

“Senior Uncle,” I asked, “why did you leave your ancestral home for Ban Long?” I knew a Vietnamese peasant’s *que huong*—the site of his ancestors’ graves—is the wellspring of life. Given the choice, Senior Uncle would have stayed to tend those graves and draw guidance from his ancestors’ spirits.

“I had to flee,” he said. “The French were going to arrest me!”

“But why you, Senior Uncle?”

“Father, what are you talking about?” Second Harvest asked. She brought a plate of water apples from the kitchen, a separate building made of tarpaper and water-palm thatch. She waved to two women paddling a canoe up the creek. “Coming back from market, are you?” she asked them.

“We’re talking about the French,” Senior Uncle said to Second Harvest. Then he turned to me. “We fled after the 1940 Uprising. The French were arresting us to fight the Germans, they raised our taxes for their war, I couldn’t feed my children, don’t you understand? We were starving! People died because of French taxes!”

“Were you a sharecropper, Senior Uncle?” I asked.

“No, no, not sharecropping.” Second Harvest divided a water apple between her father and me. The fruit, the size of a crab apple, was pink and hollow, its translucent meat crisp and coarse.

“When I was small,” Senior Uncle said, “my family had enough money to send me to school. But in 1940 I refused to be a soldier for the French in their war against the Germans. I fled, and then the French burned my house and all my rice.” He held out his hands. “I only had these two hands left. I had to work like a serf.”

“Like France in the 1300s,” Autumn said, taking half a water apple.

“We were all serfs,” Fifth Harmony said. “For one thousand square meters of land, we paid twenty kilos of unhusked rice, but sometimes we didn’t even harvest that much. We had no land of our own, no way to eat.”

Senior Uncle cupped his hands into an empty bowl. “When insects ate most of your harvest, the landlord took whatever was

left, and then the landlord took back his land, and he would take your house, and if you had a pretty daughter, he took her. If you still couldn't pay, he beat you! Do you hear me, Child, the landlord beat my grandfather to death!"

I had been rubbing the belly of Senior Uncle's small dog with my foot. I stopped. Small Dog nipped my toes, her teeth like nails.

"We were slaves!" Senior Uncle said.

"These were French landlords?" I asked.

"The Vietnamese landlords paid the French," Second Harvest said. "We were starving. That's why my parents joined the Uprising."

Autumn peered at me over the glasses perched at the end of her nose. "The French didn't want peasants to organize. That's why they kept them illiterate, so they couldn't communicate."

"Like me," Second Harvest said. "I didn't learn to read until I was ten, and then I finished only the third grade."



*The French colonialists educated only the Vietnamese administrative class, leaving behind a five-percent literacy rate. Below, Second Harvest shows how her father taught her to write on the back of banana leaves.*

Autumn turned to Second Harvest. "I got to go to school, but you know what the French taught me? King Louis this, King Louis that! Can you imagine? On their maps of Viet Nam, they wrote 'France Overseas'! And when I went to Paris, the only thing the French students I met knew about Viet Nam was that we had rubber and coal. They knew nothing about our culture, but only about what the French took from us back to France." She looked at me. "Why, Viet Nam didn't even have a name. 'Indochina' they called it! That's India and China, two giants. Where were we?" Second Harvest split another water apple. "Maybe most of us didn't learn to read until we were grown," she said, "but we knew our history, and we sang our poems to give us determination."

"We had to rise up," Senior Uncle said. "For our children."

"Where was this uprising in 1940?" I asked.

"At Vinh Kim Market," Second Harvest said. "Where we bought fish this morning."

"We only had banners and signs, just like in 1930," Senior Uncle said. "No weapons. Still, the French burned our houses and rice. I escaped to Ban Long, but it was worse for the others." He tapped his temples. "With my own eyes, I saw the French soldiers drive nails through my neighbors' hands, can you picture this? The French roped my neighbors together and dragged them into the river until the water filled their mouths and choked their cries."

"The bridge at Vinh Kim," Fifth Harmony said, pushing her foot to make the hammock swing, "the one where we tied up our *zuong* this morning. The landlords would bind the hands and feet of those who couldn't pay their taxes and shove them off the bridge. That's why we call it 'Forever Silent Bridge'."

"One piece of land, so much blood," Second Harvest said. She looked out toward the stream, her face as calm as the water with the tide about to turn. "A span of bridge, so many splinters of bone."

"*Nam Ky Khoi Nghia.*" Autumn spoke the phrase for "the Southern Uprising" as if in prayer.

We settled into silence broken only by the biddies chirping beneath the table and the slow creak of the hammock.

... Last Gust loved to reminisce. "I was so excited," he would often say, "when I first heard about the Party! I was only eight,

but I knew we would be free!! Of course that was 1930, and I was young and naive. Freedom took a long time coming.”

“Senior Uncle,” I asked, leaning forward, “can you remember *Nam Ky Khoi Nghia*?”

“As clear as [the TV program] *Mariana* last night!” Last Gust stared at the bubbles rising through his orange soda. “I was in high school in My Tho in 1940. My job was to organize the youth in Vinh Kim. I knew about the planning for the Uprising, not because I was a leader— I was too young— but because I knew how to write. I was useful as a secretary.

“I was eighteen. In 1940 the Party was weak. Then the Germans invaded France. Imagine! France became a colony! Just like us! But then the French became even more vicious masters. They increased our taxes to pay for their war against Germany, they drafted us to be their soldiers against Hitler. We couldn’t stand any more!

“The Resistance center was Long Hung, only three kilometers from Forever Silent Bridge. Long Hung was the brain, but Vinh Kim was the mouth. We spread the word, from Long Hung through the Market Mouth to Binh Trung, Phu Phong, Song Thuan, Dong Hoa, and on and on.”

From the river came the hum of approaching motors and of voices rippling back and forth.

“You spread the word over the south?” I asked.

“No! Not at all. *Nam Ky Khoi Nghia* happened right here. The Uprising was planned to be all over southern Viet Nam, but then one of the cadre in Sai Gon was arrested and tortured and gave names. The French then arrested our leaders in Sai Gon, all our top leaders! Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, the famous revolutionary, do you know about her?”

I shook my wrists and fingers, in the Vietnamese gesture for “No”.

“Oh! She was one of Uncle Ho’s most famous students. Minh Khai came from the center of Viet Nam, from Nghe An, Uncle Ho’s home. Her father was in the administrative class serving the French. She and her younger sister went to French schools. Her sister married our famous general, Vo Nguyen Giap, and died in

prison. Minh Khai's husband died in prison, too, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

"In 1929, a group of youth left Nghe An by boat for China to study revolutionary strategy with Uncle Ho. Minh Khai was nineteen and the only woman to go. She went on to Russia and was the first Vietnamese woman revolutionary to study there as well.

"It was hard to organize in the north and center of Viet Nam because the French were so vigilant. Sai Gon was more fertile ground, particularly with the port and the ships coming in and out. The laborers on the ships and the stevedores on shore linked us to the worldwide Communist movement. Minh Khai traveled from Russia through France, Germany, and Italy and returned to Viet Nam to organize in Sai Gon."



*The author with Mme. Nguyen Thi Thap (second from left), who helped organize the famous 1940 Uprising against the French at Vinh Kim Market. Autumn (second from right, next to Second Harvest, far right), a northern intellectual, was arrested for writing a letter to a schoolmate, who had joined Ho Chi Minh in the mountains. During the American War, Third Fragrance (center) was raised by relatives inside Sai Gon-held territory while her parents worked for the revolution.*

Uncle Last Gust paused, lacing his fingers together across his chest. His voice dropped to a murmur as he went on. “Minh Khai was one of our key organizers among factory workers in Sai Gon from 1936 until 1940. Oh, it was a sad day when the French took our leaders out onto the Cu Chi Road and executed them.”

Uncle Last Gust rubbed his chest. “It makes my heart stop to think of Minh Khai. The French never let the prisoners have anything they could use to communicate— no pen or paper, no bit of metal to scratch the walls.” He stuck his forefinger into his mouth as if to bite it and then drew in the air. “Minh Khai used her own blood as ink, her fingertip as a pen. She wrote a poem on the prison wall for those she left behind.” Uncle Last Gust’s voice had a gravelly sound as he recited:

*Remain resolute whether in public outcry or quiet liaison.  
Both pliers and pincers serve their purpose.  
Sacrifice yourself? Strive to serve our cause!  
The only withdrawal comes with death’s release.*

A breeze rustled the leaves of cucumber vines growing over the arbor in front of the house. Uncle Last Gust leaned forward. “When our Sai Gon leaders were arrested,” he continued, “Central Headquarters decided the Party was too weak for *Nam Ky Khoi Nghia* to succeed. If we didn’t succeed, the French would obliterate us! Central Headquarters sent messengers to tell us to wait until our Movement was stronger, but the French arrested the messengers who’d been sent to warn us. The word never arrived.”

“So you were the only ones?” I said.

“A few other localities rose up, some villages in Ben Tre, but Ben Tre province was a younger sister to My Tho. You’ve lived here, Little One. You know the sounds of nighttime, only the cicadas singing, the bamboo whispering, maybe an owl. But oh, that night, what a ruckus!! The word went out, ‘Hurry! Hurry to Vinh Kim!’ “

I pictured the scene: hundreds of canoes hurtling along the dark, mysterious sluices that fed Roaring River.

“Once we’d gathered at Vinh Kim, we moved up National Highway 4— we call it National Highway 1 now— to the house

of Landlord Nguyen Thanh Long. We were starving, but he had storehouses full of rice. We divided his rice among the poor, and we divided his rice fields, too! Oh, I've never seen such celebrating!

"The flag!" Last Gust pointed to the tiny flag atop his TV. "For the first time in anyone's memory, we had a country, and our country had a flag! Glorious red with a vibrant gold star in the middle!"

I leaned forward. "Mrs. Thap mentioned a flag when I met her."

"Indeed she might!" Last Gust tapped the table with his fingertip. "Mrs. Thap and her husband were among the chief organizers. She was a seamstress, she sewed the flags. Our very own Nguyen Thi Thap was the first person to raise the national flag of Viet Nam!"

So that's what Mrs. Thap had tried to tell me. However, she had written her autobiography with such humility that I missed a crucial fact: I'd met the Betsy Ross of Viet Nam.

Last Gust looked out the doorway at his orchids, which were sparks of color trailing from their planters. His angular features turned somber, and his voice took on a rough edge like the sound of a gravedigger's shovel slicing the earth.

"The French retaliated the next morning. In 1940, northern Viet Nam wasn't much of a threat to the French. That's how the French could concentrate their power here. You know how busy Vinh Kim Market is at seven-thirty if the tide is up. Besides, everyone had gathered to celebrate! That's when the French bombed. The wails, the wounded. In my thirty-five years with the Revolution, I never heard such terror. Thirty or forty killed, one hundred twenty wounded. Then the French sent in the Foreign Legion. Do you know about the Legion?"

"A little," I said. I remembered the day I'd been so sick and how Third Mother had told me she'd spread pig dung on her face to frighten off Foreign Legion soldiers so they wouldn't rape her.

Last Gust wove his fingers together. "There were two types of Foreign Legion soldiers. The first were white people, but they



*Tending the ancestors' graves is an important part of Tet. Fifth Harmony stands by the grave of her mother, who, as a "mother of soldiers", fed and clothed guerrillas during the French and American wars.*

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were orphans and prisoners, the people the French didn't want. They were terribly cruel. The second were soldiers drafted from the other French colonies, but we didn't have them until 1945. The white Foreign Legion burned Vinh Kim and Long Hung. They burned any village that had taken part in the Uprising. Houses and rice, burned! Whatever they wanted, stolen. Anyone they found, raped, then shot! Oh, it was terrible.

"Everyone fled. People so feared the French Foreign Legion, they didn't gather the dead. Ninety percent of our leaders, killed on the spot. Or taken for torture, a mass migration to Con Dao Prison Island. The remaining ten percent were youth like myself. I escaped to Ben Tre.

"I was a student, and so when the older Party members sent me back to Vinh Kim several days later to care for the dead, I wore my student's uniform as a guise and spoke to the soldiers in French. The Foreign Legion had dumped the bodies or what was left of



them into a bunker. Oh my God, the heat and the flies swarming, never ever has there been such a smell."

Last Gust coughed, and I was aware of the strain that remembering placed on his heart. "After two months," he continued, "we had nothing left of our new independence. Nothing. I was just a student, but I could tell the French had snuffed out our flame. What could we do? How could we have a revolution with an uprising in only one place? What we had learned here must flow to the rest of the country. We had to teach others.

"We had determination, and we had the Party. The Party was crucial. If we'd had many political parties, our push for independence would have failed. But Uncle Ho united us behind one party. Oh my, when Uncle Ho died in 1969, the bombing in the South was ferocious. As if the Americans thought bombs could break our will!"

Autumn folded the stems of her glasses in on each other. "When Uncle Ho died," she said, "Ha Noi wept tears. In the South, the sky wept bombs."

From the river came the receding put-put of a *xuong* and then the sound of its wake lapping against the shore. Last Gust gazed at his soda, its bubbles rising. "Thirty-five years from *Nam Ky Khoi Nghia* until peace. In 1975, we who survived came home with tears in our eyes. Our joy faced sorrow when we learned the fate of friends we'd lost. None of us who survived can ever live free of memory."

"Whenever anyone talks about prison," Autumn said later that night as she climbed under our mosquito net, "my blood runs as fast as the outgoing tide." She tucked the net beneath the reed mat, then stretched out next to me. The net's ribbing cast a shadow like welts across Autumn's chest. She shuddered.

"You were in prison?" I turned onto my side and propped my cheek on my elbow. I could hear Vigor singing from his bed in the back room. The song was a ballad about a Resistance fighter in the Truong Son Mountains, the Vietnamese name for the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

"I was imprisoned when I was eighteen," Autumn said....

"In the early 1950s," Autumn said, "I was in the *lycée* in Ha Noi. I joined a group of students in the Resistance against the French."

Now I was more perplexed. "Your mother and grandmother were in the Resistance?!"

"Oh no! Our group met in secret. Our *lycée* had been named for the Trung sisters, who had liberated Viet Nam from the Chinese in A.D. 43. We girls followed their example. I wrote a letter from our group to one of our students with the medical corps in the mountains. The police intercepted my letter."

"You'd signed your name?"

Autumn looked over at me and laughed. "I wasn't that naive! I only used the name 'Trung Sisters Student'. I signed in the name of our school. It took the police two months to find me."

Autumn ran her fingers over the netting. "I'd moved on to the second baccalaureate. There were only five girls in the second baccalaureate. Since forty students were needed to make a class, we girls were transferred to the boys' *lycée*, which was named for Nguyen Trai, the great poet-statesman. The police checked my handwriting on the letter against the exam papers in the Trung Sisters *lycée* and then followed me to Nguyen Trai. I was in class when they arrested me."

Autumn sighed. "They beat me for three days, they used electricity, but I refused to name others in our group. They went to my mother's house, caught my mother by surprise. She hadn't known about my activities! I was in prison a month with buyers and sellers, peasant women who'd been arrested in the market. We were like a club, reciting poetry, singing, trading stories and experience."

..."Such a cruel time!" Fifth Virtue said, exhaling smoke through the gap in his teeth.

"Like my family," Second Harvest said. "When Father fled, the puppets threw my mother into prison. I was thrown into prison with her. I was two, so I don't remember this, but Mother often told me what a comfort I was."

"Can you imagine, Little One?" Fifth Virtue added. "In 1940 everyone bombed us! First, after the Uprising, the French. Then

the Japanese invaded us. Then the Americans bombed us because of the Japanese. The Americans were the worst. They bombed everywhere."

"World War II," I said, nodding.

"Yes!" Tenth Treasure said.

"We had nothing!" Second Harvest pulled at the sleeve of her *ao ba ba*. "No cloth. No matches. No lamp oil."

"It was embarrassing to have no cloth," Sixth Rice Field added, covering his mouth. "Imagine! We made clothes out of leaves and stitched them with banana thread! A husband and wife might own a single pair of shorts. When the wife wore the shorts outside the house, the husband hid inside."

"How could we kids study?" Second Harvest said. "I didn't have clothes to wear to school. I had only one pair of shorts. No shirt! We didn't have paper. I learned to write my letters on the back of banana leaves, their veins for lines, a sliver of bamboo for a pen."

"It was different for the British colonies," Autumn said, turning to me. Her accent—the crisp sound of a Ha Noi intellectual—was always easier for me to understand than the rural southern accent used in Ban Long. "In India, the British built factories, but the French took our raw materials to France and brought back the finished goods for us to buy. There was one Vietnamese match factory in the north, and the textile mills were in the north, too. That's why we in the south had nothing." She turned to the others. "But at least people here didn't starve."

"No more than usual," Sixth Rice Field muttered.

"The French took our land, Little One," Second Harvest said. "Without land and water, how could we eat? We had no industry here, like they had in the north. Have you seen any machines? Our hands and our feet, deep in the mud—that's what makes rice grow, rice we can put in our mouths." She cupped her left hand like a bowl close to her lips, the two forefingers of her right hand like chopsticks, her mouth open.

"That's why Uncle Ho formed the Viet Minh," Sixth Rice Field said.

"Did you know about Communism in 1940 or hear about the Viet Minh in 1941?" I asked Sixth Rice Field. I knew that during the

late 1930s, Vietnamese Communist Party members who favored an international Communist revolution had disagreed with Ho Chi Minh's wish to include merchants and small landlords in his nationalist emphasis. But by 1941, with both the French and Japanese occupying Viet Nam, the Party acceded to Ho's wish to widen the nationalist movement. Independence, the Party agreed, must come first; Communism's social revolution would become a part of the independence struggle. And so in May 1941, Ho Chi Minh announced the formation of the Viet Minh— *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*, or "Alliance for an Independent Viet Nam."

Sixth Rice Field drew his fingertips along the table as if they were harrow tines. "Most of us here had never heard of Communism or the Viet Minh in 1941! We were hungry. We wanted rice."

"The hunger was even worse in the north," Autumn added. "The Japanese forced the peasants to grow jute to make rope for their war industry. By early 1945, there was no rice. Our rice was growing— you could see the bursts of gold, but by May the peasants were as thin as rice stalks. They wandered, searching for food. They died on the road."

Autumn looked out the door at a boy buying an ice-cream stick for the child on his hip, then continued. "No one knew the names of the dead. Then when the harvest came, more people died because they ate too much! And after that, cholera, and still more died. In all, two million people died during the first six months of 1945. One person out of six."

Fifth Virtue spread another pinch of tobacco on a rolling paper. All the while, he clicked his tongue against his teeth.

Autumn's voice turned grey. "The corpse cart made a *re re re* sound as it came. Terrible. A cart with bodies stacked like sticks of firewood. I was ten. I would hide whenever I heard the *re re re, re re re*. Once I saw a dead woman leaning against my neighbor's door. It was early morning, with mist all around. The woman's *ao ba ba* was open. The baby at her breast was still alive, sucking at the corpse. That's when I understood the meaning of 'dead'."

"I'll tell you, Last Child," Second Harvest said, "about the time I first learned about 'dead'. My maternal grandfather— he was my great-uncle, but since he'd raised my mother, I called him

'Maternal Grandfather'— and his best friend had just celebrated Tet when the French Foreign Legion entered Ban Long. The women had fled because they were afraid of rape. The French would have asked my grandfather whether he was Viet Minh."

Second Harvest held her hands up and rotated her wrists in the southern gesture for "No". "That's what Grandfather would have said, 'No.'"

"I came back from working for the rich landlord to find the two elders lying on the earthen floor." She lifted her hands over her eyes. "Grandfather had bullet holes through his hands, bullet holes through his eyes. That was 1948. I was ten. From that moment on, I knew I would resist the French."

... One evening in the dry season of 1990, Autumn and I were sitting with Second Harvest's son, Third Ability, at the round table in the corner of the side room at Senior Uncle's. In those days, before Ban Long had electricity, we spent our evenings talking. Second Harvest dozed in the hammock. The baby lamp on the table cast a gold light on her feet with their toes spread from gripping monkey bridges. Senior Uncle was in the other room, listening to his radio. It carried news of the Vietnamese Communist Party's sixtieth anniversary celebration.

Autumn touched Third Ability's wrist. "There may have been a big crowd in Sai Gon today," she said, "but there's never been such a crowd as Independence Day in Ha Noi after the Viet Minh defeated the French and Japanese in 1945."

"You heard Uncle Ho?!" Second Harvest asked. She climbed out of the hammock and joined us.

"Oh! So many went to hear him!" Autumn said.

"Could you see Ho Chi Minh?" I passed the peanuts we'd been nibbling to Second Harvest.

"Oh, yes." Autumn laughed. "But he was tiny. There were people from here to forever."

"What else?" Second Harvest asked. She rubbed tiger balm on the back of her hands to ease the stiffness from poor circulation. The balm's pungent scent penetrated the oily smell of burning kerosene.

"My mother gave us money for ice-cream sticks!" Autumn said.

I chuckled. In those days, still the time of rhetoric, most Vietnamese I knew would have launched into a speech about how Ho Chi Minh had quoted the American Revolution's Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. But not Autumn. She remained true to her childhood memory.

"It was midday and hot," Autumn said. "People were fainting from the heat. We'd walked all the way— several kilometers— to Ba Dinh Square. I only had one *hao* for an ice-cream stick, but I was so thirsty! I took off my conical hat and dipped water from the public fountain and drank that."

"Your mother let you?" I asked.

"Oh no. Mother stayed at home to light the incense. I'd gone with my older sister. Oh! There was such a clamor! As soon as Uncle Ho declared independence, the pagoda and church bells rang out all across the land. And then the fragrance of incense! So many of

our ancestors had died for the cause. In each house someone stayed home to light the incense and bow before the family altar so our ancestors would know that at last we were free."



*Senior Uncle, Second Harvest's father, tinkers with a radio he has used since 1940. During the American War, Senior Uncle listened to Ho Chi Minh's poems broadcast from Ha Noi at midnight on the eve of Tet.*

“We even had Children’s Tet!” Autumn added.

Centuries before, Mid-Autumn Tet—the lunar solstice—was a festival to urge the sun to return in time for spring planting. However, in recent times the festival has become a children’s holiday somewhat like Halloween.

“We’d only had independence for ten or twelve days,” Autumn went on. “There was still famine, and floods, too. But Uncle Ho loved children. He asked the youth to organize Children’s Tet. There has never been a Children’s Tet as joyful as the one in 1945. Lanterns everywhere after years of curfews and blackouts!”

Autumn gazed out the door at the blackness, then at the tiny American lamp. “Uncle Ho gathered the children of Ha Noi together in front of the Government Guest House across from the French Bank of Indochina and the Metropole Hotel. There were no adults! Only Uncle Ho and us kids and the youth who had brought us. I was so far away, I couldn’t see Uncle Ho, but I could hear the loudspeaker. Uncle Ho spoke to us as if we mattered.”

Autumn turned to me. “You’re a Westerner, Little One. You might not understand that this gesture was revolutionary. Ours was the Confucian age, where children had the lowest status. Uncle Ho kept the good in Confucianism, but he threw away the outmoded. Never before in Viet Nam had an adult spoken to children as if they were people with value like adults.” Autumn passed the peanuts around. “Once I met Uncle Ho,” she added almost as an afterthought.

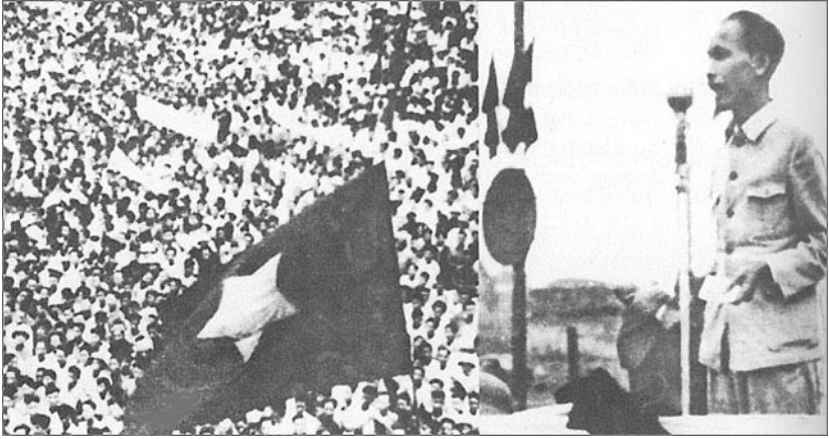
“Father!” Second Harvest called. “Come quick.”

“Why?” Senior Uncle appeared in the doorway. He ran his finger around the collarless neck of his black pajama shirt.

“Autumn met Uncle Ho!”

“Where?” Senior Uncle asked. “In a dream?” He pulled up a stool, his eyes shining.

“This was in 1964,” Autumn said, “at a meeting of four hundred women from all the provinces and ethnic groups of the North. It was the first time I had seen ethnic minority people. So many different kinds of dress! And such colors in the fabric! I was there as a representative of teachers in Ha Noi. We four hundred women were to be emulated for having the Five Attributes.”



*Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection*

*Autumn was a child in September 1945 when her mother took her to Ha Noi's Ba Dinh Square to hear Ho Chi Minh read his Declaration of Independence. Ho had modeled his text on a copy of the U.S. Declaration of Independence.*

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"And they were . . . ?" I said.

"First, 'Unite for Production'. Second, 'Work and Study'. Third, 'Manage Well'." Autumn popped a peanut into her mouth. "Oh dear! What was the fourth? I forget."

"'Labor Well'," Second Harvest said.

"No," Autumn countered. "Labor was part of 'Unite for Production'. 'Economize!' That was it. 'Economize Time, Resources, and Energy'."

"Yes," Second Harvest said, "and the fifth was 'Raise Your Children Well'."

Autumn turned to me. "You weren't good enough if you had the first four attributes. To be emulated, you must think about the next generation. And you had to think about how to enlarge the Confucian idea of family to include your school, neighborhood, factory, or cooperative."

"And Uncle Ho?" I asked, passing the peanuts to Autumn.

"All the important people sat at a long table up front." She passed the dish on. "You remember when we met Nguyen Thi



Thap in Sai Gon. She was president of the Women's Union then. She introduced Uncle Ho. He was very far away, but I could tell by his long, white goatee that he was an old man in his seventies. In his speech, Uncle Ho said the North must help the South. We must work double, once for ourselves, once for a woman in prison in the South. That's when we began *ket nghia*— the sister provinces between the North and the South."

Autumn pushed her stool back from the table. "Then when Uncle Ho finished talking, do you know what he did? I was sitting in a middle row. There was one empty seat in the hall. It was not directly in front of me, but one over. Uncle Ho left the table of honor, walked to the middle of the hall, and took that seat!"

Senior Uncle slapped the table. "To think of it! To meet Uncle Ho in real life!"

Autumn reached across Second Harvest and touched Third Ability's shoulder. "For the next hour I sat as close to Uncle Ho as I am now to you, Nephew. I could see the age lines around his eyes."

Second Harvest covered her mouth with both hands. "What did you do?"

Autumn smiled. "I didn't hear another word of the entire program. I stared at Uncle Ho, and I tried not to breathe too loudly."

I laughed. I loved being in a society so newly independent that people could remember meeting the father of their country; I relished the way that, in these anecdotes, Ho Chi Minh always foiled the Vietnamese formalities surrounding Right Relationship and Precious Guest. But I was also aware that many stories about Ho Chi Minh had shifted from history toward legend; although I believed Autumn's story, I often wondered how many others I'd heard were apocryphal.

As he often did, Senior Uncle jabbed the air with his forefinger. "Uncle Ho taught us so much, Last Child, he taught us always to be clean in our cooking, he said we shouldn't drink out of the river anymore, but should drink rainwater, that we should boil our water. When Uncle Ho was traveling and it would be time to rest, he would inspect the kitchen where he stopped, do you

see? If the kitchen wasn't clean, Uncle Ho kept walking until he found a clean kitchen."

Senior Uncle leaned toward me. He was so small that, even sitting, his head came only to my shoulder. "One time Uncle Ho was supposed to visit the soldiers at seven P.M., but instead he came at six P.M. and by the back path. The leaders had made everything on the main path beautiful in honor of Uncle Ho, can you catch my words in time? The leaders were so proud of their work. They went out to meet Uncle Ho, but Uncle Ho slipped in the back path and found a dirty kitchen. He left without eating and without meeting the pompous leaders!"

"Once I met a man from Nghe An," I said, referring to Ho Chi Minh's birthplace as I traded stories. "He was young when Uncle Ho first returned to his *que huong* after thirty years away. Ho had been all around the world, in England, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Now he was returning as president of Viet Nam. The village elders built a new road especially to welcome the president, but he insisted on taking the old one. He left those elders waiting under their fancy decorations, too!"

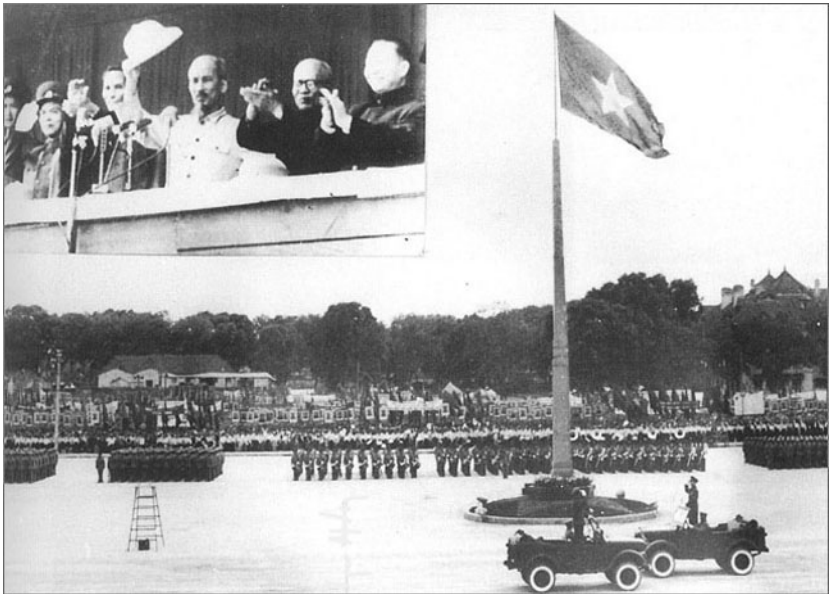


*The hand-pushed bicycle used to supply Dien Bien Phu and the Ho Chi Minh Trail is still a common means of transport in rural Viet Nam.*

I passed the plate of roasted peanuts to Senior Uncle, taking some for myself and savoring their crunchy texture. “Senior Uncle,” I asked, “when did people begin to call Ho Chi Minh ‘Uncle Ho’?”

“After the August ‘45 Revolution,” he said. “Uncle Ho was fifty-five years old. He was gaunt, his hair was thinning, he had a long beard, and he’d lost some of his teeth, do you see? This was before he had false teeth. But before 1945, around here, we’d never heard of Ho Chi Minh or of Nguyen the Patriot or of any of the other names Uncle Ho used. Maybe people in the city had heard of Ho Chi Minh, but not us country people.”

Senior Uncle leaned close. The yellow lamplight deepened the furrows in his face. “You should follow the teachings of Uncle Ho, Little One, do you catch my words in time? He taught us how to work with the people, how we should always think of three things, *cung an, cung o, cung lam*— eat with the people, live with the people, work with the people. Do you understand?”



*Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection*

*A formal ceremony on 1 January 1955 celebrated the total liberation of North Viet Nam from the French.*

“Yes, Senior Uncle,” I said. “I understand.”  
 ... Fifth Harmony split a water-palm stem. She slit one piece of the stem into slivers for thread. “I remember after the 1945 August Revolution, when Uncle Ho read the Declaration of Independence. We sat quietly together like this for the first time ever. We sewed thatch to rebuild our houses. Twenty-one days of peace! That’s all we had. Then the French invaded again. They were vicious, Little One,” she said, turning to me. “They beat my father so hard that he died shortly thereafter in 1946. I was thirteen.”

I shuddered. I knew that in October 1945 the United States transported thirteen thousand French troops to Sai Gon. The Second French War, which started with those soldiers’ arrival, was also a beginning of the American War. I folded a water-palm leaf over my stem and stitched it. Had officials in Washington read Ho Chi Minh’s Declaration of Independence? Didn’t they have any idea of Viet Nam’s history of resistance against foreign occupation?

Fifth Harmony leaned toward me. She took a palm leaf and folded it over my split stem. “Do it like this, Little One,” she instructed, tacking the leaf down with palm-stem thread. “My mother,” she said, continuing with her story, “was a Mother of Soldiers. All the time I was growing up, Mother hid Resistance fighters, tended their wounds, mended their clothes.”

Autumn reached for a sliver of thread. “I’ve read that the U.S. Army had nine soldiers in the rear to support every fighter at the front.”

“We women did that work!” Second Harvest said. “No one paid us.”

“And you?” I asked Fifth Harmony. I folded a second pinnule over my first, overlapping half.

“After my father’s death, I worked for the Resistance and fell in love with a nurse, also with the Resistance. My mother had other marriage plans for me.” Fifth Harmony covered her overbite with her long, thin fingers. “Fourth Handsome and I eloped. Mother was so angry that she beat me! Two months later, Fourth Handsome left for Regrouping in the North after the Geneva Accords. This was the time of Ngo Dinh Diem in the South.”

Fifth Harmony’s southern pronunciation of Diem’s name sounded like “No Dinh Yiem.” The Vietnamese alphabet has two

Ds, one hard, the other soft. Ngo Dinh Diem's name contains both letters. "Dinh" has the hard D, which is written with a bar across the stem and pronounced like the English D. "Diem" has the soft D, which is pronounced like a Y in the south and like a Z in the north.

Autumn reached for another pinnule. "The Americans brought Diem here to be prime minister at the time of the Geneva Accords in 1954," she explained, using the northern Z pronunciation. "Diem had been in the United States the four years before! From 1950 to 1954 in America! How could he be a Vietnamese leader?"

"I know," I said, feeling my face flush with embarrassment and rage.

I knew CIA pilots using U.S. planes had supplied the French at Dien Bien Phu and that the U.S. had paid 75 percent of the French costs at the end of the French War. But I'd only recently learned that the United States, a participant in the Geneva Conference, had refused to sign the Accords. Simultaneous with the signing of the agreement and contrary to it, Colonel Edward Lansdale, working for the CIA, had begun intensive covert actions in both North Viet Nam and South Viet Nam to subvert the Geneva Accords.

Second Harvest folded and sewed her leaves with deliberation, her fingers stiff. "In 1956," she said, "we wrote a petition to Sai Gon to ask Diem to carry out the elections required by the Geneva Accords. He refused. Then came 1957, 1958, and 1959. Diem started his five-family units, five families forced to live together like one, with a watcher! You had to report everything to the watcher. Anyone with family in the North for Regrouping had to post a sign announcing they were Viet Cong."

"We'd never heard of Viet Cong!" Ninth River said, her blunt fingers sewing quickly.

"Who were Viet Cong?" Fifth Harmony asked. "Diem made up that word. My family had a sign because my brother, brother-in-law, and husband were in the North. So many men went north. They had to! That was part of the Geneva Accords. We thought they would return in 1956 for the elections."

Second Harvest chose another leaf. "I bought a small *xuong* and set about buying and selling on the river. When one of our

soldiers was wounded, I took care of him. I began to organize other women to help. We were a small group, very small, only a few of us in 1958 and 1959, but we were growing. Then came the 10/59 Law."

"10/59?" I asked.

"October 1959," Ninth River said, tapping my thatch. "After you fold the leaf over, bring your thread up just beyond the middle."

"Any citizen," Fifth Harmony said, "who didn't report a Resistance cadre had to face the *may chem*."

"This was some kind of machine?" I said, recognizing "*may*".

Autumn set her thatch aside. In the dirt, she sketched a frame with vertical slides. "Guillotine," she said in French, adding a suspended blade, a yoke to support the neck, and a basket for the head to roll into.

I sat back. "Heavens," I said. "I thought beheading stopped with the French Revolution!"

"Maybe in France," Autumn muttered.

"Everyone had to watch!" Fifth Harmony said. She tied off the last leaf of her thatch. "If you shuddered when the head hit the dirt, the Diem soldiers said you were Communist. You'd be next. The beatings—you recall meeting my older brother, the one we call Fourth?"

"Yes." I remembered how Fourth had sat on the board bed in Fifth Harmony's house, his back against the wall of plaited water-palm leaves, his white goatee resting against his chest. He stared straight ahead without blinking.

"The puppets drove nails into his ears," Fifth Harmony said. Setting aside her thatch, she slapped her head on one side, then the other. "They beat Fourth Brother until blood flowed. To this day, he doesn't know anything."

"This was before the Americans," I said, checking.

"No!" Sixth Rice Field shouted. He dragged another palm branch from the sluice. "Diem belonged to the Americans! They brought him here! By 1954, we already had American advisors in Sai Gon and in My Tho, too. This was 1959! "

"The puppets arrested my mother," Second Harvest said, "and beat her until they thought she was dead, then threw her into the morgue. But the women prisoners begged to have her corpse. She was only unconscious. The women revived her. After that, my mother couldn't walk. That's how they treated people at Phu Loi."

"We heard in the North about Phu Loi Prison," Autumn said. "We demonstrated after the guards poisoned the prisoners."

"The guards poisoned six hundred people!" Second Harvest said to me. "Don't you understand? The prisons, the beatings, the 10/59 Law, that's why we organized Dong Khoi."

I paused, thread in hand. "You mean the 1940 and the 1960 uprisings both happened here?"

"Both!" Ninth River said. She leaned over and looked at my work. "Small stitches to be beautiful, Last Child."

As is the case with the 1940 Southern Uprising, American histories also seldom mention *Dong Khoi*— the 1960 Uprising. However, the 1960 Uprising is so famous among Vietnamese that at the end of the American War Dong Khoi became the new, official name for *Tu Do*— Freedom —Street, wartime Sai Gon's notorious bar-and-brothel strip.

Second Harvest set aside a finished layer of thatch, its leaves neatly parallel, their fringe edges even. "The people in Ben Tre rose up first, in January 1960. We had our Uprising in the early spring, when the rice was ripe."

Fifth Harmony pulled her thread through the leaves. "Whenever a Diem hamlet chief beat his brass gong," she said, "we all had to show up for a meeting. If you didn't show, you were Viet Cong. One night, the hamlet chief beat his gong for the next day's meeting. We beat gongs in response! Whoever didn't have a gong, beat an old pot."

With a palm leaf, Fifth Harmony tapped the thatch blanket in her lap as if it were a drum. "We hated living five families together! It was so hard on Fourth Brother. He couldn't remember anything because of the nails they'd driven into his head. We had to drag him hither and yon, every morning, every evening. We didn't



*Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum*

*With most of the Viet Minh men in the North, women became the main organizers and participants of the 1960 Uprising.*

want to live communally. We didn't want to pay Diem's massive paddy rents. That's why we beat our rice pots all night long.

"The puppets brought in more soldiers," she continued. "We called the women together to present a petition to the soldiers to stop their shooting. Rows and rows of women from villages all around here gathered in Vinh Kim. We were unarmed, three thousand of us! I stood way in the back. I could see all the conical hats, like thousands of ripples in the Eastern Sea. The soldiers shot into the crowd. They ripped off our hats. They arrested women and interrogated them. They beat us. What could we do?"

"We had to rise up!" Second Harvest said. "Anyone who had family in the North faced life in prison. The Diem soldiers were arresting our women to be their prostitutes, our children to be their soldiers. They were poisoning us in prison. And the guillotine taking our leaders, head by head. Someone had to take responsibility, or we would all be killed."

Second Harvest picked up a clean palm stem and held it like a rifle. "We made fake guns out of water-palm stems. Women did! Our men were gone, in the North for *tap ket*— regrouping.



At dusk we put on masks and, taking our fake guns, circled the puppets' outposts. We set off homemade explosives. Boom! Boom! Smoke and light silhouetting us and our guns. We looked like real soldiers attacking!"

She set down her make-believe rifle. "The Diem soldiers were terrified. The next day they asked us citizens, 'How many Viet Minh soldiers are there?' 'Too many to count!' we said. 'They're streaming down from the North!' we added. 'With big guns!' We never let on that it was all make-believe!

The next night, we set off more explosives, women with wooden guns running this way and that through the smoke. The puppets thought a Viet Minh company had surrounded their outpost. They dropped their weapons and ran. We snatched their guns. That's how we armed ourselves!"

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*Like a fairy, you glide over the bamboo footbridge.  
My sister, you are the guerrilla who keeps us alive.  
Our hearts vibrate with the rhythm of your steps.*

*Le Anh Xuan, 1940-1968*

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Second Harvest nodded toward Sixth Rice Field, who sliced leaves from a stem. "People like Sixth Rice Field who knew how to use guns taught the rest of us. But our first guns were only shadows. The Viet Minh soldiers in the North didn't come south to rescue us. We women rose up! That's how we liberated Ban Long in 1960, when the rice was ripe."

Sitting on his heels, Sixth Rice Field sketched a map of Roaring River in the dust. He drew in the communes, then added arrows pointing toward Ban Long. "We were the only liberated commune in My Tho province," he said. "People came to us from Vinh Kim, Kim Son, Phu Phong, Binh Trung because we had become the Resistance base for the province."

"But who organized all this," I asked, "if your leaders were in the North or in prison?"

Second Harvest laughed as she dropped her thatch into her lap. She gestured toward Sixth Rice Field and Fifth Harmony, her hands held out, palms open and empty.