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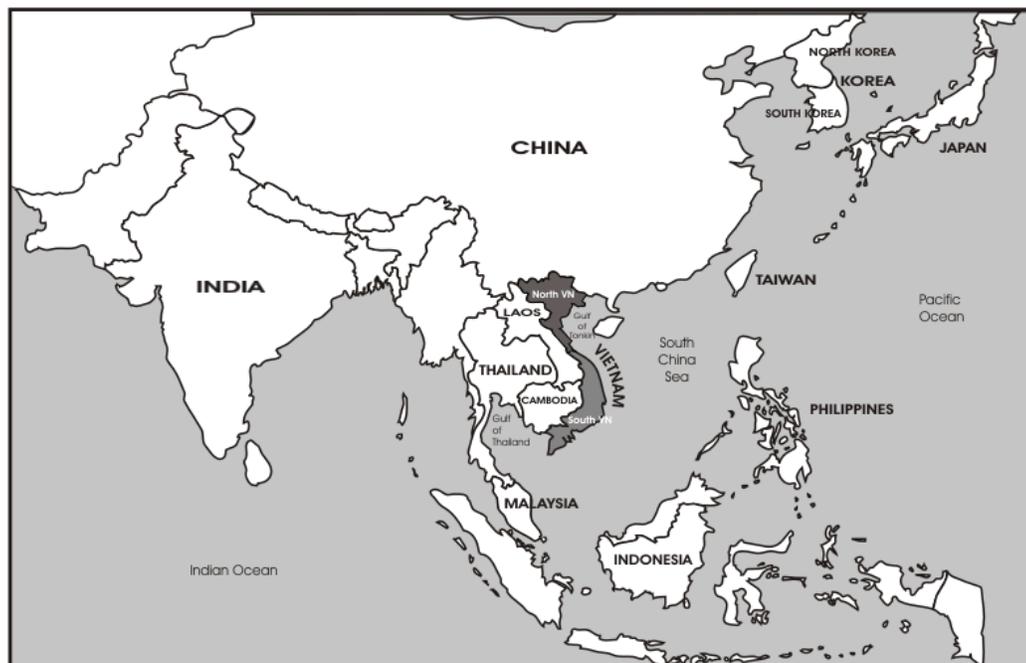
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PREFACE

This book was not written about a person, some landscape, or love. Its main emphasis was to portray the lifestyle, the way of thinking, and the behavior of generations of Vietnamese during and after the prolonged war. A war -- conducted by puppets from both Capitalist and Communist blocks -- that was imposed on a people who only wanted to live in peace and harmony among themselves and among all other peoples in the world.

If this book is able to raise some minimal awareness about the background of the Vietnamese people, awareness that leads to the understanding of the real Vietnamese whose reputation has been smeared for so long by individuals and news media, then it has fulfilled the purpose set forth by the author as well as the contributors.

The author wishes to express all her love to her husband, children, sister, and brothers for their inspiration, encouragement, and support throughout the completion of the book. And her deepest gratitude to the people without whose assistance -- in typesetting, editing, proofreading, lay out, and design -- the book would have still remained only as scattered ideas in the heart of a Vietnamese woman.



VIETNAM IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

(Map of Viet Nam in South East Asia)

A SHORT NOTE ON VIETNAM'S HISTORY

Viet Nam is both a very old and very young country: Old, because the country herself was first acknowledged of in the late third millenium before Christ; young, because Viet Nam only started to be better known by the larger world in the 1960's with the presence of the American troops fighting alongside her people against the invasion by the Communists.

From 257BC, the country was annexed to the Chinese empire for more one thousand years, during which the Vietnamese never stopped their struggle against what they called the enemy of the North.

Viet Nam regained her independence from the Chinese in 968AD, an independence lasting till 1884. During that millenium of independence, the Vietnamese had to fight the same invaders from the North. Among their achievements, to maintain their fate in their own hands, they defeated -- not only one, but three consecutives times -- the Mongol troops, the invincible cavalry whose horses' feet trampled throughout the whole world.

During this time, to gain living space, Viet Nam also expanded her boundary southward, against the Champa kingdom.

From the seventeenth until (and especially in) the late eighteenth century, Viet Nam was divided and weakened as the industrialized western countries were plying the under-developed world for her raw materials and markets. Consequently, for more than sixty years, western religious forces and secular powers plotted to turn Viet Nam into part of a French colony known as Indochina, a conglomeration of Laos, Cambodia, and Viet Nam.

During the second world war, Indochina was under Japanese occupation. Soon after the war ended, Viet Nam was the first of the three Indochinese countries to initiate the fight for independence. Unfortunately, shortsighted French policy pushed the Vietnamese people into the hand of the Communist Party, so that for more than thirty years Viet Nam was a battlefield between the two superpowers -- American capitalism and Russian communism -- and a hedge against Communist expansion, to the benefit of the Southeast Asian countries (who prospered under American aid) and world peace.

Presently, Viet Nam is one of the last four remaining communist countries in the world: China, Viet Nam, North Korea, and Cuba.

MAIN CONTEMPORARY EVENTS IN VIET NAM

1905, Eastbound Movement: Phan Boi Chau clandestinely went to Japan seeking help and appealed compatriots to go overseas learning science and technology to modernize the country and overthrow the French

1925, Phan Boi Chau caught by the French in Shanghai (China) and brought back to Viet Nam to condemn to house arrest

1927, Viet Nam People's Party (VPP): Nguyen Thai Hoc formed the nationalist party to chase the French

1930:

- February 10, VPP uprising without success, 35 members got death penalty and executed

- March 2, Viet Nam Communist Party: Ho Chi Minh formed the party in China, soon changed to Indochina Communist Party by order of the Comintern, to embrace altogether Cambodia and Laos

1931, July 22, Nghe Tinh Soviets: communist uprising in Central Viet Nam under the slogan "Intellectuals, affluents, landlords and notables, extirpate them from their base, overturn them from their roots"

1940, September 22, Japanese troops entered Viet Nam

1945:

- March 9, Japanese overthrew French in Viet Nam. Emperor Bao Dai declared Viet Nam independent, annihilated all unequal treaties between France and Viet Nam -- August 14, Japan surrendered

- August 19, communists organized meeting in Ha Noi (North Viet Nam) asking for power
 - August 30, Bao Dai abdicated
- 1946:
- March 6, Viet Nam communist government signed the Preliminary Accord, admitting French troops into North Viet Nam
 - December 19, armed conflict between French and Vietnamese communists. Communists went back to the maquis
- 1948, May 15, ex-emperor Bao Dai sent message to major general Nguyen Van Xuan approving the establishment of the anti-communist Provisional Central Government of Viet Nam
- 1949, Chinese communists conquered the whole mainland
- 1950, with the help of Communist China, first Vietnamese communist victory over the French at the Sino-Viet Nam borders
- 1954:
- French troops defeated at Dien Bien Phu
 - Geneva Accord between France and Vietnamese Communists partitioned Viet Nam into North and South Viet Nam
- 1956, communist implemented without mercy the "agrarian, industrial and cultural reforms" to repress the North, preparing invasion of the South (Viet Nam) 1959, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Resolution 15 deciding to invade South Viet Nam 1960, December 20, communists formed the People's Front for the Liberation of South Viet Nam (Mat Tran Dan Toc Giai Phong Mien Nam)
- 1965, March 8, American troop first assigned to Viet Nam
- 1968, January 30, at dawn on the first day of the Tet (Lunar New Year) truce, communists launched the bloody Mau Than Offensive
- 1973:
- January 27, an agreement "ending the war and restoring peace" in Viet Nam was signed principally in Paris by the United States and North Viet Nam -- March 29, last US troops leave South Viet Nam, ending nearly 10 years of US military intervention
- 1975:
- April 23, President Ford said "the war is finished, as far as America is concerned"
 - April 29-30, largest helicopter evacuation began removing the last Americans from Sai Gon, including US Ambassador Graham Martin
 - By dawn on April 30, communist forces moved into Sai Gon

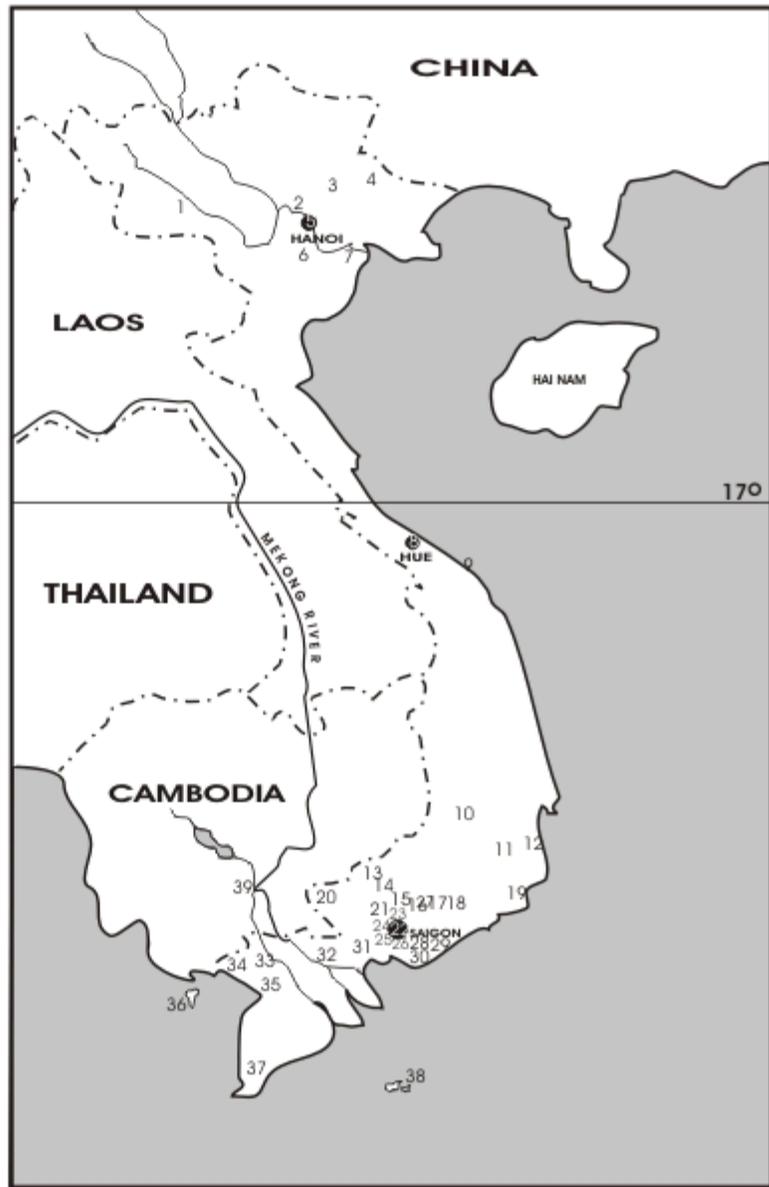
List of Cities and Provinces mentioned in text

An giang (33), Ban me thout (10), Bien Hoa (15), Binh duong (21), Binh long (13), Can tho (32), Cho lon (25), Con son (38), Da lat (11), Da nang (9), Gia dinh (23), Ha nam ninh (6, Ha nam, Nam Dinh, Ninh binh), Ha noi (5), Ha tien (34), Hai phong (7), Hue (8), Khanh hoi (26), Lang son (4), Lang cha ca (24), Long binh (27), Long khanh (17), Long thanh (28), Minh hai (37), My tho (31), Nha trang (12), Phan rang (19), Phuoc Long (14), Phuoc tinh (29), Phu quoc (36), Phnom penh (39), Rach gia (35), Sai gon (22), Song be (16), Son la (1), Tay ninh (20), Thai nguyen (3), Vinh phu (2, Vinh yen, Phuc yen), Vung tau (30), Xuan loc (18)

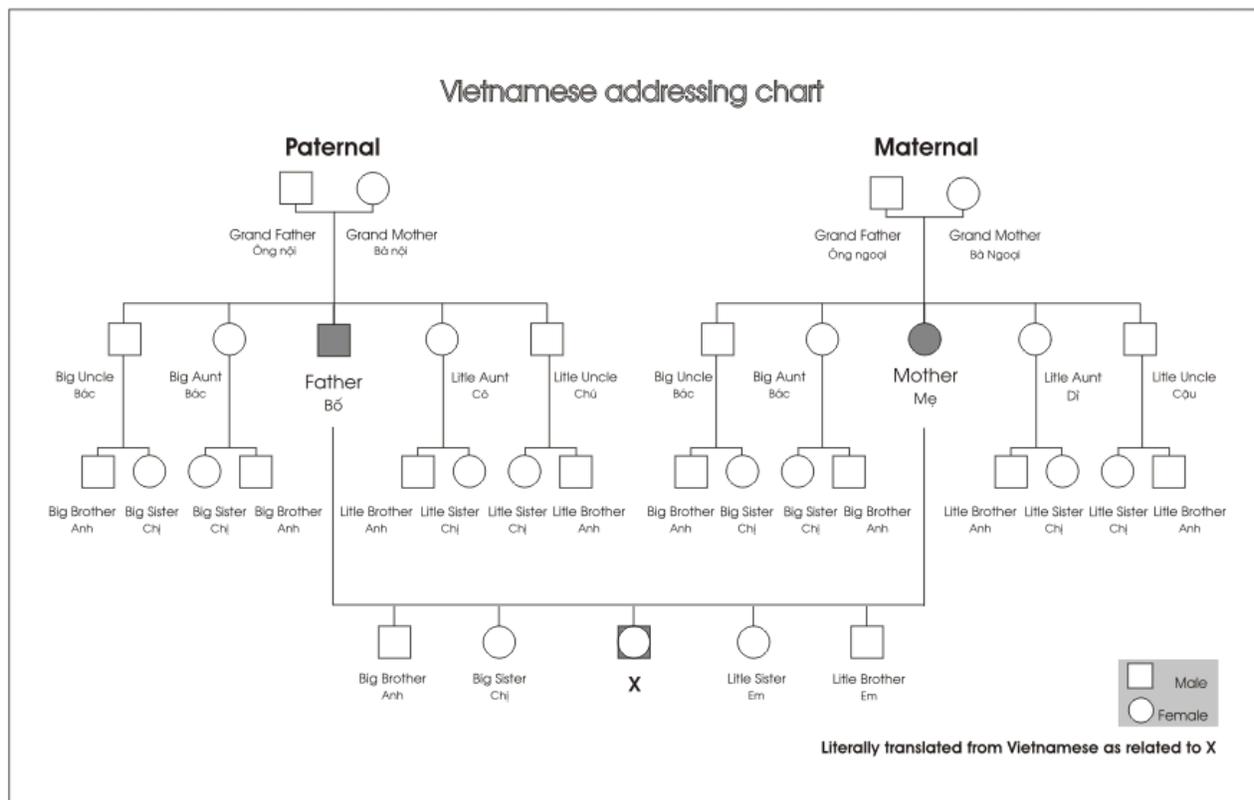
PLACES MENTIONED

- AN GIANG (33)
- BAN MÊ THUỘT (10)
- BIÊN HÒA (15)
- BÌNH DƯƠNG (21)
- BÌNH LONG (13)
- CẦN THƠ (32)
- CHỢ LỚN (25)
- CÔN SƠN (38)
- ĐÀ LẠT (11)
- ĐÀ NẴNG (9)
- GIA ĐỊNH (23)
- HÀ NAM NINH (6)
(HÀ NAM, NAM ĐỊNH, NINH BÌNH)
- HÀ NỘI (5)
- HÀ TIÊN (34)
- HẢI PHÒNG (7)
- HUẾ (8)
- KHÁNH HỘI (26)
- LẠNG SƠN (4)
- LÀNG CHA CẢ (24)

- LONG BÌNH (27)
- LONG KHÁNH (17)
- LONG THÀNH (28)
- MINH HẢI (37)
- MỸ THO (31)
- NHA TRANG (12)
- PHAN RANG (19)
- PHƯỚC LONG (14)
- PHƯỚC TỈNH (29)
- PHÚ QUỐC (36)
- PHNOM PENH (39)
- RẠCH GIÃ (35)
- SÀI GÒN (22)
- SÔNG BÉ (16)
- SƠN LA (1)
- TÂY NINH (20)
- THÁI NGUYÊN (3)
- VĨNH PHÚ (2)
(VĨNH YÊN, PHÚC YÊN)
- VÙNG TÁU (30)
- XUÂN LỘC (18)



(Map of Viet Nam)



(Vietnamse addressing chart)

HOW DO THE VIETS GET THEIR NAMES?

As in the case in many other cultures, the full name of a Viet is composed of at least a family name, inherited from the father, and a given name, bestowed by the parents upon the child's birth.

Vietnamese family names (with a total of about 100 in the whole country) normally have no particular significance, but given names usually have some specific meaning.

In most cases, given names stand for the hope parents have for their children. Some might have names like Tai, meaning talent, Duc, virtue, or Nghia, loyalty. All are good characteristics for males. Auspicious daughters' names are Van, cloud, Mai, apricot plant, Lan, orchid, Cuc, chrysanthemum, or Truc, meaning bambou. The hope is that the daughters will grow up as beautiful as cloud in the sky or as lovely as the flowers and plants named.

The one-word names are in their easy-to-call, shortened forms. However, there is usually an attributive word added in front of each given name, giving more description to it. For example Dai Tai means great talent, Huu Duc means having virtue, Trong Nghia means having respect for loyalty, Hong Van means pink cloud, Xuan Mai means spring apricot plant, Bach Lan means white orchid, Thu Cuc means autumn chrysanthemum, and Thanh Truc means green and lush bamboo. On formal occasions, compound names or even family names should be referred to, for example Ngo tong thong (President Ngo), Ho chu tich (Chairman Ho).

VIETNAMESE FAMILY NAMES

(Undoubtedly some are Chinese due to the millenium of annexation) An, Âu

Bạch, Bàng, Bành, Bé, Bì, Biện, Bò, Bù

Ca, Cái, Cao, Cầm, Cấn, Chà, Châu (Chu), Chế, Chiêm, Chủ, Chử, Chung, Chuong, Cò, Công, Cù, Cung

Dân, Danh, Diệp, Diêu, Doãn, Du, Dương

Đái (Đới), Đám, Đan, Đang, Đãng, Đặng, Đào, Đậu, Đền, Điều, Đinh, Đoàn, Đổ, Đồng, Đổng, Đường
Giang, Giảng, Giáp, Giới
Hà, Hạ, Hàn, Hãn, Hình, Hoa, Hoàng (Huỳnh), Hồ, Hổ, Hồng, Hứa Kha, Khâm, Khâu, Khấu, Khiếu, Khổng, Khu, Khuất, Khúc, Khương, Khuru, Kiều, Kim, Kỳ
La, Lã, Lạc, Lai, Lại, Lâm, Lầu, Lê, Liễu, Linh, Lò, Lô, Lỗ, Lữ, Lục, Lương, Lưu, Luyện, Lý
Ma, Mã, Mạc, Mạnh, Mai, Miêu, Mùa, Mũi
Nam, Ngạc, Nghê, Nghi, Nghiêm, Nghiêu, Ngọc, Ngô, Ngu, Ngũ, Ngụy, Nguyên, Nguyễn, Nguu, Nhan, Nhâm, Nhữ, Ninh, Nông, Nồng
Ô, Ôn, Ông
Phạm, Phan, Phàng, Phi, Phí, Phó, Phò, Phù, Phùng, Phương
Quách, Quan, Quán, Quảng, Quỳnh
Se, Soa, Sơn, Sờ, Sứ, Sự
Tạ, Tào, Tăng, Thạch, Thái, Thâm, Thân, Thào, Thiệu, Thôi, Thục, Tiết, Tiêu, Tô, Tôn, Tống, Trâm, Trần, Trang, Trát, Triệu, Trương, Tuấn, Từ, Tường
Ung, Ứng, Ứng, Vân, Vi, Võ (Vũ), Voòng, Vương, Vuu.

HOW DO THE VIETS ADDRESS EACH OTHER?

In Vietnamese address, two things should be considered.

First, the legend regarding Viet origin is particularly important. According to this legend, the Viets are descendants from the group of one hundred offsprings delivered by the fairy mother Au Co in a sac. The Viets therefore see the whole populace as a big family and consider themselves as virtually all related, as *dong bao*, meaning of the same amniotic sac.

Second, unlike most other peoples, the Viets do not use the simple I and You forms when referring to themselves and to people they are speaking to. When referring to oneself, the individual will use a form denoting his or her relationship to the one spoken to.

When talking with one's father or mother, one will refer to oneself as *con* (son, daughter, child). When communicating with the father or mother's brothers and sisters, the term will be *chau* (nephew, niece). The same word *chau* will be used in communicating with grandparents because *chau* also has the meaning of grandchild.

When talking to an elder sibling, the referent is *em* (young sister/brother). Conversely, when speaking with a younger brother or sister, an older sister will refer to herself as *chi* (older sister) and an older brother will be *anh*. With the exceptions of helpers and tenants in the agricultural sub-culture, who always consider themselves as children or grandchildren to the landowners regardless of their ages, non-related people are addressed on the basis of age. People of similar age as one's grandparents are referred to as *ong*, meaning grandpa or *ba*, meaning grandma. People of similar age as one's uncles and aunts are referred to as *bac* or *chu*, father's older or younger brother; or *cau*, mother's brothers; or *co* or *di/gia*, father's sisters or mother's sisters. People similar in age are referred to as *anh* or *em*, or *chi* or *em*. The way the Viets address one another in their extended family is very precise, contains much emotion, and is pretty complicated, especially in the northern part of the country. Furthermore, certain other reasons make person-to-person address confusing. Those who are not familiar with terms of address are prone to be mistaken about the relationship between the persons in question. First, there are usually several terms to address the same person in the family (e.g., *mẹ*, *me*, *má*, *mợ*, *mãng*, *u*, *bầm*, *đẻ* all mean mother).

Second, depending on how much feeling people want to show and on how close they want to be to the people they are talking to or about, the terms people use referring to themselves and addressing others will change. For example, a man might be addressed by his son as *ong* (grandfather). The son has put himself in the position of his own son (i.e., the father's grandson) because he wants to show more respect. Conversely, when talking to his grandfather, another man might refer to himself as *con*, meaning son, because he wants to show a closer relationship.

Another aspect deserving attention is the common practice of using terms from paternal side to show a closer relationship (i.e., calling someone bac or chu, or co, terms referring to one's father's siblings, rather than cau or di or gia, terms referring to one's mother's siblings).

Unlike Americans, who address their cousins as cousin or by name, Vietnamese cousins do not use the term cousin when they are speaking to each other. They refer to themselves and address their cousins by the same titles as people in their direct lineage. For example, there are two third cousins twice removed. One 60 years old Mr. A (of the 12th generation of an extended family) talking to Ms. B, who is much younger than he, Mr. A refers to himself as chau (grand-nephew) and addresses Ms. B as ba (great-aunt).

Another feature which makes the whole issue much, much more complicated is that these usages can change in families and do not follow any fixed pattern. Wives are addressed by their husband's names and, on many occasions, parents are addressed by the names of their older children. In most cases, people avoid addressing other by the later's own names and use their social titles or their ranks in family instead, e.g., ong phan (mister the clerk), thim giao (madam the wife of the teacher), ong hai (great uncle the second son in the family), bac ba (uncle the third son in his family or uncle the third oldest son who is one of the older brothers of one's father). In situation when some precision is needed, the short-form given names are added, making ong phan into ong phan Tai (mister the clerk whose first name is Tai), thim giao into thim giao Duc (madam the wife of the teacher whose first name is Duc), ong hai Nghia (great uncle the second son in his family with his first name of Nghia).

In the northern part of Viet Nam, only men are entitled to be addressed by their ranks in their families. Women are addressed by their own names and, once married, are addressed by their husbands' ranks. On the other hand, in the southern part, very possibly because of a stronger exposure to the French culture, men and women alike are addressed by their ranks, but the oldest children in the families are not addressed as ca, which means oldest, because this title is reserved for ong huong ca (the village chief), cha ca (the French catholic priest Pigneau de Béhaine, 1741-99), ong hoang ca (prince Canh, 1779-1801, crown prince of the founding emperor of the last Vietnamese dynasty).

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* *

PART ONE

I

For the last few nights, Van and many Saigoneses had been abruptly awakened by the chattering and rumbling of the 122mm rockets. After waking up, she just sat trembling in bed among the children to pray that the rockets would not hit her house. There was nothing she could do. Like millions of others, she just left it to fate.

Since the withdrawal of the government troops from the Highlands, Van had expected these shellings. Confined inside the house at night by the curfew at eight o'clock, she had lived in anxiety, awaiting the worst to come. Even the government denied it, everybody knew that Sai Gon had been besieged by the communists. This time, not the Southern guerillas but the North Vietnamese regulars, amounted to quite a few divisions. It was confirmed that they were well equipped with Russian made weapons and tanks.

After the fall of Ban Me Thuot and President Thieu's order to withdraw from the Highlands in March, the American officials started to leave the country. A rumor said that the U.S. Marines would be sent from the Seventh Fleet to set up a safety cordon between Sai Gon and Vung Tau, a

seaside resort town east of Sai Gon, to ensure the evacuation and then from there to the Seventh Fleet. But no such plan, if there were such a plan, could be carried out, since the battle of Xuan Loc, the last resistance of the South Viet Nam government troops, fell on April 20.

Now all roads leading to Sai Gon had been cut off.

In only over a month, one after another, all northern towns and cities had fallen. The communists were currently in control of the town only a hundred kilometers (60 miles) from Sai Gon, and at least six to ten of their best divisions were closing in.

Everyday, the Saigonese sensed that the siege got tighter and tighter, and they knew that, among tens of thousands refugees flooding into the city from the fallen towns, there must be thousands of infiltrators who came here to prepare for the soon-to-be last blow against the city.

It looked like there would be no hope for a negotiation despite Mr. Thieu's stepping down and left the country, a precondition asked by the communists. Of course they had no reason to halt their attack and negotiate knowing that they could completely win the war by overrunning the capital. In a month, they captured almost twenty provinces without fighting and they knew well Sai Gon could put up the resistance. But with a desintegrated army and an unstable government, it would not last long.

The Saigonese became nervous when Cambodia fell after many days of heavy shellings on Phnom Penh airport and, some days after that, the U.S. Defense Attache Office in Sai Gon began the mass evacuation of their Vietnamese employees.

For a week, Tan Son Nhut runways had been busy, not with jet bombers, but with U.S. Air Force C141 and C130's carrying the Saigonese to the newly set up tent city in Guam. Now the sky was the only escape route. One not only needed to have money but also good connections to get his fleeing ticket. Many wealthy people were furious when they found out that those who had worked as maids and chauffeurs for the Americans had been evacuated while, with all their money, they had not found a way out yet.

*

As for Van, she regretted that she did not follow her husband's plan, to go to Vung Tau and wait for the right time to board the fleeing boat that he and his friends had managed to moor there for their families. Chuong had made it clear that he wanted Van and the children to leave the country even without him, and he would join them abroad.

Although being confident that Chuong knew what he was going to do, Van did not want to leave him behind. Thus, on the day people came to pick her up, she decided not to go. Chuong was outraged when he found out about that, but then it was too late, since the road leading to Vung Tau was cut off. He then ordered her, by all means, to try to get out of the country by air before returning to his post in My Tho, a province eighty kilometers (50 miles) south of Sai Gon. Many nights Van could not go to sleep, overweighted by worries and anxieties to see daybreak. In the early morning, when the curfew was over, she went to the relatives and friends who had worked for the Americans to beg them to add her name and those of her four children to their lists. But it was so desperate, since many of them had refused to help for very good reasons, "We are very sorry, we wish that we could help you, but we can not, since we had more than twenty people on our list already."

After a long string of connections, Van found a woman who promised to put her children on the list of orphans to be evacuated. This woman planned to send her children ahead, then she and her husband would find a way to join them later. But the explosion of an airplane full of children a few minutes after take-off, killing many of them and scattering their bodies over the paddies in the outskirts of Sai Gon, ended the hope of many parents who planned to send their children to the U.S. that way.

Now Van's only hope clung to her single cousin who had worked for the American Embassy for ten years. He assured her that he would put her name and her children's down as his family. He said that one could take his parents, parents-in-law, unmarried brothers and sisters, wife and children.

But the brothers and sons should not be in drafting age, which meant from 18 to 45. It was fortunate that Van's children were only little girls. Her biggest concern was that her cousin had filed as single in his employee record. Would they question why suddenly he had a wife with four children? Van heard that many Americans and Vietnamese who had worked for the Americans had accepted U.S. dollars and gold to take people along with them. Thus, her cousin could get in trouble when they found out that he falsified his papers.

It was also rumored that over one hundred thousand officers and officials from colonel and director levels and their families would be evacuated. They said that the helicopters would land on the roofs of the high buildings to carry out the evacuation.

To play it safe, Van went around to be sure of the spots where helicopters would pick up evacuees at the last minutes. She kept her eyes on Duc Hotel which was not too far away from her house. This was the building where CIA personnel had resided for many years. Now it was almost vacant, since most Americans, in fact most foreigners, had left the city.

*

It was after 8 o'clock in the morning of Monday, April 28th, 1975 when Van's cousin showed up at her house. Van walked to the veranda to meet him as he stepped out of his car, greeted her with a smile, then followed her inside the house.

Looking around to see nobody in sight, he said quickly,

"Get ready, please, we're to leave now."

"Now?"

"Yes."

Though Van had tried to find all means to get out of the country, now she felt unreal when it is time to leave. Seeing her cousin still standing to wait for her, she said,

"Please sit down, I'll be ready in five minutes."

Rushed to the kitchen, Van found Mother and the servant talking about what to get in the market for the day.

"Sister Ba, go help the children get changed for me", Van told the servant.

After Ba left for the stairs, she turned to Mother,

"Mother, we are leaving now."

Van caught the look of sadness on Mother's wrinkled face. She rushed upstairs after her children to get changed herself.

After changing, she looked at the mirror to see if the girdle, made by Mother for her to put dollar bills and gold sheets that she wrapped around her waist, would show through her loose dark blue ao dai (robe). Van was confident that nobody would notice if he did not intend to pry. Looking around her bedroom for the last time before picking up her only suitcase and handbag set by the dresser, Van felt dazed. Could it be possible that she is taking her children and leaving her and Chuong's big families just like that?

Mother's voice from downstairs broke off her thought,

"Sister Ba, go tell your little aunt that little uncle is waiting."

Van rushed to the stairs and met sister Ba halfway who took the suitcase from her hand.

By the time Van reached the living room downstairs, Mother, with one year old Truc on her arms, walked along with Cousin to the door, followed by seven year old Mai, five year old Lan and three year old Cuc, her voice choked with emotion, "Please help her take care of the children. They are too young. I myself don't want them to leave, but I can not tell what's going to happen here." She was squeezing Truc in her arms. Van caught up with them when they got to the parked car. Mother stooped down to hug each girl and repeatedly kiss them on their forehead,

"Behave yourselves. Obey your mother."

Tears streaming down mother's wrinkled cheeks. Van turned away to wipe off her own.

By the time Van sat down at the front seat and mother put Truc on her lap, she could only blurrily see Mother and Ba through her tears. She nodded, but hardly comprehended what Mother

told her in an emotional, broken voice. The car started rolling. The children waved at Mother, but Van did not have the courage to look back.

*

Van arrived at one of the DAO (Defense Attache Office) compounds at the corner of Truong Minh Giang and Hien Vuong Streets, about 9 o'clock. The compound was high-walled and locked up by a huge, solid iron gate. The uniformed security man only opened the gate when the appropriate badge was shown.

The wall of the compound divided the two worlds.

Inside, hundreds of people well packed with suitcases and bags squeezed inside several huge hangars and a one-story air-conditioned office to wait for their names to be put on the manifest to flee the country.

Outside, life went on almost normally. Most stores opened. Civil servants and service men went to work as usual.

However, resigned President Thieu, his Prime Minister Khiem, many high officials and wealthy families had already left the country. The commercial flights had stopped coming to Sai Gon. The only way out was the airlift operated by the American Air Force. Many rich people, officials, officers, and anyone who wanted to flee had tried to get their flight through those who had been working for the Americans.

Van's cousin rushed to the small office to sign their names in the manifest while Van and her children waited in the parking space.

Looking around, Van found representatives of all walks of life. She recognized many senators among the many well-dressed people, the wealthy group who perhaps had to pay a lot of U.S. dollars or gold for their pass into this compound. Some men even wore their dark suits as if they were going abroad on official or business trips. Those who worked for the Americans could be distinguished from the other group.

(Since 1965, when the war escalated, a new class of people was formed in the Vietnamese society -- those who worked for the Americans. These people had been envied and looked down by many of their countrymen. The majority of them did not have any good schooling, yet their salaries were much higher than those with college educations who had been working for the government. For generations, many men's best dream had been to get a degree, find a job in the government and stay there until retirement. Now, these civil servants with a fixed income suffered the most from the inflation, except those who are in the position to bribe. The well-respected middle class is now living a meager life. They can no longer afford a live-in servant as before. Their servants either become bar girls, worked for the Americans in private homes or offices or various businesses around U.S. military installations. Their salaries were much higher than their former masters').

By their appearance and clothing, one could see that they included chauffeurs, maids, office clerks, secretaries and bar girls. They had a look that Van interpreted as, "See! You look down on us as a bunch of poor people who got to slave for the Americans for a living. Now, you, the so called high class of Sai Gon, have to bribe and beg the Americans to go with them."

*

A blue bus pulled out of the garage, followed by three more. A middle age American man and a young Vietnamese girl in western style printed flowered dress came out of the office. Holding the thick file of manifests in her hand, she shouted at the noisy crowd, "I'm going to only call out the names of the head of the family. Then he or she will take the whole family to board these buses to the airport. The rest of you will wait for your turn when we get more buses." After all seats were occupied, the four buses started rolling out of the wide, open gate. The four buses' load did not seem to decrease by much the head count of the crowd which increased quickly as the morning hours advanced toward noon. Looking at the crowd almost packed up the compound, Van

wondered, "Is this reality? Does history repeat itself? Twenty one years ago, in 1954, almost one million people left the North for the South. Now how many people will leave this country?"

However, there are many differences between these two exoduses. In 1954, the "communist government" made every effort to block, while the "nationalist government" encouraged the move, and the U.S. Navy ships were the biggest number in the world fleet volunteered to provide free transportation. Now, the government of Mr. Huong did not do anything to stop the U.S. Air Force from doing their job. It was strange that a foreign government could send their planes to this country to take as many people away as they wanted. Obviously, everybody knew who was the boss.

Actually, the government did have some passive reactions. They set up checkpoints at the entrance of the airport to arrest draft age men -- from 18 to 45. A minister went on TV to condemn the expatriate cowards who fled the fatherland like a bunch of rats. He promised to strip off their citizenship whenever they would repatriate. A general declared that he loved his country and would defend it to the last drop of his blood. Many people did not realize that, like other high ranking officers and officials, these two personages left the country not very long after their proclamations!

*

It passed one o'clock in the afternoon when the fleet of four loaded buses arrived at the checkpoint of the airport. A young American in his thirties, in civilian clothing, left the first bus to enter the checkpoint station. Van waited for a Vietnamese official to appear and check on the draft age men. To everyone's surprise, the American came out to signal the following buses to move on.

Driving around the airport, the buses then stopped at the military section which the U.S. Air Force had turned into the busiest airport in the world a few years ago.

A huge yellow and white tent gave sunshield to hundreds of people sitting on the cement floor of the chain-link fenced area.

Van set her bags down near the fence where she could find some space. She put Truc on top of the suitcase, and told her softly,

"Sit down, I'll get you some crackers."

"I'm thirsty, Mommy."

Following her eyes, Van saw her baby staring at the coke bottles in the ice chest on the ground.

"I'll get you one."

Van approached the old woman who was squatting on the concrete and busy opening bottles for customers,

"How much is it, aunt number two?"

"Five hundred dong."

"Five hundred?"

"Yes."

The woman did not bother to look up to notice the surprise on Van's face. According to official exchange rate, the 12 oz. coke cost over 1 U.S. dollar, fivefold the price downtown.

"Give me five bottles."

The woman agilely popped up five metal caps and quickly stuck five five-hundred dong bills in her blouse pocket. Van estimated that the fat pocket could be worth a month's salary for a middle level civil servant, and was thankful that Mother had suggested her keeping some Vietnamese currency.

*

After feeding her kids crackers and coke, Van stood up to look around. It was a large crowd of several hundred people. Except the new arrivals who still stood up and looked lively, the rest sat wearily on their luggage or concrete. Holding Truc in her arms, Van sat close to a middle age woman and started the conversation,

"How long have you been waiting here, big sister?"

"We got here early in the morning."

"Do you know when you board the plane?"

"There is no way to tell. I heard that many people had been waiting for a few days."

"A few days?"

"Yes. That's what I heard."

"Is there any priority? Like those who worked for the American Embassy or the DAO?"

"I have no idea. My husband worked for the Embassy, but he didn't know more than anybody else. Oh, your baby has fallen to sleep."

Van looked down at Truc's innocent face. Droplets of sweat appeared on her baby's forehead.

It is getting hot. The sky is high and clear blue. The thin nylon tent did not give much shade.

Van's cousin brought her three girls and all the luggage to her,

"Sit here with Mommy. I will go look around."

Van leaned over to get a handkerchief to wipe off Truc's sweat and used it to fan her.

She had to admit that she favored Truc more than her three big daughters. It seemed that they sensed it too and showed their jealousy sometimes. Van had to smooth them out,

"She's a baby."

Van knew why she loved Truc more. When Truc was born, the baby was received with disappointment even by her husband and her own family. As the first child, Mai was warmly welcomed. When she was one month old, Chuong's mother ordered a whole roasted pig and made a lot of colorful rice flour, baked and steamed goods to put on the altar to thank all the deities and ancestors and pray for her health for the coming years. Many friends and relatives were invited. It was their first grandchild. Mai got many tiny gold bracelets and chains. The party got smaller and smaller with each child. When it was Truc's turn, only family members were present. A one month old baby did not feel it, but Van sensed their disappointment. They had been waiting for a boy. Their patience ran out when one after another four girls were born in a row. Perhaps to compensate her for being rejected, Van loved and cared more for Truc. Bent down to kiss Truc's forehead, Van suddenly felt tired and did not want to think of anything anymore. Her eyelids became heavy. She dozed off.

*

She was awakened by noises around her. Upon opening her eyes, Van saw everybody standing up with luggage in their hands.

"Is it time to go?", someone asked.

"No, it's going to rain", another answered.

From nowhere, gray clouds covered the sky.

"We are going to that building", Van's cousin said, bending down to pick up the luggage.

"You three children, follow little uncle," Van put the baby down and tried to stand up.

Her feet were numb from sitting flat on the ground too long. When they reached the building, the rain was pouring down. People were crowded in the huge bowling alley. Van tried to squeeze toward the center of the room to get away from the doorway where more people were pushing in. On the floor, blankets and sheets were stretched hazardly where children and adults lay comfortably. They seemed to be content and felt safe here, knowing for sure that they would be flown out of the country.

Van looked around to find a spare space for her family.

"Van, Van!" Somebody was calling her name.

Van turned to see a chubby woman standing up waving both arms as if signaling for a plane to follow. Van recognized her high school classmate due to her spontaneous gesture. As the only child of a well-off and less conservative family, this girl had always acted -- to Van and many other friends -- childish, jumping up and down when she was upset or happy,

"Come here, take your children here."

Van walked toward her friend's quarter, a white sheet on the floor with two suitcases lying down as pillows.

"When did you get here?", the friend asked.

"Around one o'clock."

"I've been here four days."

"So, when are you going to leave?"

"I don't know. We paid an American two thousand dollars to bring us here and put our names in the manifest. We haven't see him today. Yesterday, he assured us and many others that everyone here will get on the plane sooner or later. By the way, where's your husband?"

"He's still in the province."

"Is he crazy? Still in the province at this time?"

"I know. He went home last week and I told him not to go, but he said Region IV was still calm, and he could not leave his post. I went with my cousin. See that skinny guy over there. He's with my three daughters."

Van signaled her daughters to come over,

"Children, say hello to big aunt Bich."

The three children crossed their arms around their chests and bowed their heads. Bich stood up to embrace three of them at one time in her arms. Van could see the genuine tenderness in her. Van had always felt sorry for her friend. Bich and her husband both were pharmacists and doing very well in business but they could not have a baby. Whenever Van felt sad about not having a boy yet, she thought about Bich and told herself that she was still better off.

"Are your parents with you?" Van asked her friend.

"No. They don't want to go. I signed over the pharmacy to them."

Boom! Boom!

The whole building was shaken.

"Is it thunder?" someone asked.

"No. It's the rocket," answered another one.

Everybody in the room jumped to their feet. All talked at the same time. Nobody could hear what the others were saying.

"Out! Everyone out of the building," somebody repeatedly shouted in the megaphone.

In an instant, like the water flooding through the broken dike, the human wave flowed toward the door. Van had just enough time to pick up Truc when people started pushing from behind, making her move forward.

"Hold on to little uncle," Van shouted to her children.

"Keep going. We'll help them," Bich shouted back.

Van felt secure when she saw each of her children holding the hand of her cousin, Bich, and her husband. Being shoved too hard in the crowd, Van did not have to walk. She tried to keep on her feet, knowing that if she fell down, she and her child would be stampeded. "Hold big uncle, big aunt and little uncle's hands," Van reminded her children, even though she could not see them in the big crowd, but only saw her cousin and friends not too far away.

When Van sensed less pushing, she realized that she was already out of the building.

"Get away from the building and lay flat on the ground!" the man shouted on the megaphone.

"No. Not here. Move further, further!" the man shouted again when many people dropped flat on the spot.

Van too put Truc on the ground and covered her tiny girl with her body. But it was quiet. The only noise was from the whizzing plane, not far away from the shaken people.

The plane dived down, and another explosion shook the ground.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Van had no idea how many bombs were dropped. Then it was quiet again, too quiet. Van could hear her own heart beat. She raised her head to search for her children. There was no way to see them when everybody was laying flat. Van saw a young US Marine standing guard at the chain-link gate, not very far from her. He looked pitifully lonely, standing by himself. His face was pale.

Poor kid. It could be the first time he experienced real action. His M16 was shaking in his hands. He was the only American Van saw around here. What was he thinking?

What is going to happen next? The plane was gone. How many planes would come? Could it be the beginning of the end? What a dangerous spot to be in, the airport, the main target for the attack! Van wished that she could be out of here. At least, in downtown, one could run from one section to another. Here, there was no place to run. And if the communists came, everyone could be killed for trying to go with the Americans.

People started talking. Looking up, Van saw some already sitting up. Then, one by one, they followed each other.

"We might not have a chance to get out. They already sent their planes here," a woman said sadly.

"It's not their plane. It's ours," a man in his thirties near Van said positively.

"How can you tell it's our plane?"

"I'm a pilot. I know about planes."

"Are you sure?" Van inquired.

"Certainly."

"Why did our plane bomb us?"

"I don't know. It could be a coup."

A coup! Ah, it could be possible. Mr. Ky, the former vice-president, a northerner, an anti-communist, a hawk who declared that he would fight to the last drop of his blood. He could get hold of the Air Force to lead the counter attack and change the situation, Van thought. Suddenly she felt relief and built up hope.

"Please stay calm. The bombing was only a coup in downtown," the young American in civilian clothing repeated several times in Vietnamese on the megaphone.

He spoke fluently with northern accent. He must be a CIA, Van pondered. (In the earlier years, the U.S. government hired Vietnamese students from the North who had been sent to the U.S. by Father Jacques -- a Belgium catholic priest -- to teach Vietnamese to U.S. personnel who would be sent to Viet Nam. Later, they realized that it was a mistake when they would be in contact with Southerners, the majority of the population. Only then, did a few Americans learn to speak Vietnamese with a Southern accent).

The pilot looked at Van proudly as if saying,

"See, what did I tell you?"

Sitting up to look around, Van saw her cousin standing with Cuc near the power plant. He should not be there. The power line could fall down, though Van was glad it was over and nobody was hurt.

"Van, Van! We're coming," Bich's voice was heard from the right side.

Mai and Lan rushed toward Van. She bent down to embrace both of them while still holding Truc in her arms.

"It's OK. It's OK," hastily, they still breathed, Van assured them, "Your sister is over there with little uncle. See? They're over there, you see them? Near the power pole."

"Yes, I see them now," Mai proudly announced. She waved both her hands. Lan and Truc followed suit.

Turning to Bich and her husband, Van gratefully said, "Thank you for taking care of them. I don't know what to do without you two."

A woman asked, "What's today?"

"April 28," a man answered.

"No. I mean the lunar day."

"What for?"

"To see if it's a good day. I knew it was a bad omen when Mr. Minh finished his handover ceremony speech, rain poured down.

A few years ago, I went to a wedding. When the groom's party came to the bride's house, the sky was clear and high. But when the bride left the house at "the hour of the rooster" as they had been

told by the fortune teller, the rain poured down before she had the chance to get into the bridal car. Her dress was soaked with water. I knew right away that it was not a good sign. Do you know what's happened? The woman spoke to her friend but obviously wanted everybody to hear it. The husband was killed in the withdrawal of Quang Tri in 1973 before his son was born."

Bich glanced at Van and secretly raised her lips to grin. Van nodded and also tried to hide her smile to agree. What a superstitious woman!

*

The evening was hot.

No breeze. The humidity was high. The stars twinkled in the dark, clear sky. The rumbling echoes of the bombings or cannons were very close. It could be the battle after Xuan Loc. Must be the decisive one.

People here paid no mind. All the fightings and worries were behind them. In a matter of hours, they would leave this war torn country to go to the newly set up tent city in Guam. What should the future be? Nobody cared. All they thought about was when would it be their turn to board those planes which landed and swiftly took off.

The talkings was subdued as the evening crept into the night. Most people fell asleep only to stir when a group of people was led to the runway. While the children slept sitting up on the asphalt, backs leaning on the suitcases, Van and Bich whispered about their high school classmates. One by one, they remembered each classmate by her seat. Since Bich got a pharmacy, she had more chance to meet old friends who came to buy medicine or just stopped by to chitchat on Saturday afternoons. They often complained that Van had hidden away from them.

It was about two o'clock when Van's cousin came back from his many inquiring tours,
"Wake the children up. It's time to go."

"Us? We're going now?" Van asked, not sure how she felt. Got no time to think. "Children, wake up, we're going now," Van gently shook them one by one while she held Truc still to let her sleep.

Van saw sadness on Bich's face. She tried to cheer her up,
"You'd be next."

"Hope so."

"We'll see you in Guam. Children, say good bye to big uncle and big aunt."

The three girls folded their arms and bowed their heads without saying a word. Van knew that they were not fully awake so she did not require them to speak. Van and her children were among the hundred evacuees who were led to the waiting buses while hundreds, could be thousands, of others were still waiting patiently for their turn.

The buses took them to the runway, then parked in straight rows with all the lights off. When the last ones finished parking, the passengers started talking very loud. Many people spoke at the same time, and Van could not tell what their conversations were. But she heard an American shout very clearly in Vietnamese when he boarded her bus,

"Be quiet. If I hear any talking, all passengers from this bus will be sent back."

He then left for another bus. Perhaps he repeated the same threat. Van sensed built up anger inside her. She got mad at that American. He sounded rude and treated the whole group of grown ups as children. She then felt shame of herself for being in this situation, of having to beg to be evacuated. She had the impression that that American looked down on every evacuee. She was also upset with the passengers on her bus. Their loud talk made the American treat everybody like school kids.

The American came back. He walked between the parked buses like a patrolman. It was dark. Van could not clearly see his face, but could perceive his nervousness. He walked swiftly while looking around and at the sky, as if waiting for the plane to land and pick him up to get away from all the troubles not related to his life. Now, Van felt sorry for him. He must wonder why he had to be here at two in the morning to deal with these foreigners while he could be safe in the U.S.?

When the American was far away from her bus, the driver turned back to Van's seat on the first row and whispered,

"Little aunt number two, do you have a towel?"

Van whispered back, "No, little uncle. Why?"

"You need one to cover your baby. Here, take mine. I used to cover the back of my chair. I have taken many people before so I know. They never turned off the engines. When a plane landed, see, that plane was going to land, we drove the bus to the back of it. The back door of the plane, as big as the garage, would be open. All bus windows on the right would be closed and you get to run quick because the plane engines were very hot. You have to cover your baby with this towel or she would be burned."

"Thank you so much, little uncle."

He must be in his fifties, Van guessed.

"Is that your husband?"

"No, he is my cousin."

"Are they your children?"

"Yes, all four girls."

"Tell them to hold on to you and run quick when I stop the bus."

Van turned around to whisper to Mai and Lan to hold their little uncle's and Cuc to hold her hands when they run to the plane.

The wait was long. Every fifteen or twenty minutes, a plane landed and took off very shortly after. It was never her bus' turn. What is the priority? Some buses which arrived later were sent before hers. Each time it happened, people on her bus started to stir,

"Why must we wait so long?"

"That bus arrived after ours."

"Shush! Shush!" somebody reminded them to be quiet.

It was muggy. The bus was stuffed with too many people and their mixed odor of sweat. Van felt a headache build up stronger in her head.

"What time you got?" Van whispered to the driver.

"It's four o'clock."

Carrying Truc in her arms, Van left her seat to sit on the bus step to get some fresh air. It was a little bit cooler sitting there. She dozed off.

Boom! Boom!

Van almost dropped Truc when she stood up. She thought she saw the red sky.

"Mai, Lan, Cuc come here to Mother. Hold your little uncle's hands."

People poured out of the buses. Van had to step aside the door, less to be stampeded, to wait for her children. It took them so long to get out. Van wanted to get on the bus to get them but she could not.

"Get away from these buses. Get away quick!" somebody repeatedly shouted.

The driver and Van's cousin were the last ones to get off the bus. Her three children were with them.

"Follow me!" the driver shouted as he ran.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Not very far from the parked buses, one section of the airport became dazzling red. People screamed hysterically. Many ran around the buses to look for their relatives.

"Get away from those buses!" somebody kept shouting.

"Run fast!" the driver shouted again. He was holding Lan and Cuc's hands.

"Mai, hold little uncle's hand," Van shouted to her oldest daughter. Her knee became weak. She could not keep up with them, trying not to lose the sight of the driver who showed self confidence. He must know where to go.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The shelling continued. At each explosion, people crouched down while running as if they could shun the rocket in that position.

Flame burst out behind the fleeing crowd. A plane, could be many planes, was set on fire, when hit by rockets.

The bombing in the afternoon was nothing compared to these shellings. The bombing happened in daytime. At least one could see the plane and knew where the danger came from even though there was nothing one could do. Now, it was dark and nobody had any idea what direction the rockets came from. When it hit the ground then it made no difference where it originated. It looked like they aimed at the runways. Could be someone standing right here at the airport to give the people out there the exact ordinates of these targets.

Van saw the bus driver stop running. A small group of people were with him. From afar, Van overheard somebody say,

"Let's get out of here quick!"

"Where're you going?" Van asked.

"I know this part of the airport very well. If anyone wants to get out of here, follow me."

"What do you want to do?" her cousin asked.

"Get out of here," Van said without hesitation.

She was too scared. She felt the urgency to get out of this inflamed spot as quick as possible.

*

When they reached the street bordering the airport, the shellings still went on. Looking back at the ablaze airport, Van was dazed. She was amazed that they could get out in one piece.

The curfew was not over, but still some rickshaws ventured on the dark streets to pick up their early customers -- the market vendors. Van walked close to the bus driver and said with deepest sincerity,

"I'm deeply grateful. You saved our lives. Thank you for taking care of my children. Children, say thank you to grandpa!"

They crossed their arms and bowed their heads in front of the bus driver while their bodies still trembled.

Van pulled out a bunch of five hundred dong bills, which she brought along to be used to bribe anybody at the airport who might interfere with her fleeing, to give to the driver,

"I don't have much but I present you this small amount for your coffee."

Actually the sum could be more than one month of his pay, but he refused to take the offer,

"I had to get out of the airport anyway."

Van pushed the bundle into his hand and added,

"Please take it. You make me feel happy. Otherwise I will feel indebted the rest of my life."

"Please don't feel that way. Who knows someday I or my children will be in need and it could be you or somebody will help us. I believe that, in doing good deeds, I'll be paid back someday, either in this life or another. Tonight, I feel great that I'd done a little bit to help you people here get out of that area. Please don't talk about paying me."

"I don't know what to say but we're deeply grateful."

Van thought about asking where he lived, but she did not say anything, knowing that she was to leave the country.

*

When Van and her children arrived at her cousin's house in two rickshaws, pink clouds started to appear in the East. She suddenly felt exhausted, her arms were tired from holding Truc all night. Her whole body and her legs were aching. She just wanted to lay down anywhere to sleep and forget everything. Cousin told his servant to go buy pho -- a beef rice noodle soup with cinnamon, ginger root, and star anise aroma. Van was grateful that the servant helped feed the children.

"After eating, we'll rest a while then go back to the DAO dispatching office to see if they resume the evacuation", Cousin said.

"Do you think the runways still good after these heavy shellings?"

"I don't know how bad the damage was. It's a big airport."

"I think I may have to stop by the house to let Mother know that we are all right. Everybody might think we're dead at the airport, by the bombings or shellings."

"I don't think we had time to do that."

It was eight-thirty when cousin woke Van up. Bright sunlight shone through the windows and door. Looking down at the children who were sleeping peacefully and soundly on the sofa, Van hesitated to wake them up and began to wonder,

"Can they live a normal life here? Why do we have to leave everything, our family, home and fatherland to go to a strange land to face an uncertain future?"

"Wake them up. It's getting late," Cousin said.

When they got out of the house, Van noticed that the streets were, unimaginably, busier than usual; it was after the morning rush hour. Many people with luggage of all sorts rushed on the streets in private cars, taxis, motorbikes and motorized rickshaws. They could be evacuees who just fled here from the northern provinces, or simply the Saigonese who were trying to leave the country. Before reaching the compound where they had come to register for the evacuation yesterday, Van had the impression something was not right. It was too quiet. No bus came out. Nobody came in either. The huge gate was closed. Cousin walked quickly toward the gate. When Van caught up with him, she heard someone say,

"The Embassy."

Cousin was talking to the Marine guard standing behind the gate.

"What did he say?" Van asked.

"He said nobody was taken to the airport since the bombing yesterday afternoon. Now they have started the evacuation by helicopters at the Embassy. We should get there quick."

*

From afar, Van already saw the huge crowd standing in front of the Embassy's closed gate. To her estimate, it could be a few thousand people. Getting nearer to the crowd, Van realized that it would not be a smooth ride. People elbowed each other to get to the gate.

It was impossible to see what was going on there. How would people be selected to be taken inside? Nobody knew for sure. Anxiety and exhaustion obviously shown on everybody's face. Different from the crowd at the airport yesterday who had been friendly and relaxed, knowing certainly they would be airlifted, this crowd was suspicious and defensive, worrying that the fellow nearby could be one's competitor for a seat. Each time a helicopter took off from the rooftop of the Embassy, everyone in the crowd looked up. Van thought she could detect envy and at the same time hope in their expressions.

"Those who worked for the Americans got priority," a well dressed middle age man said. It sounded like there was a tone of resentment in his voice. He could be a high official in the government, or a well-off businessman. Van looked around to search for Cousin who prowled about trying to find a way to push himself through the crowd to get closer to the gate. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Even if he could make to the gate, we would not have any chance," Van was well aware.

She took her children to sit under a tree and thought to herself,

"Since I can not push through the crowd with four small children, I might as well sit here to wait."

To Van's disappointment, the crowd got bigger and bigger although one helicopter took off after another.

Turning to her children, Van said,

"You children look around, see if you can spot little uncle."

"Yes, Mother," the three girls answered eagerly.

Van herself tried to look for her cousin in that chaotic crowd, but to no avail.

Suddenly Cuc shouted with excitement,

"I saw little uncle, I saw little uncle!"

"Where? Where is he?"

"There he is!"

Sure enough, Cousin emerged from the big crowd to head toward the Independence Palace while looking around to search for Van and her children.

"Let's go to little uncle. He cannot see us," Van told her children, rushing toward her cousin while shouting at the top of her lung,

"We're here. We're here! What's up? Did you get the pass?"

"No. Let's go to the Duc Hotel."

"What for?"

"They said the crowd was smaller there and we'll have more of a chance."

Van took her children to join the group of about thirty people to head for the Hotel, a few blocks from the Embassy.

"There are many other pick up centers, but Duc Hotel is the closest to the Embassy," a man said after looking around him to make sure that only this small group knew about the secret.

Van had liked the big tree-lined street around here before, but now walking along it after an exhaustive night was too much for her and the children. After crossing the International Aid Circle, a large crowd was seen in front of Duc Hotel two blocks away. A visible disappointment shown on every adult's face. Everyone seemed to agree silently, "It's not better by any means." There is no choice but to get there and find out. An idea popped into Van's head, "Somebody out there wanted to get rid of as many people as possible by spreading a rumor." Looking down the street, she saw many more people heading the same direction. She thought, "Ah! Those on the same boat!"

Like at the Embassy, it was impossible to get close to the entrance, though the crowd was smaller. Nobody knew what the priorities were. It seemed that whoever could make it to the entrance had it made. Cousin ran around to try to find those in charge, to show his U.S. Embassy badge. Nobody was responsible; except a squad of Marines standing guard at the door, M16 at firing position. Helicopters whirled above tamarind trees making deafening sounds and blowing dust down onto the crowd.

Van covered Truc's ears with her hands and beckoned Truc's three elders to cover theirs. Looking at the crowd of a few thousand, Van started to shiver, thinking about the chaotic flee from Da Nang. Hysterically, people swam and jumped to leaving ships to end up drowning. One man even held on to the wheel shaft of a plane taking off, and then fell as the plane was off the runway. Everyone fought for his own life. One tried to push away the person next to him in order to get on the bus or boat.

Cousin got back from his futile shoving in the crowd,

"Let's go back to the Embassy. We might have more of a chance over there if I could show them my badge."

Looking at the children's weary faces, Van struggled with herself to make a decision,

"Should I drag them back and forth? Would there be a safe lift or will they be pushed and stampeded? If it happened to them, I could never forgive myself."

Van reached her decision quick,

"You go ahead by yourself. I will take the children home."

Cousin showed his surprise, but Van was conscious that he himself even doubted he could be evacuated.

"Come on. We'll walk with you down the street to find a taxi," Van tried to be cheerful.

She attempted to hide her emotion when the taxi dropped him off behind the Cathedral,

"Say bye to little uncle."

The four girls said bye casually, as normal. Van half believed that it could be the last time they saw him.

Mother was in a discussion with a group of neighbors in front of the house when the taxi arrived. She was shocked to see Van and the children. She just stood there staring at them for a moment, as if she could not believe her own eyes, before rushing toward the car to take Truc from Van's arms. She hugged her tenderly as if she had been separated for a long time. Van knew exactly what Mother had thought. Mother certainly accepted that, with the bombing yesterday afternoon and the shellings early this morning, they would be killed. While walking into the house, Mother bent down to kiss the children's head.

"Sister Ba, they are home. The children are home!" Mother called out as she stepped inside.

The servant rushed out, her face lit up as she saw them. Van was touched to see how much Mother and Ba cared for them. She felt guilty for trying to leave the country.

"Can you fix us something to eat?" Van asked.

"Yes, little aunt," sister Ba left for the kitchen.

Van dropped her heavy body on the sofa and wanted to close her eyes to go to sleep.

"Where is the suitcase? Was it still in the taxi?" Mother inquired with surprise.

"No, Mother. I checked it in at the airport. We were lucky enough to get out of that mess."

"You sure were."

"This morning, we went to cousin's house. He didn't let me go home to let you know. We went to the Embassy, but it was impossible to get to the gate. Must be thousands and thousands of people over there. Tomorrow morning, I'll take the children there to try again. Hopefully it will be less crowded then."

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Due to her tiredness, Van slept soundly the first part of the night. But when woke up, she could not go back to sleep again due to anxiety and the loud and constant noises of the copters whirling over the quiet city in the dark of the night.

Except for the loud sounds of the copters, the whole city was quiet. No shelling since yesterday early morning. Now, it could happen again. Van did not understand why the communists had always shelled this city in the very early morning when the heat subdued and everyone was in deep sleep. She felt scared thinking about the shellings. She should think about sleeping in the living room downstairs instead of up here. Listening to the children's soft snoring sounds, she did not want to disturb them, but started worrying about Chuong, her husband. Where is he now? Had he left the country? Or is he still engaged in an operation in the Delta?

Then Van was aware of something strange, but she could not tell what it was. Lying on the bed, Van tried to analyze herself to find out what made her feel different. The house was quiet, other than the children's snoring. Yes, the quietness. The whole city became too quiet. The deafening sounds of the helicopters stopped completely. What was going on out there in the dark of the night? Were the shellings going to start like last night? It was about the same time now. Did the Americans know about the shellings and hold off the evacuation until daybreak? The more Van thought about the shellings the more she became worried. She wanted to wake Mother up to talk to ease up her worries but then decided not to. Van just laid still to wait for the sun to come up.

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The shellings did not happen in daytime. Van felt relief when she heard sister Ba's movements downstairs.

Ba was already up to start her first chore of washing clothes. She was surprised to see Van walk down the stairs,

"You are up early, little aunt!" "I cannot sleep anymore."

"I myself cannot sleep much either. The helicopters kept me up all night. I never heard the sounds of so many copters in my life. Grandma was already outside to see what's going on."

"Yes. That's Mother. She always keeps her ears and eyes open," Van thought.

The food vendors started chanting their foods. Van planned to let the kids sleep a little longer before waking them up for breakfast, then they would head for the American Embassy again. Hopefully the crowd would be smaller, since most of the evacuees would be airlifted by now.

In this neighborhood, only a few families had left for Vung Tau to wait for the right time to flee in their boats while the rest carried on normal activities. Van went outside to join Mother and some neighbors. She tried to keep her attempt to flee the country low key while getting grapevine information. Whereas they were chitchatting, the neighbor's two teenage boys stopped their motorbike in front of them,

"The American Embassy was closed."

"What?" Van was shocked and could not believe her ears.

"Yes. We just got back from there. All the Americans had left. They stopped the evacuation by dawn. It looked like a war zone over there now. We heard they tossed grenades down from the rooftop to bar people from climbing up. Now people were looting everything they could find: typewriters, steel safes, desks, chairs, you name it!"

"Did you go by Duc Hotel?"

"Yes, little aunt, the same thing. Not a single American! Every American building was looted."

Seeing the expression of belief on Van's face, the bigger boy said,

"If you want to, I'll take you there to see for yourself."

Without hesitation, Van sat on the rear seat of the Honda and turned back to tell Mother that she would be home shortly.

When reaching the Embassy, Van could not believe her own eyes. Just hours ago, the strongly built building seemed to represent power and stability. In fact, people knew that most important political and military decisions had been made in this compound rather than at the Independence Palace. Now it looked like a going out of business factory where all the furniture had been ripped. The boy stopped his motorbike in front of the Embassy and, as if reading her mind, he turned back and said,

"The same scene at every building."

"No more evacuation anywhere?"

"No. I didn't see any helicopters since my brother and I rode around the city."

Van felt shocked and deluded. It was impossible to believe that after twenty years of deep involvement in this country, the Americans just disappeared overnight.

"Little aunt, do you want to go around the city?" the boy interrupted her thought.

"No. Let's go home."

The boy then rode back home. As soon as Van stepped off his motorbike, his brother jumped on the rear seat and they took off in a wink.

"What's going on out there?" Mother asked as they met at the door.

"All the Americans have gone. No more evacuation."

Mother said nothing. Looking at her, Van imagined she could sense her relief. She felt that deep down Mother did not want them to go.

"Breakfast is on the table. The children and I have eaten. Sister Ba already went to market" Mother said.

Van was not hungry but, seeing Mother's concern, she sat down to eat some banh cuon (rice crepes).

Looking through the window, Van believed that it could be a hot day. The sky was clear and bright. When would the overall attack against the city trigger? How close to the city were the North Vietnamese regulars?

No information. No clue. It was horrible to live in uncertainty and worries. (over, recto)

Mother rushed into the house, "Turn on the radio. Turn on the radio! They said Mr. Minh has surrendered!"

Before Van could reach the radio, Mother already turned it on loudly and sat down to stare at it as if she expected to see Mr. Minh on the TV. Van felt dazed when she heard, roughly,

"I order soldiers of all ranks to put an end to all hostilities and remain where they are."

She had the impression that her head was saturated. It did not function anymore. It went black. She just sat there, staring through the wide open door.

"Their tanks had been moving on the Independence Palace grounds and the *co giai phong* (Liberation Front's flag) was on the top of the building," somebody shouted outside.

Gun shots were heard, not intensive but scattering. Could it be another house to house fighting like the 1968 Tet (Lunar New Year) offensive. Mother closed the door and ran upstairs to call the kids down. Van had always admired Mother's swift and clever reactions in all catastrophic situations. To Van, all the events in the last two months, especially the last two days, seemed unreal,

"What should we do, Mother?"

"Keep the children down here. I'll go to check it out."

"Please be careful, Mother."

"I know. Don't you worry."

When Mother returned, she spoke in disbelief, "It's all over." Then she added, as if consoling Van, "Maybe it is best to give up. If we put up a fight, this city would be destroyed and thousands and thousands would be killed."

Van looked up at Mother and believed what Mother said was true. But she also began to worry, "What would happen to to her family and hundreds of thousands of other soldiers' families???"

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That night, Mother waited for sister Ba to go to bed for a long time before she came to Van's bed to murmur,

"Tomorrow, when Ba isn't home, get all your husband's uniforms and pictures and burn them in the trash stack. From now on, you've got to watch out. She has been a nice woman, but you never know. She could turn you in. Give me all your money and jewelries and I'll take them home to hide for you. Later on, you need to let Ba go. It's safer not to have an outsider in the house. Besides, if you keep a servant, they know you're getting money."

"Yes, Mother," Van whispered.

She was not surprised that Mother had thought of everything ahead. For Van, her only concern was her husband. Where is he now? Was he killed, wounded, or captured in the last minute clash, or was he lucky enough to get out by helicopter or boat? She just prayed so. In the next few days, Van still did not hear from her husband, but about a week later, one of Chuong's distant cousins came to her house. Van was surprised to see the boy, since he never came before. She only saw him at Chuong's parents' at Tet (New Year) or the ancestors' commemorative days.

"Hello little brother", Van greeted him as he walked in, "How are your parents doing?"

"Dear big sister, my parents are doing fine."

He looked around and lowered his voice,

"Big brother Chuong is at my home."

"What? What's he doing over there? When did he come?"

"He came last night and asked me to give you this."

The boy pulled out a folded piece of paper from his pant's pocket. Van quickly grabbed it. Sure enough, it was Chuong's handwriting. Her name was not on it. It read:

I am at little uncle Tam's. Do not worry. I am doing fine. Do not come to see me. I will be home whenever I think it is a good time. Let parents know.

He did not sign his name.

Van took her bike out and rode along with the boy. Since the fall of Sai Gon, like many other Saigonese, she did not wear her ao dai (robe) whenever she went out as before.

A few days after the communists took over, the color of the city had changed, from the colors of the flags to the colors of clothing. All colors of the bourgeois disappeared. And now, most women wore ba ba (short peasant's blouse) of a somber shade.

When Van arrived at her in-law's, she showed the note to the father. His face lit up with relief, "At last, we know that he's safe."

"But why didn't he go home instead of staying at little uncle Tam's? Why didn't he want me to go there?"

"He made a good decision. You'd better listen to him. Come in and I'll explain why.

You don't know, but little uncle Tam had a close connection with the other side though he wasn't a party member.

Formerly, he was very poor, so he signed up to work for the rubber plantation when he was a very young man. At that time, signing the contract with the plantation almost meant signing your own death certificate. One never could break it before the time was up. Many died of malaria. Many got hooked on opium, alcohol and gambling, and had no choice but to resign the contract again and again. Most foremen acted like prison wardens. Any worker who tried to escape was beaten. If any were killed, it was no big deal. Therefore, most plantation workers hated the French who displayed the worst form of colonization. People always said that the French treated their dogs better than local people. When the Viet Minh secretly recruited workers to fight against the French, many joined them. Little uncle Tam was one of these people. But he didn't stay long as plantation worker. He got out, made cha lua (pork luncheon meat) to sell to Northerners in Sai Gon. He earned such good money that later he didn't have to peddle anymore, but opened a wholesale store.

In 1954, when the country was divided, he decided to sell his house and return to the North to buy rice fields to rent. His wife didn't quite agree, but she let him go ahead to arrange everything before she and her children would follow. When Tam got back to the native place, he bought a lot of buffaloes and hogs to provide a feast for the whole village. He also spent a lot of money to fix up his family's rundown ancestors' worship temple. He must have felt good to show the people how successful he had been, compared to the time he left it many years ago.

But when he inquired about buying rice fields, his younger brother, who was a Party member, explained to him that pretty soon the government would confiscate all the lands. He didn't believe it a bit, thinking his brother was jealous of his wealth.

After staying a little longer in the village, he heard about the "denunciations of landlords" in Region IV. He also found out that villagers lost their trust in each other. Many relatives secretly advised him to leave for the South before the port of Hai Phong was closed for the evacuation.

When he decided to leave, he lied and said that his family would arrive at Hai Phong soon, so he had come to escort them to the village.

He was too happy to get back to the South, but felt deceived. I don't think he worked for the communists anymore. But, out of fear for punishment, he still contributed money upon request. We didn't report him then. And now, as family, I believe he'll help Chuong."

"Father, do you think we can trust him? He seemed a nice man to me, but you never know," Van asked.

"Yes, I trust him. He's an old-fashioned man who believed in the value of the extended family. I'd never met him until we moved here from the North, but he was the one who looked for relatives and gave help to whomever needed it. I was touched and felt ashamed that all the well-off relatives had not assisted his family, but let him work at the plantation. However, he didn't have any hard feelings toward anybody. He even had a plan to coordinate all members of the Tran family to build an ancestor's worship temple here, like the one we had for many generations in our village in the North. Don't you worry. Let me take care of everything. You just look after the children. Do you want your sister come help you?"

"No, father, I can handle it. Besides Ba's still with me."

"You have to let Ba go soon. We'll let Nam go too. If you keep a servant, the communists consider you to be exploiting people, making them slaves and they know that you still get money.

You've to be extremely careful. They just got here, nobody knows what they'll do. Especially how they'll treat the former government officials and service men. I've the feeling that there'd be a drastic change. In 1954, they didn't have the "denunciations" until the evacuation was over."

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About three weeks after the fall of Sai Gon, following little uncle Tam's advise, Chuong came out from his hiding "to report and register." After getting his new identification paper, he went home.

Van was shocked to see how much he had aged in a month. She was glad that she and her children did not make it out of the country. Otherwise, how would he take it when coming back to an empty house with nobody to support and share his worries.

At night, Chuong often whispered,

"What's going to happen next? What are they going to do with us? I know this is not the end."

Van had the same questions. But she had to pretend everything would be all right,

"I don't think they would do anything with over a million officers and soldiers."

On June 11, a communique was issued to order officers and officials to report for "reeducation and reform."

Once again, Chuong came to seek little uncle Tam's advice. Little uncle said to go ahead with it, to get it over with in order to start a new life. He also added that all enlisted men in the city had finished their "re-education" smoothly in three days and now they were free of worry.

Chuong's father also agreed. He said,

"You have no choice. After your 'registration', they have your file."

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In reading the bulletin, everyone believed that the "re-education" would last about a month, since it specified that each person should bring enough food for that length of time.

Chuong waited until the deadline to report. His parents wanted him to come home to eat lunch with them before he went. Van felt scared. His father must suspect something bad.

It seemed like The Last Supper. Everyone was quiet, even the children who must sense the adults' worries. Chuong's parents treated him tenderly as if he was their young child. His mother fixed herself all his favorite dishes. Once in a while, she coaxed him to eat more,

"This is the sour fish soup you like. Is it salty enough?"

Van felt hurt when Chuong did not want she and the children to go with him. He bent down to hug each girl and bade goodbye to his parents and younger brothers and sisters. Before looking tenderly into Van's eyes and then nodded his head without saying a word.

Van tried to hold back her tears. She could not utter a word. Her tears streamed down her cheeks as soon as Chuong's younger brother took him away on his Honda motorbike. Van wished that she could say goodbye to Chuong by herself, so at least she could say something to him.

Van did not go home until the brother-in-law return after dropping Chuong off at Taberd School.

"What did they do?" Van asked.

"The bo doi (northern soldier) wrote their names down and took them inside. There're so many people there."

"Did they say where they would take them?"

"Nobody dared to ask."

For the next three days, Van went to Taberd School to see Chuong. But visitors were not allowed in and detainees were not permitted to go out. Along with Van, hundreds of people came to several reporting centers in the city to inquire about their loved ones but to no avail.

Then, all detainees just disappeared. When inquired, the "bo doi", with a stern face and cold voice, answered that the "puppets" had left. No destination was disclosed.

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From that day on, like hundreds of thousands of other people, Van lived in constant worry. She went to the families that she knew had members also go to "re-education" to see if they heard anything. Most of the times, bad news was shared, such as a whole camp was poisoned, many truckloads of officers were killed. Still nobody knew where the camps were located.

A month went by, but still there was no news on detainees. The "bo doi" said that the "puppets" would not be back for some time. Now people understood the confidence trick of one month.

Van liked to see her acquaintances often, even the slight ones. With them, she could trust, since they were in the same situation. Together, they could comfort each others and share their burdens.

Many of these women never worked in their lives, but lived on their husbands' salaries. Now their men were gone and there was no job to be found, plus they were on the black list of "puppets families." This was equivalent to being criminals. So they had absolutely no chance to find work. Many started selling household items such as refrigerators, TV, radios, fans, etc... Physically and mentally, Van felt exhausted.

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PART TWO

I

Any Vietnamese with common sense naturally would never think that France wanted to emancipate Viet Nam, Japan to liberate the rest of Southeast Asia, Nationalist China to help Vietnamese nationalists, Communist Russia-China to be sincere with the Vietnamese, or the United States to spend money and men to support and safeguard liberty and democracy for the people of Viet Nam. But, strangely enough, Vietnamese politicians seem to believe such things. Ho Chi Minh lived and died for Russian communism; Nguyen Hai Than put high expectations in Nationalist China; Ngo Dinh Diem relied on the United States; Nguyen Van Thieu was excessively obedient to the Americans. Were they all foolish? Not at all. This was the best means for them to reach out for political power, status, money, etc...

Some among them might even have vainly thought that if they had power, they would do such and such good things. However, they could never have good people to cooperate with them, nor could they obtain their masters' permissions to do good deeds. Besides, once having power, they usually became corrupted, and decided to hold on the monopoly without sharing with anyone else, so that they could garner money and fame for themselves, their family, or their party. The truth was that the United States did not pour its money and men out to protect liberty and democracy for Viet Nam, but only to prevent the invasion of communism (Chinese communism, more exactly stated) into South-East Asia, complying with President Truman's Containment Doctrine, devoted to the security and interests of the Americans themselves. This was only prevention, not eradication, of communism.

However, most American people did not have enough political knowledge to understand this fact. Therefore, many young American students and citizens participated in the so-called anti-war

demonstrations. They did not realize what fate would be reserved for the United States, actually for them, if the communists ever won the war on a global basis.

Others thought naively that their government was performing a futile humanitarian task for a far-away country, because people of that country did not have the sense of responsibility. They blamed South Viet Nam people as demanding and passive. They could never understand that the Vietnamese only wanted to uproot communism and did not approve the sham republic regimes, the dreadful American way of containing communism, which caused so many deaths and disasters, carried on by the lackeys and servants of the dictatorial pro-American governments. However, if the United States did not use those henchmen -- then afterwards take direct part in the Viet Nam war -- what force could block the invasion of communism down of South Viet Nam, then Kampuchea, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, etc...? This reason for American involvement does not yet mention the busy vitality of the American factories, which created jobs and products to enrich American economics and society; the American activity of inventing, producing, experimenting and selling dangerously modernized weapons; also, the meaningful opportunity to incite discord inside the communist bloc. The war also created good conditions for economic development for the US. allies, such as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore, and so forth. The sad aspect was that even the American soldiers who fought in Viet Nam did not appreciate these facts; neither did their families and friends back home.

Generally, the American mass did not grasp those things, because on one side, their government was afraid to irritate the Russians and the Chinese and never dared to explain the case in depth or to give enough publicity to a good cause; meanwhile, on the other side, their media and press -- either stupid or scoundrel -- were obviously and heartily inclined to communism. Then came Nixon's shaking hands with China, after pompous meetings with extravagant banquets and feasts, then the Shanghai Common Declaration in 1972. Next, the event of 1973, President Nixon signed the Paris Peace Treaty with North Viet Nam. And in 1974, Mao launched his three world doctrine: Soviet Russia, the first; all capitalist countries, the second; and the third one including China, South-East Asia, African and South American countries. Actually, Mao wanted South Viet Nam to maintain its present condition so that he could organize the Peoples Revolutionary Alliance of Asia including North Korea, North Viet Nam, South Viet Nam, Kampuchea, and Laos, with China at the head, to prevent "Russian hegemony in the world" and "North Vietnam hegemony in the area".

However, in April 1975, General Vanuxem of France failed in his transmission of Chinás proposal to the stupid President Duong Van Minh. Then North Viet Nam took over South Viet Nam so easily, just like a handkerchief from a pocket. Thus, Russia leisurily sent her troops and ships to sit on the bay of Cam Ranh, looking onto the Pacific Ocean, taking over the American role of paying the Vietnamese communists to contain China. The "standard bearing" North Viet Nam, after fighting for "independence and unity" now fulfilled her "international responsibility" by invading Kampuchea and Laos.

In the end, the Russia-China dispute wasted much of Chinás money and labor in Viet Nam, all vainly "poured into the rivers and oceans". A gigantic banner in Dong Hung, where rose the Friendly Gate, explicitly depicted the enraged Chairman Mao pointing his finger towards Viet Nam with the underlined blameful words: Ingrate, unfaithful. While a picture of Chairman Ho, as big as the other one, faces China with his smirk: Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom!

Nobody can explain the truth about the case of the loser-but-winner U.S.A and the winner-but-loser U.S.S.R. in the Viet Nam War. Did all of that mess come from strategies with sophisticated calculations or just plainly unpredictable chance?

Well, it is very hard to identify which powers really influence the national and international policies of the United States.

The Congress? A group of rich men and women with vague knowledge who usually have tendencies to bend under pressure and influence, and who have the sole talent of flattering voters to keep their seats and their easy jobs with fat salaries and good benefits plus nice official business trips. National interest, honor, or pride matter little to most of them. Successive presidencies that

wasted money and men so irrationally in Viet Nam slipped so smoothly through different Congresses. Or many Presidents who promised everything without executing anything but never had to really face any efficient opposition. These facts reflected Congress' intentional overlooking or tacit acceptance of the worsening situation in Viet Nam, then?

The Executive Body? Apparently, it seems that it does not have much power. If necessary, it can be investigated one day and censured the next. We did see Presidents who were suddenly hindered in the Viet Nam affair. Sometimes, they can do anything at will; then, other times, all of their acts or decisions are restricted or stopped. Their words or promises are gone with the wind; there is no loyalty or dignity. Nobody seems really in charge or responsible. Moreover, it is hard to understand the notion of honor of these American executive or legislative men. For, in their interest, they can use bad eggs as their henchmen, other countries as their battlefields, other people's blood and bones as their "dams and ramparts". When there is no more need for them, they do not hesitate to satisfy secretly their enemies, to pressure their allies to sign off on disadvantageous agreements. They break all previous promises and pledges: no more financial aid, no more military assistance; they decline shamelessly all commitments and responsibilities, just because "history turns a new page". They call that a "withdrawal with honor". Does their honor mean betrayal, double-dealing, and cowardly running away?

The People? As stated above, the American society is secure. Its people live in comfort and luxury; they do not bother with thinking. Meanwhile, the government does not dare to declare truths and facts. As a result, people tend to listen to the media and press, become conditioned and molded by them, and believe easily and carelessly in whatever they say, even opposing their government or supporting the enemies of their own nation, of the whole world. How can a nation like that be intelligent? Therefore, there is a rumor that the true power of this nation might come from manipulating capitalists behind the scene. All turmoil is only staged events created to cover a big hidden plot. Nevertheless, it is hard to name those men of true power. We only know that, in the end, the defeat of the American capitalists and the winning of the Russian communists has been twisted into the final collapse of those "iron curtains and bamboo hedges".

Is that the effect of limited war, no-win war, or defeatist policies? Or, does the United States simply apply the policy of non-policy, with the faith in the unchangeable laws that "water runs into the hollow." Wherever the water runs, in whichever direction, finally it shall gather into the deep United States "hollow". Or perhaps America simply gambles that, with large funds, the player can lose some games and still win it all in the end.

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So, for the first time, a poor and hungry communist country ran down a capitalist one of material prosperity. Not only were the communist who now entered the capitalist southern cities were amazed, but even the "specialists, advisors" of those big-brother countries were stupefied. There was no more of the pride of East Germany, the only communist country where people were exempt from standing in lines for hours to buy bread, just bread. The "specialists, advisors" from Russia and Eastern Europe came to South Viet Nam to admire and desire even the commonplace Vietnamese products, which were plentiful and good, although only locally made by an underdeveloped country, according to the communists' appraisal, well known for its poverty and hunger under capitalistic oppression and exploitation.

Surrounded by cowering local high officers and cadres, those "advisors" looked pitiful in their cheap clothing, all crumbled and discolored. They window-shopped, hesitated in front of the cheapest things, and pondered their own lack of money. Some even took off their clothes and traded them for goods. They even stood in lines to buy books published by their own countries that nobody wanted. Asked why doing so, they admitted that there were no such books at home, as their governments exported all those intellectual products to the "young-brother countries" in the propaganda campaigns. They bought those books, firstly, to read for their own satisfaction; secondly, to lend them later for a good long-time profit.

So, from the beginning until now, the "communist paradise" has always been filled with lies and cheats, poverty and privation. How could they produce spaceships and missiles in such a condition of living?

Thus is how the "capitalist hell" differed from the "communist paradise". (Therefore, it should be admitted that many inhabitants in the cities of South Viet Nam had really profited, having an easy life for twenty years, thanks to the pro-European or pro-American regimes and the aid. Unfortunately, this was only the case of the city dwellers. The majority lived in the countryside and suffered under various yokes: communists, nasty local tyrants, bombs and bullets!)

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It is hard to comprehend how the Vietnamese can bear such things with endurance and patience. For thirty years, their country had suffered devastations and disasters: foreign oppression and manipulation, impious and worse leaders, incessant bombing and killing; none of these changed the majority of people, who remained honest citizens, respecting the laws and living soundly in both body and spirit. Homicides, pillages, riots, and craziness were kept at an unimaginably low rate!

The possible explanation was that Asians, especially the Vietnamese, always consider that the central power was determined by timing and chance: "Be winner, you are king; be loser, you are rebel". With good leaders, people might benefit. With bad leaders, people should endure. Citizens recognized their duties towards the power holders, and never dared to think about raising voices for their own interests. This was why so much of Viet Nam still lived peacefully even in the heat of wartime!

Objectively speaking, ordinary Vietnamese citizens could not even understand their country's real situation. How could they differentiate between Marx's socialism and Lenin's communism, nationalism and third internationalism? Any explanations or propagandas were just useless, wasteful.

(Even a man like Nguyen Van Trung, with his Ph.D. from abroad, Professor and Dean at university, did not have clear understanding: in the '60 and '70s, he still criticized Pham Quynh (1892-1945) for wrongly and unfairly condemning the communists. And members of the western leftist "intelligentsia", such as Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, were persuaded that Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong only wanted to exterminate capitalists to end oppression and exploitation among men, to build a paradise on earth!

How could those "intellectuals" believe that the communists could build a humane world based on class' hatred; a democratic society governed by dictatorial regime; and human equality that co-exist with an exclusively favored class of leaders and cadres?

Did they not see the ambitions of Lenin and Stalin to build a global communist empire with themselves as supreme and the U.S.S.R. with world hegemony; that Mao Zedong had the ambition of building a global communist empire with himself as emperor and China as imperial court?

Actually, those dictators would use deceitful propaganda to justify the continued exploitation of labor, the oppression of people into painful sacrifice, and the cheating of the vassal countries, until Leninism or Maoism would rule the world. However, the leaders of the vassal countries only accepted humbler goals: to worship the imperial courts so that they would assist them to the thrones of chieftains of small areas. These were the communist leaders in Eastern Europe, East Germany, and North Korea, and the lands partitioned to Russia after World War II, also Cuba and Viet Nam - - with Russian and Chinese assistance). Because of propaganda, there were still people who argued that the communists combined nationalism with communist ideology.

This was an illusion. Although national love was always brought up and extolled, this was only a slogan to excite people under the domination of the capitalists. "Fighting for independence, escaping capitalism" just meant submitting full allegiance to communism. Everybody knew that communism in general, and Lenin-Stalinism in particular, absolutely excluded nationalism. Inevitably, the parties of vassal countries that joined the Third International were obliged to renounce their countries' autonomies.

Someone even thought that the communist ideal was to bring food and clothing, comfort and happiness to everybody.

This was pitiful naivety. Chiang Kai-shek had stayed only three months in Russia (1923), he became enough a fierce fighter against communism. In Viet Nam, in the North, there was Ho Chi Minh (1923); in the South, there was Tran Van Giau (1929), two so-called brilliant communists who found themselves the way to Russia and stayed there for a long period. They were not too stupid to not recognize the ambitions of Lenin, Stalin, nor the poverty and sufferings of the Russian people under communist rule. If they really loved their country, why did they bring that immoral, inhumane regime and doctrine back to apply to Viet Nam? There was only one way to understand them: they were scoundrels who leaned on the Russian and Chinese communists to attain opportunities to become chieftains of the country.

In them, there was no idealism at all. To those big or small leaders, practice was more important than theory, which was actually used only to justify the practice and did not mean anything at all. They just needed it to mislead the naive and ignorant, while reserving the "special treatments" for people with some knowledge. Therefore, if we want to understand communists, the simplest way is "do not listen to what the communists say, but just look at what the communists do"

To enhance their political power, these leaders hold that communism is already the absolute truth, "the peak of human wisdom". Anything non-communist is completely wrong. Therefore, no other power nor any other party can be accepted. All are "reactionaries" to be exterminated. Hence, there is no true liberty or democracy. Non-communists who expect to ally with the communists just show their ignorance. Eventually they will be destroyed by the communists. To the communists, politics is everything. Everything has to serve politics. Therefore, any means can be used to obtain the political end. For them, the military decisions did not come from the battlefield commanders, but the political commissioners. The victory had to bring political results. Even when winning was certain, if it might bring bad political affects, the fight should be avoided. On the contrary, if the defeat was unavoidable, but the political effects would be good, then attack should progress at any price of blood and money. (This was the case of the general uprising of the Tet Offensive in 1968). In terms of economics, sufficient food and clothing, a prosperous society would be a threat to the regime. With enough food, people would be confident and courageous enough to request more freedom, to seek further well-being and would have more ability to revolt. Lacking food, people would spend days and nights worrying about their stomachs. Therefore, the communists needed to wipe out the people who had the abilities to prosper. They needed to impoverish the whole population.

The totalitarian nature of the regime also dictated that only culture that profited the politics would be allowed. In fact, they needed to apply obscurantism, the policy of keeping people in ignorance. Ignorant people did not have the ability to judge and criticize; they listened to and obeyed any order. Therefore, the communists eradicated the educated elements, the ones with abilities or prestige: intellectuals, affluents, landlords, and notables. They awarded special diplomas to the inherently poor peasants of three generations at least, and called them "socialist intellectuals". They ordered writers to produce on command like talking parrots to polish the regime with so-called "socialist literature". The "socialist Ph.D." learned through translators, the "socialist engineers and physicians" were unable to do the four basic mathematic operations or to read the names of the medicines on prescriptions. Those were just simple facts, nothing astonishing to the ones who understood communists. Their aims were to send all the population into ignorance and poverty. That permitted them to reach the objectives of strengthening and lengthening their reign. However, when the ordinary Vietnamese saw the communists fighting against France or the United States, they simply thought those were wars against the invaders for independence and did not realize that opposition to capitalism would end up enslaving them to Russian and Chinese communism. This was not a peculiar story, anyhow. On one hand, the Northerners who had witnessed the crimes of the communists, might think these were only mistakes during wartime. In their simple minds, exploitation could be considered as sacrifice for the independence and unity of

the country. On the other hand, the Southerners did not know anything about Northern communism; they usually guessed that it would be better than the actual fake republican regimes. Because the latter, like the communists, talked about liberty and democracy but acted to increase tyranny and feudalism; it claimed nationalism, but bowed down to foreigners. The difference among the two might have been that the latter was much closer, more obvious and less successfully deceitful. Today, both North and South sides realize clearly the nature of the communist truth. However, the immutable law seeming that once you realize the communist truth, it is too late.

Genocide, bloody mass murder, impoverishment of the Russian people, eradication of Chinese traditional culture, downgrading all progress of the Kampuchians, imprisoning the Vietnamese in concentration camps: these were all communist achievements, so that they could dominate for a long time. These horrors were applied all over, in the Soviet Union, in China, in Eastern Europe, North Korea, North Viet Nam, and Cuba. No, they were not stupid, incompetent or mistaken. The communists did not go astray. They obtained all that they wanted. Whoever did not understand this, and considered them as stupid, incompetent, mistaken, is actually himself mistaken.

- A female pharmacist who came to "take over South Viet Nam", paid a visit to her relatives. When the host saw that she hesitated and did not sit down, he invited her to do so. She resignedly said, "I don't want to sit around. Here, all are traitors and whores, with 100% venereal disease infection rate. Touching anywhere, your pupils will burst; you will get leprosy; you will lose arms and legs."

"Who told you that?"

"There are statistics from the government's research. I read that in books and newspapers."

"100% venereal disease infection rate! As you have already visited Sai Gon around, how many blind men, how many crippled people did you see? Are people in this house blind or crippled at all? How do we get venereal diseases without those symptoms?"

The woman seemed puzzled, "Oh! Oh yes! Why, that's strange?"

- The female writer Ngoc Tu, who went for a "reality field trip" along the country, from up North to deep South to write her reports, when chatting with the Southerners, said, "The Park Chung Hee's troops were barbarous cannibals."

"That's not so!"

"The newspapers said so. I saw myself the mount of bones of the victims they ate, when I was led to the criminal site at Minh Hai (southernmost province)".

What lie they told! The fighting South Korean troops Ferocious Tiger, Blue Dragon, White Horse encamped only in the Central provinces. However, the writer still clung to her belief that once Big Uncle and the Party said something, it must have been true. And she would naturally report to other people later exactly what she had been told.

- There were "socialist Ph.Ds." who insisted that all scientists and inventions of the world solely came from the Great Soviet Union.

* A high-class "socialist specialist" affirmed that only Russia had spaceships. The story that Americans had landed on the moon was the pure, lying propaganda.

* Another cadre asserted, "In Thai Nguyen and Vinh Phu, we planted lemon herbs and extracted oil to replace the gasoline used in MIG airplanes; Japan begged to build a whole highway system for us in exchange for the smoke from the Hai Phong Cement Factory that they would take home to produce atomic bombs."

* Brigadier General Le Linh, political commissioner of the Second Army Corps, explained, "We covered mines with bamboo to destroy the magnetic fields. Therefore Americans had no way to detect them, and their battleships sunk in bunch."

* A head of department said, "We did not want to join the United Nations. If we did, we would have to kill buffaloes and cows to feast them. We are not stupid; we kept our buffaloes and cows to plough our fields."

* Another head said, "The Americans sent their 7th Fleet into the Tonle Sap Lake to threaten us, but we were not afraid."

* The soldiers carried scissors to cut off any crimped hair or flared-legs trousers, which they called "getting rid of the debauched culture".

* "Doctor" Cao Minh Thi, who took over the Thu Duc Polytechnic University, in his first meeting with teachers and students, declared, "The revolution won every battle, overcame every difficulty. I was only in the third grade when I became messenger for the revolution, and then regrouped to the North. When the policy of taking care of the South opened, the government called up about 250 guys with similar backgrounds to mine to enter special classes. We finished the high school program in one year, then went to Russia to study. All of us came home with doctorate or deputy doctorate degrees. We are different from the old colonists who banned our people from schooling."

There was no question-answer session. Therefore, nobody had the chance to ask him if their Russian "doctorate and deputy doctorate" programs were shrunk into one year, similarly?

* The younger brother who came to the South affectionately whispered to his elder, "Without Big Uncle, without The Party, how can we get the unity and independence as today?"

His elder replied, "Do you find today any former colony without unity and independence? Nevertheless, they do not need any Big Uncle and Party and do not pay the price that we have to."

"Oh! Oh! Yes! Why haven't we noticed that before?"

* A colonel of the security service investigated a female writer.

He said to her, "The Americans and Thieu left one million whores in Sai Gon. One whore, at her best, can only sleep with several hundreds men. Hum! The bastards Khanh and Ky said each writer is worth a division. How many divisions did you sleep with? Hah! Many dozens? Women who write are just prostitutes. Do you know that, sister?"

She answered, "Brother, I don't know how bright Big Uncle and the Party are, nor how generous are their policies. However, I know this fact for sure. Please listen carefully: You are a bastard badly brought up by them!"

But Mrs. Nha Ca was wrong. There was absolutely no bastard among them. "Big Uncle and Party" had brainwashed them. Therefore, they no longer possessed an independent mind. There was no other way. We could feel irritated, but did not hate them or blame them. We had to sympathize with them. We had to pity them. To hope otherwise, to expect the ones who lived in the communist world to think, understand, act, solve problems in the way of the free world is the most fatal mistake of our century.

*

During the "Black April" of 1975, on the very first day, April 1st, the "Provisional Republic Government of South Viet Nam" promulgated ten rules of "reconciliation and harmony policy":

1. *Eradicate completely the old regime and the puppet government's executive establishment, military forces, all organizations and laws used to oppress and restrain people. Rapidly form our revolutionary government in all levels in the newly liberated zones.*

The revolutionary government takes over all agencies of the puppet; all its officials will work under the revolutionary government.

Dissolve all reactionary parties and political organizations that served the American imperialists and the puppet government.

2. *Ensure the liberty and democracy of the people and equality among men and women.*

Guarantee the freedom and equality among the religions. Respect the freedom of worship of the people; protect the pagodas, churches, temples, and shrines.

3. *Execute the great policy of uniting the whole nation, providing reconciliation and harmony of the people to fight the invasion of imperialists. Forbid rigorously all activities that cause division, hatred, or doubt among the people and nation. Everybody without distinction of class, race, religion, or political view should unite, love, and help each other to build the liberated zones, a new happy and sound living.*

Achieve equality among all majority and minority races. Make hearty efforts in helping the ethnic minorities in economics and culture to achieve better living.

4. Everyone in the liberated zones has the right to continue their work and professions, and to share the obligations toward laws, orders, security, support of the revolution.

The people's revolutionary government will determinedly and immediately crush all enemies for sabotage and reactionary acts and plots, and will punish severely all who oppose, disturb security and order, intrude and destroy the properties administered by the revolutionary government.

5. All properties of the puppet government are under the rule of the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

6. All public services should continue to work to allow normal life to proceed. Production will be restored to ensure the living of the city dwellers, and to provide work for unemployed workers and all other laborers. Industrial and business persons are guaranteed their properties and permitted to carry on their undertakings for the profit of the nation's well-being. Heartily take care of the orphans, the old and the disabled.

7. Encourage and help the peasants to recover and develop agriculture, fishing, salt producing, and forestry.

Encourage the industrial and agricultural workers to continue their business.

8. Cultural, scientific, technical establishments, schools, and hospitals should continue to work to serve people. All imperialist American and puppet government organizations and cultural activities that are reactionary, debauched, and poisonous to the people shall be abolished.

Encourage and expand the sound national cultural activities. Highly make use of talents in science and technique that are necessary for the building of the nation.

9. The policy promulgated on the 25th of March 1975 by the Provisional Republic Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam reserved for the officers and soldiers of the puppet government shall be strictly executed.

Soldiers, officers, police officers, veterans, war invalids, and employees of the puppet government will be assisted to work, to return to their native villages, or to join in other activities, depending on their expectations and abilities. The ones who work well or work to repay their guilt will be compensated. Those who are against the revolution will be punished severely. The guilty who really repent will be forgiven.

10. The government will guarantee foreigners' lives and properties. All foreigners should respect Viet Nam's independence and rights and follow the policies and laws of the revolutionary government. Welcome the foreigners who have contributed to fighting for independence, liberty and to building of the country of South Viet Nam.

These plans sound wonderful, but they had nothing to do with the realistic of the situation.

After the evacuation of military units and administration workers, people were not fooled by pretty promises. The cities of South Viet Nam were all abandoned. Everybody, rich or poor, left all their properties, running as fast as they could for their own and their family's lives. The communists did not have enough time or men to run after.

But in Sai Gon, President Nguyen Van Thieu was still foolishly ignorant. After the loss of Phuoc Long (January 1st, 1975), Thieu still did not realize the American abandonment, and still wanted to hang on to power. On April 5th, he entrusted Nguyen Ba Can, an incapable lackey, to form a new cabinet. Two days later, April 7th, a lieutenant pilot, Nguyen Thanh Trung, underground communist, flew an F5E to bomb the Independence Palace, later landing at a communist controlled airport (Phuoc Long) to receive the Medal of Liberation, Second Degree, and the rank of Captain of the communist army.

Did the Americans whisper to Thieu to do this so that they could transfer the South smoothly to the communists? Or was he muddle-headed enough to think that if only he abandoned Military Zone II and Hue (the imperial capital), the Americans would come back to save him? Either way, he gave confusing orders, and chaos ensued.

There was a dark joke saying that Thieu was of Cham ancestry. In history, long ago, the Vietnamese had invaded and eradicated Champa. Therefore, Thieu tried to take revenge on the Vietnamese people by doing such things, to intentionally ruin the nation and let the communists ill-treat their own fellow-countrymen. For whatever reasons, to obey his masters, to be stupid, or to get revenge, the consequences that came to Thieu were dreadful. The troops of the Marine Corps and Rangers who were abandoned on their withdrawal to Phan Rang, drove bulldozers to totally destroy Thieu's family cemetery. For the Vietnamese, a cursing phrase like "I'll dig out your father, your grandfathers' tombs" would be a terrible offense. In this case, the tombs of Nguyen Van Thieu's father and grandfathers were in fact dug out. This was an everlasting humiliation for Thieu himself and his children and grandchildren, with no chance of atonement. This event might have caused Thieu's fear of "offending of the ancestors", which meant it would not be possible for him to hold his position, thus he had to resign. The old, dotty Vice President Tran Van Huong probably planned to assume the presidency that Thieu had just released; therefore he forbade the men of military service age to flee.

On April 26th, Vo Dong Giang, head of the communist delegation at Camp Davis, in a press meeting, laid down nine requirements to the United States:

1. *To respect the independence, the sovereignty, and the national unity of Viet Nam.*
2. *To annul all political pressure on the people of South Viet Nam.*
3. *To stop all military activities in South Viet Nam.*
4. *To withdraw all CIA agents from South Viet Nam.*
5. *To withdraw all civilian-disguised soldiers from South Viet Nam.*
6. *To withdraw 50 warships out of Vietnamese waters.*
7. *To withdraw 200 warplanes that the United States had prepared to intervene in South Viet Nam.*
8. *To withdraw 6,000 American Marine Corps staying on the warships.*
9. *To stop all military assistance for South Viet Nam.*

He also published seven conditions to be "arranged" with the government of the Republic of Viet Nam:

1. *To establish a new government that advocates peace, independence, democracy and national unity.*
2. *To implement the Paris Accord.*
3. *To exclude the elements of Nguyen Van Thieu's puppet regime.*
4. *To annul the policy of aggression, fascism, restraint, and oppression of the people of South Viet Nam.*
5. *To annul anti-democratic laws.*
6. *To guarantee freedom and democracy.*
7. *To release all prisoners who fought for national peace and independence.*

This hinted at disapproval of the old Huong, a Thieu's element. However, this was only a game of splitting the enemies.

After many diplomatic maneuverings, Mr. Duong Van Minh, deceptively acceptable to the communists, rejoiced, at 17:00 on April 28th, as he received the function of "President" turned over by the "puppet elements". Minh was greeted by Nguyen Thanh Trung leading five A37 warplanes left by the South Viet Nam army in Da Nang-Phan Rang to bomb the Tan Son Nhut Airport.

New "Prime Minister" Vu Van Mau hastily requested American withdrawal out of Viet Nam. Nobody understood what in the world that "Prime Minister" really wanted, and could only feel sorry for his professorship with the aggregation and his former post of Foreign Minister. These facts only showed the foolishness of a "living room politician." He surely responded to the Vietnamese communists' actual intention to obliterate all American involvement, and also the American wish to shake off all responsibilities toward South Viet Nam. He comprehended clearly the needs of other

people, but did not understand his own situation, like the "drowning person who chased out floating marsh-lentils". Even without his request, the Americans withdrew in a hurry. Youngsters and poor people broke into the deserted American agencies and establishments. Usually, they just took food and small valuables, and the rest was all destroyed. Furniture and equipment were all broken up, smashed, slashed, torn, and thrown out of upstairs, windows and down staircases. Papers and books were shredded and cluttered around. Window and door glass was shattered and spread all over. Those youngsters laughed on their own destructiveness.

*

At 9:00 in the next morning, April 30th, "President" Duong Van Minh declared officially:

I request that all brothers, soldiers of the Viet Nam Republic, calmly stop firing and stay in their own position. I also request that the brothers, soldiers of the Provisional Republic Government of South Viet Nam, stop firing. We are here waiting to meet the representatives of the Provisional Republic Government of South Viet Nam to discuss the handover of the government, to avoid the futile bloodshed of our compatriots.

The majority of the soldiers were startled, but threw down their arms, undid their military outfits, and disbanded. A few small groups of four or five soldiers still fought until the last minute, to be wiped out by the enemies, or turned their guns backward to help each other in collective suicide. To tell the truth, this naive "president/general" did not know the true situation, the real communists; he put all his trust in the monk Tri Quang. But even if this monk had wanted to, he did not have position or strength to influence the communists. When this monk admitted his incapacity, the "general/president" stunnedly surrendered.

[He did not dare think about evacuating his forces to the West, or heeding the proposals of France or China to turn around the situation. He did not have the intelligence to foresee that if we tried to hold on against all attacks, in about two three more months, even the Northern soldiers would have reactions profitable to the cause of the South. The soldiers, cadres, security agents, party members, and civilians from the North or from the obscure maquis would finally witness the prosperity, the actual liberty and democracy of the South, and they would accumulate enough anger and hatred, seeing themselves having been cheated, betrayed to turn their arms against those mischievous and treacherous leaders.

Actually, in June, 1977, during the explosion of the ammunition depot at Long Binh, all the soldiers and cadres got rid of their ungainly communist clothing of schoolboy plastic hat, used rubber tire sandals to wear southern civilian flared-leg trousers and high heel shoes, and look for "puppet" sponsors. A colonel of the Communist Security Service even admitted that, in one day and night, the whole population in Sai Gon and the environs armed themselves with knives and hoes, ready for a general revolt to exterminate the communists]. Finally, around 10:00 AM, the Northern tanks entered the capital. People peered fearfully from behind the doors' chinks. The whole town was silent; everybody held their breath. Fear and doubt could be seen on everybody's face. Due to his ignorance, Minh surrendered:

I, general Duong Van Minh, President of the Sai Gon government, ask the army of the Viet Nam Republic to drop their arms unconditionally and to surrender them to the army of the South Viet Nam Liberation Front.

I declare that the government, from the central to the localities, shall be completely disbanded and turned over to the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam.

*

The streets were cluttered with dead bodies, guns and ammunition, different kinds of furniture used as barricades, public cars left all over when the drivers had run for their lives. Then the Northern soldiers appeared, in their brand new, clumsy uniforms, with a bewildered air on their childish faces, country boys who had been collected in hurry to fuel the fire of South Viet Nam.

Among those who had some experience of communism, some donned their formal uniforms with full decorations and shot themselves in the head; others brought rat poison home to blend in the chicken soup for the last feast of the whole family; some, more clever, immediately changed everything, from their identities to their addresses.

On the other hand, life had to continue. The underground communists and opportunists shamelessly came out with red rags on their arms. They immediately got the new collective names of "men of the 30th" (actually slang for ferocious tiger) or "soldiers of the 304 division", which meant derisively that they only joined the communists on the 30th of April.

These men preferred tasks that could show off their power: giving orders to the crazy traffic, mounting guard on the empty public establishments and offices, receiving the guns and weapons brought in by the people, registering and issuing certificates to people who reported, taking over properties, etc... People and even themselves did not know that they really deserved extraordinary credit for helping the communist army now, and the military administrative committee later, that were totally ignorant in their new posts and jobs, to fulfill their victory. Then, three four months after, when the communists could firmly control the situation, these men were successively thrown into prisons with the common charge of power abuse. The "core" from the North came down South and took over their places.

The first men who timidly made contact with the northern soldiers glanced at each other, wondering,

"How could 'that' win!?"

Many soldiers whispered, "Our government says that this is peace time.

There is no fighting. We just come here to take over and build the new economic zones." This statement made many people believe that the United States and North Viet Nam had made a secret agreement about letting North Viet Nam gradually take over the South.

*

The day after the handover, May 1st, everybody was urged by the "men of the 30th" (or ferocious tigers) to gather for the celebration of the Revolutionary Victory and the International Labor Day. Thanks to the business flair of the Chinese of Cho Lon, every house could find a flag, half blue, half red, with a yellow star at the center (the Front's colors); or a yellow star on a red background (North Viet Nam's colors), to stick or hang on the front door, while the picture of "Big Uncle Ho" was given the most ceremonious place of the house. Despite such a big celebration, nobody dared to wear long dresses and suits, but all were in short clothing or plain shirts.

Afterwards, all colorful clothes were hastily dyed dark brown or black. Indeed, the very first new business of the day was operated at any corner of the streets, in large barrels set on firewood pits, containing a blackish liquid used to dye clothing. The process was very fast and careless, because the customers preferred to get the clumsiest dark clothes immediately to wear and to show that they did not like "luxury and debauches".

Rich people hastily gave elsewhere or threw away their expensive clothing and utensils. Every home tried to look poor and miserable. Anything related to the Americans and the "puppet" government was destroyed, even the smallest pictures and letters. Those might become the evidences of dangerous liaisons with the imperialists. One only dared to hide the precious gems, diamonds and gold. Most US. dollar bills had to be burned or torn up and flushed in the toilets. Some people, having so much, even brought bundles of bills to cast into the city sewer ducts. The others saw that, but shut their eyes without regret. They preferred to be safe than to risk such dangerous, valuable burdens. Everywhere, military equipment and material was piled up as high as mountains; some was burned, and some was destroyed.

(One famous antiquities dealer had to call trusted relatives in to chop jewel-encrusted chests and furniture into firewood, and to smash valuable Chinese porcelaines into pieces, to annihilate those precious things that served only the rich bourgeoisie).

Dead bodies and broken things could not be left to deteriorate indefinitely on the streets. People cleaned up the town themselves. Some were burned, some were buried. Many nameless heroes, courageous fighters who sacrificed their last blood were subject to vanish without a trace. Many valuable or indispensable things were destroyed.

The abandoned American establishments and houses of people who had fled were taken over by the soldiers and the "revolutionary committee", and transformed into their offices or residences, or just sealed off. These appropriations were notable for the big banners with awkward letters written on the walls: "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom", and so on. The yellow letters on the red background were blindingly bright.

Efforts to warn the people about the communist peril had been useless until today. Just in a minute, every kind of risk and danger appeared automatically in everybody's mind, for now the old "non-sensical threats" became terrible reality. So it was that the "nationalist" propaganda apparatus that could not do any good for itself now served the communists quite effectively. Of course, the 1954 chicken-hearted Northerner emigrants who understood communism well and were condemned for their desertion feared the most. That was comprehensible. Nevertheless, the strangest thing was how assiduously the bold Southerners were now obeying all the orders, very obediently, without any question or hesitation.

Today, it was a story of winners and losers, "the revolution" and "the puppet government, the puppet army, the puppet people". The Northerners, the Front's men had all rights. The Southerners, all of them, were criminals. They applied martial law. Therefore, not only the generals, like "puppet general" Nguyen Ngoc Loan, had the right to kill. Any lowest "revolutionary soldier" could do that. The only thing they had to do was to yell loudly: Viet traitors, reactionaries, thieves, and then shoot. "Kill one man, scare ten thousand others". Did they receive orders to do so to suppress the "puppet people"? The obvious fact was that everybody, even the most stubborn-minded hooligan, was submissive. The olds, who had received French education, been rewarded by the Party with a visit to Sai Gon, pointed out to each other, "Mais, nous sommes des Allemands à Paris!" (But we are the Germans in Paris!). This meant they were the invading foreigners amid the intimidated people. This was not a story of independence and unity at all.

(They spoke French, maybe to show off their language capacity, to prove that they were not communists, or just to keep themselves safe, apart from the ignorant communists who always listened and detected any mistaken words or deeds). However, to be fair, we should recognize that the majority of the soldiers were very young, and often came straight from the rice fields, still naive and intimidated by the prosperity and the progress of the South. They whispered to each other, "Why do the Southern women have two crossed tendons on the buttocks?" Actually, the Northern women were too poor to have an intact pair of trousers; how could they afford the panties, to have such "crossed tendons"? Scared of the sabotage by southerners, most soldiers dared not station in military camps. They sheltered themselves among the commons, in the empty houses of escapees. They did not even know how to read, much less foreign language, therefore many of them mistakenly misused detergent powder, bleaching liquid, or pesticides. Some even cried out that the "stubborn puppet reactionaries" had tried to harm the "revolution", when they turned on a faucet of hot water and burned themselves!

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Starting from the sad May 1st, 1975, from early morning to late night, the Southerners got their ears split; their heads ached from songs with sounds like wolf howls or dog barks. Moreover, the radios and the loudspeakers placed all over the town never stopped their shrill of voices condemning the American and the puppet government crimes, boasting of the revolution victories and making different kinds of threats. The Southerners could not absorb these hi-tech bombardments of sounds. They wondered why the previous governments had forbidden such music and talk, for if they had let everybody hear it, only three days would have removed any desire for such music or belief in the lies that defied all truths! Going out in the early morning, people could

not believe their eyes and tried their best not to laugh. Men and women of the city, mobilized by the "men of the 30th" to sweep the streets, were wearing Snow-White sanitary pads as mouth-covers! The soldiers distributed those pads; and everybody wore them. Nobody dared raise a word of protest or explanation about their proper use; while the soldiers were so proud of their new discovery of a classy modern sanitary method. Anyway, people could not enjoy "the revolutionary victory" forever; they had to earn their everyday livings. A few days later, all sidewalks and pavements were filled with different kinds of articles, from luxuries to base items, which came from the looting and sold at cheap prices. But nobody bought or even looked at them, except the soldiers.

The Northern occupiers always assured the Southerners that up there, in the North, everything was plentiful and the best. However, deeper talk showed that these men just made up whatever stories they could invent. Such as in Ha Noi, Sanyo televisions and Frigidaire refrigerators ran up and down the streets. They mistook the foreign brand names that they never had heard of before, thinking that these were all names of cars.

Moreover, they did not conceal their avidity for everything. They wanted to buy, to get anything, but they did not have money. Their dreams were summed up as a radio to hang on their shoulders, a watch on their wrists, and a bicycle. They borrowed those things to wear and take pictures; then sent North to show off to families and friends. If only they could wear a pair of the cheap greenest sun glasses made in Cho Lon, this would be a sign of sophistication. In the beginning, the Southerners felt pity for those men, with their poor wishes and needs, but only one year later, these became their own unobtainable wishes and needs too.

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Back in everyday life, at first, people worried about their relatives and friends. This one might have escaped; this one stayed. It was a confusing play of visits and whispers, with various reactions and feelings. Following are some true stories, some shot through with black humor:

- The vice prime minister, after his family's flight, appeared on television to assure the people of his staying. Some people were touched and praised him aloud. The truth was that he planned to drop his old wife, and implored Mong Tuyen, the attractive reformed theater "cai lung" actress to go abroad with him. She hesitated, causing him to be stuck.

Immediately, he thought of a two-way deal. One was to participate in "the Duong Van Minh government"; therefore, he was present in the Independence Palace at the time of the communist take-over. The other, a fast talker, he said that he had saved for "the revolution" Nguyen Van Thieu's 16 tons of gold. Therefore, he did not have to go to "re-education", but still stayed in high position, allotted the use of government car and chauffeur. (In reality, this gold had simply remained because no company had wanted to insure it in such an insecure situation, so no airplane came to carry it away. It was nobody's plan at all).

- A minister who had his wife and children evacuated early on. He might gamble and stay for a position in the new government. Yet, as Thieu's uncle, he could not get any consideration. At the last minute, he slid up to the gate of the American Embassy, declared his position, and showed the permit reserving a seat on the helicopter. Unfortunately, he met a brute American Marine who showed him no favor, but actually kicked him out on his butt. He had to walk home lonely; then afterward, submitted himself for "re-education" in the Long Thanh Orphanage, along with many of his colleagues.

- Another minister who had rented a building to the Americans, had also sent his wife and children away a long while ago. The embassy and his tenants had assured him that they would surely pick him up. Moreover, the helicopter landing was right on the flat roof of his high building. He was so sure of their help that, after reminding Americans and friends to call him when they took off, he went to his bedroom for a nap. All the rooms were air-conditioned and soundproof, and he slept too deeply to hear the helicopter's landing. The tenants were too confused to remember him. When he woke up, the evacuation was over. Long Thanh was his only destination, for a meeting

with the other ministers. - Another former minister, who had joined the Viet Minh ranks in the "old uprising days", also had his wife and children evacuated. Only he himself knew what incited him to stay. In the evening of the 30th, a "bo doi" on a jeep came in and asked for him. His maid said that he was out. Next day, again the "bo doi" came. Again, he was absent. He had known the communists, became panicked, and took a whole bottle of sleeping pills. He did not have the chance to realize that the impending visitor was only the son of his former very close friend in the North. The son came the other day to find out if he was gone or not. The next day the guy came again hoping to personally transfer the father's recommendation that he should get out of the country at any price. This old man died mistakenly. However, this might have been best, then: under communism, better die than live!

- A billionaire, who owned a private ship with an all-Korean crew, had already brought all of his precious things on the board; but he waited for a good time to depart. When the moment arrived, he ran to the port, just to discover that his ship was gone! The ship owner was obliged to come home, to wait for the coming campaign of "striking the mercantile bourgeoisie", at which time he entered Phan Dang Luu Prison in Gia Dinh to "crush bedbugs".

- A high school teacher's family in Khanh Hoi, who were be-friended by a ship captain, brought some ready-to-eat noodles on board and stayed there to wait to depart. They waited for a few days, ate only dry noodles, and felt their stomach burning. They went home to cook rice and got other food. When they got back to the port, the ship was gone.

- A helicopter with a Vietnamese pilot landed on Lang Cha Ca; many people climbed up. An old woman stepped in, begged the pilot to take along her cumbersome sugar-cane juice-squeezing vending cart. Request declined, she was dissatisfied and climbed down.

- Another helicopter landed on Thoai Ngoc Hau Street: Absolute emptiness. Only a man who drove by on his motorcycle stepped in. However, this good man surely remembered his wife and children, perhaps regretted leaving his motorcycle, finally climbed down. The pilot waited for a while but nobody came up, at which he dispiritedly flew away.

- Another pilot, in his landing attempt, might have felt so touched or baffled by the chaotic scene below that he steered his helicopter into the electrical wires or high trees, and he crashed in front of the Petrus Ky High School. Yet, those stories were not worth crying over. At the end of Truong Minh Giang Street, a helicopter managed to land on a tiny flat roof of a high dwelling. No doubt, that pilot was trying to pick up his own family. Unfortunately, when it lifted, the fan wings smashed into the wall of the next house. The helicopter was abandoned there for months without any consideration. This family might have found another way to escape. Anyway, the house was left empty. Nobody dared to stay there to face charges of being a "puppet family with bloody debt to the nation", which further had tried to find a way to follow the "imperialists". Those stories exclude the most popular ones of persons who were cheated. Many Vietnamese paid money or gold, but the heroes of the Co Hoa (Starred Flag, Americans) took it and left forever. While the most theatrical story might be the one of the anti-war couple, musician Trinh Cong Son and singer Khanh Ly. He wrote songs; she sang them with her drawling voice in bars and in tapes. On the "liberation day", he hastily ran to the radio station to sing his songs, such as "Joining a Big Circle of Arms". However, instead of becoming a "revolutionary", he lived in debauches, and became an alcohol addict. As for the female singer who had called for war to end and peace to come, now that "Big Uncle and Party" abolished the "aggressive army" and realized "independence and unity", she frantically ran to escape with the "imperialists". People rumored that her ship was sunk, and that her remains drifted back to Khanh Hoi. These were only curses of those left behind, however. In the United States, she still sang, sadly in her husky voice, but changed her topic into the bitterness of a wanderer losing her country! Indeed, it is difficult to understand the complicated souls of the chameleon artists!

However, this case did not sound so tragic as the one of Chu Tu-Chu Van Binh. Mr. Chu Tu, during the period 1965-67 of the "hodge-podge generals'" dispute for power, had advocated national revolution and people's well-being, and he fought both communists and capitalists. He raised funds to run a paper advocating his ways and strategies. People contributed a lot. With good

funds, he had means to gather disciples, drawing them from the darkness into the light. Regrettably, money lured his juniors into betrayal. They stole his funds, then chased him out. Meanwhile, he started to show Parkinson's disease symptoms. His arms and legs shook.

In this situation, if he stayed home, he would surely be caught in the campaign of "exterminating the reactionary and debauched culture" and would surely die in a "re-education camp". Likewise, his name would be written on historical pages as an anti-communist captured by the enemies who died in their hands. But he left his wife and children and jumped on the Viet Nam Thuong Tin ship. And the most unexpected twist of fate was that not one other ship was shot during that time but the Viet Nam Thuong Tin. When it passed Rung Sac, on the way to the estuary, the communists teasingly fired a B40 shot. Nobody on this ship was harmed, except Chu Tu, who was killed. The sailors wrapped his dead body in a piece of cloth, then threw it into the sea. His disciples who were stuck later in the camps blamed him for inciting them with his anti-communism. When the communists arrived, he left them to run for his own life, but failed even to save that.

II

The situation became more stable. On May 8th, the "revolutionary government" posted a new order, requesting everybody to report and register themselves. They had to declare the smallest details, like what did they had worked at, or where they had lived from the age of five or six; list all their relatives for three generations: names, ages and addresses of their grandparents, parents, husband or wife, children, brothers and sisters, in-laws, etc... Besides, a huge red cloth banner stretched over the front of the former House of Representatives, with big yellow letters: "Reporting place for officials of the puppet government, from district chiefs, and directors to presidents". In the Sai Gon Pre-university Center, at 81 Tran Hoang Quan, a banner stated: "Reporting location for officers of the puppet army, from colonels to generals." About one month later came a communique calling for "re-education":

On re-education for non-commissioned officers, soldiers and personnel of the puppet army, secret agents, police officers and puppet government officials who have been registered.

To implement the merciful policy of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam, helping the soldiers of the puppet army in their re-education to become honest citizens; the Sai Gon-Gia Dinh Military Administrative Committee

DECIDES

1/ All non-commissioned officers, soldiers and personnel of the puppet army belonging to the military service branches in Sai Gon or Gia Dinh; secret agents; police officers and puppet government officials of the districts, quarters, villages, hamlets, sub-hamlets who have been registered must go to the people's revolutionary committee place where they reported for re-education for three days, from 11th of June 1975 to 13th of June 1975.

Puppet government officials (from office chiefs and deputy-chiefs down) belonging to the government offices, ministries, departments, institutes, directorates, services, and provincial services of central government, Sai Gon City and Gia Dinh Province, of public enterprises, public hospitals, and public schools who have reported and registered at those agencies shall attend re-education at those locations from June 18 to June 20, 1975.

2/ The schedule of the study is from 7:00 to 16:00 (Indochina time), with 1 hour for lunch.

The re-educatees should bring lunch and dinner for themselves; after the sessions, they will come home.

3/ This order of re-education must be followed strictly. Failure to obey is considered a violation of the law.

The next day, there was a communique about the "re-education" of the puppet army officers, secret agents, puppet government administrators, and reactionary political partisans who had registered.

To realize the merciful policy of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam, helping the persons who previously were in the ranks of American imperialism, the puppet army and officials, who committed crimes toward the people can have now early opportunities for re-education to become honest citizens. Therefore, the Sai Gon-Gia Dinh Military Administrative Committee

DECIDES

I. All puppet army officers, police officers, secret agents, puppet government administrators, and reactionary political partisans already registered must go for re-education to these following locations:

A/ The puppet army officers who already reported and registered:

** General and colonel ranks must gather at the Minh Mang University Abodes, 230 Minh Mang Street.*

** Lieutenant colonel ranks must gather at Don Bosco High School, 12 Truong Minh Ky, Go Vap.*

** Major ranks who:*

- reside in 7, 8, 9th districts must gather at Petrus Ky High School, Cong Hoa Street.

- reside in 10, 11th and Phu Nhuan districts must gather at Technical Higher Schools Center, Nguyen Van Thoai Street.

- reside in 4, 5, 6th districts must gather at Nguyen Ba Tong High School, 69 Bui Thi Xuan Street.

- reside in 1, 2, 3rd, Thanh My Tay and Binh Hoa districts must gather at Taberd High School, at the corner of Gia Long and Nguyen Du Streets.

- reside in Hoc Mon, Go Vap, Tan Binh, Nha Be, Thu Duc and Binh Chanh districts must gather at Nguyen Tri Phuong Elementary School, 71 Nguyen Lam Street.

B/ Puppet police officers from major to general ranks must gather at Cu Xa 259, Tran Quoc Dung Street.

C/ American and puppet secret agents from middle to high ranks already registered must gather at Chu Van An High School, 506 Minh Mang Street.

D/ American and puppet government administrators, including legislative, judiciary and executive, from deputy district chiefs to presidents, from vice directors to ministers, from senators and congressmen to speaker of the House of Representatives to chairman of Congress (including the officers and administrators of the American and puppet army, police and secret service in special missions) who have reported and registered must gather at Gia Long High School, Phan Thanh Gian Street.

E/ Partisans of reactionary political parties, from deputy secretaries of districts and cities to general secretaries who have reported and registered must gather at Le Van Duyet High School, Le Van Duyet Street in Gia Dinh.

NOTES: *In cases of persons with two or more functions in the puppet army and government or reactionary political parties, they can go to any convenient location and report all their functions so that the organizers can dispose appropriately.*

II. Persons who come to concentration/re-education must bring pens and papers, clothing, mosquito net and blanket, personal effects, food, and enough cash for one month, from the day of concentrating.

III. Time limit of reporting is on the 13th, 14th, and 15th of June, 1975, in these above defined locations.

After these three fixed days, anyone who does not report at the gathering locations will be considered as disobeying orders.

IV. The hours of receiving the concentratees at the locations stated in article I are from 8:00 to 17:00 (Indochina time), every day.

A guideline notice for the officers who go to the "concentration":

Some defined guidelines for officers in the ranks of generals and colonels, and puppet government administrators who come to the re-education locations:

1/ Each person who comes to the re-education location must bring with him:

- cash, enough for one month of food, each day 300 dong x 30 days = 9,000 dong, plus

- 0.700 rice. 220 dong/kg x 21 kg = 4,610 dong (sic).

Total = 13,610 dong

2/ On the first concentration day, each person must bring dry food to eat for that day; from the second day on, the contractors will provide meals.

3/ Each person may bring these personal effects:

Clothes for changing

Blanket, sweater, towel, mosquito net, mat, raincoat

Toothpaste, toothbrush, eating bowl and chopsticks

Cigarettes, if smoking

Papers and pens to take notes

A bundle carrying about 3kg of food for extra feeding

The 11th of June, 1975

Chairman of the Sai Gon-Gia Dinh Military Administrative Committee

Lieutenant-General Tran Van Tra

There were many naive people who thought such notice meant that the "re-education" would last only one month. Therefore, many who were released or retired from the army also reported. There were even people who claimed higher or different positions so that they could go to the "re-education" with their friends, for fun. In fact, most of them seemed agree with the decision, or just sighed lightly, "Well, let's go for re-education for one month, and come back to think about how to earn a living." The most ironic part of this story was the subservience of the people of the "reactionary political parties". How smart was their "politics" and how great was their "reaction", that they believed in the communists, to obediently report and register themselves, from chairmen to members. The definite results were that they never had a return date. "Re-education" or "education for transformation": how very sweet and civilized those words sound! The people in the world who heard them must have thought this was a perfectly natural process. The new government, of course, had different policies; it had to pool people of the old government in order to guide them thoroughly. This was not savage and cruel like the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary-Khieu Samphan clique in Kampuchea, who crushed their people's heads or buried them alive.

How naive they were. They did not understand that the works of Pol Pot-Ieng Sary-Khieu Samphan were more humane. One blow took a life, immediately. Many could die with their families, parents, children, spouses, friends. But "re-education" was a long process of living worse than animals. Besides hard labor and death, there were hunger and thirst. But the worst was in the mind: the humiliation, the fear about a non-future, a broken family, and many things else. One person in "re-education" knew for sure that at least five relatives were suffering with him. Certainly, there were no killing fields in South Viet Nam, no sea of blood, just an ocean of tears, when people live -- with full consciousness, of his own self and his loved ones -- with the lack of minimal human living conditions: No shelter, no clothing. Food was anything they caught or found to put in their mouth. A slow but certain death was always in their mind.

Did the world know anything of the miserable situations of the Vietnamese prisoners and their families?

The relatives, or more exactly, the women, tried to protest and request the release of their spouses, fathers, children. But one did not protest against the "revolution." They used fire-hoses to

douse these women without hesitation. If these ladies did not withdraw, the next step would be guns and bullets. Who would intervene? There were no longer unresolved or slowly handled situations as under the former regimes. Now, the new bosses and soldiers could do anything they wanted without the outside world's awareness.

(All the journalists, who had used to extol the communists, were poor cowards; all ran away, none of them dared stay. Even if they stayed, bold enough to write the truth, and found a fissure to send the news out, then what would the outside world do? Korean generals, Kampuchean ministers, British or French citizens: all were put into prisons. Not a single country ventured to raise a voice. Privately, officials of nations whose citizens were held might implore, but who cared? These foreigners had also to be "re-educated", to work hard as those of the origin of An Nam!)

Consequently, many families lost their main supports. All activities belonged now under the management of the government, from catching a fish to selling a vegetable bundle. Absolutely no self-earned living or private activity. All should be "bo doi/can bo/cong nhan vien" (soldiers, cadres, government, state-owned establishments' workers).

Therefore, besides a small group of low-ranked "puppet government" officials who kept office, all of South Viet Nam's population became unemployed. As non-jobbers, young boys and girls should bring meals from home, and should join the force of "forwarding youths" to dig fake hydraulic projects or to build state-run farms, or even to disarm mines; while the adults were sent to so-called new economic zones.

Actually, before April 30, 1975, due to the war, many peasants had moved to the cities for security and to earn a living. Now, with no more war, many of them, dedicated cultivators, got bored with the town life, went back to the countryside. With the war ending, they rejoiced the peaceful life in the fields and farms and, most of all, a sound and suitable means of earning their living. The results of their work were, at first, fabulous. People could see the biggest beets or sweet potatoes or cassavas as fat as piglets, three or four roots would fill a huge panier.

Additionally, in 1976, the government promised to provide food and necessities; moreover, they would let the relatives of these peasants, their "concentrated" fathers, husbands or children, return home soon to help in the farms, with one condition: that they abide by the "new economic zones" policy. Many credulous persons were enthusiastic about the promises, giving up their houses and cultivated land to the government, taking their young children to the new sites in Binh Duong, Long Khanh, Bien Hoa, Tay Ninh, and Binh Long, expecting clemency for their loved ones.

There, they tried their best to cultivate the new desolate and waste soil. But one month after the first crop, the "authority" came and told them that this land was in the "planned scheme", then cut the rice and salt supply, and made them move to another site that even diehard peasants could hardly exploit, without water supply or fertilizer.

City people, unfamiliar with sun and rain, were not able to stand anymore. They got sick with scabies, malaria, and dysentery, but unable to find medicines. The yield was low also due to wild animals and insects. The most daring persons tried two, three times, finally gave up, and helped each other back to the cities, did anything for food, slept on the street sides, the open-markets, the bus stops, or the cemeteries, and dragged on with their life. Grim as this was, the situations in the concentration camps were worse. Even on these harsh waste lands, if there had been good seeds, fertilizers, tools and materials, with just minimal food and medicines, the "re-educatees" would certainly have done great things, not only to feed themselves, but to enrich the country with their strong hands and clear minds. They were a good work force, eager to change their lifestyle, to rebuild their country. But the treatments reserved for them came from a completely different perspective. The government tried to cause them all difficulties. They had nothing but humiliation and oppression. With bare hands, they had to create farm implements from discarded refuse. How could they have efficiency and produce crops in such conditions? They were doomed to die slowly of cold, hunger, and illness. The "re-educatees' families" also met all kinds of obstructions, from the government, when trying to help their loved ones.

Even spotting them was hard. About six months after detention, the prisoners' families might find out their addresses to send in some meager sustenance. Limited to one a month, one package of

1 kg. (2 lbs.) could be sent through the post office. The families tried their best to find or make the most suitable food that could be kept for a long period. Usually, it was only salted ground sesame, or salty dry fish cooked with lemon grass and hot pepper. Then wives, parents, or children had to stand in lines for days in front of the post office. About six months later, they might be allowed to visit the prisoners, once each three months. To see their loved ones, the family members had to overcome many things: go to hamlet, quarter authority for the travel permit, sell some last personal effects to have money to buy a black market bus ticket, travel hundreds of kilometers, then walk ten or twenty kilometers of forest roads to meet their husbands, fathers, or children in the "re-education camp" for fifteen minutes. Just enough time to give them three kilograms (6-1/2 lbs.) food. Meanwhile, in the society, communist stool pigeons pretended to be "reactionaries". They whispered to the common people, "Our soldiers are fighting here and there. They are distributing food, clothing, and medicines, all American-made". Or they may say, "Our soldiers are stopping the buses and the trains to talk to people. Mr. Ky, Mr. Lan, Mr. Truong, and Mr. Dong (South Viet Nam generals) are hiding their troops in secret zones. This deity, that saint appeared here and there, and promised or predicted the end of communism". Even in the concentration camps, the communists arranged people mingled in to spread news, "This camp or that camp was delivered by our soldiers. Helicopters landed in this camp or that camp to pick up people to take to the United States". So on and so forth. One told ten, ten told a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand. Finally, all became truths. As an effect, no one fought, since they could wait for "the ripe figs to drop off into the mouth"; thus, protests and resistances were calmed down. Everything was supposed to be pre-arranged by the Americans! We neither had to raise our fingers nor our voices. Many people believed that after the rescue by the Americans, they would become presidents, prime ministers, ministers, whatever. Today, the communists spies gave out one list of a new cabinet, tomorrow, another one of a different shade. People discreetly put on proud smiles when finding their own or their friends' names, which meant, "You see! There was absolutely no other way". Some might even declare that the Americans would land helicopters right in the camps to take him somewhere, for a special "presidential training session" in two months. No crack jokes!

The communist infiltrators passed around different rumors, but had only one goal: to lull the suffering people into sweet illusory dreams, to render them all submissive and passive under the yoke, until their slow deaths.

*

After sending the "puppet" army and government into prisons, the communists took aim at the mercantile bourgeois class, to take over their properties and merchandise. These were the rich and famous Chinese and Vietnamese businessmen, who were named as "king" of each branch or profession. For instance, the rice king Lam Binh Sanh, monosodium king Tran Thanh, stevedor king Pham Quang Khai, barbed wires king Hoang Kim Quy, medicines king La Thanh Nghe, chemicals king Nguyen Cong Kha.

Actually, most of the capital was not their own, but just savings of the banks' customers.

Take an example: Ly Sen, metal laminating king, submitted a proposal to recycle military refuse, and got a loan of one billion from Viet Nam Thuong Tin Bank. 30%, or \$300 million, according to "the normal standard", was left for the big bosses of Viet Nam Thuong Tin to "drink coffee". The rest, \$700 million, would be used in deals with big foreign companies that doubled the costs of the equipments (half for the real cost of the supplier's merchandises, half for the customer's secret accounts in anonymous banks in Switzerland). Afterwards, the "king" could do business in his own way, stuffing money in his pockets. The bank did not care about following up the loans and the borrowers. Even if they did ask for interest or capital, then the borrowers were brazen. They invited the banks to confiscate at will. Anything. Nothing lost, nobody hurt!

The communists dealt with differently. They confiscated merchandise, properties. They even detached the machines and loaded them onto northbound trucks and trains. And, they sent the bosses into Phan Dang Luu Prison in Gia Dinh. Not too big a problem for the bosses either. In the

prison, the "kings" knew the way, and received special respectful treatment from the prison "management and educating unit". Of course, they could not be "kings" anymore, but they were spared the dangerous situations that the "reactionaries" faced.

Now, came the money exchange scene!

Money exchange sounds simple, nothing strange. But in the hands of the communists, it was very unfamiliar indeed.

It might have been expected, though, if people had studied what had happened before in Russia and China: One night, the loudspeakers announced a 100% curfew. Everybody must stay in their places, no moving of any kind permitted. In the morning, the loudspeakers announced the order of money exchange. All old bills must be exchanged for new ones. Five-hundred old "dong" would equal one new. And each household was limited to 200 new "dong", with excess going to the banks. The poor people did not have money to exchange. The rich could not ask the poor ones to help, nor just give money to them.

All the savings of the rich immediately turned into smoke. The clever ones threw bills into the city sewer ducts to avoid questions about their wealth. The naive ones brought their money to the banks to deposit. Afterwards, they could withdraw very limited amounts, and for only two official reasons: 50 "dong" for funeral, and 50 "dong" for marriage.

This was a great making-money opportunity for some people. They were the cadres and party members who had experiences in the North, and who foreknew the date of the exchange. They accumulated old money in advance, or made up reasons, such as a big agency could not readily exchange large sums and needed special time extensions. During that period, they went out to buy very cheaply the old money that was now considered as scrap paper, then they exchanged it with special privileges. That was one of the reasons for the fact that, although each household could exchange only 200 "dong", at the end, some people still had plenty of the new money. Another reason was that the government had printed a large amount of new bills and used them to buy all the merchandise that was still out of its control and at the same time to create intentional inflation pauperizing people. The next step was the so-called "eradicating of the bourgeoisie culture and learning the new culture lifestyle."

The bourgeoisie culture was said to be stubbornly debauched, because it made up false manners like leisurely walking, coquettish decking out, wordly talk (such as thank you or sorry), snobbish respect for the old, women, children, or colorful and stylish clothing. "The new culture lifestyle" included: shirts out of trousers, rubber sandals, squatting with two feet on the chair, deep kissing everybody (as Chairman Ho liked to do), calling everybody "brother, sister" with no care about age, calling any "enemy" a bastard, giving each other names and cursing aloud day and night. The new ways included raising chicken, ducks and pigs in city abodes, in high buildings, where the offal clogged sewer lines and stank terribly.

All kinds of literature were to be confiscated by elementary school children who came checking in each house. All books, magazines, and music sheet in foreign languages were "imperialist", in Vietnamese language, "reactionary". Nobody dared to keep but destroyed them as soon as possible. The best way was to use them as toilet paper -- which was now rare and expensive, by the way. The situation was so bad that the itinerant usedpaper dealers were out of work. They even refused to receive such items for free.

Concurrently, writers were subjects of detention.

No doubt, the government preferred to let those talkative persons outside and followed their contacts. But the rumor was that it was preparing for the election of the "United Parliament". It was scared that the "puppet writers" who were unemployed might talk against the event. So, it pooled them together. Then, the truth was that a couple who used to work for a newspaper, now unemployed, earned their everyday living with a coffee shop in their residence downtown. Many of their friendwriters, unemployed too, frequented this location. Among them, an ex-reporter for Viet Nam Press, a Sino-Vietnamese originary of Dam Ha, was in a small reactionary organization. This organization believed in feng-shui, saying that the nation's destiny depended on a dragon, with his head reposing at the Independence Palace (the seat of the government), and his tail at The Turtle

Water Fountain. If only they could make the tail move, the head would also move, and the government would topple down. This man contacted the ethnic FULRO (Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées = United Front of Struggle of the Oppressed Races) in the Western Plateau and brought explosives to destroy The Turtle Water Fountain. After the explosion, group members took each other to a restaurant for a feast, where they unreservedly boasted about their deed. Soon, security agents took the whole bunch, and put them into prison for interrogation. Again, the man boasted, spurting out the names of everybody he knew, including the writers who used to gather at the coffee shop. As a result, the whole group got special treatment. The coffee shop couple, husband and wife, even their baby of seven days also had the chance to visit the prison. (In "socialist societies", the children's being put in prison with their parents was rather normal. Babies were born in prisons, raised there, once released, felt strange of not being enclosed in cells after work).

Then, the writers' imprisonment was simply the result of the stupidity of a boaster. (The feng shui man's delusions were not uncommon. During that period, many South Vietnamese believed that the Americans had left to set a trap luring the communists to appear, and then would come back to nab them all. Rare were people who believed that the Americans could betray an "ally" that had worked and sacrificed for them for years. There had been so many clear promises and strong guarantees from different presidents. Therefore, many opportunists tried to put on "good performances", in hopes of American special treatment, in the future, on their return).

The first "United Parliament" election was itself another interesting story. In old feudalism, there had been no election at all, and none occurred in fascism or militarism. The simple fact was that those sons of God (dictators) could put in prison anyone they liked. They did not need people's consent, nor did people dare to have any opinion at all. But at least it was honest. Good leaders bestowed favors; bad leaders oppressed. People tacitly understood these realities. On the other hand, the communists preferred to organize elections. But elections without independent candidates. All candidates had to be members named by the Party or "sympathizers" designated by the Fatherland Front, the only satellite organization outside of the Party. The voters could only choose those men. Why did the communists not name them at once, without such a complicated process? This was for the appearance of democracy. Nonetheless, nobody would believe that delusion, except the blind Vietnamese leftists, and foreigners. They organized the election very carefully, much more seriously than in democratic countries. These countries might think that they lied when they claimed that the percentage of voters was 100%. Yet, this was a very truth. If one did not vote, his or her voting card was not stamped, and he was considered as "reactionary, destroying the regime," subject to "re-education" for life. For any voter who got gravely sick, unable to get up, the local people's unit would bring the vote box to his or her sickbed, at home or in hospital. These facts explained clearly the 100%. At least about this, the communists did not lie at all.

One of the most poignant features of the first election was in one of Sai Gon's precincts. The Party and Government wanted to prove the absolute aspect of "their democracy". Therefore, they appointed the candidate Le Thi Theu. Mrs. Theu was an illiterate garbage collector. In any real democratic nation, illiterate garbage collectors usually did not worry about politics at all. There was no place for them to become candidates in a parliamentary election. But to the communists, such reasoning did not count. The importance was to show off that the Party paid attention to every class. People jokingly told each other to vote for Mrs. Theu. They believed, anyway, that all candidates for the Parliament had to be "firstly pokerfaced, secondly unanimous" and should know nothing at all. So, was there any difference between them and Mrs. Theu? A close friend of one high-ranking communist cadre once asked him mockingly: Why do you "brothers" monotonously talk about democracy but always act as absolute authoritarians? The cadre answered straightly, "Indeed, we are very democratic. The only question is to whom are we democratic. Among ourselves, we are democratic. Conversely, with enemies, we aren't. Is it logical to be democratic toward reactionaries, traitors, and destroyers of the regime?" The problem was that, except for the fellow communists, all of the population were enemies. It was hard to know if the "revolution" had

an agenda for liquidation of the "left-overs" or not. The only thing for sure was that after they tricked the "absolutely dangerous enemies", the "most troublesome puppet elements" into the "re-education camps", they thought next about the "relatively dangerous enemies" who might be in the positions to cause trouble. Those were their "comrades", the Liberation Front of South Viet Nam. Who could be sure that this group, in the name of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam, would not turn the sham into the real, take over South Viet Nam as their own? For this reason, "our Party" acted speedily to "unify the nation", in the beginning of 1976.

No one dared go against the Party. So, even "brother" three-star lieutenant-general Tran Van Tra, who had troops, power, and chairmanship of the Sai Gon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh Military Administrative Committee, could only keep quiet. No need to mention "brothers and sisters" Nguyen Huu Tho, Huynh Tan Phat, or Nguyen Thi Binh (South Vietnam Liberation Front's big shots).

People of the caliber of Thich Tri Quang, Thich Quang Lien, Chan Tin, and Nguyen Ngoc Lan (pro-communist monks and priests) could only be shocked. Maybe they had been sincere devotees, they carried sincere hopes. Pitifully, their limited intelligence permitted them to see only the sham, the surface, and the means. They took the sham for the reality; the surface for the point; the means for the ends. Always, the sham, the surface, the means were easier to understand; whereas the reality, the point, and the end were concealed, very secretly behind, which they could not recognize. Moreover, it was hard to prove this to them, because from the very beginning, they determinedly refused to see and hear in depth.

Since 1930, the dull-witted had believed that they should join the Party to fight French colonists and capitalists for food and clothing (as the Party said); they only knew the sham, the surface, and the means. While the reality, the point, and the end of real communists were slavery, impoverishment, and obscurantism. In 1945, the ones (the revolutionists) who allied with the Party, believed that they fought the French for independence (as the Party declared); they also only knew the sham, the surface, and the means. Actually, the reality, the point, and the end of real communists were to make Viet Nam a vassal country of the red empire.

In 1960, the ones in the maquis believed that fighting against Americans and Diem meant fighting against a family's despotism and for democracy (the Party's call), they only knew the sham, the surface, and the means. The reality, the point, and the end of the Party were to invade South Viet Nam to apply slavery, impoverishment, and obscurantism.

In 1965, the anti-war elements (following the Party's propaganda) believed that they were fighting against the imperialist invasion to achieve peace and unity; they only knew the sham, the surface, the means. But the reality, the point, the end of the Party was to incorporate South Viet Nam, and then Kampuchea and Laos into the communist empire.

Lots of non-communists were also deceived by the propaganda. In 1860, many believed that the French colonists and the priests were promoting civilization and saving the souls of the pagans, while the reality was their exploitation and assimilation. By 1945, many believed in the sham, which was the anti-communism, while the reality was the re-establishing of colonialism and enslavement. By 1954, many people believed in the sham, which was community progress, anti-feudalism, anti-colonialism, anti-communism, while the reality was the protection of the United States' frontiers and the Ngo Dinh Diem or Nguyen Van Thieu's person, family and party powers. By 1963, many people believed in the sham, which was the fight against the family's despotism, the Labor Personalist Party, while the reality was self-protection, survival for the groups of generals, lackeys thirsty of power. By 1965, many people believed in the sham which was democracy, liberty while the reality was the delegated war, saving American blood and bones by spending the Vietnamese people's.

III

Two of the largest streets in Sai Gon, Justice (Cong Ly) and Liberty (Tu Do), were now renamed to South Viet Nam Uprising (Nam Ky Khoi Nghia) and Concerted Uprisings (Dong Khoi). And the people responded,

South Viet Nam uprising wipes out justice,

Concerted uprisings annihilate liberty

In communist Viet Nam, as in any communist country, there existed no laws, per se. The communists ruled by resolutions, notices, decrees, orders. The Party members and Government staff (different kinds of members) were coached and then enforced the regulations at will, according to each one's deductions. Therefore, the procedures varied a lot here and there, depending on the "authorities". The common citizens should only obey.

The Party and the Government, at all levels, had the right to check any house and arrest anyone, without any paper of the courts.

At three in the morning, when the women and children were sleeping, the "bo doi" climbed over fences and banged doors to check the houses. Everybody trembled, answering the knock. The "brothers" searched all over, under the beds, inside the trunks. Afterwards, they assembled the household to lecture them, "Your husbands are Viet traitors. You sisters are all whores, you know that?" A house owner in his fifties, stood apprehensively beside his small garden of sweet potatoes recently grown to satisfy the "revolution", while the boyish "brother" soldier, with the AK gun on his shoulder, haughtily entered and searched his house, from the living room to the kitchen. When he came out, he asked,

"Where is brother's household?"

"I am living alone."

"Where are brother's wife and children?"

"They are all abroad."

"Where are brother's parents?"

"They live at another place."

"Where are brother's brothers and sisters?"

"They are in the re-education camps."

"Why didn't brother go, too?"

"I am not in the re-educatee category."

"All of you are puppets! You are to be executed for your crimes! But your lives don't deserve a bullet, so the government gives clemency. Does brother understand that?"

The residence quarter Tu Do, had luxury villas, whose owners had largely escaped to the United States. A "bo doi" unit came to appropriate them. They wanted to occupy the whole quarter, by applying harsh treatments to the remaining residents. They barred both entrances, mounted sentries causing difficulties for all goings in or out. Going out to the work? No! Going out to the market? No! Short of rice, going out for meals? No!

"Without eating, without drinking, how can I live?" someone asked.

"That's brother's problem!"

Before another unit came to replace them, they took everything out of the houses, even the lightbulbs and the ceiling fans. The doors and windows were chopped into firewood. Even the vegetables and fruit trees that they had been planted for meal improvement were all dug up.

"Why don't you leave them for the next unit?"

"Why? We didn't plant there for them to enjoy the fruit of our labor!"

Such was socialism (actually communism). Each one only cared about his own sake. Wanting to imprison somebody, the "authority" just came and arrested him. By the way, if some visitor happened to be in the house, then they just arrested him too, for the "convenience of the Party and Government". Five, six, seven months later, the warder just brought out a blank "legal order" and completed it with name and some details. This visitor would live in prison for three years. Afterwards, if the camp chief did not want the poor guy to go home, he filled up another "legal order". After six years, if the camp chief was satisfied with the detainee, he let him go, but if the area chief did not want him to be home yet, then, another "legal order" was filled up. For nine

years, he did not know what kind of crime he committed. But the "revolution" was never wrong. If he did not know about his own crime, that meant he was "not sincere enough, not awake yet", deserved more "re-education". Therefore, he should by all means find out about his crime. Even released, this was only a "temporary discharge". If the "authority" did not feel pleased with him, they would freely send him back to the camp for more "re-education".

Most of the cases were the arrests for the communists' convenience, whenever they felt like it, and they called it an "administrative measure". Somebody might plead that the Party and Government were too busy with the war, how could they execute the laws. Unfortunately, the communists were always at war. And indeed, there were no laws at all to be executed. The Law School was closed, so there was no problem, no objection. Did the Government Council include a Ministry of Justice? Nobody knew for sure. But a court trial was a rare event. Even the cases related to important persons such as Vu Dinh Huynh (Ho Chi Minh's protocol chief); Hoang Minh Chinh (dean of the Marx-Lenin Institute); General Dang Kim Giang -- the caliber of Vo Nguyen Giap, Truong Chinh, or Pham Van Dong (veterans of the first generation of Vietnamese communists) -- all of them received the silent "administrative measure", not a law court nor a tribunal verdict.

In a few hot cases, such as those of Human Culture-Fine Work or Ta Dinh De, the judges who appeared were only veteran party members, better red than professional, usually with very limited education, whom nobody expected to know law. As a result, they passed sentences according to the Party's trends or decisions; nothing sounded like justice. In the same style the Inquisition Courts many centuries ago pronounced verdicts according to the Church's decisions, agreeing to neither common sense nor the rights of the defendants. An ironical aspect was that they had attorneys. But those took the same side as the court, accusing the defendants!

All other fields were processed similarly. At their conveniences! In the same area, one official leveled tax and gave permission to do something, while another revoked the permits, imposed fines and confiscations. This province levied the "export" tax, and another one the "import" on the same agricultural product! Very soon, the residents in Sai Gon became deprived, as everything became rare and expensive. They had to benefit from the "import-export" tax policy that was imposed only on fresh products, and go to the provinces to cook rice, fish, meat and then bring the prepared meals home to eat or to sell!

Each province became a separate entity, with its own organizations exactly like those of the central government. Besides the executive, legislative and judiciary bodies, each also carried its own power: military, economic, industrial, internal, foreign trade. When something was needed, it brought local products up to the frontier or into the open ocean to exchange for foreign products. The capitalists called that a barter, while the "revolution" had a nicer name of a "two-way exchange". Can Tho province produced rice, but needed coffee, tea, and vegetables, so it took its products for "two-way exchange" with Da Lat. When Can Tho was no longer willing, it just quit the game. Da Lat was then choked with coffee, tea, vegetables, but lacked rice!

Party provincial chiefs brought in their relatives and friends to take positions. They did whatever they liked, and arrested and imprisoned whosoever they disliked, all in ignorance, avidity, and discrimination. This province had a large freezing enterprise on this side of the canal. The neighboring province, not wanting to be less "civilized", built another, bigger one right on the opposite. However, both provinces were far from the sea, so neither had seafood resources, nor chicken or pork, nor even fruits and vegetables. As a result, both factories were empty. Each quarter, district, military unit, and administration office had its own undertakings in business and production: rice wine cooking, pig raising, playing-card printing, all sorts of things! Yet the private quarters were forbidden to do so. The population did not have any means to earn their living, while prices increased incessantly and terribly, along with inflation. Everybody had the freedom to starve.

In the meantime, people were kept confused by inconsistent orders and processes, even on the most trivial issues. In a sane society, people knew that, in cultivating, farming, fishing, or manufacturing, operators must do the best with the least time and cost but the highest productivity; the products must be plenty, good, cheap, carefully checked from the start in the factories to the

end in the consumers' hands; the distribution must be prompt, on time, responding to needs. In other words, producers must give great effort to obtain profits. This also meant that usually the procedures must be planned and coordinated, under the management of one person or one organization; and each person or organization could only take care of one specialty, one field: The simplest law of efficiency.

Now, on the contrary, the communist government set out to "take it all". Besides ruling the country, the government processed everything, from distributing needles and thread, water, rice, fish sauce, firewood, salt, bath tissue, period pads, to bus, train and airplane transportation. Cultivating, farming, fishing, producing, transporting, distributing, consuming: all were government's undertakings, under the management of government public employees. The goal was only one: the exclusive monopoly of all the essential needs, so that the rulers could control the people's lives.

However, "nobody cried at the common tomb". Why did Da Lat take pains to bring its fresh vegetables to other places? Why did Tien Giang-Hau Giang need to transport their rice to the highlands? For whatever they tried, they still received the same amounts of salary and food. Why did they not just sit and relax for their own sake? This does not yet take into account that, differently from working for the private parties, working with the government also meant to be violently abused and harassed, without right to any objection. There was no such question as salary increase, time decrease, strike, or protest. So, workers secretly delayed their work, did awful jobs, reported wrong statistics, wasted materials, and destroyed machines. As a result, everything was of poor quality. Even the "high quality" export merchandise sent to the "brother socialist countries" was rejected. Thus, besides the refunds to the customers, there were also fees for shipping these returned goods into the open sea to dump, evading further cost bringing them back. Meanwhile, at home, the people lacked everything, basic foods and other indispensable needs.

An East German "specialist advisor" visited a factory, where he observed and timed a welding worker who completed 2" in half an hour. The "advisor" seemed irritated, told the worker to give him the soldering iron, and ordered him to watch the "advisor's" performance. In the same period of time, the "advisor" welded 24", twelve times more. Then, the "advisor" turned back, asking the worker, "What do you think, comrade?"

This "comrade" politely replied, "Dear comrade advisor, if you have time, sir, please stay here. I'll try again."

The "comrade" approved. The worker welded a 30" line, 6" longer than the "advisor's". The "advisor" opened his eyes wide, saying, "It's incredible! How could you break the record of the East German highest specialist? Then, why don't you keep this speed? Why only work 1/15 of your capacity?" "Dear comrade advisor, in East Germany, the comrade can buy bread without standing in lines for the whole day, your stomachs are full. Here, I have to stand in lines for the whole day, but can't buy rice to fill up my stomach; how can I work hard? Besides, if I worked hard, fourteen other comrades would be unemployed and hungry. We have to share each other's work and food to live on day by day!"

In the state-run department stores, the merchandise was poor, without orderly display, decoration, or even dusting. When a notice was posted, most buyers would be specially favored ones, with underground relations. Otherwise, the merchandise was exhausted. Salespersons were state employees. They sold goods for stamped cards, and were free to be unfriendly, even rude, as they had no need for customers.

Right after the invasion of South Viet Nam, a communist jubilantly asked a Polish reporter, "When do you think the city bearing the name of Big Uncle will be equal to your capital?"

This one smiled,

"In twenty years it will not be Warsaw. However, in only two years, it will be equal to Ha Noi".

However, in less than one year, Sai Gon had rapidly surpassed Ha Noi.

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The most astounding fact to Southerners was that, while the communists boasted about their fight against exploitation and injustice, their own exploitation and class discrimination were composed into policy. This was an obvious and natural fact in everyday life.

The servants are driving the Volga,

While the bosses, father and sons, go to the stations waiting for trains.

The servants are living in the villas,

While the bosses, father and sons, use oil paper (for roofing) to protect from the rains.

The servants are drinking wine in the morning, tea in the afternoon.

While the bosses, father and sons, eat vegetables and salted pickles (day and night) until they faint.

"Bosses" here refer to the "heroic" people; while "servants" were the Party and Government.

The most repeated slogan was: "The Party leads, the government manages, the people is boss". However, the people silently changed some commas, and then it became: "The Party leads the government, manages the people, is boss (of everything)".

The Vietnamese were now divided into three social classes: A, B, and C undoubtedly similar to the upper, middle and lower classes in the capitalist society. But the distinctions were much more detailed. There were four categories in class A: A1, A2, A3, A4; twelve categories in class B: B1, B2,... B12; fifteen categories in class C: C1, C2,... C15.

The distribution of essential needs and comforts, even the meal service, was divided into classes:

- Big kitchen, reserved for the soldiers and the lowest officials, usually served boiled water spinach (rau muong luoc) and pumpkin soup, day after day
- Medium kitchen served five to ten middle-class cadres.
- Small kitchen served only one high-class cadre.
- Special kitchen, with five or ten selected chef cooks, tried its best to cook expensive specialties to serve the leader.

They explained the ones of higher classes needed to be taken care of well, with good food, clothing and medicine, so that they could live long to serve the country, unlike the capitalists, who enjoyed comfort just for their own sake! Even human lives also had classes. After the South Viet Nam invasion, the "revolution" kicked out of the hospitals all military patients of any sickness stages. Let us suppose that those South Vietnamese invalids and patients were their enemies whom they wanted to let die. This argument sounded cruelly reasonable. Nevertheless, this was not the whole story of the ill-treatment. Because, with their own soldiers and cadres, treatments varied not depending on their illnesses, but according to their ranks.

The leaders, the heads would lie down comfortably in Vi Dan Hospital, the luxurious hospital built by Mrs. Nguyen Van Thieu. The middle-class cadres would be treated in the up-dated Sung Chinh Chinese Hospital. The common cadres were treated in Binh Dan, the free hospital of the old regime. Doctors, medicines, equipment, comforts, and foods were very different among these establishments. The Southerners who had been too lazy to study about communism, the stubborn who had doubted all statements from the anti-communists, and the foolish who had believed in every false promises of the communists: all of them were now surprised and disillusioned.

The ones who called themselves intellectuals, scholars were surprised by the rigorous and hateful methods that the communists applied towards them: No employment, no permit to write, no political ideas. Furthermore, they might be punished for previous, innocuous acts.

"You are doing art works? You brothers and sisters think that is not anti-communism: Love and romantic stories serve only the rich bourgeoisie class. You brothers and sisters are simply talking or writing? It is a way of propaganda for the reactionaries, it is puppet culture. Your deeds are business? That is the capitalist way to get rich by exploitation, helping the Americans and puppet to oppose the revolution. There is nothing non-political. You brothers and sisters have only one option, which is to surrender. To shoot you brothers and sisters means wasting the bullets. But to

spare your lives means wasting socialist rice and clothing. Because your heads are full of shit, therés no way for a cure. You brothers and sisters are living without productivity, so you'd better die as soon as possible to relieve a heavy load for the society. This world is for the new generations, who will learn the communist doctrine, and will think, act, talk, and work in the socialist style". The peasants, who had been called "allied", were now considered "basically ownership-minded", only aiming at personal interests. That was unacceptable. The whole country, all fields and lands, was the sole property of the Government (or Party). Each tree to be numbered, each chick to be counted. Capital and labor were yours? Only temporarily, considering the 50% contribution to the government, aside from all other taxes. Then, we would have co-operatives. Everybody would be paid depending on his or her labor. Nobody could have personal property. Forestry, of course, was totally the government's affair. The common persons had no right to enter the forest. They might set up maquis (guerilla counter-communist base). To gather firewood was to destroy the socialist economics. Meanwhile, the local "authorities" reserved all the rights to exploit everything. Electricity was unpredictable, on and off without notice. There were more blackouts than lights. Gasoline, fuel, petroleum: all ran out. The "authorities" and even the common people chopped down any tree, for their own use and comfort. Many big trees or precious woods were chopped into firewood. All over the country, beautiful forests were destroyed. The lovely shadow-trees on the side streets of the cities were not yet cut down, but they were stripped of their bark, dying slow deaths. Fishermen were grouped into co-operatives. Gas and oil for their boats were to be distributed according to quotas. Their fishing hours had to follow schedule, and they were forbidden to go too far, to prevent runaway plots. All seafood was to be sold cheaply to the government for export. People could only eat shrimp heads, cuttle-fish's barbels, or tiny spoiled fish. Factory workmen, the laborers who thought that they were the proletariat -- the fundamental class of the revolution, and would be well treated -- learned that this was an enormous error. Even the hardest laborers were told, "You brothers and sisters swept the floors and cleaned the toilets, providing comfort to the puppet government, so that they could be comfortable to find the ways resisting the revolution".

The masters of all establishments and enterprises were said to be the Party. Not exactly. The true masters were only the Party's leaders. All others were told to compete all the time, against all others, abiding to the slogan: "Men men to compete, field field to compete; day work is not enough, make use of night work, work further on Sunday". A worker's salary was not enough to buy food for himself, but he had to produce beyond designated records. Therefore, the workers carried the mission to become saints!

Do not think that there were no such saints. There were too many of them, on the contrary. One example was "sister" Quyen, the widow of "brother" Troi. "Brother" Troi had been a plain, illiterate electrician in South Viet Nam. That foolish "brother" went after the communist lure to set a bomb at Cong Ly bridge, hoping to kill McNamara, the American Secretary of National Defense. He was caught while still busy working, then got a death penalty sentence. During the execution, "brother" wet his pants and cursed the communists for deceiving him. Later, the communists posthumously conferred "brother" as dead hero, wrote the book "Living Like Brother", fabricated many lies, such as when "brother" got shot, he kept yelling out loud: "Long live Ho Chi Minh!"

After taking over South Viet Nam, it was rumored that the Party paid attention to "sister" Quyen. They took "sister" to the North, where they entrusted her to a teacher tutoring her in one year (again, in one year) to complete the whole high school program. After that, "sister" Quyen went to university (it is not known for how many years) and graduated. During the schooling, "sister" was still working. She managed six weaving machines at the same time (however, she had six marvellous assistant-weavers with years of experience). She enjoyed fame and perquisites to satiety: "Sister" was voted into the House of Representatives. Nevertheless, she got bored in the North, came back to the South, and became the head of the Vinh Loi state store.

The government manipulated the figures to inflate its achievements. The production had to be in very big quantities, with costs kept very small. For example, a matchbox containing 50 matches. Now, sticks should be smaller, and the firing powder should be less. The factory then produced

more matches. However, when striking, the matches broke; the powder did not fire. It required real talent to be able to get a light from one or two out of 50 matches. Therefore, powder and wood "went to the sewer drain". It was the same with cigarettes. A pack had 20 loose ones. Addicts should tightly reroll each of these and turn into three or four smokable things. Like that, they only wasted thick paper for the packet, thin paper for cigarettes. The quality or flavor was not a matter. Anyway, why bother? The smokers, who had no choice at all, tried hard to get those skinny cigarettes. They had nothing else for their addictions. Disaster had engulfed the business quarter. The business people were considered non-productive. All of the stores were to be closed. These "unproductive" middle-men should be sent to the "new economic zones" to learn the value of labor lessons about being "new socialist citizens"!

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The government had used every means to level the people, but they knew that the Southerners still had a lot of gold, precious stones, and merchandise. By the end of 1977, the scenario of money exchange occurred again. Now, ten old "dong" were worth only one new. And by the beginning of 1978, the communists announced great "property inventories".

"Cell chiefs and cell deputy-chiefs", who were in charge of many cells, came from the North. Each cell had five university or high school students, who had already passed the training session, with supporting armed groups, encircled and lived in the house of the victim. Adults and children were forced to remain in the house. The home owners had to submit all their cash and jewelry, list all their properties. Afterwards, the youth went over the houses, from inside to outside, from the ceiling to the floor, digging up everywhere to find things that could be lurkily hidden.

The "nationalistic capitalists" who had previously handed furtive contributions to the "revolution" or offered their properties right after April 30, thought that the Party and Government would overlook their attempts to withhold something for themselves. Now, the Party and Government relieved them of that idea.

One merchant, who resided on Le Thanh Ton Street, had been number one in business; number one also in secret contributions to the "revolution"; and number one in property and establishment offerings after April 30. He was sure that the Party and Government would overlook him. The only trouble was the Party and Government undoubtedly knew well about his hidden wealth. On the inventory day, a cadre pulled from nowhere a yellow flag with red stripes and wrote in the report that he had hidden the forbidden flag of the old regime, with the hope of the "puppet" government's coming back. He was sent to prison on the first day of the operation. For that reason, he also became the number one prisoner in this campaign.

The utterly heart-rending thing was that the "cell-chiefs", who already had a lot of experience in the North, reported that they received such and such "white or blue stones" or "yellow metals". Afterwards, they replaced the real stones and metals with false ones and became the new red capitalists. The ones who lost their properties did not care about such manipulations. Their properties were gone, either way!

Pitifully, some of them were so shocked by the terrible loss, threw themselves down from the top of high buildings. Some others needed the help of rat poison. But this was not the end of the lengthy tragic scenario. These former "capitalists" were useless, of course, no labor, no productivity. All of them were forced to go to the "new economic zones". Day or night, doors banged, household members were pushed out on the streets, houses sealed, adults and children were thrown on trucks from the dense cities to be dumped on the desolate forest borders.

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The Party and Government not only referred to the government and the army of South Viet Nam as puppet government, puppet army, but considered all the Southerners puppet people, too. This notion must have great effects on the Northerners, and they seemed prejudiced against the Southern

people. The Northerners did not feel comfortable with their formerly rich Southern relatives, wondering what those people did for the Americans and the puppet government to afford such lifestyles. For that reason, even northern relatives of Southerners carried doubtful hidden thoughts.

The Southerners felt irritated because their northern relatives had the tendency to say good things about the regime. Those Southerners did not know that the Ha Noi government usurped the ultimate name and rights of the nation. Then, how their northern relatives could have a different idea or the slightest disloyal thought. Moreover, day and night, those Northerners had to worry about the dark and miserable future ahead, while bearing all the prohibitions of hearing, seeing or talking. Even if they could afford a newspaper or a radio, there was nothing else but praise for the North Communists as national heroes, in every field, from fighting the enemies for independence and unity to defeating two colossal, aggressive old and new style imperialist nations. It was hard for the Southerners to comprehend the perpetually stressful living conditions of their relatives in the North, who now had the habits of caution and hiding truth. So some thought that they could ask for help from the northern relatives. But the relatives would say, "Don't worry, let him go for a good re-education and do believe in the policy of the Party and Government", and then the Southerners would blame those people, no doubt, quite unjustly. In the socialist (actually communist) society, the maxim was closeness first, position second, money third, law fourth; that meant, if you wanted to succeed, you had to be on the strong side, or to have power, or to have enough money for bribery, and only last to hope for laws' implementation. Also, the Southerners did not have enough experience to understand that "closeness and position" could only apply for the ones already in the Party or friendly to it. How could "closeness and position" be applied to "the puppet government, puppet army, puppet population, capitalist servants, Viet traitors, enemies of the class, of the people, the ones with abominable crimes"?

Besides the high-rank cadres who were appointed to go South to take over the establishment, most of the Northern civilians or regroupees who came down South Viet Nam to visit their relatives were the sensitive and brisk smugglers or those who managed to buy true or fake traveling permits under the table. They had to be very clever indeed: The Southerners did not understand how could they find their addresses so accurately. Even in cases where the Southerners had changed addresses after April 30, to live secretly, they could track them down anyhow. After twenty years of separation, the reunions should have been full of jubilation. However, the Southerners soon found out that their relatives were poor and deprived of everything. They were told that, for many years, people in the North could not have any full meal with whole rice. Houses were very small, with many people living in a space of a few square meters. Clothing material was sold by allowance; each person got no more than 4 meters (4-1/2 yards) of clothes a year, and only in the case there was enough supply for them to receive their quota:

Four meters of coarse fabric a year

How can I cover Big Uncle Ho (my private part), oh my dear?

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"With two meters of coarse fabric in my hand,

Tears of gratitude to the Party well up in my eyes.

Making the pants, my breasts I can't hide,

I resign myself to sewing a shirt, but it turns out to show my ass.

Hastily, I cover it up with Big Uncle's photograph,

Scared that people would laugh at my exposing the private parts.

With loving-kindness, the Southerners gave their belongings, even motorbikes, refrigerators or televisions, sincerely wishing to compensate their relatives' sufferings for years. However, at first, the beneficiaries did not have facilities to receive the bulky gifts, and so accepted only clothing and food. Such assistances were summed up in the common saying, "The South receives ho (relatives); the North receives hang (goods)". This is a game of words -- "ho" or "ho hang" both meant family

or relatives, but "hang" alone meant goods, articles -- reflecting the utter deprivation of the Northerners. There were many who, in twenty years, had not even gotten a smell of the fish sauce. When they received a bottle, they dared not touch it, but just displayed it on the altar for contemplation.

One thing the Northerners strongly and sincerely advised their Southern relatives was that they should hold on in Sai Gon, at any price. If they left it to go somewhere devoid of foreigners' presence, they would be terribly maltreated without any defense. Also, it would help a lot for them to divide a large family into many households, even living under the same roof.

However, most Southerners were careless and did not realize that, once they went out to register their identities and household ration book, it also meant to write down on paper all of their fate.

The Southerners thought that household book were similar to the previous family register, which had been a list of the family's members living permanently in the house. They had been irritated with this Chinese Ve Uong's (320-337BC) policy, checking the people. Although the South Viet Nam government had implemented the system, but simply as a formality, it had rarely checked the houses, unless looking for draft dodgers or underground communists.

Therefore, at first, the Southerners could not conceive that this household ration book was quite different. To be without it meant to be without rice, without salt, without firewood or coal, without cloth, without home, without school, without medicines, without all kinds of paper, permit, or petition. Briefly, to be without household ration book also meant that a person did not exist. If his name was not listed in the household ration book, this person could not stay in that house. Many re-educatees who were released, if the addresses written in their papers were not accurate, could not stay in their house, even temporarily. No name in the household ration book meant he could not live in his own home, to be reunified with his family. Logic? Kindness? No such things. You had to find for yourself somewhere to stay. But there was no "somewhere"! Parents, children, brothers or sisters who came to visit, having naturally no names in household ration book, could not stay overnight. Everything was related to the household ration book. Without it, emergency cases were refused at the hamlet, quarter, and district hospitals, because the sick could not show this paper with his name on it. Also, if one member did something wrong, it might affect the whole household. Therefore, cutting the family into small households, fewer people were implicated. For example, "capitalist families" in the "property inventory campaign" had their houses confiscated, were sent to the "new economic zones". Their household ration books should have been cancelled. But if their relatives were listed in different household, they might stay, keep the houses, and buy provisions.

Moving to a different address required the approvals of both the departure and the destination's quarter and district. Of course, both of them required plausible reasons. Anyway, departing was easier, because the authority there could terminate their duty of controlling, providing water and food and prime necessities. Reversely, the arriving one was very strict, because they had to provide those things instead. Besides, paperwork and bookkeeping were a headache for those little-educated cadres. Actually, the main reason that everybody should stay in one place was for the convenience in controlling and spying. As a result, due to jobs, it was common that the wife had to stay in one, the husband in another place. Adulteries or infidelities were then common. The government deliberately encouraged such immoral offences, to destroy the national traditions of family love and interdependence.

Nobody could realize that once registered in the household ration book, one became a "member" of a neighborhood inhabitant cell, a area, a quarter, and a district. From now on, he had to attend the cell, area, quarter, and district's meetings, about paperwork, housing, food, festivals, or campaigns, to hear the repetition of the same "lessons", contempt for all human common sense and knowledge. Absence in one meeting resulted in bad scores and doubts about "opposing the revolution, no progress", in troubles getting documents or even food allotments.

The most miserable occurrence was to meet the cadres of guerilla origin. They carried a complex hatred towards the city puppets. Next were the ones of security-service origin who mostly were party members obsessed with "friends and enemies". The soldiers were better, because most of

them were peasants who simply fulfilled their citizen obligations. The friendliest ones were the "regroupees". It was easy to understand. They had left the South to live in the North in 1954, now coming home to rejoin their families, no longer carrying illusions, but pity for themselves and others, both obviously and discreetly. Nevertheless, all of them had to wear a stern face. Towards anyone who approached or befriended them, they had to keep a rigid air and go away, to avoid being "corrupted" by the reactionaries or capitalists.

The scariest thing was that each person's fate depended entirely upon the decisions of one "area security agent". He ruled fifty or sixty households (i.e., two, three hundred persons) and had absolute power over those under his control. He could intrude into their houses anytime, day or night, interrogating anyone he wanted on any issues: family problems, sentimental affairs, business, education, food to eat or water to drink. He could call anybody to report. He had the right to permit or to forbid anyone to travel or move, to stay home or to go to re-education camp or new economic zone.

IV

*The pairs of rubber-tire-string-sandals trample the young lives to pieces,
The wave-brimmed hats hide away the road leading to the future indeed.*

The pairs of sandals made of thrown-away car's tires of the North Viet Nam communist soldiers and the hats made of cotton with the wave-brims of the Liberation Front of South Viet Nam guerillas symbolized the communist policies of obscurantism and impoverishment.

The Southerners had their own reactions, naturally, like the reactions of people under any communist domination. So, similar events were to happen. Of the four greatest religious sects in South Viet Nam, the communists must obviously disliked Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, which were the two with historical struggles against communism. Many of their followers had been buried alive, and many of their leaders killed by the communists.

Meanwhile, Christianity (or Catholicism, more exactly) had been proud of its anti-communism during a certain period. [Actually, some renowned priests and believers were noticeable leftists. But this might involve discreet orders or hushed agreements from Vatican; otherwise they would be subject to ex-communication or detracting of mass celebrating. The organization of the Catholic Church was very strict and clear, and obedience was the top virtue of all priests and believers]. But since Pope John 23 and Vatican II (1963-1965), the tension between the two factions had cooled down.

In the struggle against communism, Buddhism, particularly, was not worth mentioning. For one thing, Buddhists were not accustomed to aggressive attitudes. Also, Buddhism did not have a unified or strictly organized system. After the downfall of Ngo Dinh Diem's family despotism, the group of "fighting Buddhists" gradually divided. Each pagoda went back to its silent confines; each monk withdrew to his private world.

The communists acted as though they did not want to touch the religious, but to take good care of the secular activities.

Yet, in the "socialist" society, there were no such things as non-governmental fields and activities. Absolutely no private organizations. All establishments belonged to the government. Therefore, religious schools and seminaries were subject to closings. There would be no places to prepare the priests, to print and distribute the canons, to preach or explain religious teachings. Church, pagoda, temple, and holy place were only considered each as a household. Each had a head. The ones who lived in the same household had to be blood relatives. If not, they had to move away. Therefore, the abbots had to be self-sufficient. Many became peasants, laborers, or small handcrafters. Most of seminarists or novice-monks had to return to secular living. A very few of

them were still obstinate. They hid within a household of reliable believers and continued their underground religious practices.

In spite of all this, the number of believers increased; they got back seriously to practice and worship, in their own houses or in religious communities. One of the reasons might be that under such utterly destitute situations, they no longer carried high expectations in this physical life. Another reason was that they felt more comfortable with their religious friends. Furthermore, this was a silent defiance of the government, in a field that it did not yet attempt to prohibit authoritatively.

After the anti-communist government had cravenly run away, after the leaders and political partisans had reported for "re-education", after the religions had gotten back to their quiet worship; now, the new anti-communist elements emerged.

There were hundreds of "parties" and "fronts".

Their anti-communist spirit could not be denied. Their rustic names reflected a simple and sincere aspect -- Unicorn, Blue Dragon, White Tiger -- and the fact that they did not carry ambitions for fame and power. And naturally, they could not form systematic or politically significant organizations. A new kind of "living room politicians" also showed up. They believed that the Americans would come back soon, and invented all those hard-to-believe stories. Fundamental to the tales were their secret duties entrusted by the United States. Many ones truly believed in the US. policy and fight against communists. Many others believed in the US. intervention and hope of future positions and powers. On its side, the "revolution" did not want to be less creative. The "dissident lawyer" Do Huu Canh organized fifty to sixty "parties" and "fronts", gathering many persons of different ages and classes who did not realize his undercover records and joined him, to be swept up pretty soon as "obstinate reactionaries". This man was in fact Colonel Ba Son of the Party's Protection Corps of the Politburo. (Later, he was liquidated by the Party. This was a common end for many who had wild illusions about their great credits and sacrifices. Towards the members who took undercover roles in the enemy zones, the Party always felt doubts, considering them more or less tainted with reactionary bourgeoisie ideas.) However, the real headaches came from these elements:

- Teenagers of 14 or 15 -- who saw their fathers or brothers being imprisoned, their teachers harassed, the society disintegrated -- opened courts, with judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, to try "Big Uncle Ho" and declare the death penalty, then executed him with catapult plastic guns. As children, they only received the imprisonment for twenty to thirty years.

- Small groups of five or ten persons of different ages, mostly teenagers, gathered into the "Country Restoration Civilian and Military Cells" and plotted assaults on military camps. Those were subject to the death penalty without trial.

- Former southern soldiers who could no longer carry their guns in military operations now came out at night to kill the cadres and soldiers who carelessly walked alone in deserted areas.

- Unemployed intellectuals spent leisure time in inventing sardonic jokes, satirical folk songs, or verses to mock the regime.

- Hardworking peasants who suffered heavy taxes, started to root out plants, leaving only enough crop for their families; or slaughtering the poultry for their own consumption, as they did not want to work hard for the government's benefits.

- Low-paid workers who were obliged to work too long underpaid secretly destroyed the machinery so that they could remain idle; or took out parts to sell for some extra compensation.

The results: deprivation and poverty, ad infinitum.

Years ago, mainland China had greatly sacrificed by "cutting the rice grain seeds in two" to share with North Viet Nam, had sent not only military equipment and arms, but also food, clothing, medicine, everything; meanwhile, South Viet Nam had received all kinds of luxury products from the Americans. Now, all aids were cut off, leaving heavy duties to pay back loans from the "brother countries" and to aid Kampuchea and Laos.

Furthermore, after the South fell under Northern control, many dangerous epidemics burst out: hemorrhagic fever, scabies, malaria, fleas and lice, etc... Crop failure followed, due to weather and human causes. As all fields and farms were collective properties, nobody took responsibility; also the rice fields were under attack from pests and insects. The government replayed the Northern solution of rice mixed with cassavas or sweet potatoes. Children changed the lyrics of an official march song into:

*From the day the revolution entered here,
We have to eat rice with cassava all year.
Tomorrow we will eat it double mixed.
Oh my country! How disgusting cassava is to eat!*

That was not even true enough, because those cassavas and sweet potatoes became smaller and smaller, the size of baby fingers, spoiled, rotten, and uneatable. However, people still had to buy them. If they did not, the supply ration would be cut.

Russia came to the rescue with "bo bo", a kind of grain reserved for horses and asses, with no nutritional value for humans, but which could create the false feeling of a full stomach, because it was almost impossible to digest. Like that, the Vietnamese were downgraded to the class of dogs, horses, asses. On the New Year celebration, each household could buy one coffee spoon of monosodium and 60 green beans upon which to feast!

In every state establishment and agency, there was a "life cell unit" with the great responsibilities of looking for public sources of essential needs. The cell agents had to run and talk fast to be able to have anything to distribute. Every time necessities brought home, the whole agency stopped working to watch for a fair distribution.

Dry merchandise was rather easy to divide, if only the supplies were enough for everybody. But normal infallible shortage became a great cause for discontents and disputes among co-workers. An agency with fifty workers which received only five bicycle tires: what could they do? There was no framework for mutual concession, because everybody was so poor, so needy. So, they separated the inner tubes and the outer tires to become ten parts. Then they drew lots. Five lucky persons got the tires. Five lesser fortunate got the tubes. Afterwards, workers with immediate need could buy the tires and tubes, at black market prices, of course, from the lucky persons.

Fresh products and foods caused bigger problems. "Fresh" did not really mean fresh, but were just the antonym of "dry". In fact, vegetables, meat, and fish usually came already spoiled and smelly to consumers' hands. Nevertheless, everybody wanted to get them, as soon as possible. Anyway, where did one find anything better, but on the very costly black market?

Distribution was no easy task. Some wanted meat, others needed fat, some liked flounder, others preferred only shrimp heads. Too complicated a problem! The offices became like fish markets. This was nice for the workers, anyhow, as an allowed break-time.

To partly appease the people's needs and desires, every agency incessantly invented celebrations and feasts, paid for from public funds. On such occasions, the participants tried to eat as much and fast as they could, fearing the gluttony of their co-workers. This was a dedicated competition. People coined the term "village herald's culture". Everything must be partitioned, squabbled over. Things became increasingly rare. The people chom do nha (raked in their own household effects) first, later cha do nhom (bought up and pampered others' old items) to sell in the sidewalk markets: Game of reversing words depicting that old stuffs were running around from hands to hands; each tried to make a tiny profit to earn the day-by-day living.

Many people went out on the side streets to peddle goods: ex-military men, ex-civil officials, retirees (whose retirement pensions no longer paid), professionals such as engineers, lawyers, professors, writers, reporters, businessmen.

Now, nothing was really valuable. Each man had a few clothes, some empty bottles, a couple of hammers or scissors. All of them were old, if not torn or broken. However, the prices were pretty high. Because everything was now so scarce. A empty 6-oz-container of Tang orange powder cost 50 "dong", one-month wage of an middle level civil servant. Buy it if you wanted; if not, leave it there. A light bulb, a few aspirin pills: cheap, plentiful things a few months ago, now could hardly

be found, even after a day of searching, biking around the town. An empty Guigoz tin can became a fabulous treasure. It could bring great joy and pride. It contained food or water for lunch to the office. It was used as a pan to cook rice, water, to boil vegetables. It was durable, not leaking. It was sanitary, not rusty. It was sturdy, not distorted. Somebody even declared that the Vietnamese were now living in "the Guigoz culture era". Had the Guigoz powdered milk company ever dreamed it would receive such great honor? Ultimately, survival for the majority of the real proletariat, deprived of the slightest thing to trade for food, depended on selling their own blood. The hospitals, such as Hong Bang, were always surrounded by people who came to sell their blood, until, deprived of food, they did not have enough blood to sell regularly. From time to time, the WHO agency of the United Nations distributed tuberculosis medicine. People stood in lines for their turns. If they were in the categories of having relatives working or were acquainted with high ranking personnel at the hospital, of course, they would not have to stand in lines or prove anything. The poor had to prove that they had tuberculosis through the phlegm test. Now, some had the new business of selling phlegm! The sick would hawk out their phlegm to sell to the healthy ones. The latter held that phlegm in their mouth, waiting for their turn, then spit it out to give to the hospital attendants for the test. Like that, sooner or later, they all got tuberculosis. But what a great day that was! Now, they could obtain some expensive pills that could be sold to get food for their children!

Besides the days standing in lines to sell blood or receive medicines, old persons, children, women and men carrying metal sticks with one bent end in their hands, rag bags on their shoulders, went out to their routine search in the garbage bins or dumps. Actually, "socialist garbage" did not leave much of anything, but real "pros" could still find some recyclables. The "best-sellers" were punctured plastic bags or the throw-away torn newspapers. They washed them thoroughly to resell them to the recycling industry.

The garbage bins were feverishly exploited by many people, while the trash collectors just dragged out their jobs. The situation caused all the trash dumps to become messy and stinking; garbage and flies flew all over, making the inhabitants in those quarters crazy from pollution and pests. The image of the "Northern communist paradise" was now re-created in the South.

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Early on, the Southerners laughed incredulously when Northern relatives advised them to buy and store anything possible -- everything, even needles and threads, because they would get no more.

Besides importing luxurious and modern things, the Southerners used to be very industrious and skillful. They could produce any necessary items. But the new reality was beyond their imagination: only a few months later, by the end of 1975, all was exhausted. The imported items had been used up, naturally. But even the local products suddenly disappeared. This resulted primarily from the new government's banning previous business, and controlling all industrial production. Meanwhile, under the management of the government, the workers were delaying work or secretly damaging machinery and products. Now, the government launched the "material-saving campaigns". Thus, the rubber used for outer and inner tubes of bicycle tires was profusely blended with clay, so the tires easily went flat or burst. The bicycles frames were manufactured with thin iron sheet metal, subject to be broken on the potholed roads. Well, they did help the bike and tire repair service businesses, newly set up all along the street sides, anyway.

The Vietnamese who had been living abroad -- by this time, only the "patriotic Vietnamese abroad" from France -- came home to visit their families and longed to make "contribution to rebuild the country". They raised their voice haughtily, and accused everybody of being negative-minded, refusing to work, wandering around to chitchat and gossip in clumsy kiosks, or coffee shops, or black markets. They only stopped bragging when their irritated relatives or friends challenged them to stay in the country to share their fate. They shut up a while at this invitation,

then tried to change to another subject. How could they believe the stories told by their families and friends, such as:

About the people who could not report to sign in the household ration book; the ones who did not volunteer for "socialism labor, forward youth, hydraulic work, military obligations" and who deserted the "new economic zones", or "trepassed the frontier": all were deleted out of the household. They became homeless and lost all authorized survival means. They had to wander around and join the groups of coffee shop or snack bar loiterers and black market merchants who tried to survive on the daily basis. During the daytime, they sneaked back into their own or some friends' house to wash. During the nighttime, they slept on the sidewalks, in the open-market halls, in the parks, in the bus stations, in the cemeteries, anywhere they could. The police raided; they ran away to another place. The police could not arrest them all, and there were not enough cells to confine, not enough food to feed them. Finally, the police gave up. Then, the black markets and the swap-meets grew everywhere.

About the eating, one might have thought that with such expensive rice and food, and the scarceness of all provisions, amounts and servings would be carefully cut down. This was true only of household cuisine, not of the restaurants, kiosks, and vending carts.

The insignificant "commerce" of preparing light foods, such as sticky rice, sweet pudding, cakes, and fruits with small costs and easy preparation, was especially fitted for the women who now had to take care of the family's burdens. Besides, cooking had become too expensive with limited food supplies, time-consuming smoky firewood, complicated preparations. Moreover, people needed to run around trading or finding petty jobs. They preferred to eat out. The outside foods might be good, cheaper and more convenient actually. But the main reason for the lack of frugality came from the people's considering that maybe tomorrow they would have nothing to eat. Besides, eating food certainly was better than taking scarce medicine. Malnutrition would certainly result in sickness. They needed to be in good health to work for their family's sake and to prepare themselves for a long and dark future ahead.

As a result, small restaurants, shops, kiosks, vending carts and basket-shouldering peddlers were hastily springing up everywhere like wild mushrooms -- on the sidewalks, in the cul-de-sacs, garages, gardens, living rooms. Men, women, youngsters, elders all dragging about the eateries and coffee shops, smoking, drinking, living hastily, dealing cunningly for some underhand goods, planning an escape trip, or even plotting against the communists!!!

About the clothing, equality was practically applied in this field. The Northerners dressed better while the Southerners tried to simplify their clothing. Besides the fear of being noticed and hated, most of Southerners needed food, and sold their clothes to buy rice. Rapidly, by the end of 1975, many would wear obviously patched-up clothes, which had never happened in the South. They competed feverishly for material, to the point that one could not even find a piece of material to mend one's tattered clothes. The newest fashions for cloth were made with nylon rice or sand bags.

The intellectuals got new jobs as bicycle or cyclo drivers, peddlers, bike repairmen, lottery ticket or cigarette sellers.

The adults quit their vocational classes, and the children also left school. The parents did not care about that, as they did not have any choice. Their children were not allowed to choose schools. Children were compelled to go to local elementary schools within their quarter. However, the schools did not have enough room.

Besides, what good was going to school? The lessons were too bloody for children, with arithmetic problems like this: Puppets' number is 30, now we kill 12, how many of them still survive? The foreign languages were dictated by the school, and the lessons were only the translations of Big Uncle Ho or Comrade Le Duan's silly words. Moreover, students could not learn to hear or to speak another language, but just to read. Foreign language should be considered only a way of reference. Nobody had the right to have relations with foreigners, except the high cadres. The main subject was Marxism-Leninism, which everybody knew that was explicitly wrong. The grading depended on the curriculum vitae. The classroom cadres (students designated by the Party) had the right to decide the teachers' instructions. The teachers did not dare to give bad credits to the

students of a "core class". Because that would be sign of class antagonism. Nor could they give good credit to the "reactionary elements". Therefore, nobody needed to study. All the students were praised as good, assiduous, excellent. Then the teachers were recognized as good achievers. They all realized the "revolutionary spirit".

Even if the students were truly good, once they graduated and went to work as engineers or doctors, the earnings would be around 50 "dong", not much better than the simplest workers' salary. Therefore, why should they have to spend time and energy in schooling?

Travel and transportation became difficult and heart-rending. The government took all the profits from ship and car transportations' businesses and salaries. As a result, the drivers or the transport companies did not want to run many trips, to preserve cars and labor. Secondly, of course, there was no gas surplus distributed by the government; neither were there accessories for repair. Besides, they were instructed to use "new techniques" invented by the "socialist scientists", such as: link two buses together and run both with only one engine; use timing belts made of ropes. With such order, how could cars and trains run well? The results were predictable: a big black market in tickets for crowds of miserable travelers, who slept four or five days in stations waiting for the chance to get on the buses or trains. It was usual for even the cadres who traveled on official one-day trips to be absent from their offices for half a month or so. However, the most terrible stories came from the medical field. The prevailing malnourishment resulted in strange illness and epidemics. The harsh and disordered living, the perpetual harassment and anxiety caused mental illness. Lunatics were wandering around in town, murmuring to themselves or yelling. Sometimes, young crazy naked girls took a carefree stroll on the streets. The emergency cases of dying patients also required submitting first their paper showing household ration book and identity; without it in hand, they had to wait hours in quarter or district before getting the vital "referring paper". Even after the hospital received them, their treatment fell into the hands of the "revolution doctor-director" -- better red than professional. Medical proficiency was of minor concern.

The patients' families had to look for and be ready with chloroform, surgical knives or razor blades, and all medicines from the black markets. Since the government did not have pharmaceutical material, neither did it import medicines and equipment, it suggested that the populace get back to the traditional "Eastern and Southern" medicine. Unfortunately, there was nothing new. Just the Chinese acupuncture. Or the "healthy living methods" of the Doctors Nguyen Van Huong and Nguyen Khac Vien. Or a few "miraculous" curative herbs, such as artichoke, or noni roots. Xuyen tam lien was considered of marvelous multi-effect cure, which could abolish hundreds of sicknesses, from cancer and leprosy to migraine and cold.

In the North, there was the "miraculous remedy NT6". What the number 6 stood for, nobody knew, while NT was the abbreviation for Human Heart (Nhan Tam). This "remedy" was invented by Dr. Pham Ngoc Thach . The main procedure was to dehydrate human excrement and preserve it in bottles.

[Dr. Thach wanted to prove himself a cultured person, he referred to king Le Thanh Tong (1442-97), who had allegedly paid tribute to the stool-collector act by two famous "parallel sentences", of which the last was: Brandishing a one-meter-twenty sword to completely collect all human hearts. This "miracle medicine" could also cure everything.

Dr. Thach was the leader of Forward Youth, Head Commissioner of Foreign Affairs in the Provisional Administrative Committee of South Vietnam, Chairman of the Sai Gon-Gia Dinh Committee of Resistance and Administration, then Secretary of the Ministry of Health, eminent leader of the "revolution health service". In 1968, discontent, he requested to return to South Viet Nam, and died suspiciously along the road.]

Another "nutritional remedy" highly esteemed by the Politburo was made of foetuses. Some "doctors" in the Mothers and Children Protection Committee, under the leadership of Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, with comrade Dinh Thi Can, former cook for "Big Uncle Ho", as Vice President, took care of the foetus abortion operation for a chef who marinated them in wine as a specialty to serve only the top leaders, for their good health and longevity.

Fortunately, many people who had migrated to France before April 30th, 1975 now could send much needed money to rescue their relatives. France, after the Geneva Accord, had been maintaining good relations with Ha Noi. Via France, people who resided in other countries could manage to help their families, too. Previously, foreign aids were requested of Russia and America by the North and South governments to make war. Now began a campaign of relief requests to overseas relatives, by lucky people having someone abroad, to keep body and soul together.

Unresponsive to severe shortages and lack of means for citizen's subsistence, the government did not provide anything to the "puppet people" finally permitted them to receive "overseas aid" through the City Bank formerly named Viet Nam Thuong Tin, then cutting their ration supply card. However, as this government did not know anything about international trade or money exchange, nor acknowledge the non-value of their unwarranted currency, they fixed too low a rate for foreign monies. People tried other ways. They turned to the underground chains of Chinese intermediaries in Cho Lon to get better rates, four or five times higher. Those rich Chinese needed to transfer their hidden wealth out, with the help of their overseas relatives or fellows, who received funds and deposited into their bank accounts. Meanwhile, inside the country, the exchangers delivered bundles of the Vietnamese low-value money to the receivers. Everybody was content with such good deals. The Chinese bosses could transfer safely and discreetly their wealth while getting rid of the mount of insignificant paper currency. Their overseas fellows could get easy and secure jobs. The overseas relatives felt good helping their families at home. The beneficiaries were the happiest with some money for their survival, and evading the government's attempts preying upon them through official exchange. But super inflation took a higher toll, day after day. People turned to gold exchange. The process was similar. The Chinese used the cheap Vietnamese bills to buy gold at the market price. Most popular was the gold ring of approximately 1/10 ounce. The units were one rings, two rings, or one, two taels of 1 ounce. It was so simple and convenient. The gold was easy to hide and did not lose its value to inflation.

After this, people found out that receiving money was not as profitable as receiving needed merchandise. So, they requested that relatives send supplies and medicines.

Of course, all letters were subject to control. However, the postal agents censored or seized only the suspected elements with names in the black lists. One of the reasons was that the Northern cadres now working in the South realized that their low wages were not worth much work. Thus, they did not spend time reading these letters, but only kept them in the post offices for a time. One year, half a year, three months were usual release timetables. When the letters arrived in hands of the addressees, everything already belonged to the past.

It was the same with gifts or goods: Missing was the name of the game. Senders with no experience, only notified intended recipients by letters or telegrams after sending the packages. Their relatives would not have any proof to claim the lost materials. The more experienced ones sent copies of the receipts, so that their relatives could complain after long periods of waiting. Despite that, when they came, the customer service just said that the package had not arrived yet. Then people could not do anything. Air France cargo company, with exclusive rights for transportation into Viet Nam, did not insure the transactions. Even if the company knew that the cadres stole the merchandise, dared it intervene? Protection for vulnerable or unfairly treated persons was out of question. Either private establishments or national governments, all had been following the same goal: their own interests, naturally including Air France, a "nationalized business of the great nation of France"!

If the packages had punctures and had lost things, the customer service persons would explain, "This is the fault of the transporting company, if you don't want to accept it, we will send it back to the depot, then you go ahead to the complaint unit." Certainly, the beneficiary preferred to get the damaged packages, better to save a few things than put them back into that colossal timeless black hole.

Nothing was simple. Even passing through the lines in the banks, in the post offices, or in airport customs required very complicated paperwork. If the packages were not lost, whenever the notices came, the recipients had to prepare all kinds of paper from the household ration book, the ID card, and the money or goods permit book, and stand in lines all day. Some people came as early as two or three o'clock a.m., but still the line was already formed. Although the recipients taught each other to put the papers in order, the "comrades" only processed limited cases. Therefore, usually the line was cut off, and people were told to go home and return tomorrow. The only thing they could do was to sigh, go home, and stand in line again the next day. The lucky ones were admitted to enter and pay fees, standing and trembling, not knowing themselves either cleared or stuck. This came from the ignorance of their overseas relatives, who forgot about the strictness of these customs duty agents and wrote unclearly. The names without Vietnamese phonetic accents, the incomplete addresses, the old street names, the re-educatees name instead of his wife's: such insignificant things would cause big troubles in the "socialist society". Of course, the recipients could not rectify such "shortcomings", they had to go back to their "district and inhabitant cell" to apply for certifications. It took many days to fill out all those papers in different offices (many were houses of escapees, still with the old home furniture such as wood beds or tea cabinets). The officers could show up or not, on time or at their own will, especially the chiefs or any authorities who had the right to sign papers. That is the "revolution way" to do business.

One scarier procedure was the tax collection. Unfortunately, if "brother or sister cadres" carried "high spirit", hated "puppets, traitors, and imperialists", they opened each thing, torn open packages or boxes, ferreted through all the pockets, even stirred in toothpaste tubes. Then, the merchandise was damaged and lost value. The taxes varied according to the inspectors' tempers, without any fixed schedule. For the same small medicine tube, this officer spared, the next required 20, another charged 150 "dong".

One of the extra hardships for the recipients of packages at Tan Son Nhut Airport was that the cyclos were not permitted inside. So, people had to carry packages on their shoulders or bring along strings to tie and pull them out to the main streets. That meant, sometimes one person could not do the job. If the gift bore the name of an old man, their children or great children had to go along to carry the package, and to prevent muggers.

People noticed that relatives who originated in poor and little-educated families had the tendency to help their relatives back home much better and more often; and the ones newly immigrating sent bigger gifts. The longer they stayed, the smaller their packages. Were their feelings also diminishing in the same way? Maybe when they had just left the country, the miserable images of their relatives were still fresh in their memories, and then faded gradually with time. Maybe they developed increasing needs for comfort and means, as living in a civilized country became familiar to them.

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In the turmoil during and after April 1975, people, especially the Southerners, did not know or pay attention to anything in the outside world. The main reason was that all newspapers belonged to the government, and they let people know only what they wanted them to know. Another reason was that people had to think first about their own and their families' lives. With an empty stomach, nobody could care about anything else.

Thus, nobody foresaw an international event that would cause a huge effect on the whole world.

In the capitalist world, if conflict happened between national interests, it would be kept in certain limits, avoiding the wars or extreme cruelties common to the communist world.

On the other hand, in the communist world, all vassal countries had to show their unanimous devotion to the Russian empire. Only China refused to do so. Mao Zedong believed that China was such a fabulous country with so much longer a civilization, with a population many times greater, with land larger than Russia, why should she be submissive, in the role of a vassal country? Besides, Mao Zedong reasoned that Stalin was not worthier of veneration than he himself. From

the start, Mao had planned to take advantage of Russian communism to benefit China, or more exactly, to benefit himself. When Mao could no longer do that, he turned to conflict, and prepared to build up his own power and prestige. Naturally, due to the geographic situation, to the race, to the culture, China wanted to have North Viet Nam as her satellite, especially considering her international strategy. While North Viet Nam desired to oblige Russia. For that reason, China produced different pressures on North Viet Nam, from cutting the financial aid, withdrawing her technical specialists, and controlling communist Kampuchea to attacking Viet Nam's southwest borders.

For their part, the Kampucheans carried on historical hatred due to a long-ago invasion and domination by Viet Nam; and they understood that Viet Nam would obey Russia to attack them and incorporate their country into the Indochina Federation, according to the 1930 platform of Indochina Communist Party. Moreover, as they believed that China would help them get back their lost territories, while occupying Phnom Penh (April 17th, 1975), they killed or deported about 200,000 Vietnamese living on their land. Then they began to attack Viet Nam. In the first attacks, such as the sudden assault on Military Zone IX of An Giang, on April 30th, 1977, or the other fights in Ben Cau, Tan Bien, Xa Mat, and Chau Thanh in Tay Ninh, on September 24th, the Vietnamese communists ran away. On May 5th, 1978, Kampuchea Radio announced their calculations, "We have reached the proportion of 1 Kampuchean to 30 Vietnamese. Therefore, we need to sacrifice only 2 million Khmer people to eradicate over 50 million Vietnamese. We will still have 6 million people left."

As they could not run away anymore, on December 12th, 1978, Vietnamese communists created "The Front Of Unified Peoples To Save Kampuchea", with Heng Samrim as Chairman. And, at exactly 12:00 of Christmas night, they ordered their troops to invade Kampuchea. Now, the people were totally shocked. Again, wars. Again, military obligations. Suddenly, "we didn't like peace". "We" had become pro-war. Nobody understood why the "open the mouth, the teeth get cold socialist brothers, sharing contiguous rivers, contiguous mountains" now had become deadly enemies. The leaders explained that was "our international obligation". But what "international"? They said the government only fought "reactionaries". But Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan were all communists.

Some explained that although they were all communists, now they had divided into two wings. Viet Nam belonged to Russia, while Kampuchea belonged to China. If that was true, both seemed equally foolish. Following Russia or following China, they had to fight against each other, and kill and harm their own people, without any self-interest or advantage. Maybe both the Vietnamese and the Kampuchean peoples had reached the end of their lot.

The common South Vietnamese did not understand anything; they just performed the same usual hiding ploy to avoid the draft, which was now called military duty. But this time, many cunningly abused the system. They reported for duty, where they received two sets of "bo doi" uniforms, one pair of "dep rau" sandals, one "non coi" hat, one mosquito net, and one blanket. Then, they deserted, taking all of those "rare" things to sell for money. Whoever could not desert had the only one way: invade Kampuchea. Many died without leaving a trace; many others were maimed by Chinese mines and came home to spend the rest of their life as burdens to their families, without any assistance from the government. Fortunately, the war was quite short. On February 2nd, 1979, "we" entered and occupied Phnom Penh, to rule Kampuchea.

To be fair, the event of "our" occupation of Kampuchea was a release for her people. From April 17th, 1975 to February 2nd, 1979, in about four years of tyrannical rule, the Kampuchean communists had transformed this beautiful country into a huge collective tomb for almost half of its population. The rest became prone to sickness and hunger. The Vietnamese communists were "compassionate" when they performed the war to "liberate and assist" Kampuchea, although their own nation was sinking into an ocean of tears and sufferings of all kinds.

But still there was no peace. Another war burst out on February 17th, 1979. This time, it was initiated by the Northern giant neighbor, who sent 150,000 troops over the borders "to teach the younger brother a lesson".

The trouble had started on March 24th, 1978, when Vietnamese communists opened a campaign to "eradicate capitalists", harming many Chinese in Cho Lon. China made full use of this opportunity, opened a campaign of "overseas victims", denounced the Vietnamese communists' crime, and sent their boats onto the high seas to pick up their "compatriots". Moreover, on November 3rd, 1978, Vietnamese communists signed a friendship pact with Russia pledging economics and military co-operation for 25 years. This, the Chinese found unpardonable! The Chinese "lesson" aimed to achieve the following: a challenge to military Viet-Russia collaboration, to which Russia did not dare to have any response; a proof that the story of invincible Vietnamese communists was only bragging; and a blocking of the Vietnamese communists' ambition to become a small empire in South-East Asia. After visiting America for advice, Mr. Deng Xiaoping announced in advance that he would only attack limitedly and rapidly. Briefly, in the night of March 4th, 1979, the Chinese army took over Lang Son City. On the next day, China announced that they already achieved the aim, then stopped firing and withdrew the troops. However, the withdrawal was only completed on the 16th. Because they needed time to destroy completely the villages that they had occupied: all establishments, security posts, roads and bridges, houses and schools, markets and hospitals, manufactures and factories (including the "revered and beloved Big Uncle Hós" Pac Bo Cavern, Lenin Fall, Carl Marx Mountain).

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There was no sane way to live in such a lawless country, with only oppression and suffering, threatened by wars. Of course, people who knew and were scared of communism but could not escape before April 30th had been continuing their flights at any price. They soon discovered that neighbor countries welcomed the refugees, maybe due to pressure from the United States, which kept on trying to prove to the world the dangers of communism. Simultaneously, they also found out that they did not need to use planes or steel boats. Even the small fishing sampans could easily do the job, by going along the shores between Thailand gulf and Rach Gia-Ha Tien bays.

Moreover, our ancestors say, "in March, old women go sea-faring", which meant that during the period of the beginning of the year, the sea in Thailand gulf was calmer than a lake.

Actually, the first man who did the research and initiated the great flight was Mr. Lam Ly Hung, a "new mathematics" professor at Sai Gon Faculty of Sciences. Mr. Hung had been attending a refreshment course in Australia when he heard about the US. intention to abandon South Viet Nam. Probably receiving secret agreement from Australia, he subsequently came back to Viet Nam, bought a fishing boat, and took all of his family down. Displaying anti-communism slogans, he went around the neighbor countries, then navigated across the ocean to Australia to request asylum.

This man might have wanted to convey to everybody that fleeing was very simple. However, few grasped his message at that crucial time. Only later on, when they came to the end of the road, suddenly they discovered this fact by themselves. For those who left, Rach Gia and Ha Tien became the popular places to seek escape from the country.

Big Uncle Ho died at a cursed time

That rendered the whole population either mad or crazy

The crazy ones already flee

The stuck ones become half insane half out of mind.

Maybe people thought that being totally crazy was better than being half-and-half. For that reason, they followed in the footsteps of those who fled the country. After the campaigns of money exchange, merchandise confiscation, property inventory, and exiles to new economic zones, the new saying was "if the streetlight posts had feet, even they would flee." This meant everybody wanted to escape. Because they hated the communists so much but could not do anything against them. They wanted to have true liberty and democracy. Most of all, because they wanted to have a way to survive. One person who escaped and succeeded could get work and sent money home to feed his family, unemployed and rejected by the government. As the present situation was too clear:

"If I was caught, mother would feed me; if I died in the sea, I would feed the fish; if I made it, I would feed mother plentifully".

The very first escape plots were completely clandestine. A few families gathered money to buy a small fishing boat, found a man with experience in engine repairing and piloting a craft, then planned the journey. Of course, this plot was not easy to accomplish. All the boats had been registered, their fishing time to go into the sea was scheduled and checked carefully. Also, gas and oil to run the boat were supplied by "limited quota." All moving or traveling was restricted within the country. All strangers who came into another province had to have permit and to report to the local authority. This is not to mention that fishing boats were not favorable for a long trip on the open ocean. In others words, a flight out of the country was a big enterprise. It cost money, time, labor, calculation, distress, nightmares, even perhaps onés life. Many traitors or cheaters took money but did not operate, or did not deliver the boat, or delivered it and then reported to the police for rewards. The next step was to enter into collusion with the coast guards. However, this did not mean that wouldbe escapees could avoid the villains who sold them out, or signaled other guards to split up the spoil.

Most of the Chinese in Viet Nam, especially in the South, were merchants. They did not think about remote issues, only wanting to be at ease, to get good profits from their businesses. Therefore, they used to "forget" about paying taxes to the Southern easy-going old regimes, but made generous "contribution" to the Chinese and Vietnamese communists. Doing this, they thought that they deserved the protection of communist China and the consideration of their "youngest brother" communist Viet Nam. But they did not anticipate the coming discord between "brothers". As a result, the Vietnamese communists detained not only Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese, but also Mao Zedong's followers, and even the Chinese in Kampuchea.

Communist China could not ignore this. Deng Xiaoping propagated the story of "overseas victims", sent the boats to the open sea to pick them up, and urged the overseas Chinese living in both North and South Viet Nam to ask for the right to come home.

Again, those "who ate the national rice, but worshipped the communist ghost" thought that the Chinese lawn would be greener. The ones in up North would walk directly to the frontier. The ones in Hai Phong fled on boats. The ones in the South managed to move up to the North to follow their steps. The Viet Nam Communist Party and Government, or at least, the local authorities, took this opportunity to make money. They ordered their cadres to organize the so-called semi-official frontier trespassing trips to collect gold, under the pretext of driving the Chinese out of the country.

Thus, the Party, the Government, or the local authorities gave permission to private parties to build boats, set up offices receiving gold and making lists. The participants would be taken care of, even having security agents to escort them down to the boats.

All the boats were overcrowded. International authorities raised their voices about the "illegal human export." Therefore, many shipwrecks occurred, because of overloading on old rotten boats or intentional explosions, when just out to the open sea. Thus, the communists could still take the gold, and avoid international complaints of human export.

One example is the case of Muoi Van Nguyen Huu Gioc, a core cadre, originally poor city dweller, now a Brigadier General, Party's Province Committee Permanent Member, concurrently Chief of the Song Be (Dong Nai) Province Security Office. This cadre received the order from the Politburo (or more exactly, the bosses of the Politburo who wanted gold) to lead Project 2. He joined hands with Tran Thi Kim Anh, the former owner of the Cynos Restaurant in Vung Tau, previously concubine of Nguyen Van Thieu, to organize many emigration trips. The official price requested by the government had been five taels of gold per person; now they increased the price to 10 or 12.

Finally, Mrs. Cynos persuaded Muoi Van to organize one big trip for her to bring all of their treasure ahead, and then he would follow later, to romance in the free world. This "innate poor fool" believed in the female "capitalist puppet", who had graduated from a Switzerland university. After her successful flight, Mrs. Cynos sent a letter to the Interior Ministry denouncing Muoi Van for his wanton, dubious affairs, and his appropriation of government funds, with complete proof:

papers, pictures, and videos. The Party was unable to hush up this case. It was constrained to give Muoi Van the death penalty. In this fashion, Mrs. Cyrnos then had the credit of fighting against communist revolution. About the sentence, nobody knows if it was carried out or not. This was not important. Because under the communist regime, everything was unclear, obscure, kept from the public. The bosses could do as they liked, imprison or release, kill or pardon. Because they themselves were the law. They seemed to feel, "Now, it's our victory. Any cunning comrades better try to dredge, accumulate and rejoice in your acquisitions, to repay your gloomy past days. But do it skillfully, don't let it leak out. The worst punishment if you're caught is transfer to another place, where nobody knows about you. If there is no other way, than accept light sentences or probations; after a time, when everybody forgets about it, you will receive amnesty, then retire early, with assets great enough for a comfortable living in leisure".

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Were the escapees political or economic refugees? It was hard to make a clear distinction.

For the escapees, it was a great gamble, winning or losing all (even their lives).

The world abruptly got shocked by the numbers of Vietnamese people fleeing the country. A few honest ones had started to express their concerns. However, the majority of the leftists stubbornly continued their defenses of the communists. And soon enough, the "free world" got tired of the boat people. International forces did not control seaways, thus encouraging Thai fishing men to become pirates. These Thai knew that fleeing Vietnamese, especially Sino-Vietnamese, usually carried gold and dollars, and unarmed, unaccustomed to the sea trips, weakened by seasicknesses, were unable to resist them. At first, they only stole the material goods, then gradually they became more and more evil, raped the women, and killed people.

But still the flight continued. Besides the escapes by sea, there were also the escapes over land.

After the occupation of Kampuchea, travel between the two countries became easier. The "bo doi" started to sneak people over the trails to cross the frontiers for money. They provided fake travel-papers, guaranteed transportation up to the borders using military trucks, and then handed over to their accomplices to guide the "customers" to Thailand. The main problem was to avoid the Khmer Rouge. This way relatively lessened the risks and the costs, but only relatively. Many people vanished along the roads, disappeared on the journey, and was never seen again, such as famous singer Ho Diep.

There were many courageous attempts of escape, of course.

A few "puppet pilots", who had been later employed by the "revolution", gathered their families in a bare field, stole the helicopter to land and pick them up, then flew directly to Thailand.

There were even a few exciting hijacks. One was a flight of mostly middle-class officials on business trips from Da Lat to Rach Gia. Half way there, two "air pirates" took out their pistols and grenades, and immediately took control of the aircrew and security group. They declared that they had a mission, with a hint that they belonged to the C.I.A., that they did not want to harm anybody. They ordered the crew to follow the requests, drop the weapons, and fly the plane to Bangkok. At Bangkok, these two hijackers were met by Thai police and disappeared. A Chinese who might be used to travelling for business, with good connections, had silently gone, too. The remainder were led to a hall, had meals, then rested in hotels, under strict surveillance. The airplane was checked and fueled. The next day, the passengers were led back onto the airplane and flew home. That was not all: later, all the crew and travelers, cadres or non-cadres, were imprisoned, without dates of release.

There was also an "amusing" flight on an ocean-travel ship, a skillful arrangement by a group of "puppet" specialists in a joint-venture state-private corporation.

This corporation specialized in building roads and embanking dams. It had won the rights to utilize machinery and vessels of the old regime. Their mission accomplished, the corporation organized a great celebration of their success on a big ship. They invited all the "big ears and great

faces of the revolution" to come down there to have a lavish dinner, with live music and "couple fussing" (dancing).

After the dinner, they waved goodbye to the "great authorities" who had disembarked and continued the feast, having bright lights, loud music, and joyful dancing, while the ship slowly brought them all, people plus pianos, violins, guitars, saxophones, and drums out to the open sea! There were other, safer ways to flee, such as:

* Sneaking into East European ships.

This might require mutual agreement in advance or just trust to luck. During the night, escapees, mostly young girls, rented a small sampan to carry them quietly close to the big ship. Then they climbed on and hid under the ship's hold. The ship might enter the port of a free country. These escapees knew perfectly in advance their fate when they fell into the hands of the foreign sailors. But they did not care, as this was their only hope to get out of this country of sufferings.

* Marrying any foreigner or a future immigrant.

Many foreigners had been living in Viet Nam for a long time to do business, such as the Indians who had lost their jobs or were banned to continue their business now. Or other foreigners who could not leave Viet Nam before April 30th, 1975. All dared not stay any longer in Viet Nam, and requested permission to go home. The government opened the Operation Office for Foreigners, to resolve their cases.

Vietnamese girls took this opportunity, and tried to get married to those to leave with them. Most of the cases are of Vietnamese girls who married reckless male foreigners; rare were the female foreigners marrying Vietnamese men. Another way was to pay them for a feigned marriage certificate. This deal did not require any other condition but a reasonable price. However, there were many stories as painful as shameful. For example, a girl from a high-class family had to pay a great sum to get married to an old Indian man. She thought that when arriving in India, the old man would fulfill his promise and help her to take refuge in a third country. On the contrary, he detained her in this strange country, and forced her to be one of his concubine, in his harem of many other Indian wives.

Eventually, the High Commissariat of Refugees of the United Nations, or the United States of America more exactly, saw that the Vietnamese communist government exploited too much "human export". At this, they implemented the ODP (Orderly Departure Program), which permitted the overseas Vietnamese to sponsor their relatives for family reunion, so that they could terminate the refugee program. Vietnamese communists also rejoiced about that, because they could kick out more of the unwanted and also plant underground agents. The ones with close relatives in other countries to sponsor them for family reunification became the new life buoys for many others. Usually this was a lucrative business. The price was always favorable, to the future immigrant and to the authorities, too. Ones could get marriage certificate, household card, and any paper needed for a complete immigration file.

However, the matter was not that simple. First, the communist government did not have clear rules. All procedures were simple or complicated, depending on the "authorities". The people in charge had full rights to decide anything. Acceptance or rejection was completely based on inspiration. Where and to whom would one lodge a complaint?

The procedures consisted of:

- Bringing the completed file to the district police.
- The district security office would investigate, if approves, sends the file to the Operations Office for Foreigners on Nguyen Du Street.
- The office checks the file, requests supplements if needed, and transfers everything to the higher Operations Office of the Interior Department on Nguyen Trai Street.
- If the Nguyen Trai office approves, it will submit the request to Ha Noi for a departure permit.
- When the permit arrives, one goes to the Foreign Affairs Office to apply for an entry visa.
- Interview by the United Nations delegate follows this.
- General health checking is done.

- After receiving the entry permit, one goes back to the Operations Office on Nguyen Trai to register for the flight.

- When one's name was posted on the list, one would go to the representatives of the High Commissariat for Refugees to request a permit for an air ticket, and:

- Declare the luggage at the customs office.

- Declare all precious metal, jewelry, and loan status at the Sai Gon City Bank. - Declare the legal status of the house left behind at the Housing Office.

- Declare the tax status at the Tax Office.

- Check in luggage at Air Viet Nam.

- Wait for the departure date, and

- Complete all final formalities at the airport.

This was a long process, quite understandable. However, the reality was even more complicated. The main reason was the same: "the authorities" did not have any clear rule or law, but worked only according to their "initiatives". Around the offices, from early morning till late night, never-ending crowds of people came and went, looking and asking, sharing with each other all kinds of rumors. These were quite at ease due to "foreign aid" from their overseas relatives, and had the reassurance of leaving, sooner or later. Therefore, they had plenty of time and money to hang around, drink coffee and chat, helping others to have some easy jobs, like guarding motorcycles or selling fast food. To leave the fast way, all they needed was to look for an appropriate "big cadre" (ie., someone with power to help), to register his or her name in the household book, and then transfer the house's title into his or her name before going. The simplest way was always the "thu tuc dau tien". Again a game of reversed words: thu tuc dau tien (first formality); tien dau (where is the money). Rare were the ones who could forego paying bribes, in this or that phase. The problem was how to avoid cheats, which were plenty. In many cases, even at the airport, one still could be called back and be detained. The best method was to give only part of the promised amount. After the airplane's take-off, a remaining family member would pay the rest.

The departure under the "Amerasian Children" or "Half-breed Children" program was rather sarcastic.

When the American army had been encamped in Viet Nam, the women who lived with the G.I.'s were mockingly called me My (American madams), because most of them were snack-bar or dancing-girls, who were involved in passing romance with the foreigners. By the time of the "general withdrawal", the ones who were not dropped by their "husbands" increased their value instantly. However, most of them were abandoned to poverty and misery. Their half-breed children were among the most piteous and rejected sorts. Many of them became homeless, living day-to-day on the streets.

Suddenly, there was a policy of taking those ill-fated children to the US. Nobody knew if it came from American compassion for those "misplaced seeds", or from the urging of responsibility from the Vietnamese government. The reality was that the "me" became quite popular. Many men even asked to marry them. Many others strove to have these ladies' names on their household book. If only the lady could get in touch with one of her ex-men, and have the chance to go to the United States, then he and his family and his whole household would also be allowed to accompany her. Or one could pay high price to adopt a half-breed child. The whole family could easily profit from such a transaction.

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The Southerners, especially the Sai Gon inhabitants, had gotten the chance to have contact with the outside world before. They knew how to do business, and had many properties, as well as many ways to challenge inventories, confiscations, orders, and other means of exploitation.

In the past, Russia received assistance from the US., China from Russia. Particularly, North Viet Nam got aid from China and Russia to leisurely stepping on the "socialism peak", doing their "international obligations." But now, the situation became different. Each for himself. In the case of

Viet Nam, after the dirty affair in Kampuchea, after the "lesson" of Deng Xiaoping, and the "protection" for Laos, no "big brothers" wanted to feed this "youngest brother" anymore. The Vietnamese communists had to face reality. They discovered that governing was not that simple. Feeding a population, even at mere subsistence, was no easy task. At least, it had to have something to allocate. Now, there was absolutely nothing. Thus, the government had to let people get back to their own routine: doing business, engaging in production, although small, still, this could answer the urgent demand.

At this point, the communists began to act like capitalists. Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet created Cholimex Corporation, using Trieu Binh Thiet, a Chinese in Cho Lon having relatives owning establishments in Hong Kong and Singapore, specializing in exchanging shrimp, fish, eggs, shark fins, bird nests, and rice for materials, chemicals, accessories, and machinery. Kiet also invited Charles Duc, a Vietnamese with French nationality, to take over the presidency of the Agricultural Products Import Export Company, and the vice presidency of the Imex Corporation to do business with the capitalists.

From that time on, communist government confessed defeat through its actions. A few manufacturers of necessary consumer goods such as fabric, aluminium utensils, plastic implements, electrical devices, soap, bicycles, and bicycle accessories re-opened and went into production.

In one word, the government had finally admitted its failure. When the government could not control the people's stomach, the only thing it could do, sooner or later, was to give up.

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PART THREE

I

Very early each morning, the whole city was awakened by loud megaphones calling for exercise and labor on the streets. During the day, they had to wait in line to buy bad quality rice. The supplies of foods had diminished tremendously. More money was spent, but less food was on the table.

After supper, people had to attend "neighborhood meetings." The same topics were repeated over and over: the French colonialism, the Americans and Thieu-Ky's crimes, and the bright future of Vietnam under "socialism." The cadres who led the meetings spurted out their topics by heart, like school children reciting their lessons to the teacher in front of the class. The "bad elements," families of the old regime officials and officers and bourgeois class, kept low profiles. They talked as little as possible and even seemed to manage to occupy less space.

During these meetings, Van tried her best not to fall asleep. Slowly, she developed the technique of looking attentively at the "cadre" when he talked as if she was really interested while her mind wandered into something interesting in the past.

Van knew that a single "faux pas" could lead to disaster, since each soldier or cadre could make his own decision concerning her fate. There was chaos: no laws, no rules. The whole administrative system was unorganized. There was no overall planning, only patchwork. One sector of the city had different policies from the next.

Many nights Van wondered, how long could she hold on? All she faced was uncertainty. No job. No future. No news from her husband. Was he dead or alive? Then, horrifying news about lives in the camps had seeped out. The prisoners had to work from dawn till dark with very little food. They stayed starved all the time. Many died of diseases and hardship. Many who could not stand the brainwashing committed suicide. The detainees had to accept the invented crimes they were supposed to have committed during the "puppet regime" and to write their past activities over and

over. These data were compared, and when an error or omission was found, the prisoner had to answer questions again and again.

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It was over a year before Van heard from her husband.

A major named Minh whom Van had met a few times was taken to the North the same time as Chuong. By some connection, Minh got in touch with his big sister who married to a man who joined the Viet Minh in 1945.

When the French-Viet Minh conflict broke out, all city people were compelled to evacuate to the countryside. Soon, the French took over control of the cities, people returned to their homes. Later on, many patriots who had co-operated with the Viet Minh also took refuge in the French controlled areas when discovering that the Viet Minh were actually communist which eventually would liquidate all non-communist elements. Minh's family returned to the city like thousands of others while his sister followed her husband to Region IV (a region under total communist control). Then, the country was divided in 1954, the family moved to the South and saw her no more.

Now Minh's brother-in-law had a high position. His sister came to the camp in Son La (North Viet Nam) to see him. Chuong wrote Van a letter, no, not a letter, but a note with a few sentences on a small piece of yellowish trash paper and asked Minh's sister to hand it to Van in person when she went South to see her parents.

Van was terrified when Minh's sister and her husband came. By now, many of Chuong's relatives and hers had come from the North. They met her parents and his first, before seeing her, so she was not surprised. Now an official from the North directly came to her house. It must be bad news.

"Are you Mrs. Van?" the skinny middle age woman asked.

"Yes," Van said reluctantly.

"Is your husband Chuong?"

Van stared at them, her mouth open. Seeing the shock in her eyes, the man said with pity, "I bring you this letter from him."

"A letter?"

"Yes," the man pulled out from his front shirt pocket a folded piece of paper smaller than half of a palm.

Van unfolded it with her trembling hands. Her heart started beating faster and faster. She believed the couple could even hear the beating. Yes, it was her husband's handwriting. He did not address it to her name, but only started:

I am doing well. Take good care of parents and children. Remember we planned to visit cousin Lien. I heard that she is very sick now. Try your best to take the children to see her before it is too late.

Chuong did not sign his name.

Van was dazzled with happiness. At least, she knew that her husband was still alive. However, she was still clear headed enough to understand his message. Lien was Chuong's cousin who had gone to school in Australia a few years before the fall of Sai Gon. He had no way of knowing about her health. He only wanted Van and the children to flee the country.

Van sensed relief when she found out about this couple. For gratitude, Van insisted they stay for supper.

Lately, Van had entertained many relatives from the North whom she never met but only heard about. By some mystery, all people from the North who had relatives in the South but had never been here or got in touch with them for twenty years could easily find the houses in Sai Gon; too big a city compared to the tiny towns in the North.

Those Northerners were amazed at the big houses, large avenues, high buildings and high level of living. Many could not conceive how such a strong and wealthy part of the country could be defeated.

Before their arrival, they had heard that the "American imperialists" and the "puppet government" had stripped the Southerners to their bones. Many carried all the way, on their trips of almost two thousand kilometers (1500 miles), a few kilos (pounds) of low quality tough rice, or some heavy stoneware bowls to give their relatives. They had heard that in the South people had to eat corn and sweet potato instead of rice, and use coconut shells for bowls. Now, being served the very modest meals compared to those before the fall of Sai Gon, they thought those were big feasts. They felt ashamed to give their gifts. All of them then returned home with big presents. They accepted everything: TV's, refrigerators, electric fans, motorbikes, bikes, even bulky living room and bedroom furniture. More and more Northerners came to get their share of gifts. Van's parents and those of her husband always made plans to take the Northern relatives to see her. They even made fanfare out of these visits by inviting them for a big supper, keeping their visits long and chitchatting so loud outside the house to make sure that people, especially the neighborhood security agent knew that Van had relatives in the communist government. Van found that the tricks worked. She was cocksure that the agent looks became less aggressive and once in a while she missed a meeting, but had not been asked for "self criticism."

Van told Chuong's parents that she planned to go North to see him. But they opposed the idea, "You have to be home with the children. If something happened to you, who'd take care of them? It's not safe for a young woman to go to an unknown place like that. The camp is in the jungle."

"I want to visit him to see how is he doing, Father."

"Maybe I can go to see him."

"You, Father, you're too old to take such a rough trip."

"No. I'm well enough. Besides, I know about the North and what can they do to an old man like me?"

"Your father's right. He can find the place much easier than you. As a young woman, you'd expose yourself to risk, but your father cannot go by himself either. We'll find those people whose relatives were also sent to the North and go with them in a group."

"Your mother has a good idea."

A few months passed by before Chuong's father formed a small group to head North. Upon his return home, besides the weariness from the rough trip, Van detected despair in the expression of her father-in-law.

"How's the father of my children doing, Father?" Van asked.

He glanced at his wife as if they made agreement on what he was going to say,

"Oh! He's doing well."

He did not look at Van but at the children sitting with grandma on the sofa. Grandma held Truc in her arms, and bent down to kiss her head. Van supposed her mother-in-law tried to hide her face. She began to shiver. Did they try to hide something from her? Was it really bad?

"Father, is my husband really OK?"

Hearing her trembling voice and seeing fear on her face, her father-in-law realized what she had in mind,

"Oh, yes. He's OK. Of course he lost a lot of weight. But compared to many others, he's doing well. He told us not to worry about him, but take care of ourselves. Especially you, he wanted you to take care of the children," he added, "and he wanted the children to flee the country."

"What do you think, Father?"

"I don't know. It's a big risk, especially with small children. Many have left, but their families have never heard from them. Remember the young couple down the street? Their family still hasn't hear anything. It's been eight or nine months already. I think they're dead. If they got anywhere, they'd get in touch with their relatives in France. But it's up to you to decide."

"I don't think I'm going to do anything until my husband gets home."

*

Thus, people were resigned to the fact that officers from major level and officials from director up had been sent to the North. These prisoners had less chance to be released. So far, none of them was set free.

Van kept close contact with Minh's family. Through his sister in the North, the family got news about him in the camp. They did not go North to visit him, but sent money to the sister who brought him food whenever she came to his camp. Van then gave money to Minh's wife so the sister could buy food for Chuong too. She was grateful that through this connection she could at least know about her husband. He was now at Ha Nam Ninh prison.

During the heavy fighting on the borders with the Chinese, many prisons were moved, but families of prisoners had no way to find out about that. Actually, the government never disclosed anything. The locations were only discovered through the detainees who were lucky enough to get connections. Although more often, when relatives reached the sites, their loved ones were not there anymore. They were imprisoned in remote areas. Therefore, except for the older prisoners originally from the North, most of them did not know the direction of their camps. Even if they knew enough, the chances of escape were slim. They had no chance to mingle with local people but would be spotted right away by their look, their accent and their language. After twenty years under the Communists, the North Vietnamese spoke "communist language", unfamiliar to the South. Thus, the prisoners were actually in a foreign land!

II

Due to several exchanges of currency when each household was permitted only a fixed limit, everybody was struck except those who dared to hide gold and precious stones. Millions and millions of "dong" became worthless. They were more useless than old newspapers, which could be used for wrapping. Now what people -- both rich and poor -- feared the most was going to the "new economic zones".

This meant a rough life in remote areas in the countryside where all work had to be done by bare hands. Anybody (in the city) who did not have a government job -- this meant the majority of the population -- faced the destiny of being sent there. The police confiscated their household ration book. That left them no choice.

Here people were struck with disease and malnutrition. In many areas, the land was uncultivable. There were no tools and irrigation. It was not very long before they had to run away from these zones.

The uprooted people flocked back to the city, only to find out that their houses had been occupied by the cadres. The doorsteps then became their shelters. Thousands and ten thousands of homeless people slept, cooked, ate and digested right on the pavement.

To shun from being driven out of the city, Van bribed for a neighborhood co-operative membership, then came to cooperate with a friend whose husband had also been sent to prison in the North. They opened a clandestine cafe right in the friend's living room.

Actually, the fifteen by fifteen foot room and the veranda adjoining it looked more like a used furniture store with all broken and mix-matched tables and chairs.

They did not make money from this cafe, but it was a good cover for both of them; a good place to get information. Some junior officers who had not been sent North were released. One of the most popular jobs for these lucky "puppet officers" was to become cyclo pedalists. This was the most luxurious independent job. Anyone with enough money could rent a cyclo with a huge deposit, then pedaled along streets to pick up passengers and rumors. He could work or rest as he wished. Regularly, these men were then customers of the sidewalk cafes. From them, one could hear all the news.

Now what people whispered the most was frontier crossing, escaping abroad. With no future in sight, people of all classes, rich and poor, tried to find a way to flee the country. Almost everyday Van heard somebody talked about the organizing of escapes.

After the invasion of Kampuchea and the fighting with the Chinese on the borders, many families with draft age boys saw no other alternatives. On one of her visits to her in-laws, Chuong's father disclosed to Van that little uncle Tam was making connections to sent his three draft age boys to Thailand through Kampuchea. The plan was that the "bo doi" would take them in military vehicles from Sai Gon to Phnom Penh. From there, they lead them to the jungle near the Thai border. A guide would conduct them through till they reach Thailand. Each person had to pay two ounces of gold in advance. This includes everything, food and transportation. The only dangerous setback was that they could encounter the Khmer Rouges who had been pushed into the jungles by the Vietnamese.

He also added that many of little uncle Tam's friends had another plan to escape by boat. They had gotten in touch with some fishermen in Vung Tau who had their own boats. Gradually, they would stock enough fuel and food, and when the right time came, they would give the signal.

Van was not surprised a bit to hear about these plans, since escape had become a must in many people's lives. Nor was she astonished about little uncle Tam's friends' decisions.

(His friends, most of them were very, very poor Northerners who worked at the French rubber plantations, or migrated to the South prior World War II. Like little uncle Tam, they hated the French for their mistreatment and resented the rich for looking down on them. Thus, they gave the Viet Minh financial support, or secretly helped friends who were Viet Minh members.

Also, like most immigrants anywhere, they worked hard in this land of opportunities and built their wealth. Some even had their houses of two, three, four or five stories near the Central Market, the prime location in the city where the ground floors were stores while the families lived upstairs. When the Communists "liberated" the South, these families gave them strong support and identified themselves as the working class, the privileged ones in the communist society.

Unfortunately, they were shocked when groups of students came to their stores to lock them inside for days while taking inventory of everything in the house. They were told that they owed the government backpay taxes since 1945, the time the Viet Minh took power. These supporters felt betrayed when realizing that their money given to and connections with the other side did not bring them better treatment. In fact, they were classified as "capitalists." This meant more troubles to be faced ahead).

Van knew that her father did not talk about these escape plans for the sake of conversation. He meant to hint that these people could be trusted. She was sure that most older people wanted their children to flee, but at the same time they feared for the worst. Thus, her father-in-law just threw it on the table and let her make her own decision.

Many nights Van had pondered over whether to escape or not. Actually she had no desire to live here. Under the communist government, she and her children were the family of a "criminal." She would never have a chance to get a job. Her children would never be allowed in the university, since their personal records showed that their father was a "puppet officer," as in the case of her and Chuong's sibilings, cousins and nephews. These kids got high academic scores, but were rejected the university admission due to their relationship to "puppet officials and officers."

Furthermore, what Van feared the most was the disintegration of her nuclear family. Her four little girls had always been her love and the aim of her life. Now she began to find that they could turn into four little spies in her own house. Every time adults had something to discuss, they had to look around to make sure children were not within earshot. At schools, they were indoctrinated about "Big Uncle Ho and his love and blessings" brought to the children and people. Mai and Lan were old enough, so Van often whispered to them, "If anybody asked what we had for supper, tell them that we only had coarse rice and cheap vegetables. Don't ever mention fish or shrimp."

But Cuc and Truc were too young to keep such a secret, so Van decided to take the chance of not mentioning it.

For nights, watching them sleep peacefully, Van let her sorrows pour out through her tears. How long could she keep her children? Sooner or later, they would feel ashamed of their father and then resent the entire family, for every member had had been connected to the "puppet government." Van knew that she would not have the chance to raise them the way she wanted them to be -- free to think, to believe, and to reason.

Van remembered the meal she ate at Mother's when one of Mother's distant nephews from the North came to visit. She had never met this cousin who lived in Mother's old village. Van was not sure what his position was, but like all the cadres, he talked like reading by heart from a book and repeated again and again as if everybody was too dumb to understand him. When Mother asked about his family, he started with, "Thanks to Big Uncle and the Party, my family is a lot better off."

Everybody just kept quiet then and let Mother carry on the conversation, but after he left, another cousin who was also related to him through their maternal grandmother bursted out,

"I can't take it anymore. All of them talk the same, act the same. They always thank their Big Uncle and their Party. What did they get, stupidity and poverty!"

"Calm down, little brother," Van interrupted, "You have to understand that they grew up in the communist society. Like your children and mine, they would be molded the same way. To tell you the truth, I felt sorry for them all."

"Yes, it's easy for you to say so, because you're not in the camp for three years like me. You couldn't feel sorry for a guy whom you knew was stupid, but yet had the power to control your fate, keep you imprisoned forever, kill you or release you as he wishes."

Since that day, Van had always feared that soon the children would be drifted away -- not physically. However she had no heart to escape while Chuong was still in prison. She felt guilty of not going North to visit him. But everybody, especially her father-in-law who had visited his son, was against the idea. Van believed that he did not want her to know the truth.

*

Van's hope for her husband's release wore out. She talked to her cafe's customers to know how they had gotten so lucky.

"We have no idea."

"I believe they released us randomly to confuse us."

"The prisoners sent to the North were different. They sorted them out and perhaps had some special planning."

These answers scared Van.

It could be hopeless for her husband. Every night, before going to sleep, she crossed her hands in front of her chest and prayed, "Dear ancestors, please protect my husband and all of us."

Van had always helped mother and mother-in-law in the preparation for the commemoration of the ancestors. But never before she had prayed so often for their protection.

Van also prayed that her husband had a strong will to survive and take care of himself and not act foolish by trying to escape. She had heard that those who tried to were shot -- which was too lucky -- or beaten to death. Their corpses were buried, wrapped in tattered reed mats, outside prisons by prisoner mates. Their relatives had never been informed.

Many times Van sent her husband a note through Minh's sister to remind him not to try to flight,

Dear uncle Number Two,

(Chuong was the first child in the family. Van did not want the cadres to detect her. Thus, she wrote him as his niece),

All of us are doing fine. Take care of your health. Grandpa went to visit little uncle Mai (Mai was their first child) in the hospital and he strongly suggested that little uncle Mai should stay in until he would be completely well and released by hospital officials.

Grandpa said that if little uncle Mai wanted early release, he would be infected with more serious disease. Then it could be incurable. Little aunt Mai said that she would wait until little uncle Mai got out of the hospital and they would go visit cousin Lien.

Van hoped that Chuong grasped what she intended to say and listened to her advice. She knew that it had been rough for all prisoners not only physically -- they had to work hard from dawn to dusk to cut down trees in the jungle by self-made hand axes and to plant corn, rice, sweet potato and manioc while they had always stayed starved -- but also mentally. They had to listen to the cadres who talked repeatedly about the American imperialists, the government's crimes, the enemies of the people (the prisoners themselves and all those related to the old regime).

Even as a "free" person, Van sometimes wanted to scream at the neighborhood's meetings, after listening to the cadres who talked about the same topics over and over.

She was not surprised that many prisoners decided to end their lives to free themselves from such sufferings. But, on the other hand, she was amazed to hear the cadres talk about these subjects with eagerness.

One evening, she watched a woman cadre -- who used to be a illiterate itinerant vegetable vendor -- talk about how to shed bourgeois thoughts and become a good Communist,

"You have to labor. Only labor, hard labor helps you clean your brain to become a good element."

"Parrots. That is right, they became parrots. Like parrots, when they learned something, they loved to repeat it with seriousness." Van thought to herself. She must smile at her own thought, for the cadre pointed at her,

"Hey, you, woman over there! Why do you smile? Do you smile at what I said?"

Van felt chill run over her body, "No, 'comrade'. No, I didn't smile."

"Yes, you did. Did you try to say that I lied?"

"Oh, no! Oh, I got a toothache. I just wink my lips,"

Van was surprised at her own alert answer.

When at home that evening, Van could understand her cousin's bitterness when he said, after the meal the other day, that he could not feel sorry for those communists as she did.

Watching the cadres talk eloquently -- all of them -- she thought they really believed that "Big Uncle Ho" loved them more than anybody else and that all his life he only ate coarse rice with sesame seeds roasted with salt. That meant he did not eat savory foods, enjoy luxuries like "puppets." He even only smoked dark cigarettes, and not the aromatic and filtered ones.

She remembered that in the 17th century, Vietnam was also divided in two parts. At that time, people didn't have the choice where to live either, but the difference between now and then was that, after the reunification of over two centuries of division, the people did not have to change their way of living or thinking.

Now everything has been turned upside down. This did not only mean the social status such as the rich became poor and the less educated became the ruling class. But just say the family, the smallest unit in the society, however the most important foundation, has been disintegrated. People even had to be afraid of, and to watch out for, the children. It wasn't their fault either. The bad thing was that one knew what is wrong but could not change it. Just like one became helpless to see one's own children taken away. Now one could not trust one's own relatives, and did not know who were one's friends. For generations, our society has been based on families, extended families, trust, and friendship. Now all one heard was, "the party, the state, and the people." Everything belonged to "the people." But who were "the people"?

III

As Van approached Minh's house, she saw many bicycles parked in the veranda.

"It must be one of the ancestors' commomerative days," Van pondered.

But when Minh's wife came out to open the small iron gate leading to the veranda, Van sensed something different.

"Hello big sister! We just talked about you."

"About me? What about?"

"Oh! We're going to see you." Minh's wife talked cheerfully.

Yes, something different. Most of the time, it would be Van who came to see Minh's wife to ask for favor.

By that time, they reached the living room.

"Yes. My husband just got home two days ago. He has had no chance to get out of the house yet. One relative after another has come over."

Van had the impression that her heart had stopped beating. She stood at the door, staring at the group of people sitting at the dining table to look for Minh. They were not eating, but that was the only decent outfit in the room. The living-room furniture had been sold, and so were other facilities.

"Big sister Chuong!" an old man stood up from his chair.

Van could not trust her own eyes. Was it Minh, major Minh, the tall and handsome major whom she saw, the last time, only four years ago?

That old man a few feet away from her looked in his sixties with half gray hair and bony face. His cheek bones sticked out too high making his tired eyes sunken in. His complexion was dark. He looked like a sun-beaten old farmer who was too weary to hold the plow. Perhaps he was even too tired to stay home to help take care of grandchildren as old people often do.

"Hello big brother!" Van tried to hide her feeling, "I'm happy for you and your family."

"Chuong's doing fine. He sent you a letter. Darling, please come to the bedroom to get the letter for me," he told his wife.

"Please have a seat. I'll be right back. Oh, don't you worry. All these men are family," Mrs. Minh turned to the men at the table.

Van nodded at them with a faint smile. She recognized Minh's younger brother who had been released a year ago, since he was only a lieutenant and was not sent North. All four others must be close relatives. As if reading her mind, Minh introduced them,

"Have you met my younger brother?"

"Yes."

"All these four guys are my cousins."

"Please have a seat," Mrs. Minh came out with a piece of paper.

Van sat down before opening the yellowish paper to read. As usual, Chuong wrote that he was doing fine. He reminded Van to take care of the children and his parents. But this time, he added something special,

Try to visit cousin Lien as soon as possible. Ask brother Number Four (as Minh was called by his family) to help you go there.

Van got the idea that Mind would organize her escape.

"So, they're starting to release prisoners now?"

"No. There was no sign of that."

"But you, you're here."

"Me? I'm a special case. Remember my sister who came to see you last year? She was the one who helped me. Actually it was my brother-in-law. He was a Party member before 1946. Even so, it took him over three years. I don't know if it was that hard to get me out or, as a core communist, he wanted me to stay there long enough so the hard labor could help 'clean my brain'."

"Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. Thanks to 'Uncle and the Party' that our brains have been washed clean," Minh's younger brother said sarcastrically.

Everyone laughed heartily.

Before Van left, Minh said,

"I had a lot to talk with you about, after I settle down."

Van decided to see Minh before he came to her. As a matter of fact, she did not want the "neighborhood police" to know that she got in touch with a "puppet officer".

This time, Minh did not have any visitor, so Van could talk to him,

"Please tell me the truth. Is my husband really well?"

"Yes. He lost weight like me. Other than that, he's doing well. The hardest thing was to know how to keep the balance of your mind. We, your husband and I, do that very well.

By some fate he and I had always crossed paths. We were in the same platoon when on training at Thu Duc Reserve School. I had been sent to the Central and the Highlands and he stayed in the Highlands then to the Delta. But we were promoted major the same year.

We were imprisoned in the same camp at Tan Hiep. Then, on the ship, we met each other again. At first, we thought they took us to Con Son Island, but after two days, we started to worry. Perhaps they had a plan to execute and dump us in mass in the ocean or something, since I knew it didn't take that long even to get to the Central. It was a hell of a trip. We were packed in the floor like sardines. When lying down, it was impossible to get out without stepping on somebody. People threw up on each other, and the floor stunk like a garbage can with rotten fish.

We didn't know where we went to, until we reached Hai Phong Port. From there, we're loaded onto trucks to head toward Ha Noi. You know, both cities looked worse off than the time we left in 1954. Besides the bomb crates and building damages by bombings, all the houses looked old with plasters and paints felt off. They had not been painted or fixed up in twenty years.

When we drove by the dikes, lines of peasants carrying baskets on two ends of the bamboo poles called us names and threw stuff at us. We quickly found out that they threw human or animal droppings. I guessed they still collect them to use as fertilizer like in the old times. Perhaps they had been told about our 'sins' and our arrival, so they look angry and ascribed us robbers, killers, butchers,... I was scared of them.

I didn't know what the cadres had told them about us, but I could see their hatred. We're their enemies. I thought they'd kill us with bamboo poles, or even their bare hands if they caught us. Luckily for us the drivers did not slow down. Later, I wondered why they didn't plan that scheme -- let the mob slaughter us while the government was still considered good to 'the criminals'. I anticipated then how the American pilots felt when their planes were shot down and they were surrounded by a bunch of hostile foreigners. They shouted and jumped at you. You didn't have to understand the language to know that they wanted to kill you.

Our camp was in the middle of the jungle, far away from the population. I didn't have a chance to find out where it was.

Don't you worry. Your husband and I weren't upset because you and my wife didn't come to visit. Actually we were glad you didn't come. If we saw you, we only have missed you more and you would be distressed knowing our suffering. Anyway, do you want to know why I didn't lose my sanity? Your husband, I believed, got the method too. It wasn't easy. I saw many high and well known officers and officials act so childish.

First of all, I'd read about communism. So, when I wrote my personal curriculum vitae, I made it short and precise. I then memorized all the details, even all of the dates: when I graduated from schools, drafted and assigned to different posts.

When asked to write another and another, I made the exact duplicate copy from my head. Even when they investigated me in person, I still kept the same details, but tried not to say it by heart. I had to act skillfully. I pretended that I had to recollect these details and then slowly spilled them out, always the same every time. I even had the thrill of playing the games.

Many people make the big mistake of writing too much, even adding something they did not do, to show that they had been very bad but repented now. Then they forgot what they had written. Each time they wrote differently. Thus, they were required to write over and over, and called in to

answer all of the questions when the cadres compared the data. The more they wrote the more they made mistakes. The continuous interrogations drove them nuts.

Secondly, I did not consider the cadres my enemies. You must think I was crazy. No, I was quite sane. See, when you considered somebody your enemy, you built up hatred and tried to make plans to harm and destroy them. In my case, I knew perfectly well that I couldn't destroy those cadres, so I only built up hatred within myself. That wasn't healthy for me. I then decided to feel sorry for the cadres. Perhaps the same feelings the martyrs had about their executioners, knowing that they would go to hell but there was no chance to help them save their souls.

Many people went crazy listening to cadres repeatedly talk about the crimes committed by 'imperialists, puppets,' the debts of blood 'the lackeys' -- meaning us -- owed 'the people.' I entertained them as my children. It wasn't their fault. Furthermore, I gave the communists credit for inventing many new, big words, making Vietnamese language more thriving. Why be bothered about their repetition. Just think about prayers. Didn't people say the same prayers over and over? Didn't preachers of all religions over the world preach the same things again and again?"

Van looked at Minh and wondered why he was so enthusiastic to talk to her. Perhaps she was a good listener.

"Are you tired of listening to me?"

"No, no! Please go on. I'm interested to find out how you could stay stable under such conditions. I hope Chuong can do the same," Van felt embarrassed.

"Oh, of course he did. He and I talked whenever we got the chance. I believe that your mind can control your body and your health.

All of us had to work hard. We had to cut down trees, dig up stumps to clear the land to grow corn, potato, manioc and vegetables. The soil was not good so they didn't grow well. The first few weeks, all our hands were blistered, then the outer skin fell off, and the inner were rubbed so hard that they started to bleed. We always stayed hungry.

Despite our food of coarse rice, and what vegetables we grew, we never had enough to eat. Instead of thinking about the meals I had at home, at restaurants, or at the parties with all kinds of meats, shrimp and fishes, I thought about the meals of the camp guards. It worked for me. I felt less and less hungry. Perhaps my stomach got used to less food. I felt less miserable. Even the cold. When I felt cold, I also remembered the guards. They didn't have quilted blankets. Most of them put on two or three blouses. That was all they had. Not many had jackets or sweaters.

I didn't remember that it was so cold in the North when I was young. Perhaps because I didn't have enough to eat, so my body resistance was so low and I didn't have enough clothes either. Besides, I lived in the jungle. You know what if the war was still going on? I could write a book entitled 'How to keep sanity and survive in the communist prison.' I believe it would be a bestseller," Minh grinned.

"Perhaps," Van said with a smile.

"I bet you, nobody in the Southern government had ever had a plan on how to deal with the communists and to reconstruct the country if we won the war. I myself never thought about it. Perhaps in our mind, we doubted that we could ever win. But when in prison, I pondered about it, and believed it would be easy.

The communists won the war, and now their toughest job is to brainwash the whole society in the South. It seemed impossible. They could do that to your children and mine, just as they had done to the post 1954 generations in the North, but they couldn't change you and me or the majority of the population. People didn't buy the propaganda that everything belongs to the state and the people. Even the most naive person realized that he didn't gain anything. On the contrary, he lost more freedom, spent more time in meetings and was in constant fear of being watched.

But if we won the war, we didn't have to imprison the communists to clean them of their doctrine. Just expose them to comfort and wealth. Give each cadre or soldier a good job and a good life. I bet you, it wouldn't be very long and they'd forget all about 'Big Uncle and the Party.' I supposed that if we distributed all the money spent on the war to people, we'd win easily.

You must be tired of listening to me. But I still had something to tell you."

"No! It's very interesting to hear somebody speak frankly like you. To tell you the truth, I had never talked to somebody about these issues since the 'liberation.' I always had a lot on my mind, and didn't know who I can trust."

"Do you trust me?"

"Sure! You know I do."

"Of course. I believe your family and mine should leave the country," Minh lowered his voice, "Do you remember your husband's letter? I promised him that I'd help you and your children escape. I'll keep that promise. Trust me. I'll try my best to help you. Don't worry about your husband. He's strong. Later on, maybe my brother-in-law will help him. If you stay here, you cannot do much for him anyway. We have to go for our children. I don't want to raise them here. How will our society would turn out? Who knows? Everyone has been affected by social changes.

As for me, I don't care where I live. How many more years can I live? Ten or twenty? It doesn't make any difference. I don't see any importance in what I eat or wear. I can go out and pedal cyclo to make a living. Before I couldn't do that. But now, everybody has to accept the cruel reality. Like you: Before, when you went out of the house, you had to wear long robe and make up. But now you only wear short pyjama-like clothing and ride a bike instead of a car. You don't feel bad because everyone else lives the same way.

What I'm trying to say is that material comfort is not that important. What I don't like is to be considered 'enemy of the people' all my life and even all my children's lives. Eventually, they will feel ashamed of me and pity for themselves. They don't have a chance to a good future just because their father was a 'puppet officer' and their grandfather a 'puppet servant'. I don't want my children to believe in what the communist government wants them to believe, like all the cadres.

When our generation is gone, the younger ones won't know anything besides communism. Just like in Russia, most of the people have grown up under communism, so they accept it as a fact. Some people hope that someday the Russian people will stand up to fight the communists, but I doubt it. They have been firmly controlled for over sixty years. I was only surprised that the Eastern Germans didn't do anything while I thought that, as Westerners, they'd have deep belief in democracy. As for Viet Nam, we have no hope of getting rid of communist domination. At least in our time.

Many people imagined that if the Americans supported Ho to get free of the French right after World War II, he wouldn't go with the communists. I don't think so. After defeating the French, he could get over with communism and start to rebuild the country if he were a patriot and really cared about the people. To me, he was a communist from the beginning and even after his death. During the struggle against the French, he liquidated all non-communist patriots who joined his force. Many people praised him for winning independence, but what for. We fared worse under his regime. Nowadays, his comrades are still determined to turn this country into a communist nation. I think we have no choice but to leave."

"I agree with you one hundred percent, but I cannot leave without my husband."

"I already explained to you," Minh raised his voice, sounded a little irritated, "You cannot do anything staying here. I'm sure his dad can do a better job of getting connections to get him released than you. I'll try to get help from my sister too. I know he'll be happy to know that you and your children made it to a free country, no matter what country. Besides, you can go to work there and help relatives. What are you going to do here when your savings run out? I know you don't make money on that sidewalk cafe. Are you willing to marry a 'nouveau rich' cadre who just hoarded bribery money, like many prisoners' wives?" Minh smiled mischievously.

"I have to discuss this with our families. You know, it's a great risk, especially for small children, but go ahead to make connections, please!"

"Don't get me wrong. I won't try to make profit or anything. I only want to help, because I've been close to Chuong. I'm even closer to him than to my own brother. Because I can talk and confide to him. I promised him I'll help and I'll keep my promise."

"I know. I appreciate it very much. I trust you. But it's a tough decision for me. I'll let you know."

IV

When Sai Gon fell, the rich and bourgeois classes realized right away that they became the most underprivileged ones in the new society. They feared both the governing class of the communist government and the poor.

The latter assumed that the new government would seize the wealth of the rich to distribute to them. In their simple minds, their social status would change. However that sweet dream was never materialized. Now they face the unkind truth, the rich became poor, and the poor became worse. And the only privileged one was the communist governing class. Cadres and police started taking bribes. After heavy clash with the Chinese on the borders, semi-officially they organized escapes for the Chinese living in the North to Hong Kong and those in the South to Southeast Asian countries. In so doing, they could get hold of the escapees' properties and gold. It is true that people said that it took more to bribe these hungry cadres.

Van stayed sleepless for many nights. To stay or to go? The question she had to answer by herself. Minh was right that the children will have a better chance. At least they will have freedom to shape their own lives, and she can find a job and make plans for the future instead of living in fear and uncertainty. But, she was scared to recall about many people who had fled and never been heard of. They had perished at sea. She also heard about the savage rapings by Thai pirates. Many people suspected that the Thai government, maybe many other governments in the free world, had supported, or at least never tried hard to stop, these inhuman acts of killings and rapings. It seemed all the countries in the free world try to discourage the Vietnamese to seek their freedom. If the escape would be abortive and she would be caught, then it meant jail and loss of her house. The case of Mr. Hoang down the street was still vivid. He had been a high official in the Ministry of Finance under the Thieu government. Three years ago, he tried to escape by boat.

In the dark of the moonless night, over one hundred people silently climbed into the boat. People entertained relief when the last person boarded, and this would be the beginning of the hopeful journey, but as the motor started to run, shots burst out from behind the bushes, flashlights pointed at the boat. "Freeze!" many voices shouted.

The steerman sped up, trying to get away from the firing. It was too late. Ahead of them, lights started flashing from a boat. They had been caught red-handed. Actually it was the very scheme of the police accepting bribes who incited their companions' arrest to strip off more gold and dollars from escapees. Everyone was put in prison. After a few weeks, young children were set free. Once more, relatives of prisoners had to pay bribery for release, but men of higher positions had a hard time. They were accused of working for the CIA.

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The communists had an obsession about the CIA. They imagined everyone who worked for the Thieu government was also a CIA agent. Actually, many of these people did not know what the CIA was. However, they were conscious of the seriousness of the accusation.

When Mrs. Hoang got home, their house had been occupied by a cadre's family. They claimed that the house belonged to the "people." And until now, three years after, Mr. Hoang has not been released.

Van was aware that if she was arrested for trying to escape, she would surely be accused of being a CIA agent. Especially since her husband was a "puppet officer" and still not "re-educated" yet.

But Minh called her concern defeatist thought,

"Just like in a battle, you have to know about your enemy, then decide on the strategy. But most importantly, you had to have confidence that you're going to win. Nobody thinks about losing

before the engagement. You're scared upon hearing about people being captured. How about those who've made it?

Since my release, I've done extensive study on the scheme and the failure of it. Most of the boats were small and overloaded. Not because the organizer planned it that way. In many cases, the boats were overtaken by people who just waited for any boat to leave to board free. This created overload, the shortage of food and water too. Then, many pilots were only amateurs. Fishers knew enough about their boats, but only fished offshore, so they were easily stranded on the open sea. Most of the boat's engines were old. Yet not many people know how to fix them. Those were the causes of many disasters, and as for those who got caught, I believe that it was caused by the people's indiscretion. I heard many people blame Mrs. Hoang for going to say goodbye to many friends. We learned from the others' mistakes. I want to let you know that we have found a good size boat in a good condition. We have several navy officers who know everything about the boat and the ocean. We also have enough guns to cope with pirates. Trust us, the old fighters."

Van noticed a twinkle in Minh's eyes as he talked. He must enjoy himself as if he were drawing up a plan for his military operations.

"I suggest that you follow my advise. Ask your mother to come live with you. It's even better to transfer her household ration book to yours. Now, start telling the neighbors that when the school is out, you'll take the children to visit relatives in Da Lat. Thus, when you leave, nobody'll suspect anything. Don't tell anybody, except your parents, about your trip. I'm sure they know, but play it safe by reminding them to keep it a secret. I may not come to get you, but I'll send somebody. A few days before, I'll give a code. Don't bring gold or U.S. dollars with you. You know why? If they know you have money, they'll torture you to get more.

The wife of a bank director who had been imprisoned with me bought a boat and hid all her diamonds, gold, and dollars behind the walls of the cabin. When the coast guards caught her boat near Phu Quoc Isle, they found the cache easily. Somebody must have known about it and reported to the 'authority'. Do you know what they did to her? They tied her to the pillar of a pier and let water submerge almost to her neck for several hours. They found too much gold and dollars so they tried to cough up more. Her daughter was with her, begging them many times to untie her to no avail. At last, late in the night, the poor woman was going to die, the daughter started to scream. When the guards untied her, she already drew her last breath. They declared the cause of death: internal hemorrhage!

I don't want to scare you, just warn you of the danger. It's a good idea to stay more in the sun to get darker complexion in order to look more like a peasant. If you got caught, I said if, try to pose as a peasant and don't know me at all. I know it's hard for you to act. Me, I have learned my acting at the 're-education camp'!

You know, when the cadre talked about the crimes we had committed, I tried to look sad and to remember all the mistakes I'd made. I showed my repentance, but not too eagerly like many of my camp mates. The 'cadres' weren't that dumb. They could tell whether you faked. When they talked about how wonderful our lives would be under 'socialism,' I looked at them with respect and admiration. But inside me, I had the urge of punching them in the nose. I must cross my arms in front of my chest as school children do in front of a teacher to remind myself of the position I was in. When I make it to the free world, certainly I'd become an excellent actor!" Minh said with a smile, "I strongly believe that we we'll make it. But like in the operations, we have to make plans for the advance as well for the retreat. A good commander should know how to withdraw his troops most effectively."

"Oh, my God! This man loves the military career," Van murmured, "If the war went on, he would be a general one day."

"So, if they catch you, don't even mention your husband's name. I'll give you the name of one of my dead soldiers. You're his widow. Only tell your children about this shortly before the boarding. Make them memorize it. That's only a precaution. I've confidence that it won't happen though."

Following Minh's suggestion, Van only told her parents and parents-in-law about her plan to escape. The children did not know anything. Life went on as usual. One early Saturday morning in June 1980, a woman in old black short blouse came to see Van at her cafe shop and said the right code. Van told her partner that her parents-in-law wanted to see her and would be back then went home with the woman but made her wait down the road, while she came to get the children.

Van was glad to find Mother alone. "Mother, we're leaving," Van whispered.

"Now?"

Van could see sadness and shock on Mother's face, even mother knew it would happen beforehand.

"Yes, Mother. Where are the children?"

"They're upstairs."

"I'll tell them that I take them to their grandparents and will let them know later."

Mother tenderly hugged the children one by one, tears in her eyes, followed them as they walked out. She then remembered and stepped back.

Looking back, Van saw Mother standing behind the half-open door with tears streaming down. Van tried to fight back hers. This could be the last time she saw Mother.

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It was late in the afternoon when they arrived at the fishing village of Phuoc Tinh. Van felt safe here, knowing that all the villagers were catholic refugees who fled the communists when they took power in the North in 1954. The woman took Van and her children to one wooden house. A middle age man with dark complexion came to the door.

"This is Mrs. Van," the woman said.

"Please come in."

"Yes." Van let the children come in first, then followed them.

The woman turned back to look at Van when they got in the big room in the center of the house and whispered,

"They'll go with us too."

Van just nodded.

"You stay here. I have to go. Don't worry, you're safe."

"Thank you so much."

The woman left in hurry.

"Please sit down and my children will bring you tea," the man warmly invited.

"Thank you. Please don't bother," Van replied.

"You and the children just rest for a while and we'll eat supper. My wife is cooking right now."

Looking at the man, Van perceived she could trust him. He was a typical northern country folk.

Most of the people in the country somewhat distrusted and were scared of the city people. They believed city folks are shrewd and ready to take advantage of them. To some extent this was true. Prior to the war, the social classes were well established, especially in the North. Although there was no royal family like in the Central, the ruling class of mandarins and the rich were treated with respect by peasants. Being illiterate and confined to a few neighboring villages, most peasants led a simple, hard working, and honest life. To them, city folks were too tricky to deal with.

These fishers were old-fashioned, so they treated Van and her children as their honored guests. The biggest fish and shrimp were served, but still the wife kept apologizing, "Please eat your meal. I don't know how to fix the city dishes. Here, we only cook the country way."

"These are the best shrimp and fish I have had since the 'liberation'," Van really meant what she said. Since the communists took over, the supplies of foods and commodities decreased tremendously, creating the sky rocketing of prices. Farmers and fishermen had no motivation to produce, since they had to sell all their products to the government at many times below the market prices. For a long time, Van could not afford to buy any big fish or shrimp which were scarce and

very expensive at the black market. At least farmers and fishers could conceal their own foods while city folks had been hit hard. Van knew that these fishers were better off than her and many others in the city. Like all other immigrants from the North, these people had built their wealth from empty hands. From the huts of palm leaves they built houses of bricks and tiles and hardwood floors plus the gold they purchased whenever they could save.

According to communist definition, they should be classified as the working class who did not own "the debt of blood to the people." Yet, they still wanted to leave the country. Perhaps they did not have any clear notion about freedom and independence, and they did not know that in his Independence Day speech, Ho declared that all men have the right to liberty and happiness, but they surely knew that in his "land reform" Ho killed over five hundred thousand honest people by public torturing and humiliating. Now they were also aware that they have been strictly controlled. Their movements have been limited. One had to get permission from the hamlet or village chief for leaving home, or to stay overnight at a friend or relative's.

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Van did not know how many people would participate this time. Would they make it? She did not want to ponder further, but she was touched by the warmheartedness and sincerity of this family. If she could not make it, at least she could recognize that there was still trust among people in a society where everyone feared being watched and reported by everyone else. It was dark when Minh snuck in through the back door, "I'm sorry I couldn't get in touch with you sooner. I've been too busy. So far so good," he whispered, "We're going to leave tonight. Little uncle Nam here will help you take the children to the boat whenever it's time. Don't worry. You're in good hands. From this time on, we have had to move people to the boat. We'll leave a little earlier than the other fishing ones. Not too early to stir up suspicion. Now, I have to go. Get some sleep. Little aunt Nam will wake you up. Bye now." The fisherman followed Minh and they murmured at the back door before Minh disappeared into the darkness of the night.

It was around three o'clock when the fisherman's wife woke Van up.

"It's time to go," the woman whispered.

Van gently shook the children's legs and murmured to each of them,

"It's time to go. Be quiet and follow me."

She helped the children up and let them sit on the bed to adjust to the darkness. There was no moon. It was dark outside and inside. The woman moved around easily in the pitch-dark room,

"Let my kids carry the children for you. It's a rough road from here to the dock."

"I appreciate it."

The woman was right. Even walking by herself, Van could hardly keep up with the fisherman family who strode skillfully on the uneven dirt path. Everyone was quiet. Van had the impression she followed a group of ghosts to an unknown place. She tried not to breathe hard, and made efforts to subdue her heart, but unsuccessfully. The thought of a security agent jumping out of a bush, or from behind a rock scared her. Walking fast to keep up with her guides, Van tried to shut her mind from all worries. She told herself,

"Go on! Have the courage and leave it to fate."

Van was the last one in her group to step inside the boat.

"I'll take your children to sit with mine. We're waiting for two more families," Minh whispered in the dark.

After adjusting to the obscurity, Van started seeing the boat full of people.

"We'll leave in a moment. Everything is OK. Go back to sleep. Don't worry," Minh whispered again.

Van knew that she could not go to sleep. Following Minh in the dark, she tried not to step on people lying on the floor.

Her heart still pounded very fast as she sat down. Holding Truc in her arms, she began to think positively to calm herself, "At least we are safer here if the police came than if they caught us on

the way to the boat. They could then shoot at us and attributed to us for running. Now, they can not come here and shoot at people when they are sleeping and have no way to escape. The worst would be that they would arrest everyone," she convinced herself.

The waiting was so long. Van made every effort not to think about the police and the arrest. She hoped that Minh and all the organizers knew what they were doing. So far, she trusted them. She just prayed that the last two families made it safely here and on time, not caught on the way.

Van yearned that she could go to sleep like many people who got here early, to rid herself of fear and anxiety.

Finally, a group of shadows quietly slipped into the boat.

"That's it. Everybody's here," somebody murmured.

Van comprehended that not only her, but many people in the boat felt relief to see the last group made it safely. Everyone must have the same idea that if they got caught, it would be a disaster for the whole.

"We'll be leaving soon," a man with a countryfolk accent, one of the fishers, whispered.

The shore still slept in the moonless night. Not a single fishing boat stirred up for its trip yet.

When the engine was started up and the boat began to move, Van perceived her heart pounding faster. Van felt a mixture of excitement and fear. They could be caught by the coast guard. Or, in a few hours, they could be free in the open sea.

All the older people began to pray softly. Everyone sensed the danger ahead. That made Van nervous.

She reminisced about the day when Mother set fruits and foods on the altar to pray to the ancestors for her safe escape. Now was the time that the protection from her ancestors was most needed.

Van had learned to respect and have faith in her ancestors since she was a small child. On numerous commemorative days, when the candles flickered on their shining brass holders and fragrant incense smoke twirled on top of its burner, Van perceived the presence of her ancestors while she kowtowed in front of the altar. She had confidence that if her ancestors could do anything to help their descendants they would.

Van felt calmness. She had the vision of the family gathering for the celebrations of Tet (Lunar New Year), the anniversaries of the dead, the weddings,... always centered around the altar. On those days, there seemed to be a close bond between ancestors and descendants.

She recollected the eyes of her grandparents looking down at her on her wedding day as she and Chuong stood in front of them behind elder Uncle and Father. The eyes showed a sign of approval.

Now, with the vivid pictures of her grandparents on the altar, Van prayed in her mind, "Please, ancestors of both sides, help us and protect us in this venture."

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Dawn broke early on the ocean. It was only dim light, but Van could see the boat tossed by the waves like a bamboo leaf. The shore was already too far away to be seen. Good, the boat could already be in the international water. This meant they were out of the coast guard's patrol.

The sun rose from the water. The sky was clear. The blue ocean met the blue sky from a far away distance. At least there was promise of a calm day. The older women of the fishing families stopped praying. They started to cook the first meal of the day. Everything was well prepared. Besides rice, dry noodles, dry fish and shrimp, they also brought pineapple and jicama to quench the thirst.

Van saw Minh standing with a group of men at the other end of the boat. They looked happy as if they just won the battle.

Van admired them. In a democratic society, it is no big deal to plan a trip for a couple hundred people, but in this communist controlled country, it took shrewdness, coordination and courage. It took them months to get in touch with the fishers who owned the boat and coordinate with the escapees without being exposed. It was a successful plan.

The only fear now was encountering the Thai pirates. Knowing that most of the escapees had gold, the pirates circle around the coast of Viet Nam to attack the small, defenseless boats. Van guessed that this boat did not have adequate firearms as Minh had boasted. Since his wife had given her a small bottle of brownish liquid not long before, "This is a mixture of iodine and mercurochrome. Put it on your face and arms if we're attacked by the pirates. They only gave this to a few people, least making everybody worry. They wanted us to show up on the deck to make the pirates think that we had some deadly disease." However Van had confidence in these organizers. Many of them had military experience. She believed that they could handle the barbarian pirates.

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The sea was calm. The sail had been smooth for two days. When it was getting dark, the boat slowed down. To answer everybody's question before it was asked, colonel Hung, one of the organizers, announced,

"We're close to Thai shores, but we cannot land at night. We'll get off early in the morning. Try to get a good night's sleep and be ready for tomorrow."

Everyone felt relief. Nobody cared where they would land, as long as it was not Viet Nam. Many had no idea where Thailand was.

Everybody seemed to have a better sleep after knowing that their escape was successful.

Daylight started to break after the first meal of the day was over. The boat began to move toward the shore. It was not the pier, but the dense jungle. Once again, the colonel stood in the middle of the boat, and, with his natural commanding attitude, he threw out his plan,

"We're only a few kilometers from the Thailand border, but we cannot get there by boat. They'll shove our boat off. Now, we have to cut through the jungle to get there."

People were shocked to hear the plan. Many started to talk at the same time,

"How can we walk in the jungle? There are many women and children."

Even the fishermen's families seemed reluctant.

"Please calm down," colonel Hung said, "We have planned carefully. Have confidence in us.

We have little brother Manh here who has guided many groups before us. He knows this area as the palm of his hand. We will divide into five groups. One group of men will walk ahead to lead. This includes little brother Manh. The other two will be on the two sides. The fourth one will be at the rear. All elder folks, women and children will be in the center.

As for weapons, we have everything, machine, hand guns, grenades, and jungle knives. Remember that all of us military men here had many years of combat experience. Some of Pol Pot's disbanded troops are not our big concern. But, as always, we take all precautions. We only ask you to follow our directions. When we signal you to lay down, run or stay still, just do it. I am positive that we'll make it.

Oh! This is the white flag," colonel Hung handed a white shirt tied to a bamboo stick to an old man standing near him, "Big uncle, you hold this. When we get to the border near the camp, let women and children move ahead carrying this flag. Now get moving!"

As the colonel talked, a group of men started getting out of the boat to get into the water.

It was still dark. Van tried to peer to see how deep the water was. It was not too bad, only above the waist, but the children, how could they get through that distance. To answer her question, somebody explained, "Our first group tried to get on land to check it out. If everything is OK, we will form a line to carry all the children and help the women. Don't worry, the water is shallow and we are close to the bank."

Being tired of waiting, many people, after living two or three years in the camp, were too happy to go anywhere.

Like everybody else, Van was occupied with the thought of early resettlement in a third country. She registered with every country having a representative here. As a rule, those who had relatives or friends in a third country had priority. Van thought she would have a good chance to go to France, since she had many relatives who had left for France after different coups, long before the communists took over the South.

But, as she told Minh and his wife about her chance, Minh objected,

"You should be patient and have determination to go to the U.S. It's still the land of fortune. Many people love to go there."

"I'm tired of the uncertainty. I just want to have a place to live, a job, and at least a plan for the future. Plus, my children took ill a lot over here. I am worried to death whenever any of them get sick at night. Then in the morning I had to take her to wait in the hot sun for hours before we got some Tylenol, and since I had learned more French than English at school, I would fit in more easily in France."

"Don't worry. Your English is good enough. I have been in the U.S. before. The only trouble we have is the accent. Sometimes it's hard to understand what people said and to make them understand us, but our lives are over, we only live for the children. As far as I know, it's easy for children to finish school in the U.S. In France, the education program hasn't changed much since the time you and I went to school. I have contacted many friends who left the country before us, and they promised they would help me. I'll try to find you a sponsor so we can leave at the same time. If not, I will go first and guarantee that I will get you there."

Van stared at Minh and tried to find an answer,

"What does this man want? Why is he too nice to her? Is it too good to be true?"

After living under the new regime for five years, Van saw that the whole society had been turned upside down. The well-off and highly educated class had been displaced. The ruling class was now based on the number of years in the Party, rather than on the education. But, worst of all, was the distrust among people. Nobody trusted anybody else, even one's relatives.

Looking straight into Van's eyes, Minh stressed his thought, "I know exactly what you think. Believe it or not, I do not only help you, but I also do it for myself. In the re-education camp, your husband and I were very close. We had been through a lot, and he was perhaps closer to me than my own brother. There were times I felt very depressed and didn't care about anything. I then understood why someone committed suicide. I didn't mind working hard or not having enough food, but the repetitive political indoctrination by fanatic cadres killed me, until I developed the daydreaming tactics. I also told myself that I wouldn't let these cadres and their mental torture change me. I wanted to be what I was. Your husband and I promised each other that whoever got out first would help the other's family. You understand then why I said that I do something for myself when helping you. I want to make sure to myself that I'm still a decent human being who does the best to keep his promise." "I understand you and thank you for everything you have done for my children and me," Van looked at Minh and then turned away to hide her embarrassment. She felt ashamed of herself for not trusting him,

"I'll wait for you to find me a sponsor in the U.S."

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Van felt content that she had solved the question of which country she would settle in.

As she stayed in the camp, Van found out that all of the people on her boat were lucky. They all made it here safely. Many others before them who went on the same route were killed and robbed by the Khmer Rouge in the jungle. More were killed and robbed by sea pirates. Many died from hunger and thirst. Van heard about the fifty or sixty refugees stranded on a coral reef. Then one by one all of them died, except one teenage girl who was saved later, after more than three months of suffering. Van pictured how much that young girl had been through and pitied her. She felt closer

and more protective toward her children and comprehended how lucky they were when they still had each other. Every time Van felt discouraged about the uncertainty of the future, she ruminated about those misfortunes, and then felt ashamed of herself. She should consider herself lucky and be happy with what she had.

There was a woman living down the section, every morning and afternoon, who came out to tend her small patch of vegetables near her hut. There was something about the woman that attracted Van's attention. She was quiet, too quiet. Her face always looked blank. She did not seem to pay any attention to the people or things going on around her. Just her own world of a few rows of green mustards. From the distance, Van noticed how tenderly she took care of her vegetables. With a small rusty metal can, she scooped water from a plastic bucket to carefully pour over each mustard as if trying to distribute it evenly among the plants.

While standing in line to get her ration of food, Van found out that the quiet little woman came from Nha Trang, a seashore town. She and her husband had opened a pho (noodle soup) bistro long before the fall of the South. After living under the communists for two years, they decided to escape with their six children, but the steerman was a local fisher who did not know his course. The boat got lost in the high seas for over a month. Food and water ran out. The refugees lived on the fish they caught and the rationed rain water. Eventually there was not enough food for the overcrowded boat. Elder people and young children died of starvation and dehydration. Five of the woman's six children, from twelve to four, died a few days from each other. Their skinny bodies were thrown into the ocean.

Luckily enough, the boat returned to Nha Trang. Most people on it were dreadful of the nightmarish escape, but a few month later, the woman, her husband, and their only two-year old surviving child escaped again. They made it this time. Van found tears on her cheeks when she heard the story. Many times she wanted to come and talk to the woman, but her strange cold look made Van reluctant. What would she say to her? Condolence would stir up the unhealed wound. Just pray that the woman had the courage, and time would heal.

Van never stopped asking what made that woman determined to make another dangerous adventure after seeing five of her children die a lingering death. Van also thought about a few books and articles written by some pro-communist reporters that she had just read. Those foreign reporters made the outside world think that the Vietnamese people were very happy to have independence under communism.

Actually, people in the South never thought that they did not have independence. When the communists took over, only a very small percentage entertained their enthusiasm. Some others were just political opportunists. Many simply tried to show their zeal in order to cover themselves.

Van wished that those reporters would come to this camp to see for themselves that the Vietnamese people did not want to live under communism as they thought. The majority of the refugees were not of high class, but common people who should be the communists' privileged. The highly educated and well-off class was scared to take the risk of escaping. Because if caught, they would be accused of being CIA agents or traitors, on top of their other crimes of working for "the puppet" and being "reactionaries." The cadres tried their best to brand them with more crimes in order to get more bribery money.

As for the poor, they did not have anything to lose. Knowing that, the cadres did not care to make accusations, and therefore their imprisonment was short. (over, recto)

VI

Van wanted these reporters to meet the people like that quiet woman or Mr. Thuan, a communist major that she just befriended.

When Van saw him waiting in line in front of the infirmary tent, she found him familiar, but could not remember where she met him. Many nights she tried to recollect about that man. Van was certain that she had met him before. She wanted to test her memory by remembering all her husband's and brothers' friends. He could not be a friend of theirs because he was much older. He must be in his late fifties, tall and slim.

He had no special trait that would help her memory, but she believed that he was not a newly released prisoner. Besides being skinny, most released prisoners had the special expression that Van thought of as fear, or lack of confidence that became a give-away sign.

When Van saw the man again, he seemed to shun her stare. That made her feel certain she knew him from somewhere, but why did he try to avoid her. Was it her imagination? No, Van was sure that the man seemed irritated when she stared at him.

Then one day, she was not very far from him in the line and overheard him talking to a man beside him. The voice, his voice, gave him away. In an instant, Van remembered he was the eldest son of little aunt Ba, so she was called by all people in the neighborhood because of her age, who lived near her husband's family. Van was so happy as if she had solved some mystery, but she was very disappointed when the man denied that he was the person she thought he was. Van wondered why he did that. She was sure that she was right and endured of being cheated after trying so hard to remember.

A few days later, Van crossed the man again while taking a walk with her children after supper. He looked away as if he did not see her. He looked worried. Yes, he was afraid of her. A few weeks ago, a young teacher who had joined the "third force" to oppose the Thieu government and call for negotiation with the communists was beaten by the crowd. He had to be taken from the camp. This man must think that it would happen to him if Van disclosed that he was a major in the communist army.

Van felt sorry for him. She knew exactly how he felt, since she too had feared any cadre or soldier. Any of them could arrest her any time without any reason, warrant or trial. Now the situation reversed. Several months ago, that man could control her fate. Now, he feared and shunned her. For his sake, she decided that she did not know him. But to her surprise, he came and struck up a conversation when she was watching her children jumping ropes, "Can I talk to you?" Van was shocked when she saw the man beside her.

"Yes, we are neighbors of your husband's family. Your husband is about the same age as my younger brother, so I can consider you my younger sister-in-law. I guess you know the reason for my denial, but somehow I trust you. I don't know why, just my gut feeling.

Do you know my wife and children are in the U.S.?"

"No, I didn't," Van was really surprised.

"They have only been settled there for a few months. We paid three ounces of gold per person to be smuggled with the Chinese from the North to Hong Kong. I didn't go with them for fear of being caught. I told everybody that they went South to visit family. I then asked to be transferred to the South. After knowing that they had been sponsored by my brother to go to the U.S., I made a connection to escape.

You see, if the Americans knew that I was in the communist army, they would never let me reunite with my family. Perhaps they would even expel them."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't tell anybody."

"I know, I trust you. Do you know why I joined the communists?"

"I guess not."

"You are lucky. You are a woman and didn't live in a turmoil period like us.

I was in the last year of high school at Petrus Ky when World War II was over. Patriotism was very high at the time. We wanted our independence, but the British came to disarm the Japanese and turned the power back to the French. We started the fight. Thousands of enthusiastic young men like me joined the patriotic forces. We were not afraid. We were ready to sacrifice our lives for the country. When the French sent more reinforcements, we withdrew to the countryside and carried on the guerilla warfare until 1954. After the signing of the Geneva Accords to divide the

country, I was ordered to regroup to the North. At the time, I believed that after two years there would be an election and the country would be reunified as an independent nation. I could then return home to resume my normal life.

You know, I was shocked and scared when the "denunciation of landlords" was implemented in the North in 1953. I believed that the majority of us somehow still held on to the idea of fighting the French to get independence back to the country. Until now, I'm still not a Party member. I could assure many regrouped soldiers and cadres were disappointed and frightened like me. We didn't want to become communists.

I believed the Party would have a harder time to get a grip of the people and establish communism in the South than in the North. The Northerners were too poor and very submissive to authority. I couldn't conceive that in such a cold weather most country folks didn't have a sweater or jacket. They put on all cotton shirts or blouses which meant only a few they owned. When going out, they had to wear a palm leave cape, which served both as rain protection and overcoat.

When did your family move to the South?"

"In 1954."

"You must have been a child at the time."

"Not really. I was almost 9 years old."

"Did you ever live in the countryside?"

"Yes. We evacuated to my parents native village when the war broke out in 1946 and only returned to the city in 1950."

"I really felt sorry for all those country folks, especially women. I couldn't believe that those small women could push the heavy plow in the cold and wet rice fields. Watching them work laboriously, I thought their lives were similar to those of the buffaloes working so hard to get a bundle of straw for reward, that they couldn't afford to own. And as for them, a few bowls of mixed cassava-rice eaten with pickled mustard and anchovies.

After 1956, it was worse off. All consumer goods were rationed. Each person was allowed to purchase four meters of fabric a year. Can you believe it? Just enough to make one trouser and one blouse."

"Were you disappointed to live in the North?"

"Very much. Like most of the regrouped Southerners, we felt that we had been mistrusted and watched. Political commissioners controlled us military officers. Most of them didn't have much education and were very fanatic. They didn't have their own reasoning, but blindly believed what was drilled in their heads. The whole population had been isolated from the outside world and indoctrinated with many silly ideas. Can you imagine that during the air raids, they even made the militia come out to shoot at the bombers with their rifles. They actually believed they could do it."

"Did you think that we would be reunited after two years?"

"At first, I somewhat hoped so, but later, I realized that it would be impossible. When the war escalated, I and many others I knew wished that the South would win. We had longed to go home."

"I thought you married a woman in Ha Noi."

"Yes, I did. We had four children, two boys and two girls. No, not because I didn't like to live in the North. I just didn't want to live under communism."

"Was your wife a Party member?"

"No, her parents got a cloth shop in Ha Noi and didn't want to evacuate to the South when the country was divided. They didn't want to lose their house in the city and rice fields in the village. They had a rough time when the communists took complete control. They were classified as bourgeois class. Thanks to the help of some relatives who had joined the Party, my wife was admitted into nursing school. I met her when I was hospitalized in Bach Mai Hospital."

"What did you find about the South when you returned home?"

"I felt guilty. You know, for many years I had heard how miserable the people in the South had lived. At first, I doubted that propaganda. But gradually, I began to doubt myself and start to believe what I heard. I remembered how prosperous the South had been. Rice fields had been fertile and rivers stocked with fish, shrimp and crab, but it was possible that the American neo-colonists

stripped them and enslaved them like the French plantation owners. Upon coming back Sai Gon, I was dazzled by many new buildings, cars, motorbikes, abundance of consumer goods and general high living standard of the people."

"We were worse off than before. Many people still had gold, but they had to play poor."

"I know. But overall, people were one hundred times better off than those in the North. I then concluded that what I had thought was true. The thirty year war was a waste. Millions killed and nothing was achieved. They could say that we got independence. What good would it do when people were worse off, half starved and mistrusted each other. You must have hated us when Sai Gon was defeated." "To tell you the truth, I was more scared than hateful. Later on, realizing the ignorance of many cadres and soldiers, I began to feel sorry for them. I take my words back. I do think I hated the ruling class. I don't mean you. No offense, but you are small fry like us. I don't think they care about the people or the country. All they care about was the execution of communism. Didn't you realize that the poor class also hated the communists like the bourgeois? I believed that we had been gripped more by our own people than by foreigners."

"I know. That's why I am here now. I felt bad that I had helped to bring down the people. I thought that everybody, including my relatives, hated me for the consequence. I don't blame them."

"It could be true to some extent, but many of us understand that many people, especially those in your generation, were pure patriots who only wanted to fight the French to win independence. I noticed that the regrouped people from the South, like you, were more easy-going, less ignorant, less fanatic, and less bullied than those from the North."

"I appreciate your understanding. I feel relieved to know that you didn't hate me as I thought, especially when your husband is still in prison."

"You may not believe me, but deep in my heart I feel sorry for you. You had sacrificed all your life to what you maintained was a good cause. It turned out to be delusion. In fact, I feel sorry for everybody, the whole country. The thirty years of war had effected everyone's life. Who should we blame? The French, the Communists or the Americans?"

"I think all of them."

After that day, Van became a good friend with Mr. Thuan. They chatted while waiting in line for food. When they were alone and far from earshot, he confided to her his dreams as a young man. He talked about his secret love for a beautiful young girl in his neighborhood.

He did not have the courage to tell her that he loved her. But everyday passing by her house, he searched for her. A glimpse of her made his day fill with happiness. He planned that after finishing high school, he would ask his parents to come to talk to hers about the engagement. The wedding would take place when he finished his degree in agriculture. He planned it all out and had confidence that her parents would let her marry him, since both families were of the same well-off class.

When the war broke out, he had to go to the countryside to fight. He believed that everything would become normal in a few years. During the hours of loneliness and depression, the memory of a slim girl in the purple long robe with shiny straight black hair streamed down half of her back kept him going. He only got married after regrouping to the North for several years, knowing that the return to his home in the South was very remote, but still cherished the secret love in his heart.

"But when I returned home in 1978, I found an aged gray haired woman. She aged before her age. Like everybody else, her body showed the lack of nutrients. Her husband and her eldest son were in 're-education camps' in the North. She and her daughter-in-law set up some low chairs in front of her house to sell soup to support the grandchildren. I felt guilty for creating all her sufferings."

"No! Don't blame yourself. You had no power to do anything. We all are victims of the event."

"I was glad that she didn't remember me. Perhaps she never knew how much I loved her, but she certainly knew that, with her beauty and her families well-off status, many young men had fallen in love with her. Nobody could predict that one day the rich and beautiful girl from one of the prestigious schools would become a food vendor on the pavement."

Sometimes I wished I hadn't seen her again, but do you know what? Somehow my brain refused to accept the old woman as the same person I had held dear in my heart for thirty years. Even now, when I think about her, I always have the image of a beautiful young girl in front of me. When I returned to my old neighborhood, I fancied I went back in time, the time when I was twenty years young. The thirty turmoil years of my life seemed like a dream, perhaps a nightmare."

"I felt the same since the change in 1975. I guess somehow our brain made the selection of good memories to retain and discarded the bad ones. Perhaps that's why we could stay sane."

Van was surprised to find out that after thirty years under communism Thuan still kept his bourgeois thoughts. He was the typical pre-war bourgeois who was influenced by the French romantic literature.

Van found romanticism in most of the pre-war books and songs where love and melancholy were the main themes. As for Van, she grew up in the war, so she thought of herself as more realistic. Songs and novels in her time mentioned more about death and the pain of separation between lovers and husbands and wives when the men had to join the military and had been sent to the front.

Van enjoyed talking to Mr. Thuan. He was the living historical witness of the pre and post-French resistance. His father was the first generation trained by and co-operated with the French. Himself, he was also educated by the French and influenced by their literature and philosophy. He turned out to be romantic and, at the same time, determined to fight for the independence of the country.

Through him, Van could see the struggling of his generation -- to cooperate with, or to fight the French -- the courage of many young men who left behind the easy and happy lives to lead the rough and dangerous ones of the guerillas. Then near the end of their lives, they realized that their sacrifices had been smeared. The independence they brought to the people was not appreciated. On the contrary, people blamed them for the sufferings -- physically and mentally -- not enough food to eat, less freedom and more suppression than during the French domination.

As for Van and her generation, they had an uneasy feeling of being considered co-operators of foreigners, first with the French and then the Americans, by the rural populace. Actually the nationalist side had no solid cause. The Bao Dai government was formed by the French in 1948. The troops were trained and commanded by the French to fight the Viet Minh who had been considered patriots. The general public did not know that the Viet Minh were communists. Only the bourgeois realized the threat. Thus, they moved to the French-controlled cities, separating themselves from the rural population.

History then repeated itself. When the Americans joined in the game, they also only controlled a small percentage of the population, the city people, while the whole majority of the country folks became the enemies. Unlike in the conventional wars where the enemies had been clearly identified, at least by their uniforms and grades, in this guerilla war, enemies could not be found or identified, even by Vietnamese soldiers.

Phoenix Operations was launched with the intention to search and destroy the enemies. But many innocent civilians were liquidated. The body counts became important to the Pentagon.

Van remembered what the father of one friend told her, "You know, we were just like the children of a wealthy family who didn't want to share the wealth. Each child wanted it for himself. Then each went to a neighbor to ask for help. For their own interests, the neighbors were willing. One gave this child all the weapons he needed. The other jumped in to take over the fight himself. When it was over, the house was destroyed and the children were all wounded. At any rate, we were not the ones who were in the control of it."

This talk made Van wish that she could stop thinking about everything. But she could not help herself, and now she felt sad somewhat depressed when the escape of hundreds of thousands of bitter people was believed to be for economic reasons. The Vietnamese had always been attached to their places, their families, both the living and the dead. People did not want to leave their village, even to move to cities only fifty or a hundred kilometers (30/60 miles) away. Before the

war, people in the North and Central did not want to go to the South, the land of fortune. Only the poorest reluctantly had to.

But when the communists took over the North in 1954, a million people moved South empty handed.

In 1975, when the communists took over the South, people did not have the chance to escape. Now they risked their lives to search for freedom and steadiness. Those who made it to the camps in different countries in South East Asia still faced uncertainty in their future. Except a small number of people who already had relatives living in third country, the majority did not know where they would be allowed to settle.

Van had made up her mind and waited to be settled in the United States, but it all depended on if Minh could find her a sponsor. He was confident that he could find her one, sooner or later.

Now Van felt sad when Minh and his family left the camp to go to the Philippines. From there, they would be processed to go to a city called Fayetteville in North Carolina. Van never heard of that city, but Minh said it had a big base called Fort Bragg, where his former American advisor was stationed. Actually, Van should be happy to see Minh's settlement in the U.S. as the light in the tunnel for her and the children. But she felt the loss of a strong pillar. Since the planning of the escape, she had trusted and depended so much on Minh, who was one of the very few people still keeping their pre-communist integrity. Being raised in the middle-class family, Van was taught the value of honesty and trust. She had a simple life of going to school, getting married, having children and be provided for by a husband. When exposed to the communist-controlled society, she found herself lost, almost a foreigner among her own countrymen. She awkwardly dealt with the changing of the social classes, the medley and distrust of the whole society.

Like all Vietnamese, Van instinctively coped with the changing situation without realizing how she did it. Now looking back, she tried to analyze herself and the others. She developed an ambition that some day, after setting down at a stable place, she would write a book, perhaps lives' stories of those she met in the camp, of what she had lived and seen from the French resistance to the defeat of Sai Gon. Thirty years or fifty years from now, perhaps nobody would wonder why the Vietnamese are in every country in the world. If somebody is curious enough to try to find the answer, he would be partially replied: Economic reason. Van wished to give an objective answer especially to the younger generations of Vietnamese at home and abroad. She wanted them to know what the generation of her time had been through, how they lived, coped and survived all the turmoils.

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PART FOUR

I

After several months of corresponding with Minh, Van finally got good news. Through the church of his sponsor, he found a small church in the capital city of the State which was willing to be patron for her family.

The city is not very far from where we live, about one half hour drive. It is a medium size city with several universities, a plus for your daughters in the future. I believe you have a chance to find a better job there than where I live now. I myself would want to move there if I could.

As always, cautious, Van did not mention the good news to anybody until a few days before her departure.

After many months of sharing the fiberboard shelter with four other families, Van and her children became part of them. Now Van realized that perhaps she could never see these new friends again. Chances were that they would be scattered to every part of the world. She had the feeling of guilt for leaving them behind with their uncertainty while she started a new promising life in the U.S. It was the same feeling she had when she decided to escape. Many nights, she had dreams of coming back to Viet Nam to try to help relatives to flee, but every single time they were caught by the police and she was the only one who made it, because she had the citizenship of another country.

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On the plane, Van had a mixed feelings, relief to be settled, but at the same time worried about the unknown future. She squeezed Truc in her arms and thought to herself, "We are going to make it."

Closing her eyes, Van felt encouraged by the picture of Minh, his wife and their three children sitting in their comfortable living room sent to her a few months ago. They looked happy with their new life. After several of months living in a decent place, their expressions also changed. They seemed to look younger, perhaps due to gaining weight, getting rid of the sun-beaten complexion and better clothing. Van paid special attention to Minh's wife. She regained her image of a major's wife of the pre-communist era with complete make-up of purple eye-shadow, dark eye-liner, neat hair-do and red polished nails. Van could not help but notice the nails when she folded her hands on her lap. She also noticed the simple and neat dress, with white flowers. This was the first time she saw her in a Western style dress. This meant they began to incorporate into their new adopted society. Van hoped that she and her children would go through a smooth transition.

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Van found that she got more tired and jet-lagged than the children. Dragging behind the other passengers to the terminal building, Van hoped that Minh and his wife would come to meet her.

It was after ten in the evening and there were not many passengers in this small airport.

Van could see Minh rush toward her from afar. Suddenly she felt a zeal and all the tiredness was gone.

Minh quickly picked up Truc in his arms and poured out questions without waiting for answers, "How is my little girl doing? Oh! How grown up you are! How was your flight? Was it fun to fly over the clouds?"

"Children! Say hello to big uncle."

The four girls folded their arms in front of their chests and bowed their heads to say, "Greeting to big uncle!"

Minh's wife just caught up with him.

"And say hello to big aunt."

They all repeated their gestures.

"Are you tired?" Minh's wife asked.

"Yes. It's a long flight."

"Your church is coming to meet your family."

"My church?"

"Yes. The church which is sponsoring you. They're over there."

Looking ahead, Van saw a crowd of around thirty Americans waiving at her. She was shocked. She never expected to be welcomed like that. She only hoped that Minh would come to the airport to pick her and the children up and bring them to his house. Now a group of people coming here at ten o'clock at night to meet her family whom they never saw before, except a picture she sent them

through the charity organization. Van became nervous when getting closer to them. She did not know how to act. Fortunately Minh walked up close to her and, with a smile, he introduced,

"This is Mrs. Van and her four daughters. And these are the ladies and gentlemen from Grace Lutheran Church."

Minh's introduction seemed to awaken her forgotten Western etiquette of hands shaking,

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," Van repeated with each hand shaking.

Some ladies bent down to hug her four girls. She then contemplated how shabby she and the children looked, compared to these neatly dressed ladies, most of them were elder. The girls' sun-beaten complexions shown more obvious next to the nicely made-up faces.

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Van was surprised to find out that her family was not going to stay with Minh's but with an American one in Raleigh. After claiming their meager baggage of a few cardboard boxes of old clothes given by the Red Cross, Van bid goodbye to all her greeters to get in her hosts' station wagon.

Even dead tired, Van and the children were dazzled by the beautifully decorated living room. They reluctantly sat down on the cream-colored sofa. Their hostess noticed their exhaustion and took them to their quarters in the basement. Here, two bedrooms were spared for them. After sleeping on the cement floor for so long, Van thought she was lying in the clouds when her back touched the soft mattress.

The next morning, Van and the children woke up late and found the empty house. The couple had gone to work and their children to school. She discovered a note on the dinnette table in the kitchen telling her to make herself at home. Van had not time to decide what she was going to do when a lady from the Church called and said that she was going to come over.

Trudy was in her early thirties, a housewife, and a Church member. She volunteered to provide Van the transportation and was also in charge of finding them an apartment. She told Van that before their arrival, the Church had held a few meetings, and several members had volunteered to help them settle in the new country. Van could not imagine how thoughtful and well organized the Church had been. There was one man in charge of buying her a car, a woman in finding schools for the children, and a few more in finding her a job.

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After two weeks of searching, Trudy found Van a small house of less than a thousand square feet with three bedrooms and one bath.

Van was too happy to have a place of her own. The children also showed their excitement. They ran through all the rooms and discussed who should stay in the biggest. Like Van, they also felt uncomfortable in living with their hosts, although their house was big and nice. Mother and children shared the feeling of being all in the family again after over two years staying in the camp. Van was touched to see the Church members carry old furniture, pots and pans, and all the basic necessities into her house. They even helped put up stuff. After they left, Van found everything she needed, from kitchen utensils, even a broom and dust pan, to a big bag of rice. Still they apologized for not giving her better stuff.

Van felt indebted to their kindness. It was ironic that she had to run away from her own people and then be warmly welcomed and helped by perfect strangers of a different race. Van was forever grateful for their help.

One member of the Church found Van a job as an electronic assembler. One week of training was so simple. What Van had to do was to put various components in the holes drilled on the PC boards as indicated. After the training, Van was eager to work, and felt happy to get five dollars an hour for doing such an easy job.

After a few hours of working on the first day, Van realized that the work was no so easy. The speed of the chain line was killing. Each worker had to put in twelve or thirteen components from the bins set in front of her. Flip over the board, clip the leads and slide it down to the next person. The components would fall off if one did not know how to hold them when flipping the board over. The line must flow. Whenever one person was behind, she held up the whole line. There was no chance for a new trainee to keep up.

After a few hours of cutting hundreds of leads, Van's right hand was all blistered, caused by gripping the cutter. The pain got worse and worse but she dared not slow down, feeling the pressure of the people down the line waiting for the boards. Quickly glancing around her, she found that the other four new girls, who were trained in the same session with her, also struggled to keep up, but failed like her. Piles of boards stocked besides each new girl while the old ones enjoyed their free time of waiting to chitchat. When the file of boards got higher and the talking became louder, the leadhand asked the people on down the line to help the new ones.

Previously, when they had a group of ten or twelve new employees, they set up a line of all new workers to build the simple boards. Thus everyone was at the same pace and did not have to struggle to keep up. It was too bad that they only hired five girls this time, and they were placed to work besides the experienced. The old timers were very reluctant to help. They felt that they had to do extra work for the newly hired.

In the company, the assemblers were the lowest paid and so was their status. Slowly they could climb up to be the repair persons, the inspectors who sat at the end of the line to make sure that all components were correctly installed, or the set-up persons whose responsibility was to get components ready. Each morning, at seven thirty, Charles, the supervisor and the only man in the department, came to say good morning to every single girl at her station.

"It's nice of him to come and say good morning to us," Van told a girl sitting next to her.

Sue looked around before whispering, "Better watch out for that son of the bitch. He comes to check if you're at your station on time. He looks over our shoulders all the time. By the way, what is son of the bitch in Vietnamese?"

Van felt embarrassed. She heard the vendors in the market speak sometimes, but never spoke the word herself,

"No, we don't have the equivalent of those words."

"How about bullshit. You must have that word!"

"We do. But we do not use it to swear."

That is the truth. And when one hears foreign profane language, he does not feel bad as he hears his own native language.

"Come on, tell me how to say it!"

"Why do you want to learn those words?"

"So when Charles says good morning to me, I can just smile to him and say it in Vietnamese and he would never know."

Now it was Van's turn to burst out laughing. She then realized that there was a resentment toward the supervisor.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the shift, the lines would stop and each girl had to sweep the floor around her station to collect all the dropped components and sort them out. Van noticed that only Mary, the elderly woman, took the sorting seriously. She spread the mixed components on the table and carefully checked each resistor by its color code, each chip and capacitor by its number and put them back in their bins. All the young girls took advantage of the free time to talk, and when the leadhand was not around, they dumped all the mixed components in the trash.

"Come on Mary, it's four thirty."

"It's time to go."

"They don't pay you to stay over to do that."

No matter what they said, Mary always stayed until she finished sorting the mixed components, "Oh! I just wait for the traffic to clear out and I'm in no hurry."

Mary was a widow and the eldest woman in the area. She had been on this assembly job for a few years, so her speed was good. Whenever Van worked near her, she always helped her out by putting together one or two components. In this kind of work, a few seconds saved made a difference.

Mary did not join in the girls talks which centered around soap and sex. One time Van heard the girl sitting next to her talking about her sex life with her boyfriend to the girls down the line. Van could not understand all the slangs plus she had to concentrate to keep up.

The girl suddenly turned to Van and asked, "Are you married?"

"Yes."

Then she bluntly inquired, "How often do you have sex?"

Van never heard such a question in her life.

"Come on! There is nothing to hide," voiced one girl down the line.

"My husband is not here."

"Where is he?"

"In re-education camp."

"What's it?"

"Oh! It's just like prison."

Van felt the silence. She thought that they looked at her.

"What did he do?"

Van mischievously intended to say "He's a killer" but then decided not to, "Oh! The communists imprisoned him."

"For what?"

"You know about the Viet Nam War?"

"I heard a lot about it, but I'm not sure what it's all about."

"My uncle was over there for two years, but he never wanted to talk about it," another girl joined in.

Van looked at the girls working on her line. They were all in their early twenties. So, when the war went on, they were only in their teens.

"You know, our country was divided into two parts. The northern part was controlled by the communists and the southern wasn't, but the communists wanted to take the whole thing. So they started the war. We fought back and lost. Now they have imprisoned those who worked for the southern regime and my husband was in the military."

"It's just like the Civil War!"

"Sort of," Van did not want to elaborate. She knew that these girls were not interested in listening to boring stuff.

"But why did we get involved?"

"Just helped them out, I guess, as we did in World War II," one other girl exchanged view.

"I think because of the location of our country. The U.S. government believed that if the communists took control of the southern part of Viet Nam, the whole of South East Asia would fall under their domination."

Van believed that these girls did not have the slightest idea why their government had to worry about the communist control in South East Asia or even the world. They were only concerned about getting their check every Friday to pay their bills, trying to find a boyfriend, and coming here to talk to each other about their love lives.

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Soon Van also found herself less and less concerned about world politics. After work, she hurried home to fix supper and help the girls with their homework. Then it was bedtime.

Friday was more relaxing. After cashing her paycheck, Van went home knowing that the girls were waiting for her. The ice-cream truck was always in the neighborhood on Friday afternoon. The man knew exactly which house had kids. He stopped in front of the house, turned on the music aloud to tempt the small ones.

Every Friday afternoon, Van had to buy her children ice-cream. There was something special about the ice-cream truck. Could be the music or the fact that other kids got it that made the children all get excited. No, the ice-cream from the grocery did not taste that good. Perhaps it did not have the personal touch of the man who handed it out with the music all along.

Van always sat on the step to watch her children enjoy licking that cool treat. She could not help but think that one esquimo could buy a whole meal at home. She also realized that ice-cream on Friday and fast foods once in a while were their only luxury. They seemed to be content with the hand-me-down clothes and old toys given by the Church.

Van wondered for how long? Eventually, they will forget about the rough life in the old country and comprehended that they did not have what their friends over here had. Van did not want to remind them much about the rough life back then, but she always told them never to waste food.

For Van, her whole life centered around the four girls. After work, she stayed home with them and, on week-ends, they all went shopping or to grocery stores together. Many times Van refused to go to the bar with the girls on Friday after work.

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"Hey, Van! Want to come with us to the Lone Ranch?"

"No. I need to be home with the kids."

"Come on. They can take care of themselves."

"We may find you a boyfriend like Aiko."

Aiko was a middle age woman, must be in her late forties or early fifties. She was an average on beauty, but always well-groomed. Van observed that she wore dressed-up pants, never jeans like most of the girls. She applied heavy eye shadow and black eye liner, tried to make her eyes look bigger. She was married to a GI. He brought her here. They had three boys. He got out of the service, went to work for a big company, and climbed up to be a manager. He found somebody at work, divorced Aiko and transferred to another state. Aiko and the boys lived in their house. Now all three boys went to college. Perhaps without the alimony, she had to work.

When Van came to her house, she could not believe that somebody working on the assembly job like her could live in a four thousand square foot compound in one of the prestigious subdivisions of the town.

The size of the house accentuated Aiko's loneliness. Seeing her sitting on the big beige sectional couch in the huge cathedral ceiling living room, Van felt sorry for her. The whole house looked too neat. Everything was at the right place. It was a model home without living spirit, even the live plants in the expensive ceramic vases looked stiff. Aiko existed, but she did not live in this house.

Van's children must be in awe of the large room, all the beautiful furniture and the whole glass wall showing the Japanese garden with two dwarf red lacy Japanese maples standing out from white marble.

"You have four beautiful girls," Aiko was very Westernized, Van thought.

In her country, people never mentioned that the children are beautiful. Perhaps it was due to the superstitious belief that the ghosts would get jealous and take the children with them, and also due to the humble attitude of the people.

"Thank you."

"I always wanted to have one girl, but I got all boys. Girls are always closer to parents than boys. You want more cookies, honeys? Help yourselves."

"Really? Me, I always wished to have one boy, but I got all girls," Van quickly realized that she made the mistake of saying so in front of her children. "Actually, my family and that of my husband wanted me to have a boy, but for myself, I am happy to have my daughters."

Van told the truth. For many years, she had had the guilty feeling of not fulfilling her role as a daughter-in-law and a wife to have a boy to carry on her husband family's name and to worship his ancestors.

However, when the communists took over, Van knew that the veneration of ancestors would not be continued in the younger generation. How could it be when children were encouraged to spy on and denounced their parents. Children of the well-off parents, as well as employees and servicemen of the old regime, felt ashamed of their parents and grand-parents who had been called "puppets" and "blood suckers." Van felt sorry for these young children who had been brainwashed and were about to be rifted from their family ties. As for her own, she loved them more than before, but was always careful about what she said in front of them, for fear of being reported at their meetings at school. Beyond the people's control, a mistrust had been implanted in the families and in the society.

Now in America, Van recreated the trust and close knit feeling of her small family, but she knew nobody could restore the sense of continuation of generations that Mother had always discussed.

Mother talked about the family's cemetery, where all relatives rested in peace, as if she talked about her childhood dwelling. She remembered all the dates of their deaths, even though many had been gone for a long time. She remembered these dates since she commemorated them each year. She also talked dearly and respectfully about the ancestors' worshipping house. To her, this house represented the continuation of families.

Each family had a kind of temple where their ancestors of the fifth generation and beyond as well as unmarried and childless members were commemorated communally every year on a set date. The house was taken care of by the eldest branch. Depending on the wealth of the families, a certain amount of rice fields were reserved to cover the upkeep and expenditures of the commemorations and gatherings of family members.

Van imagined that the faith in joining their ancestors made people become less afraid of death. She wondered if Aiko wanted to be cremated, and her ashes be buried in the mountain with her ancestors,

"Have you been home lately?"

"No. Not for several years, since the death of my mother."

"Do you ever think about going home to live?"

"No. Not really. I have been away for a long time and everything has changed. I believe I'll be here with my boys."

Van could imagine that Aiko was considered outcast by her family since the day she got married to her GI husband. She wondered if Aiko ever regretted what she had chosen. Instead of marrying to a man from her country and being embraced by the love of her brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews and nieces she married to a foreigner and now, at grandma age, she still had to find temporary companions picked at the bar.

Van tried not to think about her own situation when her children had grown up.

*

To escape the boredom of the repetitive work of the assembly line, Van became a daydreamer.

Every morning, after sitting down to build PC boards and familiarize herself with the locations of the components, she started making plans for the post-communist Viet Nam.

To Van, the ultimate responsibility was to restore the value of family. Children must be taught to respect and trust their grandparents, parents and all members of the extended family. They must be proud of the heritage, and see the importance of the continuation of generations. It was also important to build trust among people.

There must be a good leader who really wanted to rebuild the country and help the people. Van was confident that somehow a good and courageous person would eventually emerge. In a country in which three young women, at two different periods of time had stood up to drive the Chinese dominators out, a general had asked the emperor to behead him if he wanted to surrender to the Mongolian invaders, and several scholar-mandarins committed suicide for failing to defend their provinces against the French conquest, then there must be someone. Van planned out the popular education program, with more emphasis on vocational training, and public schools would be available to every child. She had reminded her children that they had been lucky to be in school and even having free bus ride. Now, at home, thousands of children could not get any education, since public schools were not sufficiently available and the parents could not afford to pay the tuition in illegal private institutions.

She moved on to the resettlement project, where people in the overpopulated regions in the North and the Central would be moved to the South and the Highlands, to develop virgin lands and recultivate the abandoned fields. The communists had tried to carry out the project, but failed. Actually, they did not sincerely have a long term program to aid people but only to drive them out of the cities hastily, as a form of punishment. Without equipment and money to sustain themselves, people snuck back. But their house had been occupied by the cadres. These poor people then had to live on the pavement. As a matter of fact, the city of Sai Gon needed an overhaul. Except for the central area where the French had built in the 19th century, and which should be kept as historic, many other sections must be reconstructed. The city infrastructure must be modernized. At one time, the Diem government had a plan to build a modern city on the other bank of the river. The plan was not materialized, perhaps due to the lack of funds.

To Van, all civilization seems to be based on the structure of the bathroom. The Roman Empire had been praised for their advanced construction of their baths. After hundreds of years, many of the roman baths had still been admired for their aesthetic and functional designs.

In present time, the Americans stressed the number of bathrooms in their houses. It seems now that a person's success was measured by the size and number of the bathrooms in his house. When Van went to the house-warming parties, more often the guests would ask how many bathrooms the house had? The hostess seemed to wait for this chance to show off her bathrooms, especially if it included a jacuzzi.

Van detailed the plan to have manufacturing plants built on the outside of the city. With a good management, the hard working Vietnamese could build these PC boards at a much lower price and better quality, provided a trust was re-established among people.

Here, everything was based on statistics. At the meetings, it was reported that the defect was from 2 to 3%. In reality, Van saw a lot of components being wrongly installed, and improper components put on the boards. (She remembered then the list of VC formerly reported killed at each encounter in Viet Nam. No doubt the data included all the innocent civilians caught in the middle).

The supervisors wanted the number of boards finished as planned, no matter what. Being rushed, the workers made many mistakes. Everyone tried to cover his, so false reports were released.

The relationship between supervisors and workers was based on hypocrisy. Many workers tried to work as little as possible. If a girl was behind at her station, all others on the line enjoyed their free time chitchatting instead of helping the poor girl.

At every meeting, the subjects of team work and pride of being part of a team were discussed, but in the back of their minds, workers knew that when the market went wrong, lay-offs would be on the way. Thus, for their part, they would leave the company for an increase of a few dimes an hour. The quality, conscientiousness, and loyalty of the Japanese workers were also stressed. However the Japanese had skillfully developed the management style which combined the old-fashioned family factory with the big-scale industry. There has been trust and loyalty between the management and workers. Van wished that her country could adapt such a policy when it develops the industry.

Mary was the only one who always helped out. She never dumped her mixed components in the trash but took her time to sort them out, "I grew up in the depression, so I very much appreciate what we have now. I worked on the farm all my life until my husband passed away. This kind of work here is easy compared to the hard farm work."

Van admitted that Mary was very thrifty and disciplined. She was never late for work, and always back on time at each break. At the breakroom, she always cleaned up after herself while many tables were littered with paper cups, napkins, aluminum cans and bottles. She reminded Van of her own mother. It seemed that Mary belonged to the lost generation.

Like Mary, Van was grateful to get the job, even though it was the lowest pay in the company. She barely made the ends meet, but was content to be able to support her children.

*

Seeing the homeless loitering about downtown streets, Van realized that she was lucky to have a roof over her head, and food on the table. Compared to her pre-communist life in her country, she was worse off. At the time, she did neither cooking nor take care of the house. Servants did all the chores. Now she went to work, cooked, cleaned up the house and the yard, but compared to her communist life, she was much better. Here, she got a paycheck every week, allowing her to do the budget planning. Most important of all, she had the freedom. No more "neighborhood meeting," no more "self-criticism," not being dubbed as wife of a "puppet soldier."

Van was happy to see her children grown and know that they would be what they wanted to be. She was grateful that everything went smoothly for the children and herself.

After all busy weekdays, she enjoyed Saturday morning the most. Getting up early as usual, she would peep through the doors to watch the girls sleep peacefully, then head for the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee. Sipping it, Van enjoyed the special, special quietness of the Saturday morning. Most of the people took advantage of the non-working day to get up late, while Van enjoyed watching her flowers blooming in front of her eyes with dew drops still shining on the petals. She remembered that while living under the communists she never thought about or set eyes on plants or flowers. She had a zillion things to worry about.

After getting married, Van had always planned when the war ended, that she would move back to the country to have a small fruit orchard, a flower and vegetable garden, and a chicken coop.

The simple dream was never achieved at home. Here, in this country, that simple wish would be easily carried out, but somehow Van felt reluctant to move out to the countryside, conceiving that she would be the only Oriental there. She wished that her big family were here so they would live together. Whenever thinking about her family, Van felt guilty perhaps like a deserter who fled the battlefield for a safe place, while his comrades in arms stayed to fight for their lives. Van felt lonely. She needed to share the feeling with somebody. She knew that she could never be really happy knowing that all her family was suffering at home. They lived in a constant fear and struggle to have barely enough food to eat. The only solace she got was knowing her family received a couple of hundred dollars she sent home every few months. The sending of money was a gamble. Since there was no diplomatic relation between Viet Nam and the U.S., she had to give somebody her money then that person called his contact in a third country. From there, the contact person would write to his liaison in Viet Nam to bring the money to her family. It was very important to find somebody you could trust. The loss of money was not as essential as the secrecy. If the cadres knew about the sending of money, they would, no doubt, try to get it by accusing the receiver of being a spy, for keeping in touch with people living in the U.S. Being aware of the fact, Van never dared to write home.

The news of Mother's death was a shock to Van.

Holding the letter in her hand, she saw Mother with tears running down her cheeks hugging each girl before they left the house the last time. That scene was imprinted on her memory.

Since she arrived safely to the camp, then settled in the U.S., Van always regretted that she did not take her parents with her. To ease her conscience, Van reasoned that they would never be happy here when their other children and grandchildren were still suffering at home.

There was an elderly lady who fled with her son's family. Whenever Van stopped by to see her, she told Van her life's story. Van listened to her over and over. She told how her marriage was arranged by her parents through a matchmaker. Her wedding was the biggest in the area with twenty hogs and two buffaloes killed for the banquet. She had seven children. Two eldest daughters married before the anti-French war. Their husbands joined "the resistance," so they stayed in the North when the country was divided in 1954. The rest of the family moved to the South. Her eldest son was drafted in the army. He was lucky enough to take his family to Bach Dang Quay when all the ships began to leave for Vung Tau while the communists tanks were rolling closer to Independence Palace. The communist soldiers got lost in the streets of Sai Gon. In the chaos, not many people paid attention to the departing fleet of merchant and military vessels heading for the ocean. Thousands of people were lucky enough to flee at the last minute on these ships, but one of the biggest was shelled, when finally the communists realized where the vessels were headed for. Somehow the ship still made it to Guam.

Now the old lady stayed home by herself during the weekdays, until members of her family got back from work and school. But they were then busy with the preparation of the supper and homework. Weekends were also filled with washing, cleaning and yard work. Nobody had time to sit down to chitchat with her. Thus, when a visitor came, she poured her heart out. Van maintained that members of her family tried to hide their irritation when the lady talked about her life story. They must feel that the visitor had to listen so many times out of politeness. So Van sympathized with the lady. She always listened attentively and asked questions to show interest.

Everytime Van came to see the lady, she thought Mother would have a lonely life like her if she came here. At home, she had more children and grandchildren and relatives. Furthermore, she could step out of the door to talk to neighbors.

*

"What's wrong, Mom?"

Looking up, Van saw Mai, her eldest daughter, standing in front of her. She then realized that while thinking about Mother, tears had been streaming down, "Grandma passed away."

Mai hugged Van tenderly.

"Come get your sisters for me."

"Yes, Mom," Mai walked away quietly.

When they came, Van knew that Mai had done the hard job of breaking the bad news for her. Van embraced them. She felt choked and could not speak. Holding Truc in her arms, she found comfort. They were her family here.

After trying so hard, Van barely whispered, "Do you remember Grandma?" They only nodded. Van knew that Truc could hardly recall. She was too small when they left. It was too bad that Van could not bring pictures of any family member for fear of being caught she could not deny her fleeing.

"Nothing we can do but pray at the altar," Mai said.

Van looked at her and nodded. Her daughter was right, she thought. The altar was only a simple wooden shelf fastened to the wall in the living room. On it were a ceramic joss stick burning holder and two vases for flowers. On the days of Lunar New Year and on the anniversaries of her grandparents' deaths, Van prepared simple meals and fruits to put on it to pray for the dead, like Mother had done all her life. Different from home, here Van did not have any relative and did not

want to invite friends. She purposely wanted to spare some time for the children and herself, to think about their dead ancestors as well as the relatives living at home.

Van felt glad that her children, somewhat, still had faith in the old customs of veneration of ancestors.

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When her children were around, Van tried to carry on normally. But at night, before she could go to sleep, Mother always appeared before her. Most vivid was the picture of Mother hugging the four girls. She was reluctant to let go of them. Tears in her eyes. Both Mother and Van knew that this was their last farewell. Van sensed that Mother worried they could be perished in the escape, either by drowning or killed by pirates.

Van remembered the time when either one of her brothers or herself was late from school, Mother stood at the door to wait for them with anxiety. She had great patience with her children and grandchildren. Very seldom had she shown she was upset. She had the gift of creating vivacity around her. At mealtimes, she was the one who started the conversation. It was only about what she saw or encountered at the market, or in the neighborhood during the day. She enjoyed filling everyone in on relatives after a visit, or attending a commemoration. She was close to her relatives as well as Father's. She had a fantastic memory for remembering the anniversaries of the dead. Her dream of being buried at the family cemetery among relatives haunted Van. Perhaps through Mother's dream, Van had wished that someday she could come to that cemetery to burn joss sticks in front of each tomb, kind of introducing herself to relatives. Now Van felt sad that Mother would not be there. She was cremated, and her ashes were sent to a pagoda. Van knew that her sister and brothers had no other choice. The family cemetery was in Father's native village in the North. Even though the country had been reunified, the communists did not allow people to move from the South to the North or vice versa, except the cadres.

Burial had always been the Vietnamese custom for centuries. Since the communists took over control of the South, they forced people to excavate all the tombs in the cemeteries inside as well as outside the city of Sai Gon. This was a calamity to the living relatives. For generations, people believed that tombs were the sacred resting places of their dead relatives.

Emperors and wealthy people had always chosen the site and design of the cemeteries for themselves and their families. The disturbance of these sacred places would affect the well-being of the living.

Now facing uncertainty in their lives as well as in their deaths, people had no choice but to cremate the dead. In so doing, they were certain that the communists would not be able to disturb their loved ones anymore.

*

Many times Van forgot that Mother was dead. The short letter arriving a few months late via France seemed unreal. She hoped that it was not true, but she recognized her sister's handwriting.

It was strange that death was a fact of life, nevertheless Van never thought about the death of her parents. Perhaps unconsciously she fancied that if she did not think about it it would not happen. Now reality struck her, and she realized that it could happen to her too.

The children, her poor four little girls, that was Van's first thought when thinking about her death. What would happen to them? In this country, they would not be starved or put out in the cold, but they could be sent to different foster homes. Each could be raised by different people and they would no longer be family. The idea scared Van.

She then planned to write a letter to the social services to ask them keep all the four girls in the same foster home in case of her death. She also wrote a letter to her children:

Dear children,

I hope that all of you are already grown up when you read this letter. But if you are not, please have courage.

Grandmother's death prompted me to write you.

Death is part of life. Everyone will come to the same end. The only differences are the when and the how. I realize that my death will be rough on you, since we did not have our family over here.

I hope you understand why I decided to take you away from the family and the country. Here, we missed the love and support of our big family and sometimes we found some discrimination because of our race (Van recalled the incident when a young man killed a Vietnamese-Chinese after a squabble at the poolhall because his brother was an MIA). But at home, we were discriminated because of our class. You would not be admitted to any college because your father was an officer in the South Vietnamese government, considered as a criminal. You would not have a chance to get a job because we were not Communist Party members.

There is no perfect idealistic society, but I believe this country is one of the best places in which to live. Here you have more freedom that you do not appreciate unless you have lived in other places like our country, even under the so-called republic government.

I hope that each of you will try to do your best to become a good and useful person. You will find that life is more meaningful when you care about and help others. At least try to help our relatives back home when they ask for assistance. They are less fortunate than us. Except for the governing communist apparatus, the whole population needs our support and compassion. Mai, as the eldest, you should take responsibility to love and care for your sisters. Remember they are the only family you have in this country. Do not let anything, including the love for a man, interfere with your love for your sisters. You should set a good example for them. Give Truc special care. She did not have the chance to be with Daddy and Grandparents as you had. As for you, Lan, Cuc, and Truc, you have to obey and respect your eldest sister. Love and support each other. Even after your marriages, maintain a close relationship. Build a close relationship among your children. I hope you can create an extended family like at home.

Remember, no matter how bad the situation you are in, there are many others who are worse off. Always be prepared to cope with the unexpected. Have courage. I hope Daddy will be released soon, but if not, it is your responsibility to send money home so your aunts and uncles can visit him. He had been forced to defend our freedom. He was not a criminal, but only an officer of the defeated side. Try all possibilities to bring him here to be with you.

*Love,
Mommy*

Van was not very satisfied with her letter. She knew that she had a language barrier. She could not express what she wanted to say in English, and her children could not completely understand what she would write in Vietnamese. Somehow she felt relief after writing it. At least, she hoped to convey the main idea to them.

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Chuong's letter was a surprise to Van just as the news of Mother's death some months back. She read it again and again to make sure that what he wrote was what she understood.

I was released from the hospital a few days ago thanks to big brother Tu's sister's interference. I regretted that I did not see Mother. Now, I am staying with Mai's grandparents. I am still weak from the long stay in the hospital, but I consider myself very lucky compared to many others who got the same disease, had died, or are still in various hospitals.

Do not forget to send me a gift so I can give it to big brother Tu's sister.

Van was too happy with the news. According to the date on the letter, Chuong had been freed almost three months. She wondered why his cousin did not call her from Sidney when she received his letter. It does not matter now that the news was a few weeks late. It was only important that Chuong was free. She should break the good news to the kids,

"Mai, Lan, Cuc, Truc! Where are you? Come out here. Mom has something to tell you."

It was quiet. Nobody answered. Van then realized that it was Sunday afternoon. The children went to play with the other kids in the neighborhood. Sitting alone by herself in the quiet house, Van could hear her own heartbeat. The news was too good to be true.

Many nights lying in bed, she tried to imagine what Chuong would be doing in his "re-education camp."

It is around noon over there, so he must be eating his lunch of a few bowls of coarse rice, some spoonfuls of anchovie and the vegetables that they planted themselves after breaking the virgin ground of the forest. Van remembered Minh had said that even though they dug the soil so deep and crushed it thin, none of the vegetable had grown well. The corn did not have kernels, and the sweet potatoes were as big as the toes. Prisoners stay hungry all the time.

Van felt bad that she left Chuong behind to have that miserable life. What could she do? In this peaceful part of the world, she could only pray that her husband would have the courage and determination to survive. She hoped that he never tried to escape. Van heard of many harsh punishments reserved for the escapees. After being repeatedly tortured, and if survived, they would be forced to write confession over and over.

Now the nightmare was behind her. At least he is now in the bigger prison with some other sixty million people. He had enough food to eat, a bed on which to sleep, the love and support of his family.

An idea flashed through her mind, "What if Chuong tried to flee the country? If caught, he would be put in jail again. This time, it would be impossible for anybody to get him out. For sure he would be accused of being a CIA agent." Van must write him a letter to tell him not to try to escape by boat. She was confident that her letter would get home on time to warn him even via Sidney, because it would take time to establish good connections for the fleeing. "Oh, I must call Minh to thank him," Van thought, "Without his sister's help, Chuong could never get out of prison."

The following days, Van could not help but dream about the day Chuong would join her and the children here. They would be a family again. She dreamed about the time when they would have a house where she would plant a lot of flowers and vegetables. Then the children would get married and have children of their own. On week-ends, children and grandchildren would gather at the house, and she would cook beef noodle soup with grilled pork and beef marinated in lemongrass for them. Van wished that she would have a lot of grandchildren. She expected the big gathering of all the relatives at the commemoration of her grandparents each year. As for now, to commemorate her husband's grandparents and hers, she only prepared a few simple dishes to put on the shelf along in-season fruits and fresh flowers and then burned some joss sticks to pray.

Of course, she did not believe they came back to eat the food but still wanted to keep the tradition.

While preparing the food, Van mused about her grand parents and all the relatives she could remember. She could not understand how the lives of millions had been changed in over thirty years. The war had taken the lives of millions. Her parents had lost their fortune when they moved to the South to shun the communists. Herself, she fled the country to live in this other side of the world. Her children and grandchildren would be part of this country. Their old ones would be a history book. Now the Vietnamese scattered in every part of the world. Van's cousins lived in France. Their grandchildren and hers would speak different languages and eventually would lose connection.

IV

It has been over three years since Chuong was released. During that time, Van only received some letters from him, either via Sidney or Paris. She comprehended that there were many reasons why people did not want to correspond. They could not write straightforward what they wanted to

say, but had to make up a story that only the family members understood. To Van, no news was good news. The letter from the Philippines was the great unexpected event to Van. The handwriting on the envelop was Chuong's. His full name was on the top left corner. He could have given it to somebody who went to the Philippines to mail it. Van imagined while opening the letter, her hands shaking.

I arrived safely in the Philippines on May 18th. They took us to this refugee camp. I am doing fine here. Everybody is doing well at home. Now it is important: You must send three thousand dollars to this address (name, number, street, city, state, zip code).

I know that it is a lot of money for you at one time, but I had no choice. I already paid them half in gold before I left. The rest should be paid when I get to the camp. The escape was well organized by cadres. If you do not have enough money, borrow it from Minh. I believe he would lend it to us.

Van understood that she had to send the money as soon as possible. Even though Chuong was safe in the Philippines, all the relatives were still at home. The organizers must have a thorough grasp of the escapees' lives that they agreed to let them pay upon their safe arrivals.

Van was too overjoyed by her husband's safe flight to worry about the money. It was almost unreal. In the back of her mind, she always expected to hear the news of his death since she found out that he had been sent to the North. But after eight years of suffering, he was released from prison, and three years later he made it to a free country. Now it was only a matter of time. She would file with the immigration services to sponsor him here. The reunion would become true. They would be a family again in this newly adopted land. They would be free to plan and dream about their future.

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After fifteen months of waiting for the papers to be cleared, the great news came from the Lutheran Family Services. Chuong would be at the airport at 10pm on Saturday night.

The long wait had made the children, and even Van, lose the thrill. Now the news really excited them. They showed their enthusiasm in tidying up the house. After peeping through all bedrooms, Van came to sit at the dinette, "We should keep the house in order like this all the time. Daddy is a very neat person."

The big yellow mum pot in the middle of the table brightened the room. Van was so happy. She laughed to herself, "What would a prisoner of eight years who used to sleep on a reed mat on a dirt floor care about flowers?" Perhaps Chuong might think it was a waste of money. The money could feed the family at home for a few days, he could say so. But being practical, Van bought the mum so she would plant it in the garden to enjoy it for years to come. Furthermore she wanted to make it a special day, a celebration of their reunion after thirteen years of separation.

"Oh! I have to put the wine bottle in the refrigerator," Van talked aloud to herself.

Standing up to go to the pantry to get the wine bottle she bought for the occasion, Van saw Mai and Lan hanging up a white paper banner with big colorful letters "Welcome to the US," across the big window in the living room.

"Good job," Van said smilingly. She never thought of such thing, "We are going to leave at 9:00, a little bit early better than late. Remind me to turn off the oven before leaving."

*

Van kept looking at the clock and the dark runway through the big glass window. The flight would be on time. She still had twelve more minutes. Van took out the little mirror to look at herself. The rouge still looked good. Lipstick had not been smeared. She was content with herself. At the age of forty two, she has not had a single gray hair. None could guess that she was in her forties. All Orientals looked younger than their ages to Americans. The stewardess walked to gate 11. The plane must land soon. All the people in the waiting area ran quickly to the big glass, piercing through the darkness outside.

A big jet was lowering down at the other end of the airport. All of its lights were flickering. Then it was out of sight. When it appeared again, the big bird was on the ground, so close to the building, following the man with two red flashlights in his hand.

The plane door connected to the tunnel. Disembarked passengers could not be seen. This was a new feature added to the expanded airport. When Van arrived here several years back, she had to walk a long distance from the runway to the terminal.

Van left the window to walk to the gate, followed by the four girls. They stood behind her.

A lot of huggings and happy chattings. Nobody showed any sign of air sickness; comfort of the big jets.

Where was Chuong? Van looked through the tunnel. A few passengers dragging behind with their rolling suit cases. She held her purse firmly to her chest. She could not believe her eyes, Chuong's father was walking slowly toward her. He had the same gray hair but was thinner and more stooped. Chuong must have recognized her shock. Van tried to flash a smile. It seemed too late. The handbag dangling on his shoulder seemed too heavy and too big.

"How was the flight? Let me carry this for you," Van offered.

"No, no. I can do it."

Van did not look at the girls but, through their quietness, she could imagine their shock.

Chuong stopped back to look at his children. With a big grim on his yellowish skinny face, he uttered,

"You're grown so big. I couldn't recognize you."

Bending down, he hugged little Truc who is fourteen. His gay hair next to her shiny dark brown was the perfect picture of a grandfather and grandchild.

"Let's go down to claim the luggage," Van proposed.

"I don't have anything else. That's all I had."

"Do you want something to drink?"

"No. I got coke on the plane."

He walked too slow. Something was wrong with his left leg. He did not lift it up off the ground but was dragging it along the floor.

Van knew she had made the right decision to make this meeting a family matter, not to let any friend or representative of the Lutheran Family Services come. She and the children needed time to adjust.

Van was silly enough to expect a strong and healthy man of thirteen years ago. The most vivid picture imprinted on her mind was that of a tall and muscular man with a saddened face and worried eyes bidding goodbye to his family on his way to "re-education" assured to last a few months. It turned out to be eight years of high security and torturous imprisonment.

For many years, Van thought that it was the last picture she would ever have of her husband. In a way, it was true. Now she had the man back, the forty-six year old who looked and acted like seventy.

Van conceived the impatience of the girls who had to slow down to walk behind,

"You girls go ahead to bring the car to the door for us."

It must have been their relief. They all rushed to the escalator.

"They're all grown big," Chuong said.

Van thought she found the amazement and sadness in the tone. Chuong turned to Van with a slow glance from head to toe,

"You look the same."

"I have gained ten pounds, almost four kilos."

"Maybe that keeps you looking young."

Van looked into his eyes to find his sincerity. She thought they were too yellow. It could be jaundice. She held his hand to step on the escalator. No passion. A little bit sad. Sorrow, perhaps, for an old man.

In their daily life, Van tried her best to act as a translator and mediator between her husband and the children.

To her, it was natural that she spoke Vietnamese to them and they spoke English to her. They called her Mom, sometimes Mommy, to stress tenderness. Very rarely, they called her Ma, solely when there were only Vietnamese around. But for their Daddy, they called him Ba all the time and spoke Vietnamese, sometimes struggling to translate to him.

Uneasiness existed in the air, the feeling of a stranger living in the house. Was Chuong a stranger to Van?

After over a year of courtship including a few dozen times of eating out, going to movies and shopping for the wedding, they got married. Still that was much more than her parents, uncles and aunts knew about each other. Usually the questions were about to which families they belonged. What schools did they attend. What degrees they had and what kind of jobs they held. A few glimpses of each other preceded pre-engagement, engagement and wedding. That was enough for them "to live together a hundred years of happiness, until their hair became white and their teeth fallen out." They must have many children and grandchildren.

Van was content to fulfill her role of new wife, of supervising a servant to cook, and keep the house clean and in order. A baby was born. Her husband was transferred to the Highlands and would be home a week or two in every four or six months. She had to share his time of leave with his family and friends. Then he was transferred to the Delta, which was much closer to home. The visit was one or two days every one or two weeks. That was a blessing enough during the time of war. Out of twenty two years of marriage, thirteen were complete separation. To consolidate the time they really lived together was three out of nine years.

Yes, Van found her husband a stranger. Physically, the man she remembered and dreamed of at nights was not the same anymore.

At home, during the mushrooming of the bars, the turn-over rate of servants was so high that Van adjusted to a new servant often with no problem. But for thirteen years, she and her children had lived in a home without any outsider. Van knew well that Chuong was annoyed to see the children drop their clothes and books on the floor. She herself did not like it either, but was not easy to tell them nor tidy up for them.

Sometimes Van wondered why many children here had their habit of throwing stuff on the floor. Actually they had too much of everything: clothes, toys, and books. At home, clothes were washed every morning (here once a week), books were rare and expensive, always treated with respect, put on the shelves or desks. Van sustained that she had failed in training her daughters.

They had tried their best to keep the house tidy for a few weeks after their father's arrival. But slowly, they returned to their own selves. Van tried so hard to smooth out their transitional life. In doing so, she created more troubles. When she fixed spaghetti or roastbeef for the girls, Chuong lost his patience, "Why do you have to spoil them? They shouldn't be picky. Why don't they eat Vietnamese dish?"

Van could understand that after many years in the "re-education camps," with barely enough to live on, Chuong could see the daily meal as a feast. She wondered what he thought about when he watched advertisements of dogs and cats' food, even served on a silver plate or tray!

Van hoped that eventually the children and their daddy would learn to compromise, adjust and co-exist. They seemed surprised when their daddy got irritated with their natural English speaking.

"Why don't you speak Vietnamese at home?" Chuong must feel that he lived among strangers. No doubt he never imagined that his dream of reuniting with his wife and four little girls would turn out like this. Van knew the feeling. Though she took English from the first year of junior high to the end of high school, speaking English was quite different. Van had a hard time with her communication. It was strange that instead of speaking slowly for a foreigner, the Americans usually spoke louder. To her amazement, the children with no previous English lessons, only after some months, outplayed her with their speaking. Children, especially girls, have the gift of learning

a foreign language. Van had to admit that sometimes her pride was hurt when her kids acted as interpreter and corrected her mis-pronunciation.

Still Van was glad that the girls were sensitive enough not to act smart with their daddy. They had been grown up. Van felt bad that the children had to restraint their talking in front of their daddy. Supper, the only meal they ate together on weekdays, became dull with Van's failing to carry on conversation with her husband and children.

She hoped that after staying here for a while, Chuong would understand. This was a small Vietnamese community of a few hundred, scattered all over town. Even the number had increased quickly in proportion to the demand of labor in the area, there were only three big gatherings in a year: the celebration of the Tet, a picnic, and the mid-autumn festival for children. Most of the time children spoke English to their Vietnamese friends, and also to their parents who knew English.

Van had planned to teach Cuc and Truc how to read and write Vietnamese. Somehow she put it off for so long because she realized that it was easy to teach a child to read and write but it was almost impossible to train her to think Vietnamese.

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Van considered it a blessing that Chuong found and accepted the job. After two months of acting, trying to make everyone, including herself, think that everything was fine while it was not, Van wanted to scream sometimes. More money to spend and more work to do. Everyday she had to fix Vietnamese dishes for her husband and American ones for her children. The telephone bills were high with long distance calls. Chuong got in touch with his friends scattered all over the states. One friend lead to others. While on the telephone, he usually forgot that he was talking away his dollar. Van just chuckled at the bill, "It's the therapy money!"

Now the schedule worked fine for her and the children. Chuong left for work before they got home. The children could act more natural. They hugged her and talked freely in English. Suppers were more relaxing and enjoyable without Chuong.

On Saturday mornings, when Chuong and the children still slept, Van again strolled along her flower beds to admire their fresh beauty under the early dew. With a cup of coffee in her hand, she resumed her dream of buying a house, marrying off her daughters and then entertaining them and their children every week-end. She was confident that it could be materialized. With two pay checks, sooner or later she could save enough for the down payment. Many families here, with a husband and wife worked similar jobs like her, had bought houses in the middle class neighborhood. Instead of moving out to have their privacy, the Vietnamese children stayed with their parents and pooled their salaries. They also followed the principle to save enough and buy later, not to buy now and pay master card. Surprised by the success of many Vietnamese, the American co-workers believed that Uncle Sam had given tax exemptions to these refugees.

V

Van was so happy to hear that Minh would come to visit her family. Since the escape, Minh had always been a strong person for her to lean on. He was the one who gave her encouragement when she felt low in the camp. He was the one who found her the sponsor and helped her settle in this country. With his help, Chuong had been released much earlier than many other prisoners. He was an energetic, optimistic and self-confident person. He gave Van the feeling that everything was so simple and every problem could be solved easily. Van was so sad when his family moved to California; his became her extended one. Their move made her desolate. They assured that they would arrange for her to come when they were well established there. Van never heard them mention about her coming over, despite Minh getting a job as an electronic technician, better than previous job as a security guard here. His wife opened a nail shop after working for somebody for a

while. Minh had also engaged in anti-communist activities there. Van was glad that many people still carried on the torch, hoping that some day they would liberate millions of compatriots from the communist yoke.

Van sensed that Chuong became more cheerful at Minh's presence. Before reaching Raleigh, Minh made his tour by driving from California via Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi where all large Vietnamese communities were found.

"To you, where is the best to live?," Van asked Chuong.

"It depends on an individual's life style. For you and the children, I think Raleigh is. I know you like the quiet and simple life. In California, we get more chance to do business. But it is also very competitive. Can you believe that doctors and dentists had to provide transportation for their patients as well as giving them gifts? As for unskilled workers, it is hard to get a job.

Housing is so high that a house or apartment is very often shared by more than one family. Many single persons rent out living room as sleeping area at night. As for the elders and those who cannot speak English, it is paradise. There is no need to speak the language to survive. Now you know why I never asked you to move over, but my wife loves it there. She hates the sewing job she got in Fayetteville. Now she can gossip all day and then count the big bucks at the end of the day. Doing nails is a good business. It only takes six months to learn the trade. With a smiling face and charming mouth, one can get big tips.

Actually, I can afford to quit working, but don't want to be called dependent," Minh laughed heartily. Turning to Chuong, he added,

"Have you heard that, in this country, women are number one, children number two, dogs and cats number three, and men number four?"

"Maybe that is what men have to pay for being chauvinist so long," Van replied jokingly.

"It could be. I only know that most of the divorces are filed by women."

"Are there many divorces over there?"

"Yes. I believe the number is increasing."

"Have you noticed the divorce rate in different groups? Such as social class, age,... I think it would be interesting for a sociologist to study if the American life style has affected the families of the new immigrants like us."

"I think our families had been affected by both the post-communist and American living. When we officers and officials of the government were sent to "re-education camps," most of the wives didn't have any means to support their families, so they learned how to survive and became independent. I believe the husband's role has diminished since then. As you know, our society had been turned upside down after 1975. The less educated became the governing, the high and middle classes being considered criminals. I fancied myself lucky that my wife didn't leave me after I was released from prison. It had happened to some of my friends."

"Do you remember lieutenant colonel Phan? Upon returning home from prison, he found out that a cadre took over both his house and wife. A lot of people criticized her. But to me, she was only the victim of circumstances. Being accustomed to a comfortable life with the service of a chauffeured car and a few servants, she never knew how to make money, but only spend it. Suddenly, the money was gone and then the threat of being thrown out of her own house. The cadre was her savior. As for him, a country and less educated man from the North, he must feel blessed to get a beautiful woman plus her 'palace'."

"By the way, I met Phan in Houston. He looked much better than the last time I saw him in Sai Gon. He worked as a salesman for an auto parts store where many of the customers are Vietnamese. I think he lived with a woman whose husband is still in Viet Nam.

Oh my, most of our lives here sound like soap operas. Here the Vietnamese community is small and most people live among Americans, so you don't hear many stories like me over there. My wife was one of the best sources. I called her nail shop the information center of California."

"You should write a book about what you heard," Van interrupted, "You know we, all of us Vietnamese at home and abroad, had been through a tremendous shock, economical, cultural and

moral. I appreciated what you had been through in those camps. Then, when out, you still had to adjust to a lot of big changes, at home and here. If using your California term, I figure the camp life could be the earth-quake and the life after the camp would be the after-shock. According to American standard, I believe everyone of us need counseling."

Van looked at her husband, sitting across from Minh. Holding a cigarette between his fingers, his eyes half closed. Is it the smoke or is he sleepy? She noticed that he talked to Minh when they were alone, but very often stayed out when she and Minh carried on the conversation. Van wondered if he felt uncomfortable with her straightforwardness. Was he worried that she would leave him? She better change the subject, "Have you started writing your 'How to' book?"

"What book?"

"Remember, at home, you said you would write a book on how to stay sane in the communist prison?"

"It's over now. After living here, I realize how hard it had been for the Americans. They have an easy life here. Over there, they lived in a nightmare. Do you remember our saying, 'The cut on rich's finger hurts so bad as the cut on the beggar's gut'?"

"Seriously, I still think you should write about your life."

"My life? What is there to write about, except to grow up, to go to school, get drafted, put in prison and now in self exile!"

"That's interesting enough. We owe it to the next generation to let them know about our time period. Fifty years from now, who would know how many millions and millions of us, and our country, had been through. Pray that communism would be history by then."

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Van felt embarrassed when entering the house.

The hostess was wearing a low cut green satin evening gown adorned with jade, choker and bracelet while she wore slacks and a blouse. She did not know that it was a house warming party. She thought that they only invited Minh for a family dinner.

Van only knew Tri and his wife through Minh. He was a sergeant under Minh's command. Settled here since 1975, they moved to his second house in the middle class neighborhood due to hard work. Tri worked as metal worker and his wife a seamstress on weekdays and waitress on weekends for a Japanese restaurant. Chuong looked astonished to meet the chic hostess, a sergeant's wife and ex-fruit vendor at home. But Minh did not show any surprise upon seeing five women overdressed for a house warming party. Each seemed to try to overshadow the others with her gown and jewelry. Van noticed that Tri's wife and two other women had their nose ridges raised to make them look more Caucasian, their eyes lids sewn up to double it, and tattooed with black eyebrows. Van had to admit that Tri's wife looked younger than her age, thanks to her fair and smooth complexion. Van wondered if she had a face-lift.

As for the meal, it was a big feast. The hostess went to a great length for the preparation. She had to drive five hours to a Chinese restaurant in D.C. to buy roasted ducks and a whole roasted pig. She took pride in serving her delicious eggrolls, jelly fish salad, and crab meat soup.

Van felt sorry for the women who had to sit on the floor when wearing evening gowns. Over forty men and women seemed content squatted on the white sheets spread on the floors of the dining and living rooms. Looking at the beautiful wrapped gifts piled up on the dining table at the corner of the room, Van felt bad that she did not bring any. Nevertheless Van believed Tri did not care about hers. She had the impression that Tri and his wife mainly intended to show off their success to Minh and Chuong. At home, probably Minh never came to their house which could be in one small alley in the poor neighborhood where a car could not get in.

When Tri raised his glass to propose a toast, "To my reunion with my major and major Chuong, his friend here," Chuong looked uneasy. Perhaps since his imprisonment, he tried to forget about his rank or he did not want to compare his "have not" with the "have" of a former sergeant. But Minh was very much at ease,

"I'm glad to visit your family and the town we first settled down in this country. I still like the slow pace of this area. Maybe when I retire, I'll move back to live, especially now that my friend is here."

Something struck Van tonight.

Tri's daughter got home in the middle of the meal. She is a beautiful young girl, slender, long legs, good complexion, fixed high ridge nose. Clad in tight mini black leather skirt and red shirt, she walked in the hallway with her arm around her American boyfriend's waist and his around hers.

"Come eat, honey!" Tri's wife cheerfully called out.

It was a proud picture for any American family, a daughter brought home a handsome boyfriend. However, seeing some of the guests glancing at each others, Van sensed their disapproval.

For generations, the Vietnamese have always rejected a woman's marriage to a foreigner, even of the same race, like the Chinese or Japanese. In their mind, the marriage is only for money.

In a society that is based on the strict control of the family where the parents in older customs would arrange the marriage for their children, love did not play a vital role. Social codes had had great effect. For almost one hundred years of French domination, the percentage of French-Vietnamese intermarriage was low. A name "me Tay" was invented to call a woman whose husband was French and later changed to "me My" for American. The word "me" could be derived from the French "mère," but for generations it just meant bad status for a woman. During the thirty years of war, bars had been mushrooming in cities around military installations. Thousands of Eurasians and Amerasians had been brought into the world. Still, that fact did not change the Vietnamese opinions about interracial marriage.

The concept had been deep rooted in the Vietnamese mind that, even after living here, in the U.S. for many years, they still have hard time to accept.

Anyway, Tri's wife seemed happy and proud of her daughter and her boyfriend. But when she later talked about Danny's love for Vietnamese food, "He can eat 'nuoc mam' (a pungent fish sauce)," Van considered that she believed she had turned their would-be-son-in-law into a Vietnamese just as at several weddings where American grooms had been done in Vietnamese costumes, as the bride's families had wished them to become Vietnamese.

Van wondered what her reaction would be if one of her daughters brought home an American boyfriend. It was strange that, all along, she painted her would-be-grandchildren, through the images of her little nieces and nephew. She never imagined that they would be mixed blood!

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"How could Tri have money to buy such a nice house?" Chuong inquired of Minh on the way home.

"Simple. He, his wife, and all the children have worked and pooled their salaries. They bought their first small house, sold it with profit, and then bought this one.

Visiting my friends in Texas and Louisiana before getting here, I was amazed to see how well we refugees have done. Most people bought houses. Some pooled the salaries of the whole family to pay off mortgages in a few years.

A fisherman in Louisiana came to a car dealer, in flip flop shabby shorts and T-shirt, to look for a car for his son who graduated from high school, such pride for his family, the first diploma the family ever held. The salesman reluctantly greeted him, being cocksure it would be a waste of time.

After a long bargain, he left, to the salesman relief. The next day, he returned. The salesman tried to shun him but to no avail.

"I'm here to get the car," he said.

The salesman searched for the simple way to explain the paperwork. Before he uttered any word, the fisherman pulled stacks of bills from a brown grocery bag.

Most of the refugees settled in Versailles, a small town edging the Gulf in Louisiana, were ardent anti-communist catholic fishermen. They left the North for the South at the country partition

in 1954. Their second resettlement here was much more prosperous than the first. Living in apartments to start with, in a few years they took over the suburb across the road. Literally, there were no more Americans in their sector.

Contrasted to the hustle of Little Saigon in California, this is a quiet fishing village. Old men and women still clad in black ba ba and cone palm hats tending their vegetable gardens that they created along the banks of the affluent winding behind their houses. Perhaps to these old people the change of geography did not change their life style a bit.

Even though there were several grocery stores to provide them with all they need, they still have an open market in the early hours before dawn, then masses everyday. Part of their happiness was contributing money for their church.

Van wondered what her husband thought about those success stories. Was he impressed, encouraged, or discouraged? She could not see his face from her back seat to guess. For herself, she believed that this is the land of opportunity. As for Tri's family, if staying home, they would live in a shanty in a Sai Gon slum, and his children may never finish high school.

VI

Chuong became more reserved. He seemed to give up playing his role as head of the family.

He had no choice, being separated from the family for so long and then reunited in a complete different social setting. Van felt sad to see him withdraw to his room to listen to Vietnamese music by himself while the girls were watching TV in the living room. Many times she asked him to join them, but he did not stay long.

He never said anything to her, but Van believed that he felt isolated in his very own family. Even herself, she surmised that the girls became more independent. They were less close to her. They did not go shopping with her anymore. Between part time jobs and school, the two older girls spent less time at home and shared less meals with the family.

In this vacation, Van had to persuade Chuong and the girls to go to Charleston, then to Myrtle Beach.

Since high school years, Van had been interested in history. She wanted to know how the people had lived. She wished to visit the historic sights. She read about Co Loa Castle. It was built, with the help of the Holy Golden Turtle, of a special spiral structure. The deity also gave the king his claw to be used as a bow's trigger. This bow could release ten thousand arrows at one shot.

The neighboring (South Chinese) king had many times failed to conquer the country, then had to hold peace between the two nations. To fake his good will, he asked for the hand of the rival king's daughter for his son. Since she was the only child, the prince then went to live in his wife's kingdom. They lived happily. Then the prince fraudulently exchanged the trigger, pretended to be homesick and left his wife to visit his family. He gave her a goose feather cape, and told her to leave a trail if she had to flee in any misadventure. After the prince's departure, the enemy attacked. The king was confident that with his bow he would never be defeated. But this time, to his astonishment, it lost the magic and could only release one arrow at a time. He took the princess to flee on horse. After a long riding, he was encircled by the ocean. The deity appeared in front of him and said, "The enemy is behind you." Turning back, the king found a trail of goose feathers. Drawing out his royal sword, he beheaded his beloved daughter, threw her body into the water and galloped himself into the ocean, the noble way chosen by many defeated royalties.

The princess' blood swallowed by the oysters turned into pearls. When the prince caught up, it was too late. He jumped into a well nearby. Legend said that the well water had become ideal for cleansing and shining pearls. As a matter of fact, it became later one of the required tributes by any Chinese emperor. Legends had always been entwined in Vietnam's history, but father told Van that he had been to the site where Co Loa Castle was supposed to be.

"Did you see anything left?" Van inquired him.

"No, only an earthen hill."

"Does it have a spiral shape?"

"From afar, it seemed to be. It was too bad that we didn't have any trace of many palaces and citadels of many dynasties."

Father was the only one in the big family who had visited many historic and well known sights. He had not had anybody to share his interest with. He only smiled when his brother-in-law commented, "I don't understand why you wasted your time and money to go that far to look at an earthen hill?"

He told Van about the places he had been. To her, it seemed unreal. At the time he talked about his trips, it was unsafe even to get out of the city during the day and a complete "no, no" at night. She could not believe that there had been a time when Father went to Sapa, a northernmost resort high up in the mountains where clouds flew just above your head. He visited the pagoda built in the third century and the ones on top, on the flanks, in the caves of the mountains where for many generations emperors, mandarins, and poets came to visit and write their poems on stones to praise their beauty.

Since she had her memory, war had been a way of life. She could not dream of having the chance to visit the places that Father had been. Even in this young American country with only over two hundred years, Van still did not have time and money to see what she wished to.

Now, she went to visit Charleston, one of the most prosperous pre-civil war ports. The old city of special charm with many beautiful mansions of unique sideways structure. Van was also interested in its many Tara era plantations. Magnolia was not as magnificent as Tara, but it had been loved for many acres of well planned and well kept plants and flowers.

Walking among thousands of bushes and plants with colorful flowers reflecting on many dark gray ponds, Van left the busy and worrisome world behind to get back to a time of peace and tranquility over a hundred years ago. In this garden, she found the unification of nature. The hundred year old oaks lining the alley had been witnesses of many events in this plantation, from the happy days in peace, the plunder of Union troops in war, their torture of a slave for hidden treasure to the death of the owner. To Van, the owner had been unified with plants and trees of his plantation. His body was buried here. It had been dissolved in this soil, and these oaks had absorbed it to nourish themselves. Van rationalized these trees had some part of the owner in them. She wanted to share her feelings with Chuong, but she had wandered too far away from his seating. His bad leg could not carry him very long. The girls had left the garden. None of them was interested in flowers and plants. They preferred the shopping centers. Van thought about Monet's garden and the famous paintings of his flowers. She wished she could paint, or write poems. Van was disappointed that she did not inherit any talent from her grandfather. In his generation, all students were taught how to write poems. In eight verses of seven words each, which had to rhyme at the end, the poet could express his feelings. Not many novels had been written in the old days, so the younger generations only learned about their forefathers through poems.

The live oaks alley made Van muse about the poem by a mandarin's wife describing her feeling while passing by the ruined Thang Long Palace of the Le Dynasty:

The autumn grass spirit lingered on the carriage and horse's old impressions

Twilight shone on the ruined mansion and palace's foundations.

Living in the country of constant war and destruction, and before the raise and fall of dynasties, many Vietnamese often felt melancholy and sorrow for the defeated. Van could share the poetess' feeling about the ruined palaces. It represented a dynasty for many years. Now it was destroyed and so was the dynasty itself. Van could feel it because now a new dynasty had been built in her country. Yet, there was nothing she could do.

She knew that her children never had that feeling of the Vietnamese. They would never share the poet's sentiment in front of the ruins like herself. For over a thousand years, the country either fought against the foreign conquerors, staged wars against weaker neighboring nations, or carried on civil wars. Men lost confidence in their ability to control their own life. He believed in fate and

realized his life was fragile and short. Therefore, even the best privileged ones had to exclaim sceptically, "Fame and wealth did not last longer than the cooking time of a pot of millet."

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Van loved to walk on the beach at night.

It was less crowded. Some small groups of teen-agers fired their fireworks. Several men and women were jogging. Some older people walked their dogs. If not for the high rise buildings in the background, Van could think it was Vung Tau beach. The same dark, clear, high sky with twinkling stars. The same dark gray ocean joined with the gray sky from afar. The same waves indifferent to the dread of the boat people, or the delight of the surfers. Van shivered to think about the escape in a small boat at night. Just like a toy boat in the huge ocean. She could not believe that, like hundreds of thousands of people, she had made such a dangerous decision.

After several years of living in a peaceful and free country, Van suffered to think how unfortunate her country was, a country where many people, like herself lived in war all their lives. Not only in her time but for over a thousand years the war had lingered on and off. This was the second civil war in the last two hundred years and also the second time the country was divided. But perhaps now, in the latter one, were the most dangerous victors who tried to destroy the social structure of their own country for the benefit of communism. The conquerors who treated their own countrymen worse than animals. The tides were getting higher, so were the breezes. Van smelt salt and pungent ocean air. The waves covered the beach, and then pulled back to the ocean, making rhythmic roaring sounds. The sky was high and clear. The moon was bright. It must be the thirteenth of the lunar month, since the moon was not completely full. Van remembered the nights she walked beside Chuong in Vung Tau beach not long after their wedding. Holding his arm, she told him about her plan of having two boys and two girls. She planned to move out of the city when the war was over and he would be discharged from the service. In her mind, she assumed that her side, the nationalists, would be the winners.

While making plans for their future, Van had always tried to forget her fear. Could Chuong make it to the end of the war? Now he made it, but as a defeatist, not as she anticipated. And her plan of having two boys and two girls was not materialized. Van wondered what Chuong was thinking about her not having a boy to carry his family's name? Did he ever consider it as important as his parents and other relatives did at home? Did he realize that the next descent in this country might stop venerating ancestors as we had done for generations? Van conceived that it would be impossible to keep the tradition. Gradually, the younger generations would assimilate the Christian main stream of this country. It was hard for her to explain the belief that the majority of the Vietnamese had followed to her children.

It could be the best mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism and many more. It might sound strange to other people, but to the Vietnamese, it had been a way of life. Except for Christians, Vietnamese children did not need any formal religious teaching. Through family and social traditions, they learned to respect their ancestors, grandparents, parents, elders, family hierarchy and teachers. They learned to do good deeds to others. When they met with misfortune, they accepted it with courage, believing that they had done something wrong to somebody, perhaps in the previous lives. Now they had to pay and try to do good to clear their mistakes. Individuals were not important. Each had to fulfill the responsible role in the big family.

Like most Asians, Vietnamese children were more bound to rules and restrictions. At home, they had to obey their parents and elder siblings. At school, they had to respect and obey teachers, and were taught to memorize their texts. As the eldest daughter-in-law in the family, Van was expected to have a son, to take care of the parents-in-law before her own. She must look after the annual commemorations of her husband's ancestors. Everything seemed to come into order naturally.

When the communists took over, the whole social structure had been changed at home while, in this country, a small Vietnamese community could not convey to their children the value, the

sense of responsibility to the big family. In a way, Western individualism gave a child more freedom and opportunity to fully develop his curiosity and ability. Young Vietnamese who grew up in this society did not have to show their absolute obedience and respect accordingly to family hierarchy. In many homes, the children seemed embarrassed about their parents' language barrier and unfamiliarity with the new lives. The word "big brother" and "big sister" were mostly dropped off while addressing elder siblings. Instead, the first names were often called.

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Chuong looked so lonely sitting by himself on the wooden step, his cigarette flickering in the ocean breeze. He could not walk very far with Van neither in the garden nor on the beach. He smoked a lot. Many times Van wanted to ask him to cut down. She decided not to. Maybe later. Smoking was his only enjoyment now. What was he thinking? About his years in prison? About his constant hunger? Was he sad that she did not go to see him during his imprisonment? He never mentioned anything.

But Minh said that in prison one thought more about food than his family. When they were sent to work in the jungle, they ate everything, from leaves, grasshoppers, bee maggots to raw corn, sweet potatoes, manioc if they could hide from the cadres. Upon returning to the prison at the end of the work day, they were searched at the gate for any hidden goods. Even a hot pepper was not allowed.

He could be thinking about those who died of disease in the "re-education camps," those who committed suicide because they could not take it anymore. All the prisoners did not have any sentence. They had never been tried. They had only been told that if they took the indoctrination well, they would be released soon. Nobody knew for sure what the yardstick was for their indoctrination. The release date was obscure. They would never see the end.

Many tried to escape. They were either captured and put in a confinement cell, or would be dead somewhere. They had a very slim chance to get out of the jungle. If they could get to any hamlet, villagers would report them to save their skin. Furthermore, everything was rationed, nobody could afford to feed another mouth, even if they felt pity for the escapees. During the war, the South Vietnamese government had experienced great failure when sending agents to carry out sabotage within the enemy's territory. Where could a stranger hide when units of three families were set up to watch over each other's activities. "Only in prison could one find out who had integrity, dignity and courage," Minh said, "I have seen some people betray their former comrades-in-arms for some trivial food. Some thought that if they brown-nosed, they could be released sooner, but many of us knew the communists too well. I still believed that they tried to confuse us on their release policy, and make us betray each other. Nobody knew what their principle was. It was not based on our ranks or positions in the government."

How different people's minds react, Van puzzled. Imprisoned in the same conditions, Minh liked to babble about his miserable period of life. He both talked about the sad and funny things which happened to him and other prisoners, but Chuong seemed to try to erase that time period.

"Do you want to get back to the room?" Van asked her husband.

"No. Not yet. It feels good out here."

Van felt the sticky salt on Chuong's arm. She also felt its age. It was not the strong and firm muscled arm she had known. It was the soft and skinny one of an old man. She was not familiar with the white head yet. Besides her dark brown hair, his white one looked whiter under the silvery moon light. That hair, Van did not have the chance to see it change from a speckle of white to salt and pepper, but from shiny dark brown to white. That wrinkled face with tired and deep set eyes and hollowed cheeks was not the face she remembered. She remembered the man in his thirties. Now, she found a stranger, a man in his late forties who looked seventy. She had to learn again about his habits and to live with him, but unlike when they first married, now there was a lack of passion and not much planning for the future.

Formerly, each time Van got pregnant, she loved to discuss with Chuong the name for a boy. They had to find a name that was not given to anybody in both families. Contrary to the Western custom, it was disrespectful to name a child after anybody in the big families. During the dynasties, candidates had to remember all emperors and his relatives' names and had to avoid writing them in their essays or poems in the examinations.

But all four times, a boy's name was not needed.

Van moved close to her husband. Held his arm with both her hands and put her head over his shoulder; she suffered that she did not bear him a boy. Even though Chuong never voiced anything, Van felt and knew that all along he wished to have one, like most men.

A boy to commemorate the anniversary of the dead was no longer important now. Van hoped Chuong realized that after living here several months. She doubted that the tradition would be carried on by her children's generation. She believed that after her husband and she were gone, the girls would put away the altar she set up. The most they would do is to put flowers on her grave on her birthday. It would be OK with her, but what would Chuong think? Had he ever thought about it?

Van rubbed her cheek against that of her husband. She expected that he would put his arm around her. Looking at the dark ocean and hearing the roaring sounds of the high waves, Van felt too small and scared. She knew that in a few more years, the children would move away, and the two of them would be alone.

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Many times Van was tempted to ask Chuong if he had had an affair, had a mistress at one time, or perhaps many times.

At a wedding reception, one of Chuong friend's wives took Van aside to tell her a secret.

After glancing around to make sure nobody was within earshot, she whispered,

"You know, I love you like my own sister."

Van was staring at the woman. She was only an acquaintance, a wife of her husband's fellow officer. They had met several times at weddings, funerals and gatherings. They carried on conversations but nothing mutual. The woman loved to show experiences and was always eager to give nonsense advices. Once, she told the first time pregnant woman,

"Stop eating rice soup!"

"But that's the only thing I could eat. My morning sickness was so bad that I couldn't hold any food."

"Rice soup is so gluey, and so is the baby when it is born."

So what was the woman going to tell her? Did she want Van to join in their business. Van did not know what kind of business many of the officer's wives engaged in, but she was certain that many had something going on. Everybody knew that with inflation skyrocketing they could hardly make the ends meet with their husbands' salaries, less to afford all the glittering diamond chokers, earrings, bracelets and rings.

Did she want to send some "ghost" or "decorative" soldiers to Van's husband's unit? The former meant an imaginary soldier with real name and number. Actually, the person did exist, but he may live right in Sai Gon. The latter meant the soldier would be sent to the unit, but kept in the safe position. It could be a surprise to outsiders how much influence Vietnamese women play in all aspects, family, business, military, and politics. Many people blamed Mme. Nhu for the fall of the Diem regime, but she was only one of the exceptions, those who wanted to show off power instead of pulling the strings behind the scene like the majority.

Van fancied the woman looked at her with pity. Did she really love her like a sister?

The woman whispered softer,

"Don't tell your husband that I told you. He kept a mistress in the province."

She seemed to stare at Van's face to see any change. Van did not know how she looked at the time but thought her heart stopped beating. Actually she did not feel hurt, just shocked.

She looked at the woman and wanted to ask,

"How did you know about it," but could not utter the words.

The woman seemed to read her mind,

"Many people in the province knew about it. I heard that she was beautiful and young. Don't let your husband make out that you know about it. I'll find out where she lives for you."

On the way home, Van wanted to ask her husband right away if he had a mistress. But seeing that he had too much to drink and remembering Mother always said that it was important to choose the right time to talk, she kept quiet. Van had to admit that she could not follow Mother's advice all the time. But, when on bed, Chuong fell to sleep quickly, and started snoring in ten minutes. That kept Van from falling to sleep in addition to a thousand of questions in her mind.

Was it true that Chuong had a mistress? When did he start having the affair? Was it after Van had Cuc, the third daughter? It could be true. It seemed that Chuong was less interested in making love to her. When he did, he was not passionate as before. Waking up in the middle of the sleep, he made love to her quietly, and went back to sleep quickly. No love talks, just to fulfill a need. Perhaps he was disappointed to find her on the bed instead of his mistress. Was it because she gained too much weight? During pregnancy, she craved for sweet. Everybody said it would be a boy. She built up hope. Another disappointment for everyone including herself. Many people consoled her,

"It's good to have five girls in a row. That would be 'five dragon princesses'!"

No, Van thought. She did not want that many children. She had wished to have two boys and two girls so they would have somebody to play with and confide in when grown up, remembering her lonely childhood in a house filled of brothers. Her sister was too much older to be close.

Van admitted that her body was out of shape. After the baby was born, she could not squeeze into her before pregnancy clothes. However nobody made any comments, not even Chuong. It seemed natural, after having three babies and getting older. Therefore Van was not concerned about her gaining weight. Now she had to cut down her eating and do some exercise, some sit-ups everyday. But it was too late. Chuong had lost interest in her. Since when? Could be during her pregnancy. Her pride was hurt. What should she do? Look up the girl and ask her to leave Chuong alone? Result was doubtful. Confront Chuong? If he denied? Showed him the facts? But if he admitted? Then what? Push him away or beg him to drop the girl? If he refused? Ask for a divorce? He may be happy to do so. Perhaps with the support of his family. Did his family know about the affair? Did the girl have children with Chuong? Did she have a boy? If she got a boy, Van completely lost the ground.

Van heard Cuc stir in the her crib in the next room. She tiptoed to check on her then quietly lay down next to Mai, her eldest daughter. A few months afterward, out of curiosity, Van went to My Tho to look up the girl. She lived with her parents at an old brick, red tile roofed house surrounded by mature fruit trees. They belonged to the high class of this province. Her father could be a landowner or high official or both. She was about Van's age at the time of her marriage. Without makeup, she still had the fresh and innocent beauty of a provincial girl. From her slim but well formed figure, Van believed she had not had any baby. Perhaps Chuong was still courting her.

He could have a wedding here and Van would not know about it. A story was heard many times. After a soldier died, more than one wife turned up to claim the body. It was strange that each held a marriage license. When a soldier transferred to a new place, if he wished to marry a local girl, he could bribe or hire some people to play his parents, and the wedding was organized. In some cases, the higher officers would play the role of the groom's family. The groom would swear that he was a bachelor. If it was a lie, who cared? In this time of uncertainty, live today, die tomorrow, nothing was important.

What would Van do if Chuong divorced, or just left her. With three small children and no career, she could hardly make the ends meet with this escalated inflation. She felt headed for a dead end. Nobody to talk to. Van wondered whether her own family would accept the fact that her husband had a mistress. In Mother's time, it was expected a wife would let her husband have a concubine if she could not bear him a son. Many times the wife would hand-pick one and arrange for the wedding.

"No way I could live in the same house with a woman who shared my husband," she told herself. Her generation had changed. Could be the influence of the Western culture.

If Chuong really had an affair with that young girl, Van could hardly compete. The only thing she could do was to lose some weight and flatten her tummy. But she could never have the freshness and youth of that girl. Van thought that when a man was interested in somebody else, he would pay no attention to his wife's beauty, or else he had the ability to compartmentalize his feeling that he could maintain his love, perhaps sexual attractions, to many women at the same time. Van was scared when she thought that the girl could be a communist agent. Yes, she could seduce Chuong to get information. The communists then could decide to shun his operation or ambush him. Many times Van warned Chuong,

"Be careful, your area is well known as one of the communist strongholds."

Chuong was always confident,

"Don't worry. 'When the tangerine's skin is thick, one has sharp fingernail'."

"Sometimes over confidence could lead to disaster," Van deliberated, "Watch out for the communist schemes of using beautiful women to get information."

Van carefully observed Chuong's expressions to detect any change. He could be surprised or suspected that she had known about his affair. She found no special manifestation.

Chuong just laughed,

"You must read a lot of espionage books."

"Espionage had been existed for centuries. Women's beauties have been playing a key role."

Van dared not confront Chuong. She did not have the nerve to find out the truth. Every few weeks, when they got together, Van could not completely enjoy it. She always wondered,

"Is this the last time?"

Chuong could be killed by a sniper on the way back to the province, or in the battle. At night, when they were in bed, Van tenderly watched Chuong. He fell to sleep easily. His face was tan healthy and calm. There was no sign of a nightmare of the battles. Van gently embraced his body, to feel his warmth, to ensure herself that he was still alive and they were still together. But for how long? She dreaded to think that one day this body could be cold, this face pale and no more rhythmic breathing.

Van made up her mind. She should not ask Chuong whether he was having an affair. She told herself that nothing happened. They could live happily ever after. But Van thought she needed to have a career for herself in case something happened, a divorce, or Chuong's death.

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Van felt strange to be in the classroom with the freshly graduated high school students. She noticed that more girls entered college now than her time. One of the reasons was that, due to the war, men had to postpone their marriages. Girls then realized that they had to build a career for themselves. Another reason was that male students got drafted when they flunked baccalaureat examinations. They did not have the chance to take over the girls, due to the limit to their age. Van felt sorry for all the young boys. They had been under pressure. The draft hung over their heads. Even when they passed the high school exams, they had to pass their college examinations every year to meet the draft age requirement. The classroom was overcrowded. One had to come early to get a chair, otherwise sit on the floor. Whenever she missed the chair, there was always some young man nice enough to give up his for her. One time, she was surprised that the man who gave up his chair was older than her. She always thought herself the eldest in class. He was in his mid-thirties, slightly overweight, a beer belly had started to form. Van gracefully denied the offer for the sake of formality. She acted like she only sat down because of his insistence. At the end of the class, when passing by the man outside, she flashed a big smile and thanked him again. Since that day she did not have to worry about getting a seat. The man always set his book on a chair next to him to reserve it for her. Van wondered why, at his age, that man was not in the service. Perhaps

he was a civil servant who was in reserve. But later on Van found out that he was an active captain working at the Headquarters of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The man always showed his friendliness. He could feel closer to her because they were the two oldest students, people of the same generation. They talked about their living in their native birth places in the North, prior to the partition of the country.

Piece by piece Van put his life into pictures. It was almost similar to Chuong's. After failing bacalaureat part II, he was drafted. Got his baccalaureat a few years after out of Thu Duc Reserved School. He had worked in an office since, he must have good connections.

Van believed that the man was married with children. She did not know what made her think so. He did not wear a ring, but many men never liked to wear rings; just her instinct. Van felt that the man seemed to like her. He stayed longer and longer after class to talk with her. Maybe he needed somebody to talk to. As for Van, she just considered him an acquaintance, not close, but somehow she felt flattered that a man was still interested in her. In the conversation, Van tried not to reveal anything about herself. However Van was certain that the man knew that she was a married woman with children. Among the fresh and slim young girls, her chubby figure gave her away. Everyday, she then did more sit-ups to try to flatten her tummy quickly. Sometimes Van wondered why she got the determination to get back in shape to beautify herself? Did she want to win her husband back from that beautiful young provincial girl? But the story could be not true. Chuong might not have an affair. It could be his rival officers plot to undermine his family. Yes, nothing could damage the man more than destroying his family. It could be some officer who wanted his position, or Chuong wanted somebody else's position. In these days, one had to watch out, or he could be easily stabbed on the back. After almost thirty years of war, the society had been turned upside down. The values had changed, not mainly based on one's integrity, but on his position and money. It was a vicious cycle. Money brought position. Positions brought money. Most people knew that each position had a price tag. A province chief position had a higher price than a district chief, and so on. The price was also based on the prosperity of the area. The investor got his capital and profits back easily.

VII

Thinking about buying a house, Van wanted to establish a concrete foundation for her family here.

It had been a year since Chuong reunited with them. He seemed content with his job of driving forklift for a warehouse.

Van thought it would be a good time to discuss purchasing a house with him. But to her surprise, Chuong disagreed,

"I don't see any need to buy a house. We're fine here."

"I think we lose money on the rent."

"We don't save much on paying thirty years of interest."

"Hope we make money on the appraisal."

Actually Van thought more about the steadiness of their lives here in buying a house. Actually she wished to buy a small farm, not very far from the city where she was going to plant a lot of fruit trees, at least one of each kind. She would plant two oak trees on two sides of the driveways as her grandmother had planted two ficus on front of her roofed gate. The two big trees had provided shade for many market-goers on the hot days for years. Now remembering those two trees and all the fruit trees planted by Grandma, Van realized that Grandma had created the continuity for the family.

How could Van explain her feelings to Chuong. It was something that she felt the urge of doing, but it seemed unrealistic. In this industrialized country, more people moved away from their farms and nobody attached to the land. One had to plant the trees and watch them grow, blossom and bear

fruits to love the land. Van wished that her children would not move away too far so they would only come home once a year. Perhaps Van felt lonely in this new country with no relatives, but she believed that many older Americans had felt the nostalgia about the Waltons too.

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"Remember Colonel Tung?" Chuong asked Van.

"Not sure."

"He was at Thu Duc Reserved Officers School."

"What about him?"

"He opened a grocery store in San Jose."

"One of the smart guys. Could be his wife who saved gold for the exile days," Van thought.

"He asked me to come there help him run the store."

Van looked at her husband's face to see his expression. Had he asked for the job? Was he unhappy here? She could not find the answer from his face.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him I'll think about it."

Van felt a little shocked and hurt. It meant he may move over there.

"So, what do you think?"

"It's up to you."

They did not talk about it anymore. But many times Van thought it was not a bad idea. She could see how bored her husband felt: Wake up every morning in the empty house, wife and children have gone to work and school. Eat lunch alone. Go and drive a forklift to move crates of merchandises around the warehouse. Get back at night to the quiet home. Everyone has been in bed. Try to be a mouse. Mow the lawn on the weekend. Share meals with family but conversations are limited. The children did not have anything to talk with their father. And Van found it was hard to find a subject to carry on the conversations with her husband.

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"The flight is one hour delay," Van turned around to tell Chuong.

"One hour!" Truc exclaimed.

"You should have called them, Mom!"

Van felt the irritation in Cuc's voice. She looked at the four girls. They seemed to blame her for the would-be long boring hour of waiting. They whispered to each other.

"Mom! We'll be at the giftshop."

"Wait! Take the handbag to the gate upstairs for your father."

"That's OK. I'll get it!"

"Let them take it up there for you. The giftshop is also upstairs."

"It's OK. I can handle it."

Van had to slow down to be in the same pace with Chuong.

She felt so sad that their children were indifferent to their father's moving to California. Sometimes she had the feeling they were even happy or actually relieved about him moving away. Truc, the youngest, was too young to remember her father. Even Mai the eldest had only blurry memories. Before his imprisonment, Chuong was only home on weekends, sometimes every other weekend. Now the children saw him as a stranger to the family. They had to remember not to speak English in front of him. They had tried so hard, but not as their father expected to be neat. Chuong did not like the mirror to be speckled with toothpaste. He did not want clothes on the floor.

Van felt responsible for the girls unneatness. She often tidied up after them. She did not remember that Chuong was particularly neat when they were at home. Perhaps, thanks to the servant, her house was always well kept as he expected. Or the prison life, with only a small space big enough to spread a reed mat to sleep on and to keep all belongings of clothing, blanket and food

brought by family on their visits of every six months, made Chuong become more concerned about tidiness. His children seemed at ease when he was not around. They would never know and feel what he had been through. They would not know what hunger was when one only got a piece of manioc as big as three fingers for breakfast. After a whole morning of labor in the field, lunch included a few pieces of manioc again, and a bowl of few vegetables floating in water seasoned with salt. Rice was a luxury and was weighed on a scale. A serving was only a few table spoons that one could finish in two gulplings.

Van often heard that "a day in prison was as long as thousand years outside." But that was regular prison where one knew his term. In the "re-education camps", one did not have the sentence and lost the rights of a human being. The prisoners' lives were in the hands of the cadres who did not have much education but knew communist mottos by heart. Van wished that Minh would write about his imprisonment. She believed that the people of today and the generations to come should know how many thousands of people had suffered in those communist prisons.

"Do you want something to drink?" Van inquired.

"No. I'm OK."

Van looked at Chuong before sitting down next to him. He had gained some weight. His face showed a little bit less wrinkle and the skin was less yellowish. But he looked tired, dark circles around his eyes. Lack of sleep, he must struggle within himself making the decision to move.

He put his arm on her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. Her head was on his shoulder. This was the first time since their marriage they showed their affection in public. It could be the last. Van took his hand and looked at the wrinkles. No wedding ring band on the finger. The night before he went for "re-education," Chuong took it off to give Van. She had sold it to buy food.

"Were you sad that I didn't come to visit you at prison?"

"No. I understood. Many prisoners didn't have relatives come either. We knew that it was a very rough journey. It took father three days and three nights from Sai Gon to Ha Noi by train. He usually stayed overnight in Ha Noi and took the bus to Son La early in the morning. He had to walk ten kilometers (6 miles) to the camp. One time, he came after I had been transferred to another camp in Vinh Phu. It happened to many people. They transferred us from one camp to another without prior notice. In fact, I was glad that you didn't go. You could be robbed easily, especially since you didn't know the North as well as father.

Minh's sister living in Ha Noi, came to visit him regularly, every six months. He always shared his food with me. It was very hard to find somebody you could trust in prison."

Van closed her eyes to watch her own movie, not the one on the TV screen hanging high in the room.

It was sixteen months ago, at this same airport, she came to pick up her husband after thirteen years of separation. She had planned to have a house on a big lot outside the city, just as she had dreamed about when the war would be over at home. The war had been over, but millions of lives had come to a disastrous turn. Still, she was confident that with the reunion of her husband they could put the suffering years behind and rebuild their lives in this new land. They would grow old together in peace.

Van had not thought about the big adjustment Chuong had gone through. He felt that he did not belong to his own family. She did not know how she had changed since their separation, and what did her husband think about her? The children did not talk much to him.

Very often, Van tried to start a conversation at a few meals the family shared during the weekends,

"How is my 'pho'?"

"It's OK."

"Just OK? I thought that I could open a 'pho' bistro with my many years of practicing."

The children just laughed.

"Oh, Cuc and Truc didn't know how 'pho' is supposed to taste. When you two grew up, we couldn't afford to eat 'pho' anymore. I'm sure Mai and Lan remembered when Dad and I took you out to eat for breakfast whenever he was home."

"It's been a long time."

"But your 'pho' is almost as good as the one in D.C.," Mai added to flatter Van.

"Daddy! Do you think my 'pho' is as good as in Sai Gon?"

"The beef is better. It's tender," Chuong seemed serious.

Van always remembered to serve him first, as it had been at home, but she sensed that he felt he had lost the father's authority. Many times Van suggested that he keep the account and pay the bills, but he refused.

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When did he plan to leave? He must have felt that Van and the children had been doing fine without him.

If Minh, or some friends lived in this area, Chuong would not move, Van thought. She felt sad that the children did not try to hide their joy about their father's moving.

Van opened her eyes to look up at Chuong. She had not yet become familiar with his tired and wrinkled face. After many years of separation, she had to learn to live with a new man. She was still learning, and now a new separation. Van knew this one was for good.

What was this life all about? Nine years of marriage when death was everpresent in the back of the mind. Thirteen years of separation and now an unspoken farewell. Van held back her tears. Did Chuong ever get the chance to make decisions for his life? Drafted after high school. Imprisoned because of the draft. How much suffering he had been through these years in prison. Now forty-eight years old and he was going to stock cans on the shelves, pack bean sprouts, vegetables, and carry rice bags to customers' cars!

After almost two decades and many drastic changes in their lives, now she could make her own living and was confident of her look, Van considered Chuong's affair a small cluster of cloud drifting by. But out of curiosity, not jealousy or insecurity, Van wanted to inquire about it. Then she decided not to again. If it was true, she implanted a sense of guilt in him. Instead Van wished that he had had an affair with that beautiful young provincial girl. She wished that they had a son.

The stewardess came to the gate. Chuong was lingering. He was the last one in line. His arm around her waist. They walked slowly to prolong the last few minutes together.

Chuong handed the ticket to the stewardess. Van felt the firm squeeze on her shoulders. Tears blurred her view.

"Call me when you get there," her voice choking.

A bird cried in despair.

A lone bird disbanded from its flock on its way southward.

A gust blew in the late afternoon.

Van felt cold. She held Truc closer to her.

The sky was low and slate gray...