year-elegant capital of nobility and delicateness. For almost a month, I could not see the same comparable image of Saigon. Only one time on the Reed Mat Street, I perceived on the balcony of a house a young girl with an oblong face doing her morning exercise presenting her perfect body. In the months and years after living in the remote wilderness areas, I could see beautiful northern girls, mostly the matron cadres. I realized then human psychology looking to things according to the conditions of the environment. The communist exploited to maximum the principle to dominate the people. They gradually eliminated the difference between happiness and misfortune, beauty and ugliness, patriotism and betrayal. They totally brainwashed the people and removed from them the perception of right and wrong.

## **THIRTY-SEVEN**

### **Near Death**

It was in full summer. It became hotter and hotter and mosquitoes multiplied. Especially in prison II with lower and bigger windows, they entered in droves. I was exhausted due to the locks and the mosquitoes. I had to stay up all night fanning away mosquitoes with my shirt. Mosquitoes abounded here because the windows are lower and bigger. I was the one not having any mosquito net and offering full fares to all the blood-sucking insects. Perhaps my body had lost its immunity and due to the constant state of filthiness. Sores and galls covered my body that became itchy and infected. I had reported many times before nurse Dau gave me a vial of gall pomade. Anyhow, after use I had to put it away at the lock of the next bed. Perhaps they were afraid that the prisoner would use it as poison to commit suicide. Everyday when they let me go out to empty and clean my potty I had to report and rush using my pomade before they locked me up again.

After thirty days in lock and not being called to deposition my feet became more and more painful feeling like bitten from the bones out. They swelled puffy to the extent that I could not raise them up. I will die this time but I rather die quickly with a bullet. Instead of, they wanted me to die a slow death in pain and misery, watching death coming slowly. As a Christian, I could not commit suicide. Anyhow, if I wanted I would not be able to do it with my locked position. My spirit was at its lowest point with intense pain in my feet and the constant itch. I could not sit up and lie down constantly to maintain blood circulation. I had to crawl out to get my rice and do it very slowly. One day the impatient warden grabbed the collar of my shirt to jerk me back. He made rice and soup spill all over the floor. I had to crawl picking them up as much as I could with my hands. Perhaps seeing my dire condition he reported and the assistant director Le came, standing at the door because the room was so fetid. He said, "Why you were so obstinate to not confess fully"? With a breathless voice I replied, "I had confessed ... everything ... but they did not believe me".

The door closed and I lay down feeling like bobbing on a boat, my ears humming. Certainly, I would die tonight; my body could not stand it any more after forty-three days under locks. My two legs became completely stiff. I wanted to slide down and bend them a little bit but my arms were so weak and flaggy. God, let me die. Mosquitoes, you may enjoy my blood which would become ash and dust. I passed out. Somebody pulled me up. I opened my eyes to see a man in white robe giving me an injection. I was not anymore in the cell and I was on a wooden bed, my two legs stretched out widely. I guessed the man was nurse Hue and asked, "Sir where is it here"? With a brighten face he smiled, "The infirmary, I have thought that you were gone last night. You have a miraculous living will"! I lay down, trying to recollect

all the events; last evening I suddenly felt weightless losing all sense of pains and itchiness and back in Saigon meeting my mother who gave me a thick book with golden characters saying that this is a very precious book. I passed out and some checking guard got permission to take me to the infirmary. It was fateful; God had not wanted me to die. I felt itchy again and while trying to lift my legs they were still weighty but I could manage. I strived and with difficulty, I could sit up. I was in a small room just by myself.

Suddenly the door opened showing a large room next door with single beds having all the skinny bony patients looking like skeletons. Nurse Dau came in, opening her brightened eyes looking at me, "Yesterday I thought you were gone". I raised my appreciative eyes and asked some pomade for my sore gall. She nodded a little bit and left showing a positive attitude. Having the urge to urinate I saw in a corner a pot and strained to slide down slowly moving to the pot to relieve. The shot had given me some strength back. I lay down on my bed again looking at my puffed up and weighty feet. Nurse Hue came back followed by an ordinary prisoner with a steamy hot bowl of rice soup. He also gave me the vial of gall pomade. I asked, "Sir, how long can I stay"? He cautiously replied, "I am not sure but perhaps a few more days". I was so scared to be back to the cell. I finished my hot soup and sweated profusely feeling much better. As there was no bath facility and I was all by myself, I removed all my clothes scratching to break the sore crusts and applied the pomade with the hope to be fully cured when I regained my prison cell.

They gave me another hot soup. When I finished eating, assistant Le came with warden Bang, looking at me with a more amiable expression. He started his discourse, "Have you seen that you should have died last night without the humanitarian principle of the Party. The Party and Revolution had returned you to life. You must be grateful forever. I have given instruction to improve your diet with one week of bran rice. To repay you must frankly confess everything. You still have a long life ahead to benefit of the generosity of the party and government and reintegrate into the society". Hearing his rerun over and over litany I put my hand on my chest and very slowly said without conviction, "At the very bottom of my heart I am very grateful to the party and revolution and especially to you". With gratified tone, Le went on, "Due to your health condition I have given order to dispense you of leg-lock. Right after going back to the cell you must have deep thoughts on your past mistakes and confess all the ruses and stratagems of Diem-Americans to harm the people, the Party and the country. That is the only way for you to benefit from the generosity and forgiveness of the Party". Regardless of what they said, the hearing of the words "dispense of leg-lock" made my soul dandling, feeling like having a big stone removed from my chest.

At 5pm, warden Bang escorted me back to the cell. The dying day of summer with its slanted rays gave the whole scenery a glorious golden illumination. A few sparrows were chirping in the branches displaying new green leaves swaying in the breeze like sharing with me the return to life. Bang led me to prison II into cell 2 closer to the gate and closer to the talkative loudspeaker. Seeing his good disposition, I asked him to let me retrieve my broom pillow left in room 4. He opened cell 4, which now had occupants and told me to go look for it in the washroom. I found it all wet and full of feces, which I washed off quickly and took back to my new cell. Bang was much easier with me today. The cell was dirty. I actively cleaned up the two platforms and the floor under. Then I undressed to start my active gall treatment. That night to defend against mosquitoes, I put one prison uniform on and use the second pant to cover my legs tying the waistband to my knees. The extra shirt covered my head with my hands on it. I perspired a lot but it was still better than being prey to mosquitoes. I had a very good sleep that night.

The next day was washday. I scratched open all gall sores and smeared pomade on them. Gall subsided and I regained my strength in three days to move around leisurely in the cell. I strained to read the small inscription left on the wall by previous prisoners, engraved with a piece of steel wire or a nail. I saw "Tran Minh Chau, alias Cap 1958 spy case", then "case of the gold seal of Bao Dai", etc. I was trying to

decipher those inscriptions when matron Hoa called me to deposition. I was angry back from death feeling hatred and decided to behave consequently. I saw Nhuan and Thanh, showed them my cold face and sat right down on the stool. Nhuan looked at me and said with a false moralist voice, "How are you lately, why you look so skinny". I flatly said, "Thank you, I am OK"! Thanh talked with an insipidly sentimental voice, "We have been quite busy for sometimes and miss you. Today we pay you visit with the believing that time has changed for the better with you. If you have something to express we are ready to examine your new ideas". I gave a quick response, "Sirs, when you gave order to lock my two legs I almost died. If it was not luck I could not have survived to come here and think about your questions". Both of them opened their eyes pretending astonished and Thanh asked. "What? So were you locked? Who told you that we gave that order"? That is typical communist. It was hypocritically obdurate. I felt heat swarming through my body and I did not care anymore, looking straight to their face I said, "I had fully given all truth and I regret it now"! Nhuan stood up menacing giving a big blow to the desk. Pointing his finger to my face he said, "Liar, why do you dare addressing the state employees like that"? I kept my face up and with a firm voice stated, "I have thought you were right digging in my mind and I gave you all details. When I came here, I did nothing for the Diem-Americans and you subjected me to the tortures of the colonialist to become a wretched body. Then when you see that I could not survive you gave me a temporary reprieve".

I showed them my hands and feet, "Look at them still swollen and covered with sores. Give the order to shoot me and I shall be thankful". Nhuan gave a flat smile while Thanh sat still. A short while later he said loud, "We said we did not lock you up. Let me check with the prison. I tell you we do it squarely, and do not have to lie with you. People like you are not worthy to save. You had eaten all the leftover butter and cheese of Diem-Americans. You are determined to be a traitor to the country and if we let you live it would only be a waste of the people's rice". I could not stand it anymore. I talked with resentment, "I am a young man having the Vietnamese blood flowing forcefully in my body. If foreigners invaded my country, I will be at the forefront to defend this beautiful land. I shall die for this country neither for money nor for recognition. I do not like the Americans and I will oppose whoever wanting to control my country and put its independence in jeopardy ...". Both of them displayed a somber face and to calm the situation, I continued, "I am a patriot and I love my country. Perhaps I did it the wrong way"! Thanh smiled and used a conciliatory tone, "It is good that you love the country. Why don't you tell the revolution all the ruses and tricks that Diem-Americans want you to do up here"? I wanted to take advantage of what they said to coin my statement, "That is why I did not wait until now. I had from the beginning the responsibility to tell you everything that the enemy had wanted me to do. You had understood my thoughts and from now on stop using the words traitor to the country and the people with me". They both laughed and one moment later Nhuan used a half kidding half-quizzical question, "I must frankly ask you what you do not agree with socialism to prevent you from saying all the truth? I have investigated many cases but yours is a tough one for me. Whoever sees the light of righteousness would sincerely give all details. You are the only one who keeps it to yourself".

Then he showed a bright face to flatter and court, "Do you know that we thought a great deal of you. We wanted to come up with a favorable solution for you. If we could get you into the revolution, it would be very beneficial to the state and the revolution. With the Party, bentwood will serve for bent construction and straight wood used when we need for straight structure. Your ability could bring good results in the service of the people". I smiled and answered with a neutral voice, "I appreciate your thinking but perhaps it was a joke. I am young and crude and it is too much from you to call me capable. As I am arrested and a criminal all I desire is to repent and submit to punishment". Before dismissing me Nhuan showed his friendliness to encourage me "to think about the problem thoroughly and they will resolve my case to satisfaction".

I limped back to the cell with Bang, chuckling on their low class comedy. I was not that naïve to forget about the bottom of their darkest heart. I was like a fish and they were the one fishing. If you took the

bait, you ended up in their basket or getting your mouth bloody. It was 5 June today, in mid summer and it was so hot and dry. After one-week diet with rice bran, my feet deflated and the gall sores became scars with treatment. I was in Hanoi one year and eight days and spent my time in Hoa Lo twenty days shy of a year. The only misfortunes were heat and mosquitoes. If I bared my body for air, the mosquitoes would suck my body and I will be sick not having enough to eat. I had to cover the best I can with my two jail uniforms and perspiration made me so smelly. People used to say “the prisoner, the leper, the wood splitter, the charcoal helper”, the four dirty kinds of persons. I had to resign to my situation.

## **THIRTY-EIGHT**

### **The Hero of Dien-Bien-Phu: a Price to Pay**

It was early morning. It suddenly became so dark. I looked out of the window, sitting on the lock. One small piece of beautiful sky suddenly turned dark and laden with water. The spark of lightning illuminated the whole scenery followed by a bolt of thunder vibrating the whole room. Then a successive artillery explosion went from one side to the other. In the dark prison I felt completely excluded from the outside, listening to the thundering sound, insulated from the human world. The wind started blowing hard and rain fell, at first scattered on the rooftop to end up like an avalanche. Rain and wind of nature came and went while rain and storm in your soul kept unabated. The door opened, a big man having a big beard and carrying a kaki color blanket came in followed by warden Tu. We nodded at each other and he arranged his things on the next bed, clothing, tobacco, matches, in a shamble perhaps after inspection by prison guards. He looked at the two big leg-locks and said, “Those terrible looking locks. Perhaps the colonialists built this prison and the regime preserved it to show the atrocious colonial system. I just smiled back unsusceptible.

He asked loudly, “How long did they arrest you”? I gave a straight answer, “One year”. He rounded his eyes, “One year! Aren’t you kidding”? I smiled and asked back, “How about you”? “Just today, I was arrested at Vinh this morning and taken here now”. He looked savage though through conversation he sounded nice and open. I ventured inquiring, “What did they arrest you for”? “Crossing borders”. He turned up his jaw and asked, “How about you”? I was like kidding, “Crossing borders too”. He stared widely and ogled me and for not too shocking, I said, “But from South to North”. He stopped arranging his stuffs to turn about asking, “So you like socialism and the socialist regime here”? My reply made him somewhat pensive, “Not only I do not like it, I also oppose it and that is why I am now in their prison”. He retorted, “Does that mean ...”? “It means that I belong to the Saigon administration and I infiltrated here as a spy”.

He looked so gratified. At night, we exchanged thoughts and knew roughly each other. His name is Hoang Hung and he joined the revolution on 19 August 1945 when he was 21 to become Army. In 1958, they transferred him to the Ministry of Finance. He married in 1959 and now has two young children. He said that the motive for crossing the borders was quite complex and he was caught when his friend wanted to part with his lover in Vinh and the thing was uncovered. He also showed his desire to know of the southern regime under President Ngo Dinh Diem. He took out his small pipe and tobacco and wanted me to join in. I jumped to his bed watching him prepare the pipe. He sucked with a humming sound, straining his neck, his eyes half closed and exhaling through his rounded up lips like from the smokestack of a boat. I also tried once to feel high and hazy like floating on the wavy ocean surface. At bedtime, when the loudspeaker stopped he told me to join under his mosquito net, head to toe. As the bed was narrow, I went back to mine and did the usual preparation against the bloodthirsty insects. He threw to me his empty bag to use as pillow. I felt rising in me a sentimental feeling of companionship between persons of the same country. He and I had belonged to two opposing front lines. We were now together

in the same reality to fulfill and understand the beauty of humankind belonging to the same patrimony. It made me confident that regardless of their method and system, the communists would be unable to change the fundamental basis of human nature.

Hung always inquired of the regime in the South. He went into minute details, asking the cost of one kilo of rice and beef. I only told him the concrete facts since President Ngo Dinh Diem came home to take the rein of the country. He went to deposition continually and let me use his pipe. I did it three times a day and became addicted to raw tobacco since then. Lately he seemed very preoccupied, coming back from deposition and he talked less. He went to bed early saying he had headache. He was in here nearly one month and they did not permit his family to visit him yet. As usual, I took in the bowl of rice for him but it sat there untouched and cold. In the afternoon when he was back, with a reddened face and the lips glued shut, Warden Tu followed in displaying a menacing face to slide the strut out. He ordered Hung to move the bowl of rice off the lock and shouted, "Put your legs in"! Hung slowly put one leg in and Tu shouted again, "The other leg too"! Hung's face was redder while he trusted his other leg in the lock. Warden Tu slammed the jaw down and it cut his leg bloody. Without a word, Hung closed his eyes and lay down, his face turned dark purple.

I was thoughtful about Hung's life in the sacrifice to the country. Perhaps he had showed them his anger during deposition. The irony of fate had given him the answer when he talked about the locks built by the French colonialist and now preserved by the party as a remembrance of past atrocity. I put my hand on his shoulder and begged him to sit up eating his rice. He only shook his head without a word and I returned to my bed respecting his privacy. The window opened. Tu showed his face and opened the door shouting, "Do you eat your rice or not"? Hung clenched his teeth and lay still. Tu shouted again to me in a rugged voice, "Take that bowl out"! I lay down thinking randomly when at 6pm Hung raised his sad voice asking me to help hooking up his mosquito net. I turned and returned in my bed with all kinds of thoughts about Hung and his huge legs. How he could cope with position change for his sanitary needs. The loudspeaker stopped quite a while ago. Suddenly I heard the choked sound of suffocation and saw through the dim light the enlarging dark red spot on his shirt. I got up to see blood all over his shirt wetting his blanket while he lay still, his complexion changed to pale grey and his eyes tightly shut. I screamed to the window, "Reporting, a man committing suicide at cell 2".

The clanking sounds of keys and an unfamiliar face showed up in civilian clothes wearing a pistol at his side. He lifted the mosquito net and the blanket to see the coagulated blood of the locked legs. Then I saw Hung's throat slashed with bubbling small balloon of blood, his wrist and elbows cut open. Nhiem found the razor blade and they lifted the body onto a wooden litter. I remembered that despicable The beating me when I first was in here. Nhiem ordered me to gather all Hung belongings, including his small pipe, matches and tobacco. With his approval, I ran out taking three pots of water to rinse off the bed and floor. It was past midnight and I stayed awake smelling the trite blood odor wondering whether Hung was dead or alive. I forgot about the sack he gave me to use as pillow. One day when warden Tu was about to close the door I raised the sack. I said that this belonged to Hung and I would want to return to him. Tu looked at the old military sack and slowly said, "I give it to you". Therefore, Hung was no more. Did his folks know about it? Where are they now? I still had so many things I would like to tell you and I would like to ask you so many things. Why did you leave so quickly? You forgot about your young wife and young kids taking with you hatred and rancor. I suddenly sobbed, sighing in grief for a meaningless life. His story haunted me every night awakening me to see on the next bed the image of Hung stiffened in locks all smeared in blood as if he was still there.

## THIRTY-NINE

### The Second Winter

This morning warden Bang called me to deposition. I saw only Nhuan who displayed a big smile showing me the stool to sit down and said, "I expect to hear new things from you. I trust that during the last half month you have thoroughly thought of the problems. I leave it to you to say it out freely and boldly. You are holding the key to your future". Listening, I showed my despair and pains. After he urged me I fully opened up, "Sir, I had thought that the state fully understand my sincerity. Now you tell me to open my door to my future I am unable to react. I see that the party has not given a fair conclusion to my case and I have waited for it more than one year now". He stopped smiling stiffening his voice, "It is OK. We are still ready to leave the door open welcoming the stragglers back to our fold. It is better late than ever. Now I would like you to describe the thatched house at Cau Cong where Hoa trained you".

I worried somewhat. Seeing the photo of Phan and me, I was certain that they had planted their men in there. It meant that they could cross check. I had taken the house of a Chinese friend in Cholon whom I knew well. All I had was to dig in my memory all the details. While I talked he listened and wrote down, quizzing on things he deemed unclear. He dismissed me at almost noontime. He called me again in the afternoon giving me five sheets of paper and showed me to a small table at the corner, "You write down all details about that house, the tools, furnishings, in and out of the house, the way from Khanh Hoi to it. On another sheet, you draw a sketch with annotation going from Saigon to Khanh Hoi onto the alley leading to the address. Holding the paper to the desk, my brain was all-tense. Was this a final knot for them to untie the whole spool, I had thought carefully. Seeing that the only way was to move forward, I did it without hesitation. My sketch looked clear and precise though I still saved some cracks for future use.

Back in the cell, I found the door opened and warden Tu holding a few pieces of striped cloth from my pants. He offensively asked where I took them. I told him it came from the old uniform I got when I first came here one year ago. It was torn and I saved some for use as washcloth. I used the top part as my underwear, which I showed to him under my pants. Thinking that they were looking for reason to lock me up, as I did not commit any infractions to internal regulations, they use the old pants to accuse me of the crime of destruction of property of socialism. He pulled the strut out and ordered me to put in my legs. Another period of hardship started with lost freedom. The cruel leg-lock kept me isolated in the solitude of prison cell day in and day out and months after months.

At the off time, the cadres got their bicycles to go home. I suddenly heard mixed voices from a group going from the Hoa Lo gate to the common gate of the camp. Nhiem raised his voice, "Why are you so late today"? Then Tan answered sobbing, "I have to report that the tribunal just finished its session". Nhiem said in a harsh tone, "Are you so innocent to cry? What are you taking in here"? Came a choked voice followed by nose blowing and a wailing tone, "I must report that our families gave us some supplies". "Are you Chuong? How many years did the court give you"? A craggy voice sounded, "Reporting, life"! "I ask about you"? A bellow voice sounded, "twenty years"! "What is the fate of this man"? Tan voice, weeping convulsively, "Fifteen years"! I thought about Tan naive. He was subjective until he received a hammer blow serving as a lesson for me to act and think in the future.

It changed to winter and my fingers and toes started to swell up painful again. The voice of assistant Le sounded threatening with anger, "Yesterday who was the comrade using my bike"? A hesitant voice answered, "Comrade I did not go down town; may be comrade The"? Le again rose his voice angrier, "You never asked me before taking my bicycle. Every time I use it, either there was the loss of a brake pad, a mud shield or a broken brake cable. I had it fixed and the same thing happens again. Even locked



you pried it open. I must tell you that we are not yet in the period of social communism”. Through the exchanges, I realized that in their mind they still believed in the bright future of socialism. I also deduced that the people of North Vietnam were looking forward to the beautifully painted cake promising them succulent and aromatic savor.

This morning after opening the door for potty work, warden Tu pointed to the hip of blankets and vests in the corner for each one to get a blanket and eventually a vest. When my turn came, as I was the longest tenure inmate, Tu showed his good disposition and said, “You have not enough clothes, I let you get the thickest blanket plus a vest”. I got that thick blanket and a good vest about 80%. Thinking of the next winter cold I humbly showed him my swollen hands and feet asking for an extra blanket if there would still be available. He did not say a word and told me to enter the cell. I put my feet into the lock. Anyhow seeing that he did not lock I got it out glancing from time to time at the lock. Tu finally opened my cell, and showed me three blankets on the ground telling me to fold it and he lent me one extra. I had the feeling of a child getting his gift and hurried in with the blanket for my warmth during the upcoming winter.

## **FORTY**

### **A Surprise Victory: The Coup D’etat in The South**

It was 2 November, the cold drizzling winter rains made everything damp, the whole sky laden without a hint of sunshine. From time to time the freezing breeze penetrated through cracks bringing with them solitary coldness to punish the hungry prisoner. As usual, I lay down in my solitude regardless of the strident voice of the female announcer. On at a sudden I heard that voice announcing the toppling of Ngo Dinh Diem by a coup of the Council of Generals of Saigon. My heart oppressed; I crawled up straining my eyes and my ears towards the loudspeaker. Outside the cadres were discussing noisily when a voice shouted lightly, “Comrades keep quiet to hear first”! The loudspeaker still sounded clearly, “The coup troops are in control of the situation. The brothers Ngo Dinh Nhiem are isolated in the basement of Gia Long Palace. The atmosphere in Saigon is very tense and apprehensive”.

I was astounded and nervous. Would the fate of the country be so tragic? Was this reality or communist propaganda? With my logical thinking, I knew this was reality. Anyhow, sentimentally I persisted to think it as a communist psy-war ploy with the purpose of spreading rumor detrimental to the morale of the people. From the day they arrested me I had not recited prayers. Today, facing the danger to a person, I love and to the entire nation, I implored God to grant protection to President Ngo in whom I reserved veneration. They had carried the pots of rice and soup to the usual location and I did not notice it. Until they opened the door telling me to get my ration, I jolted as if I just woke up from a nightmare of blood and fire. After I got my food I did not as usual swoop down to eat with rapture. I remained cool and detached, waiting the 5pm broadcast to know of the evolving situation back home.

The situation in Saigon was still tense with round the clock imposed martial law. The coup side seemed to be reaching 90% success requesting President Diem to surrender before they bombed Gia Long Palace. The commentary of Hanoi broadcast showed objectivity even though one could read in between lines their wish to see Ngo Dinh Diem toppled, a person they feared and whom their political apparatus was trying by all means available to destroy. Now some people were doing that work for them and certainly, they were shaking each other’s hands saluting such a sudden victory. I could not sleep through the night with all thoughts churned in my mind, expecting to hear the morning broadcast. The cold winter wind wailed as the advance signal to the descendants of the Fairy and the Dragon of a period of despair and

tragedy. There was news that the brothers Ngo had escaped through an underground tunnel out of the Palace to the Church of Father Tam in Cholon. According to that exasperate loudspeaker, they took them back in an Army armored vehicle. They killed both on the way with bayonet and bullets. My ears buzzed, my nose suffocated, the grape leaves out there were like dancing wildly to my eyes. Was it true or just a nightmare? The shouting of two cadres running to the gate, “Ngo Dinh Diem is no more, Ngo Dinh Diem is killed”, gave me a freezing chill along my spine. My painful heart seemed torn to pieces.

In general, the communist cadres were non-communicative, displaying stern faces, unlike the smiling faces in the south. It was more typical with the prison cadres. Today they burst into hurrahs, dancing joyfully in public. In the context of present Vietnam, half of the country was under the communists while the other half had a Front of Liberation planted by them. The Nationalist camp did not have enough time to settle, the people still divided between right and wrong. Therefore, a change of leadership was most beneficial to the enemy. President Diem had imperfections, but as there was no better man, we must opt for the not too perfect one and try to improve him. The Generals conducting their revolution to start mutual destruction for personal interests were lending their hands to the enemy. The communist smelled it quickly and knew that the morale of our people and the military was at its lowest. After the meeting of their political bureau, the legal cadres shouted into my face, “If not due to the international situation and pressure, all we need is five well armed and trained divisions to easily force our way from Ben Hai to Saigon. Your people and Army would disband disorderly”. Our fighters in communist jail or the silent hopeful people for liberation from communism by the south had their dream in smoke.

During the night, I went through terrible nightmares. The northerly wind and the unending winter rain battered leaves like my tattered body. My skinny legs felt frozen in the steel lock, my fingers and toes became puffer and painful. Anyhow, physical pains were not comparable to mental pains due to loss of confidence and belief. Suddenly the window opened showing a nose and a spectacled pair of eyes. I heard a familiar Southern voice, “Are you OK lately”? It was prison Director Vo. One year ago, he saved me from my locks. I rushed my answer, “Thank you I am well as usual”. He was in such a hurry to show his enthusiasm on the new of the success of the coup in Saigon. He wanted to share his thoughts with a man coming from the south to tell him that the south now is not anymore a capable adversary. Therefore, the country reunification is a question of timing. He smiled ear to ear and wished me good health before he closed the window.

Two days later matron Hoa called me to deposition. There were three of them, Thanh, Duc and Nhuan, all displaying a joyful face. After I sat down, Duc asked at once, “Did you follow the broadcast lately”? To my positive response he added, “How do you think about it”? I gave an impassible answer, knowing that their six eyes were focused intensely on my face, “Sirs I have heard about the coup in Saigon and perhaps they killed the two brothers Ngo Dinh Diem”. Nhuan with a testing sentence advanced, “I know that you had been very sad lately with the death of your master. I think that is a good chance because you are not obliged anymore to anyone. Now you must think of saving your own skin by confessing it all to the revolution. As for that Duong Van Minh and the bunch of Generals, they are good for the trashcan. They will do infighting to be lackeys of the Americans”! I acted surprised, “Sir I am always sad in here. To say that Ngo Dinh Diem is my master is wrong. I have never met him before. Besides, he had not given me any favor and neither did I hate him. Therefore, life or death for him does not matter to me. As for confessing, I did it thoroughly from the beginning, not waiting to do it now”. Thanh rushed, “What you say is not true. Diem is Catholic and so you are and you must give him support”. Showing my surprise I retorted, “Sirs I have told you several times before that my parents and relatives are all merchants. I am the only one influenced by movies to naively venture to Hanoi on their urging. Really, for me, I do not care seeing whoever be President or Chief because I do not understand anything of them. Now they are more meaningless to me. I hate them so much”! Thanh acted astonished, “Why you say it is meaningless to you”? I acted annoyed and answered in a sad voice, “Now I understand clearly! When Mr. Diem was still there, I was just like an abandoned child in the market place. No one in Saigon, save

my parents and my siblings, remembered me. Death or alive, those people of the coup mafia would not care about me and that is why I said they are all meaningless”

Perhaps seeing that it was only an insignificant exchange of barbs, Duc changed the direction, “According to you what will the situation in the south be”? I said, “Sir, how can I know it to say my opinion. Anyhow, in the present situation, the Generals will start their infightings leading the society to more disorder. I am quite sure that the Front of Liberation will easily take over under the leadership of the Party”. All three displayed brightened eyes and Nhuan added laughing, “Very good, you could be a brainy advisor”! I cautiously answered them, “You were mocking me. I only say what comes to my mind. I would not be able to handle such a big problem”. Then Duc firmed his voice, “I must throw it to your face that if not due to international constraints we simply launch five divisions to easily fight their way from Ben Hai to Saigon”. Showing my confidence I added, “I will be happy because you will catch the whole espionage network of Saigon. Then you will really understand my sincerity”! I rambled to gain their confidence, “About Diem, I remember the aborted coup of 11 November 1960 when the people in the south disliked him. He had taken as national emblem the bamboo tree to show his integrity, ethics and transparency. He was supposed to act as a perfect man. Then when the paratroopers surrounded him in the Independence Palace, he went to the airwave declaring to the people that he agreed to compromise with the Revolutionary Council to retract his promise when the few military units gave him support. I could not see in him the gentleman behind the bamboo symbol”.

They all laughed while Duc said that the promise given under duress would not have validity and Diem acted right under the circumstances. Anyhow, I realized that the communists are opportunist. They would not uphold any promise or contract they signed to abrogate later as the circumstances permit.

## **FORTY-ONE**

### **The Guillotine - Nightmare for The Inmates**

They did not call me often for deposition lately. They questioned me here and there; encouraging, wooing or threatening perhaps thinking that time would wear me out. Anyhow, at present, my spirit seemed dead, the whole surrounding was just very dark and I lost all fighting will. I hated life and men, my mind now focused to death, which would absolve everything. They still locked my legs and my feet were turgid and painful. I hated them all; I did not even anymore talk of my lock.

One day, warden Tu opened the cell and told me to move to another cell. With a bundle of things in my arms, I walked in front of him through the yard of the common camp onto a narrow steel gate. The area surrounded by a semi-circle low wall, topped with bare electrical wires. He opened the gate to a small yard junked with dry leaves from a big overhung branch outside. In the middle of the yard were strung cords for drying clothes. It was dead silent letting the noise of steps over the dry leaves sounding very clear. Coming to a long building, I saw under very dim light a small room with a desk and chair, perhaps the duty room of the jail. He went to room 3, pulled the strut out. I came in taking the broom to clean the floor and the cement bed and took out the pot still with feces and urine. I asked him to let me empty and clean it. He looked into it and showed me to the location next to cell 1 urging me to expedite. That room had a faucet for washing and there was a big latrine hole perhaps the toilet for cadres. When done I glanced quickly and saw that jail I was the size of both II and III together. According to what I heard from Tan, jail I was the death row built by the French Colonialists and they called it “guillotine row”. Tu shouted “hurry up, put your leg in”.

It was quiet again. I was looking around when a low pitch voice sounded, “Hi new friend of cell 3, how are you”? I strained my ears and coughed twice as a reply. It was similar to the cell in Jail II except for the large window fitted with a wooden box without bottom for aeration. The French built this structure and many Viet Minh were through it to know of the cracks that prisoners used as communications channels. Now they blocked them to correct the discrepancies. I was deep in my sorrow and sank into the night until I heard the rattling of keys and the opening and closing of doors. My turn came, after they pulled the strut out, I took the potty limping and saw cadre Chien I met a few times when I went to deposition. He was an Adjutant with a military attitude, cool and to the point with an impassible eye quite different from the other security men. Then during the times to get your meal or to return the bowls, you did not hear any noise except the sound of utensils or the scraping of steps. I had the feeling sitting in a tomb of a deserted cemetery.

It was changing to spring but the late Northeast wind still brought exacting cold to torture the body of the desperate. My fingers and toes were all swollen and itchy. During the previous months, I withstood all the misery and suffering due to my confidence in my free country of South Vietnam, bringing freedom to the North under the inhumane communists. Now thinking of my troubled country I bowed my head, turning down my face in shame and anger. The idea of death insinuated in me, creeping up like a tide of black ink. Tonight alike the previous ones my inner self was all tormented, I woke up having no knowledge of the time being. As usual, I grabbed the potty from under the bed. I managed to position it on the bed. I braced up with my free leg to put my butt on it. Being constipated I strained, my body covered under a blanket, my butt feeling pains pressing on the sharp rusted edges of the pot. After about twenty minutes I tried to change position when I slipped and fell down, hanging on the locked leg and my head dangling over the floor. The lock cut my leg bleeding while the potty toppled emptying its content of urine and feces to the floor. My back hit the edge of the bed and I took a while to recover. My blanket and mat were wet with urine and pieces of excrements rolling all over. Using my fingers to press on the wound, I tried to stop the bleeding not having even a piece of paper to bandage it. For Heaven sake, how could I do? I was all shaking with cold. I wrung the urine soaked blanket to cover my body while picking up the feces and putting it back in the pot. Bleeding stopped but my trembling leg opened the wound and it was bleeding again. Suddenly the small window opened. I was not able to see out and rushed to report with my quivered voice, “Please cadre, my leg was cut and there was no way to stop bleeding. Would you give me some tobacco for it”? After asking the cause of the bleeding, he closed the window without any other words. Fifteen minutes later two fingers pressing a cigarette pushed through the bars and I strained my whole body to get it. I did not know who he was though he showed some kind of human compassion

The bleeding stopped, the bed and the blanket had dried somewhat and I quivered less. I enveloped my head and neck with the empty sack I used as pillow and leaned to the wall waiting for morning, thinking of my misfortune. I did not succeed in school. The small work given by the country was unsuccessful and I ended in the hands of the enemy. I missed my filial duty not paying my debt to my parents for their immense sacrifice. While in Saigon, I always showed to my organization and the priests that I was a fearless man looking at death as simply a long sleep. In reality when they took me to the firing squat that night I wet my pants and sweated, proof that I was a poor coward. I would not deserve a life wasting the food of the people and crowding the planet. My religion forbids suicide. Anyhow, I had prayed and begged God and Mother Maria several times for pardon. My faith was shaky and broken like the reliance of the people to the present administration. I did not find any hope to cling to it. God, you gave me life and freedom. The enemy submitted me to all cruel treatment and I foresaw that I would die at the end. It was so unreasonable and illogical. The communists had usurped my minimal freedom, subjected my body to starvation and freezing. What remained is my life, which is between God and me. I decided to take it in my own hands. Oh God, forgive me! I shall decide for my own life!

After many nights struggling spiritually I finally decided to die. Death now meant a victory against my enemy and it is a clean slate. My mind directed at random to my parents, my siblings, my relatives and my friends. I also thought of the famous names, the researchers and inventors of renown, those who contributed greatly to the society and humankind, the names like Quang Trung, Nguyen Thai Hoc, Pascal, Kennedy, Khai Hung, Han Mac Tu, etc. They died even though society still needed them. As for a low and despicable creature like me who should have died but still live. I took my decision but still had to find the way. I looked at the window behind me and the sturdy pants they issued me last October. I will use my teeth to tear and rip it into long straps 4.5 cm wide braided into a 1.2 to 1.4 m long rope. It took me four days work. I must avoid the constant surveillance of the prison warden, tearing cloth when there were noises of opening and closing doors and braiding under the blanket. I got a finished solid rope, which I wore around my waist.

In the meantime, they called me to deposition twice, in the same scenario of threatening and courting. If they were keen enough, they would notice that I did not anymore show fear and worry and in case they touched my belly, they would find that rope hidden under my pant waist. My mind was towards the things I will part with, the book match Thanh gave me in Ha Tinh, my small horn comb and the pack of toothpicks hiding the secret pen. I looked at everything around me with a hint of farewell, the blanket, the mat and even the broken strap Thai sandals. I suddenly thought of the Buddhist Reincarnation teaching. When I die perhaps, I shall become a glorious General commanding an army to crush the communists bringing freedom and happiness to our compatriots in the north. Alternatively, I might be the descendant of the powerful political bureau chief to bury their inhumane socialism. In case I reincarnated into a girl she would use her beauty to serve the country, bringing up her progeny to fight for freedom and democracy. I thought of the many national heroes who offered their life to the national cause like Nguyen Thai Hoc, Pham Hong Thai, Hoang Thuy Nam. My brain went randomly from the Japanese Bushido to the strength of survival of the Jews. I opened my eyes from dream to reality. I looked at the window behind me, from the windowsill to my cement bed was 1.50 m and in front of the steel bars was a steel netting having 3cm diameters mesh. To get ready for my plan I must have my leg conveniently arranged too. I used my old shorts to roll up as a sheath encasing my ankle in the lock making it easy sliding up and down.

## **FORTY-TWO**

### **Encounter with Death**

The opportunity came on Sunday. Warden Chien was off and replaced by another man. It was close to 8am when I heard the opening of the gate followed by a light step and the cranking of keys. The duty room opened, table and chairs shuffled, and keys thrown on the table followed by a light stifled breathing. There was no doubt; it was old Kim, an easy man compared to the others. He was about 60 wearing thick glasses. He was a retained warden serving in this prison since the French. One time seeing that a prisoner standing on the lock to look out he merely scolded him instead of locking him up as the other wardens would do. A special feature was he went along pulling out all the struts before opening the doors for potty work. Perhaps he was old and would want to save some good destiny to his descendants and be ready for a peaceful death. Moreover, being a retained warden from the French system he was wooed by the communist inmates and was somewhat exposed to patriotism. Anyhow, that was simply my personal thinking not based on any concrete proof. When my turn came to empty my potty I glanced at his face with some anxiety, thinking it unfair to take advantage of his poor eyesight and easy character to put my plan to execution. They would severely reprimand or even demote him. I would be unable to do anything with the other vicious wardens like malicious Chien, Dien or ball-eyed Bang. Old Kim was the only opportunity offered and I could not let the bourgeois sentimentality get into my way.

I practiced all moves when Warden Kim started to open doors for prisoners to empty their pots and go get their meals. The time for him to get up from his desk and return sitting down knocking his keys on it then again very slowly go close and lock the door took more than one minute, the duration for me to do all my planned drills and preparations. I rolled up the old bag used as pillow about the size of my leg and tied it neatly. When Warden Kim started his work with one cell, I practiced my move so that I could do it smoothly in a minute: I took my pants off, bent one leg to my butt, put my pants back on and sat on the bed: then I slipped the rolled up and tied bag in the empty pant sleeve. I practiced three times and everything went without a hitch.

About 4pm Warden Kim started open the doors again for inmates to go return their bowls. I did not know why when my turn came, I limped out and back, I started getting things done as planned, Kim poked his head into my door with a quaint look. I covered my whole body under the blanket and pretended coughing a little bit. After a minute of silence, he closed and locked the door. I sighed relaxed feeling the oppressive burden removed from my chest. At 5pm, another warden took over from Kim and started his round of checks through each small window. The jail became very quiet and desolate. I came to the reality of a man ready to part with this life, my heart and mind burdened. I sat with my head bent down in an ocean of suffering and anger. I still cherished this life though the special requirement of shameful circumstances obliged me to die. Pain and grief tortured me and I bowed down passing out until the fateful start time. Late into the night from time to time, I heard the wailing from some cell or the hooting of a prisoner in a frightful nightmare.

It was perhaps two in the morning with the sounding steps of a security patrol behind the jail. I crawled up taking out the rope from my waist and hid it under the blanket. I got the secret pencil from my pack of toothpicks and inserted into my anus. I heard the stepping on dry leaves and lay down covering my body under the blanket. The small window opened indicating the change to another warden every two hours. According to the prison routine, right after the changeover was the best time because another checking would occur only after thirty minutes. I crawled back up again to take out my rope and tied a knot at one end. Then I made a sliding sloop looking up to the windowsill, which was 2.10m above the floor. Anyhow, when putting your head into the loop and hanging down feeling the choke a normal person would try to free himself for breathing. I would use my arms to hoist me up or my legs bracing from the two beds in a survival reflex and I would not end up as wished. I used my professional experience to tie one end to the steel bar and tie another slipknot. When I engaged my neck into the loop, I put my hands into the second loop and pushing myself down from the windowsill to strangulate and in the same time tightening my hands. While I worked with my rope on the windowsill, my heart and mind turned to the image of my mother looking at me with a fixed stare, to all my colleagues at the Central Espionage Directorate and to the beloved faraway receding South Country. I cried heartily not because I was afraid of death or my attachment to this life. Those were teardrops shed to a death in anger and darkness. I knelt down bowing three times to my South Country asking forgiveness from my mother, bidding farewell to this unfortunate life.

Suddenly a loud shouting in the night from behind the prison, “What are you doing on that window”? I bounced throwing myself down with the quick thought that in ten minutes it will be over. I felt my neck jerked out violently and a feeling of invasive heat mounting to my head. I passed out completely.

## **FORTY-THREE**

### **Faced with The Grim Reaper**

I felt acridity in my nose and opened my eyes to see around me several persons. Then I had hiccups and passed out again. My head was hot feeling like hearing a long whistle blow and I came back. A moment later, I saw a blue dressed person pressing heavily on my chest and I breathed with difficulty. Then a remote murmur sounded, "He is alive"! That blue dressed man with light complexion and about my age held my hand looking at me with compassion. He whispered to my ear, "Do not be stupid to commit suicide. Strive to live". I wanted to say a few words of appreciation but I was unable to do it. Then a man in white robe bringing a tray of medicine came in. It was Nurse Hue giving me auscultation with his stethoscope. I started seeing clearer and saw Nhiem the warden of jail III and Ke of the common camp holding in his hand my cut off rope. Nurse Hue dissolved a powdery yellow stuff into a glass of water and poured into my mouth urging me to drink it. My throat was so painful that I could swallow very slowly the liquid smelling like raw cabbage. Then he massaged my neck with the hot rub, saying that I should not be stupid to die. I listened and did not say anything; actually, I was not able to talk. They all went out and closed the door. I passed out instantly.

I woke up hearing somebody calling and opened my eyes to see Warden Chien frowning, "Yesterday why you dared fooling Warden Kim to hang yourself"? I looked at him unable to say anything. He was mad and then realizing that my neck was still swollen he exited and closed the door. At about 9 o'clock Assistant Director Tri came in with Warden Chien behind. With a heavy central accent, he said, "Are you committing suicide to follow Ngo Dinh Diem"? I shook my head lightly while he smiled halfway to say mockingly that I wanted to go down the hole and report to Ngo Dinh Diem. His attitude was so contemptible and I turned in without a word. Before going out he threatened me, "Later on when you want to live you will not be given that chance"! I fully understood communism. Even when their tribunal decided on your death penalty, they will not let you kill yourself because they wanted to execute you with their own hands. They usurped your sacred right to life. Moreover, they still kept you alive to dig whatever information from you.

They did not give me any food and I was wretched lying there motionless until Warden Chien shouted to go get my soup. I stood up vacillating, my hands leaned and braced along the wall to get my meal. I found only one bowl of clear salty rice porridge and squatted down to drink it slowly since my throat hurt. Chien rushed me but my hands trembled and my throat felt like encrusted with glass sharks and it took me fifteen minutes to finish with. I drank clear porridge for two days and they gave me regular rice porridge for three more days. My left arm felt paralyzed and the top of my head like pricked with needles. It could be my body reaction from the strangulation. They locked my legs again the first day with regular rice porridge. I was hopeless, unable to die and having now a helpless arm and a cerebral disease. Thinking of the scenario of my suicide attempt, that armed security man in blue uniform saved my life giving me first aid chest pressing. I felt mounting in my heart affection for the man, I never knew. My pain receded and my left arm was able to move with the help of my right arm. Anyhow, my headache increased making me worry very much. On the sixth day, they gave me rice, which I chewed slowly little by little. Warden Chien understood my condition and let me go out last to return the bowl.

That afternoon Chien called me to the duty room. After I sat down he stiffened his face and coldly said, "Last Sunday you fooled the cadre who inadvertently did not lock your legs. Then you tore your uniform braiding into rope to kill yourself that night. You committed serious infractions of internal regulations. Today I let you write down your report; how you got prepared, how you deceived the cadre and why you decided to commit suicide. According to the sincerity of your report, the revolution will take appropriate actions". I took his three sheets of paper, ink and pen to go out sitting in a corner writing my report. Roughly, I said that, "I was at fault with the socialist country when I infiltrated in Hanoi. Having inclinations with socialism, I did not do anything for the Saigon regime. When arrested I had fully confessed but was still locked up in jail for more than two years. Thinking that eventually I will die and as the state had not understood my sincerity, I felt so desperate and shameful deciding to finish my life" I had not completed my report when somebody knocked at the gate and Chien ordered me to go in

the bathroom and close the door. There was a prisoner back from deposition and they did not permit prisoners from different cells to see each other. When done Chien again shouted to get out and continue my report.

My heart burdened with all the bitterness of life, I aspired sending with the clumps of white clouds sailing to the faraway South my love and deep regret. I saw a few sparrows chirping and hopping joyfully. They searched for food in the cracks. I remembered when I was a young boy trotting around with the other boys; now I am here in this environment of solitude and grief though in the mid of Hanoi. The odor of green moss mixed with the acrid dry leaves reminded me of those old temples. I came back to reality and finished quickly my report my headache becoming unsustainable. In the morning, Warden Chien opened my door holding in his hands a piece of paper. Ogling me with a stern cold face he said, “You must hear the disciplinary order of the Direction”:

*The Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Ministry of Security,  
Disciplinary order  
The named Dang Chi Binh had torn the prison issue pants, fooled the cadre,  
He committed serious internal regulations of the prison.  
We hereby decided to lock his two legs for seven days  
From ... to ...  
The management, Signed, Le Tri, Assistant Director.*

He went out pulling the strut, and I put my two legs in like an automaton.

## **FORTY-FOUR**

### **Did They Uncover “Document M”?**

The second summer started. They took out all blankets. It was not yet too hot, but mosquitoes began multiplying. I lay down closing my eyes letting my thoughts sailing at random like on an immense wavy ocean. I remembered the text of the disciplinary order mentioning my tearing of jail pants and not the purpose of it. They did not say anything of my suicidal attempt. Then I mumbled that it would not matter since my body did not belong to me anymore. My headache became worse, feeling like near exploding when I lay down. I kept sitting up leaned to the wall and my legs were more wearisome. Suddenly I heard loud bangs on the door of a close by cell. Chien rushed in shouting, “What is the matter, who thumped like that”? A shrieking voice intoned, “I had been in here more than three months without any inquiry. I want to see the interrogators to know where I stand. I could not hold it anymore day in day out in this environment”! It was cell ten across from my cell. Chien’s cold voice sounded solidly, “Shut up! If you want to see the interrogators, you must give a respectful request. If you still make noise I’ll lock your mouth”. The voice from cell 10 turned supplicating, “Please, cadre, let me see the legal men. I am scared now and will become crazy sitting in this tiny cubicle for so long”. Chien voice softened a bit, “OK, keep quiet and I shall request it for you”. Silence came back. I was in this prison I for more than three months and with my head focused to my death I did not pay any attention to anything.

In the morning, supply cadre Dien called me to deposition. It had been one month since, and I wondered what it would be like. I saw both Duc and Thanh staring at my neck with a big bruise. Thanh showed me the stool and very amiably said, “Sit down please! We have not seen you for a long time. How are you lately”? I curbed my head down to reply cautiously, “I am just normal as usual”. Duc kept busy shuffling through his dossier until he raised his voice, “Did you hear the broadcasts lately”? I should say that my suicidal plan preoccupied me so much that I did not pay any attention to anything around. Then I



answered, “My hearing had become so weak lately and I could not follow it closely”. Duc hesitated somewhat and asked, “Then did you know that in the south they are having coup after coup”? I knew that his purpose was to demoralize me and I gave him a very short and blunt response, “No”!

Duc’s face turned steely. “What was your purpose for going to Ngoc Son so often”? I was somewhat astounded, was it related to document M? Knowing that they were intently watching my face, I stayed calm and advanced my testing answer, “As I had reported and written before, Ngoc Son is a beautiful landmark and a memorable souvenir of my childhood. That is why I am attracted to it”. Duc sprung up waving his hand to stop me. He frowned menacingly, “Stop using that rehearsed narration. You related with a girl there and we got all evidences. So give us all details and do not blame us”! I felt like a big knot strangulating my heart. I brainstormed quickly keeping my composure. Did they just uncover the leads to document M? Why did they keep it until now? Why did they mention only Ngoc Son Temple and not the Toad Garden? There were two possibilities, either from their Saigon source, but Saigon did not know where I remitted document M except the The Huc Bridge as the rendezvous point. Alternatively, they had caught the M setup and got the confession. However, why they only talked of Ngoc Son Temple and not Toad Garden? Finally, to know exactly their purpose I opened my wide eyes, “Sirs you give me such a big surprise. I did not ever talk with any girl in Ngoc Son Temple”! Duc frowned and roared banging violently on the desk, “Why you are sill stubborn at this moment? Did you pretend talking with the kids to meet that girl”? Thanh also interfered, “Binh, be reasonable to fully confess or the worst punishments will befall at once and you will not have time to repent”! While they shouted and threatened, I kept on thinking. It is certain that it did not come from their planted spies in our directorate. If they knew document M, they should have known also document X or the three letters from Father Hoang Quynh. I was pacified and pretending to remember it now, I said turning up a smiling face, “Now I know. You are so suspicious. It was not a girl but a woman. I do not remember which day it was when I went to Ngoc Son sightseeing as usual. There was a group of children running after each other and using very dirty words. The woman admonished them saying that they should not use that kind of language being the beloved nephews of Uncle Ho, the vanguard flag bearers of the Hanoi children. The kids insulted her and even threw pebbles at her and I interfered, not saying a word to that plain folk person”. Both Duc and Thanh seemed calmer but Duc still ascertained that I took advantage of the situation to remit something to her. Their statement made things clearer and I coolly stated, “I do not understand why you get that information. I told you about my daily routine. I came across so many people on the streets and there is no need to tell you about it. I completely forgot that woman at Ngoc Son if you do not say it now. I had not talked or given anything to that person. Please investigate and if I am wrong I shall accept all punishments”!

Duc kept on shouting, “Stop your lies. Don’t you know that we are aware of what you did and where. We are not scarecrows”! Then I decided to strike a deeper blow, “Yes sir, I know that you know it all because I had fully confessed all details to you”. He shouted louder, “Even without your avowal we know it all”! I smiled looking at him with a hint of suspicion. I guessed why they questioned me now on that event. The clear thing for me was that up to now they still have to investigate on my case. As they were not fully satisfied, they must reexamine the entire dossier. They must study the minute details; crosscheck all reports submitted by my tails. To corroborate, they called me in to use their psychological pressure to see my reaction. Therefore, I would not care because I did not have anything related to that woman. Looking at me for a moment, Thanh asked, “Are you trying to kill yourself to go with Ngo Dinh Diem? Are you trying to bring with you your secret”? I showed a sad face and answered it was like what I wrote in my report. Thanh smiled and incited, “I do not believe what you said. You are smart and determined. I cannot see that your suicide is due to the harshness of prison treatment”. I also laughed saying that I had no determination whatsoever and despised this life now. Duc saw that the exchanges led nowhere and dismissed me for “thinking and confessing about your encounter with that woman in Ngoc Son Temple”.

On my way back to my cell I had my conscious laden worrying that they had not concluded on my case? Therefore, they would increase their pressure on me and direct their Saigon agents to research all things related to me. I hoped that there was only one thing (the unlucky thing for me) that they uncovered me the day I got to Hanoi. Anyhow it could be an advantage that as they knew all of my activities from the beginning they would believe that I did not do anything as I disclosed in my deposition. The reflection and analytical judgment made my headache more acute.

Right in the afternoon they opened the door and a man about 30 came in and put his stuffs on the next bed as directed by Chien who ordered him to go to deposition immediately. He hurried and went out glancing at my two legs in lock. I saw on his bed a slew of things, blankets, mats, plenty of book matches with tobacco and a few pieces of bread with candies. The sight of tobacco and book matches attracted me. Having a companion would make it less solitary. Anyhow, as I had my legs locked they would not authorize me to go empty my pot or get my meal. Therefore, my immobilized legs will paralyze quickly. Chien told me to go for my rice and pick up another ration for the other inmate. After the man came back and started sorting his things, I urged him to eat first because in fifteen minutes the warden will require him to go return the bowl. He looked at me staring at my lock and said in a sad voice, "I am so tired and do not want to eat". I would want his meal but I refrained from asking him for self-pride. He asked why they locked you and I answered it was due to my infraction to prison regulations. I inquired on his arrest, where they incarcerated him initially and for which crime. To which he said, "I was arrested one week ago and they put me in room 9 of the common camp due to my black-trafficking while I drove a passengers bus on the northwest line. Therefore, this man was an ordinary criminal, but why they put him in my cell. He did not know the reason either and said that he only got five kilos of tea buds. He perhaps will get from three to six months.

He looked intently at my locked legs and wondered what kind of crime did I commit to be treated that bad. I was certain that they were afraid that I would suicide again and paired an ordinary criminal with me who would not stay here very long. I answered him, "I was teacher in Phu Ly Public School and I was a Revisionist". He laughed innocently, "You politicians are so daring"! Then he stared at my bed asking, "Do you smoke"? I said I did it somewhat but did not have supply from my family lately. He very naturally urged me to do it as much as I could and pulled out a five packs of tobacco. Seeing his plain honest attitude, I wondered about the pipe to which he said that in a few minutes he would get it ready. At that moment, the door opened for returning the bowl. I tendered him my under short and urged him to pour his rice onto it so that I will eat and he can use some as glue to make the pipe. Dai, that was his name, put all the rice to where I suggested and said, "I forgot to invite you. I had downed three gluey cakes and one loaf of bread and I am so full".

After returning the bowl Dai got busy, fabricating the pipe tube from a toothpaste aluminum can and three boxes of matches assembled together with the wrapping from the tobacco. While doing it he talked with me with a detached soldier like attitude and threw to me two gluey cakes saying, "Eat them. Do not eat that stale rice". I waived my hands and returned to him the two cakes telling him, "There are still long days ahead, do not waste it". He finished the pipe in two hours and shot his first smoke presenting a satisfying face. He then handed the pipe to me and I got high. That night I had an additional ration and I lay down enjoying a full belly feeling also that my headache had slackened. I knew better of Dai who was a discharged military four years ago. He managed to get a driver job on the northwest road, which is nowadays a good profitable work especially if you know how to interact with passengers to transport illegal things for them. He was married with two children and he made a good living. He was open-minded and his largesse was better than Tan, Hoan and even Hoang Hung.

## FORTY-FIVE

### Spirit Changed

Exactly seven days after they locked up both legs, I was deep in my despair. Warden Chien came in and solemnly declared that from today Tuesday I will have only one leg locked. My legs were so tired and stiff during the week. Our four eyes opened wide while in the same time Chien pulled the strut out and ordered to go empty the potties. I felt like having a jumpstart and along with Dai, we took the pots to the washroom. Chien looked like he just provided recompense to a destitute person. His face looked so nice today, his twinkling eyes fixed at me. From now on, it will be much easier for me sitting up or lying down. Anyhow, my head was still as painful. My headache was so intense day in day out and there was no medicine. The tablet of aspirin, which did the trick fast before did not work now. My mind entangled with all kinds of concerns, from the happiness of success to the bitterness of failures. I became philosophical, thinking of the famous writing of some French author *“When you do not have what you like, you must like what you have”!* What do I have now? I had two satisfying meals daily, which I longed for every time. They were much more appetizing than the best banquet of the past. Then I let my soul wander to the caprice of my imagination looking down to the communist herd, *“You caught me, incarcerated me and I bet you cannot lock up my mind”.* I remembered another writing of Madame de Maintenon, *“When you are unfortunate, think of the more unfortunate and it is the best cure for you”.*

After one night thinking, my view of life completely changed and I did not anymore see grey around me. My morale was elevated and my view of life altered. Then I directed my thoughts to my body. I passed in review the Western Relaxation Method, the Indian Yoga, the Chi of the Chinese Martial Arts. I remembered the article “Long Life” in an American Magazine interviewing several centenarians. I came up with the three easy criteria, (1) short time, (2) simplicity of execution and (3) best result. Everyday I lay flat on my back, closed my eyes and counted my breath, relaxed fully until I saw only one color. That helps control your mind voiding it of all random contemplation. As for exercises, I devised a number of movements suitable to my prison confinement with minimal food intake. Then I practiced deep breathing with one free leg on the floor. I kept the schedule of no more than fifteen minutes a day regardless of the circumstances and slept easier with my headache in remission.

Dai stayed with me for about twenty days. Warden Chien opened the door and told him to get his stuff out and I looked at Dai with an affectionate good bye. He gave me a pack of tobacco, a book match and the pipe telling me to keep them for my use. I was so touched and urged him to take along as a souvenir, to that he said that in the common camp there was plenty. Rushed by Chien, he took his bundle out and said “good-bye and be healthy”. I was alone again; my hands kept touching the pipe meditating on the gratification of an unfortunate man to another desperate man. Warden Chien observed me everyday and perhaps he reported on my positive attitude so that they did not need to keep somebody with me anymore. Chien was a strict and cold person. He despised flattery and submissive characters unlike the other cadres. From his eyes, it seemed that it had for me a hint of sympathy.

## FORTY-SIX

### Making Needle From A Nail

It was Sunday, there was no soul around and they rarely got you out for deposition. Mid summer, the air was very dry. From the green moss in the courtyard and the moldy dampness of the cell mounted an acrid odor. I was looking at the mosquito bite scars thinking of the ways against it when the window opened and Warden Dien thrust his finger in, calling me out to deposition. I was surprised and on my way, I

passed the common camp going through prisons II and III where I had encountered dead-devils. Crossing the yard of the common camp Dien turned right into a big room, which was the prison management office. In there were five or six persons among them a tall and thin graying man, wearing reading glass with jacket and looking very austere. On his right sat Captain Tri and on his left was first Lieutenant Le both of them assistant directors of the prison displaying a very solemn attitude. When I walked in I suddenly heard the thundering voice of the white haired man, “Ho-hum! What an electrical pair of eyes”! I approached the stool in front of the desk and stood there when the heavy centrist voice of Tri sounded. “Take the seat”! I sat down for quite a while wondering who that spiteful old man was. Then suddenly he raised his voice, “Binh, look at me”. I stared directly into his eyes; he must be around sixty displaying a pair of sparkling eyes. He frowned sternly looking into my eyes like hypnotizing me for a few minutes and pointed his long finger to my face, twisting it in circles before stating clearly, “Your brain is churning out deceits and hostile designs. It shows clearly in your eyes. You twisted in many times and you will have to unwind it the same”. He circled his finger in the other direction and shouted his order, “I let you go”!

I stood up to follow Dien back to my cell, very curious to know who that man was who spent only ten minutes with me without any question! The very short encounter left a clear mark in my mind and even now after 21 years, I still remember it. Nowadays he must be no more. Anyhow, in my eighteen years and four months in prison he remains in my mind as one of the two most malicious men I have ever encountered. That afternoon and night, I kept thinking of that no name man and the meeting I had with him.

The next very hot summer day, in the dampness of the prison, I lay with eyes half closed thinking of the outhouse. Next to the toilet hole there was a small wooden box holding all kinds of used toilet papers and pieces of rags or colored sanitary napkins. This place was for cadres. It was quite far off so male cadres very seldom used it while female cadres very often came in for bathing and washing. When I went to empty my pot I made plan to fabricate shield against mosquitoes using the pieces of rags I quickly reprieved from that box. They were poor and used all kinds of stuff even leaves for the purpose. I took all sizes and shapes pieces, I washed them and dried them in my cell until I had enough to make gloves, feet and head covers. Out of the long sturdy pieces I pulled out yarn to make thread. I made a needle out of a bamboo toothpick, which I sanded to shape on the cement floor. The bamboo needle was useful but it did not help making a good-looking seam while it often caught in the cloth. I must look for a way to fabricate a knife and a steel needle. One day I came across a small piece of rusted steel edge on the window of the outhouse and I broke it out little by little each day to get finally that small thumb size piece. I smuggled it out to my cell and ground it on the cell floor into a tiny knife sharp enough to cut my pieces of cloth and my nails too. I carried the precious tool with me all the time by slipping it into the hem of my shirt. The idea of fabricating a steel needle always haunted me and I always looked back and forth for some suitable material.

Usually when I finished my pot work Warden Chien would shout, “Get out” and I took the pot back to my cell. Anyhow, today when I passed his desk he softly told me to get my pot to the cell and be out here for some talk. I worried, hurried up hiding my pieces of cloth under my pillow-sack and slowly went to his desk. He showed me the stool to sit down with a very pleasant voice. He seemed hesitant and cautiously asked, “You came to Hanoi by what means”? I was surprised a little bit and slowly advanced, “Sir, by sea boat”. Then in the conversation, he inquired of my debarkation, the duration before they caught me and where in the south did I live. When I told him that I lived in Saigon, he asked about the famine in Saigon and the extent of death by starvation every year there. I opened my big eyes of astonishment while he seemed surprised, “Sir, I lived in Saigon eight years and I never heard the word starvation”. He showed shock on his face and asked, “Is it true”? I went on, “In reality my family is poor and that is why I must live in the student refugee’s camp to attend school where the government provides free meals. Even when I was home, I would never pay attention to the price of rice because nobody cares about rice. Any body

just discussed on the best places to eat out. In the student camp, we rolled rice or broke pieces of bread to throw at each other. There were in street zones social welfare restaurants where you pay \$5 for food while rice is free. To let you know better, before 1962 the South Labor Department fixed as minimum wage for men at \$45 and women at \$42. It was for unskilled workers like janitors. Anyhow, the people would not like to do those menial works because they feel shameful. Besides, they could find food anywhere and they did not need to work for such a dismal pay. As you see with the lowest wage, they could have enough to eat for four days while working only one day. And here you must work hard each day for your mouth”. Warden Chien displayed a pensive face and after some hesitation, he told me to see him sometime telling him of my story, a little bit each time

During our conversation, I perceived his uneasiness, at times anxious or half-believing and other time craving with curiosity. He did not comfortably sit down listening to me and when hearing noise at the gate he rushed me back to my cell. It was only Warden Bang going to the toilet or getting somebody to deposition. In the upcoming days, he looked at me with some compassion but he never called me out again. I was certain that he did not try to dig information from me for report to his superiors because if it was his purpose he should have tried to relate with me more times. Anyhow, he could not take the risk of weakness in his ideological beliefs. It showed me clearly that in their ranks there were already morale cracks or hairline fissures.

When I went to get my evening ration, I saw on a loose edge of the bamboo bench the kitchen used to carry rice and soup out one protruding nail head. I wanted to pry it out and there were always the watching eyes of Warden Chien against the quick fingers of prisoners swindling some rice from the remaining bowls. I must wait for the appropriate occasion, which came inadvertently when Chien had to rush in a cell where two inmates were fighting. I used my fingers yanking that loose small nail out before somebody from the kitchen would hammer it back in. I quickly went back to my cell with the booty and engaged my leg in the lock thinking of fabricating that needle. It would not be a difficult challenge for a jeweler. Anyhow, I was not free to grind and shape it all the times since in the quiet environment of the prison, the sound would reverberate out and there were the constant eyes and ears of the prison guards. I had to work at night and on Sundays paying attention to the sound of gate opening at 40m away. I straightened the nail prying in the cracks of the leg-lock and started grinding it square on the cement floor before shaping it round. The nail became so hot that at first, I used cloth to hold it and then I must grind it with water. At times, I felt so hopeless and tense that I wanted to quit. Then I remembered this song taught in second grade school books when I was a kid,

*“As a young boy you must be patiently determined,  
“Do not worry to marry late and to have kids later,  
“When you succeed Heaven will lend a hand,  
“A real man calculating five and managing seven times,  
“God created you and would not abandon you,  
“Fame and opportunity offered to the heroic hands,  
“Your intelligence serving your heart,  
“Striving to grind steel will give you needle later.*

A hint of sadness came to me because I could only achieve the last verse while the top part of the song had been a failure. I was incapable to fulfill the mission offered. I stopped for a moment and started grinding again to have that needle in half a month. As a jeweler, I transformed that crude nail into a shiny little needle the eye of which I formed by grinding the end flat and curb back over into a hole, which I ground again to the thickness of the needle. I hid the steel needle in the strap of my pillow-sack along with the bamboo needle for showing to the cadres if they asked.

Having a good steel needle now, I sewed fast making knee-length boots for my legs, elbow-length gloves for my hands and hood for my head. I fined, refined and modified my products many times according to the needs. I sewed hems for the boots, gloves and hood with inserted strings to pull them shut. I made fingers for the gloves so that I could use my fingers conveniently for scratching or pulling strings. To draw design on the assembled cloth I burned a reed from the broom and dipped in water to make a piece of charcoal for the purpose. There were two inconveniences though: It was too hot under my protective gear and I sweated abundantly. In addition, the control cadres often knocked at my window to see whether I was dead or alive lying like a mummy. I made a big bag for all my things, the comb, toothbrush, book match, pipe and tobacco and even embroidered my initial B on top of it. My life became organized and I had a nice hobby doing embroideries of flowers and leaves all day, crude but they were my creations which I did not stop admiring. I was fully relaxed, my heart enlightened, I had more energy and my headache went away without notice.

## **FORTY-SEVEN**

### **The Dream-Like Minutes**

I became very relaxed, bursting into singing or reciting poems. Tired of sitting, I lay down letting my soul wander to the beautiful aspects of life. I remembered the days before my venture one friend took me to see the movie “The Thief of Baghdad” roughly the story of a handsome thief ordered by the King to find the Blue Rose for curing the terrible disease of his daughter princess. After several dangerous encounters, he arrived at the last gate and snatched the magic mantle of the guardian genie to become invisible and go to the inner sanctum to get that blue rose. I drifted into a dream wearing that mantle to penetrate the bedroom of Ho Chi Minh catching him scared, killing him and taking his body out to the lakeshore hanging with a big sign showing “Fox Ho penitence! All people, be united in the destruction of communism! Signed, the world front for burial of communism”. Then I took the flight through Hong Kong to the White House to report to President Johnson that I had killed Ho Chi Minh and urged him to help me going to other communist countries like the USSR, China, East Germany, Cuba to take care of all their leadership the same way that I did with Ho Chi Minh. Then the President would create an international front with Japan, France, West Germany, Italy, Britain and Israel to help install democracy everywhere.

I shall complete my work in six months erasing completely from the globe socialist communism, which had become a calamitous plague to the world and its inhabitants. I woke up in the reality of the guillotine rows of Hoa Lo, my leg gently shaking in the lock like enjoying the after taste of a spiritual banquet. At least I had two hours of freedom in the atrocity of this prison.

## **FORTY-EIGHT**

### **An Espionage Net Prior To 1954**

My soul was flying between two worlds, one being dream and the other the hard reality of prison when suddenly the small window opened. I sprung up, would they call me for deposition at this late time? Then clicking sounds of keys and the door opened with Assistant Le sounding stern, “Take everything out”. I pulled my leg out, ready to move to another cell. All my possessions were no more than an old jail uniform, the pillow-sack souvenir from Hoang Hung and the small self-made bag containing pieces of rags and miscellaneous things. I got everything on my arms not knowing where I will go. Actually, I

would not care because my body does not belong to me anymore. I was standing there anxious and hesitant when Le waved his hand to move further in. He opened cell 6 and in the same time pulled out the lock strut. After he locked my leg and shut the door, I looked around to see a larger cell located at the prison corner in the shape of a V wide. I kept busy dusting the bed and the floor under it with my reed mat when I heard a muttering voice from cell 12, “Hi friend of 3, how are you, did they just transfer you here”? I opened wide my eyes, wondering who was that bold prisoner talking openly and answered, “Thank you friend, I am OK, are you in 12”? Somewhat hesitant, he pursued, “Yes I am in 12. A few months ago what was your problem to commit suicide. I thought you had died, hearing prison guards stampeding”. Then a roguish southern voice from the cell next to my right intoned, “Fuck it! Why die when there were so many girlies as flavorful as a jackfruit section”. I frowned, it was the crude voice of cell 7 whose din I heard very often and I turned back to cell 12, “How are you 12, can you observe closely the cadres to-and-fro to talk so openly”? He chuckled, “I am all right, they will take my case to judgment this 15 but I am not sure of the outcome. I have been in here for five years and am the prison king to know all of their movements. Stop talking if you hear my cough”. I felt disturbed, wondering what kind of crime for such a long incarceration. I could not suppress my curiosity and asked more to know that they arrested him for spy activity since 1959. I was all knotty, was his my comrade, my colleague? Then I rushed probing and knew that he lived at 80 Quan Thanh where the bicycle repair shop was. So, as a northern man, what was his espionage work? His coughs sounded, the prison was silent again and I heard very mute sound in the yard along with the ruffled steps on dry leaves followed by the opening and closing of windows by control guards.

When the guard was gone, he raised his voice asking my name, as he was Nguyen Van Can. I inquired whether he had an accomplice to that the man at cell 7 raised his raw voice, “I am the only accomplice of that animal”! Therefore, number 7 listened to our conversation. He changed to an affected flexile tone, “My sweetheart Huong, tonight in a romantic time please sleep with me and I will bring you the uppermost happiness”. I knew that in cell 9, there were two girls but I could not understand why that cell 7 man could use that kind of crude language. He went on, “My dear beauty queen, throughout the two cities of Chau Doc and Hanoi every kiddy would know who Long Chau Sa is. I have trampled the sky and agitated oceans. I will give you happiness for life. My thing is oversize bringing you scream of contentment”. He punctuated his dirty flirting words by bursting into crazy laughter and tramping his bed. Complete silence was in the prison while I was surprised why such crazy thing could occur here. This man was such a low thug. Perhaps being isolated for a long time he deranged under pressure. He again raised his jarring voice, “Dearest Huong if you do not answer me I will not sleep and I shall disturb everybody sleep. Tomorrow is washday; I will smear excrement on your chopsticks and your clothes drying out there”. Then I heard the female crystal voice, “Please sleep cell seven”. The hog sound of the man ensued, “Thank you princess for answering me. I will heed your order and sleep well tonight”.

I had wanted to ask more on the case of cell 12 and was impatiently waiting in the silence of the jail under the light dry breeze of the upcoming autumn when the clear voice from cell 9 echoed, “Number 6 why were you arrested”? I directed my ears to the direction of cell 9 but there was only silence. I guessed that while I was drying my clothes out there inmates from the outside room 9 to 14 could stand up on their beds to see me when they knew the position of the cadres. Therefore, inmate Can would have done the same. There were those malicious cadres like Chien who followed the one outside glancing at such window to know which inmate looked out and then entrapped them. I heard that they caught a few and locked them up. It was a mini-nerve war for the smartest to win. One-hour later cell 12 called, “Did you sleep yet”? He inquired on my arrest and why. As the other cell could hear, I only answered that as a teacher in Phu Ly, I sought freedom and I fought with the cadre during my arrest. To deflect I asked on his case and his connection with cell 7. He said that Long Chau Sa killed a child on Silver Street to shut his mouth up and they uncovered them. He is now 33 and lives with his in-laws in Quan Thanh with two children. He was a spy planted before 1954 and his case related to Tran Minh Chau alias Cap. I was

astounded and said that they executed Cap in 1958. According to Can, his case was uncovered after they executed Cap and therefore it was very difficult for them to investigate. That was why they locked his legs for nearly two years, half-dead half-alive. His legs paralyzed for months and he would not survive if his wife did not help him. I inquired on cell 7 and knew that the man was a returnee cadre, a half thug flatterer always greasing the cadres. Hearing that, number seven roared, “Fuck your mother galled pig Can, don’t you think that you are that beautiful”? To have some hints on my case I asked Can, “In more than a week they will take you to court, how is your guess”? Weighing for a little, he advanced, “For me I will get 15 to a maximum of 20, as for number 7 it would be from 10-12 to 15 years”.

Next morning was the bathing and laundry day. When my turn was done Warden Chien shouted, “Get out”. They did not want inmates to see others and you must report after you finished washing or hanging your clothes on the lines for permission to move in and not encountering an outgoing inmate. When I hung my clothes on the drying cord, I noticed also some female clothes and quickly glanced to see cells 9 and 12 looking out. Even though from the bright outside you could not see clearly through the steel net of the window, I could discern the round face with a short haircut over a round body of No 12. As for No 9, I saw both girls one short and one tall, waiving frenetically. I did not dare turning my face to them because Chien was at his desk observing. I just smiled a little bit while touching the clothes. Perhaps Huong was the tall girl with long hair and oval face. Back to my cell, I had a vague feeling of joy for the warm human interaction. During the two days and with my two years prison experiences I knew now the entire population here. The total was 17 persons distributed as follows. Cell 1 had one person, cell 2 unoccupied, cell 3 two with one having one leg locked. Cell 4 had two persons; cell 5 had one person and cell 6 with one leg-locked man, cell 7 one leg-locked person. Cell 8 had two one leg-locked persons, cell 9 two females, cell 10 one person, cell 11 one leg-locked person, cell 12 one person, cell 13 unoccupied and cell 14 two persons one of them one leg-locked. I wondered why cells 2 and 13 were always vacant with groups of visitors in and out.

Suddenly cell 12 raised his voice, “Where are you from and how old are you cell 6”? I answered, “I am from Hanoi and 26”. Then cell nine hesitantly said, “No 6 has only prison clothing, don’t you have family supply, how long did they arrest you”? This girl was fussy, I gave her a neutral answer, “Thanks for your concern, due to special reasons I did not have any family assistance”. Like a sow roaring for food, Tan Sa Chau exclaimed, “My princess, you talk too much! Hearing you I want to drop my pants”! Ignoring his raw expressions I turned to cell 12, “Do you know what they use cells 2 and 13 for”? He answered, “Last year when Warden Van was on duty here as I was in prison for a long time he gave me the favor to do janitor work out. Once I had to wash those two cells. Cell 2 had Hoang Van Thu and cell 13 Tran Dang Ninh. Now they preserved them as memorials showing to visitors cruelty and atrocity of French Colonialism.

Very early on day 15, several unfamiliar cadres came to take cells 12 and 7 out. They were only back at noon and I was impatient to know the result. I must wait for the appropriate moment since the cadres were still there and the malicious tomato-nose The was still around trapping you. I coughed and still no answer, perhaps the tense duration in court made 12 so tired that he would not want to communicate with anyone. All of a sudden in the afternoon Miss Huong of 9 raised her voice, “How is the judgment of 12 and 7”? The wailing of 7 sounded, “My beauty, my case was so tense and it is not completed. This time they might send me to the bottom of the sea”. The small widow opened at a sudden. A shrieking loud shout followed, “Whom do you talk with”? He answered, “With my fairy”. “Which fairy”? With a smart answer, avoiding problem to 9 he said, “The fairy of my dream”. Warden Bang perhaps lenient for a long tenure prisoner during a very tense court appearance simply asked him and 12 to get dressed for court.

At 4pm the gate opened followed by mute sobbing into the yard, Warden Chien clicking his keys on his desk asked, “How many years? You reap what you sowed, why cry”? A heavy centrist voice sounded, “Death sentence for Nguyen Van Can and life for Le Van Luong”. They gave them orders to move out of



prison one. I was thinking of the underestimates of these cases as well as for the case of Pham Huy Tan before. Was it the purpose of the legal system of the communists to suppress opposition to their socialism instead of fostering justice and equity? I did not hear anything from Can and the only wailing sounds came from Luong who, while arranging his stuff lamented, "My princess, from now on how can I live far from you for thousands miles"! Warden Chien shouted, "Shut it" instead of imposing any punishment, perhaps he understood the state of mind of the sentenced man.

Then they pulled out the strut of cell 12 and the centrist voice as heavy as pestle pounded in a mortar sounded, "You have heard the order from the jail administration and now execute it". Then I heard the trembling voice of Can, "How could my wife and kids live now"! While he secured the lock, Warden Chien asked whether in court Can signed the request for clemency from the Chief of State which would give him six more months to live. Can answered yes but said that for political crimes the President had never pardoned anyone. The same voice sounded vexed, "Do not utter falsehood and be confident". The door closed, gliding steps moved out, I felt an immense sympathy for Can. After straining my ears to make sure there was no guard around, I wanted to be the first one to say a few words of consolation for a comrade for the same goal, "My friend Can, I want to share in your painful misfortune". In a trembling and emotional voice he said, "Thank you, I only pity for my wife and children". Suddenly Huong of cell 9 interfered with a murmur, "Cadres are coming". I was thankful for her assistance watching the yellow thugs for us.

That night brother Can disturbed me so much. Though not knowing fully each other he and I were so close because he also was a freedom fighter on the front line of the free world against communism. There still were plenty of persons with weapons in hands ready to sacrifice their life in this fight for freedom. I love Can because he was unfortunate to fall in the hands of the enemy and judged by their factional legal system. Now he was lonely, waiting to return to ash and dust in the cold darkness of jail-and-lock without anyone concern except his wife and innocent children. I was the only representative of all who are enjoying freedom with fortune and happiness to express our gratitude to him. I sank into deep slumber when a shrieking scream and laughter woke me up. It came from cell 10 and stopped when the warden opened the window to admonish and then began again as crazy as before. Chien had to lock his legs up and threatened to lock his mouth if he would not shut up. I often saw him scattering rice and soup on the ground and lately he did not anymore go empty his pot or take his bath. The waft of autumn breeze brought the fetid smell of his cell to mine. I was afraid of nerves derangement in the desolate cell environment under pressure of unending depositions and the constant thought of family and friends, of life and the society.

## **FORTY-NINE**

### **Escape Attempt**

It was the start of fall but still very hot. I lay down thoughtful of the case of brother Can when the window opened and the twang Quang Nam accent of matron Hoa called for deposition. It had been a long time since the last deposition and I had not seen her for 4 or 5 months. Perhaps they transferred her to another post. I followed her, watching her funny walking on her concave legs swaying like eggbeaters taking my imagination to her girly days. How could her beauty conquer our sergeant to crush our Army post? I slowly walked behind her. Instead of turning left as usual, she made sign to turn right to the gate. Before reaching the gate, she led me right going up a few steps to a room having a bicycle leaning next to the door. She rushed me in a small room quite bare with an old desk and a stool. A very unfamiliar cadre about thirty sat there with a thick brief case showing the stool for me to sit down. He spoke with the quaint rural accent of the north, "Are you Dang Chi Binh"? According to his accent and attitude, I knew that he came from a remote area and I offered a cautious "yes". He stood up and talked with an austere

and cold voice, “You must sincerely answer my questions. In 1954, your parents emigrated south. During the agrarian reform campaign, your relatives and the farmers working for your parents accused that your father buried in his property a big vessel containing high value antique porcelain and bronze pieces. At present, they had demolished your parent’s property for new constructions and here is the map of the land and house. If you can pinpoint the burial spot of that vase and it could be dug out you will get half of its value”. I was somewhat surprised because in 1953 when I was back to my village for a few days visit, my father and I had buried that big vase at night and there was no witness when my father even gave our house cleaner one day leave. Therefore, they had tried to dig and find the hidden treasure with no success and now knowing that I was in Hoa Lo prison they sent their local cadre hoping to get some good indication. Besides, I thought it was a childish way to lure me and I showed him my astonishment saying, “I was only twelve when we left our village and never heard my parents talking of that vessel, even during our stay in Saigon. Was it misinformation”?

The face of that rural cadre showed stupidity, his right cheek muscle twitching and his hand swiping incessantly the desk surface. It just came to my mind a rapid decision to take advantage of that simple-minded man to evade. The poker game was at its final stage, I must increase my bet to either win big or lose nothing since I had nothing to lose now. Very fast, I formulated a plan. It was 3pm, just two more hours before the end of shift and I remembered his bicycle leaned out of the door. That stupid cadre was still looking at the map of our property. He was fatter than I was but his arm muscles looked flabby, lacking exercises. During my two years of experience with the routine of deposition, I noticed that after the sessions, the interrogator delivered me to the cadre on duty and the cadre would sign a paper to take the prisoner back to the cell. I was tense with calculation and came up with the decision to take the risk. It was dangerous and time was of the essence.

I displayed a brightened face and approached the cadre tapping on my forehead as if I remembered something, saying, “I suddenly recollected this. In 1952 or 53 when we played in the room I did not see the big vessel where we used to hide in our hide-and-seek game, my sister told me that my father buried it between the peach and the apricot trees”. His eye sparkled and he turned his face down to the map asking frenetically, “Where are the peach and apricot trees”. I caught him in my game as I moved closer for a better position while he was tracing on the map with the pencil the position of the trees. I twisted my body to increase momentum and stroke down with a right hand chop squarely on his neck just to make him dizzy and use a special locking technique so that he passed out. I rushed to lock the door undressed him and changed to his uniform, taking his papers with a card bearing his name Do Dinh Ha. Before getting out of the room, I saw his folded legs slowly stretching out and his complexion reversing to pinkish color. I decided to induce additional sleep and choked his neck for 6-7 minutes making his whole body and members contracted while he excreted fetidly. I was on a tiger back and had to kick the beast on being at a point-of-no-return now. I straightened my uniform but I could not find his hat. When I went out the room, I quickly glanced at the grape yard and the prison gate. Looking on the left was a long corridor perhaps the row of armed security rooms. At all cost I must have a hat to hide my pale face and I found only a black beret with a hole. The bicycle was still there with the chain-lock hanging on the handle bar. Time was too short now; I took the brief case and tied it on the luggage rack of the bike while that tomato-nose guy approached. I pretended securing the briefcase with the intention to revenge for his beating in the cell two years ago. Anyhow, he turned to another direction.

I slowly walked with my bicycle to the gate, observing the other cadres in and out to see how they did. Very calmly I went to the control desk and the cadre raised his quizzical face at me, a face that I had seen somewhere before may be during my going to deposition. I turned up an open face and saluted him, “Comrade, I am Do Dinh Ha”. He looked at me somewhat indecisive. I felt heat on my cheeks and an intense itch on my chest. To break that silence, I smiled while complaining, “I thought it was short and it took nearly three hours”. In the mean time, two cadres coming in with bikes had to wait for my bike to move out. The duty cadre shuffled in the tray and gave me the ID card. He looked at me like asking

something and then stopped short. I smiled at him and got my bike through to let the other two coming in. It had changed to autumn but my perspiration exuded on my forehead. If I were able to cross this life-or-death gate, I would escape 80-90% to go north selling the bike and lay down waiting for the occasion to steal some papers and escape south as the conditions permitted.

Out of Hoa Lo, I noticed the narrow and deserted street. I quickly glanced at the armed young security guard with a CKC hanging muzzle down on his shoulder. He seemed distractively directing his eyes at the line of “sau” trees across. When I guided my bike in front of him, he looked at me with non-focused eyesight as just waking up from a long dream. I smiled at him and he responded with a naïve smirk. On a sudden when my bike wheel dropped from the sidewalk the chain got loose while from across, Assistant Le and supply clerk Dien were riding their bikes to the Hoa Lo gate. There was no possibility to avoid them; I kept guiding my unchained bicycle forward. I was tense and the dry and loud voice of Le sounded like an order, “That comrade over there, stop now”!

## **FIFTY**

### **Men Propose, Heaven Disposes**

Oh my God, I am doomed! I reacted like an automaton devoid of any reasoning. I threw the bike to the street and ran as fast as I could along Hoa Lo Street onto Cotton Dye Street hearing the shouting of Le, “Prisoner evasion, sound the alarm”! Three detonations from gunfire echoed along the streets in a forlorn autumn afternoon. The loud sound of stampede added to the clamor behind followed me to the street corner when I collapsed with exhaustion. It was a total failure, heaven did not help me and the only recourse was to accept death repaying my debt to my country. From a guard bastion of Hoa Lo Jail bullets flew to the street surface blocking my escape route throwing zigzagging sparkles. I got up and ran, actually trying to meet the bullets. At that moment, two police agents from the street corner ran blocking my way while I mixed in with the flow of bicycles among a crowd of yellow uniformed armed soldiers. One kick to my leg sent me face down. It was the end of the show, the curtain dropped and my life went with the fate of my country. Two solid face slaps sent sparkles to my eyes and my ears buzzing with shouted obscenities. Two men hoisted me up under my armpits to drag me back to Hoa Lo.

I was like dead, around was a crowd of noisy people. Luckily, it was the end of workday and cadres from Hoa Lo rushed out preventing me from the hatred group beating leading to future painful sequels. When they dragged me inside the gate and the whole story known, one armed security man suddenly raised his CKC and trusted the gun muzzle to my face shouting, “I am blinding you despicable animal”. Blood streamed out to my nose and mouth and I saw only a hazy red color. Another brutal blow threw me to the ground; my arms tied to the back were painful. I could not utter any sound, my mouth completely frozen while my ears vaguely hearing the shouting, “Do not kill him and take him into the room”. I passed out, not knowing anything anymore.

I felt my hair pulled and opened my eyes shaking cold, my clothes all soaked wet. Hazily in front of me was the faint image of an old man under light blue pajama wearing clear glasses making sign to a young security man holding a water bucket. I tried to focus my eyes and saw jail director Vo with the two interrogators Thanh and Duc. A full crowd around me talked noisily. Another armed security man displaying a ruddy face wanted to give a blow to my head. The voice of Director Vo, as strident as the high pitch note of a trumpet sounded, “I forbid comrade to beat him. We shall prosecute him appropriately”. At that moment, interrogator Duc pushed out the armed security man who looked quite like Do Dinh Ha. Perhaps he related to Do Dinh Ha to act that revengeful. He wanted to trust his gun muzzle into my eye to blind me. Anyhow, as I jerked my head sideward he hit between my eyes just

above my nose and I bled abundantly passing out. With a second trust, he hit my mouth breaking three teeth, which I spit one out while I pushed back with my tongue the two loose ones. It hurt so much, my mouth filled with blood, my lower lip split; my mouth completely swollen and I could not talk. Director Vo's voice sounded, "Comrade Tri, please take him into the office to write a report. Remember do not let anyone beating him. Call comrade Hue to treat his wound and throw him in solitary confinement pending order". Vo then left while two security men dragged me into the office. They let me on the floor leaned to the wall and untied my arms, which hung loose. My right arm was not broken but perhaps it was disjointed and tumid. Out of the two gun muzzle hits, I had bruises and my whole body hurt perhaps due to the many kicks and fist-blows making me breathing difficult. Nurse Hue came in with a tray and got me lying on the floor to wash the wound between my eyes. He told me to close my eyes and doused with a greenish liquid, which felt hot flowing into my brain and I passed out. I woke up in the dispensary, my loose teeth removed and my mouth bandaged. My stomach squeamish, I wondered how I could eat with my puffy mouth. My right arm had a prickly feeling with the elbow swollen under thick bandage smelling hot rub. It hurt so much that I was unable to turn over and I passed out again.

I awoke in the small tightly shut room. I gradually thought back to the past events. If I exited the gate five minutes later or if I did not have the problem with that hat to make it out five minutes earlier, I would not have encountered the two Le and Dien. Again, that word "if" had always given me misfortune. The more I thought the darker was my feeling for my life and the fate of my country. Suddenly a faded yellow color appeared in my eyes, the image of a nude Do Dinh Ha lying in a hip with smelly urine and feces. That man must remember me as the ban dog giving him that fatal neck chop.

When I was back from my inanimate state, it was full daylight. I heard the sound of key opening the door and Nurse Hue entered wearing facemask and a white blouse. He curbed down to check the wounds on my forehead, my mouth and finally my arMs. He displayed a more sympathetic face and very softly said, "They should have put you into confinement right away. Anyhow, seeing that you had a big hole between your eyebrows, according to my experience you could not have survived more than two days in confinement. If there was no desire to kill you I proposed to send you to the infirmary in case the party commissar approves it". While talking he kept glancing to the door and I understood that he was cautious. I wanted to say a few words of appreciation and he waived his hand, "Lie down to rest, I will bring you some hot rice porridge". One moment later, he came back followed by a common prisoner carrying a steamy hot soup. He cut an opening of the mouth bandage and inserted a brown rubber tube telling me to try sucking. As my lip was split and swollen, I clenched my teeth and tears rolled down my cheeks. Mr. Hue saw my extreme effort and showed a hint of compassion in his eyes. I finished the hot salty rice porridge. The next day, I started to say a few abstruse words. The nurse came two or three times a day to give injections. Three days later, he cut and removed bandages and smeared the wound with antibiotic powder and red mercurio-chrome. They had removed Do Dinh Ha's uniform and I did not know it. Now they gave me another new striped uniform with the letters TGHN printed on it (the initials standing for Hanoi prison)

## **FIFTY-ONE**

### **Confinement Dungeons of Hoa-Lo Prison**

Today the wound on my forehead became so painful that I perspired extensively and I passed out again. Somebody shook me up and I opened my eyes to see interrogator Thanh who smiled asking whether I was feeling better. I was somewhat shameful having always said that I love socialism and ended up beating the cadre to evade. I was surprised to see Thanh still displaying the same attitude. He opened a big notebook asking me the reason of my escape attempt. I answered, as I confessed in full from the

beginning and the revolution did not trust me, I sought death without success leading me to the attempt of evasion. Thanh often asked clarifications as it took me long to say in a halted voice. He then asked, "When did you intend to escape, did you try to kill the unfamiliar cadre interrogating you"? I answered that I nurtured the escape plan after my unsuccessful suicide. As for that cadre, I saw that he was dumb and decided to strike him inanimate to flee and that I was capable to finish him but I did not do it. Thanh pressed on with more details, where I want to go, how I could avoid security, which way would I go south, whom I would contact, etc.

When he was gone, my soul was like floating and twirling. I understood that when "you spread wind you will get storm". I had sowed the seed; I must be ready to reap the crop. I was fully aware that in the upcoming journey I must be ready to clench the teeth confronting all hardship. I understood that after this difficult problem other harsher ones would offer to test my will. That is life! I was deep in my reflection giving me more determination to confront whatever will come up. I stayed in the infirmary for six days now. My mouth felt better except for the missing teeth. Nurse Hue had manipulated my right elbow, which became less tumid and I could move it a little. The bruises given by fist blows were in remission and I did not vomit blood anymore. The wound between my eyebrows still hurt. Nurse Hue said that I was very lucky because if that gun muzzle trust just 1cm to the left I would have lost that eye. I wondered about the size of the scar and Hue boasted of his clever handiwork to come up with an acceptable scar.

I still had a diet of rice porridge. Nevertheless, Warden Bang came with the order to take me to the dungeon. I remembered that I still had my stuffs in prison and asked him with halted voice to let me retrieve them. He retorted that as I had tried to evade I would not need those things anymore. Looking at his expression, I felt that he was not too revengeful and supplicated him, "Please help me; if I succeeded I would not miss anything. But now I failed..." Both Bang and Hue laughed and Hue gave me a sachet of antibiotic powder for use on my forehead wound to avoid fatal infection. I limped behind Bang through a deserted yard with a few scattered yellow leaves announcing the start of autumn. I was close to the dungeon, which according to Tan, was reserved for life or capital prisoners, a sinister killer place. If you did not die right away, you would succumb with all kind of diseases. I would know about it now.

I came to an unending corridor leading to a thick steel door leading to several steps down onto another very short and small steel door. Bang took out one key to open that door and led me through a narrow alley enclosed between walls built with massive blocks of stones. A strange fetid and morbid odor rose making you vomit and Bang cleared his throat ejecting his phlegm. I saw three or four stone caves and high above, the presence of yellow uniformed guards. Bang opened the small steel door of one box for me to curb down and crawl in. One leg-cuff similar to the one in cells was present with an additional two big steel chains anchored on the stone stall. Bang pulled the strut out, ordered me to engage my legs and locked the two chain ends to my wrists. Afterwards he intoned, "Discipline of dungeon, unlock chains once a week for 15 minutes each Monday; eating is permitted once a day; excretion is done at the pot under steel lid to be emptied once a week". I begged Bang to help giving me the mat and my miscellaneous things from my former cell and he banged shut the door saying there is no need now.

I had the feeling to be in a stone casket with the only difference that it was 1.50m square. There was no room to stretch out. The light was very dim. My nose became used to that strange rotten flesh odor and I did not feel throwing up any more. I knew that this was the most difficult time of my existence. If I did not try to survive, my life would not last that long being subjected to all kind of maladies, sores, tuberculosis, paralysis, psychiatric derangement, madness. Lack of air and oxygen was a big problem. The air was so polluted and infected that the more you try to breathe in the quicker you would die. Each day at about 12:30 the warden on duty escorted a common prisoner carrying a square wooden box containing two balls of rice wrapped in leaves with some salt. It also had a kettle having about four scoops of water. There was another man in another cave and I tried last night to call but there was no answer. The two balls of rice were for both dungeons. This noon as I was putting the powder on my

forehead wound the rattle of keys and the small steel guillotine door raised, I saw a blackened hand pushing the ball of rice in. I handed out the scoop for him to pour in water. I gulped all the water and tendered the scoop out for another fill up as reserve for washing. The common prisoner pulled the strut for the door to slide down and the cadre locked it up. The good thing was that there were not too many mosquitoes down here perhaps because it was so tightly enclosed and there was not enough air for the insects. Going potty was a torture and the odor was unbearable. The commies were aware of it and used it as means of punishment. They used time and the stomach to press you to the end. In addition, I was subjected to weak and negative attitude within the confine of this close environment leading to death in the most severe and atrocious condition. I must fight against those rejections with my positive and optimistic attitude waging a constant and arduous struggle against me.

Today is Monday and I was in this dungeon six days. The wounds were in remission except for the forehead wound in suppuration. Nights were especially desolate. I tried screaming for the person next in to no avail and from time to time I heard the murmur of confessional prayer. While I was randomly thinking of so many things, I heard the rattling of key and the sliding steel door lifted up. It was Cadre Ke and the common prisoner who used to bring rice. Ke was a southern man, 45-50 years old and used to guard cell 9 at the common jail. Today he had to wear facemask and grimaced when he opened my locks to get out quickly before shouting, "You are permitted to empty your pot, rinse your bed and bathe for fifteen minutes". When I crawl out of my hole my knees were all shaky and I had to squat down on the floor to crawl up several times under the sympathetic stare of the common prisoner. Then I was able to crawl back in to get the pot out. Warden Ke had to withdraw farther out from that smelly one-week excreted potty. On the contrary, the common prisoner pretended rearranging the box with one ball of rice and a bowl of blackened water spinach soup. When a guard from above talked with Warden Ke, the smart common prisoner whispered to me, "Don't you know that the prisoners up there praised so much your courageous action. They also know that you came from the south to work in Hanoi. One of ours had cleaned the office and told us that you stroke that cadre, feces out". Warden Ke stopped his conversation and directed his eyes down. I was not able to say my appreciation to our brothers. Anyhow, I felt rising in me a sense of consolation and encouragement mixed with some vague sadness.

## **FIFTY-TWO**

### **Death of An Imprisoned Priest**

It has become chilly. Some dry cold breeze at time shook the air. I had no uniform to change. I undressed and washed my dirty clothes kneading forcefully feeling some heat. Under the faucet, I massaged and scratched to loosen the crusty scars. My thighs were only three fingers thick, my knees looked bony and the touch of my butt gave the feel of angular clumps. There were so many things to do in just fifteen minutes. Warden Ke seeing my ardent strive of survival granted me an additional five minutes. I finished eating and gulping the spinach soup, taking the ball of rice into the dungeon to munch as time was up. I tried to guess on my next-door person but there was no sound of moving out to empty the pot and washing after the door lifted up. Only silence for a short while before that small door was down. So many times, I tried to call without any echo back.

I suddenly trembled with cold under my wet uniform. In the very dim light of the dungeon, I removed the leaf wrapper of the ball of rice when I smelled a special odor making me salivating. In the center of the ball was a small brownish and whitish piece of pork meat about three centimeters square and half centimeter thick. Ooh! How could I get such a wonderful and magic moment! Meat was a rarity in the central prison of Hanoi, perhaps three times a year with a tiny piece. It should have been the smuggling from a common prisoner cook to show his appreciation for somebody whom he admired, a very risky and

dangerous action. It could bring about demotion from the fattening job as a cook or the transfer to the continual hunger of cell life. I will remember it forever. I lay down and smelled with enrapture the flavor. Then I started gnawing bit-by-bit feeling the juice impregnating every cell of my body, flowing along my digestive tract. I thanked the creator to have bestowed on me such a perfect gift. The following days the balls of rice still looked the same but tightly and densely shaped to be more than half size the usual ones. I came to realize the voice of the silent majority off the indoctrination and brainwashing of the communist minority. My body was given more fuel to sustain hardship and my spirit was reinforced in the belief that I was on the right path to free the people from the inhumane socialist communist vise grip.

Gradually I heard less and less the grating sounds of chain and the humming prayers from the next dungeon. On that Saturday, after hearing the lifting of the guillotine door the common prisoner stampeded out to report in a halted voice that the inmate was dead. Guessing that he was waiting on the stair steps I coughed and said vaguely, “My God, I had such a stomach ache”! I heard the light sound of steps down and a soft voice asking, “How about that”? My purpose was to inquire of his name and of the next-door inmate. I said whispering, “I wish to know your name, friend”. He answered, “I am Minh, and you”? “Dang Chi Binh, do you know of the just dead man in the next dungeon”? Minh told me that he was a priest who had not said a word since his arrest and they put him in confinement. In the meantime, four or five persons ran down, then with the sound of rattling chains followed by the hauling of a corpse passing my cell smelling long dead body. Half an hour later, the door of the dungeon lifted up again. Then there were the sounds of running water and of the broom sweeping followed by vomiting. All at a sudden, I heard the whispers of Minh, “They used to take the body to the morgue but today they had to take it out at once because it smelled so bad”. I asked him how long was he dead to smell that awful and he told me since yesterday but his leg was putrefied eaten by worms half month ago giving rotten flesh odor. He said his name is Le Hoang Minh and he did not know the name of that priest who was about 40-45 years old whom they put in dungeon two months ago. The priest died because his leg was rotten bare to the white bone.

Suddenly a southern voice shouted, “Were you done, why you took so long”? Minh rushed up to report. The door of my dungeon dropped down; I sat pensive wondering why that priest did not talk with me. Perhaps I could know more of him and boost his morale so that he would not die. That night I felt scared being now by myself in this solitary confinement. Spirits and devils haunted me; I listened to the strange sounds, which perhaps came from a rat hustling for food. Nevertheless, with the thoughts that if spirits were real they would have strangulated all those criminals and there would not be any communist left. I became calm and fell asleep.

## **FIFTY-THREE**

### **Golden Hearts in The Prison**

With legs immobilized, I must lay down still. Each time when they let me go empty my pot or have a bath I could not stand up squarely and had to lean on the wall up and down a few times before moving gradually. To avoid being crippled I used my hands to massage my legs though I could only reach my knees due to the chains. I used a reed from the broom to scratch my legs. I thought of Minh as a God given encounter. The additional half size rice ration boosted my health and it was important morale uplift in the communist body incinerator. I was unable to exercise on one leg like when I was in my previous cell. I sat up in meditation posture three times a day, breathing and concentrating on the funny appearance of my legs.

Today was my 34<sup>th</sup> day in the dungeon. However, I had done my best to survive with additional rice supplied by Minh; still my two feet became more swollen. It was not because of cold. It was the lack of nutrition and the immobilization. Another discouraging element was that Minh was gone replaced by another slow and absent man. As I remained the only dweller in this place, I tried to keep it clean by getting two more buckets of water each time to rinse my cave. The cadre did not have anymore to stand away from my cell and they watched me more closely. In life, there were pros and cons, the two opposing sides of things, which could be complementary or self-destructive. The balls of rice became less substantial without the help of Minh. I looked forward to Monday, the day of washing and cleaning. Today was the duty turn of old Kim. From the day, I fooled him to commit suicide; he always frowned at me with anger. It was five or six months ago and I had not seen him since. He shouted at me when he unlocked my hands. I avoided his eyes directed at me with a hint of surprise. I was unable to stand up. I crawled out strenuously, standing up and sitting down several times, while the common prisoner waited on the stone edge for me to finish bathing and cleaning my pot. Old Kim suddenly asked, "How many days were you in here"? I answered, "Senior, (others called him that way because he was 60) today is my 42<sup>nd</sup> day in dungeon". Through his voice and his look, it seemed that he did not hate me too much. Looking at me crawling back and forth with much effort he said, "You are just like an animal, you never stay put"!

I knew that they could not change the foundation of men. Only the outside appearance altered with the environment. When he locked my hands, he again asked whether the cadre said for how long. To that question, I said no. What bothered me was there was not any convenient occasion to inquire of Minh, where he is and what happened to him. On Friday morning, I was worrying about my legs, which could paralyze with lack of food and exercise. Then I heard the rattling of keys. It was too early for mealtime. May be it was another new admitted unfortunate person? I intended to crawl up to see but I was so weak that I was unable to sit up. The dungeon door lifted up and cadre Dai shouted, "Crawl up, give me your hands to have them unlocked". I tried bracing with my arms but the two chains were not long enough for my hands to reach the bed surface. Dai had to unlock the other ends of the chains before he pulled the strut off the leg-lock. Free from the weight of the chains I leaned on my hands to crawl. Anyhow, I was so weak, my body was like a wet rag and it took a while before I could move. It was hard for me to raise the jaw of the lock to pull my feet out. They were so puffy that they looked like two boiled sweet potatoes pierced by a pair of chopsticks. Dai looked at me shaking his head and told me to try moving to the faucet to wash before sitting down writing the report. I looked at the cadre and saw only a hazy face, my eyes unable to focus perhaps due to malnutrition and isolation for long in a dark place. He pointed his fingers at the sheets of paper and pen on the stone steps. I clenched my teeth dragging my two potatoes along to the faucet to rinse my eyes and still did not see any better.

It was the beginning of autumn and the air was cooling down. I massaged my eyelids but did not see clearer. I crawled to where were the paper and the ink and tried to write first the heading "Democratic Republic of Vietnam". Anyhow, I saw only the crooked blackish and hazy line on the paper with no precise shape of letters. I told the cadre that I was unable to write correctly and looking at the paper, he turned on all lights, which did not help. I dropped the pen telling him, "When I see better I shall write the report. Moreover, I am so tired and exhausted now to know what to write". He replied, "It is OK. Anyhow, for principle, do write this -- I acknowledge my fault and ascertain that I shall not commit any such mistake in the future --". I attempted to write and handed the paper to him and he made sign for me to go back to the dungeon, saying, "Temporarily you will be dispensed of locks".

I crawled back to my cage quicker than when I crawled out. The sliding door dropped down. I managed to lie down leaning my head on the steel lock, raising my legs up and down. At first, I was unable to do it and gradually I succeeded taking a break at times. I reasoned that my feet became puffy with water retention and the up and down movements would help disseminate it to my body. At noon, an unfamiliar cadre escorted the ordinary prisoner bringing rice to feed me. After eating, I resumed my exercise and my



feet swelling diminished. Especially at night without locks, I felt the enjoyment of freedom, putting my arms or my legs wherever I wanted. “Aha! Freedom, you are the angel of humankind! But not anyone can expect your visit”! I was still apprehensive and hearing the noise at the entrance, I was fearful to see the cadre giving order to put my members in locks again. Sometimes I thought that men are no better than dogs. Anyhow, how would a dog be conscious when you chained him? God created men as an elevated species of the animal kingdom and men were the most vicious of all kinds.

## **FIFTY-FOUR**

### **Seeing Old Things, Not Old Faces.**

That afternoon at the end of the workday, Dai opened my cage and let me out. He stood at attention displaying a very solemn and austere face reciting the order, “By instruction from the jail directorate you are released from the dungeon to reintegrate the cell with one leg locked”. Looking at his stiff attitude showing a dumb fat face, lips closely shut I must refrain from laughing as I seemed hearing the whistling of “the bridge of Kwai River” tune celebrating my return to the society of men. He made sign for me to crawl up the ramp because I was not able to walk. Certainly, the administration of the prison was aware of it and waited until all prisoners were back to their dungeon to let me crawling out on my bony knob knees, which started bleeding. I was exhausted and lay flat immobile. Dai looked at me not knowing how to do when Assistant Director Tri came by with another cadre. Tri looked at me belly, up breathing jarringly and directed his eyes to my legs to instruct Dai, “Comrade, go to the shop stall get one man to hoist him back to the cell”. When Dai hurried out Assistant Tri looked at me, his upper lip curbing up showing his protruding dirty front teeth saying, “You have very good resistance, did you”! I did not say a word when Dai was back with a short tanned face man about 30 wearing brown shorts with patches on his butt. The man carefully lifted my arms to help me up and softly told me in a southern mixed with the northern accent to envelop my arms around his neck. He hauled me on his back moving on while Tri followed rattling his keys.

Counting from my first day in dungeon it was forty-seven days and things have changed very much. Here and there were a number of newly dug trenches. The four loudspeakers hung at the corners of the yard kept insulting the American war provocation using the Maddox incident in the gulf of Tonkin. The speeches and communiqués of the leadership encouraged the people to get ready for a big war. “The schools, hospitals and all production installations not needed to war effort evacuated out of Hanoi. All elements of the armed forces increased their training and readiness to confront that war in all eventualities”. The American airplanes started bombing Dong Hoi and Hon Gay. An atmosphere of war dominated the whole Hanoi sky.

When the common prisoner hoisted me to the gate of prison I, Dai pushed open the gate and made sign for him to take me in. The yard was full of leaves and ripe fruits. I turned up my eyes to the branches to see the trembling leaves ready to drop down with fruits falling in a staccato, creating the perfect painting of autumn. I opened fully my nose to enjoy the flavorful aroma of the ripe fruits when the common prisoner whispered to my ears, “At the shop stalls, we highly commended you”! I just turned my face to him as to express my appreciation for the good feeling they give me when Dai made sign to haul me into the cell. Anyhow, it was cell 5 instead of cell 6. Therefore, I reported that I had a few things left in six, the old uniform, the reed mat, my pillow-sack and the self-made bag containing some rags, tobacco and the pipe. He made sign to the common prisoner to go to six and bring those things back to me. I looked at those old things with lots of emotion. They were the painstaking products of my works and there was the secret pencil. While I was busy, arranging my stuffs Dai pulled out the lock strut. I cautiously lifted

the jaw of the lock to engage my ankle. As my leg was puffy, it was just about fit when the jaw was down. Many inmates had their big leg cut to become infected and rotten.

After Dai locked the door, I tried twisting and moving my ankle and it was too tight. There was only one solution, to exercise somewhat to deflate that puffiness and loosen up. I looked at the next bed. The lock looked bigger. Tomorrow I shall ask Warden Chien to move me to that bed. I did not know whether he still hated me or not. I remembered the two girls of cell 9 and Can of cell 12. Certainly, they did not know anything about me except that I had suddenly disappeared. They would not have known that I was through a stormy time and was now back here from death. The jail was quieter than before and I had the feeling that things changed completely during my two months of absence. The sound of the loudspeakers was so clear now. They talked of alertness against the south special Seal operatives debarking on the island of Hon Me. They talked of special operation 34A sending Seal members ashore during dark nights to kidnap cadres or inhabitants taking them out on rubber rafts to the big ships heading south for interrogations. Operation 34A should have been top secret. Why they were now discussing about it? Did the counter intelligence of the communists know of it since its inception? The loudspeakers now switched off. Everything became so silent except for the dropping of the ripe fruits from the “badamier trees”. The old sceneries were still here. Where were all the familiar faces? I gradually sank in a deep slumber.

## **FIFTY-FIVE**

### **Twisted Propaganda**

Very early, the loudspeakers turned on. It had become a torture hearing them. This morning their editorials said, *“In the capitalistic so called society of freedom, their principle is based on the strong wins while the weak loses. Therefore, strength dictates reason. Our perfect socialist society has demonstrated to the world our clear advantage, changing completely the foundation of life from the ugly capitalistic society into the ideal socialist society where reason creates strength”*. An ordinary citizen would know that it was misleading propaganda because under the rule of their socialist system they always use strength to suppress reason. You could never find any freedom anywhere in their society.

It was starting time and the prison cadres began opening cells letting prisoners out for sanitary works. I did not hear the familiar voice and sounds of Chien. When cell 1 reported done, I heard shouting, “out”. It was Du, about 50-55, short and a relatively easy type. I hurried to lift up with difficulty the jaw lock and slowly moved out reporting that I just came back from the dungeon last night and was unable to walk. Showing the pressure mark on my leg, I asked him to give me the next bed with a bigger lock for my puffy legs. He slammed shut the door without saying a word, and did not pull out the other side strut. I took advantage of the situation to lean along the edge of the bed to practice walking. Looking at my puffy feet, which were dark purplish like having blood congestion, I loudly reported the need to see the nurse. The small window opened and Du shouted, “What is the problem to report so loud”. After I told him that my feet were so painful, and I begged him to send the nurse for some medication, he said, “Wait”. I glanced at him and saw his new insignia with three stars over a white stripe on a red background. I remembered having seen Dai displaying also a brand new rank insignia. In the war climate, their political leadership was wooing the low rank cadres with promotion translated into an additional \$10 pay raise.

One moment later, the door opened and Nurse Dau came in. She looked skinny with her pale hands similar to frog hands. She also must have wondered of my skeleton appearance when she softly inquired of the dark purple color of my feet. She said that an injection of B-1 would take care of it but as B-1 was in short supply, she will prescribe one week of bran rice diet. The attitudes of cadre Du and Nurse Dau boosted my morale and it seemed to me that they did not hate me striking the cadre to evade. I must

crawl in and out for my rice and returning the bowl. When I was back in the cell, the strut of the other bed pulled and I engaged my leg in it. I started to have rice mixed with bran. Five days later, I was able to slowly lean along the wall to move out for my food. The bran rice diet in addition to my exercise effort diminished the puffiness of my feet and I was able to walk normally. My life was back to its previous condition and I concluded that I did not lose anything out of my unsuccessful evasion. In fact, I lost three teeth added to a big souvenir scar on my forehead.

The two girls of cell 9 were not there anymore. The crazy laugh of cell 10 was gone. Can being sentenced to death had signed a clemency request which was only a political ploy as a democratic dressing with the people court, the people control, the legislative office and the congress. All of them were the cover for their body incinerator, their slaughterhouse, and not any differently. Can must be executed now especially in the new political context changing into wartime climate. There were new faces among the prison cadres after my two months of absence.

I was lying there with all kinds of thoughts in my head enjoying the aroma of ripe fruits whipped up by the light breeze. Suddenly the window opened and the muzzle of Warden Bang showed through like the mouth of a shark with two short words, "Go deposition" before he pulled the strut out and unlocked the door. I very slowly walked out getting my mind ready for the session after two months in cage. Out into the yard I saw all the ripe and flavorful fruits in hips here and there. I decided to manage when I will be back to swipe a couple of them back to the cell to smell and gobble up. At the common gate, I saw a crowd of cadres and interrogators, political and criminal. Thanh signed the release paper before making sign to follow him.

When he led me into the room, interrogator Dang was already there with his usual thick brief case. They positioned the stool farther than usual and both of them looked at my feet with eyes showing anxiety and defensiveness. Thanh started diplomatically, "You have not been here for a long time and did you see any difference"? The question was vague. Was there any difference in the room setting or in the yard? To make it less tense I talked of the yard with the war like atmosphere showing all the newly dug individual trenches. Both of them nodded as my response fit their desire. Then Dang showed a stern face to state solemnly, "The American imperialists had bombed and strafed our socialist country and threatened to take us back to Stone Age. We shall see whether they were capable to do it or not. Our people will teach them an appropriate lesson. America is rich having modern weaponry. Superficially, one would say that they were strong. Anyhow, you must go to the bottom to see the weakness inherent to the American society, in the head of the Americans. Our party considers them like a giant with clay feet".

I understood that if Dang roughly talked about the Americans it was just an introduction to another purpose. He turned his face cold and opened his file to sternly state, "You must confess in details the motive leading you to your attempt of evasion". Having plenty of experience regarding their method, I related the whole story, skipping things, which I deemed leading to future complicated situations. When I came to the part on the search for a hat, he stopped me, "Your report on the evasion is plausible. Anyhow, it is illogical that you go into the security ward for a hat and not for weapons". Hearing their reasoning, I chuckled in my mind. Even when they just arrested me, I did not fall into their childish trap. When they acted violent, banging on the desk or shouting epithets, my experiences with them helped me keeping my cool. I simply told them the truth, with all events occurring as is to find my way south with my family. I did not say anything of my plan to go north to mislead security. In addition, I emphasized my belief in socialism but being unable to get that trust, I committed the aborted suicide to try finally my evasion. It took the whole day for the deposition. Two days later, they called me again to write my report, which I completed in another two days.

## **FIFTY-SIX**

### **Faults of The Free World**

It was Sunday and I could not see sunlight from my cell. The damp cool of the end of autumn made me think of the ways to ward off the freezing of next winter. I worried very much for my feet, which will become swollen and itchy. The only defense was to make warm covers for them and I actively began looking for rags to make thick socks. I had lost the fabricated small knife hidden in the hem of my previous uniform and must find another one. Suddenly Matron Hoa called me to deposition. What happened? Was the M set up or the Z-5 uncovered? Did they get more information from Saigon? My mind was all busy under the misty drizzle changing directions like autumn teardrops parting with winter.

When I reached the duty room, I saw Thanh making sign for me to follow him on a pathway among planters of chrysanthemums and roses with petals having droplets of water like diamond gems. Did they grow beautiful flowers in this environment of sufferings and wailing to alleviate misery? When I walked into the room, there were six or seven unfamiliar persons, some of them with cameras along with Thanh and Duc. Thanh showed me the stool to sit down while the unfamiliar faces were on a bench displaying cold and scrutinizing faces. Thanh unwrapped two boiled sweet potatoes and urged me to eat before starting to act my scenario of evasion. I acted in all scenes of my unsuccessful evasion. The funny thing was when one man played the role of Do Dinh Ha and I twisted my body to gain momentum for my neck chop he furtively glanced fearful of my strike. He was a strong man while I was skinny and therefore, the fear came from the mind and not the muscle. They took many pictures including when I led my bicycle out after waiting to get the card. They did not describe the scene when they arrested me and beat me up like a rag.

It took the whole morning and they let me go back to the cell at noon. During the break, I asked to go to the outhouse and saw a rusty piece of steel, which I broke and hoarded back to the cell. Aha! I got my knife again. Back, I heard the strident voice of the loudspeaker; Nguyen Van Thieu consolidating his position after founding the second republic, Thieu requesting the Americans' assistance, etc. The door locked and I lay down thinking of the situation back in my country. Mr. Thieu was not the capable adversary of communist north. He put personal interest at the forefront regardless of the society, the people and the country. From there stemmed so many weaknesses, irresponsibility, superficiality, bureaucracy, draft dodging, corruption, etc. Besides, America the big brother helping little brothers of the free world committed three fundamental mistakes. First, force the country it assisted to follow the model of the American democracy. Second, mind primarily its interest. Third, put an emphasis on money and weaponry. They led to the sad result that they cannot achieve the goal and the assisted countries instead of showing their appreciation considered them as neo-colonialist, looking for new consumer markets.

## **FIFTY-SEVEN**

### **The Comic-Drama Teardrops**

I was deep in my thoughts when the lock strut pulled out with a grinding sound. I was jumpy waking up from my daydreaming. It was time for evening meal, which I completely forgot being so preoccupied with my random reflections. I had never forgotten it before; I always anticipated mealtime since I never had a full stomach, the communists using food to control your mind. Perhaps after two months in dungeon, due to sickness and immobilization my stomach has shrunken. Now back to normal life in my cell, my body recovered and my mind settled after the aborted evasion, I started again my constant food craving to forget everything around, like the Americans poised to bring troops in or the Hanoi visit of a

high military delegation of the USSR. Day in day out I was looking for a full belly. Nevertheless, the rice and water spinach soup they provided were meager and I gobbled up to the last grain in no time to feel the pang of hunger again. If my clothes were edible, I would chew them bit by bit to satisfy my stomach craving for fullness. I devised a way to have at least one satisfying meal a day. For my lunch, I only gulped dry my spinach soup. I save my rice on a piece of retrieved toilet washed rag made into a sack hung on a broom reed anchored in a nail hole on the wall. When they locked my leg, I lay down contemplating my reserved rice sack anticipating a full belly tonight, a feeling that I forgot a long time ago. I stared at the sack, counting time until evening, listening to the rumbling sound in my viscera where perhaps some starving parasitic worms were clamoring their share. Evening mealtime came and I ambled out on a pair of unsteady legs to get my ration. Solemnly, I got things ready for the enjoyment just like the preparation for a banquet of heretofore. I sat cross-legged on the bed eating the morning suspended sack of rice before finishing my regular evening rice. All my cells in my digestive tract seemed eager to absorb a full fare but my shrunken stomach being not used anymore to a distended volume was sickentired. Ooh! How happy I was with a distended belly and I lay flat down massaging it. I decided to repeat the same method twice a week only every Tuesday and Friday.

Early on Sunday of the start of winter, the cell was so cold feeling desolate. The early winter wind infiltrated through the cracks of the windows lamenting and increasing the homesickness of the prisoners. Duty time commenced and the loudspeakers turned off. There was a complete silence. There were no instructions for sanitary works and everyone was waiting. Suddenly there were noises of many persons, males and females talking and moving from the main entrance gate. When they opened the doors of cells 2 and 13, I understood right away that a visiting delegation was inspecting the guillotine row. A clear centrist voice intoned, *“Dear comrades, the cruel colonialists had used these terrible locks to punish comrades Hoang Van Thu and Tran Dang Ninh. Our two comrades confronted sufferings offering their blood and bones to enhance class struggle. They decided to sacrifice their own life to save the party. Nowadays, we are reaping the glorious results of the revolution owing to the sacrifice of the two comrades”*.

The sound of sobbing and then weeping of women reverberated throughout the jail. I admired their method of brainwashing and indoctrination to control the mind of the people. They foment the opposition of the people against the so-called cruelty of the southern administration taking a separate incident to blow up into full-scale incident for propaganda purpose. Take the Phu Loi incident. They created the story of wholesale killing of prisoners in Phu Loi by poisoning foodstuff. They incited the population in Nghe An to demonstrate against the atrocity of the southern government with cadres and people weeping and sobbing, mourning the death of their comrades under the ruthless hands of the colonialist lackeys. Now the scenes took to the streets of Hanoi, screaming and vociferating rancor against Diem-Americans with sincere emotional tears from the brain washed crowd. Cries and tears became reality; they interviewed, filmed, photographed and showed the scenes on television and news media, creating mass effect to the extent that the Italian, Swedish, French women cried their heart off in their opposition to the American massacre at My Lai. I wondered whether the visitors realized that in this prison ward, there were fourteen cells and out of those, they visited, in the remaining ones there were inmates suffering under the locks fabricated by the colonialists.

One hour later, cells were unlocked for inmates to go do their sanitary works. The winter sky brightened somewhat with a hint of sunrays relieving the sad forlorn aspect of the Hanoi scenery. The loudspeakers talked at length of a man named Nguyen Duc Thuan just released from the cruel jail of Hitler style Ngo Dinh Diem after three years of incarceration. Now back in Hanoi, he wrote his memoir titled “Unbending”. He is the central committee member, arrested for three years and at present deputy-chair of the confederation of workers under Hoang Quoc Viet. They forced me to hear that propaganda joke all day.

I went to deposition a few days later. Facing the interrogators, I felt fearless and asked them point-blank, “Your broadcasts talked lately of Nguyen Duc Thuan imprisoned by Ngo Dinh Diem for three years and released. You said that Ngo Dinh Diem was barbarous and cruel. Therefore, with my nearly three years in jail without any solution, what would you say”? Thanh who up to now seemed quite amiable burst into bad temper to strike the desk with his fist and shouted, “Do not be insolent! You cannot compare yourself with a revolutionary”! I softened my voice to say, “Sir, I do not dare comparing myself with Mr. Nguyen Duc Thuan. Anyhow, I saw that he belongs to the central standing committee of the party, like the cases of Nguyen Huu Tho, Nguyen Thi Binh and Dao Sy Chu who they arrested and now freed. Perhaps they are high-ranking members of the party and Ngo Dinh Diem had not dared to keep for long. As I am simply small fish, I would never try to emulate them”.

## FIFTY-EIGHT

### An American Prisoner

It is the end of winter and it was still so cold. Very often, you could not see the sun. The northern breeze was like cutting into your flesh. An unending freezing drizzle created a dreary scenery days and nights. The cell became darker, my hands and feet were puffy and painful. I was unable to sew and lay buried under the blanket to sit up only when my back ached. I thought of so many things letting my imagination-wandering wild. Not anymore, the thief of Baghdad, now my mind led me to the magic lantern of Aladdin. I scratched the lantern until the genie appeared and ordered him to cure my hands and feet and take me back to Saigon to visit my parents. Then he will setup in the U Minh forest a big house to invite all the world head of states to a meeting to hear my order dismantling their autocratic system and install the American system with only a maximum eight-year presidential term avoiding possibility of dictatorship.

I closed my eyes letting my mind free to wander and I forgot all about my fate of a locked up prisoner under starvation and freezing condition. When the prison guard did not see me out to do my sanitary work he trusted his head in shouting “out now” and slammed shut the door seeing that I am still day dreaming under my blanket. I only went back to reality when it was time to go get my meal. In the mean time, spring came chasing away the severe winter. Anyhow, there was no change in the cruel prison environment. Perhaps I was inspired by the word spring to recite the few verses of Nguyen Binh, which I modified to fit the situation.

*“Spring is here, no one knows,  
“Spring love aplenty, spring inspiration full,  
“Prison life is so sad, why spring does not come,  
“Why not going away, why staying here?”*

The small window opened crisply and Warden Du shouted in anger, “What did you sing, are you trying to disturb the prison order”? Looking at him, I softly replied, “Sir, it is so sad and I am homesick”. “I forbid you to disturb the silence of prison”! He coldly closed the window. Anyhow, I saw in his eyesight a hint of easy understanding and I realized that at the bottom of his heart there was still some human substance.

Tonight, I strained my ears to hear the editorial and warning of the northern government aimed at America. News such as Kosigin visit to Hanoi, the Americans started bombing North Vietnam; the first two Marines Battalions en route from Okinawa to South Vietnam made the headlines. The situation was like burning fire or boiling water while they still locked my legs. I was unable to sleep, tormented by the

situation of the country and the family. Several times, I remembered my mother wishing to hold her hands crying, tears rolling out ending up screaming, mommy o mommy! I suddenly realized that the navel being the end of the umbilical cord was the flesh of mother. I touched and massaged my navel thinking of my mother. I smelled her aroma feeling her warmth in my cold inner self. From then on, wherever I was, in the malaria infested jungles or the harshest prison camp, I kept touching my navel to feel the consolation of my mother.

This morning, as usual when I finished my potty work and returned to my cell Warden Du locked my legs. Then the window opened again and Warden Bang poked his shark muzzle in to rush me out for deposition. I had understood him as not too cruel even though his language was not that likeable. When I approached the room, directing my eyes to the newly dug trenches I saw a tall skinny man wearing also a similar striped uniform and escorted by a security man. My heart squeezed seeing his awkward walking, his white complexion and blue eyes. It was an American, a very young American pilot, about my age, 24 to 25. He displayed a bewildered, stupid and surprised pair of eyes seeing perhaps a quite different scenes and so different people and attitudes. Perhaps he was just shot down and still was in complete awe and fearful. Two different cases meeting at the same point, he came down voluntarily from the sky while I landed circumstantially from the sea. The meeting place is Hoa Lo of Hanoi, which is Hanoi Hilton for you. I stared at your face with pity, admiration and recognition. Pity because you were used to a comfortable life and though they might give you a better treatment you were still less fortunate than us. Admiration and recognition for your pride and daring through the dense anti-aircraft fire for the sake of freedom of a faraway people being oppressed by the barbarous communist. I fought for my own country and you fought for our people's freedom. You deserved our gratitude and admiration. That reflection stayed in my mind until I went into the deposition room.

I saw Thanh and another man whom I might have seen many times in this place. I knew that his name is Quy. Through my observations, Quy did not have enough background and tricks to interrogate spy operatives. After a while, I found out the answer. In wartime, they were short of cadres. But as my case was at a point when

Thanh can handle it himself, they had to provide an additional person since the day I attacked that stupid cadre for evasion. I noticed that at every session Thanh was the only one who worked me out while Quy from time to time offer a smile or an insipid statement. Thanh questioned back and forth the whole story from the beginning and summed it up in writing. It took one whole week and I had to reread and sign off. It looked like the procedural conclusion of the case due to wartime condition when the American airplanes increased their attacks.

Two days later, I must sit down to write my deposition in a small room under guard by a uniformed security armed with a pistol. This was the second time of my life in Hoa Lo to do this kind of written report. This is their method of filtration and comparing information. With that understanding, I rewrote all the essential elements that I remembered well, doing away with a few superficial things to be logical when you forgot some with time. To write on things that you did not mention before would bring about problems. It took me one month to finish my written report, writing with the normal speed and thinking carefully as I went. One day I quickly glanced to the window of next room to see the first American pilot I met the other day. I said that I met that first one because I came across with two or three more, one about 40 looking quite gung ho, another with head and arm under bandage. They all looked pale and skinny, their blue eyes changing to whitish color.

That first pilot in the next room glanced through the window and caught my stare. It looked like he recognized me during our brief encounter and his face brightened a bit losing the expression of stern curiosity and alienating. He was also sitting down writing laboriously and from time to time, he raised his face looking at me as if we were exchanging mute understanding of our situation.

I noticed that he did not have a security man sitting next to him. Perhaps they thought that his standout features of blue eyes and big nose would preclude him from being mixed up with the crowd. That is why they gave him papers and pen and left him alone, while they waited for him from another room. On my side, my security man could have noticed that from time to time we looked at each other, Anyhow, thinking that we were totally aliens and impossible to communicate in our own languages, he simply ignored it. I clearly remembered that pilot whose features imprinted in my mind, perhaps he was the first shot down aviator of the retaliation day of 8 May 1964 when the communists boasted downing eight planes and capturing three pilots. Afterwards I came across hundreds of them in Hoa Lo Prison and I did not keep any souvenir of anyone of them.

When I finished my written report, Thanh called me in one more time. He told me half way that they would transfer him to a faraway job, in “B” zone in South Vietnam as good news for him and a slanted threat to me that he would get full information about me. At the end of the session, he rolled the hundred pages of my report in his hands and kidded that the story of my life would be interesting if published when Vietnam fully reunited. Seeing that it would be only a fun statement before parting away, I also coined my joke that if there would be an after life I would leave it to that after life because for this present life it looked like a thing of the imagination. Both Thanh and Quy laughed. When Quy led me back to my cell, the loudspeaker kept repeating the slogan “Each individual for the people and the people for each individual”. It was a false and misleading slogan just like others, “Strive your best to the common goal; rush in the front line to kill the enemy; every branch to compete, every individual to compete”! Those slogans were repeatedly chanted to become flat and banal, and at present it changed to, “I do it for everybody, everybody do it for socialism”! That was the revolution, a continual change into a narrower lane, the method applied by the leadership of communism to rule the people and guarantee their seat.

## **FIFTY-NINE**

### **Hanoi Bombed, What Will Be Their Socialism?**

Summer was hesitantly moving up. Some cicadas woke up from their long sleep of winter-spring, wailing to regret a not too fulfilled dormant state. Yearly, I would not desire to put the cicadas to sleep announcing the coming of winter and foretelling the puffiness of my toes and fingers, lying on the frozen cement bed without enough warm clothes and winter bedding. Winter for me was the commencement of misfortune while my body did not have enough calories due to lack of sugar and fat or simply some starch.

I was waiting for my turn to go do my potty work when suddenly the lengthy wailing of the alarm siren sounded. Warden Du rushed inmate of cell 7 to race back to his cell and he jumped into the individual trench left. The loudspeaker intoned, “Beware, the people and the Army of Hanoi, a number of enemy airplanes from North West direction and another group from South East direction are flying into our sky. All weapons systems must be ready according to plan K, the Fire Arrows Division deployed with plan G and Air Force to execute plan M”. Thundering noises of antiaircraft shells and bombs exploding shook the whole sky with steel blue lightning. My door shook like in an earthquake. Staccato on the roof and in the yard, amid the acidity of gunsmoke, the waft of burning fire and the faraway screaming and crying gave a background to the announcement of a Phantom jet disintegrated North of Hanoi and the cutting of two Thunderbirds in the south.

My mind was foggy, not focused to any opposing ideas. In the cells, those not having their legs locked up took shelter under the cement beds. As my two legs immobilized in the lockjaws I simply lay there belly up regardless of any eventuality. All the cadres were in their individual dug holes. Anyhow, I heard



the sound of machine gunfire around indicating that there were people fighting back. In fact, the loudspeakers broadcast always urged the people and the armed forces to confront the enemy from their own position with whatever weapon they have. Soldiers with the kind of guns in hands, on the rooftops or trees will aim at the direction of the enemy planes and squeeze triggers. I thought that it was only psychological stuff to motivate the whole population in the fighting for the country. Anyhow, it served its purpose fooling the world opinion on the fighting spirit of the whole country against foreign invaders.

The American strategist has valued a city or a society through the eyesight of the capitalist system. The Hanoi communist government was able to direct efficiently the evacuation and dissemination of their means and population. In addition to it, the American side always pre-announced their plan of attack and to what extent. There was the free American press, which foretold the military and political moves for the communists to act timely. As for the destructive action of modern weaponry, the cost would not be worth the destructed installations. Even in Hanoi where all constructions were dilapidated for years, their destruction would save the cost of demolition. The suburb of the capital city had only thatched huts and the use of a bomb or a rocket would give only a return of 2 or 3 percent. Besides, everyday their broadcast talked of the ability and characteristics of the American weapon systems. Even the population of Hanoi was aware of the new Stealth F-111 making them more confident on their clear-sighted leadership. Hanoi requested the USSR for counter measures to down Phantoms, F-105, Sabers and B-52. They took more pilots prisoners, reinforcing their internal propaganda and the international outcry of American aggression.

Two hours later the announcement of end of alert came and Warden Du opened my door for me to empty my pot and get my meal in the same time. I saw the presence of several black, very sharp and contorted metallic pieces in the yard and picked up one piece showing to Du, "I do not know what this is which would kill if it hits your head". He showed me another bigger piece on his desk and said they came from our anti-aircraft artillery. I pretended ignorant of the two kinds of weapons reaching to different attitudes to maintain a normal and unusual interaction with the prison cadre. I remembered my first days in prison when he always stared at me with his cold and investigating pair of eyes. Gradually as time went, he seemed more sympathetic his scrutinizing eyes changed to curiosity and now a hint of sympathy. From time to time talking with me, he looked above 50, small and used less raw language.

This noon, I tried without success to close my eyes during siesta. I looked at the pale greenish color of my arms and legs. It had been a long time since I enjoyed the sun caressing my skin. I long for sunlight like a steamy bowl of beef soup complete with green onion and Chinese parsley. Usually at this time, I would have heard the noisy voices of kindergarten Tan-Trao kiddies. Their song plus the buzzing of cicadas made a joyful midday choir. At present there were only cicadas singing, at times unisonant like shower on steel roofing and at other instances, completely mute like in a minute of silence of a memorial ceremony. The kiddies evacuated out of Hanoi due to present situation. Suddenly the convoluted alarm siren was on like the roaring of an agonizing beast silencing all cicadas humming. Bombs drop, explosives flaring in a stunning din created an infernal fracas. I was lying belly up on my cement bed listening to the deafening sounds when the breaking of tiles on the roof sent down a beautiful beam of light with dancing dust creating a scintillating circle next to my lock. I thank the American pilot to grant me the gift from God. I rushed to remove my shirt and twisted my legs to sit up on the lock taking the beam of sun on my face down to my neck, chest, belly and my forearms. Everyday I could enjoy for one hour the infrared and ultraviolet rays of the solar beam like a light broom sweeping a good part of my body.

Then Du's voice announced that today there will not be potty cleansing since the plumbing of Hoa Lo was out of order due to the bombing. The odor of gasoline burning sent its harsh acidity to the whole prison. Du watched me through the small window to see me contorting grotesquely with the solar beam direction. During the frequent bombings while everyone sought shelters I was the only one on my cement

bed enjoying that sunlight which lasts only one hour and is constantly changing direction. I had the peaceful feeling that I was the only person in the whole world under the fracas of explosion and destruction. Actually, would I care about life or death in my present situation?

## SIXTY

### Of Mice and Men

One afternoon, I was waiting for the sunbeam, my eyes half closed, thinking of life's fluctuations. Suddenly I heard a faint noise coming from the floor. I glanced to the direction of the feeble noise and I saw a tiny mouse squatting under the other bed bringing its minuscule hands to its mouth like gnawing some thing. I lay still and assessed the situation. He could not get out through the door, which closed tight to the cement floor. The only possible exit was the drain hole under the wall, the size of the face of a wristwatch. The bombing din made his life unsecured; he had to look for a haven and ended up in my cell. Anyhow, the sorry thing for him is, this Promised Land has only brick, steel, cement and not even one grain of rice. Thinking of rice, I looked at my bag of reserved rice, which I set aside at the end of the lock. I was expecting full belly next dinnertime after waiting more than twenty hours. The bag now has a hole scattering the precious grains to the floor. I felt painful for my digestive tract at the loss of thirty to forty grains. I sat up in a hurry and the mouse disappeared. I was sorry of my rush and I regretted the loss of rice and of the mouse, my new friend. Thinking that he might be back, I planned to catch him, sacrificing a few grains of rice per day for my new friend so that my life in here would be less lonely. Anyhow, this mouse seemed very malicious. As they locked my legs and I was unable to reach to the drain hole, how could I manage? Between men and animals who is smarter? I devised a plan to capture the mouse.

Tomorrow I will save about twenty grains of rice scattered on the floor away from the drain hole. On my bed, I will lay immobile holding the broom end and when the mouse was in picking the grains I simply in a sudden stretch plug the hole with the handle of the broom. I was still unable to catch him. I waited until when the prison guard pulled out my strut to quickly get my legs out and swoop on him, judging his darting direction to catch him. I had fabricated a strong long thread twisted with six yarns from the toilet rag and tied one end to the bed support pillar while the other end had a slipknot. The whole scenario would take a couple of minutes starting with the sliding out of the strut and ending when the guard opened the door to order me out for pot work. The whole morning I finished my plan to deal with this very smart animal. I lay as usual waiting glancing furtively at the hole my ears strained to perceive the inaudible sound. In the patient oppressive wait, ten minutes, twenty minutes and forty minutes passed and nothing happened. Perhaps the mouse was aware that I set trap to catch him or he could have found another tastier food source. I almost lost patience when I heard a flossy sound and the weak light of the hole seemed diminished while a tiny bearded muzzle trusted in and out. Finally, I saw the miniscule red nose and then the head; it was exactly the mouse of yesterday. Please come in, I would treat you as a friend and I would not harm you. Today he was so hesitant, moving forward a little and backing out lifting his head left and right, raising his large ears as if he sensed a climate of insecurity. Anyhow, his nose must have caught the aroma of the rice. In spite of danger ahead, his starved stomach pushed him on. I sprung up to stop the exit drain hole with the handle of the broom. The mouse was smart knowing that there was no other exit. He raced back to the plugged hole trying to escape. He withdrew to under the next bed looking at me with fear and anger while I watched him as a well-disposed friend. I did not know whether he understood it or not. The lock strut pulled out crisply; I quickly jumped down to block the entrance door. Facing extreme danger the mouse sprung up high, I jumped on him and missed the first time to take advantage of my off balance position to scoop and get him in my hand.

Now, the door opened and Warden Du shouted, “What are you doing there”? He opened his big curious and angry eyes while I tied the mouse leg in the slipknot, breathing heavily to say in a broken voice, “Sir, I caught a mouse”. He looked at the mouse and then stared at me; at first he seemed annoyed frowning and then his stare became toned down hacking, “Kill it and dispose in the outhouse”. I took my pot out and supplicated him to let me take care of the mouse a few days because I was so lonely in here. Perhaps seeing that there was no harm with such a tiny creature and besides he had become somewhat compassionate, he did not say yes or no, rushing me to do my potty work fast. I behave well cleaning expediently the pot and after taking it back to my cell, I went out for my rice in no time.

He locked the door and my legs. I had the feeling that my room was warmer. After so many lonely days and nights, I got a new friend, a confidante with whom I am able to say things without any danger. I would sacrifice several grains of rice each day to reward him. Before eating, I threw a few grains to him as an invitation. He bent his tiny head watching with wily eyes, his ears and eyes opening up and down scary and not pacified. He did not eat those grains while I gobbled up the rest. After I returned my bowl, there was only the mouse in complete silence. I did not know how to explain that my conduct toward him is peace, understanding and friendliness for our mutual interest. I decided to lie down sleeping after scattering a few more grains. I woke up a moment later to see him still squatting there staring at me with his miniscule eyes and the grains of rice were still around. I went on sleeping with the thoughts that as a living thing like me if he does not eat today, he will do it tomorrow and I felt relaxed to plunge deep into my slumber.

In the morning when I woke up the mouse disappeared with no trace of rice, just the twisted length of thread. I was stupid, judging too low my newfound friend. It was painful for the loss of my effort and of a new friend who left me before we fully understood each other. I was not quite sure he would be back. Nevertheless, I still put a few grains on the floor in case. About ten days later, I was daydreaming on a hot summer noon waiting for lunchtime. I looked distractively at the window and the lock when I noticed that the grains of rice had disappeared. The mouse had returned. I will lie in wait for him tomorrow. With just a few grains as bait, I caught him again. Perhaps in a starving world he was unsuccessfully looking for food. He must finally take the bold decision going back to this dangerous place, as conditions limited knowledge and smartness. Having you this time I would not give you any leeway to evade. With my legs locked again, I bent down pulling the cord up to catch him in my hand murmuring, “because I want to share my life with you, I must ask for your two front teeth”. I knew that if he can talk he would vehemently protest. Anyhow, I got the reason of the stronger and I broke his teeth off removing his ability to cut his chain.

He used to live with me and was not anymore fearful to bury himself in my belly. My life became homey. This night as usual I was playing and talking with him when gunfire erupted like corn popping followed by thundering explosions without alert siren. The cell thick door shook violently like in earthquake and the mouse was so terrified to dig in my navel. His mustaches kept chafing giving me goose bumps and exhilarating pleasure.

Then there was complete blackout, the noisy loudspeakers were off. It was pitch-dark showing the zigzagging steel-green lightning. I missed that spectacular firework displaying colorful arches of light in the sky. I did not understand where Hanoi got that much ammo. So many antiaircraft guns were firing endlessly like breaking the whole firmament. The frequency of American air attack also increased days and nights to a couple of weeks break and then another resumption.

Today is Sunday and the prison cadres started open cell doors only at 9 o'clock. When my turn came I saw Warden Ba, a stern faced Nghe An man I have seen before in Prison III. When I got my pot back he stood in my room pointing his finger at the mouse and ogled to say, “What is this mouse”? I replied, “Sir, he came in my cell and I caught him”. “Who gives you permission to raise mouse in here”? “He is small and I keep him for fun”. He firmed his voice and shouted, “Crush it and dump it”! Seeing that he became

infuriated I softened my voice supplicating, “Sir, I chained and raised him for more than half month. As he did not create any problem to this prison, please leave it to me and I shall kill him and dispose of him in the morning”. He retorted, “Impossible, get your legs in the lock”! When he finished locking my legs, he rushed back in and tramped the tiny mouse. My heart squeezed, the mouse jumped fast avoiding his foot. Due to the unforgiving chain I tied to his foot, he popped crushed with a wet sound, his two black eyes ejected out dangling, his legs shaking to stretch slowly out immobile. A heat wave mounted from my neck to my eyes. Looking at the cadre, I wanted him to share the same fate than the mouse. Anyhow, seeing my locked up legs and my present situation, I felt a cold bucket of water dumped on my head.

I am a miserable coward, not able to protect even a mouse! Looking at his crushed body showing his entrails, I felt my inner organs gradually contused. The death of the mouse made me pensive many days; I directed my thoughts to life, family and society. So many changes were occurring while I was here counting months and years going by. The most mischievous thing was my legs in the locks without any freedom to sit up or lie down. In my South country, so many coups and upheavals, swamp changing to hills while the hills reversed to marshland. Did I still have some friends and lose others, who went up hills and who fell down hills? In the mean time, the Americans came in rows after rows. I had so much concern while I am here powerless. That mouse, the newly found friend was no more making me saddened to forget all my set principles. I suddenly remembered the lyrics of the song “Que sera, sera! Whatever will be will be”! I would not solve any problem in the present condition. It led me to the poem of Tham Tam,

*“Mother, you would better be like a day slumber,  
“Love, it would better be like an exalting cigarette smoke,  
“Sweetheart, you would better like be a flying leaf,  
“Country, it would better be like a full bowl of rice.*

Nevertheless, I had a day slumber. As for the exalting cigarette smoke, watching the flying leaf and enjoying a full bowl of rice, when shall I get it?

## **SIXTY-ONE**

### **Counting the Autumns...**

It turned to fall again as I lay here counting falls passing by. The broadcast announced that 1,261 aircraft of all kinds were down capturing a number of pilots. They announced daily the precise number of aircraft downed. Anyhow, they did not say the precise number of pilots captured, merely 2 or 3 of them day in day out. It showed perfectly their design to use the capture of pilots as pressure on the USA in the future. The whole world realized that the number of aircraft down at 1,261 was an inflated figure. I thought of an imaginary story to chuckle: The telephone conversation between Comrades Mao and Ho.

Mao, “Hello comrade Ho, the media reported that you downed 1,261 planes. Between you and me, you must frankly tell me the real figure. How many exactly did you down”?

Ho, “Between brothers of the same family I have to tell the truth that we downed only 514 each”. Mao angrily thumped on his desk to shout, “Young brother why you dare to trick me? According to my on the spot intelligence you had downed only 184 American planes. As comrades and brothers, you still try tricking me. So in this world whoever did you not trick”?

The date was 2 September, the National Independence Day. Yearly it was a big day with troop reviews, people demonstration and lengthy oratorical speeches. Anyhow, this year the celebration must have occurred in some remote jungle areas because their whole leadership thrust their head in some mountain

caves. No one knew whether American planes would give a visit today. Perhaps the civilized Americans playing the big fair game showed their respect for the national culture and value and refrained from coming. So, keep toiling your butt off to enjoy your national day.

Only at 9 o'clock, the cadre opened the door for potty work. When my door opened, I saw Du in a brand new starchy grand uniform with the two splashy red Aspirant insignias. His face was blooming under a new cap with a bloody band. I had the impression seeing his outfit made in paper, especially when I perceived the sleeves of his vest extending over his set of keys in his right hand while the other side showed only three fingers wigwagging. I felt like seeing a uniformed casket bearer of a funeral home. I cleaned my potty in the outhouse thinking that the old foxes in their political bureau were aware that the dummies helped building the system and their power came from them. Like the snake, the venom is in the malicious head while the tail merely follows. When I got out with my potty and saw bombastic Tu in his boxed uniform, I had to turn my face away with my smirk. In the same way, the two Chien and Nhiem newly promoted to Second Lieutenant and Aspirant walked in rigidly from the gate with faces blossoming. They promoted them in 1963 and gave them one more rank now. Perhaps because of war situation the members of the political bureau needed to pump up all low ranking cadres.

Cadre Bang called me to deposition the next day. It had been two to three months since and I did not know what happened. When I went out of the gate, I looked in the common yard and noticed the difference. From the rows of houses next to prison II, there was an elevated small square hut with the four loudspeakers. The area had now posts surrounded by bamboo screen into an enclosed space. The sheet of bamboo screen nailed to the posts at a height of 2.2m, leaving at the lower part 30cm gap from the ground showing many hairy barefooted legs. I realized that the rooms next to prison II were for American pilots and the surrounded area was for them to take bath and to eat. They did not like the American and Vietnamese prisoners to see each other. I turned my head to look at those huge legs, some deep black others under bandages when Warden Bang shouted, "Keep going, what are you looking at"? I turned back to meet Bang's stern eyes and praised, "Wow, we caught so many American pilots". He remained indifferent not saying a word. When I passed the duty office I saw two unfamiliar legal cadres receiving two pilots, one very tall and skinny while the other was of medium built displaying a thick beard. The latter one stared at me twice perhaps he noticed my greenish skin, skeleton body and my anemic eyes.

When I reached the front yard with the grape canopy, I glanced into the rooms to see sitting on accused stool like me a few big-nose-green-eyes men. Therefore the legal office had to rush training English to their interrogators or to recruit English speaking people for their need questioning the American pilots on intelligence and tactics, etc. My interrogator was Hue-man Dang. Another unfamiliar man sat at a desk leafing through a thick dossier. I sat down waiting, keeping my head down. With a crisp and hard accent Dang asked, "Are you OK lately"? "Sir, I am all right as usual". He stared at me through his glass and slowly talked, "Today we reexamine your whole file. For three years, there is no change in your thoughts because you harbor reactionary blood in your system. That is why you see that socialism is backward and poverty and its people have to pull oxcarts and are not free to go here and there. How could you see the rising force of King Phu Dong making the strength of the people to face the most powerful America and give them headache? Very soon, time would cleanse your body off the reactionary blood. You have to listen carefully to what I am reading. Things that you reported but not signed off yet, now please sign".

I sat still lowering my head to listen. About three years ago, the two Nhuan and Thanh had nicely asked my opinion on socialism. As they said that it would not bear down on my situation, I talked about something that everyone sees, the sight of old men pulling oxcarts foretelling a better tomorrow. That was a more logical statement than simply tell them that I love socialism. Now they took it out to remonstrate me, which is another good lesson for me. Communism is a blunder to fool the naïve and the

slow thinker. After they lasso you, they uncover their mask to show a devil face with bloody eyes, green mouth and long sharp fangs to devour human flesh.

They sketchily read and gave me to sign. I told Dang it was not necessary to read and I simply signed it. Even if they ask me to sign my death warrant, I would do too. I understood that it was only formality. When you were under their hands if they want to kill you, they will do it regardless of your reason. I told them that they do not need to spend extra time and just show me the place needing my signature and I will give it. Both of them looked at me with gentle eyes though they released me only at noon.

On my way back, my escort Bang, meeting a cadre told me to wait for him. I could enjoy the blue firmament after so many months. The deep blue autumn sky adorned with a few flocks of light cloud here and there like mums and narcissus flowers embedded. While I was thinking of the perfume of the flowers, I suddenly noticed white brilliant specks high over like white storks in the sky. As I just realized that they were airplanes, the alert horn sounded like a bull having his throat slashed cut. Then the thundering sounds of bombs and explosives filled the whole sky. Today I was able to witness the American planes diving and strafing amid antiaircraft fires zigzagging from all directions like fireworks. I was absorbed by the spectacle when I heard a shouting, "Rush in here, do you want to die"? Deep in a hole at the corner was Bang with four or five other yellow uniformed men. Bang pulled me in and I tumbled on him. He asked, "Who permit you to watch air strike"? Thinking to me that I gave that permission, I softly answered, "I do not think that I can go in the shelter with you". He briefly retorted, "Stupid". During their conversation, I knew that they were afraid of antiaircraft shrapnel. There were many casualties in town. Half an hour later, the alert was over and I went back to my cell through a deserted yard when all prisoners must be in their room during the attack.

## SIXTY-TWO

### Prison Visit, Who Is The Stranger?

One week after my deposition, when I was lying with my eyes closed meditating, the sound of key clicked and the door opened. Warden Du entered and I wondered, as time was off, meal and pot all done, would it be another deposition at this late hour? The warden very nicely in a soft voice said, "I get the order from the directorate to dispense you of leg lock". I opened wide my eyes and my jaw dropped. I wanted to ask him again, I thought I heard wrong and offered a timid yes. The lock strut pulled out dryly, I slowly lifted the jaw and took my legs out in bewilderment. He locked the door and I sat there in uncertainty, my hands caressing my liberated legs. For three years that lock was a constant nightmare, a source of miseries leading to death. One time I wanted to offer the amputation of one leg in repentance of my crime. The cut-off leg would heal and the sufferance would end. Now with my freed legs I could stand up, sit down, moving around in the cell and exercise.

**Oh! Freedom, dear Freedom, I swear to defend you to the end of my life!**

Now I could do so many things in the confine of my cell. Early each morning out of my exercise, I ran on the spot 100 steps, deeply breathing. Tired of lying, I sprung up to walk around eight steps in the rectangular space between the two beds for half hour alternating between lying and walking until nine which was bed time. And so on, I did regularly everyday, morning, afternoon and evening. To show my good conduct, I did not try to be curious and communicate with other cells. Anyhow, last night around 8pm I heard a light sound at the gate followed by the hammering leather sole on the cement floor mixed with the sliding of rubber sandals. Was it a local or a foreigner? It moved to my neighboring cell 4. The door was locked shut and silence was complete. The next morning at time of pot work, I strained my ears

to investigate. There were footsteps out but not any more the particular sound of leather sole. I deduced that the new man of cell 4 was a Vietnamese who realized that his shoes sound was too strange in here to go barefooted. Three days later, I heard cell 4 requesting backache medicine in a Quang Binh accent mixed with northern tone indicating to me that his age must be around mine. That fretted my curiosity and I must find it out.

Today, after eating I was ready with my day slumber when I heard voices blurt from a group going through the prison gate. I thought it came from a delegation visiting cells of Hoang Van Thu and Tran Dang Ninh. Anyhow, those visits were normally in Sundays. They opened cells 2 and 13 without any noisy presentation and closed them again. It was so strange and different from the normal. I felt anxious, listening with my ear against the small window when I hastily jumped down at the opening of that window. The door opened and there was a crowd headed by a fifty years old man under grey jacket with four pockets. His two eyebrows were bushy black looking like two hairy worms pushing his deep ash grey eyes in the sockets. His cheekbones thrust forward making him look like a gorilla, fierce and severe. The two assistant directors Tri and Le under full uniforms with rank insignias escorted him with deferential attitudes. 5 to 6 others men stood in the back. The old man in civilian costume stared at me scrutinizing and suddenly softened his eyes, his lips quivering opened into half smile, "Are you OK"? Seeing his possible high standing, I showed my submissive respect by answering, "Sir, I am all right". He directed his eyes watching my whole body and burst into laughter, nodding lightly to say, "You took that daring medicine to venture by yourself into Hanoi"! His face brightened. He looked again at me and chuckled while I refrained from smiling back. The two assistants had their hands crossed on their belly with austere faces. The grey jacket man watched me again from head to toe and chuckled, "Good bye". Warden Du locked the door, the visiting team went away to the gate and I wondered whom that man was who just said a few short words to me bearing possibly on my future? He must have high standing in the security organization so that both prison assistants kept quiet during the interaction.

The washday came two days later. There was change in Du's behavior. He granted an additional time for the clothes to dry out and wait until close to 5 o'clock shift change to open the doors for inmates to reclaim their clothes. It showed clearly his character. I was leisurely walking between two beds, my mind reflecting at random when the door opened again and Du said in low voice, "I let you go out for a while for fun". Oh! Real surprise, I had never seen in my four years in prison a cadre letting an inmate out for fun. I was dumb struck for a few seconds and raced out while Du sat at his desk writing. The yard still had sunlight; I took off my shirt and exposed my chest getting all the sunrays on my body. For nearly four years I lived in the semi-darkness of cell life, I twisted myself and even rolled up my pant sleeves to let all the nooks and crannies enjoying the food of heaven.

After twenty minutes of contortions and enjoyment, I came to think of the reason why Du gratified me specially. He had seen me several times exposing my body to that small light beam coming through an orange size hole of the roof. Perhaps it struck his mind granting me something that did not cost him anything. I remembered his benevolence even though he might not know that by feeding my body with sunlight would spare me grave diseases in the future. I had to behave well so that he might give me another benefit next time. That was why as cells 10 and 14 showed their smiling faces, I kept cool ignoring them. Glancing at the clothes on the drying rope, I perceived an overcoat with two brand new white shirts having cufflinks. I pretended walking around the yard when I was close enough I could see that the two shirts were Paris make in snow white poplin and the cufflinks with false diamonds looked perfect. Whoever had those garments should wear the sounding shoes I have heard going to cell 4. Who was he and why they incarcerated him? Those questions aroused my curiosity and I completely forgot the autumn scenery, which I missed long time ago. Warden Du stood up shaking his key, "Take your clothes and go in". I got my stuff and while passing in front of him I directed my emotional face to him saying, "I thank you Sir". He looked at me with sympathy and did not say a word.

## SIXTY-THREE

### The Saigon Female Spy

Wind blew stronger, the air became chillier and the prison had issued blankets. At noon I lay down, my eyes half closed ready with my siesta. After a while, I woke up immobile under my blanket to listen intently. Out of the usual rubbing of leaves, I thought hearing concussive noise on the bed of my next-door cell 6. At present, there were not many inmates in the prison. Perhaps, I was not aware of the new admission in my sleep. Alternatively, may be my nervous system was still hazy during my siesta and I did not hear clear? Then I heard again the sound of concussion. No doubt, some body was turning over on that bed at the other side of the common wall.

To seek consolation in this desolate environment, I pulled my hand out of the blanket to knock the wall lightly twice. Complete silence! I did it again and there was no echo save the hissing of wind through cracks on the rooftop. Perhaps the new person was still overwhelmed with the arrest and did not care of whatsoever. I also felt tired and turned to the other direction, ready to sleep when suddenly I heard a quick friction on the wall from a wooden object. I about faced and gave two light knocks. Now there were two very light and dispersed knocks answering back. A real joy went up in me; and with my horn comb, I gave a staccato knocking like applauding a newfound friend. At the evening chow time, I waited listening. When the warden closed cell 6 after the person returned with the bowl of rice I clearly heard the sound of the bowl on the lock. Then I gave 5 to 6 knocks desiring to invite him to start eating. There were also 5 or 6 knocks in response. Those were merely inarticulate sounds in place of words. Anyhow, I felt rejoicing with a strong feeling of warmth. At bedtime, I knocked again as if inquiring whether the friend had started to sleep. The same knocks came back.

After sleeping for quite long I waked up. Thinking of the next-door friend, I gave two discreet knocks not disrupting his rest. Still the answered knocks sent back and so on during the night, every time I opened my eyes to knock and hear his echo. Perhaps he did not close his eyes a single minute. Early morning, feeling pitiful for a friend who was not able to sleep being sorry and uncertain in the present condition, I rushed to knock frenetically in series to remonstrate and to console him as well. He seemed getting my message and eagerly answered in kind. I became so curious that when time came for getting meal and returning bowl, I lay on the floor straining my eyes through the 1/2cm gap under the floor to look out. I saw, out of the brownish feet of Warden Du on his rubber sandals the small light skin feet on Thai sandals with red straps. They looked like female feet. Was the person I communicated with a woman?

That night, very late, I suddenly woke up to hear the faraway choked sobbing reverberating with the howling of wind. It clearly came from a woman convulsively weeping like supplicating assistance and redemption. I knew that it came from cell 6 and rushed to give a few knocks on the wall. The crying stopped. I gave several more pressing consoling and uplifting knocks. There were knocks back and especially I did not hear anymore crying. Perhaps when I was asleep she knocked and heard no answer back to feel saddened in the mid of the silent night surrounded by the four cold walls of the prison in the presence of that terrible lock just like in the solitude of a cemetery and it made her weeping. One thought came to my mind. What was this woman's crime, political or common penitence? I had never seen a woman in a cell by herself. In the solitary room, especially in nights of drizzling rain and howling north wind, hearing the wailing or hooting of some inmates were not bearable to even male prisoners. That is why they used to put two persons together for mutual sustenance and to avoid suicidal attempt. I was in cell 6 before, a larger cell giving you more sense of solitude. Sitting night long in that environment would make your entrails rotten.



It came to my mind to find way relating with the neighbor friend to console and understand more about her. It was risky to talk not only because of the constant surveillance of the cadres but also the possible planting of bait prisoners. Moreover, as it was a female inmate several people would like to interact with her and she would refrain from answering. I thought using the “Morse” code very familiar in scout organization. I signaled, “Who are you” using my horn comb. The other side swept the wall with her hand in circular motion to say that she did not get it. Therefore, she did not know Morse code. I must arrive with some way and my mind kept busy all day, which was a good pastime. I tried communicating the day of my arrest. To start the process I knocked twice and heard the two knocks back signaling that she was ready. I used my horn comb to knock because at the end the use of my knuckle hurt. First I knocked 24 times then stopped, then six times, stop, one time, stop, nine times, stop, six times, stop, twice, stop. Waiting for a few minutes, I heard the gliding back and forth on the wall of something like a paper fan. She did not understand the message. Patience was the key for success. I repeated the same thing one and two more times, figuring that she was tense working out the enigma. Then suddenly the frenetic swiping of the fan signaling that she broke the code as she knocked back my date 24-6-1962. I heard another two knocks from her saying I am ready. I knocked back the same, ready. She knocked the day of her arrest 29-9-1965 which was one month to date.

I wanted to know her name but the present code was not appropriate. All days and nights, I squeezed my mind searching for another method going through the 24 letters of the alphabet. I must let the other side understand my new code while she certainly was irked with the difficult communication. I started as usual with my two call-sign knocks to get her two ready-sign knocks. Then I knocked once saying a, a, a, twice, saying b, b, b, three knocks, saying c, c, c. I stopped to hear the fan gliding slowly on the wall. After a minute, I redid the same thing and suddenly the gliding sound of the fan became frenzy while she knocked the same signals. I was raving, my legs shaking with joy and I tramped my bed deliriously. I used that technique to converse with her days and nights except when it was time for sanitary work or to get meals. I knew that her name is Dao Thi Bac and what was beyond imagination; she is a spy of Saigon. The communication became faster with use. Besides, we devised some useful abbreviations to shorten time. I also knew that Bac worked in the same time for Hanoi, a kind of double agent but she said it was not true. When she went to deposition, I missed her and I started to connect with cell 4, a smart man who got the clue at once. He was about my age, named Nguyen Lan of Quang Binh, the son of a veteran killed in the French war and just came back from Romania to be arrested and incarcerated.

One day when Miss Bac took her pot out, I timed my action with the surveillance of the warden to glance through the window and saw Miss Bac having a white front hair lock while her black hair combed to the back. She had a fair complexion with her lower lip hanging out a little. She quickly looked at me; her face instantly gladdened reversing back at once in a veil of sadness. That was why when she was back I kept quiet and so she did. After the evening meal, I knocked good-bye to cell 4 and went to bed. At around 10pm the crying at first subdued then bursting into loud sobbing arose. I crawled up listening to realize that it came from Miss Bac. I must console her, as she is my comrade-in-arm and my colleague. I knocked twice to hear a moment later her two light and hesitant knocks back. I asked her why she wept. She answered she was sad. I did my best within the limitations of our means to tell her to be courageous looking at my three years in confinement as crying would not solve any problem. She stopped crying and we resumed our conversation.

## **SIXTY-FOUR**

### **A Clever Means of Communication**

While I was leaning to the wall-sending knock signs to Miss Bac the small window opened I leaped to hear the door opened thinking that they might hear my relation with cell 6. The chubby face of Assistant Tri showed with two grey lips moving under a big rough nose staring throughout the whole cell with his two fade white eyes. I heard my heartbeat quickening and a moment later, he raised his weighty centrist voice, "Take all your things out". I felt surprised. I had moved several times before but I missed a room where I was free from the lock and especially I was parting with cells 4 and 6. I wanted to knock my farewell to 6, a woman who would easily shed tears. Anyhow, that man Tri was sticky as I managed back and forth to finally knock lightly a few times. I was apprehensive about where I will go when he directed me to cell 11 opposite of cell 6, which was a big surprise. Moreover, the new cell faced out to the prison yard giving more light and a full view of the outside with the "badamier" tree and enabling me to see all faces going out to dry clothes.

From the day of my admission, out of the two big events of suicide and evasion, I had not committed any infractions. Besides, they had submitted me to nearly four years in darkness. Now to give me some brighter life so that I would not die inadvertently since I was still an animal to repay them with labor. I was thinking at random and cleaning my new home where I could exercise and walk around daily when I heard the sound of cadre coming from the gate. I recognized him as Cadre Van, a fatso southern man going around to check before shift change. He opened the windows and closed them without securing with the steel bars, perhaps to be convenient when he checked around to keep the inmates unaware of it. Right that evening I experimented with soundless communication. I pushed opened the steel plate covering the window and used a reed of the broom having a bifurcation as a hook to pull it down after use. This cadre was not a smart man. When he inspected the other side cells, he pulled the windows wide open, and left my side ajar. I pushed my window fully open and could see the other room at 2m distance. I coughed and saw nothing until when I heard the sound of pot moving I poked out to see vaguely a bare arm with a black under shirt. I waited until she crawled under the mosquito net to cough two to three times and then she faced out. Her first reaction was she seemed disturbed, wrapping her body with her shirt. Then she smiled widely looking at me with a joyful expression as if she was meeting with a long gone friend. Like two deaf and dumb persons, I used gestures with my hands and fingers to let her know that when I cough twice she will stand on the bed facing me on my bed and I will show her how to communicate. I must repeat my gestures a few times using also my winking eyes before she got it. At that moment, I heard an imperceptible sound and made sign for her to move inside the net while I cautiously pulled the window shut to regain my bed. The light steps came to my window and the man pushed the pane down while I pretended sleeping soundly.

Early in the morning before the arrival of the duty guard, I stood up coughing for Miss Bac to practice my thought out idea. From each cell looking at the other you could see a rectangular area on the wall 50x60 cm, a perfect writing board. Using my finger, I wrote in capital letters "DO YOU SEE CLEARLY". With her booming face, she nodded and I wrote again "PLEASE WRITE SOMETHING" so that I could adjust her board by hand signals. From now on, we were capable to communicate with one another silently. Thinking that the French and now the Viet Minh were not aware of our method otherwise, they would not have built two facing rows of cells. In one word, if I could be on top of this situation it was because they did not know my ability to neutralize it. The Free World and America always "lift the shirt to let people peruse your back"; it explains why they ended up in a rut.

After conversing with Miss Bac for several days, I felt safe to confide to her that I was an operative sent from South Vietnam. I also told her on my thirty days playing a dangerous game with the Hanoi counter espionage. At the end, I asked her to recount her life leading to double agent ending up as a solitary female prisoner. Her trembling eyelids turned red, teardrops running down her cheeks moving me so much that I turned my head to the other direction. She wrote while sobbing, "Like by a chance opportunity, I am happy to meet you here. I had weighed it for several days. I consider my life ended now. I still have a unique son in Saigon. Therefore, I give you all the details of my life as my last will

and want to trust my progeny to you”. I read her text, seeing her skinny shoulders trembling and from time to time bringing her towel up to dry her tears. I thought of my fate, were you confiding your son to me? In the circumstance, between us two, whoever will reverse to dust first? Looking at the strand of white hair on her head and her slant posture making her neck withdrawn, I forgot of my destiny and agreed to be a “rotten pillar for the green moss to cling”.

## **SIXTY-FIVE**

### **Life of The Unfortunate Female Spy**

During the recount of her life, Miss Bac always had tears in her eyes. Here is the summary of her story.

*“My life leading to my arrest is a misfortune. Even my love life is full of painful tears and sufferings. I grew up in a well to do family in the suburb of Hanoi. I was student at the girl’s high school Trung Vuong of the years 1948-49. I fell in love with a boy three grades over. At the time, I was ready for the certificate of junior high while he went through his Baccalaureate II. We loved each other for four years and my family approved. Everyday he came tutoring me and my parents agreed to celebrate our wedding after the examination. He biked to my place and on his return; a GMC Truck hit and killed him. The whole world was crumbling. I attempted to kill myself and with my family authorization, I went to his funeral as his wife. I decided to shut off my heart with the decision to stay single regardless of my parents’ advice. I asked to be assigned to a remote rural area of Hung Yen and then Bac Ninh to teach school. There I lived a modest life like a nun surrounded by the young schoolchildren as my enjoyment. I thought it was my destiny when the war occurred and the kids lost their school. I had to return to Hanoi with my family.*

*It was in 1952 and war intensified. I found a new direction to my life. Having CEPFI Diploma I volunteered for the Army notwithstanding the opposition of my family. After six months of training, I became Second Lieutenant assigned to office work at the JGS. A young girl officer working in a surrounding of young handsome men in uniforms, I finally succumbed to a man, Major Tran Ngoc Tinh. A supposedly desiccated heart after the first unachieved love became alive again leading to a beautiful wedding. Then the country changed with the 1954 Geneva Accord. Being 4 months pregnant, JGS assigned me to an office for the organization and transport of the military and families to the south. My husband became Lt-Colonel and I worked hard until I gave birth to a baby boy named Tran Ngoc Trang. I thought having adopted a vegetarian diet and volunteering for charity work, Buddha had granted me a happy life in a free country. Another tragic luck happened to me. During a mission trip to Dalat, his Jeep dived in a ravine and my husband was killed. I became completely crazy. If not due to my baby son, I would have killed myself. We were during the 300-day limit. I decided to take my son back North with my family regardless of advice from friends and the Army.*

*I lived in the suburb of Hanoi keeping busy with my boy. The war intensified and all my siblings enlisted. The local Communist committee did not bother me and I joined group activities not paying attention to politics. My life went on until 1960 when my son was five and started school. The Northern Intelligence seeing in me a good prospect as a former Army officer and the widow of a high-ranking officer of the South with perhaps connections wooed me and recruited me. After nearly one year training I was sent back south with my son under the plausible reason that I was tired of living under a harsh society being in constant surveillance. After I crossed the Ben Hai River, I ended up in the Gia Dinh refugee center. Friends visited me among them, an old friend of my husband, Colonel Xuan sponsored us out to live in the officer’s quarters. Colonel Xuan was with the south intelligence. Perhaps Bac liked the south society or*

*south intelligence was smart. She divulged her connection with the north spy organization and the south jumped on the opportunity to send her back working for them.*

*South counter espionage had the same weakness of superficiality and irresponsibility innate in our administration. They lacked research and rushed to recruit and send Bac up north, creating loopholes for her to evade. In 1965, Bac reported to northern counter spy that she was uncovered and the two sides would create a scenario so that she could cross the DMZ back home. Northern Intelligence took her right away to an upstairs room at 23 Sugar Street. In complete seclusion, they had her writing every detail, since she first set her foot in Saigon. They took all her papers and she completed her report in a month time thinking that she would go back to her family. Anyhow, they shouted at her, remonstrated and even showed her photos and proofs to break her down. She rewrote her second paper and they got her to cell 6 of Hanoi prison”.*

While she wrote her story, her red eyes always filled with tears, thinking that this is the end of her life. If there were still any flickering light, it would be her son. He is now 11 living with a relative on Phan Thanh Gian Street. Her life is like a small water hyacinth floating on a river and now hooked to a bigger clump of water hyacinths. To console her I pretended to be that big clump of water hyacinths, though I would not know where I would go.

## **SIXTY-SIX**

### **Two Shirts Changed a Life**

I tried to communicate with Lan of cell 4. As his cell is somewhat farther, it took many adjustments. I had agreed with Lan on my call sign of two sounds of throat clearing. The first phrase he wrote made me chuckle, “The cause of his arrest is his two shirts” (the same I have seen on the drying rope). His native place was at the bottleneck of the country, a very poor area with stones and pebbles. His father was a top communist fighter killed during the French War. They sent him to study economic management in Rumania foretelling a bright future in the socialist system. After four years in Rumania, he looked back to his country to see injustice and backwardness and he did not feel ardent to go home. He had an uncle who was his mother’s young brother who was a laborer in New Caledonia and ended up as a humble taxicab driver in Paris. When the students in Bucharest had a summer camp in the Black Sea, his uncle managed to take his family to a summer picnic there so that he could relate with his nephew on the news of relatives at home. Lan had saved 50 FF hidden in his pocket as a gift to his uncle in need. When the two meet before he could handle his uncle the cash gift, his poor taxicab driver slipped into his hand 500 FF along with the two white poplin shirts. Suddenly, Lan realized the difference and in exchange letters with his uncle he vaguely mention of his desire to seek political asylum. He had carefully destroyed the letters but one student had retrieved the pieces in the wastebasket to patch back and photocopied one of them. They opened the letter from his uncle to copy before putting back the re-glued envelope.

One month ago, he received a cable from home saying that his mother was dying. As the examination was close, he did not know whether to go home or not. The student team leader who was also Party member urged him to go home because he was the only son and should be with his mother. Tickets and necessary papers were ready for him. One member of the Vietnam Embassy escorted him through Moscow keeping all papers. He had the impression of a prisoner. In Moscow, he took a taxicab drive and when seeing the tri-color flag he rushed in. The French Embassy, seeing a man not having a single French word, haggard and scared begging with his joined hands and attempting to hide in a corner, turned him over to the Soviet authority. They repatriated him through China. From then on, he was under armed escort straight to cell 4 of Hoa Lo prison.

In the evening sleep did not come easy as my mind was all about Lan's story. Suddenly light was off and the sinister alert siren was on followed by deafening explosions with blinding green light rays on the wall before me. I kicked my blanket off and sprung up. All the cadres must be into trenches now. I stood up on my bed looking out at ease and saw a vast expanse of dark purple North-West sky. A series of fire threads of all sizes, colors and shapes spiked from all directions to the sky. Suddenly a green lightning illuminated the whole yard followed by a loud concussive metallic sound. By instinct, I ducked down. The air seemed thickened with salty and acidic odor of gunpowder. I inhaled fully that inspirational explosive aroma. It came to my mind wishing to see one bomb smack in the middle of the yard killing many people including me. Then it would end my sufferings while enjoying that heavenly salty and acidic scent.

Unexpectedly a close by thunderous explosion shook everything violently. The big leaves of the "badamier" tree trembled and shed en masse. The steel net on which I leaned my forehead to look out trembled madly. Since I moved to this cell, I witnessed so many American air strikes through the dense air defense from the ground. So far, this one was the most spectacular lasting more than two hours. I was looking at the East following two orange specks of sparkles rushing through artillery fire at a 30 degrees angle when a hissing thunderous explosion happened followed by a twister almost uprooting the tree. A violent tornado bolted true, shaking furiously the leaves blowing my hair backward. It was so captivating that I wished having such spectacle each night to make my life less dull. I looked at Bac's window and cough twice to see her out with hair ruffled and chuckled to write on the board illuminated by the artillery light, "What happened to your face and your hair"? With her shaky hand she wrote back, "I was so scared to dig under the bed".

I told her that if bomb dropped in here there would not be any good shelter. So, do like me to enjoy the spectacle of a heavenly multicolor painting with sound, which changed at time with the hands of the artist. She became less fearful but disappeared at once. Looking through the window, I saw a bare-torso Warden Nhiem with only under shorts, running bowed toward a trench. He was all about his life and did not see me though I jumped down unconsciously. This air attack was quite long with airplanes coming from all directions and attitudes while ground antiaircraft fires were so dense and sounded like a continual corn popping.

## **SIXTY-SEVEN**

### **The Living Will of Dao Thi Bac**

Winter came again, my fourth winter in jail. Lately the legal men seemed forgetting about me while Miss Bac looked more and more pitiful. She finished only half her daily ration while I craved for three meals. The strand of her white hair enlarged and she looked like a wilted autumn leaf. I tried to boost her morale. Seeing her half-eaten bowl of rice, I wanted to ask Warden to give it to me. Perhaps he might suspect connivance between the two spies from the south and besides I felt somewhat shy asking I hesitated. Du guessed and told me to take that leftover rice if I desired. I opened my bright eyes and raced out for that half bowl to gobble up in a couple minutes. I called Bac, telling her about it and encouraged her to finish her ration. She looked emotional and with tears filled eyes, she faced the wall to write, "You are still young, you need that rice to live and do so many unachieved things". At the end, I told her to eat all her lunch rice then I would agree to finish her half dinner ration.

Perhaps Warden Du noticed her frail sick condition, when everybody had completed the sanitation work, he opened cell 6 and said something to her. I saw her going into cell 9 and heard the gliding of the broom

sweeping slowly out. I watched through the small gap under the door when I perceived a scant shadow where she was sweeping. I jumped fast onto my bed lying with eyes half closed. The window opened with Du's face and closed again. That Du was tricky and smart. He suspected connection between us and he opened the door to see me immobile on my bed. He walked back and forth watching the windows. He opened the window of cell 14 and raised his sharp and cold voice, "What are you standing up there for?" One feeble and trembling voice answered, "Sir, please excuse me and forgive me". Du shouted angrily, "Shut up and put your legs into that lock". "I recognize my fault! I will not commit anymore the mistake". Du's voice, "You committed such a huge mistake. If you do not repent, you will not be back to your wife and kids. If I catch you another time I shall lock you and record on your personal file". I saw that Du merely shouted and remonstrated without locking, quite different from the other guards. I came up with signals with Bac. I coughed once as my question whether there was a cadre watching. Silence, the cadre was trapping, one cough showed the cadre was sitting at his desk and a scratch on her head was for the cadre standing up from his chair.

Two days later Miss Bac was out again sweeping. When she reached my door, I saw one piece of tied up rag pressed half way into my door gap. I retrieved it and opened into a palm size piece of cloth with my returned needle. Embroidered on it with dyed blackened blood yarn the message, "*My dearest son Trang, this is my blood testament to you. Uncle Binh is my comrade and fighter and he will recount to you my last days in the death row of Hoa Lo*". Holding the rag in my shaking hands, I felt a chill mounting in my spine. It moved me so much, the maternal love and the bitterness of a mother in pathetic pains. That night I called her again. She stood up with red eyes probably crying lonely. She dammed up her tears and wrote her message, "**From now on, in the many directions in life, please strive to look for and assist Trang. In case I close my eyes forever, I always am confident that you never abandon him. He is my last drop of blood in this world**". Understanding her pains, I accepted her request. However, in the hand of the communists the expectation of return would be like the falling leaves in autumn. She also hoped that if Buddha let her survive, she would make vow to shave her head and take shelter in Cao Pagoda in Bac Ninh under his commiserate realm. In reality with the communists, her dream would never come true. I foresaw that if she would not die in their hands she would end up in some gulags until she would wither away.

Warden Du again let her out sweeping. Anyhow, with her health condition due to lack of food intake she would be dizzy and vacillate. Seeing her condition, he called me out for janitorial work. It is a gratification breathing the outside air and away from the confinement. I must behave well though he still watched me closely. I looked better now, my arms and legs seemed regaining their shapes owing to Miss Bac who became weaker and skinnier. Gradually when she stood up to write message to me, she had to lean to the wall, her head becoming whiter, curbing to the wall. I almost cried looking at her pitiful appearance filled with love for a comrade and a person of the same country.

One morning while I waited for Warden Du to move out to communicate with Sister Bac, Du came in and asked me to get my pot and broom to clean rooms 13 and 2. I had been always curious about those rooms. Du became more confident with me. The first flagrant impression was the dramatic frightful painting. The whole cells were painted pitch-black making them very dark with an atmosphere of sinister incarceration; the steel massive lock also painted black. On the wall, facing the entrance door was hung a 80x40 sign with white characters painted on red lacquer.

**"Here is where the French colonialists had  
incarcerated, locked up and tortured Comrade Tran Dang Ninh".**

The other cell looked the same except that the name was Hoang Van Thu. After my work done, I went back to my cell. With the needle, I pried the paint coats and saw that there were eight layers but none of

them black. The communists applied the black paint. They wanted to show to visiting groups a more tragic sight and the atrocious life under the French colonialists.

Today is washday. When Sister Bac was out drying her clothes I stood up looking at her. I was astounded seeing her wilted feature, her feet swollen pale and her eyelids huffy. It moved me so much to see such a quick change in four days. I felt pity for her. Did her relatives get any hints about her? Did the south espionage which pushed her to the abyss know that she was about to die? Perhaps she was counting her days until she return to the dark land, in the humiliation of an unfortunate life. When I write these lines nineteen years had passed. I did not know that Sister Bac is still alive anywhere or she is just some dry bones in some desolate jungles. My nephew Tran Ngoc Trang, I still save the dry blood testimonial rag from your mother. Where are you now? Are you still alive or bobbing somewhere with the changes of the country? How could I fulfill the desire that your mother wanted me to do?

## SIXTY-EIGHT

### The Enigma of Writer Thuy An

Time flies, summer is here again. The badamier buds now opened into green leaves trembling in the breeze. A few sparrows hustled into bouquets of leaves shaking the young shoots. The sparkling gold sunrays were pulling Dame Spring to another destination. A light breeze pushed the perfume of late spring into my cell. My chest rounded up and my nose strutted out to inhale deeply the creamy odor of a dying spring evening. A light noise from the gate made me jumpy. The gate opened slowly and I hastily sat down leaving with regret the late spring sky. Sounds of steps crossed the yard and I heard a Vietnamese speaking English, "Turn right here". Then cell 10 next to mine opened. A foreigner in prison, no doubt he is an American. I listened and heard only English whispered by the Vietnamese man with no answer.

I was using all my ability to sense when the window opened. Warden Du poked his finger through saying, "Get on your stuff out to another cell". I assembled all my belongings feeling anxious of where they transfer me. I will be away from Sister Bac and besides it would mean a loss of supplemental food. I looked at Du with whom I maintained a good impression in the enemy camp. Then he opened cell 12. I was lucky recovering my lost treasure. In this cell, I still have all the convenient conditions. I kept busy cleaning the place when I saw on the wall next to the lock a few engraved words:

**"In here I used my chopstick to blind one of my eyes as a protest against the inhumane communist dictatorship oppressing writers and artists".**

**Signed: Thuy An, Luu Thi Yen**

It took a while to decipher that sentence because it was dark under an overcoat of paint. Anyhow, as the carving was quite deep I got it.

I recollected when I was in Saigon I read on the daily Tu Do a story by Hoang Hai Thuy titled "Beyond the iron curtain" in which the writer talked about the sentimental and literary life of writer Thuy An. Her love related to Hoang Quoc Viet, the top spy of the communists. He is at present the boss of the Confederation of Workers, one of the five uppermost leaders of the communists, Ho Chi Minh surrounded by Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap and Hoang Quoc Viet. Therefore, Mrs Thuy An was incarcerated in here. Where she is now, is she still alive or dead? She must have been very beautiful. In the future when they transferred me to the central camp, I had the opportunity to meet her along with several prominent names and to know about her story.

They got another foreigner to cell eight. With the presence of two foreigner inmates, many unfamiliar cadres were around. During the few days before, I have seen two of them in cell 7, one of the two very tall and slim, brown skin around 35. The other of medium built, with two protruded gold fish eyes, around 30. They called the tall man often to deposition while the other man had to do it now and then. Especially when the tall man was in deposition then they called out the gold-fish-eye man to let him return before his colleague was back so that the tall man would not be aware of his friend status. It fretted my curiosity and I followed the situation as much as my condition permitted. Twice when the tall man was out for deposition, I saw Warden Du opening the door to let out the other man. The latter got an arm full of banana peels, wrapper leaves and newspapers and went to the gate to return a moment later. I concluded roughly that as he went to the gate unescorted, which was unusual and as next to Du's desk, there was a small cabinet containing foodstuff, I must be very cautious and refrain from communicating with the other cells and especially the new foreigners. Anyhow, due to my innate curiosity, when condition permitted, I tried to relate with cells 10 and 8 with my very limited English.

Two days later at midnight while I was sleeping I suddenly heard like bears roaring in the jungle. I crawled up and strained my ears to locate it from cell 10. For the first time in my life, I heard an American man crying, sounding strangely like gurgling and hollering. At first, I thought hearing the chanting of the American Indians in movies followed by nose blowing and interrupted breathing. Then came another crying from cell 8 perhaps the tragic sound from cell 10 had induced the sadness of solitude and loss of freedom. I understood that the American friends were so used to a comfortable free life. Now, in the confines of a cold and empty cell they would feel miserable. Anyhow, if they had locks and privation like us our friends would not be able to subsist.

I knew that they were American pilots. In the morning when they called cell 10 to deposition, I used my tricks to observe. I saw a very tall man whose head was close to the beam of the eave and dressed in the same striped uniform. He was talking and pointing his fingers to the common yard with an unfamiliar cadre under civilian garb. He had a gung-ho face adorned with a very thick beard which were unrelated to his crying. Though sympathizing with him, hearing him crying made me chuckling. I also saw that everyday a cadre escorting a common prisoner carrying a big plate with a loaf of bread, a banana and a three-finger portion of meat. Looking at the American ration, I was pensive. C'est la vie! They always treated rich kids better. In any circumstance, the citizens of big nations always got better treatments, regardless of the call for democracy and equality.

Back to my prison life, the leaves of the badamier tree which were of a young vibrant green color turned now to dark green. The clumps of miniscule flowers appeared. The summer south breeze scattered to the ground tiny gold petals. Every other day Warden Du got me out to sweep the yard picking a basket full each time. I scooped handful of odoriferous flowers into the basket. If not a prisoner, I would love living here an exalting life. Looking at Warden Du busy writing at his desk, from time to time I glanced at the window of cell 10 expecting to see the pilot. Anyhow, his window always stayed blank. I knew that he was fully familiar with the internal regulations. Their regulations were their business and we must have our own ideas, do we? I knew that you missed your family and your country. Anyhow, to sit in the cubicle all day thinking of your misfortune would not solve anything. Why did you not from time to time stand up to look at nature with the clouds, the sky, the trees and flowers?

During the last few days, American planes penetrated the sky of Hanoi two nights in a row. I had enjoyed many beautiful scenes, which I called the feasts of lanterns. I bet you that no one could produce such a lively and gigantic show. I went to bed early to wake up in case they would offer another magnificent show. I heard the opening of cell 6 of Sister Bac. I stoop down close to the floor to see through the gap one cadre with his rubber sandal. Sister Bac came out with an armful of blanket and mosquito net and I felt nostalgic with her change to another cell, another prison or another camp. When they reached the



gate, I was able using my tricks to watch and my heart was heavy seeing Bac under a light blue square shawl, limping out to somewhere. From now on, I could not see or hear anymore of her and it was the last image I had of her. I also saw that the guard was tomato-nose The, the malicious one.

The two American pilots cried very often lately. Their cries induced my homesickness and I was tired hearing it. In an impulsion I shouted, "Do not cry anymore"! Both of them shut quiet thinking perhaps of a cadre. I chuckled with some regret. Do you know brothers that I liked communicating with you, that I shared with you the same air of this prison, which you nicknamed Hanoi Hilton? By sharing the same souvenirs, we would be easily friends, combat-in-arms friends. I felt indebted to you to have fought for my country where my people were so deprived and miserable.

It was so fast to see those flowers becoming tiny clumps of fruits growing in no time to full size under the heat of summer. It was so strange that I did not hear anymore the songs of cicadas. Where did you go? Perhaps did the explosion of bombs and antiaircraft fire chase you and your mid-summer choir to some remote places? About ten days later, they got the two American pilots to the common camp. I was sorry not having any occasion to interact with them. I merely guessed that while in the common camp you showed your innate gung-ho character like in movies to refuse submission to them. Anyhow, like me you were ready with weapons and hammers to forget that the enemy was so low to control you with your stomach. They were despicably low but efficient to subjugate you to become sheep under their order.

They moved the two American pilots to the common camp early morning. Then I heard that they admitted two females to cell nine. From the day Sister Bac was gone, I felt saddened at losing a colleague and a source of additional food. I must return to my plan of saving my morning rice to have a full belly in the evening every Tuesdays and Fridays. Being preoccupied with my tummy, I did not anymore pay attention to anything around. This afternoon when everyone was through with returning bowls, suddenly Warden Tu called me out and said in a sympathetic voice, "Please meet me at my desk". After sitting down on the stool he intimately confided, "Tomorrow I shall take my annual leave and there will be another replacement. Please listen to me carefully. During my absence, do not let them catch you infringing with prison regulations. On my return if I heard reports to the contrary, don't blame me". Through his interaction, I knew that he was aware of my hustling character and perhaps he had not caught my bloody hands or he looked the other way. Anyhow, I had to realize that he kept some good disposition for me. No other warden would confide to an inmate of his leave of absence and give him recommendations. I then brightened my face asking him, "Where will you go"? "I will be back to my native place". "Where is it"? "It is Ha Nam". "Please convey my wishes to your family". He looked moved, the tip of his nose turning red and trembling then fixing his eyes on me he nodded a little. Seeing that it was an appropriate moment I asked him, "The other day a man went with Assistants Tri and Le into my cell; do you know who he was"? Somewhat hesitant, he slowly answered, "Mr. Nguyen Van Long, Director of security of Hanoi". Oh! That was why the two assistants were so deferent. He also is a Colonel and the standing member of the Permanent Committee of the whole nation Capital. Seeing that he had talked too much, he told me to go back to my cell.

## **SIXTY-NINE**

### **The Dirty Acts of Prison Guards to Female Prisoners**

The replacement of Tu was no other than tomato-nose The. Since our fiery encounter four years ago, we always looked at each other with vexatious eyes. I hated him but was unable to do anything. He had a despicable low character and would torture me at will at the first occasion. As a prisoner, I must curb my head and do, as he wanted, though I felt deep anger in my entrails. That was why I decided to live low

during his assignment. When he opened my door for my pot to the outhouse, I was aware that his two small eel-eyes scrutinized me like a snake on a frog. I merely pretended not seeing anything.

When all cells were through with their meals, he opened door 9 to let out the two female inmates. I became curious trying to see what type of persons they were. Anyhow, knowing that he was the most malicious among the whole bunch of Hanoi wardens, I must be cautious; not letting him catching my infraction. I looked for the way to look-see the two women when I heard a loud chilling shout, "What are you standing up for"? Therefore, he was trapping! Sound of footsteps toward cell 10 of a newly admitted inmate when they moved the American pilots to the common camp. The dry friction sound of the strut pulled out without any question save the dry voice of The, "Engage your legs". This was the most propitious time. I quickly stood up on my bed looking out. Oooh my Golly, I was astounded! One woman about 25, 26, tall and slim was walking back and forth along the wall separating the yard of the common camp with the prison. The other one about 20, 22, as beautiful as an angel, her two hands clasped behind her neck. She was rhythmically swinging in a sexy waltz. I was dumbfounded. I had never seen during my month wandering in Hanoi any such beauty. Then how come that in the mid of the Hanoi jail there was such out of the world beauty? That explained why tomato-nose The rushed to let them out and why cell 10 had his legs locked as soon as he entered here.

The delicate body undulating under the golden sunrays absorbed me totally. Her bare arms behind her neck exhibited the marvel of nature and her long shiny hair half covered her bare shoulders. In a sudden, like hit by an imaginary electrical wave, she looked at my window, screamed and stooped down behind the wall of my window. The older girl about faced asking, "What happened"? There was no reply from the young girl while tomato-nose The raced out shouting, "What is the matter"? My heart squeezed waiting for the answer from her. In a short moment, she raised her voice to say abruptly, "Nothing"! It is good to be beautiful to give such a dry response to a jail warden without any single remonstrance. I exhaled relaxed.

In the afternoon when everything completed with all cells, it was 4pm, one hour before the end of duty time. With my very accurate hearing, I clearly perceived the gliding sound of bare feet. I strained my eye through the door gap to see the feet cautiously moving to cell nine. There was no sound of door opening, just the pulling of the pot and the rustle of peeing. What did he go there for? Perhaps he entered room nine the door of which he did not lock so that people would not know. Alternately, as he went barefooted, holding his sandals, he would be a peeping Tom watching the privacy of those women.

The next day was washday. My turn came and I ended up hanging my stuff on the drying line. When I hung up my colossal thick socks made with multicolor rags, I knew that the two girls were watching. Anyhow, I merely displayed a faint smile since The was at his desk watching. When cell 9 went out drying their clothes, another man of cell 14 was caught looking and was locked. Beautiful women are quite dangerous. From the antiquity, they made so many heroes shedding tears. Warden The always went to cell 9 at the end of his shift. He even came during the other men shift, his eyes haggard and suspicious, barefooted and holding his sandals in hands. Lately the tomato of his nose was bigger and rougher over a set of lips as grey as water buffalo meat. Nevertheless, he fit the misses. Money and authority are always so powerful! Several evenings I noticed whispering and they authorized the girls to bring their own nice buckets for use in the washroom.

It was in full summer and hotter, especially in the prison when perspiration was so much that I always felt sticky and dirty. Before getting to bed, I took a special bath. When I returned the bowl, I gulped dry the first scoop and got another full spare. At 9pm when I was sure that there was no guard around, I stripped off and dipped my rag wet to cleanse my body. I knew that they did not authorize to go out of the cell during off duty time. The case of the girls was an exception and the funny thing was that Warden The

always tiptoed out barefooted. Warden The is a bad person in any organization and the two women behavior was not worthy to talk about.

The again authorized the two girls to go out for fun. I was leisurely walking between the two beds watching the badamier branches heavy with golden ripe fruits inhaling the aroma of ripe fruits when I saw in the drain hole a few fruits pushed into my cell. I grabbed the broom reed pushing in while from outside they pulled out in a seesaw battle chuckling. On their way back, they pushed the temerity to knock twice at my door.

The next day Warden Du opened the doors. He just returned from vacation. When came my turn I whispered, "Welcome back". He nodded smiling while looking at my funny haircut that The had ordered done. When I was back from the outhouse with my clean pot, he entered my room and put on my mat a portion of sugar cane and one gluey cake. He said in a nice voice, "It is a peasant gift"! Perhaps having me for a long time, he understood my character and could act that way. I would not let the other men know of it otherwise they could severely reprimand him. Du pointed his finger to my head and sincerely said, "Why did you get your head shaved bare like that"? I made it simple to answer, "To be cool in summer". Then I asked, "Is everyone in the family all right"? He slowly said, "They were all drafted. Just my wife and I remained. The whole yard had weeds. I spent my month weeding and hoeing". "Is your garden large"? "No such thing to be called large. We got only 5% for family enhancement and the rest was for the cooperative". Through our conversation, I thought that he is a plain honest peasant. Before end of shift, he went to cells 10 and 14 to reprimand harshly.

That night I also heard steps going in cell 9. I did not hear tomato-nose The going there often. He used to come by at 9 or 10pm. Today the sounds of the steps occurred around 8pm. I watched through the door gap and saw a huge pair of bare feet and I could not identify which cadre it was. I must investigate. At about 9pm the same feet tiptoed out perhaps to the duty desk before putting on sandals. I heard the feet hustling the fallen fruits and I used my face up technique to watch and see Assistant Director Tri, a muscled body man with fleshy face awash in sensuality. Then from that day on Tri often came and I did not see anymore that man The.

One evening after assessing that there was no cadre around I raised my voice to cell 7, "cell 7, this is cell 12 calling". There was no reply when I heard the female crystal voice of cell 9, "Young man of 12, are you OK"? I kept my eyes on the top edge of the gate and replied, "Thank you, I am all right, are you from Hanoi"? I heard two mute chuckles, "Yes, Hanoi". I went on, "What is your crime"? "We jumped fence. As for you, we already know it all"! I was stunned, were they just kidding? Anyhow, by using that slang with me showed that they did not know anything about a person coming from the south. I did not want to ask the meaning of her words being afraid to be stupid. Then I asked some more, "What do you do out there"? A high pitch laugh then she answered, "Central Cultural Group". That is why she is so beautiful. Anyhow, I did not know quite clear about her crime of "jump fence". I refrain from asking Nguyen Lan of cell 4, as there was a cadre in the outhouse and besides I did not want to show my stupidity to the girls, I cleared my throat twice, my call sign for him. Lan wrote explaining to me it was also his crime, trying to flee to another country.

Only at close to 10pm the person in the outhouse came out. It was neither matron Hoa nor nurse Dau. Instead of, I saw the back of a very young girl having under her arm one blue enameled bucket. Her extra long hair covered from her shoulders to her bottom. I had not seen her before but her shapely body indicated that she was in full bloom.

## SEVENTY

## **We Know Each Other in Winter**

At times, the cool autumn breeze changed slowly the green leaves into a faint gold. The ripe fruits dropped all over the yard emanating a heavenly perfume. Every other day, I went out sweeping. I had the impression of leisurely catching butterflies and picking flowers. I heard the news from the loudspeakers that according to UPI and AFP the Americans were sending two more airborne parachutist battalions reinforcing the First Cavalier Division, citing the exact number of troops down to the dozens. I was so upset to hear those precise numbers. I understood that, America is powerful and rich and talked with the communists in straight and frank language. If the American Government did not say it, the Congress and the media would say it all. The communist spies would easily gather intelligence data while it is very hard for the free world to look in a hermit society.

Tonight I did not know why my sleep was hard to come. I opened my eyes through the window to see the autumn moon like urging me to sit up. In the silence, I perceived the subdued wailing from cell 1. The cloudless firmament of a dark purple color showed in the East side the sickle shape moon. A light breeze shuffled the leaves of the badamier tree. I had not enjoyed the perfume of autumn for so long. The staccato of a gecko pulled me back to reality and I lay down sleeping in the dying fall night.

Soon winter came, my fifth winter here. For the past year, they did not call me to deposition. It had been a surprise and in the same time, a psychological threat. I felt scared being afraid that they forgot about me. Years in years out, in spite of my morale strength, my body would wither away. I was still lucky to have the sympathetic Du who let me go out sweeping. It was terrible; they used time to test my resistance. Anytime I woke up at night, I felt scared, a chill invading my whole body even though I still exercise and practice meditation. My fear was at the maximum in 1967. I became anxious and was afraid of darkness. In this jail, exception for the cases of Can and Luong no one would stay more than a year. There were plenty of new faces except Nguyen Lan of cell 4. He became skinny like a walking skeleton going out to dry his clothes.

So many cells reported for medicine. Nguyen Lan too reported with the nurse for stomach medicine even though I had never heard such thing from him. Warden Du led the female nurse in, whose voice was different from Nurse Dau. I am also curious to see how she was. I heard a condescending voice, "What are you asking for"? The centrist rubbing voice of Lan sounded, "Ma'am, I am requesting stomach medicine". She asked back, "Did you ever get stomach ache to seek medicine now"? Lan's voice, "But I am aching now". "Why do you know it is stomach ache"? "It is mine so I know". The window slammed shut followed by her voice, "I am not kidding with you boy"! Then cell 10 reported, "Madam Nurse, I am requesting porridge". Warden Du raised his voice, "The nurse is a 19 years old nurse named Van. Please address her consequently". Then the harsh voice of cell 10 sounded, "Reporting to Miss Nurse Van, I am requesting porridge diet". Through the open window Miss Van asked, "Why do you need porridge diet"? The reply came, "Miss, I was constipated for three days". She retorted, "No, massage your belly". Warden Du and the nurse moved to the duty desk. I rushed to stand up and glanced out to see the girl with long hair and shapely body. Anyhow, I had not seen her face. The lack of female substance in this confined place created that rustle.

One day I saw a full bowl of overcooked rice for the stomachache man. I got the idea to request such diet giving me a fuller bowl. Anyhow, the nurse was so arrogant and condescending. She behaved like a prison cadre and a security agent. She caused Warden Tu to lock the legs of a few prisoners. I guessed that she should belong to a true revolutionary family or at least, she was the vanguard member of the revolutionary youth organization. One week later while I was running on the spot, my window opened with a sudden grating noise. Two crystal eyes looked through and it seemed that it was Van, with an oval face and light complexion, specially the eyes as limpid as the water in a well next to the village center.

Ten days after when I was sweeping, I saw in a gate crack a cigarette butt. Glancing quickly to see Warden Du busily writing at his desk, I retrieved it and hid it under my trouser waistband, expecting a minute of future enjoyment. Then two wide eyes stared at me. Feeling uncomfortable, I went on sweeping. The girl with a very rhythmic walk passed to where Warden Du was sitting. A strange perfume freshened the whole yard. The two hair braids tied at the ends with red wool yarns pulled my attention. I kept on sweeping until she was out and another waft of perfume filled the air. I lost my composure to feel something hazy creeping in me.

I still looked at the overcooked rice and got courage to ask Warden Du, “Sir for sometimes I had bellyache after eating and belched up acid. Right now it hurt so much and I report for the nurse to help me”. Warden Du wondered because he had never heard my complaint of sickness and he was so eager in his solicitude that in no time he opened my door telling me to go out to check with the nurse at his desk. I sat down on the stool and Miss Van in a very soft and melodious voice asked, “How is your sickness”? I said, “I belched up acid and it hurts after eating”. I complained of stomachache and she checked my pulse at both arms and told me to roll up my sleeves for her to massage up to my elbows. She did not say anything and I suggested she gave me a diet of overcooked rice. She looked at me and said, “Please return to your cell”. I got what I wanted. I did not know why.

## **SEVENTY-ONE**

### **Small Thing To Show Love**

At noon, I kept touching my pipe, hesitant whether to enjoy my cigarette butt now or later this evening. Then my window opened. Looking out in the dim light I saw a cute nose under two sparkling crystal eyes. Then two tiny ivory fingertips pushed in contrasting with the dark green bars. It was Van and I did not know when she came to open carefully my window. She raised her soft voice, “Do you smoke raw tobacco”? I lightly nodded and replied, “I do but have no tobacco”. “Please stop smoking”. The voice sounded so warm and earnest refreshing my desiccated heart. I mumbled like talking to myself, “It is so sad in here and I do it to relax. Anyhow, I do not have tobacco”. One asparagus like finger reached in wagging, “Let me see your pipe”. I tendered the small pipe, which her two ivory fingers pinched and pulled out. She looked at the matchboxes pipe and then putting her lips close to the steel net, she whispered, “Do not use anymore raw tobacco. Smoke cigarette instead of it”.

Looking at her lips like peach petals in spring, I felt warmth enveloping my whole body. Anyhow, I realized that she belonged to the other side of the fence while I am a prisoner, there could not be any misunderstanding, I coldly raised my voice, “Miss, please give me back the pipe”. She gave back the pipe through the steel net and while I hold it, our two sets of eyes glued together without any word. A light sound came from the yard and she released her hold, closing the window. At 10 this morning, Van was in giving medicine to a number of cells. I walked around in my cell not paying any attention to what was around. Things became quiet again and perhaps she was gone. Anyhow, I vaguely heard her voice at the duty desk. Suddenly my door opened and Warden Du came in telling me to go see Miss Van. I was not so sure until he repeated a second time to walk slowly out to the desk. Her eyesight was like an electric zap and I turned my eyes down. She opened a package on the desk to say, “Seeing your weakened body I proposed to improve your nutrition for one week, 20 cents a day for a total of \$1,40. I had told Mr. Du that I approved your desire to buy one pack of Truong Son cigarette with a matchbook and for the rest I bought some candies and cakes for you”.

Hearing what she said, I had the feeling to be on a fruit tree in Binh Duong awash with flavorful ripe fruits. I was like a soulless man, half-awake half dreaming until Warden Du rushed, "Take everything to your cell and go get your meal". Like an automaton, I took everything back forgetting to say my thanks, my nose humming the acidity of the sour candies and the acrid flavor of the cigarettes. Saliva ran out filling my mouth, I raced like a rooster picking my bowl of rice and my scoop of water back to my cell. Certainly, Du and Van were both chuckling at my awkward and clumsy attitude. I did not have any appetite while looking at the newspaper wrapped package. I opened the package to see for the first time in five years the green wrapped candies. After returning the bowl, Miss Van was gone. I went into my room, sitting flat on the bed to smell the pack of cigarettes, the candies and the cakes. I was salivating fully but I decided not to enjoy them yet. I kept looking at this one and the others. Not anyone could understand my joy and ecstasy. I had the feeling that every pair of cells in my body were up in a rhythmic celebration of an abundant crop gathering. I unwrapped one piece of candy, looking at that emerald like morsel to hear the tide of saliva mounting. I had not tasted any sugar for five years. I put it in my mouth and fell down on the bed, my eyes shut, my tongue pushing it around, feeling the rush of sweet water in my throat. After the candy, I ate a cake feeling like bobbing on a small boat in a breezy evening at the entrance of the river.

Now, I suddenly thought of Miss Van. I had never suggested her to improve my nutrition. She had taken the initiative to do it. Why in front of Warden Du she said I suggested it. Why she did not say it frankly? It was not understandable. At noon while I was lying daydreaming, a light sound at the window made me crawling up. Van was there looking at me with her two ivory white fingers on the bars. I looked at her eyes then her fingers. Our faces were so close that I smelled her breath and saw the velvet hairs over her lip. She moved her lips like saying something. I wanted to raise my hand to her fingers and felt it so heavy and impossible. One remote voice sounded, "Have you smoked your cigarette yet"? I replied without thinking, "In this sad prison I would rather smoke raw tobacco". "Stop using raw tobacco"! After those short words, we again stood still. Then she said to nowhere, "I must go to the Evening Market". She nodded lightly and closed the window, leaving while I stood there perplexed.

## **SEVENTY-TWO**

### **A Comrade Prisoner, Thunder Tiger**

The sky suddenly turned dark and thunder roared in the far horizon. Big storm was brewing. Steel blue lightning zigzagged followed by a deafening explosion shaking the whole prison. Staccato of raindrops on the rooftop mixed with the undulating alert siren. The antiaircraft fire pulled me out of my dream. I was lost among the bombs exploding, the heavy artillery fire and the rockets zipping out. I stood on my bed looking out watching rain and man made lethal showers. The pilots took advantage of the clouds and the bad weather to invade Hanoi sky. You struck a beautiful aerial attack but there would not be any conclusive result unless foot soldiers were involved. The air strike lasted nearly one hour and the rain stopped. The sun was out again shedding light on Hanoi with certainly death and destruction.

I turned in when I saw in window 5 an anemic face smiling at me. I made sign to guide him on my communication technique I used with sister Bac. Our conversation started with my question, "How long did they arrest you"? He replied, "They arrested me four months ago". I went on, "You are here less than half month, where did they incarcerate you before"? "In Thanh Tri Prison near Hanoi". "Where did you come from"? "I was in Cholon, Saigon". I asked, surprised, "What was your crime"? The answer totally astounded me. He belonged to the special group "Thunder Tiger" being dropped in War Zone D. His name is Luu Nghia Luong, ethnic Chinese living at 276 Ba Hat Street Cholon. He was with a 6-7 men team with an American advisor. His team landed by helicopter in Zone D several times searching for

information on the enemy. The last time they had tough luck landing right in an enemy trap, they dispersed to all directions and the enemy caught him after three days in the jungle and shipped him up north.

Knowing that he was my comrade-in-arm, I told him my story and shared with him my experiences to face interrogators. I also told him the pathetic story of Miss Bac. At the end of our conversation, he hesitantly wrote, "Nurse Van falls in love with you". My heart squeezed somewhat and I asked him, "How can you say that"? He said a few times he saw her back when she came to the window to talk with me. I retorted that in truth Van and we belonged to two opposing sides. We were doomed and fell in their hands, do not play with fire to be sorry at the end. Luong said that Van is aloof and she caused many lock-ups even to that handsome young man of 4. Anyhow, she gave you special sentiments. He suggested me to move on, "brightening somewhat your life in the loneliness of confinement".

In my interaction with Luong, I felt rising in me a warm sentiment of belongingness as brothers and comrade-in-arms. I asked him whether he smoked cigarettes. His eyes brightened and he said that from the day of his arrest he terribly missed that inhalation. In the evening when I was certain that, no guard was around; I tied a short piece of reed from the broom to the end of my long fabricated rope and flicked to the gap of Luong's door. Luong used a branched reed of his broom to hook it through and pull cigarettes, matches and candies tied to the other end of the rope. Luong thanked me in profusion and urged me to continue so that "your brother could get candies and cigarettes". Luong was too subjective; the girl had her own belief and cast. Anyhow, why did she look at me like that? Why she kept going to my window to talk with me? I was unable to get a good answer.

Tonight, the full moon of late summer was bright and beautiful on a dark sky. I was standing enjoying the sight when the sound at the gate pulled me down though my eyes caught in a glimpse the long black hair half-covering bare arms holding an enameled bucket. Van was back for a bath. For no reason my heartbeat became quicker and stronger. Hearing the rush of water, my body felt a tide of warmth mounting and I was unable to sleep. Suddenly a shouting came from outside the, "You over there, what are you standing up for"? Then sounded the friction of sandals toward the prison followed by the dry opening of the small window, "Who just stood up here"? The voice of a young man supplicated, "Please forgive me. I wanted to look at the beautiful moon". Her voice rose condescending and abusive, "Tomorrow, you will tell it to the cadre on duty"! I heard window closing and sandals moving out then complete silence. It showed that Van was still around. Wow! What a tough girl she was! I was tempted to test my ability to see whether she could catch me. If she did, perhaps I shall have one week locked up to finish with this senseless story.

I stripped off my mosquito gears and facing up to the ceiling, I slowly brought my eyes to the level of the windowsill. Out there was a heavenly painting. Under the dreamlike moonlight, the body of a full-blossomed girl wearing tight-fitted black trousers molding her perfect slender legs displayed an ivory complexion while her wax candle like arms shook fanning her long hair in the breeze. A creamy sweet flesh aroma mixing with the odor of dry leaves wafted through. I became a poet and an artist painter fully attuned to that heavenly spectacle. From time to time, Van spanned her eyes to all windows but she did not see me. I came to decide to stand up fully looking out squarely to see her reaction. When she looked at my window, I expected shouting ending up my unreasonable dream. On the contrary, she looked at me, her hands on her chest like shielding her body, her lips quivering to a smile spreading to her wide opened eyes.

Under the moonlight, the prison was so quiet. Two pairs of eyes stared at each other in silence. Still having her hands over her chest, she slowly approached my window as if pulled by a mysterious force. I was as stiff as a wooden statue. The distance between us was about one meter. She lifted one hand toward my window, her upper lips curbing up, quivering while I touched and massage the window net. It

was a dangerous moment if a cadre came in. Van too understood it and grabbed her enameled bucket to walk to the gate looking at me for a little while before she closed the gate and left. I started conversing with Luong when the sounds of sandals and throat clearing of Aspirant Ke pushed us down. He was making his roll-call check for shift change. Therefore, it must be around 9 or 10 pm. I got ready with my protective gears and went to bed wondering why with so many cadres in this prison she focused her eyes on a penitent like me? I was deep in my dream when I heard very clearly, "Brother Binh, brother Binh". I sprung up, removed my head cover and saw a cute nose and two sparkling eyes between the steel bars. Our faces were so close that I smelled the creamy sweet breath making me so exalted. I got my gloves off to put my hand on the window. Van whispered, "I could not sleep". Then I felt her sped-up breathing while her two trembling fingers tendered me a sachet of raw tobacco and a pack of Dien Bien Cigarettes. She murmured and I felt her warm and odoriferous breath swarming over my face, "Smoke less raw tobacco darling". I was so emotional to merely nodding without any word. Then the idea came to my mind to tell her not reporting to Warden on cell 14. She said she had to act stiff to prevent them from looking out otherwise it would be a complete mess in here. She addressed to me as darling in an instant impulse. She put her index and middle fingers between the central bars and I did the same next to hers. I asked without denomination, "What time is it"? Her answer came the same way, "Midnight". Then she lifted her fingers and put them on top of mine. Like by a mysterious attraction our fingers intertwined to finally we hold our fingers tightly with eyes directed at each other in silence.

At the sound of the gate, Van took her bucket to the washroom. Then keys dropped on the desk and a man went checking around. Van got out of the washroom to ask, "Are you on duty now uncle Dai"? The male goose voice of Dai sounded back, "Yes Miss, you are staying quite late". Her steps sounded out to the gate. Luong got another half pack of cigarettes and we did not hear Warden Du reaction to cell 14.

## **SEVENTY-THREE**

### **Benefaction in The See-Through**

On one Sunday noon, while I was scraping my toothbrush on a soap cake for some foam to clean my teeth, Van came breathless. She looked through my window breathing heavily; drops of perspiration exuded on her forehead. I whispered, "What did you do to breathe like that. Wipe off your face". She took out a white handkerchief to dry her sweat and said in an interrupted voice, "I just biked back from Gia Lam to see a friend I missed for long". I asked, "Where are your native place"? "I am from Hung Yen". "For how long have you been in health work"? "I finished school six months ago". Then she got close to the window and whispered breathing, "Tomorrow Monday, you open the lid of the pot to clear your throat and spit phlegm in it. You poked between your teeth with a toothpick. You get some blood and dip it in the center of the phlegm. You take the pot out to report to Warden Du that you have chest pain".

The next day I did as told and reported to Warden Du with my hands on my chest worrying of a dreadful disease leading to death. When she came to dispense medicine to inmates, Du led her to my cell. She told me to lie down and she put her cup on my chest asking me where it hurt. As I told her the lungs location, she applied her hands to it touching and pressing. I pretended getting my hands up to my chest and grabbed her hands. She did not say anything and just smiled. Warden Du stood at the door and from time to time looked in. Van looked around my room to see that I had nothing except one Thai sandal side used to a shredded sole and one scraped thin throwaway wooden clog I had picked up from somebody. Two days later, I again got my enhanced nutrition package of candies and cakes. She had not asked of my origin and crime and I knew that she was the niece of Assistant Director Le. I guessed that she must be somewhat aware of my family and my crime. After she left, I chuckled that we never exchanged our



sentimental feeling. Therefore, it should be a mute understanding, was it? So many strange things occurred in this new-chartered land!

That night while I was walking around in the confine of my cell counting to 200 turns before going to bed, the small window opened. Two ingenuous doe eyes searched for a lone buck next to a deserted stream. Like attracted by a magnet, I approached the window. A light breeze pushed some of her hair through sweeping my face in a waft of body perfume plunging me in a trance of desire. I gripped the window and heard a mute call, "Darling". Like wakening from a beautiful dream, I suddenly came to the reality of my prison life to firm my voice saying, "Miss Van why you are so difficult and condescending"? I saw the color of her eyes changing from light green of lilies to the light amber of chrysanthemums. Tears circled her red eyes and her choked voice said, "Why could you say such thing"? I felt so painful! A reflux of acidity and salinity choked my throat and I took a natural tone to say, "Several persons in here complained of it". Nevertheless, I felt stormy in my heart. After a few months spending many efforts and thinking to climb up the stairs to the palace of love and now I was destroying that access. She asked me vexatious, "Which room are you talking of"? I acted more cold, "Do not ask me who are they. Don't you see that you are too strict to go astray the teaching that "healthcare is a loving mother"? She cried, her tears dropped down and I felt like the tips of my toes were freezing.

She closed the window and left. I told Luong of the occurrence and he remonstrated that I let go a chance to help other comrades in jail. One day at noon, I was fixing my winter gear, patching up weak spots on my socks with reclaimed rags from the outhouse. A pair of teary eyes appeared at the window looking with compassion at my hands with all the rags. I felt emotional but sat still. Her lips shook and burst into a pathetic call, "My dear Binh". I could not hold it anymore. I slipped on my rickety sandals to move slowly to the window. Eyes fixed at eyes. The fine hair over her lips was like velvet covering young peaches. Her cheeks became rosy; the aroma of jasmine soap enveloped the whole room. She talked in choked voice, "Are you mad with me Binh"? I shook my head and she rushed out at the sound from the gate.

In the afternoon Warden Du opened my door and rushed me out to deposition. I followed Du out of the gate. The corner of the common yard was still enclosed with bamboo screen. Therefore, we still got American pilots. The transit house was now also full of prisoner pilots. That is why at night I heard funny screaming and shouting. It was close to 5pm and all prisoners had regained their cells. The duty room was deserted. Du led me straight to the administrative office. The newly promoted Captain Tri was there with a small flag. He took over from the southern man Vo, who had retired. My heart squeezed somewhat when I vaguely saw the Hung Yen beauty arranging cups and glasses on a small table in the corner. With a soft ponytail, she moved her shapely body under a fine brown uniform. In addition, she wore high heel clogs too.

I sat down on the stool facing Tri displaying a very amiable face. He sounded so nice and completely different, "Today I inform you that, the Party and the Government being aware of your health condition, we transfer you to the common camp. You go back to your cell and take all your belongings out there. You must abide all regulations of the common camp and are forbidden to tell anyone of things in the cells". I did not believe my ears. Instantly, it came to my mind that it was the work of Van, proposing extra nutrition and faking bloody phlegm. That is why she was present here, tendering her ears, though it was none of her business cleaning the table. Perhaps she wanted to make sure that I know she did it. Anyhow, it was her mistake because in cell, though there was the obstacle of the window bars and steel net we still see each other easily. With the common camp, in presence of a crowd and with my natural character of shy stiffness, I do not think that there will be any more such opportunity. When I saluted Tri to go with Du, I glanced at the half smile of the "girl from Pho Hien" like petals of roses in spring breeze.

## SEVENTY-FOUR

### Big Barrack, a Pocket Socialism

Back to the cell, I felt in disarray of a new life turn. Today is 2 December 1967, five years and almost six months in the darkness of confinement. There were so many changes in life and in the fate of my country. The more than five years in here with sufferings and bitterness imparted in me a certain regret. I gathered all my belongings and inquired with Du on the common camp to know that it was still Hoa Lo Prison and I must get everything, blanket, mat and vest with me. To say good-bye to Lan and Luong I coughed twice and cleared my throat twice, and certainly Du could not understand the meaning of those sounds. Du led me through the big yard of the camp. The decision to change my status came after a series of approvals of the security and the head duty cadre prior to final sign off by the jail director. I showed my gratitude to Du adding my wishes of good fortune to his family. He said with a hint of compassion, "Please take care of your health". He guided me through the big yard where was the corridor to the dungeon from where three years ago I crawled back to prison I. We came to a huge gate, the upper part of which had wrist size steel bars while the lower part was a solid steel plate.

I had never known the common camp. Looking in, there was a crowd and a multitude of eyes staring out. I felt completely lost because there were also kiddy prisoners 6 or 7 years of age. The total population estimated at 150, young kids of all sizes dressed at random with rags and patched garments, skinny bodies covered with sores and galls. There were two adults plus a dozen teenage boys while the rest were kiddies. A man about 40 introduced himself as room chief, Phan Tan Hung and showed me a spot next to his. He then introduced another salt-and-pepper man named Nguyen Van Khanh bus driver of the line Hanoi-HaiPhong. Hung is a southern repatriated man, light complexion, seemingly educated. They accused him of revisionism, corruption and stealing public property. He had a special furtive pair of eyes. At first, he and a number of youth stared at me intently with condescendence. Then after knowing that I was a spy coming from the south and the rumor that I had beaten a cadre feces out to evade their expression of stubbornness and despise replaced by welcoming joy. They all surrounded me talking. Cigarettes and raw tobacco abounded. A young man, about 22, tall and clean looking shook my hand like having seen a next of kin after a long separation, "Three years ago I was in cell 6 and a cook told of your beating a cadre to evade and they put you in dungeon. They said that you were trained in Tokyo and got your black belt judo".

He talked about me like a legend and introduced himself as HoangHuu Phuc, nick named Phuc the Local, leader of the group "Chenh Vom" (Burglar) in the Nam Dong area. He had completed senior high school. At 24, he was arrested six times and a conviction. They gave him two years incarceration in the central prison and released him six months before they arrested him again. He introduced another named Tho the Stripper having a tan complexion, two very sharp eyes and a scar slash from his left eyelid to his ear pulling it upward menacingly. Tho also completed senior high and snatched things on moving trains to bail out to rivers or roadways. Roughly, in this room out of the two men Hung and Khanh accused of corruption and black marketeering all others were thieves or swindlers.

At 9pm at the sound of gong, all prisoners must be in bed and quiet according to regulations. The hoodlums gave me special treatment. They reserved a dry and clean place between Phuc the Local and Tho the Grabber meaning that I belonged to high class having many servants waiting on. Phuc the Local whispered, "In Hanoi if I knew you before I would guarantee that police and security would not be able to smell your presence. We are the ticks and mites in their uniforms, the lords of the land. If we did not steal for our tummy, I swear that they could never touch our hair". Then he confided, "That old Hung is a "Zoo" (antenna). Anyhow, he must be reasonable otherwise we would have got some of his blood".

I closed my eyes thinking of what I heard from Phuc the Local who showed me his malice. Being an educated thug, there was some truth on what he said. Then why the communists put me in here with all the thieves and thugs of Hanoi? Perhaps they thought that in total isolation I would be ignorant of the outside world. After my unsuccessful evasion, they realized that they could not improve me. Therefore, to put me with political prisoners, presented risk of contamination. With the bunch of thieves and thugs, Phan Tan Hung would monitor my thinking and attitude for a while so that they could clearly understand me. I did not have a good sleep the first night here with screams here and there of kiddies in their nightmare. In the morning, I looked for the toilet. Close at the corner of the restroom under a very weak 60-watt light bulb there were four kids in the fifteens locked in the same kind I had seen in Ha Tinh. You still can move and stand up and the system can lock many persons in the same time as needed. The layout of the room was from the French. In the middle was a long cement platform running the whole length of the room leaving walkway around. Perhaps it was for prisoners sleeping on the central platform. Anyhow, under the revolutionary system, there were too many inmates and the whole area up and down the platform was for sleeping. I must walk over persons clumped together in groups to reach the restroom. The restroom was tiny with a small kerosene lamp. The floor was full of feces and urine and so smelly. I went barefooted and stepped over rubbery objects that popped.

Back to my area, I was unable to sleep. The feces and urine added to the smell of dirty bodies and vestments gave out an indescribable sourly odor that went up my head. It was daylight. The clear opening tune of the People Army started before the strident voice of the female announcer, "The People Army, faithful with the Party, grateful to the people, we complete our mission, daunt all obstacles and defeat all enemies". It was a pushing slogan to imprint in the mind of the people the same thinking and view to become the guiding life principle. I acted like everybody. It was near work time and all were still sleeping cluttered in small groups. I lay down again subjected like everyone to that broadcast. Then the program for children started. I did not hear the urge for children on obedience to their parents. From their early age, they taught to obey Uncle Ho and the Party represented by the teachers, guardians of the gospel of the party. "I play in the garden. White flowers are smiling at me. I would not pick any flower which belongs to everyone". "The red seeds are nurtured into green fresh plants under the school roof"

I was listening to the communist crooked propaganda when Phuc the Local asked, "You are so early. Did you have a good night"? I crawled up and answered, "If I want to sleep I can do it. Anyhow, do you smell the odor of urine and excrements"? He said, "No, if you live next to the latrine you will be used to its smell". Then he went to the restroom. Looking obliquely, I saw a bundled blanket with a skinny leg out full with sores and galls. When that blanket removed, I saw three children sitting up. The oldest of them about 13, light skinned tall and skinny, looking like a spider. The two others were short and bitty appearing only like one person under the blanket. The three kids sat up under the torn blanket. They all stared at my water pipe ready for my first shooting. They expected the second or third puff but were afraid to ask for fear of lack of deference. I made sign at the rolled up blanket and all three of them raced on with bright eyes. They sat around me waiting with galls and sores. I got out the packet of raw tobacco that Tho the Grabber gave me yesterday and rolled three balls for each one of them. I asked the oldest of them, "What is your name and where are your parents"? He replied, "Uncle, I am Thang the White and I was in Silver Street". I was astounded to continue, "What was your address did your family deal in gold"? When he said he was at 127 Silver Street, I rushed asking whether it was Bao Hung Long Store. He opened wide his eyes to say, "That is my parents and why you knew about it".

It was my turn to be bewildered. I rushed to ask him about auntie Thuan, the boys Hoa, Hieu and Miss Tam..., the whole scene of the former Silver Street in the years 52, 53 and 54. I was then silversmith for Tan Hung, Bao Hung Long, Duc Hung and Miss Thuan was Silver Beauty Queen, and the owner of Bao Hung Long was Thuan's sister. Therefore, Thang the White is nephew of Hoa and Hieu. I was then about 15 or 16 working as silversmith and going to school for my French. What bothered me was those were from high-class families, why they became thieves living on the margin of society. I then asked

Thang, “Why you do not go to school instead of living the miserable life of a pickpocket”? He answered that his parents renounced him and he went “dome straying” for a long time. Not catching fully the meaning of that slang “dome straying” I wanted to ask when the little one joined in, “You know, “dome straying” means leaving the family to go with the life of dust and trash of the society”. I looked at that small kid raising his proud face showing that he too belonged to the bottom of society. I felt fun to ask him, “What is your name”? Thang quickly answered for him, “Uncle, his name is Phuc and nick named Phuc the Slipper”. All three burst in laughter and Thang explained, “He slipped fast. In a crowd, you are unable to find him. He is small and digs between legs to disappear. When security gets him and holds his small hand he suddenly jerks it out to slip into the crowd”. Curious, I asked, “How old are you”? “I am eleven”. I was surprised to see him just like a five or six year old southern kid, standing up pulling his shirt over his distended belly with a narrow face and a very sharp pair of eyes.

The cadre came in for checking. In pairs, holding hands we went out for the cadre to count. I looked down to see the white wigwagging things crawling about. They were the fly larvae coming from the restroom excrements. I stepped on them last night but no one seemed to pay any attention to them. Hung led the group to a water cistern having two compartments. It was full but a small faucet kept running in clear water while the water in the cistern was soiled with grease and smudge from the previous users. There were only ten scoops for hundreds of users. Some of them scooped water with their cupped hands to wash their faces. After fifteen minutes, all regained the room in pairs to sit down at the designated places marked by chalk lines. They were doing janitorial work in the room. Each day they assigned four persons for cleaning the restroom and the whole area.

While in the yard, I was next to Tien the Station and wondered how he could sleep with so many grubs crawling about? He said, “We get used to it; sometimes grub goes in your ear and you just dig it out. You sleep on the platform where there were no grubs but mites are the problem”. Everyone was getting shirts off to catch mites. Suddenly a quick hand quickly grab my collar and Phong the Pop-Eyed put a big fat mite in my hand, belly up and quivering its legs to turn back. Khanh told me that the cadre was calling me to his desk.

## **SEVENTY-FIVE**

### **The New Problems**

At the corner, there was a desk where sat Aspirant Ke, a southern man. I knew him long ago as a corporal. I sat on the stool and he checked my identity before he said softly, “You are an adult in the room and I would ask you to take care of discipline and news reading”. I was about to refuse the offer when he seriously stated, “This is also a way to restore your thinking. We shall value your positive or negative attitude in this assignment”. I merely said that as “I am not healthy please give me only news reading”. He shook his head, “No, there were four other people for discipline. You must do it. As for your health, I know you fully, do not pretend”.

10 am was the starting time for news reading and activities. Everyone assembled on the cement platform to hear the reading of “the People Army” and “the People” from the circled red parts by the cadres. Mr. Khanh, Tho the Grabber and Hung were in charge of discipline. Khanh was about 55, looked healthy and strong. He whispered to my ears, “There are kiddies and swindlers in this room which is good. They go in and out fast everyday, and there is only one-hour news reading twice a day. In the other room, it is two two-hour sessions a day with indoctrination and critiques, which is headache”.

11 am was the end of news reading. The kitchen brought meals up, a big basket of rice with a container of enameled steel bowls and spoons. The orderly team and the room head were in charge of receiving and dividing rations. Along the wall was a long table. My room had 174 persons and each ration has rice and soup. The bowls were in five rows on the table and you used the spoon to distribute rice equally to all the bowls. After you did and counted, then you reported to the cadre for prisoners to go out one by one for their rice and soup. After eating, prisoners again went back by couple through control of the cadre. I sat next to Thang of Bao Hung Long to know more about Silver Street. There was rumor that I came across a nephew in jail. I knew that most of the well-to-do kids of Silver Street were in prison for swindling or reactionary counter propaganda.

The parents incarcerated as capitalists had their property confiscated. They ended up as laborers with starvation wages for their own mouths. Father to feed father and mother to feed mother, there was nothing left for the children who must leave the family into the bottom of the society. There were only two directions, either join the Army or go with the hoodlums. I understood the complexity of problems for the leadership of socialism. Their goal is ignorance of the people so that the people would not know true or false to blindly follow them and consolidate the seat of the fifteen communist leaders. They also encouraged education for what they called "an outstanding society of the humankind". Anyhow, the more the people became educated the more they knew of the falsehood and lies of the party. Then they blocked the entrance to higher learning, filtering and limiting to the criteria of "three generations of poor peasantry". Being poor and destitute now they emerged to a better class owing to the party to which they must offer complete allegiance. Another selected kind is the off spring of killed partisans even though their death was due to their stupid ignorance.

Therefore, they must obey blindly the Party because the Party always had good reasons. You cannot have doubt seeing this or that deputy was a garbage man or a house cleaner, this professor lacked knowledge or that engineer back from Moscow was short of know how. It created a headache problem for the members of the Politburo. (1) If the people are happy and the country is prosperous, then there will be no more places for them. (2) If they enjoyed guaranteed seat the people will stay poor and stupid.

In the morning, being used to my cell life, I got up very early to exercise. Anyhow, in such a crowded and polluted room, I was unable to do it. Mr. Khanh sat next to me under his blanket. Under his salt-and-pepper head, he still looked very strong with his muscled arms and full chest. He brightened his eyes to talk of his exploits as tennis player at Septo Stadium. Then he opened his heart whispering, "In life you get only one chance. In 1954, I went with my suitcase to Hai Phong. After two days waiting for going south, I thought about my wife and kids and our few houses in Hanoi. I decided to go back ending up losing all property, throwing my kids to the wild world and squabbling with my wife at no end. Now I am incarcerated for black marketing". Surprisingly he brightened his face saying, "I am still lucky to become bus driver to the state company. Most of well-to-do property owners were arrested in the years 56-57. A few committed suicides while others died in confinement. Truly, the whole nation was fooled"! He told me to be careful about Hung.

The rolled blanket with three kiddies shook violently with the bitty Phuc the Slipper kicked out crying. I rushed tapping Thang's shoulder and asked, "Why he kicks Phuc out". Thang said, "In my dream I saw a turtle crawling in to bite my foot and I kicked it out". Both Mr. Khanh and I laughed feeling compassionate for the innocent kids thrown in the garbage dump of society due to the dozen high communist thugs. I took from my pocket the tobacco and rolled up for each one a ball. They all displayed a big smile, the bitty Phuc under the blanket looked like a small doggie. I asked him when he started pickpocketing. Thang the White rushed the answer, "Uncle, he did it when he was four. His mother taught him elaborately. She carried him at crowded place like movies and he slipped his hands in the other's pockets to steal fountain pen, glasses and sometimes cash. If caught his mother merely beg pardon for the unruly hands of her child". I waved my hand to stop Thang and directed my question to

Phuc the Slipper, “The most that you picked was how much”. He opened his sparkling eyes to say, “Last Tet I picked \$180 in one time”. “Where and from whom?” As to show his victorious feats, his eyes opened even wider to narrate, “It was near Tet. I went into a Department Store to buy candies when I saw a woman having a flowery cloth bag. In addition, she opened it for cash payment of a shirt. I followed her for half a day until when she went to the Central Train Station to buy ticket; I slipped in to use my new razor blade slashing her bag for her cash”. I understood that in Hanoi those having that much cash should be either treasurer or state finance cadre. I asked more, “What do you use the cash for, where do you save it”?

They all laughed to say that they all had various saving means, the women tea or meal stall vendors. When they were short of cash, they could buy credit from them. I asked’ “Do you have some cash now”? His reply was fast, “Of course yes! I stay in the House for one or two month and when they free me I must have cash to go make money again” (House is the slang for Central prison). Thang keeping quiet in the meantime now joined in, “We seldom are arrested. If we have some cash, a watch or a fountain pen we would not enter the House. We know every police or security on the streets. When they catch us, they search us and confiscate the cash or the watch as proof. On the way to the post, they would ask us to wait while they went peeing. It means time to run off and the police would keep cash or the watch for them”.

## SEVENTY-SIX

### Love of The Hung Yen Girl

Every morning Miss Van got a desk at a corner dispensing gall and sores pomade to kiddies. From time to time, she looked at me. I pretended looking the other way knowing that there was no solution and it would make hearts bleeding more. If they knew the affair, they would say that people from the south are only playboys without any morality. That was why I avoided her eyes and always looked the other way. When I distractively directed my eyes to the bamboo enclosure showing big hairy feet, moving around, a small child came telling me that the nurse wanted to see me. I felt my heartbeat speeding though I kept wiping off the table. Van! Please let me go my calm and obscure route! In spite of my thinking, my heart kept rushing its beats and gradually my legs moved to where she was writing and copying. Her hands went on opening this vial and screwing back another one. She knew that I was coming but pretended unaware, displaying a cold face perhaps due to the many eyes watching. She slowly raised her eyes at me trembling a little and changing color from seedling green to the light delicate hue of young jasmine. She raised her voice, “Why you did not come out these days”? I answered emotionally, “What for, to be sadder”? The Assistant Director Tri came and she wrapped up a few pills for me telling to report for medicine tomorrow at close of the end of the day.

Holding the sachet of pills I returned to the meal table, my heart troubled and my mind foggy. She softly blamed me of not be out showing clearly her passionate expectation. Anyhow, darling Van, I am also longing terribly for your friendship. Excluded for long from the scent of dry leaves, the aroma of badamier flowers, I wanted the sunshine, the clouds and the drizzling cold rain. I watched the sparrows rustling among green leaves and I wanted to share my sentiments with friends. Then you came to me Van, with crystal pure love, passionate human interaction making us troubled many nights. Was it magnificent human love? Would steel and blood be able to constrain and control that love?

Suddenly, Tho the Stripper came whispering to my ear, “There was news that Nguyen Chi Thanh was very sick and died in Moscow. Anyhow, the rumor in Hanoi says that he died during a B-52 bombing in Dau Tieng”. I asked him to be more precise, “Where did you get that news, from the BBC or the south broadcast”? He said that his newly arrested friend listened to the Saigon radio. I praised him for the good

news. Then I told him not letting anyone know that he gave me the information. In that afternoon, when I came out the door, I saw in the next room 4 or 5 persons cluttered at the entrance. Then I heard a very familiar southern “male-duck” voice. A man displaying his glancing puffy eyes, his big front teeth and a beaten up gold tooth laughed loudly, “Long Sa Chau Le Van Luong just back from the Central Camp”. I asked, “Why they sent you back”? “The case must be retried”. Then I asked about Le Van Can. He wondered why I knew about Can who died in front of the firing squat three years ago. I closed my eyes in a minute of silence to commemorate a brother-in-arms immolated to the country.

At night while I talked with Uncle Khanh, Phuc the Local whispered showing to me in a corner 5 or 6 boys waiting. I was surprised and followed him. In the group, there was also Tho the Stripper and others renown of the “hammer-and-machete” Hanoi gang. Some mounted guards watching cadres while others went into the restroom to boil water with papers for a kettle of tea. I wondered why they did not worry about Hung. Phuc the Local smiled to explain that they do not care because that man knows how to avoid a mouthful of tomato paste. Then he looked at me with very sentimental eyes to state, “Old brother, as your young brothers we feel lucky to know you. Whoever dares to irritate you would see the end of their fate”!

Tho the Stripper stayed quiet for a while. He poured hot tea into an only bowl and offered to me saying, “We invite you Big Brother. You did not have anything during the many years in prison, did you? We saw you rolled under the blanket like a cadaver”! The young kids sitting on the sideline joined in, “We saw you tightly fit under the blanket and we were so scared that we must go pee in group”. Phuc the Local took out a rucksack sorting out a mosquito net, a yellow “tetoron” pants and a camouflaged vest saying, “Here are things for your use. We will provide all the clothing you need”. Moved I said, “I understand your heart. Anyhow, for six years in this prison, privation had been a fact for me. You too do not have what you need and I suggest that you keep it for your use”. Phuc the Local raised his emotional voice, “Brother Binh, we are like homeless soldiers. At time, we are hungry and thirsty and at other time, we can have the feast of kings. Those things do not have any meaning for us. A pair of pants costing \$60 traded in for a .50 loaf of bread in necessity is not out of the ordinary. We respect you for your military attitude, acting and not talking”. While talking he urged me to try them on. I did it for not deceiving them and Minh the Ball-eye burst into laughter, “They fit perfectly. You look so handsome except for your three missing teeth giving me the impression of a crenelle in a French outpost”. Tien the Train-Station took out a pair of sandals to put to my feet. I asked him where did he get them and he said in his twisted mouth of gang member, “Big brother, soldier does not ask, just use”!

On the next morning I read the news on “farming” with the praise for “the five-ton country” of Thai Binh, I heard the chuckle of kiddies in a corner. Mr. Khanh reminded them to keep quiet to no avail and became very irritated; anyhow, they respected only their leader; they would not give a damn of cadres or bossy chiefs. They despised informants, flatterers or orderly. Mr. Khanh became mad when a young teenage boy named Trung Ly Thu stared squarely at him. Mr. Khanh could not stand it anymore rolled up his shirtsleeves to point his fingers at the boy face roaring, “You are not up to my kid’s age. If you are my son, I would beat and kill you to make your mom sorrow”. The boy stood up menacingly to scream, “You are lucky. If you are my father I would have beaten you to leave your dad forever”! The whole room burst into laughter. Khanh was very mad, his complexion changed to dark purple, his jaw muscles twitched and his hands open and close ready for a punishing punch. Anyhow, he must realize that it could be a losing proposition with all the little and big brothers of the boy around. I told Khanh to cool off and in the same time, I said to Trung Ly Thu, “Please sit down”. I was certain that they were all watching my attitude.

It was time to divide rations and I will have to see Miss Van. It rained continually since this morning. The chilly northeast wind blew the drizzling water screen jerking off the few left red leaves down while the sparrows hustled quivering under the eaves. Over there, at the corner next to room 5 was the health

desk where was the wasp body of the nurse with her two hair braids tied by red wool yarn. At the front of the desk was a line of bony inmates trembling under blankets subjected to the slash and cut of the freezing north wind. Sitting next to me Mr. Khanh gave out a long sigh. I turned to see his wrinkled face directed distractively to a far away Hanoi, perhaps at the thought of his wife and children. Each has his own life and fate keeping it tight in his own mind and heart, impervious to only himself. Seeing that it was almost off time and there were only two persons at her desk, I loudly said that I almost forgot my appointment with the nurse.

I went out to her desk to see clearly on her braids the droplets of rains scintillating like gems on her black jet smooth hair. The familiar scent wafted through enveloping my whole body. Seeing me walking up she softly asked, “Are you cold, Binh?” I answered, “How can I feel cold when there is a person warming up the whole atmosphere?” Her cheeks turned rosy like peach petals, her lips shivered uncovering perfect teeth while her fingers played with the small can of Yellow Star Rub. She turned up her face asking, “Where did you find that nice outfit?” I felt embarrassed answering back that the young friends of the room gave it to me and forced me to wear. She opened the drawer and took out a small white handkerchief to say timidly, “Brother Binh, could you embroider it for me?” I was surprised, “I do not know how to”. She said I saw the embroidery on your sack. Do what you want, perhaps a peach branch with two birds. Or you can design it for me to do it myself”. I did not understand why she asked me to embroider for her. It showed her plain and pure soul. Anyhow, how could I do it in the crowded room? As she was dreaming, I must be fully awake. It could not be a fun affair and I do not have the right to play this fun game for good when between her and I there was that imperturbable wall. A yellow leaf fell on her desk and the sight of a kid covered with sores falling in the yard pulled me to reality. I firmed my voice coldly looking at her to say, “Thank you a million and farewell”! I walked straight back to the room hearing behind the begging voice “Darling Binh”.

Back in the room, I felt too cruel. My dear Van, I am painful. Both of us were withering in our heart and mind, we could not enjoy the same sky and moon. They wanted to punish me for my love of humankind and the country. I had to use the hard-hearted language with you because I did not have the courage to look at your clear blue eyes directed at a horizon full of expectation. I understood that behind them were a vast firmament where we are like two birds flying together to an uncharted horizon. Anyhow, darling Van, everything was simply an ephemeral dream. I could not go on to a bubble bust, which would be more brutal. Would you try to consider the past as an extraordinary experience, a memorable souvenir of this significant and idealistic life?

## **SEVENTY-SEVEN**

### **Another Painful Truth of Communist Paradise**

It was time to lock the door when the rustle of noise in the yard pulled all the young kids to look out. The discipline team with Khanh, Tho the Stripper, and I went out. From the gate, Warden Bang was leading about ten kids of various sizes to this room. Out of a few barefooted boys the rest had sandals and clean clothes. Bang shouted at them to sit down pending the arrival of Ke. There were noisy exchanges, inquiring where is this one or that one, how long did they enter the House, etc. From the inside fingers pointed out appropriating this hat or that pair of sandals, meaning that after entering there will be stripping and transfer of property. Anyhow, the thing of note was that there was an attitude of good disposition without any animosity. The strippers and the stripped ones were all as joyful as during a picnic. I was curious to ask them why they did not seem angry a bit. They talked almost in unison, “Uncle, House for us is home. Going astray for a while and if they arrested you it means going back to the House for resting. They will release you after some time because if they keep us, there will be no more children in



Hanoi. Most of us have records in the post. As no parents have money for their children, they then must steal for survival.

Surprised, I asked them about girls. They all laughed, "Brother, you are not at the bottom of this society like us. We go to school half day and the rest of time we are cheaters. Girls are very cheap. We have money to buy for them a movie ticket or a bowl of beef soup and we can easily lay them. I can tell you that it is difficult to find a virgin in Hanoi. On the streets the well dressed boys or girls are all swindlers". Ke came from the gate and they noisily entered the room while Hung corrected the affixed number to 192. At the approach of weekend, the room became more crowded. On Fridays there were usually two trucks taking kiddy prisoners out to Ky Son Camp for those 13 to 17 and to Mai Linh Camp for the younger ones.

After they locked the door, I sat down with a group among them was Phuc the Local to hear more of their life. They made room for me and I said, "Your story was very exciting. So girls are also swindlers and thieves, are they arrested"? They all wanted to talk but Phuc the Local raised his voice, "Plenty, in Mai Linh there are three girls' camps. In Ky Son there is a separate girls' camp next to the boys' camp. When you turn eighteen, they transfer you to the central prison. In Hanoi half of the girls are prostitutes, some are professional while the better rest have boyfriends like us providing them with money for showoff". Now they caught too many girls and they open big schools in Lao Kay and Phu Tho. In reality, those are big prisons, which they call Secondary Vocational Schools I, II and III and the guards are teachers. They move girls over eighteen to Mo Chen Camp having now 3,000 females. At each Central Prison there is a female facility next to it". To reinforce his point, Phuc pointed his fingers at those sitting around ready to join in the conversation, "I introduce, Minh the Big Eyes specialized in "horse jumping" (bicycle jack), Tin the Black specialist of "lock loose" (watch stealing), Dong the Mackerel, specialist of "dome slip" (house break-in). They always play game-double with one or two elegant looking girls in tandem. The girls as sexy and sweet as a jackfruit section stood close to the victims and sensually beating their eyelash for the boys to strip the victims. Even the case of the French Embassy robbed of antiques and art objects was caused by those lascivious girlies distracting the guards for the boys to enter and empty the place".

Seeing Hung smoking his pipe with Khanh I switched to matters related to the country. "Do you like this administration, how much do you appreciate Uncle Ho"? The whole group laughed, some of them raised their clasped hands over their head waving. Minh the Big Eye stated solemnly, "I did not think that you ask that question, being certain that you fully understand us. I am now 23 and had completed my twelve grades. I can say that no one in this Hanoi and of the whole North Vietnam love this son-of-the-bitch communist rule save a minority having special privileges. We all wish to see the south pushing north and you will see that the people, even the communist cadres will turn their guns to the communist leaders. When you see that the Army and the Self Defense forces at factories were determined to sacrifice against the American airplanes, do not believe that everyone is against the Americans. It is not true; we have been in the Army and the Self Defense Corps. For everyone it was simply a question of the pot of rice. If you do not act, they will charge you with revisionism and each one has the responsibility to watch his colleagues. If the Army of the south or the Americans come up here, they will break the dike like in a flash flood. The whole population will stand up to revenge the bloodthirsty communists."

Stopping for a while, Minh gained momentum to ask, "Brother, do you know what the desire of the population of Hanoi is? Democracy and capitalism are necessary, but there is something more symbolical. It is to clean up the Ba Dinh Square and build in place a good public restroom facility for Hanoiens. It is so funny to see the fecund imagination of the people of Hanoi. It was a matter encompassing the opinion of the population toward the so called -- the pick of humankind and the conscience of humanity -- ". Seeing that we had a good time, Hung came around. Phuc the Local ignoring his presence continued asking in another direction, "Do you know the pastime for the 40-50 in Hanoi"? Thinking that it was a question to neutralize the previous statement, I smiled and shook my

head. Surprisingly he went on, “In groups of four or five men they gather in a room with alcohol and tidbits. They got a 13-15 years old girl with them and have her undressed nude sitting on the laps of the men, cuddling while sipping alcohol. Guessing that they were kidding I chuckled and said, “You boys invent so many stories”. Anyhow, Minh the Big Eye seriously stated, “It is real. First, the men are so bored and cannot find any way out. It is cheap to have sex but there is no money for tonics and medication in case of disease. That is why that becomes their hobby”.

Hung left the scene when he heard the boys talking of girls and sex. I watched the whole audience to say, “You boys have really espionage tricks to be praised”. Phuc the Local blushed, “You praise us too much. We merely learn to survive in a society of ruses, deceits and cruelty. We call it changing tunes, if you turn quiet those SOB spies will suspect. You pretend not seeing. Then you change the subject in a normal conversational tone”.

That afternoon it was sunny and I was looking at the bamboo screen enclosure with hairy big feet when Ke called me out and gave me a key. He told me to get two sanitary boys with buckets and brooms to clean the dungeon. They rushed to volunteer and Phuc the Local said that three days ago they put three ducklings in the dungeon for having beaten the informant in the female area. Among them there were Diep the Explosive and Yen the Metisse whom they like”. Tho the Stripper gave me two Dien Bien Cigarettes, one for me and the other one for Yen the Metisse and designated two tiny 15-16 boys to go with me. I unlocked a very smelly room with fetid excrements and urine. In the middle of the room was a steel cage made of wrist size steel bars having four girls 15-17 with braided or frizzy hair. They had neither blankets nor reed mat in the coldness of winter. I had pity for the girls under torn clothes trying to shield their body with their hands. I said, “It is so cold can you sleep last night”? Their pathetic reply, “It is so cold uncle. We clumped together crying the whole night”. I gave one cigarette to Yen the Metisse and the remaining cigarette to the other three to share getting a little warmth from the puffing. Then one girl blushing wanted to say something to me to finally telling me to tell Matron Dau or Nurse Tho that they have vegetarian diet today. On my way back, I came across Nurse Tho and reported to her the same. Back to the room the kids laughed at my ignorance saying that it means they have periods. Why did those women use such enigmatic language?

## **SEVENTY-EIGHT**

### **Dang Chi Binh to be on Trial? A Strange Evasion...**

In the afternoon while everyone waited for mealtime, the warden called me to deposition. I was in the common camp for nearly half a month and for two years they had not called me to deposition, I worried what would happen. Several kids watched me getting ready, curious and surprised. I used the horn comb of Phuc the Local to manage my unruly hair. Minh the Big-Eyes caught on my shirt collar two big mites and gave to me. Being in a hurry, I dumped them in the drain instead of crushing those comrades of the bloodthirsty communists. Dien directed me to a small room next to the administrative office. In there was a cadre about 40, dressed in a checkered shirt with very thick prescription glasses. He was busy with his thick dossier. He raised his eyes giving a diplomatic smile to say, “Please sit down”. It was a surprise having not seen any cadre so politely inviting you to sit down. Very cautious, I sat down with my eyes wide open.

After asking my identification and the date of my arrest, he cleared his throat to solemnly state, “I am the Cadre of the Capital People Tribunal. I have the duty and privilege to inform you that the People Control and the Trial Court Office have decided to refer your case to court session 30 December 1967. According

to the people democratic system, we allow you to have a defense lawyer. Therefore, do you intend to have a lawyer”? It came as a surprise and I was dumbfounded. In nearly six years struggling in their hands, I clearly knew that all their Legislative, Executive and Judiciary or whatever other names they used boiled down to the only one cruel genie with bloody mouth and green exorbitant eyes which is the communist party with full authority to kill. I then turned up my face to say, “What, do I need a lawyer? Whatever was my crime, it would be for the party to decide”. He laboriously wrote down and asked, “Do you have any relative that you want present during the trial”? I shook my head, “No, I have none”.

He gave a number of copies to sign and I did without looking at it. Being in the hands of autocratic fascism, they can do whatever suits them. Different from the previous session when they transferred me back to the prison, the cadre on duty, Warden Dien, merely took me through the gate and made sign for me to report to the room cadre. Through the large yard where several inmates were already in their cells, I still saw so many prisoners crowding the whole place. I leisurely ambled through the gate of Prison I, looking at the old path with the twisted badamier tree under the northern winter wind. All the souvenirs of the past were there, and if I may, I would like to pay a visit to Warden Du.

My mind was hazy like floating here and there when I saw a young man about 20 among a crowd eating outside the room. He hold a half finished bowl of rice, his head lightly shaking and nodding in trance, his mouth biting up and down and his eyes blinking. All of a sudden, saliva dripped out while his eyes turned up white and he fell shaking his trembling legs, his head hitting the brickyard and bleeding. Several people, among them cadres Dan and Hong of rooms 7 and 8 watched like in a show and you can even hear chuckles. Two or three men raced up picking the scattered grains of rice to put in their mouth. I even saw one man getting a clump of rice in the blood to wipe off on his pants and calmly munch. As I do not belong to the same room, I could not interfere. I asked a man standing close by, “why no one tries to help him out”? That man very laconically replied, “It is seizure, nothing important to act. We have had two or three cases like that”.

I curbed my head walking back to my room very pensive on men with men. That night I was not able to sleep thinking of the tribunal prosecuting me. Subjectively, I revised all possibilities, my acceptance of mission up north, my not doing anything detrimental to the regime and the party, my arrest and avowals, my suicide and evasion attempts when the party and revolution rejected me, etc. Psychologically prepared, I felt positive and guessed that a maximum penalization of ten years would be possible. As I had spent six years, I would spend four more years in a central work camp and at the end, I would spend the rest of my life in a labor reeducation camp, their gulag. So thinking, I sunk into a late slumber to wake up in the morning hearing tumultuous noise. It was 7am when the morning broadcast just started. Sounds of the key and the door opened and they called the head of the room plus the discipline team out. The prison director Captain Tri was there with a number of yellow uniform cadres. Among them was the Hung Yen girl Nurse Van.

Warden Le held the hand of Huy the Turkey frowning his face asked, “Did you see this boy in the room last night”? I looked at Huy the Turkey who was about 14 short but fatso wearing only a hem shredded shorts, barefooted and looking slow and stupid. He also had another nickname Huy the Pick-Plate. On the streets he had no other skill than go into food joints to clean leftover from plates of patrons. I remembered that last night I saw in the restroom the little Hong the One-Eyed knocking his head and Huy the Turkey merely sat crying in front of a laughing group. I then raised my finger to ascertain that at 8pm Huy was still in the room while Miss Van raised her gladdened face. Assistant Tri in a heavy sarcastic voice said, “At midnight a sleepy comrade heard the hustling noise at the bowls holder and thought it came from rats and hissed to chase them away. After a short time, the same noise was back and he took a flashlight checking to catch this boy under the shelf. We had asked him closely and he kept saying that at 5pm after the counting and door locking he slipped out looking for food”

The case became more mysterious. Some curious boys kept asking him. Anyhow, being naïve, stupid and solitary he stayed quiet or said that he slipped out at 5pm after the cadre checked. Thinking that to solve the mystery one must go to the source, which was Huy the Turkey. Seeing the boy sitting in a corner breaking his gall sores, I came to him with my pipe. I smiled at him and gave him the lighted match asking him to hold it to the pipe for me to puff. He looked joyful and I put in another pinch of tobacco for him. He closed his eyes telling me to keep it a secret. He climbed up the window trying until he found at the end one space that fitted his head and out he slipped. He said he found a piece of boiled cassava to eat. He entered a room with bed and blanket to sleep until he felt hungry again and hustled for more food when they discovered him. He did it again to show me and the whole room was overexcited. Hung shouted at him to get down and loudly reported. It was 10 pm when Assistant Tri, Warden Le and a dozen of security men came watching Huy the Turkey's exhibition. They called the room chief and the disciplinary team out to inquire of who had discovered the thing. They asked me how I did to get his avowal. To avoid any future complication I just said that I offered him a smoke and I did not expect him to disclose". Nurse Van went next to me saying, "You are super, brother Binh". It was midnight and Cadre Le instructed the shop to board off all windows. Room chief Hung looked at me to say, "No wonder, it is CIA". All the kids in the room talked highly of CIA with all the imaginary legends.

## **SEVENTY-NINE**

### **Duel Between The Northern Gangs**

I was rolling my waistband out looking for mites giving me itch and scratch when Hung came, sitting next to me offering one Dien Bien cigarette. I wondered what his purpose was. Finally, he showed his sentimentality stating, "I saw that you have an outstanding ability. Having sympathy with you, I want to help your future in the central reeducation camp. Your way in the central camp will be wide open if you put to use that ability. I listened carefully not understanding what he meant. I finally told him, "Please go straight into the matter instead of moving around". He said that in the Central Reeducation there were good and bad people. The bad people are like patients whom the doctors helped recovering. The best thing that you can do to help is to report and suggest to the cadres, etc. I smelled his dirty character. He thought that I wanted to relate well with the cadres when I acted on Huy the Turkey case. I knew of his spooky things but I did not realize that he could approach me that way. I wanted to slap his face. Anyhow, I controlled myself and merely thanked him and asked him on the story of the fight between the two countries Han and So of the Chinese Three Countries novel in which the victorious Luu Bi ordered the decapitation of Dang Cong who helped him because Dang Cong betrayed his King. He shyly said that a story of the antiquity would not be true now.

In the evening while Tho the Stripper and I were dividing equally rice to the bowls, a group of unfamiliar security cadres came in and stood at various corners watching. One man about 30 with deep eyes and sparse mustache, his arms crossed on his chest looked at me measuring rice to bowls. He opened up in a nice smile, "Do you feel hungry eating this ration of rice"? Hearing his amiable voice I about faced to tell him that hunger is the true word. The children here would eat twice that amount and for us adult we need three times that much". He frowned pensive as if he was confronting a difficult problem. Finally, he confided, "I am a cadre of the organization. According to the report of comrades of labor reeducation, starch criteria like this are enough. Now you say that it is not sufficient, I cannot understand, because for us we eat the same amount everyday". Seeing his sincerity, I elaborated a little more for him, "Man lives with sugar, fat and protein, about one thousand grams of each kind. For you in the outside sometimes you have a candy, a sugar cane, a banana or a glass of lemonade. You also eat rice with fish, meat, beans and tomatoes. Therefore, you get all the fat and protein to supplement your two bowls of rice. Moreover, you might have banquets, which give you reserves. In here, we have only rice with a little bit of salt or a soup

of old spinach cooked with salt. How could it be enough for our hunger”? He brightened his eyes saying that it sounds logical. The conversation stopped there while I still had to finish my work dividing rice to all the bowls.

Back to the room, after dinner was over, I saw Phuc the Local and Thach the Scar-face bare torso while they cleared up the platform. Thach the Scar-face was barge handler of Haiphong Harbor. I jumped up asking who will be the referee and Phuc the Local pointed at Tho the Stripper. I asked Thach the Scar-Face whether he agrees with the selection of referee. He then said that this is Hanoi fief and I am most afraid with group beating. For my honor, I only accept a one on one fight. Then I came up with the following rules of fighting, (1) it is a fight to determine the capability of the persons involved, (2) it is a free fight until one man threw his towel, and there is no revenge, (3) no group involved and no gang beating. A big applause followed by the loud voice of Minh the Big-Eye, “Please applaud Brother Binh as referee”. A wild hand clasping of acclamation ensued. Then I turned to both adversaries raising my arms to sternly state, “As referee, strictly abide the set rules. I will not tolerate any infraction. Let the fight start now”. I took off my thick cotton vest and gave to Tien the Gasoline. I walked in circle to clear the area. The two antagonists had only undershorts. Phuc the Local 1.70m tall, clean looking and agile while Thach the Scar-Face is short and sturdy with a scar slashing diagonally his face across his nose gave him an air of stubborn decision. I hold both hands ready for the handshake. To my inquiries on weight, Phuc said that he weighs 57kg while Thach was 60kg.

Right after the handshake, Phuc the Local in a lightning attack gave a solid punch to Thach’s jaw and rotated his body kicking Thach’s tummy like a hammer on an anvil. Thach avoided the punch but had to withstand that kick putting him off balance. After the two first spectacular hits of Phuc, Thach was like a gorilla advancing two steps punching with his right hand and while Phuc ducked, he lifted his right knee up hitting Phuc’s chest squarely. The fight became erratic, both sides rushed head on to kick and box without any technique. Thach had a bleeding nose while Phuc got a big bump on his face. It is time to stop the fight, I bent down in between separating them, shouting, “Stop now; it is enough to show your ability”. They were still overheated. Anyhow, my firm voice and my threat to use my punishing power calmed them down. The boys joined in cleaning the platform while I entertained the crowd on stories of the international boxing events in Saigon.

In my two months here, I connected with the bottom society of Hanoi. They came from all classes dumped out without any hope of redemption under the atrocious regime of the communists. They became swindlers, thieves and robbers or the garbage of socialism. I realized that the necessity of men management and social security had led them to use wholesale hunger to keep everyone busy looking for the way to fill the tummy. The side effect would be the creation of social problems of swindling, thievery and prostitution. All of that class of youth originated from the communist system and their “human planting” technique gave me a clear insight on communism at large and the Vietnamese communists in particular.

## **EIGHTY**

### **Legendary Movies, Tricks of The Communists**

It did not rain but it was freezing cold. I was doing my morning clean up at the cistern. I directed my eyes to Room 8 where they kept political inmates. When the prisoners went out by pairs, the last couple drew my attention. A man in the thirties had the right leg amputated above knee and the right arm was only a 10cm stump. The crutch on his right side had a string to his shoulder and another string tied it to his waist. On his neck was a bag holding his bowl, scoop and a tin can. He used his strong left arm to

control everything in a left gait walk. He displayed a cold and stern face without any hint of a smile. Out of a slew of string, enveloping his body there was another cord tied to his left shoulder to the left wrist of a tall and skinny man. This man was blind, his hollow eyes always turning upward like looking at the sky and the leaves of the badamier tree. No one seemed to be paying any attention to the couple.

I inquired with Phuc the Local, “What did those two blind and lame men do to be jailed”? His reply came fast, “You will see plenty of blinds and lames in the Central Camp. They still are able to commit crimes from their mouth. The communists incriminate them as counter propagandists”. The two went to their room. I sat there thinking of the fate of men. Then I saw a few people coming from the gate with long bamboo poles, cords and a big piece of white canvas. Tho the Stripper behind me shouted, “We have movies tonight”! The news spread quickly to the room about the show “The Golden hair Princess” of Czechoslovakia. They said that the prison showed movies every two months and last time they had “The Green Beard Sorcerer” of Rumania. When I wondered why Hanoi liked mythical movies and Tho the Stripper, Mr. Khanh and Phuc the Local also had never thought of the question and always believed it was due to the preference of viewers. They forgot that cultural matters were directional at the discretion of the communist leadership and never geared to the people desire or preference.

Everyone felt excited and worried with the wind bringing rain, which would stop the projection. At 7:30pm, the show began. Each room under the direction of room chief went out to the designated location. Even with the installation of four additional 60w light bulbs, the yard was still dark. Cadres with room chiefs had their chairs far from the screen while all prisoners sat on the floor. Out of Matron Tho and a few other women, probably the cadres’ wives, I perceived a shape that made my heart quicken. Van walked behind Assistant Le, wearing a white cotton vest with big light violet flowers. She would not be able to see where I was in that big crowd. Neither did I pay attention to her, keeping my eyes on the screen. The movie was on, starting with news showing the scenes of Saigon with military trucks having Korean or American soldiers raising their bottles of beer and dragging behind Vietnamese children. Then the scene on Tran Hung Dao Boulevard showing rows of Honda bikes with well dressed boys and girls demonstrating against the Government of Thieu committing human rights shouting, “Wake up to advance”. I curbed my head swallowing my sadness, I felt a hand on my shoulder with a soft voice, “Brother, why were they so fortunate and so stupid? Would they prefer our life now”? It was Phuc the Local and I answered him, “They were stupid. Anyhow, mistakes came from the leadership of the south administration”! My thoughts went astray and the film came when I was still deep in my thinking.

Suddenly the wailing alert siren raised its sinister sound. Then a complete black out with shouting, crying and calling amid gunfire and whistle blowing. People were afraid of shrapnel from anti-aircraft and rushed under the eaves. There were a number of holes dug as shelters for cadres. Anyhow, between life and death there was no guarantee when it was “to each one according to his need”! If I decided to run, I would be faster than anyone would. I remembered my nights in the cell when I stood up to see a small piece of Hanoi sky. Here now under the badamier tree I enjoyed the entire open night sky making my mind in between ducking in a shelter or sitting out here. Suddenly a hand grabbed mine. I was opening my eyes wide trying to see when the waft of a familiar creamy scent filled my nose. In a reflex, I grabbed the soft velvet hand, which trembled with the fear of bombs and explosives or the vibrations in her heart.

I was so emotional. A warm quivering came up from my hip up to the feeling of heaviness on my shoulders. Van leaned on me without a word. I could not guess her thinking. I had the feeling that the worldly atmosphere merely dissolved notwithstanding bomb drop and ammo explosion. I enjoyed sitting like this regardless of everything around. In the mid of the staccato debris falling, a big fracas sounded close by, the two bodies sprung in a tight embrace. Van coiled up as for a protection and I was proud that I could use my strength offering her shield against all the bullets and explosives falling down. Then a loud scream coming like from a slashed cutthroat, “Van, Van, where are you”? It came from Assistant Le. Van like out of a dream, delicately got off the embrace to race toward the voice.

I was still absorbed watching the sky full of flower like clumps of smoke. A hissing sound went through the prison yard like an electrical zap, shaking violently the bony badamier branches. Then from the east two big fiery orange dots became bigger and bigger in the direction of Hoa Lo to change into blinding light. The two thunderous explosions came shaking loose the roof tiles. Fire happened close to Hoa Lo and I felt the heat in the mid of winter, the whole air seemed dense with smell of burning and ammo exploding. The alert lasted one hour. The loudspeakers shouted praise of the spirit of the fighters and the downing of a total of X American planes with a number of pilots taken prisoners. There was no electricity, a power plant or a transformer hit. Flashlights directed prisoners back to rooms and things calmed down with the news that three prisoners wounded by shrapnel.

## **EIGHTY-ONE**

### **The Judgment of Dang Chi Binh**

Tomorrow on 30 December, I had to go in front of the judges. Knowing that under the communist regime the trial was merely a mockery, I felt relaxed. At 7:30, Warden Bang called me out and inquired on my health since in the common camp. I answered him dryly, "All right". In the duty room, I saw two unknown yellow dressed police agents probably sent from the court to get me. After sign-off in the book, one man turned a very stern face to me, "According to regulation we have to lock your arms". I gave them my hands, which they secured in lock 8. I walked up front while the two men escorted me behind to Hoa Lo Street. The whole scene of my evasion reappeared, my lose bicycle chain, my race after throwing off the bicycle. It had been more than three and half years ago.

They led me to the direction of the former Hanoi Tribunal. From the day they escorted me to Ha Tinh to retrieve my buried stuff it was five years ago. Now I could again see one corner of the streets of Hanoi. Passersby looked with curiosity at a prisoner with hands locked and escorted by two armed police agents. What was in their mind when every family would have prisoners in their own circle? From my mind, I felt completely alien in a stranger world. Their lives did not relate to me at all. Anyway, if I fell into this pit it was due to them. I softly sighed. At the tribunal, they got me through a long corridor to a small room to sit down waiting while they guarded outside. My mind turned back to 1953 when I was a young boy going with other kids to see the skulls and bones of the Manchurians killed by Emperor Quang Trung in 1979. There was no change in the sight of the tribunal except for the big red sign "People Tribunal of Hanoi" with all black mossy walls around.

More than one hour later, they unlocked my arms to guide me to a big room with many persons sitting. In the middle, three imposing men sat on an elevated platform behind a shiny lacquered enclosure. The police agents led me to a varnished framed horseshoe structure. They went sitting down in the seats two meters behind me. There were only eight persons in a very quiet room. One could hear only the shuffling of papers and the tic-tock of a big clock on the wall. I was the only one standing behind the horseshoe frame. Suddenly the knock of a wooden gavel shook the picture of that bearded man on the wall. The Chief Judge stood up to ceremoniously state, "Respectful comrades, the court starts now. I invite Comrade representing the Public Prosecutor Office for comments". The thick-glassed man stood up clearing his voice, "Respectful Comrade Court Chair, Comrade representing the Control Institute and Comrade representing the People of Hanoi. Standing behind the horseshoe is the named Dang Chi Binh, alias, etc., agent of Diem-Americans. The CIA and the false South Vietnam regime trained him extensively to penetrate our capital of Hanoi to conduct reactionary actions against the party and the revolution. Anyhow, owing to the outstanding leadership of the party he was uncovered and arrested. Under a false student face, he is a very dangerous criminal, roving here and there, eating from 20 cents to

\$20 dinners, boarding from \$2 without mosquito net to \$6 a night. He slipped in the darkest alley to interact with all kind of persons. Arrested he still tried to cover all Diem-Americans crimes and almost killed a comrade to evade, etc.” The man lengthily talked for hours while I stood up tired and hungry, watching the clock arm swinging and the werewolf eyes of that old fox staring at me. I would want them to let me sleep regardless of what their judgment will be. The Public Controller’s turn came. He repeated the same, “We judge not only this criminal Dang Chi Binh but also the two big heads behind him”. I jumped looking behind me and realized that he talked of the American aggressor and Diem the henchman. The session took the whole morning. The court adjourned and they locked me again to escort back to Hoa Lo.

I had the time to gobble up my two bowls of rice and I returned to the tribunal like in the morning under armed escorts. This time was the turn of the People Representative. He stood up and shouted, remonstrated, his trembling hands holding the papers, his lower lip extended out like from the mouth of shark, chanting the dictatorship of the proletariat under the leadership of Uncle Ho, spraying saliva to the other men who kept wiping it off. “This Dang Chi Binh is very dangerous. I propose to punish him the maximum as a face slap to the number one American imperialist and their henchman Ngo Dinh Diem”. Finally, the Chief justice pointed his finger at my face and stated, “I permit the accused to say a few words”. My two feet were numb standing too long and I slowly stated, “Respectful court, you have precisely determined what I did. Through this court, I see clearly the outstanding regime of our country. That is the end of my statement”.

Another wood gavel knock and the court went in the back room for deliberation. Ten minutes later, they went out like a herd and the wooden gavel sounded again. The head magistrate about fifty having his nose tip naturally bent upward giving you the feeling that he always stared to the ceiling, stood stiff and ceremoniously read:

*“Viewing,*

*“The Gravity and importance of the crime*

*“The Security of the people and the state*

*“To increase the alertness on the dangerous stratagem of Diem-Americans in war*

*“To show the generosity of the party using reeducation as the principal mean*

*“This court decides*

*“To give Dang Chi Binh 18 years incarceration and five years loss of citizen rights.*

The two police led me to a room where there was a man about 40 behind a desk with dossiers. I sat in front of him as indicated. He talked in a rural Bui Chu Turkey tone, “According to the rules of the people court, you have the right to sign the appeal fifteen days after the judgment was given. Do you want to sign your appeal”? I shook my head no and he gave me a paper to sign accordingly. No problem, I signed it at once because “the party can never be wrong”. Now I am 29, I had been in prison for six years. Therefore, with twelve additional years I will be 41, still young enough!

The two armed police agents again escorted me back to Hoa Lo. All the kids surrounded me and when they knew of my eighteen years judgment, they shook their heads and pulled out their tongue saying, “Your life is finished”! In addition, they wondered why I stay so cool with no change in my usual behavior. Anyhow, as I had proved to them that what I did was just sightseeing, the eighteen years penance was too much. Then, my thoughts and what I did without their knowledge perhaps made the judgment too lenient.

## **EIGHTY-TWO**



## **From Hanoi Hilton to Vietnam Gulag**

I had thought that I could enjoy my first Tet in the common camp of Hoa Lo. Anyhow, ten days after the court, very early in the morning when it was still pitch dark and a steady freezing drizzle made everything wet and chilly, several cadres rushed in to call out 50 or 60 children's names and mine as the only adult. When we all assembled in the yard, Assistant Le informed us that we would go to reeducation camps; some to Mai Linh while others to Ky Son Camps. I had only time to shake hands good-bye to a few and I wondered why they shipped me to Ky Son, which is a kids' camp while I was the worst political prisoner?

I had in my arms a bundle of clothing supplied by the kids. A column of ragtag kids covered with gall and sores followed me to the gate of Hoa Lo. One unfamiliar police agent came up to lock my hands with lockset 8 and I let him do as wanted since for more than six years my body was not mine anymore. At 5 am, we went out of the gate. It was predawn and the sky was still grey. In the sweaty wetness of winter, a person raced out from the cadres' rows with unkempt hair catching the attention of a wide-eyed Le. I had seen it from afar. They could lock my hands but they were unable to lock my heart speeding up at the sight of that shape. From the movie night, I always tried to avoid her, thinking that she might realize her misplaced love. Cadre Le shouted, "Where are you running to at such an early time"? She raised two vials of medicine saying that she had promised gall pomade to two children who would not be able to get it in the Camp. She breathed heavily showing a pale white face and she glanced at me with the color of her eyes changing from fresh green jasmine to wilt yellow. The small drops of fine rain wetted her eyelashes, her full pinky lips of the days before starting to fade trembling like sobbing. I turned my eyes at the line of trees with frenzied leaves in communion with the broken heart of an unachieved first love.

The children orderly climbed up the two old trucks. Forty of them boarded the truck to Ky Son in Hoa Binh. They had to help me up where were two armed security men with their CKC guns. At the front seat was a driver flanked by an armed police agent. Through the thin curtain of fine drizzle, Nurse Van was at the gate with a white foulard wiping off the rain or the tears of regret and separation. Did she weep for the young creatures in the harshness of imprisonment? Did she shed tears for a forever-lost love? Watching in the haze of drizzle, the deserted streets of Hoa Lo and the tiny raindrops dancing in the wind with my hands in the freezing lock, I turned my mind to the melancholy of a tune by Pham Duy with lyrics by Cung Tram Tuong, "winter sky in Paris, forever making separation". "Hah! Winter in Hanoi is sadder! Winter of Hanoi Hilton, farewell to the girl of Hung Yen"! The truck slowly rolled out. The image of Hoa Lo receded while the truck moved into the winter drizzle.

## **EIGHTY-THREE**

### **On My Way to The Gulag**

I bid farewell to Hoa Lo. The never-ending drizzle in the north wind hissed under a mournful grey sky. The truck slowly rolled out of Hanoi to the North Country. My conscious was heavy with the separation of the first love of the girl from the land of plenty of Hung Yen and the end of my six years in Hoa Lo, which was the lengthy period of my stormy sufferings. The images of farewell to Hoa Lo were encompassing my mind when the shout of an armed security pulled me off my dream, "Stop". The old truck slowly stopped. The armed security and the police agent sitting next to the driver jumped out fast chasing a miniscule shadow rushing through green bushes on the right side of the highway. The pop sound of a gun followed by two other gunfire sounds echoed in forlorn scenery. The scream of a wounded beast pathetically hooted in the rain. The children in the truck noisily rustled under the CKC muzzle of the other armed security loading his gun.

I was absorbed by the girl from Hung Yen and did not pay attention to the presence of six or seven teenage girls among them Thanh the missing teeth girl whom Trung Ly Thu ordered to carry my stuff. I spanned my eyes to see all the witty children sitting quiet and glancing furtively to the explosion and the scream. From a bush, the security and the police agent hoisted the armpits of a young 14 years old kid out. He was so skinny looking like a small frog, a big bump bleeding on his red face and his right leg broken under knee dangling inside his pants sleeve. In the truck, a voice said it was Toothless Hoang of Mo Market. Dumped on the truck bed kid Hoang kept wailing with his eyes shut, "I beg you uncles, please forgive me; I want to see my mom. I will not do it again".

From a remote hamlet, several haggard armed guerilla men raced out. An Army Command car coming from the opposite direction also stopped with a few junior officers alighting to see what happened. They looked at the body of the kid bleeding and wailing in supplications. The Hoa Lo police agent coldly told the officers and guerilla men to move on since there was simply one prisoner evasion. One Army Lieutenant pointed his finger at the skinny leg of the kid to say, "Comrade you must take him to the hospital otherwise he will die with such a hemorrhage". The security men seemed angry and the Hoa Lo Police agent stared at the officer face saying coldly, "We have special mission. We are not going for fun". He ordered the driver to roll straight on, "We are late".

The guerilla men and junior officers still stood there pensive. What was in the back of their minds, there is no easy guess, and one thing you can be sure of is they should be concerned with their pot of rice. The roaring of the old truck could not hide the tragic wailing of the dying Toothless Hoang. Looking at his skinny body changing to a dirt grey color and the stump of his bone covered by messy flesh I felt heat mounting to my head. I looked at Trung Ly Thu and directed my eyes to the two security men, I told Thanh the missed tooth girl to open my bundle and get my pants for Trung Ly Thu to bandage his leg. The security with chilly face turned the other way watching the scenery around the roadway and Tien the Rail-Station took his vest to cover the poor kid. Now his face turned black and the bleeding stopped. Some kids shouted, "He is dying" while there was an imperceptible wailing followed by the hacking, "I beg ... uncles". We stared at each other voiceless. The girls clumped together with teary eyes. Thanh leaned her head to my shoulder shaking and sobbing, perhaps thinking of her homeless life in this sad dusty unforgiving world. My mind and heart were all knotty.

Looking at the country and the people bewailing in misery I turned to my destiny on my way to the unknown cruel jungle. I stared at the innocent teardrops to think that they were also my mournful tears for my native country, my youth and my life. Suddenly the pitiful hoot of Hoang followed his violent shake and his eyes turned up white. His mouth moved a little like trying to say something and then his arms and legs relaxed to stretch out motionless. The kids clustered frightened seeing Hoang's eyes turned up toward the armed security man as if he was begging, "Uncles, please forgive me". The girls cried and the boys screamed making my heart saddened and my eyes bitter. The truck stopped and the Police Aspirant of Hoa Lo descended looking at the cadaver frowning his menacing eyes to say, "Keep quiet, what do you cry for? Any of you wanting to evade has to learn the example. I shall shoot him dead"! They discussed things while the driver stepped down to have a look at Hoang's body and then coolly climbed back to his seat, as if it was a usual thing.

It was almost 10am, the sky cleared up and rain stopped. After discussing with each other, the Aspirant went back to the remote hamlet to be out with one four-pocket man followed by two young guerilla men having an old reed mat. They spread open the reed mat on the road, got the corpse down and rolled it up in it to carry to a dirt path in thick brush. The truck rolled forward again. I thought of my pants covering Hoang's leg and the begging of the kid before his death. His wish now fulfilled; his "uncles" in a common accord bestowed his desire freeing him to see his mother. The story of Hoang haunted me when Trung Ly Thu came next to me whispering that Hoang was from Mo Market and his dad was a retired Army man. I whispered to his ears, "Remember this location. When you will be free, go inform his

parents”. The kids quickly forgot things. After screaming and crying, they now started again talking and kidding as if nothing had happened.

It was almost noon and the sun appeared shedding rays on a cemetery where there were two new tombs next to each other under new yellow soil. One kid shouted, “Tombs of American pilots”, while another one said, “Also of our pilot”. I was surprised when Trung Ly Thu whispered to my ear, “During an air raid of Hanoi two airplanes followed in a dog fight and both of them were downed by anti-aircraft batteries of Ky Son. In confusion, they mistook that all two were Americans and buried them next to each other. The kids got excited seeing Ky Son Camp when the truck moved into a narrow road. The security man told me to stay put and I had only time to say farewell to Trung Ly Thu who said, “They take you to the Central Camp. Take care of your health, uncle”! I smiled at him and a feeling of solitude invaded me. Looking from my hands under locks to the kids going by pairs into the camp through a security man check with notebook and pen, I saw further in a few long bamboo barracks of a uniformed grey color like the wet soaked ground and the bloody flag on top of the administration and armed security post. Two fences of barbed wires surrounded the whole area.

A group of young teenagers went in single line escorted by an armed security man. Each boy hauled two heavy baskets over brimmed with cassava tubers. When they passed the water buffalo stall where one boy was feeding the animals with straw. The boy carrying the load of tubers shook his carriage to drop on the road a fat tuber the size of a forearm. The animal feeder sprung out like a squirrel, picking up the tuber and rolling it under his waistband. The armed security man caught his bloody hand shouting, “You steal that tuber”. The boy about 15 with two black bony legs twisted his clasped hands, “Uncle, I do not mean it. I just ...” He had not finished his sentence when the solid sound of the gun butt hit his side sending him to the ground and the cassava tuber rolled out. The security man was ready for another hit when he suddenly stopped, running to the cassava carriers to put the tuber in the carriage ahead. He again faced back raising his gun to the contorted boy face shouting the threat to report to the disciplinary office. The kid got up limping toward the buffalo stall directing with regret his grimacing face to the full load of tubers.

By myself on the truck in company of the security man, I followed the living scene with a feeling of loss, pushing out a sigh for the bitterness of the animal life. I was deep in my reflections when a man about 30 dressed in a torn cotton vest patched randomly climbed up giving me a ball of rice under leaf wrap in his blackened hand saying, “This is your ration. I am also going to the camp”. I got my rice when the guard named Nhuong loudly said, “As you belong to the self-educated progress group I do not lock your hands. Anyhow, during the travel if you side tract I will prosecute at one”. The newcomer showed a pleased face to rush his answer, “Cadre, I was granted self education by the administration of this camp for a year now. I have only one year left to serve and I would not be so stupid”. Seeing his behavior, I turned chilly not saying a word, playing dumb through the very long travel.

Rain fell again, an unending drizzle of end of winter. Gusts of north wind pushed through the truck wagon slashing your skin in precise surgery chilly cut. I trembled and was unable to release the knot of my bundle to get the mosquito net out for use as a blanket. I did not want to ask assistance from the co-traveler who turned his face the other way being certainly aware of my unfriendly attitude. Hungry and frozen, my whole body shook uncontrollably. I made an effort to gnaw the ball of stale rice with salt. The truck rolled nearly an hour. It was probably 2pm. I closed my eyes, my body up and down on an uneven roadway. Suddenly the sounds of drumbeats followed by shouting “Double your efforts, everybody for the winter-spring harvest”! I opened my eyes to see some ready rice fields wafting the heavenly ripeness aroma. In the background were high mountain ranges under a canopy of clouds. Through the rain curtain a procession of women under rain gear waded through the muddy fields cutting the rice stalks, in the presence of a couple of soaked wet red flags. A banner was erected on the perimeter in red characters, “Do not quit when it rains and do not relax when it is sunny. Do not be away from the

sun; do not leave the moon behind”. A man under a nylon tarp with a beret ran back and forth shouting the slogan through a bullhorn.

I directed my mind to the past. The same scene happened with the peasants up before the rooster for the field in the wee hours working in the muddy chilly stuff. At the end of the long day toiling, they hauled home their harvest load. There was no difference now except that they had to haul the fruit of their labor to the storage bin of the people.

The truck stopped when I was still deep in my contemplative mood. The armed security jumped down shouting, “Down”! It took me a while before I could manage to descend with my bundle under a very light drizzle. One small dirt path forked to two directions, each one going to hilly terrain with immense fields of cassava and sweet potato. On the left was a vast flat area surrounded by a wall of stones 4 to 5 m high topped with barbed wires. The wall is mossy green and reed and vegetation went up to half wall at many places. On the roadside, 300 m from where the truck parked was a solid gate where the gate doors were gone leaving huge rusty hinges. Above the gate was a building having yellow tattered paint. Looking into the gate there was not a single construction with here and there tons of old bricks and masonry on foundations of various levels. It looked like a location abandoned for years.

The security man Nhuong turned to the common criminal man (I knew through his conversation with the other man). He pointed his finger at the uphill dirt path on the right, “You go up this way”. Then I had the urge to urinate after nearly one day sitting on the truck. He looked at me with suspicion and ordered the armed militia, “Comrade, take him out”. It was at a small bush on the roadside and the armed security man had to stand behind me. Though I was dead tired I chuckled, even to go urinating I had two strong bodyguards with gun and pistol to care for me. This skinny man still had his hands locked. Therefore, I had a hard time on an uneven road with the bundle of clothes in my arms.

The road went up as slippery as oil. The freezing wind felt like needles pricking my skin. The scenery of hilly jungle under rain exacted my skinny unsteady body. The two arms used to keep balance were locked I slipped on the muddy stuff at an uneven elbow and tumbled; the bundle fell out rolling into the cassava field. Perhaps they saw my problem and besides as I moved too slowly they told the common prisoner to carry the bundle for me. We went into a thick bamboo forest where out of the grating sound of bamboo trunks the howling of some bird made me feel more lonesome. Far in, at the base of the hill a rain soaked red flag stood out in the immensity of the green jungle. Sparsely distributed among the trees surrounding the white flag pole were several houses. I slowly advanced on the slippery uneven road going uphill. Turning to the edge of a bare hill, I saw a group of thirty prisoners working the ground into long planters for sweet potato. They looked very young from 18 to 25 under all kinds of shredded torn vestments unable to cover their skinny bodies under the freezing rain and wind. They worked in pairs, one hoeing while his mate shoveled. An armed security under his Army plastic raingear walked back and forth supervising. When I was in Hoa Lo, I had heard of inmate labors in the reeducation camps. Anyhow, I did not fully visualize the life of prisoners toiling in those secluded fringe border areas. Walking by they stopped to look at me with their white-grey eyes and one of them shouted, “New prisoner”! Another man said, “He looks like a cadre”. Those brief sounds died down quickly in the winter environment. What was in their mind seeing a hand-locked prisoner moving slowly having a servant prisoner carrying his bundle? Nhuong the armed security displayed a cold face, not even exchanging a hello with his comrade standing on the roadside.

I looked forward to twelve years of hardship and torture in the communist so-called re-education camp, which is the euphemism for the Russian word Gulag.