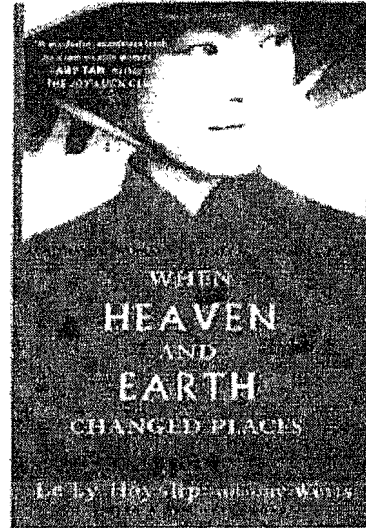


NOTICE
This material may be
protected by copyright
law (Title 17 U.S. Code)



Le Ly Hayslip (b. 1954)



Introduction to *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* by Le Ly Hayslip

Le Ly Hayslip was born in 1949 in the rural village of Ky La near Danang in what would become South Vietnam five years later after the division of her country at the 17th Parallel in 1954. Her memoir tells of her relatively peaceful early upbringing steeped in traditional Buddhist values such as ancestor worship and respect for elders and describes her family's reliance on the cultivation of rice and vegetables. She is the sixth and youngest child in her family (her family nickname, "Bay," literally means "Number Six"), with two brothers and three sisters before her.

Hayslip remembers French and Moroccan troops terrorizing her village ("monsters" in her childlike view of the world) during the French-Indochinese War (1946-54). Her family supported the Vietminh, Vietnamese communists and nationalists fighting against the French, in that conflict. This chapter from her book, "Open Wounds," is set during the US war in Vietnam in the mid-1960s, as she describes the struggle to control her village between the Republican troops of the pro-US government in the South (Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors) and the

Vietcong or southern communist guerrillas who support Ho Chi Minh and his communist government in the North (many of them, including Hayslip's brother, received training in the north).

Hayslip initially supports the Vietcong, and the pro-US government in the south captures and tortures her on several occasions. As she describes it, Republican troops controlled her village by day, but the Vietcong, who enjoyed wider support despite their terroristic tactics against the villagers, controlled the village at night. We begin with her recent release from her first capture and torture at the hands of the pro-US southern government. She was caught and arrested for attending a Vietcong rally near her village. Her brother-in-law, Ba, who is married to her sister Chin and is a policeman for the southern government in Danang, is able to secure her release, although he is resentful for having to do so.

Village life for Hayslip and her family became impossible due to the war and the use of defoliants by US forces, which destroyed the crops of peasant villagers. After being denounced by the Vietcong, she moved to Saigon in 1965, initially working as a maid for a wealthy businessman. She has an affair with him, which gives her a son but also costs her the job, so then she works for a while on Saigon's booming black market before becoming a health care worker for US and Republican troops. She marries a US soldier and moves to the US in 1970. As you read the excerpt keep these questions in mind for discussion:

1. How does she describe the government in South Vietnam?
2. How does she describe the tactics of the Vietcong and their relations with the villagers?
3. How and why does Le Ly become a hero for the Vietcong at one point?
4. To the extent that you can tell, what impact does the war have on traditional Vietnamese society?

When Heaven and Earth Changed Places

A Vietnamese Woman's
Journey from War to Peace

LE LY HAYSLIP

with Jay Wurts

*Hayslip, Le. When
heaven and earth change
places. New York, New York:
Penguin group, 1990.*



A PLUME BOOK

PROLOGUE

Dedication to Peace

FOR MY FIRST TWELVE YEARS of life, I was a peasant girl in Ky La, now called Xa Hoa Qui, a small village near Danang in Central Vietnam. My father taught me to love god, my family, our traditions, and the people we could not see: our ancestors. He taught me that to sacrifice one's self for freedom—like our ancient kings who fought bravely against invaders; or in the manner of our women warriors, including Miss Trung Nhi Trung Trac who drowned herself rather than give in to foreign conquerors—was a very high honor. From my love of my ancestors and my native soil, he said, I must never retreat.

From my mother I learned humility and the strength of virtue. I learned it was no disgrace to work like an animal on our farm, provided I did not complain. "Would you be less than our ox," she asked, "who works to feed us without grumbling?" She also taught me, when I began to notice village boys, that there is no love beyond faithful love, and that in my love for my future husband, my ancestors, and my native soil, I must always remain steadfast.

For my next three years of life, I loved, labored, and fought steadfastly for the Viet Cong against American and South Vietnamese soldiers.

* * *

Everything I knew about the war I learned as a teenaged girl from the North Vietnamese cadre leaders in the swamps outside Ky La. During these midnight meetings, we peasants assumed everything we heard was true because what the Viet Cong said matched, in one way or another, the beliefs we already had.

The first lesson we learned about the new "American" war was why the Viet Cong was formed and why we should support it. Because this lesson came on the heels of our war with the French (which began in 1946 and lasted, on and off, for eight years), what the cadre leaders told us seemed to be self-evident.

First, we were taught that Vietnam was *con rong chau tien*—a sovereign nation which had been held in thrall by Western imperialists for over a century. That all nations had a right to determine their own destiny also seemed beyond dispute, since we farmers subsisted by our own hands and felt we owed nothing to anyone but god and our ancestors for the right to live as we saw fit. Even the Chinese, who had made their own disastrous attempt to rule Vietnam in centuries past, had learned a painful lesson about our country's zeal for independence. "Vietnam," went the saying that summarized their experience, "is nobody's lapdog."

Second, the cadres told us that the division of Vietnam into North and South in 1954 was nothing more than a ploy by the defeated French and their Western allies, mainly the United States, to preserve what influence they could in our country.

"*Chia doi dat nuoc?*" the Viet Cong asked, "Why should outsiders divide the land and tell some people to go north and others south? If Vietnam were truly for the Vietnamese, wouldn't we choose for ourselves what kind of government our people wanted? A nation cannot have *two* governments," they said, "anymore than a family can have two fathers."

Because those who favored America quickly occupied the seats of power formerly held by the French, and because the North remained pretty much on its own, the choice of which side best represented independence was, for us, a foregone conclusion. In fact, the Viet Cong usually ended our indoctrination sessions with a song that played on our worst fears:

Americans come to kill our people,
Follow America, and kill your relatives!
The smart bird flies before it's caught.
The smart person comes home before Tet.
Follow us, and you'll always have a family.
Follow America, and you'll always be alone!

After these initial "lessons," the cadre leaders introduced us to the two Vietnamese leaders who personified each view—the opposite poles of our tiny world. On the South pole was President Ngo Dinh Diem, America's staunch ally, who was Catholic like the French. Although he was idolized by many who said he was a great humanitarian and patriot, his religion alone was enough to make him suspicious to Buddhists on the Central Coast. The loyalty we showed him, consequently, was more duty to a landlord than love for a founding father. Here is a song the Republican schoolteachers made us learn to praise the Southern president:

In stormy seas, Vietnam's boat rolls and pitches.
 Still we must row; our President's hand upon the helm.
 The ship of state plows through heavy seas,
 Holding fast its course to democracy.
 Our President is celebrated from Europe to Asia,
 He is the image of philanthropy and love.
 He has sacrificed himself for our happiness.
 He fights for liberty in the land of the Viet.
 Everyone loves him earnestly, and behind him we will march
 Down the street of freedom, lined with fresh flowers,
 The flag of liberty crackling above our heads!

In the North, on the other pole, was Ho Chi Minh, whom we were encouraged to call *Bac Ho*—Uncle Ho—the way we would refer to a trusted family friend. We knew nothing of his past beyond stories of his compassion and his love for our troubled country—the independence of which, we were told, he had made the mission of his life.

Given the gulf between these leaders, the choice of whom we should support again seemed obvious. The cadre leaders encouraged our natural prejudices (fear of outsiders and love of our ancestors) with stirring songs and tender stories about Uncle Ho in which the Communist leader and our ancient heroes seemed to inhabit one congenial world. Like an unbroken thread, the path from our ancestors and legends seemed to lead inevitably to the Northern leader—then past him to a future of harmony and peace.

But to achieve that independence, Ho said, we must wage total war. His cadresmen cried out "We must hold together and oppose the American empire. There is nothing better than freedom, independence, and happiness!"

To us, these ideas seemed as obvious as everything else we had heard. *Freedom* meant a Vietnam free of colonial domination. *Independence* meant one Vietnamese people—not two countries, North and South—deter-

mining its own destiny. *Happiness* meant plenty of food and an end to war—the ability, we assumed, to live our lives in accordance with our ancient ways. We wondered: how can the Southerners oppose these wonderful things? The answer the Viet Cong gave us was that the Republicans prized Yankee dollars more than the blood of their brothers and sisters. We did not think to question with our hearts what our minds told us must be true.

Although most of us thought we knew what the Viet Cong meant by freedom, independence, and happiness, a few of us dared to ask what life the Northerners promised when the war was over. The answer was always the same: "Uncle Ho promises that after our victory, the Communist state will look after your rights and interests. Your highest interest, of course, is the independence of our fatherland and the freedom of our people. Our greatest right is the right to determine our own future as a state." This always brought storms of applause from the villagers because most people remembered what life was like under the French.

Nonetheless, despite our vocal support, the Viet Cong never took our loyalty for granted. They rallied and rewarded and lectured us sternly, as the situation demanded, while the Republicans assumed we would be loyal because we lived south of a line some diplomats had drawn on a map. Even when things were at their worst—when the allied forces devastated the countryside and the Viet Cong themselves resorted to terror to make us act the way they wanted—the villagers clung to the vision the Communists had drummed into us. When the Republicans put us in jail, we had the image of "Communist freedom"—freedom from war—to see us through. When the Viet Cong executed a relative, we convinced ourselves that it was necessary to bring "Communist happiness"—peace in the village—a little closer. Because the Viet Cong encouraged us to voice our basic human feelings through patriotic songs, the tortured, self-imposed silence we endured around Republicans only made us hate the government more. Even on those occasions when the Republicans tried to help us, we saw their favors as a trick or sign of weakness. Thus, even as we accepted their kindness, we despised the Republicans for it.

As the war gathered steam in the 1960s, every villager found his or her little world expanded—usually for the worse. The steady parade of troops through Ky La meant new opportunities for us to fall victim to outsiders. Catholic Republicans spurned and mistreated Buddhists for worshipping their ancestors. City boys taunted and cheated the "country bumpkins" while Vietnamese servicemen from other provinces made fun of our funny accents and strange ways. When the tactics on both sides got so rough that people were in danger no matter which side they favored,

our sisters fled to the cities where they learned about liquor, drugs, adultery, materialism, and disrespect for their ancestors. More than one village father died inside when a "stranger from Saigon" returned in place of the daughter he had raised.

In contrast to this, the Viet Cong were, for the most part, our neighbors. Even though our cadre leaders had been trained in Hanoi, they had all been born on the Central Coast. They did not insult us for our manners and speech because they had been raised exactly like us. Where the Republicans came into the village overburdened with American equipment designed for a different war, the Viet Cong made do with what they had and seldom wasted their best ammunition—the goodwill of the people. The cadresmen pointed out to us that where the Republicans wore medals, the Viet Cong wore rags and never gave up the fight. "Where the Republicans pillage, rape, and plunder," they said, "we preserve your houses, crops, and family"; for they knew that it was only by these resources—our food for rations, our homes for hiding, our sons and brothers for recruits—that they were able to keep the field.

Of course, the Viet Cong cadresmen, like the Republicans, had no desire (or ability, most of them) to paint a fairer picture. For them, there could be no larger reason for Americans fighting the war than imperialist aggression. Because we peasants knew nothing about the United States, we could not stop to think how absurd it would be for so large and wealthy a nation to covet our poor little country for its rice fields, swamps, and pagodas. Because our only exposure to politics had been through the French colonial government (and before that, the rule of Vietnamese kings), we had no concept of democracy. For us, "Western culture" meant bars, brothels, black markets, and *xa hoi van minh*—bewildering machines—most of them destructive. We couldn't imagine that life in the capitalist world was anything other than a frantic, alien terror. Because, as peasants, we defined "politics" as something other people did someplace else, it had no relevance to our daily lives—except as a source of endless trouble. As a consequence, we overlooked the power that lay in our hands: our power to achieve virtually anything we wanted if only we acted together. The Viet Cong and the North, on the other hand, always recognized and respected this strength.

We children also knew that our ancestral spirits demanded we resist the outsiders. Our parents told us of the misery they had suffered from the invading Japanese ("small death," our neighbors called them) in World War II, and from the French, who returned in 1946. These soldiers destroyed our crops, killed our livestock, burned our houses, raped our women, and tortured or put to death anyone who opposed them—as well

as many who did not. Now, the souls of all those people who had been mercilessly killed had come back to haunt Ky La—demanding revenge against the invaders. This we children believed with all our hearts. After all, we had been taught from birth that ghosts were simply people we could not see.

There was only one way to remove this curse. Uncle Ho had urged the poor to take up arms so that everyone might be guaranteed a little land on which to cultivate some rice. Because nearly everyone in Central Vietnam was a farmer, and because farmers must have land, almost everyone went to war: with a rifle or a hoe; with vigilance to give the alarm; with food and shelter for our fighters; or, if one was too little for anything else, with flowers and songs to cheer them up. Everything we knew commanded us to fight. Our ancestors called us to war. Our myths and legends called us to war. Our parents' teachings called us to war. Uncle Ho's cadre called us to war. Even President Diem had called us to fight for the very thing we now believed he was betraying—an independent Vietnam. Should an obedient child be less than an ox and refuse to do her duty?

And so the war began and became an insatiable dragon that roared around Ky La. By the time I turned thirteen, that dragon had swallowed me up.

In 1986, after living for sixteen years in America and becoming a U.S. citizen, I went back to Vietnam—to find out what had happened to my family, my village, my people, and to the man I loved who had given me my first son. I went with many memories and many questions. This book is the story of what I remember and what I found.

It is dedicated to all those who fought for their country, wherever it may be. It is dedicated, too, to those who did not fight—but suffered, wept, raged, bled, and died just the same. We all did what we had to do. By mingling our blood and tears on the earth, god has made us brothers and sisters.

If you were an American GI, I ask you to read this book and look into the heart of one you once called enemy. I have witnessed, firsthand, all that you went through. I will try to tell you who your enemy was and why almost everyone in the country you tried to help resented, feared, and misunderstood you. It was not your fault. It could not have been otherwise. Long before you arrived, my country had yielded to the terrible logic of war. What for you was normal—a life of peace and plenty—was for us a hazy dream known only in our legends. Because we had to appease the allied forces by day and were terrorized by Viet Cong at

night, we slept as little as you did. We obeyed both sides and wound up pleasing neither. We were people in the middle. We were what the war was all about.

Your story, however, was different. You came to Vietnam, willingly or not, because your country demanded it. Most of you did not know, or fully understand, the different wars my people were fighting when you got here. For you, it was a simple thing: democracy against communism. For us, that was not our fight at all. How could it be? We knew little of democracy and even less about communism. For most of us it was a fight for independence—like the American Revolution. Many of us also fought for religious ideals, the way the Buddhists fought the Catholics. Behind the religious war came the battle between city people and country people—the rich against the poor—a war fought by those who wanted to change Vietnam and those who wanted to leave it as it had been for a thousand years. Beneath all that, too, we had vendettas: between native Vietnamese and immigrants (mostly Chinese and Khmer) who had fought for centuries over the land. Many of these wars go on today. How could you hope to end them by fighting a battle so different from our own?

The least you did—the least any of us did—was our duty. For that we must be proud. The most that any of us did—or saw—was another face of destiny or luck or god. Children and soldiers have always known it to be terrible. If you have not yet found peace at the end of your war, I hope you will find it here. We have important new roles to play.

In the war many Americans—and many more Vietnamese—lost limbs, loved ones, and that little light we see in babies' eyes which is our own hope for the future. Do not despair. As long as you are alive, that light still burns within you. If you lost someone you love, his light burns on in you—so long as you remember. Be happy every day you are alive.

If you are a person who knows the Vietnam war, or any war, only by stories and pictures, this book is written for you too. For you see, the face of destiny or luck or god that gives us war also gives us other kinds of pain: the loss of health and youth; the loss of loved ones or of love; the fear that we will end our days alone. Some people suffer in peace the way others suffer in war. The special gift of that suffering, I have learned, is how to be strong while we are weak, how to be brave when we are afraid, how to be wise in the midst of confusion, and how to let go of that which we can no longer hold. In this way, anger can teach forgiveness, hate can teach us love, and war can teach us peace.

PHUNG THI LE LY HAYSLIP
San Diego, California
October 1988

* * *

WHEN I ARRIVED back at Ky La after my first arrest, Republican and American soldiers were everywhere. Although there had been a few funerals after the bombardment, the Viet Cong warning had saved many lives and the government troops were angry and discouraged at their inability to locate the enemy.

In the absence of fighting, the Republicans and Americans tried harder to "pacify" our village, distributing food and cigarettes, and taking our wounded civilians to GI hospitals. Still, the government soldiers who wandered too far were soon discovered with their throats slashed or with a bullet between their eyes. Whenever they heard gunshots or found more victims, the Republican and American forces would deploy and pepper the area with gunfire, artillery shells, and air strikes. Because the Viet Cong were always low on ammunition and had to make every shot count, they seldom attacked unless they were sure of victory. Because they had so much of everything, the Republican soldiers seldom counted their shots and called most attacks a victory. This pull and tug soon settled into a kind of routine for fighting the war: Viet Cong attack, government counterattack, period of calm, then Viet Cong retribution and another round of fighting.

Unfortunately, this routine came to an end about six months after my return from the district jail—just before the New Year's holiday. Convinced by the enemy's sloppy tactics that the allies were ripe for defeat, the Viet Cong decided to mass for a major attack against Ky La—a "bloody nose" for the government delivered by schoolchildren and militiamen that would be felt all over Vietnam.

First, because everyone went visiting during New Year's, our major holiday of Tet, the Viet Cong used the week of extra traffic to smuggle weapons and troops into the area. Some rode in coffins during fake funerals or right along with the corpse if the funeral was real. Others changed clothes with the pallbearers and sneaked into the village undetected by Republican sentries. Code words were passed by people who pretended to be drunks shouting or singing in the streets. Village girls were told to prepare extra food and bandages because the battle was supposed to last three days and casualties might be high. Old men and women said extra prayers while those few younger men left around made coffins or ran off to join the Viet Cong so that they would not be left out of the victory.

Two girls I grew up with who had gone off with the Viet Cong earlier in the year now came back for the battle. When I saw them just before the fight, I could hardly believe my eyes. They had undergone training in Hanoi and were tough as old army boots. They snapped orders and

wore their weapons the way Saigon girls wore jewelry. They said the attack had been planned to the last detail and rehearsed in the jungle using models of the village. Their battle code, as always, was simple: "When the enemy attacks, we withdraw. When he stands, we harass. When he is tired and disorganized, we attack. When he withdraws, we pursue." I tried to talk to them about village things—teenage-girl things, like handsome boys and local gossip—but they were not interested. War, for them, was more than a name on a blackboard or a bottle cap medal for stealing some soldier's watch.

Finally, on the evening when the Republican garrison and their American allies were getting ready to move out—to be replaced by another unit—we got word the attack was coming. My father gave the warning signal from our house—it was a careless poke with his broom at our roof—something the Republican sentries, who were always watching, never suspected. The signal was passed from house to house until everyone knew to take shelter after dark. For us, the trick would be to get into our family bunker without being seen by the soldiers. Because this was not always possible, we knew we might have to pass the night in the tunnel beneath our cookstove, as we had done before, praying—wide-eyed and terrified—while the shooting went on outside.

And as fate or luck or god would have it, the attack began too soon, catching the villagers, as well as the enemy, off-guard. Out of the shadows beyond Ky La, mortar rounds screamed in and exploded on the Republican convoy. Viet Cong fire teams inside the village popped out of their hiding places and raked the streets with bullets while the Viet Cong main force began advancing through the darkened fields.

When the shooting started, I was at a neighbor's house delivering some first aid kits I had hidden in a basket. They were for the Viet Cong riflemen the widow woman let hide in a tunnel underneath her bed. The first explosions knocked us down and when I tried to get up, the woman's bed flew back and knocked me down again as three Viet Cong fighters scrambled up to their positions. In the street outside, the Republicans and Americans dove for cover and began firing blindly, not knowing where the enemy shots were coming from.

The Viet Cong in the room started shooting and the noise from their guns was so loud I saw double. They were supposed to be snipers but it sounded like they were firing at anything and everything that moved—just like their terrified opponents outside. How many allies shot allies and Viet Cong shot Viet Cong we never knew but the melee was murderous and nothing but chaos—a riot of shouts and screams and terrible, ear-

crushing thun
the poor won
no one was h
cartridges an
covered my
to move—to
out—or to e
All I could d
and wait for

Then, as
When I drop
Viet Cong in
outside, sm
The widow
or scared to
street, an ar
fire with bu
packs, tools
equipment—
bodies. In th
of mortars;

Like a li
kit, and dan
making su
direction of
returning to
Before I
light of the
was still ali
American
tom to rem
middle of

As far a
in one sho
shoulder a
chest wou
antiseptic
man woul
the bullet
coughed

crushing thunder. Time and again machine gun bullets ripped through the poor woman's house and covered us with splinters, but miraculously no one was hit. The floor itself vibrated with the rhythm of battle—spent cartridges and pottery shards danced around our heads—and I finally covered my ears with my hands and coiled up like a baby: too terrified to move—to slide to safety in the hole where the Viet Cong had come out—or to even think about doing it. I was too terrified even to pray. All I could do was hug my head and curl up like an almost-squashed bug and wait for it all to be over.

Then, as if my unsaid prayers were answered, everything got quiet. When I dropped my shaking hands and raised my head, I saw that the Viet Cong in the room were gone. The door to the house was open, and outside, smoke billowed like an oily black caterpillar down the street. The widow woman beside me looked up too, but she was too shocked or scared to move. I crawled to the door and peeked out. Across the street, an army truck lay on its side against a house which it had set on fire with burning gas. A treasure-trove of government supplies—backpacks, tools, spilled cartons of rations, and bits and pieces of wrecked equipment—lay everywhere on the road, along with several crumpled bodies. In the distance, I could hear gunfire crackle and the steady *whump* of mortars; but here, the battle of Ky La seemed over.

Like a little black cat, I hopped to my bare feet, grabbed a first aid kit, and darted out the door. I crouched on the warm earth for a moment, making sure nobody saw me, then scampered down the street in the direction of my house. All I could think of was finding my parents and returning to the safety of our bunker.

Before I got very far, I came to a half-dozen bodies sprawled in the light of the burning truck. All were villagers or Viet Cong but only one was still alive—I could tell by his groans. I didn't see any Republican or American casualties—there must have been many—but it was their custom to remove their dead and wounded as soon as possible, even in the middle of a fight.

As far as I could see the survivor had two wounds: a big shrapnel tear in one shoulder and a bullet hole in the chest. I put a compress on the shoulder as I had been taught to do in our midnight meetings, but the chest wound was sucking air and, although I timidly poured what little antiseptic I had all over it, I knew from my first aid lessons that the poor man would not live long enough to be tended by a doctor. I tried to cover the bullet hole with a bandage but the man twitched and yelled and coughed blood so badly that I got scared and backed away. I watched

and its occupants tied up and taken away for interrogation. Two thirds of my village disappeared this way: in smoke and prison trucks during those first days after the battle. So little was left that even the Viet Cong soon lost interest in Ky La as a prize of war. Instead, they turned their attention to the one thing they knew they could gain no matter what: a grip of terror on the survivors.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the terrible battle, the Viet Cong cadresmen took even harsher steps to control us. They began by killing those they suspected of spying for the enemy, usually by taking the accused from their houses in the middle of the night and shooting them in the street—leaving the bodies for relatives to discover. Later, when government forces weren't around, the Viet Cong called villagers to special justice meetings—*moi chi di hop*—during which they held kangaroo courts for the accused and shot them afterward. Everybody knew these trials weren't trials at all but warnings to make sure we did what we were told. To us, the trials simply gave the Viet Cong the excuse they needed to kill more and more villagers for smaller and smaller crimes.

Naturally, these trials made us stay on our toes and we were careful not to talk to the wrong person or go to the wrong place at the wrong time. After a while, our fear of the Viet Cong—of false accusation by jealous neighbors or headstrong kids—was almost as strong as our fear of the Republicans. If the Republicans were like elephants trampling our village, the Viet Cong were like snakes who came at us in the night. At least you could see an elephant coming and get out of its way.

One consequence of the increased killing by both sides was the growing number of parentless children. Many of them found homes with relatives, in Ky La or more distant places, but many others were reduced to scavenging in the fields and garbage dumps, begging, or stealing from farmers. They wandered around, alone or with other orphans, looking as miserable as they were. Sometimes they played with the other kids, only to stop when they remembered their situation and move on like little ghosts. Most of the time they just hung around like old people, waiting for something good or bad to happen: for a little food or affection to come their way, or for death—sudden or slow—to release them from their suffering.

The oldest child in each family was responsible for providing for that family once the parents were gone. Sometimes this responsibility included vengeance for the father's death. I think many killings in the war, all over Vietnam, came from this alone. Too few of us were able to leave hurt behind and seek life instead of death. Too many of us were willing to die, and not enough were willing to live, no matter what. I finally

began to realize that *this* was what my father meant when he called me a "woman warrior" so many years before. A woman may do many things, but the first thing god equipped her for is to bring forth and nourish life, and to defend it with a warrior's strength. My task, I was beginning to see, was to find life in the midst of death and nourish it like a flower—a lonely flower in the graveyard my country had become.

At times these killings were so frequent—from vendettas against informers or fighting among old rivals, as well as from patrolling soldiers—that anyone nearby, including children or old women, was collared into burying the dead. More than once while working in our fields, I heard gunshots and hit the deck. When it was safe to look up, I would see people running to a dike or to the middle of a paddy where a dead villager would be sprawled in the mud. We would stop our work and drag the person to a space of dry ground and dig an instant grave. We even stopped wondering which side had done the killing. Someone might say, *My ban*—killed by Americans, or simply *dich ban*—killed by the enemy, without taking the time or risk of specifying which enemy it was. As months of this went by, we children gradually lost our appetite for the "game" of liberation. We were, after all, just kids. We could take only so many sleepless nights, endless hours in musty bunkers, unjust beatings at the hands of soldiers, and terror at the Viet Cong trials before all we wanted was for things to return to the way they had been before the new war started. Of course, a child must grow up—she can't stay an infant forever; just as a war, once started, grows from infancy to assume a life of its own—one so terrible that even the parents who spawned it no longer claim it for their own.

When our enthusiasm for resisting got too cool, the Viet Cong simply turned up the heat. By the second year of this new war, we could not go to another town or talk with anyone from outside the area without first getting permission from the cadre. If a stranger came to the village—even someone's long-lost relative or an orphan from another district—everyone wanted to know who it was and how long he or she was going to stay. Life in the village had gone from love and distrust of no one to fear and mistrust of everyone, including our neighbors. It was okay to visit your friends and relatives, but if you stayed too long, the cadre leaders were sure to ask about it later. If you stopped for a ladle of water, they asked why you chose to stop at that particular house and why you lifted the ladle in that particular way. And there was no doubt who was answering those questions—warping every innocent act to make it appear to be a threat: it was the younger children. They had studied the example

of older k
names on
a neighb

Unlike
were exp
to earn m
else the s
of every
computer
our depa
'consume
not alwa
all our fo
the Viet
should v
were sul
they wei
to prese
began to
we bega
with hig

On a
the dist
was unu
of the v
and I k
suppose
careful
pended
two we
gossip
unusua
instruct
Occasi
safe—
we ha
shiver

Th
to col

him squirm for a minute, deciding what, if anything, I could do, then finally closed the lid of my stolen American first aid kit, crawled back, and said a little Buddhist prayer in his ear, and left him to his ancestors.

Near our house at the edge of the village the battle was raging much closer. The Americans and Republicans were fighting fiercely in the paddies—I could see them leapfrogging to and fro in the failing light. Flares began popping overhead and covered the fields with an eerie blue light while gun muzzles flashed like fireflies in the darkness below the trees. Overhead, helicopters and warplanes began to arrive—traced by their fiery exhaust and the deafening noise of their engines. Explosions from their bombs and rockets began to rip the jungle. Soon the whole field was lost in acrid smoke.

I found my parents hurriedly burying two dead Viet Cong fighters and although their hearts rejoiced at seeing me, we had no time for greeting. As I helped my mother roll one badly mutilated body in a mat, I noticed that the strangely unmarred face staring back at me was the handsome, cocky Viet Cong fighter who had winked at me that night the Viet Cong first came to Ky La. My heart rose to my throat and my arms became like lead.

"What's wrong, Bay Ly?" my mother snapped. "Do you want us to get caught? Hurry—cover him up!"

Hiding my feelings as I had seen the other women do, I gently covered his face and lifted—embraced—the body's head while my mother took the feet. Together, we lowered him into the dark hole my father had dug and covered him up with earth.

The fighting raged for the rest of the night and although the Viet Cong never controlled the village, they claimed later to have killed over fifty enemy soldiers at the cost of only eight. When morning finally came, my mother and father and I climbed out of our bunker to watch the sun rise on our battered, bullet-pocked home. Our mouths were dry as the dusty street but we were too tired to drink—too exhausted even for sleep. Our job now, as it had always been, was to clean up and rebuild our lives with whatever the war had left us.

For the next few days, the Republicans and Americans poured troops and firepower into the jungle around Ky La—a raging elephant stomping on red ants too far down in their holes now to feel the blows. The Viet Cong had planned a three-day battle, but they had underestimated the colossal numbers of men and arms the enemy was willing to commit to prevent Ky La from falling into their hands. Inside the village, soldiers went from house to house, tearing everything apart to find the Viet Cong hideouts. Where anything suspicious was found, the house was burned

and its occupi
of my village
those first day
soon lost inte
attention to t
grip of terror

Despite—
cadremen to
those they sus
from their ho
street—leavi
ment forces v
meetings—
the accused a
trials at all b
the trials sir
and more vi

Naturally,
not to talk t
time. After
jealous neigl
of the Republ
village, the
least you co

One consi
number of p
in Ky La o
vanging in
ers. They
miserable a
to stop wh
ghosts. Mo
for someth
come their
their suffer

The old
family onc
vengeance
over Vietn
hurt behin
to die, an

of older kids like me and wanted to be heroes. They wanted to get their names on the Blackboard of Honor, even if it cost them, now and again, a neighbor, aunt, or sister.

Unlike suspicion, however, food and money were in short supply. Girls were expected to gather wild fruit and firewood and sell it in the market to earn money for Viet Cong clothing, medicine, cigarettes, and anything else the soldiers needed. The Viet Cong also wanted us to keep a record of every animal we slaughtered so that our tithe of rations could be computed. This was especially troublesome during times of feasting for our departed ancestors. We needed permission from the cadre leaders to consume anything more special than our daily fare and permission was not always granted. Finally, my parents decided it was simpler just to eat all our food outside so the neighbors could count what we ate and reassure the Viet Cong we were not feasting in secret. We agreed that nobody should waste food or clothing or have luxuries while our countrymen were suffering to rid us of invaders. But we also knew that the reason they were fighting—the reason they were *supposed* to be fighting—was to preserve our ancient rights and independence. When the Viet Cong began to condemn us for practicing what they claimed to be protecting, we began to suspect—at least in our hearts—that the new war we began with high hopes was over, and that another sort of war had begun.

On a February morning in 1964, shortly after I had been released from the district jail after my first arrest, I was on sentry duty in Ky La. It was unusually chilly and a heavy mist hung in the valleys on three sides of the village. My shift had started at sunrise—about an hour before—and I knew it would be a long day. The older woman, Sau, who was supposed to be my partner, had not shown up. The Viet Cong were very careful about scheduling the teams of sentries upon whom so much depended. Usually, a team consisted of one mature woman and a girl, or two women—but never two girls, for the temptation to daydream or gossip was too strong and there was always the chance that something unusual would happen—something not foreseen by detailed Viet Cong instructions—which would require quick action and good judgment. Occasionally, Viet Cong inspectors would check us if the area seemed safe—Loi and Mau were the fighters detailed most often to my shift, and we had an easy, friendly relationship. But today, even the birds stayed shivering in their nests.

The fog that morning made everything drippy and caused the world to collapse to my feet. To make matters worse, the white air absorbed

all sounds from the village and ever since I arrived I had heard a faint moaning and grinding which my predecessors (the sentries from dusk till dawn) had attributed to mountain spirits.

Consequently, I put my bucket (we always carried a pail or basket to avoid suspicion) on a piece of dry ground beneath the big tree that was our station and made myself a fortress against the ghosts: sitting hunched with my arms over my knees; peeking between them and the brim of my useless sun hat at the watery wall of air.

After what seemed like half the morning, the ground gradually opened around me—ten meters, twenty, finally a hundred and more until the fog touched the dikes at the edge of the field and the trees beyond the road to Phe Binh loomed out of the mist like giants. It was then that I saw the teeming mass of soldiers on the road—Republicans, hundreds of them. The moaning had been their voices, muffled by the fog; the grinding, the soldiers' boots on the rocky road.

Panicked, I jumped up—but saw I had no place to go. The troops were already past my station and almost inside the village. If I ran either way—toward Ky La or away toward the Viet Cong—I would surely be cut down. If I stood still, or attempted to hide among the rocks, I would not only let the Viet Cong walk into a trap, but be caught in the crossfire myself. In the blink of an eye, my situation had gone from nervous boredom to one so desperate that only a desperate act would save me. Despite my terror, I forced myself to walk nonchalantly toward the road, right into the soldiers' teeth. Every few paces, I bent to pick up a sweet potato or low-lying berries that grew around the field, and put them in my bucket. When I got close enough to see out of the corner of my eye the soldiers watching me from the corners of their eyes, I hummed a little tune and paused even longer and more often. *Surely, they must think, there is no more loyal Republican than this happy little farm girl out gathering her family's breakfast!*

By good acting or good luck, nobody bothered me and when I was completely past the troops and within a stone's throw of the swamp (the direction from which the Viet Cong usually came), I dropped my bucket and peeled off the top two of the three shirts I always wore. The top shirt—the one I would wear all day if nothing happened—was brown. Any Viet Cong seeing it would know that conditions were clear in my sector. The second shirt was white, which I would show if anything suspicious had happened—like a helicopter loitering in the area or a reconnaissance team passing through. The bottom shirt, the one I wore now, was all black and meant that a major threat was around—a fully armed patrol or convoy of troops headed in my direction.

As it turned out, a woman I recognized as a Viet Cong scout was coming down the road from the direction of Bai Gian carrying a shoulder pole with two buckets. Her presence meant that the Viet Cong were on the move and probably close behind her. If she was doing her job properly, she would be looking for me in the fields, which were now barely visible through the mist. Sure enough, she scanned the horizon as she walked, then stopped when she saw that I was not at my station. Slowly, she looked around until she saw me in my black shirt pretending to pick berries by the road. Quick as a wink, she unshouldered her pole, pretended to have trouble with one of the ropes that held the buckets, and scuttled back in the opposite direction.

My legs went limp with relief. By giving my signal in time, I had prevented a Viet Cong massacre. But there were still hundreds of enemy troops between me and the village. I had no alternative but to continue playing the innocent schoolgirl.

When my bucket had a respectable load of potatoes and berries, I walked back toward Ky La. The Republicans by now were beginning their sweep through the fields and the quarter-mile of road between me and the village was almost clear. The further I went, the faster I walked until I dashed the last few steps to my house. Inside, my father greeted me with a sigh of relief. He had looked for me on the hillside when the fog lifted and, seeing I wasn't there, became frantic. I told him about the soldiers and the close call with the scout and he told me to change my shirt quickly so that, in case of trouble, the soldiers who saw me couldn't identify me as the girl beside the road.

We then got our tools and went out to watch the situation—but we didn't wait long. The Republican and American soldiers were back within hours, angry because their mission had been spoiled. They sent squads through the village rounding up women who fit my description. Although most girls ran away, I just stood there with my father, trusting my new shirt and loyalty act to get me through. Unfortunately, I had already pushed my luck too far that wintry day. A squad surrounded us at once and I was arrested, along with three other girls, and blindfolded. My hands were tied behind my back and as the soldiers led us to a truck, my father tried to convince the sergeant in charge that I had only been out gathering breakfast, but the soldiers pushed him away and threatened him, too, with arrest if he didn't stop interfering.

The ride to Don Thi Tran prison was unpleasantly familiar. I prayed that my old tormentors would not be on duty when I arrived—especially Sergeant Hoa. I hoped I would be kept in the arrival area instead of the awful cages, and that my sister Ba's policeman husband could be sum-

moned from Danang before I was called for interrogation. To my surprise, all my wishes came true.

The holding room was full of prisoners—mostly girls—and because I had not been charged with anything specific, my priority for interrogation was low. Besides, as I had already learned, the questions and answers were always the same: *Why were you arrested?* “I don’t know.” *How old are you?* “Fifteen—I’m just a little kid.” *Have you seen any Viet Cong?* “Yes.” *What do they look like?* “They look like you, but with black clothes,” and so on. The problem with their questions was that you could answer most of them honestly, even if you were a cadre leader yourself, and not get into trouble. For most of us, including the district police who inherited us as prisoners, the mass arrests after a raid were little more than a game. The worst part was being held captive while a sweep was going on. The troops would herd us together and make us wait in the hot sun without water or permission to go to the toilet—sometimes for most of the day. We often wondered why heavily armed soldiers worried so much about us women and children, but by this time, experience had taught them never to turn their back on a villager—no matter how skinny, little, or harmless she appeared.

Late the next morning, Ba’s husband, Chin, arrived on his bicycle and gave the prison commander an order for my release. When I came out from the cell, both the commandant and my brother-in-law scowled at me.

“The logbook shows you’ve been here before, Phung Thi Le Ly,” the commandant said sourly. “Your brother-in-law vouched for you then, but you can’t seem to stay out of trouble. Well, I promise you both that if you’re picked up again, even a note from the President won’t get you out! Now get out of here! *Di ve*—both of you!”

I could see Chin was even more angered by the commandant’s chewing out than by the trouble I had caused him. When we were outside, he pulled me up by the shoulders and gave me a good shaking.

“Look, you little troublemaker,” he barked, “I’m finished with you and your whole family! I don’t care if we’re related or if Ba Xuan cries to high heaven about her poor little sister. You tell your mother and father that I’m finished risking my job for you. One day the soldiers will catch you doing something really bad and then we’ll *all* go to prison—this policeman’s badge won’t mean a thing! Do you understand me?”

I nodded yes and he got onto his bicycle and pedaled away, ringing the bell irritably at some people who blocked his path.

It took me an hour to walk home, and when I got there, the soldiers were gone and the village was buzzing about my exploit.

“You’re
calling a

It was
houses a
waiting I
the shou
through
cadre le
have be
indirect

“To
will do
teach al
honor.”

The
enemie
never s
songs t
it had
girl, w
lowing

thi

"You're a hero, Bay Ly!" my mother told me. "The Viet Cong are calling a meeting tonight in your honor!"

It was true. Shortly after sundown, the villagers crept out of their houses and went into the swamp where the cadre leaders were already waiting by a roaring fire. When everyone had gathered, the woman with the shoulder pole testified that I had risked my life by walking right through the enemy column to find a place to give my signal. Next, the cadre leader proclaimed that his small band of fighters would probably have been wiped out by the Republican force, which meant that I was indirectly responsible, too, for saving his own life.

"To honor you, Miss Le Ly," he said, grinning in the firelight, "we will do much more than write your name on the blackboard. We will teach all the children in the village to sing the 'Sister Ly' song in your honor."

The original "Sister Ly" was a Viet Cong fighter who killed many enemies and was very famous, although she was eventually arrested and never seen again. It was Viet Cong practice to dedicate such patriotic songs to a hero's namesake when that person distinguished herself—but it had never before happened in Ky La, and the honor, for such a young girl, was unprecedented. The cadresmen passed out papers with the following song printed neatly across it:

SONG FOR SISTER LY

Sister Ly, who comes from Go Noi,
Where the Thu Bon washes the trees,
Has defeated the horse-faced enemy.
Her daily rice she could not eat
Without hearing the tortured prisoners.
Although the moon is covered with clouds,
Her glory will shine forever.
One day we heard Sister Ly
Was in prison—tied up hand and foot.
Beaten by day—tortured by night
She sings "Mother don't cry.
While I live, I still struggle.
Comrades, please save your tears,
Sister Ly is still living,
And her struggle will go on forever.

After the cadresman had led the children through a few choruses of this song, he added: "Miss Le Ly is now assigned the honored task of

teaching the young children how to serve the fighters who defend them. She will teach them how to resist their captors in jail—as she has done twice herself—so that they may follow in her glorious footsteps.”

The villagers all clapped and the little kids, who were always the most enthusiastic at these meetings, cheered with them. My mother beamed proudly and although my father smiled too, I could see by his eyes that he was worried. He realized that my notoriety might very well put me in more danger over the next few months than any of us had bargained for.

During the next few days, I carried my song sheet around with me constantly, even though I had already memorized the words. I diligently taught our neighbors’ children all the Viet Cong songs I knew but told them never to practice them at home, where Republicans might be listening. In the fields, we played the “Viet Cong game” and they all ran and hid and I praised those who were hard to find and made those whom I discovered too easily keep practicing until I had to shout for them to come out. It was just like my old war games at school, except now everyone was on the same side.

One afternoon, at a time that was usually quiet, I was resting in a hammock under the shed that housed our water buffalo, humming “Sister Ly” to myself, when I was completely surprised by a Republican patrol that appeared out of nowhere by the roadside. I could tell from their camouflaged uniforms, red scarves, and painted faces, as well as by the crispness and silence of their movements, that these were not ordinary soldiers, but *linh biet dong quan*—South Vietnamese Rangers. These special forces were seldom seen in our area, and when they were, bad trouble always followed. Where the regular Republican troops feared to go, these tough, clever fighters walked right in. Whenever I saw them, my mind filled with half-forgotten images of *ma duong rach mac*—the “slash face” legionnaires of my most terrifying childhood memories. Now, these ghosts from my past had materialized for real and their weapons were pointed at me.

I rolled out of my hammock and glanced involuntarily at the hillside, wondering why the danger signal had not been given, but it was too late for heroics. One camouflaged trooper stepped up and grabbed me by the collar. The paper with the Viet Cong song on it fluttered to the ground from under my shirttail.

“What’s your name?” the soldier demanded.

I stammered an answer and prayed the paper would go unnoticed.

“Hey, look,” the soldier beside him said. “She dropped something!”

The first soldier picked up the paper, studied it a moment, then looked me straight in the eye. "Where did you get this, girl?"

"I—I found it—"

"Where?"

I turned and pointed to the swamp.

"You mean somebody gave it to you?"

"No! I found it blowing in the wind. There were lots of them flying around. Just ask the other kids. They all have one too!"

More soldiers crowded around to look at the paper and I could already feel their fists and rifle butts beating me. I chewed my lip and tried to look innocent even though I wanted to cry.

Finally the first soldier shook the paper in my face and said, "You know what we do when we find trash like this?"

I shook my head, wide-eyed with terror.

"We do this!" He took out his lighter, flipped open the top, and in seconds my little song was reduced to ashes. "Wrap her up," he snapped to a subordinate. "We'll take her into the village."

Again, my hands were tied behind my back and I was shoved down the road to Ky La. As we went, more of these camouflaged, fast-moving troopers darted out of the bushes and from behind trees and dikes into the fields. Moments later gunfire broke out but it did not sound like a battle until I arrived with the rest of the villagers at the holding area behind our house. There we were held at gunpoint while Republican helicopters swarmed overhead and landed beyond the trees. Within the hour, thick smoke rose above the distant jungle. "Bai Gian—" the word passed quietly. "The soldiers are attacking Bai Gian!"

Bai Gian was a peaceful forest hamlet tucked in among coconut, orange, and mangrove trees with freshwater pools and waterfalls that were a haven for animals and birds and the many people who used to go there just to enjoy the scenery. It was also a very wealthy place with big houses and people who bore the honorary surname *Cuu*, which meant "village elder." Because it was so quiet and hard to reach, the Viet Cong often used Bai Gian for recreation, and because the Viet Cong were usually lurking nearby, the Republicans avoided it like the plague. That was before the special forces took an interest in the place. When all was said and done, not only Bai Gian, but its poorer, neighboring suburbs and most of its sister village of Tung Lam would be reduced to ashes.

Near sundown the troops came back and, although the battle was continuing, they apparently felt safe enough to let us go back to our homes. My hands were untied and with my parents I went immediately

to our bunker where we lived on emergency rations for two days while troops and tanks and airplanes widened the battle zone around Bai Gian.

On the third day we came out. Although the air was hazy from dust and smoke, the sunshine felt good and we were glad to leave the musty bunker, which now smelled of our collective waste and sweat. Rumor had it that the rangers had trapped a few Viet Cong away from their sanctuaries, but the ordinary troops who came in to press the attack had suffered heavy losses. Consequently, the soldiers mopping up after the battle were in a vengeful mood.

While the other troops withdrew, these soldiers stayed behind to question us for clues to the enemy's sanctuaries. When the temporary camp by my school was too full to admit more prisoners, they set up assembly-line interrogation stations in the street and sometimes openly beat the villagers who didn't give satisfactory answers. This caused us to worry even more because such actions showed the soldiers no longer cared about our good opinion. Ominously, they seemed to talk about us the way we talked about our barnyard animals on the day they ceased to be pets and began to look like supper.

Near sundown, when all but a score of Republicans had withdrawn, the last of the soldiers began shooting at random, hitting people and animals that were unlucky enough to be caught in the streets. Others looted houses near the center of town and set them on fire with lighters and gasoline. By the time they had finished, the fire had spread to outlying buildings and over half of Ky La was in flames.

My father and the other village men spent the rest of the night battling the fires as best they could. My mother went from house to house giving food to survivors and consoling several women who had been raped and beaten by departing troops. For my part, I remained in our house and watched over the little children whose parents could no longer care for them. I dressed burns on tiny hands and put bandages on cut legs and bloody heads. The kids' terrified eyes stared back at me in the light of their own burning homes as if they expected the heroic Miss Ly to bind up their breaking hearts as well as their battered bodies. As much as I wanted to raise their spirits, I couldn't think of anything to say.

One little boy with bad burns on his arm saw that I was distressed. In the saddest, smallest voice I ever heard, he began to sing the "Song for Sister Ly." I knelt beside him and, being careful not to disturb his arm, hugged his head and chest so hard that his song turned into sobs. Within moments, all of Ky La's children were wailing as their village and childhood innocence came crashing down around them. Although I could silence Miss Ly's song—which now seemed to me obscene—I could not

silence the children's pain. For the pain itself was a voice; a voice that had risen above Ky La as a chorus of deathly smoke.

For several weeks after the three-day battle, the Republicans bombarded the area around my village—attempting to do with aircraft and artillery what ground troops had failed to accomplish: drive the Viet Cong away or slaughter them in their hiding places. Although the aerial attacks didn't occur every day, they happened often enough and with so little warning that we seldom went into the fields, and even then what we found usually did not make the risk worth taking. The paddies would be littered with rubble—upturned trees, shattered rocks, and charred craters where bombs or artillery rounds went astray. Those crops that weren't pulverized were scorched by the blast and lay withering on stalks like embryos cut from the womb. Dead animals lay rotting in the sun—water buffalo with stiff legs and bodies bloated as big as a car; disemboweled pigs and the remains of jungle animals that had run out of the forest to escape the gunfire only to be ripped apart by the explosions. Every now and then, too, we came across some dead humans—charred like wooden dolls fished from an oven, blackened arms cocked in an eternal embrace with their ancestors.

For the most part, the soldiers ignored civilian and animal casualties and we had to dispose of them as best we could to prevent disease from infecting the living. By the time we cleared our fields of rubble and buried the victims, another attack would usually begin or it would be dark and time to go back to our homes. Like it or not, we had become part of the endless machinery of terror, death, and regeneration.

One afternoon during this long campaign, some families were brought to Ky La from Bai Gian after what was left of that once-beautiful village had been converted to a "strategic hamlet," requiring half of the people to move to a more secure location. Because the bombings and periodic sweeps by Republican and American soldiers had suppressed Viet Cong activity in our area, Ky La was considered a "pacified" village, although government troops seldom spent the night here and when they did, it was always under arms.

Among these refugees reduced to begging was the family of Cuu Loi, the second wealthiest man in Bai Gian and an old friend of my father's. Cuu Loi's number-eight daughter, Thien, was about two years older than I was and a little bit shorter, with the much darker skin typical of people from that area. She was a quiet girl and we always got along well because I loved to talk and, after several years of war, there was a shortage of listeners in the village—the teenagers having gone off with the Viet Cong, the Republicans, or to shallow, premature graves. Thien was also a Viet Cong supporter, but had been arrested more often and (although she

wouldn't speak of it) had been tortured more intensely and more frequently than I had. When I saw her again after the destruction of Bai Gian, she had the lackluster eyes of one who had seen and suffered too much. She clung to me for security just as I clung to her for companionship—although I could never make her safe anymore than she could substitute for my own lost brothers and sisters. Anyway, for the time being, we were all that each other had.

Cuu Loi repaired an abandoned house next to Uncle Huong, who lived at the edge of the village. For several weeks things went well—Thien's mother set up a garden and tended some hens that we gave her. Her father worked the land next to ours and we girls spent many pleasant hours together helping each other do chores. One night, however, our unaccustomed good luck ran out. Cuu Loi went out after dark to relieve himself and was shot dead outside his door. To make matters worse, no one could claim or examine the body until daybreak—such were the dangers from the government "cat" while Viet Cong "mice" were around our village.

When I went to Thien's house the next morning, it had already been surrounded by troops. After a few minutes' questioning about her father, Thien was arrested once more and taken away in a truck. When she came back two days later, she had been beaten quite badly and could hardly move or speak. I nursed her at our house because she was my friend and because her mother now had to labor in the fields without a husband. Over the next six weeks, Thien was arrested again and again, and each time returned in worse shape than before. Although she was always quiet, she now said nothing at all, and even my mother—who had never particularly liked Thien's family owing to their wealth and high station—began to pity her. As it turned out, she could have saved her pity for us both.

After one evening of particularly intense bombardment, Thien and I were rousted by soldiers from a roadside trench into which we had jumped to escape the shells. As soon as we climbed out, I knew we were in for trouble. The soldier who shone the flashlight in my face was none other than the Republican ranger who had burned my song a while before.

"Didn't we arrest you on the road a few weeks ago?" the ranger said. "Yes—you're the girl with the filthy VC songbook!"

"No, not me—" I protested.

He shone the light at poor Thien, whose face was still raw from a QC (Quan Canh, the Republican military police) beating administered a few days before. "Then maybe, it was you—"

"No—not her either!" I interrupted. "She's from Bai Gian. She's only been in the village a little while!"

"Bai Gian!" the soldier spat. "That shithole is full of VC! Here"—he called to his corporal—"bat no Di! [arrest them both!] Two more Charlie for My Thi."

A pair of rangers quickly put us on the ground, frisked us for weapons, and tied our hands; but cold terror at the very mention of My Thi had already paralyzed us like a punch to the stomach. My Thi torture camp—the maximum security POW prison outside Danang—was run by the army, not the district police. It was a place even the toughest Viet Cong couldn't talk about without wincing. While the rangers hustled us back to the village with the day's haul of prisoners, we were all too terrified even to whisper among ourselves.

For about twenty minutes Thien and I rode down the bumpy, darkened road with a half-dozen others, mostly grown-ups I didn't recognize. Although we were in a walled compound when we got out, I recognized the sounds and smells of China Beach immediately. My Thi was a huge camp containing many American-built shacks—some for prisoners, some for guards, some for purposes I did not want to know. As soon as we were off the truck, QCs descended on us like vultures and hustled us off to different places. I was led to a small bare cell where I would spend the rest of the night alone—listening to guards shuffling up and down the hall and, when they went away, to the roaring surf beyond the brightly lit perimeter.

In the morning, I was awakened by human screams. I got off the plywood board that served as a bed and crouched on the cement floor, covering my head to block the sound. Perhaps, if I looked small and pathetic enough, the guards would leave me alone. Such was the state of reasoning even one night in My Thi produced.

Within an hour two guards came to my cell and pulled me into the corridor. They didn't even wait until I was in the interrogation room to brutalize me, but banged me against the walls and punched me with their fists, shouting threats and accusations as we went. Inside the interrogation room, which was at the end of the same long building as my cell, I was shown a number of implements on a table in front of me. There were some electric wires hooked up to a hand-cranked generator, scissors, razor blades, and knives of various shapes (like the kind a surgeon uses), and buckets of soapy water which I knew were not for washing.

Without even asking me a question, the interrogator ordered: "Put your hands on the table!"

As soon as I did, the guards strapped down my wrists and the interrogator clipped a wire to each thumb. He turned the crank casually a few times and flicked a switch the way someone else might turn on a radio. A jolt of electricity knocked my legs out from under me and the entire room went white. A second later I was hanging from the straps, clambering to stand up. My lips were tingly and I could see my fingers twitching in the harness.

"So—you see we're not playing games!" the interrogator said, leaning on the table. "Tell me quickly: Why were you and the other girl hiding in the trench?"

"We jumped in to escape the explosions—"

"*Liar!*" The interrogator slammed the table. "There was a battle going on! You are *phu nu can bo*—VC cadre girl! You were carrying supplies! Where is the ammunition hidden?"

"I don't know anything about ammunition!"

"Then what were you doing on the battlefield? How many battles have you been in, eh? What is your rank?"

"Please! I'm just a little girl! I haven't done anything!" His hand hovered near the crank and I instinctively pulled against the straps. But instead of turning on the electricity, he picked up a short-bladed knife.

"Do you know what these are for?" he asked.

"Yes. I've seen them before."

"Has anyone used them on you?"

I hesitated before answering, "No—"

"Good." He put down the knife and stood up quickly. "Release her."

To my amazement, the guards unbuckled the straps. I backed away from the table like a wary animal and rubbed my wrists.

"Go back to your cell. Think about what these things could do to your body. How would your boyfriend or husband or baby like you without nipples, eh? Or, perhaps, I'll cut some skin off your ass for some sandals, or maybe throw a few of your fingers to the guard dogs. You think well about it, Miss Viet Cong hero—then when you're called again, come prepared to tell me everything you know!"

The guards pushed me to the door and down the hall to my cell. I knew it was as useless to worry about the torture the interrogator described as it was to try and figure out ways to outsmart him. If I was to survive, I must play my own game—not his. Experience had taught me that if you answer one way long enough, it ruins your tormentor's game. After all, for most of them, it's just a job (just like my job now was to be a prisoner). No workman wants to work harder than he has to—especially for no reward. Even a sadistic interrogator has better things to do than

terrorize dumb schoolgirls when there is nothing left to learn. With my mind reassured by that plan, I had the luxury of stretching out on my small board and thinking about Thien—wondering where she was, what was happening to her, and what would be left of her should she ever be released. How hopeless it must seem to her—to be in a place like this without a father to grieve for you, work for your release, or greet you when you came back.

The next morning the same two guards took me from my cell, but instead of going back to the interrogation room, I was taken with two other girls whom I did not know to an alley between the buildings where a post was set into the ground. We were ordered to stand against the post, each facing a different direction, while one guard tied us fast with a rope. I had no idea what they intended to do with us—we were too close to the buildings to be set on fire and if they intended to rape us, we would not be left clothed with our legs immobilized by rope. I concluded that, with no interrogator present, we three had, for some reason, been singled out for punishment—and that punishment was to stand under the hot sun, without water or toilet, for the afternoon. Compared with the knives and scissors, there were worse ways we could have spent the day. Besides, feeling the other girls' shoulders against my own was comforting, and after a few moments we found our fingers were locked together in mutual support. Unfortunately, the post held other perils besides the sun.

As soon as we were tied up, one guard brought out a can and began to brush something sticky all over our feet. When I looked down, I saw that the whole area between the buildings was covered with anthills—the small black kind whose bites stung worse than bees. Within minutes, our sticky feet had attracted dozens of them and the girls beside me were screaming and trying to drive them off, but the ropes prevented us from raising our legs. For some reason, I alone had the presence of mind to stand still. *The ants want honey, not me*, I thought, as if it all made perfect sense, *so I will stand still and let them have it*. The more the girls beside me struggled, the more the ants attacked them. The longer I stood still, the higher I could feel the hundreds of little legs on my skin—tickling the fine hair of my body, crawling along my crotch and buttocks and down the backside of my knees—but the fewer times I was bitten. To make matters worse, the guards had gone on about their business and the girls had no one to appeal to with their screams and I had nobody to impress with my self-control. And so we occupied ourselves, shrieking and pulling against the ropes or trying to hold still, while the shadow of the pole crept from one building to the other.

After several hours, our perspiration had carried away most of the honey and we were no more to the ants than what the post had been before. The guards came back and looked us over, smirking at how our legs had become swollen and purple as berries.

"Have our patriotic ants made you girls any smarter?" one of them asked, looking directly at me. "Are you ready to talk now to the interrogator? Huh? Answer me!"

"I'm ready to go *home*!" was the only reply I could think of.

The soldier laughed and went away. A few minutes later he came back with a bucket of water. Gingerly, he rolled up his sleeve, fished around in the bucket, and brought out a glistening water snake about half the length of his arm. This he promptly dropped into my shirt, and repeated the act with two more snakes for the other girls. I knew from their appearance that the little snakes weren't poisonous, but their bite was painful and the awful slithering—as they probed my waist, breasts, armpits, and neck trying to find a way back to the water—was, in its own way, worse than the ants. Besides, whatever patience or self-control I could muster had long ago been exhausted. I screamed at the snake, then screamed at the guards, then screamed at the sky until the noon blue turned black and my voice was reduced to a squeak.

After sundown, the guards untied us and threw water all over us to get rid of the honey and ants and to help them recover their snakes. I was taken again to the interrogator's room where the previous day's encounter was repeated. This time, the interrogator tried to trick me by asking the same question several different ways, banging the table whenever my answer was wrong. "Where do the Viet Cong hide?" he would ask. "I don't know," I would answer. "Okay then, if you don't know where they hide, tell me where they come from!" Then, "If you don't know where they come from, tell me where they go!" and so on. Next he asked if I ever stole weapons and ammunition and went down the list of other commonly pilfered items: first aid kits, clothing, and rations. My only defense was to answer all his questions the same way ("No," "I don't know," and "I don't understand") and avoid playing the interrogator's game: giving measured answers to trick questions which would only whet his suspicions and draw me closer toward the deadly instruments he reserved for his final assault. In the end, he just threw up his hands and had me taken to my cell.

When the door slammed shut I found myself in darkness with a hollow heart, sick stomach, and itchy legs. I lay down on my hard little bed and tried to make sense of what was happening. I truly believed this inter-

rogator was at last convinced I had nothing to hide, but his realization of this was no guarantee of a speedy release—now, or ever. The army had many interrogators and one suspect held in prison would be one less Viet Cong to worry about in the bush. Already, in the few times I had been moved around the camp, I recognized several people from the village—people who had disappeared years before and who, very likely, would call My Thi their home until the end of the war, or death, released them.

The next morning, however, I was taken neither to the interrogation room nor to the torture post, but to the front gate where I was escorted through layers of fences, barbed wire, and curling concertina to the sandy headlands and told simply to “Go home!”

Dumbfounded, I could only stand there and watch the soldiers go back into the compound, wondering why and how I had been so miraculously released. It then occurred to me that perhaps Thien had been released too—maybe ahead of me—so I ran as fast as I could for the road to Danang and my sister Ba’s house, where I could get cleaned up and eat a meal before beginning the long walk home.

At Ba’s house, however, I was surprised to find my mother waiting for me.

“How did you know I would be released?” I asked her. “Nobody gets out of My Thi in three days!”

“Well, you do, little miss hero—and it cost me more than you can count!” She immediately began inspecting me for damage, her face angry, relieved, and sad all at once.

“Chin got me out?” I didn’t believe my policeman brother-in-law could have such clout, let alone such a monumental change of heart—as well as character.

“Chin? Don’t be silly! He has no influence in a military camp. He wouldn’t even handle the bribe for fear of a corruption charge on his record! No, I had to go to my nephew, Uncle Nhu’s son—the Republican lieutenant. He couldn’t act directly, but he knew someone I could approach. It cost me half your dowry, but I suppose you’re worth it—” She took me by the ear and twisted me around, inspecting my backside for wounds. “Well, I can see you’re in one piece. Wash up and I’ll take you home before anything else can happen.”

As it turned out, there was no more dangerous place we could have gone than Ky La. As soon as we entered the village, I could tell everything had changed. People—even old neighbors—avoided my glance, then stared at me as I passed. That night, the Viet Cong held a rally, but the

messenger didn't come to our house. "Just stay at home tonight," my father counseled with a worried look on his face. "It's going to take a while for them to decide what to do."

"Decide about what, Father? Are they angry with me?"

"They're suspicious because nobody gets out of My Thi so quickly—even for a bribe."

"Then why don't we tell them about Uncle Nhu's son?" I asked innocently.

"That would be even worse." My father shook his head. "Then they'd know we had blood ties to the Republicans. Just sit still for a while and let things calm down."

But things didn't calm down—they went from bad to worse. Because the Viet Cong (and because of them, the villagers) didn't trust us, we no longer got warnings about Republican raids or Viet Cong reprisals. When troops appeared, our only defense was to stand still and so we were frequently questioned when Americans and Republicans came to the village—contact that only strengthened the Viet Cong's suspicions. To make things worse, our obvious estrangement from the villagers made us even more trustworthy in Republican eyes, and our house was often spared while the other homes were ransacked. Even my own father, in his attempts to protect me, wound up increasing my danger. He was certain I would not survive another arrest (Thien, in fact, still hadn't come back) and forbade me to go to the fields. Instead, he did all my work himself, even those chores I customarily did for the Viet Cong—delivering rations and making up first aid kits. My absence, however, only convinced them even more that I was cooperating with the Republicans. My father argued that I was sick—first to the Republican soldiers, who remembered me from their patrols, and then to the Viet Cong, when they asked about my absence. Of course, no one believed him, and I could see from his expression each night that the noose around my neck was also tightening around his own. I decided I could not let anything happen to my father because of me.

The next morning, I took my hoe and left the house before my parents, determined to put in a good day's work in front of everyone. On the way, I passed six Republican soldiers, who, having grown more friendly toward me over the last few weeks, only waved. I ignored them, stuck my proud nose higher in the air, and went about my business. Unfortunately, I soon heard their boots on the soil behind me.

The faster I walked, the faster the crunching followed. I forced myself not to look back, but I knew they were behind me. A moment later I heard shouts, followed by the crackle of gunfire, and hit the dirt. But the

soldiers weren't firing at me. Instead, they were all shooting furiously into the bushes beside the road. A second later, they charged forward and I heard one yell that they had hit two Viet Cong fighters—killing one and badly wounding the other. Apparently, the Viet Cong were in the process of setting up an ambush and, afraid the soldiers had seen them, tried to run away. Some of them made it, but these two did not.

Now I could hear the Republicans chatter excitedly. They were pleased with their trophies, but wondered if I was a Viet Cong spy sent to lure them to an ambush. One of them started to come after me, then stopped, looked around, and went back to his buddies. Without further delay, they took their prisoner and scuttled down the road the way they came, worried, apparently, that a bigger force of Viet Cong lurked somewhere in the forest.

Now I had no doubt that my days with the Viet Cong were over. Not only had I mysteriously escaped the notorious My Thi prison, but I had just been seen leading a Republican squad toward a Viet Cong position. Nobody would be interested in my side of the story. Nobody would be interested in the truth. The same "facts" were there for everyone to see and truth, in this war, was whatever you wanted to make it. And, as if all this wasn't bad enough, I had brought it on by disobeying my father. I was a disgrace and liability to everyone. I didn't deserve to live.

With tears streaming down my face, I stumbled down the road to our paddy and began working like a robot. As self-inflicted punishment, I would expose myself to whichever side wanted to shoot me first. *Giet toi di—go ahead! My heart shouted silently, Kill me! My life is over. What more do I have to lose?*

But no one attacked me that morning in the paddy—nor that afternoon. My father went to work in another field and the villagers ignored me, as usual. At the end of the day I just went home. The winter air seemed chillier than usual and even the setting sun and calling birds held no warmth for me. Workers hurried to stuff a last few bundles of rice into their baskets before the light was gone; the kids, ducks, and chickens all jammed around their houses waiting to be fed. Pigs squealed and dogs barked but their familiar sounds no longer gave me comfort. When I got home my mother asked me where I'd been.

"Working," I told her in a sullen voice, and began sweeping the house while she prepared our evening meal.

"Your father will want to speak to you," she said, and made it clear that she, too, was displeased with my disobedience. I didn't mention the skirmish by the road.

Furiously, I swept a cloud of dust out our front door and onto the feet

of two callers who had suddenly appeared in the dusk. I apologized and looked up into the faces of Loi and Mau—the two Viet Cong fighters who had been my supervisors on sentry duty. Normally, I would have been pleased to see them. Now, their hard faces made the broom freeze in my hands.

"Miss Ly," Loi, the oldest, said formally, "*Moi chi di hop.*" (You must come to a meeting.)

Because we had been excluded from meetings since my release, my first reaction was one of gratitude: I was being accepted back by my comrades!—or at least was being given a chance to tell my side of the story.

"Who is it?" my mother called.

"Loi and Mau," I replied in an eager voice. "I'm supposed to go to a meeting!"

My mother came to the door with terror in her eyes. She studied the stony Viet Cong faces a moment, then said, "Give me a minute. I'm coming with you—"

"No!" Loi held up his rifle. "Miss Ly comes alone!"

I looked at my mother and a lump of fear rose in my throat. Still, there was no way to argue with Loi's rifle.

"I'll tell your father." My mother hugged me tightly, then gave me up.

As we walked through the darkened street, Loi in front and Mau in the rear—as guards would escort a criminal, not a hero—our neighbors glanced with hate from their windows. "Now you're going to get what you deserve!" their eyes seem to say. "Spy! Now you'll see what we do to traitors!"

"Where are we going?" I asked Loi, trying to keep the panic from my voice.

"*Chi im di!*" (Shut up!) he replied. "The prisoner may not ask questions."

Prisoner! Mo toa oan nhan dan—So I am going to my trial! Of course, the Viet Cong "people's court" followed only one script and had only one ending—I had seen enough of them to know that. As we left the settled area and the gloom of the forest engulfed us, my mind raced for an answer—what to say, what to do, to convince them of my innocence? Somehow, even the cold efficiency of the My Thi torture factory seemed more just than this. At least the government kept you alive in order to give you pain, and where there's life, I had learned, there's always hope.

After marching awhile, I could see we were headed for a thatched cottage near Phe Binh where children's education meetings were often held. My old girlfriend Khinh used to live there—she had a crush on

my brother Sau Ban and came around often before the youth corps took him away. Now, seeing the cottage again reminded me of Khinh; and Khinh, of my brother Ban. By the time we got to the clearing, my eyes were so full of tears I could hardly see the front door.

Inside, about twenty people were seated in a circle around the floor. One of the cadre leaders, a strident woman named Tram, was in the middle of a speech. Loi stopped me at the door and I felt Mau grab my hands and begin tying them behind my back. As he did so, I recognized an old family friend—a man highly regarded in the village—get up and leave the meeting. He squeezed past me in the doorway and for a second our eyes met. Oddly, there was no hint of reproach in his glance—not even the kind of fear that would drive a loyal friend to abandon me in my hour of need. Instead, the eyes were friendly—almost joking—as if this were all some kind of prank. I was too stunned by his manner—by the events of the day—to call out for help. And so the only man who might have saved me in what was obviously my trial for life slipped wordlessly into the jungle.

Feeling more helpless than ever I turned my attention to Tram's beligerent speech. I saw at once from her flame-red cheeks and raspy voice that this would not be a prosecution, but a denunciation.

"... So, I ask you, what should we do with a woman who betrays our revolution? What should be done with a woman who spies for the enemy and betrays her comrades in the field? What have we done to such people in the past?"

"Execute her! Kill her!" some voices piped back. "Teach her a lesson all traitors will learn from!"

Two things happened now that were very odd. First, it struck me that Tram never once mentioned my name—only "a woman" who has done this and that. Second, although my hands had been tied and my escort made it clear I was a prisoner, I had not been thrust into the center of the room—the usual place for the condemned at a Viet Cong trial. Did the people at Tram's meeting really know it was Phung Thi Le Ly she was denouncing? Or was this some other meeting to which I had been summoned merely as a warning? Or—worst of all—had Tram and Loi and Mau simply decided to take the people's justice into their own hands?

"There, do you hear that, Miss Ly?" Loi whispered menacingly in my ear. "The sentence is death!"

Tram had stopped speaking now and was staring at me with hard, pitiless eyes. All of a sudden I was pulled backward out of the house and hustled down a narrow path toward Rung Phe Binh—the swamp at the edge of the village. Loi and Mau were moving quickly, as if they were

afraid of being followed or of not finishing their mission fast enough. This too was unusual. All executions heretofore had been in front of a crowd. Who would profit from my lesson if my little body simply disappeared into the swamp? Such was the work of gangsters, not the liberation army—but still, I would be just as dead. It was all too confusing and horrifying to think about—and time for thinking, or anything else, was running out.

The hard dirt turned mushy beneath our feet and I felt flying bugs and dangly branches and tall grass brush against me in the dark. Eventually we came to a neck of ground that led to a weedy island in a part of the river that had been dammed for irrigation. It had always been a pleasant, vital place—full of birds and fish and frogs—I had played there many times with my brother Sau Ban and kids from school. Now, the ragged, moonlit brush and scruffy trees bobbed ominously in the wind and the black water, like the gauzy air, was silent and foreboding.

We splashed across the swampy ground and plowed through the brush to a clearing among the trees. In the middle of the clearing was a hole—a grave—with two shovels stuck into the loamy soil. There was no question about where we were headed. All I could think of was my mother and father—had someone from the meeting gone to tell them what was happening? *Maybe they're on their way to save me right now!* How would they take the news of my death? I was the last child in the family—everyone else had been lost to the cities or the war. I knew my father couldn't live without his family around him. The bullet that killed me might just as well pass through his heart. *So this is how I will repay him as a Phung Thi woman—a woman warrior—by lying dead in a swampy grave!*

Loi pulled my tied hands up sharply, buckling my legs, and I fell to my knees beside the grave.

"Well, Miss Ly, you know why we're here," he said, almost casually, as if we were about to go fishing or pick some fruit.

I heard the bolt slide up and down in his rifle, chambering a round. I swayed on my knees, trying to think of something to say—*anything*—that would keep me alive a little longer. While I fretted, another part of my brain wondered what my *ma ruoc hon*—the ancestral ghost who would escort me down to hell—would look like. Would she be beautiful and filmy, like the Christian death-angels I had seen in the Catholic picture books? Or would she be harsh and painted, like the Buddhas that guarded Marble Mountain? I concentrated on my breath—on taking in and letting out the stuff of life. Living things breathe and as long as I

could feel my own breath I'd know I was alive. I closed my eyes, took in a deep, quivering, lungful of air, and—

Loi's heavy sandal kicked me over onto my side.

Although the air was cool, the sand on my cheek still held the warmth of day. I lay there relishing the sound of the wind and the croaking frogs and—somewhere far away—a barking dog and wailing baby. I opened my eyes and through the brush I could see the village oil lamps come on across the river: *ngon den treo truoc gio*, I thought—the lamp before the storm—like the light of life, so terribly hard to spark and so easy to put out. If a lamp glowed in my parents' house, it would mean my father was home—banging his head against the wall, raging at his impotence to save his daughter. My mother would be shrieking in his ear, *What are you doing? Do something!* I can hear him answer in a voice that's thick with pain, "*Dap dau vao tuong chet!*" (I cannot, so I must break my head upon the wall!)

Around me, the swamp creatures went about their nightly rituals—spinning webs, setting traps, stalking prey—and I knew I was only one of many beings on this island who would not see the morning sun. Here is where I would stay. My little bones would become a part of this tiny island for the rest of time—my spirit a mournful howl in the wind. With dirt in my eyes and mouth and hair, I was already becoming part of Mother Earth.

Loi's strong hand plucked me out of the sand and I teetered again on my knees. He forced my head out over the yawning grave.

"Do you see that?"

"Yes," I said in a weary voice.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A grave—"

He yanked my hair savagely. "Stupid girl! It's *your* grave!"

"It's my grave—" I repeated tonelessly.

"Do you know that the enemy is with your parents right now?"

"No."

"Do you care about your parents?"

"Yes."

"Okay then. You answer my questions honestly and maybe they'll stay alive. Why did you lead the soldiers to our comrades this morning?"

"I didn't lead them. I was just going into the fields and they followed me. Why won't you believe me?"

"What kind of deal did you make to get out of My Thi prison? Did you promise them some Viet Cong ears for their belts?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. My mother bribed an official—"

"Why did you lead the enemy to our ambush?"

Loi repeated all his questions as if I hadn't answered. I repeated all my answers as if I didn't care. There was no point prolonging things. I was ready to die.

"Bah!" Loi hit the back of my head and I fell over. I closed my eyes and chanted a prayer.

"What's this?" Loi asked sarcastically, "Our hero Miss Ly is afraid to die?" His rifle barrel bit into my temple like a drill, pushing my head further into the sand.

My heart shouted silently into the night, *Why don't you do it—bastard! What are you waiting for?* and I prepared for the shattering explosion that would return my spirit to the well of souls, to come back at another time and place to a better life.

Suddenly, the pressure of the gun barrel went away and Loi turned around. I heard him whispering with Mau, then his moon shadow fell over me again.

"Hey—hero! Do you want to live?"

My heartbeat, reduced to a trickle—no more than the sap in the trees whose roots would soon surround my corpse—began to pound in my head. My eyes flickered open. For a second, I almost resented my body's desperate desire to live after my soul had made its peace with eternity. But I was just a little girl and living flesh, as it must, won out. I prayed that I would find the right words.

"My life is in your hands—"

"What the hell does that mean?"

Before I replied, I thanked god for my extra breath—my extra time. Whatever happened, I knew I must try to calm things down—to keep Loi from jerking the trigger even by accident. In as soft a voice as I could muster, I said, "I mean I won't ever talk to the enemy. I have been shamed enough in the village."

"You hear that, Mau?" Loi turned and I heard Mau laugh like a ghost. Loi's hands wrapped around my ankles, twisted me onto my back, then grabbed my collar and jerked me to my feet like a puppet. He removed his peasant's hat and tossed it to the sand. His rifle was gone, but a knife gleamed evilly in his hand. He looked me up and down the way a butcher eyes a roast.

Now they're going to do it! I thought. He's going to stab me! He doesn't want to waste a bullet! Like an alarm, my spirit voice cried to my mother

and father, blotting out all sounds in my head except the pounding of my heart. My skin broke out in sweat, clammy as a fish. Leaves rustled at the edge of the clearing and I noticed Mau had disappeared. *What's happening? What are they up to? What—*

Loi knocked me flat on my back. When I opened my eyes, the shadow of Loi's face—*inches away, grotesque and distorted, scarcely human—*blotted out the stars. I rolled my head from side to side, trying to escape his face and evil breath.

"All right, you fucking traitor—!" His rough hands tore down my pants. His weight went away and he stood astride me in the moonlight, frantically unbuttoning his pants. "But if you tell anybody about this, we're going to kill you for real!"

New terror rose inside me. I wriggled like a crab—flopped like a fish—toward the grave, for the safety of the hole, but with my hands tied behind me and my feet tangled in my pants and Loi's fence-post legs holding me fast, I couldn't move.

"God—*no!*" I shouted "Mother! Father! Please—no!"

Loi's hand covered my mouth, "Shut up, you little bitch—!" The hand went to my neck and stopped me from sliding and what felt like a big, blunt thumb pressed urgently between my legs. A second later it was as if the knife itself had cut my crotch. Loi's hips pumped furiously and his fingers tightened around my throat, choking me till my vision sparkled. I went limp and prayed that when this was over, Loi would at least have the kindness to kill me quickly. What choice would he have now? *None*. In Viet Cong eyes, he was now as much a criminal as me. I prayed my father would find my grave. Certainly, my lingering, shrieking soul would guide him to it like a beacon and I would then have a casket and funeral as I deserved. But not this. *Not this!*

Loi's hand relaxed and breath flowed back in my body. He pulled away, staggered to his feet, and raised his pants. His face, though dim in the moonlight, was still revolting. He hawked up some spittle and spat it over me. I turned my head and rolled to one side, pulling my quivering knees up to my chin. I tried to think but my brain was as numb as my body.

*I have been raped—*I now knew the horror that every woman dreads. What had been saved a lifetime for my husband had been ripped away in less time than it takes to tell. Most horrible of all was that the act of making life itself had left me feeling dead. The force of Loi's twisted soul had entered me and killed me as surely as his knife. He could shoot me now—I wouldn't even feel the bullet.

Mau was next to me. He untied my hands and gently turned me over. "Le Ly," he whispered, as if afraid to be overheard, "listen to me. If you live, do you promise to never tell anybody about what happened?"

I pulled up my pants and stared into the younger man's face. "I didn't deserve this, Mau," I said bitterly.

He didn't answer. I saw Loi across the clearing, urinating into the bushes. Loi called over his shoulder, "She's going to tell her family, isn't she?"

"No," Mau shouted. "She's too ashamed. Aren't you, Le Ly?"

I didn't say anything. Loi came back and picked up his rifle.

"Okay," he said. "We could've killed you for your crime, but we didn't. Consider yourself lucky. What happens next is up to you. If you ever say anything about this to anyone at all, we'll wipe out your whole family. Do you understand?"

I nodded sullenly.

"Okay," he sniffed loudly. "Now get the hell out of here!"

I started to jump up but Mau held me fast.

"No, wait," Mau said. "She can't go home tonight. Even if she doesn't talk, Tram will skin us for letting her go."

"You're right." Loi thought a moment, then said to me, "Hey, hero! Don't you have an aunt who lives near here?"

He meant my cousin Thum, Uncle Huong's daughter. Thum had two brothers who went to Hanoi and her house was sometimes used by the Viet Cong to hide supplies. "Yes," I said, averting my eyes—I couldn't bear to look at him, "in Tung Lam."

"Okay then, we'll take you there for the night. But say one word to her about any of this and we'll burn her house down with both of you inside! Now get up. Get moving!"

Painfully, as if I had been on the sand for a thousand years, I got up and straightened my clothes. The grave still lay open beside me, but it was now no more threatening than a post hole or a bunker. What Loi had killed in me could not be buried; yet I already felt its weight—like a shoulder pole or tumor—on my soul. My bottom stung and was wet with my virgin blood and Loi's seed, and as I walked bowlegged toward the old boat used as a ferry on the far side of the island, I felt filthy and wanted only to bathe in the river and pray at the ruined pagoda that loomed darkly above the trees outside Tung Lam.

But there would be time for all that later. In fact, my whole life now seemed burdened with time: time I would not spend with a husband for whom I had been ruined; time free of happy children that I would never

bear. Curiously, despite the paralyzing fear I had felt only moments before, I now longed for the bullet that slept in Loi's rifle.

We took one of the canoes the villagers kept tethered to the bank and paddled onto the river. I could easily see the lights of Tung Lam through the trees ahead, and behind and to the east, the lights of Ky La, which was now circled with flares and aircraft.

"The Americans are back," Mau whispered, pointing to the lights.

Loi sniffed the chill air and wouldn't look. Certainly, the allies would return in force after the morning's skirmish and chances were good that Loi and Mau would be in battle again before tomorrow was over. An hour ago I would have felt sorry for them. Now I silently relished the moment of their death.

We tied up the boat on the opposite bank and moved quietly through the brush—no place at night was one hundred percent safe, even for the Viet Cong—and knocked on the door to my cousin's house. It swung open and I saw Thum with a baby in her arms. Loi pushed her aside and went in, rifle cocked and ready. There was nobody home except Thum and her three children.

"Bay Ly!" Thum was surprised to see me, "What are you doing here this time of night?"

"Never mind," Loi answered for me. He pointed the gun at my cousin. "Come inside."

Loi and Mau went in and talked with Thum while I shivered on the porch. A few minutes later the fighters came out and started off for the jungle.

"So remember," Loi said over his shoulder to Thum, "mind your own business and give her a place to sleep. We'll come for her in the morning."

Thum looked me up and down and could see from my pale face, rumpled clothes, and shivering body that I had been through an ordeal. "Come on, Bay Ly," she said softly, "come and sit by the stove. Have you eaten?" She called to Loi, "Don't worry—she'll be fine."

Thum took me inside and poured some water for me to wash. Although she never said so, I could see she thought I had been assaulted by soldiers—beaten up and maybe molested. "Those damned Republicans!" she swore under her breath, confirming what I had already guessed Loi told her. "Damn all of them to hell!" I was too tired and too afraid of Loi's threat—and too ashamed—to contradict her. All I wanted now was sleep.

I wrapped myself in a blanket and lay on the bed while Thum's children did homework around the stove. It was a warm, peaceful scene and my

eyelids began to sag. Just as I was about to go to sleep, someone knocked on the door.

Thum answered it and I heard a male voice. I opened my eyes and saw Thum look at me, then step back from the door. Mau came into the room and said, "Miss Ly, you must come with me."

With every joint on fire, I threw back the blanket, got up, and trudged after Mau like a zombie. Just outside the house, I stopped and asked, "Where's Loi? Where are you taking me? What's going on?"

Mau looked back with his little boy's face and motioned me forward, "Come on. Just a little further. I've got something to tell you."

I sighed, but I figured that without Loi around, Mau at least could be trusted. I knew he felt bad about what Loi had done. Maybe he wanted to apologize. Maybe he had already reported Loi to Tram, their hard-nosed lady commandant, and Loi himself had been arrested. Maybe Mau couldn't stand the thought of a comrade so vilely degrading a hero of the liberation—let alone a young girl from their own village—and killed Loi himself and had come now to tell me I could rest easy.

When we were just beyond sight of Thum's house, Mau whirled around and pushed me down on the jungle floor. I squealed and covered my face, expecting him to beat me, but instead he sat on my stomach and aimed his rifle at my head.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Miss Ly"—his voice quivered more than mine—"but this is something I have to do!"

My god—here it comes! I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. I tilted my head upward to give him a better shot. I didn't want him to miss or just wound me. I wanted him to end it—to end all this, to end everything now all at once. This was god's mercy. I would wait for peace no longer.

But Mau didn't fire. Instead, rough male hands again tore down my pants. I opened my eyes to see Mau struggling feverishly with his belt, the rifle crooked absently in his arm. It would have been easy to disarm him—to knock the gun away and crush his testicles with my knee and run back to cousin Thum's—but what then? I could take the gun and shoot him, but would that save me from Viet Cong retribution? Would hunting down Loi and splattering the sand with his brains restore my lost virginity? Would accusing the two Viet Cong who wronged me make the cadre leaders think I had wronged the Viet Cong any less?

Drugged by too much hate and fear and confusion, I just lay back and let Mau do what he had to do. Unlike Loi, he did not spit on me and curse my womanness when he finished. Rather, he seemed like a sad little boy who, believing he was not a man, settled for the imitation of manhood Loi had shown him. That I was the stage for this poor show made no

difference; for by now I knew I was no more than the dirt on which we lay. The war—these men—had finally ground me down to oneness with the soil, from which I could no longer be distinguished as a person. Dishonored, raped, and ruined for any decent man, my soiled little body had become its own grave.

When Mau was done, he got up, buttoned his pants, and offered me his hand. Slowly, dizzily—like falling in a dream—I put on my pants and got up without his help. He walked me back to Thum's house, then ran when she opened the door.

"What happened to you?" Thum asked, looking at the leaves in my hair and the dirt on my just-washed face.

"Nothing." I didn't even give her the courtesy of a decent lie. "Mau had something to tell me."

I went back to bed and Thum put out the lamp. I could hear her children asleep around me like warm puppies. While I began the endless wait for sleep, I tried to plan what to do in the morning, but it all seemed so pointless and futile. Either Loi and Mau would come, or they would not. Either I would be raped again, or I would not. I might be arrested again by the Viet Cong, or perhaps by the Republicans—but what did it matter? The bullets of one would just save bullets for the other. I no longer cared even for vengeance. Both sides in this terrible, endless, *stupid* war had finally found the perfect enemy: a terrified peasant girl who would endlessly and stupidly consent to be their victim—as all Vietnam's peasants had consented to be victims, from creation to the end of time! From now on, I promised myself, I would only flow with the strongest current and drift with the steadiest wind—and not resist. To resist, you have to believe in something.

LATE MORNING, APRIL 3, 1986:

WESTBOUND OVER THE KAMPUCHEA-VIETNAM BORDER

Per, having gotten up to use the toilet, returns to his seat and apologizes for being gone so long. He says he ran into another worker from his UN agency at the back of the plane and stopped to chat. I tell him not to worry about me; I am a big girl whose eyes are wide open. I thank him for his help so far and assure him I am quite content with my situation. I have decided to let go of useless worry and put myself in the hands of god, who has done okay by me so far. Why shouldn't I trust him for another couple of weeks?

"Good," Per says, and jots down some numbers on the back of his